

Alcohol: Freedom or Morality

The early Temperance movement was a moralistic effort focused on social pressure, “signatures” and personal pledges of temperance. All the same, a great diversity of opinion about the issue existed in the Champlain Valley. As early as 1844 a Vermont temperance circular, in arguing for no license votes, frames it as a test of morality and an experiment:

The time has now come when the honesty of those who have heretofore professed an adherence to the cause of temperance is to be put to the test. There are many who oppose the course pursued by the advocates of the anti-license system, because, say they, we are too ultra in our notions. To such we appeal in a spirit of kindness, and ask them, to let the principles we advocate be once carried out, and then if their operation is not beneficial, immediately to withdraw their support from our ticket. We are not warring against liberty – we would set the intemperate free from an enslaving vice, and remove the tyrant of temptation.

Both sides use ideas of “freedom” and “enslavement” to argue for their side and against the other. Plattsburgh Republican in 1835, fears that too “coercive” a policy would derail the public sentiment toward temperance:

Has it not been often repeated, by the first and warmest friends of temperance; by the greatest and wisest men of our age, that the only true means of forwarding the great temperance reform, was by convincing men of its benefits by candid appeals to their reason; to their sense of duty and to their own best interest and to studiously avoid every semblance of harsh means or of seeming oppression--... let them once attempt to mingle their efforts with affairs of church, or party politics, or with measures bearing even the semblance of force or coercion and that moment many of the warmest friends of temperance will despair of success in their great works of charity;..³⁶

A wonderful recounting of a Westport NY Temperance meeting and its resolutions about the Maine Law is found in the Essex County Republican from April 1853:

together - DeLottinville, Peter. "Joe Beef of Montreal: Working-Class Culture and Tavern, 1869-1889," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 8/9 (Autumn/Spring 1981/82). pp.9-40.

“In English Canada, both before and after prohibition, the isolation of public drinking from music and other forms of entertainment undoubtedly stifled the growth of popular music and popular theatre in Canada, compared to what was seen in Britain and Ireland. Montreal’s nightclubs were a special case, where drink and music were allowed to co-exist and, coincidentally, where Canada’s most vigorous jazz scene developed. Canada’s booze legislation, then, contributed to the country’s international reputation as a coldly austere, culturally repressed country whose public cultural life matched its often forbidding climate.” - Heron, Craig. *A Distilled History* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2003), pp.372-373

³⁶ “To the Freemen of Chittenden County,” 1844, Broadside, Special Collections, Bailey/Howe Library, University of Vermont, Graffagnino, et al., *Vermont Voices*, p.154 – Also see adds for Temperance Hotels in Carpenter, Thomas B., “United States Hotel” temperance hotel notice, *Plattsburgh Village* (R. G. Stone, Printer: Clinton County, April 15, 1842), from nyhistoricnewspapers.org, accessed 2019-9-28, <http://nyhistoricnewspapers.org/lccn/sn83031979/1839-08-24/ed-1/seq-5/png/>

The Hall was filled to overflowing at an early hour. Prayer by Rev. C. L Hagar. The following Resolution were reported by H. D. Ranney, chairman of the committee appointed for that purpose.

1st. That we believe the organization and measures of the Sons of Temperance well calculated to further the cause of Total Abstinences, and that the present state of the cause calls for renewed and constant labor, among the Divisions and for activity among all Temperance men, that we may have a parallel line of effort with that opposing influence that knows no stopping place while stomach, avarice and barrel remain.

2nd. We consider that frequent meetings in towns and neighborhoods for open and candid discussion, especially upon the subject of stringent laws united with the distribution of Temperance Tracts and other periodicals an important means to further the work.

3rd. We will use our best endeavors to procure and sustain a stringent prohibitory law in this state, believing that it is imperiously demanded and quite necessary with us particularly from our near proximity to Vermont, choosing to have our great enemy largely diluted in the waters of Lake Champlain rather than pollute not only our own but the highly cultivated temperance soil of that state.

4th. Our own safety from the large influx of foreigners, from the great increase of business in the Iron Manufactures and probable rail road building requires the rigid use of what means we have in our power at the present time, to suppress the retail traffic in groceries and dens of wickedness.

Some assurances have been given that the Ladies would take part in the exercises, an opportunity was given, when Miss H. M. Bap of the Seminary came forward with her pupils giving some deeply interesting essays, and arguments touching this reformation, Maine Law &c. This taken in connection with some beautiful songs sung by others, shows the right spirit among the Ladies of Westport at least.³⁷

This passage and its resolutions touch on many of the issues surrounding 19th century temperance before and after the civil war and even acknowledge the cross-lake connection in the movement. Is this a patronizing treatment of the Women's movement in Westport? It is important to remember that women's marginalization in social causes like this often encouraged them to take the matters into their own hands (as at the World Anti-Slavery Convention in 1840, which excluded women and boosted the suffrage movement in US).

Back in Plattsburgh, where local option eventually ruled, the Republican newspaper often waded into the politics of the Maine Law and state prohibition in the 1850s (a NY state prohibition bill passed but was declared unconstitutional by Gov Horatio Seymour). Some voices encouraged enforcement of existing laws, while others

³⁷ Van Vleck, Wm & H. N. Cole, "Temperance Meetings," *Essex County Republican*, 1852, April 2 (Keeseville NY: Jonathan Tarbell, 1853), Vol. XIII, No.46.

lament that the movement's strategy when it: "gave up 'moral suasion' to make force – penal enactments and confiscations – the elements of reform, was the master-error by which the whole temperance movement was wrecked."³⁸

There was clearly a diverse array of feelings around the proper treatment of alcohol in the Valley. The prohibition in Vermont was likely sometimes economically damaging to the state, as in when hotels or businesses opted on the local in "local option" New York side over technically-dry Vermont.³⁹ Corruption abounded under this system. Famed legislator and governor of Vermont Urban A. Woodbury operated a hotel that served alcohol throughout much of Vermont's state prohibition, with little consequence. The inequality of this is most apparent when considered alongside characters like Catharine Dillon or the Italian families of Barre, who faced fines and arrest for lesser violations.

After the Civil War and the end of Abolition as an effective corresponding issue for temperance, the impulses of the movement began more and more to focus on legislative action, as we have seen with the Maine Law. The issues of personal freedom and social reform become more and more contentious: Freedom from alcohol vs. freedom from moral control by ones "neighbors." None-the-less, the damages of alcohol were still widely noted in newspapers, as in the *Caledonian* of St. Johnsbury which asserts in 1864: "nine-tenths of all the crimes, petty and capital, that have been committed in our state for the last five years are traceable directly to rum as the inciting cause."⁴⁰

In the 1870s in Vermont (and the rest of the nation) saw a hardening of enforcement in the diverse temperance movements.⁴¹ In 1874, a spontaneous Temperance Crusade by women in the Midwest ignited a revival of temperament and prohibition sentiment that would ultimately help lead both to federal prohibition and women's suffrage on the U.S.⁴² Powerful new temperance movements arose to carry on the effort, like the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, which would have branches meeting regularly across the Champlain Valley, and the Anti-Saloon League. The later would become one of the most pragmatic and powerful single-interest groups in American history as it sought Federal prohibition through exiting pragmatic partnerships and local channels in the name of "American Christianity."

The temperance movement was characterized by strong connections to proper notions of "family," and women, as the guardians of domestic space in the Victorian Era, thus played a key role in the early movement. "Freedom" from alcohol and abusive or neglectful men were major themes. This early "maternal feminist" movement argued that intemperance was a threat to the Christian home. We can trace an evolution toward Prohibition as a facet of suffrage and wider women's movement in 20th century. In 1888, the Women's Christian Temperance Union of Vermont passed a series of "Resolutions Relating to Women's Rights, Temperance, and Other Reforms." The group addressed a

³⁸ "Political Temperance Agitation" *Plattsburgh Republican* (Plattsburgh, Dec. 4, 1858), nyshistoricnewspapers.org

³⁹ Krakowski, *Vermont Prohibition*, p.74. Dry politician Percival Clement claimed a \$200,000 investment in Burlington was called off due to the liquor issue and the hotel was built on the New York shore instead.

⁴⁰ Stone, C. M. & Co., "The Temperance Movement" *The Caledonian* (St. Johnsbury, Vt.: Friday, Feb. 19, 1864), nyshistoricnewspapers.org

⁴¹ Krakowski, *Vermont Prohibition*, pp.60-65

⁴² Rorabaugh, *Prohibition*, p.26

variety of new issues connected to temperance in the late 19th century, in a state where the substance was already illegal to sell:

5. Believing the use of tobacco to be one of the great evils of our times, and only second to the liquor traffic in its baneful effects upon the young men of our nation, Therefore, be it Resolved, That we petition the next legislature of Vermont to make the sale or giving of tobacco in any form to minors, a criminal offence...

8. Whereas, The earliest days of life are the best days in which to train the young in the principles of temperance, and to form character, Resolved, That the work for the children in our state under school age shall be organized under the mother's covenant work, also that we will endeavor to create a sentiment for the Kindergarten in the public schools.

10. Most thoroughly believing the fact stated by Gov. Ormsbee, namely "That the laws upon this subjects (Prohibition) are openly violated and flagrantly disregarded, and that in some instances, too numerous to be contemplated without concern, those upon whom has been and is imposed the sworn duty of its faithful execution, are its violators and are blind and indifferent to its violation in others," Therefore, be it Resolved, That we record our emphatic denunciation of the conduct of all officials, who according to the testimony of the governor of the State, do thus neglect their sworn duty.

11. Resolved, That the decision of the U.S. Supreme Court in the case of Bowman versus the Chicago & Northwestern Railroad Co., proves beyond question that the prohibition of the liquor traffic is a national issue.

12. Resolved, That the success of municipal suffrage in Kansas, convinces us that no stronger weapon has been hurled against the liquor power, and as the Republican Party in Vermont in their platform have declared their willingness to grant municipal suffrage to women when the desire it, we therefor urge upon our members the importance of trying to secure this power, in our state where there is a prospect of success in such and undertaking.

13. Resolved, That we re-affirm our loyalty to the Prohibition Party, in State and Nation, and thank the generous brothers at the Indianapolis National Convention, for standing so strongly by the plank for the enfranchisement of women as a means of home protection..."⁴³

Temperance, which was once a community effort, had morphed (through the difficulties of localized enforcement) into a national issue, and became associated with a cadre of new objectives including tobacco reform, kindergarten, public education, women's suffrage, and an ominously named National Social Purity department. The issue of intemperance was increasingly seen as an institutional problem that required sweeping

⁴³ *Fourteenth Annual Report of the Women's Christian Temperance Union of Vermont, 1888*, (Brattleboro, Vt.: Press of Frank E. Housh & Co., 1889), pp. 20-22, in Graffagnino, et al., *Vermont Voices*, pp. 217-218.

legislative solutions. A cooperative effort between the Vermont Women Suffrage Association and the WCTU soon succeeded in granting tax-paying women the right to vote in municipal elections in the late 1880s and would continue to advance bills in every congressional session up to 1917.⁴⁴

For another interesting source, activist and anarchist Emma Goldman visited Barre, VT in 1899 and wrote of the extensive corruption of city officials under Vermont's "blessings of Prohibition." She noted the proliferation of brothels in Barre due to urban prohibition, seeing an institutional problem from a different angle.⁴⁵

A turning point in Vermont politics came with the election of 1902. A challenger Republican nominee from Rutland named Percival Clement ran against the incumbent John McCullough for Republican ticket, resulting in one of the closest elections in the state's history, primarily over the issue of the stale 1852 liquor law. Clements' gave a popular speech in Bethel, Vermont, which laid out temperance as an individual issue:

*"The Prohibitionist, while he is not always able to control himself even in the matter of drinking intoxicating liquors, seeks to control his neighbor, not by precept and example, but by argument and moral suasion – that process is too slow to suit his ideas of progress, and besides sometimes his neighbor tells him to mind his own business – but the prohibitionist seems to think it is his business to attend to that of his neighbor..."*⁴⁶

He also pushes against antiquated religious sentiment about alcohol in a letter to voters in 1902:

*"Its advocates, recognizing the evils of intemperance, undoubtedly expected that the law would bring on the millennium, but in that they were disappointed. A man has never been made temperate in what he eats or drinks by legislative enactment, and the law reenactment and amended and made more stringent at subsequent sessions of the Legislature, remains a wart upon the public statues."*⁴⁷

The election was ultimately so close that it was decided by the legislature in favor of McCullough, but Clement's argument for public option was seen as a mandate and enacted by the winner. It is somewhat ironic that Vermont took a step away from legislating personal morality just as the national stage was being set for Federal Prohibition.

But Vermont's transitioned to local option in the 1904 law was not really a step away from temperance. The local option that took its place effectively created a more prohibitory society than had existed during full state prohibition, as it strengthened enforcement while allowing two-thirds of the state to remain dry by choice. Only one saloon license was allowed per 1000 residents, which inhibited the opening of such

⁴⁴ Clifford, Deborah, P., "The Drive for Women's Municipal Suffrage in Vermont 1883-1917" *Vermont History* (Proceedings of the Vermont Historical Society: Summer 1979), Vol.47, No.3, p.175

⁴⁵ Krakowski, *Vermont Prohibition*, p.66

⁴⁶ Green, Mason A., *Nineteen-Two in Vermont: The Fight for Local Option* (Rutland, Vt: Marble City Press, 1912), p.16, in Krakowski, Adam. *Vermont Prohibition: Teetotalers, Bootleggers & Corruption*, Charleston, SC: American Palate, 2016), p.74.

⁴⁷ Green, Mason A., *Nineteen-Two in Vermont: The Fight for Local Option* (Rutland, Vt: Marble City Press, 1912), p.11, in Graffagnino, et al., *Vermont Voices*, p.249.

establishments across many of the rural communities in the first place. Two thirds of counties quickly voted to maintain their dry statuses, and these dry counties went on to advocate for further restrictions to the wets so as to discourage cross-border drinking (no licenses issued within certain distances of the dividing lines, etc.). Under-the-table distributors who would have faced small punishments prior to 1904 found themselves paying large fines and prison time if unable to pay. Perhaps the major change from Vermont state prohibition to local option was the newly available tax revenue that the state could now wield in wet locales, which it had missed out on for fifty years prior.⁴⁸ No matter what the policy, voices in VT and NY advocated either for more or less enforcement based on their principles of liberty and morality. Examples from this period are the town signs labeled “Wet” “Dry” “Damp” at Bennington Museum.⁴⁹

While enforcement may have improved to a degree after the 1902 campaign, the health burdens and economic pressures of uncontrolled booze remained. The most tragic case of 1910s, during the era of Vermont local option, occurred in Bristol when 15 people died after drinking contaminated wood alcohol, purchased in Whitehall and sold by a local pharmacist. He was ultimately sent to jail for illegal importation and manslaughter, but later pardoned by the notorious temperance-opponent Governor Clement. Blame was ultimately shifted to the New York distributor who had shipped the alcohol across the border.⁵⁰ The impulse to control the liquor trade was still strong.

Nationwide organizations continued to lobby and propagandize. The Vermont Anti-Saloon League was formed in 1889 and, after 1904, focused on advancing the reestablishment of prohibition on the state through the local option law. They reported in 1908 that “In 1903 there were ninety-two wet towns; in 1904, forty; in 1905, thirty-four; in 1906, twenty-nine; in 1907, thirty, and in 1908, twenty-seven – a steady diminution each year except one.”⁵¹

In New York that same year, the league celebrated its local option successes in terms of the Erie Canal: “A net gain of forty-six towns has been won in the past five years, which would equal 1,656 square miles, or a strip of land seven miles wide, from Albany to Buffalo.”⁵²

By the early 20th century, a report on “the status of rural Vermont” lamented societal changes from “healthy” rural society to morally degraded industrial society by recognizing the decreased role of protestant religion in the region, stating “The character standing of a community is essentially its religious standing...”⁵³ Decreased religiosity was seen as a weakening in moral wellbeing of the countryside and is another reminder that other factors were now driving prohibition. In Vermont, this degradation of rural character went hand in hand with Anti-Catholic sentiment, although “the increasing freedom from bigotry, narrowness and denominational zeal” were encouraging to

⁴⁸ Krakowski, *Vermont Prohibition*, pp.84-85

⁴⁹ See Image of Directional Signs, *Wells VT, Pawlet VT, Granville NY, 1890-1920*, Bennington Museum Collection, Gifts of Susan Evans McDougall and Rebecca Evans in Memory of Dr. and Mrs. Hiram J. Evans of Pawlet, Vermont.

⁵⁰ Krakowski, *Vermont Prohibition*, pp.91-96

⁵¹ Jackson, J. C., “Work of the Anti-Saloon League,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol.32, *Regulation of the Liquor Traffic* (Sage Publications: Nov., 1908), p.23

⁵² Jackson., “Work of the Anti-Saloon League,” p.19

⁵³ Wells, George F., *The Status of Rural Vermont* (St. Albans: Vermont State Agricultural Commission, 1903), pp.29-35, in Graffagnino, et al., *Vermont Voices*, pp.258-259

practicing Protestants. Documents like these, as well as the language seen in McCullough's inauguration speech of 1904 demonstrate an attempt to solidify an "Anglo-Saxon" notation of Vermont and American culture that pitted urban and rural "Anglo" residents against immigrant communities.⁵⁴

Women and girls in rural society were increasingly seeking independent opportunities off the farm, as seen in the 1896 article by Harriet M. Rice titled "The Young Women and the Farm" in a Vermont Agricultural Report from that year.⁵⁵ Though this certainly played a part in the anxiety around rural changes, the phenomena was becoming more common either because of personal choice or economic necessity. The report asks "How shall life in the country be made so pleasant and attractive that people in general, and the young women in particular, shall prefer it to life in the city?" These movements toward freedom and social access led to more demand for women's suffrage across the country. Ironically, though, for that movement in Vermont, when the anti-prohibition champion Percival Clement did achieve the Vermont governorship in 1918, he vetoed a bill passed by the full Vermont legislature to grant women the vote, fearing that they would again move for full state prohibition. Despite this, the 18th and 19th Amendments would both be passed by 1920, disappointing Clement on both the issues of alcohol and women's suffrage.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Graffagnino, J. Kevin et al, *Vermont Voices, 1609 Through the 1990s: A Documentary History of the Green Mountain State* (Barre VT: Vermont Historical Society, 1999), p.75; Merrill, John L., "The Bible and the American Temperance Movement: Text, Context, and Pretext," *The Harvard Theological Review* (Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Harvard Divinity School, 1988), Vol.81, No.2, p.164 as movement away from religion as motivating force toward other national issues; away from moralizing toward broader structural, legal strategy.

⁵⁵ Harriet M. Rice, "The Young Women and the Farm," *Sixteenth Vermont Agricultural Report by the State Board of Agriculture for the Year 1896* (Burlington, Vt: Free Press Association, 1896), pp.193-201, in Graffagnino, et al., *Vermont Voices*, pp.232-236

⁵⁶ Krakowski, *Vermont Prohibition*, p.97