

**NOTE:** The original 1,000+ page manuscript for *Slaying the Dragon: The History of Addiction Treatment and Recovery in America* had to be cut by more than half before its first publication in 1998. This is an edited excerpt that was deleted from the original manuscript.

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## **The New Republic on a Binge**

William L. White

In the decades between the Revolutionary War and the Civil War, America was being transformed and so were her drinking problems. Changes in demographics and new patterns of drinking set the stage for the birth of a unique social movement in American history. In the early 19th century, America's rising use of alcohol and other drugs inspired a temperance movement, and out of that movement came long-term efforts to make alcohol and other drugs unavailable to the public.

### **Rising Alcohol Consumption and Alcoholism**

Between 1790 and 1830, America redefined the basic nature of its relationship with alcohol. In the new republic, nearly every aspect of colonial drinking was changing--including when, where, why, and how much people drank. Alcohol grew separate from the rituals it had long been connected to and its consumption for purposes of intoxication became an end in itself. Alcohol use was shifting from the colonial tavern to the urban saloon and more and more alcohol was being taken out of these institutions and consumed on American streets and in American homes (Bacon, 1968). Problems of public drunkenness and disorder and the impact of drunkenness on family life intensified as these changes unfolded.

In America's earliest decades as a republic, it seemed as if her citizens were committed to an extended alcoholic binge to celebrate her birth as a country. Thomas Jefferson raised concerns that the rise in alcohol use might weaken civic virtue. He was so worried about drinking among public officials that he suggested that the public weigh the suitability of each candidate by asking this question: "Is he addicted to the use of ardent spirits?" (Kobler, 1973, p. 33).

Jefferson's concern about the increase in alcohol use showed a keen vision of the future. In 1792 there were 2,579 distilleries in the U.S., and annual per-capita alcohol consumption was 2.2 gallons. In 1810 there were 14,191 U.S. distilleries, and annual per-capita consumption had risen to more than 4.2 gallons. By 1830, annual per-capita alcohol consumption had risen to 7.1 gallons of pure alcohol per person<sup>1</sup> (Cherrington, 1920). The country had never before, nor has it since, reached such a volume of alcohol consumption. Compare that with the American per-

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<sup>1</sup> Some, such as Asbury (1950), have estimated per-capita consumption during this period as high as 10 gallons.

capita alcohol consumption in the 2009 of 2.3 gallons of alcohol a year.<sup>2</sup>

This explosive rise in alcohol use inspired W.J. Rorabaugh to name his book studying this period *The Alcoholic Republic*, and to describe citizens of the time as a "Nation of Drunkards." The new pattern of alcohol use was partly the result of changes in the availability of, and taste for, particular types of alcoholic beverages. In 17th-century Colonial America, 90% of the alcohol consumed was in beer. By the end of the eighteenth century, 90% of the alcohol used in the new republic was in the form of distilled spirits. Americans were drinking a more powerful form of alcohol and drinking it in ever-increasing quantities.

The drink of choice was whiskey, and Americans drank it in quantities they had never before experienced. It was potent, cheap, and highly portable. Although early temperance leaders urged their fellow citizens to substitute wine or beer, this suggestion seemed impractical: After all, they could buy a half-gallon of whiskey for the same price as a bottle of beer (about 18 cents) (Rorabaugh, 1979).

Another factor was the new type of drinker who started to dominate the scene at the beginning of the 19th century. Increased immigration, industrialization, and the movement into the Western frontier all served to create a class of American men who organized their work life and leisure time around drinking. These men were basically alone, without family duty or a history of ties to the community. They presented a new business opportunity for the institutions that provided alcohol, gambling, prostitution, and the other activities that single men tended to use to fill their non-working hours (Winkler, 1968).

This new class of men also presented a new source of social disturbance. The problem was not that these men drank alcohol, but how much they drank and how wild their behavior became when they were drinking. Where early colonial drinking had served to strengthen social ties, this new pattern of solitary binge drinking seemed to threaten social ties. New terms like "spree" and "frolic" came into the language to describe extended drinking episode. This new pattern of drinking threatened the civility and stability of community life (Rorabaugh, 1979).

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<sup>2</sup> <http://pubs.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/Surveillance92/CONS09.pdf>

America's changing drinking rituals were also reflected in the evolution from the tavern to the saloon. Where the tavern was the center of village life, the saloon became a threat to community life. The tavern's many functions were being taken over by new social institutions--town halls, hotels and restaurants--and the saloon was left to find new ways to sustain its business. Where the tavern had given shelter to the needy, the saloon was seen as a seducer of the vulnerable. Where the tavern was a place for families, the saloon became an institution for men who could be seduced by the offer of social contact and "free lunches" of heavily salted food.

The American saloon became increasingly associated with drunkenness, violence, gambling, prostitution, sexually transmitted disease, and political corruption. The competition for dollars created a climate in which patrons could find all kinds of vices, scams, and products (from morphine to "Spanish Fly") in the saloon (Clark, 1976). The evolution from tavern to saloon also saw a change in ownership and operation of these institutions. Early tavern owners were leading citizens in private business, but most of the saloons (about 70% of them) were owned by the brewers and distillers who put pressure on the saloon keeper to "push" higher and higher quantities of the brewers' product. The role of "keeper of the public order" was sacrificed for the role of "pusher of alcohol" (Burnham, 1993, p. 57).

There is no question that the problems caused by heavy drinking were increasing during this period. David Robson has reconstructed how personally devastating alcoholism could be to families during this period. He recounts the story of Thomas Nisbet, son of the Reverend Charles Nisbit, who to his father's great distress, became an habitual drunkard and resisted all manner efforts at assistance. Father and son died within months of one another in 1804 (Robson, 1985). The Nesbit story was not an isolated one. Records of early American asylums for the insane, such as Philadelphia's Pennsylvania Hospital and Boston's McLean Asylum, show a majority of admissions due to "insanity caused by intemperance." Drinkers began to experience delirium tremens for the first time in America during the 1820s.<sup>3</sup> The problems caused by excessive drinking--public intoxication, assaults, family violence, and family desertion--were seen as unsettling forces that could lead to social chaos and drain the financial resources of the new republic. And then there was the continuing issue of drunkenness in the military.

### **Drunkenness among Soldiers and Students: A Continued Concern**

The problem of drunkenness in the colonial militia was serious enough to worry the likes of George Washington and Dr. Benjamin Rush. These concerns continued into the 19th century and grew in intensity during the Civil War. The following story reported by Dr. T.D. Crothers shows how far some soldiers on both sides of that war would go to find alcohol.

*During the Civil War, a sutler's wagon with a barrel of whiskey was broken down between the lines within easy range of sharpshooters on both sides. The certainty of instant death did not deter men on both sides from attempting to reach the barrel to procure spirits. After a number of men had been killed a cannon was brought up to destroy the barrel (Crothers, 1902, p. 30).*

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<sup>3</sup> The condition was most often treated during this period with alcohol or opium (Rorabaugh, 1979).

Drunkenness among Civil War soldiers was significant enough to spark action by military leaders, even by some leaders who were not known for their temperance. Much has been written about the drinking problem of General Grant, but there were many other military leaders who were alcohol dependent by today's standards. In 1862, strict laws against drunkenness were passed, including an ordinance that called for the dismissal of any soldier found guilty of habitual drunkenness. During the same year, Congress did away with the liquor ration in the Navy (Cherrington, 1920).

During the years following the Civil War, the debate intensified over whether or not it was necessary or advisable to provide alcohol to soldiers. Action to eliminate the practice was finally taken in the 1880s. In 1881, President Hayes issued an order banning the sale of alcohol at all Army forts, camps, and posts. His order began:

*...In view of the well-known fact that the sale of intoxicating liquors in the army of the United States is the cause of much demoralization among the officers and men, and that it gives rise to a large portion of the cases before the general and garrison courts-martial....(Milner, 1920, 109)*

In 1889, Navy Secretary John D. Long issued an order stating that no alcohol could be sold or issued to any man in the Navy (Milner, 1920).

The rise in per-capita alcohol consumption after the Revolutionary War also became apparent in America's colleges. The earlier policy of providing alcohol to students and faculty came under attack, as growing numbers of drinking-related incidents arose in a community climate now influenced by the early temperance movement. Educational leaders like Timothy Dwight of Yale spoke out against profanity, drunkenness, and gambling among students. They demanded that the traditional alcohol-soaked festivities be stopped. After 1800 most colleges banned drinking, and by the 1820s, the range of penalties for student drunkenness had increased to include suspension (Warner, 1970). This same period witnessed many college faculty and students playing prominent roles in a rising temperance crusade (Blocker, 1979).

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