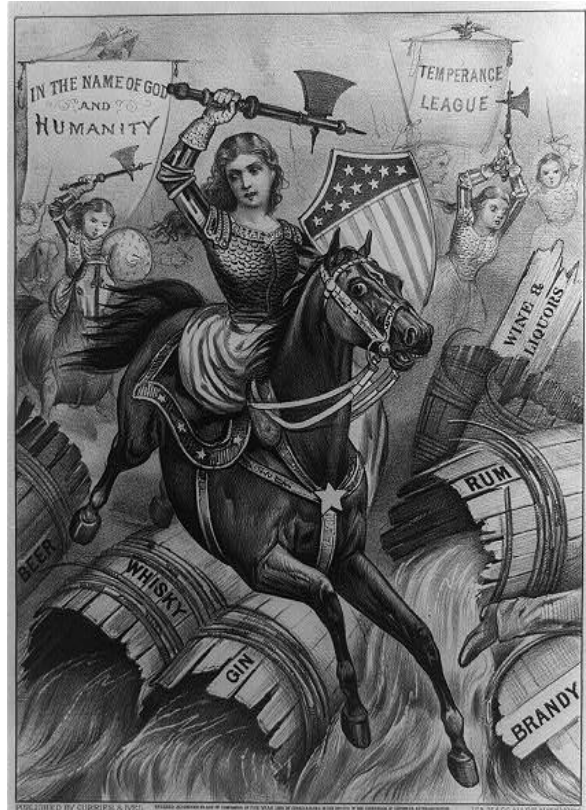




Prohibition in Connecticut

As of April 2024, Connecticut is home to over 100 independent breweries. This tally doesn't include the State's numerous wineries, cideries, distilleries, and countless bars. According to the National Survey on Drug Use & Health, roughly 56% of respondents over the age of twelve reported alcohol use within the past 30 days. This places Connecticut above the national average and in the top 10 states for alcohol consumption (NSDUH 2021-2022). Needless to say, Connecticut is a big fan of indulging in the drink. The United States as a whole may be reaching its peak for how many new breweries can pop up each year. Clearly, much has changed since America embarked on its 13-year "noble" experiment: Prohibition.

Connecticut has an interesting history with the temperance movement. The idea of prohibition was nothing new by the time of the 18th Amendment to the Constitution, prohibiting the manufacture, sale, or transportation of intoxicating liquors, which came into effect in 1920. The United States had a growing temperance movement with its roots in Connecticut. In the year 1789, over 100 residents of Litchfield, CT, formed what was likely the first Temperance Association in the country (Boyd). Additional small scale temperance movements began in other towns and states soon after. In order to better understand some of the rationale behind the movement, an examination of America's drinking habits is needed. In the last decade of the 17th century, the average American was drinking 5.8 gallons of absolute alcohol annually. By 1830, the number was 7.1 gallons. To add some perspective, Americans today consume roughly 2.3 gallons of absolute alcohol annually (Bustard). Drinking alcohol was certainly an ingrained part of American culture but by the first half of the 19th century the temperance movement was gaining traction,



Woman's Holy War; Grand Charge on the Enemy's Works. Temperance flyer. c.1874. Source: Library of Congress.

eventually culminating with the Maine Liquor Laws. Passed in 1851, the law prohibited the sale of alcohol unless it was to be used for medicinal or manufacturing purposes. Connecticut, along with 11 other states, quickly, followed suit with its own ban in 1854 (Blocker 57). Enforcement of the new law was inconsistent at best. The law contained numerous loopholes that allowed it to be openly disobeyed, leading to it being repealed in 1872.

Though Connecticut's first attempt at prohibition was unsuccessful, temperance continued to be a simmering topic in American politics. By the start of the 20th century, the Woman's Christian Temperance Union had become the largest women's organization in the United States (Sklar). Cases of husbands spending their paycheck at the saloon, along with the drunken abuse of



The Progress of Intemperance: Plate IV. The Ruined Family. c. 1841. Source: Library of Congress.

their wives and children, were common enough stories to aid in recruitment towards the temperance movement. Middle class tradesmen formed fraternal temperance organizations offering alcohol-free social activities as they believed that the saloon was subversive to the security of the home, causing family breakdown and crime (Aaron and Musto). Anti-Catholic and anti-immigration ideologies were commonplace in the Anti Saloon League, a political pressure group started in 1893 by Protestant ministers. Newly arrived Catholic immigrants from central

Europe and Ireland formed a large block of the urban poor community. These immigrants had a strong culture of beer drinking and brought that with them to the United States. To meet demand, bars lined the way to factories in Connecticut as industrialization and immigration rapidly increased in the late 1800s. The temperance journal, Connecticut Home, published the claim that Connecticut had more saloons than Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, South Carolina, and Florida combined (Boyd). Connecticut's rising immigrant population offers one reason why national temperance organizations saw less success in our state compared to many others.

As America entered the 1910s, a handful of states were already "dry" and more than half of the country lived under some form of prohibition. Indeed, even Connecticut itself had a local option law allowing towns to independently choose whether they were "wet" or "dry" locales. The majority of Connecticut's population centers had chosen to be wet. A statewide tally included 76 wet towns and 91 dry (Van Dusen 282). After decades of effort by temperance movements across America, the topic of nationwide prohibition reached Congress in 1917. Ratification of the 18th Amendment would be up to the states. The Connecticut Senate made national headlines as the first political body in the country to vote against prohibition. Regardless, a total of 46 states would pass the legislation and national prohibition was slated to go into effect on January 17th, 1920. Only two states rejected the proposal: Connecticut and Rhode Island. This is possibly due to these New

England states having a large number of Catholic residents that showed resistance to the temperance movement.

Once prohibition went fully into effect, Connecticut realized that the same challenges of their past experiments with an alcohol ban would reoccur; Namely how could the state enforce such a law and would there be any willingness to enforce it? Many of Connecticut's small towns did not have uniformed police. Instead, these towns relied on constables that prided themselves on knowing all of the town's inhabitants. In many cases, towns did not have the resources to hunt down those skirting the new law. Officers could be bribed to look the other way or showed a reluctance to arrest those they knew for alcohol violations. The Mayor of Norwalk was so dismayed by the progress of his local force that he asked for the recently formed state police to conduct raids in the city. State police conducted the alcohol raids in November of 1925, resulting in 16 arrests, including the arrest of a town constable (Boyd). Federal assistance was lacking as well. Only 13 agents of the U.S. Treasury Department were assigned to Connecticut to assist with prohibition enforcement. The Coast Guard, still in its infancy, was charged with protecting the waterways from illegal importation of liquor by "rum-runners" returning from "rum row". Foreign ships would anchor in a row off the U.S. coastline just past the edge of the Coast Guard's 3-mile jurisdiction. Each ship offered various liquor for sale, generally rum or whiskey. Using small, quick boats, rum-runners could speed out to the ships, purchase whatever they would like, and outrun the Coast Guard's patrol ships back to the coast. They were not always successful however, and the act was punctuated by arrests, hijackings, and deaths.

LAST HOURS OF J. BARLEYCORN GOING QUICKLY

Eighteenth Constitutional Amendment Goes Into Effect Tonight

With the last stroke of the clock at midnight the Eighteenth Constitutional Amendment, prohibiting the sale and manufacture of intoxicating liquors and from that time on Bridgeport and the entire country is scheduled to become an arid waste in a land of plenty.

Article title signifying the new ban on alcohol, the end of "J. Barleycorn". Bridgeport Republican Farmer, January 16, 1920. Source: Library of Congress, Chronicling America.



Armed Coast Guardsman and a rum runner at the end of a chase. C. 1924. Source Library of Congress.



Prohibition agents examining barrels on a boat. C.1924. Source: Library of Congress.

While the Connecticut coastline was one method of getting some banned booze, it seems the majority of it flooded into Connecticut's speakeasies from New York or from homebrewing. Many of the intercepted shipments of alcohol were on trucks sporting New York licenses. Closer to home, state police found a 400-gallon still on a farm in Stafford Springs in May of 1923. The moonshiners were fined the modern equivalent of roughly \$14,763 (Van Busen 284). The negative consequences of prohibition had become clear. Smuggling had resulted in a growth in both organized crime and violence in the state. New London had become home to the biggest concentration of anti-smuggling ships in the country's history (Boyd). In West Haven, a bootlegger named Harry Kitone was shot and killed by his own gang in 1927. A Waterbury bootlegger, John Costanzo, was shot in his car as part of an organized crime killing. While Connecticut saw less of this type of violence compared to nearby locations like New York, it was clear that a growing number of Americans had no interest in obeying the 18th Amendment. A 1926 student poll at Yale University found that over 60% of students believed that prohibition had failed to reduce drinking on campus. Alcohol could easily be found off university grounds. A similar survey at Connecticut colleges a few years later revealed that a large majority of college students indulged in binge drinking and most wished to see the 18th Amendment repealed (Van Dusen 283). Across the state, admissions to hospitals for alcoholic psychoses were steadily increasing since the first couple of years under Prohibition. Connecticut's reputation for disregarding the ban and for its reliable bootlegging industry earned it the title of "the Union's wettest state", a label it shared with New Jersey (Boyd).



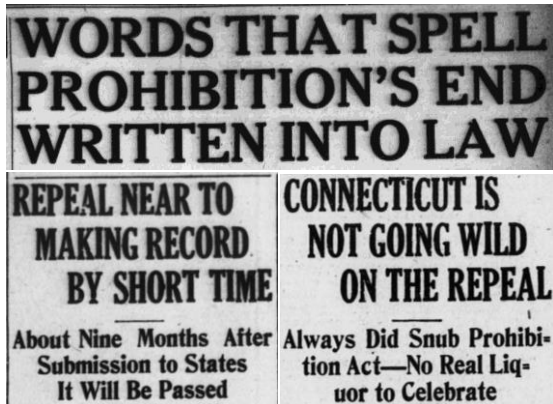
New York City Deputy Police Commissioner John A. Leach watching agents pour liquor into sewer following a raid during the height of prohibition. C. 1920s. Source: Library of Congress.

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Connecticut Woman Suffrage Association headquarters. Hartford, CT. C.1920s. Note the Prohibition Party banner on the left wall. Source: Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain.

Though prohibition is remembered almost exclusively in a negative light today, it is worth noting that it had some successes. A 1927 study that gathered reports by social workers and public officials in Connecticut cities gave positive remarks. Previous to Prohibition in Danbury, an official of a hat factory stated that about 40% of the workforce would fail to show up to work on



Article titles that appeared on the front page of *The Waterbury Democrat* on the day of repeal. December 5, 1933. Source: Library of Congress, *Chronicling America*.

Monday morning after a weekend spent at one of the 54 saloons located within two blocks of the factory. After Prohibition, the official reported that this problem on Monday mornings was virtually nonexistent, the workers seemed better dressed, and their families seemed better fed (Bruère 201-202). There were less cases for relief aid from the Welfare Bureau in Willimantic and there were less arrests for intoxication on the Hartford police docket (205-209). Other studies reported that Connecticut's death rate for alcoholism in the years 1920-1927 were less than half the number when compared to 1912-1919 (Van Dusen 285). Nevertheless, by 1930 these positives

were massively overshadowed by widespread defiance of the law, ineffective law enforcement, a rising crime rate, and perhaps most importantly to the federal and state governments, the desperate need for tax revenue from alcohol at the start of the Great Depression (Murrill). In addition to the hundreds of millions of tax dollars that the federal government was not receiving under Prohibition, the distilling and brewing industries could put tens of thousands of Americans to work when the unemployment rate was 10% and rapidly increasing. The question of repealing the 18th amendment made its way onto the Connecticut ballot in 1932. Residents gave a resounding "yes" with over 85% of voters answering in favor of removal (Ballotpedia). The following year, with unemployment over 20%, Congress proposed the 21st amendment to repeal prohibition. On December 5th, 1933, Prohibition was officially repealed and legal liquor flowed once more.

Today, we are spoiled for choice when we are in the mood to imbibe. So-called "speakeasies" have returned as a popular fad, though the danger and secret locations have been replaced by quirky, novelty bars serving expensive cocktails. The last gasp of Prohibition in our state probably came more recently than you may think. The last "dry" town, Bridgewater, Connecticut, voted to end its local ban on alcohol and go "wet" in 2014. Cheers.

Ryan Elgin serves as EC-CHAP Assistant Director, Curator of the Gardiner Hall Jr History Museum, and Volunteer Coordinator. He may be contacted directly at ryan@ec-chap.org.

The Gardiner Hall Jr Museum is open to the public Saturdays from 10:00am to 12:00pm. For more information, please call 518-791-9474.

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