

The Eighteenth Amendment and National Prohibition, Part 3: Temperance Movements

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This Legal Sidebar post is the third in a seven-part series that discusses the [Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution](#). Prior to its [repeal](#), the Eighteenth Amendment prohibited the manufacture, sale, or transportation of “intoxicating liquors” for “beverage purposes” within the United States. Section 2 of the Amendment granted Congress and the state legislatures “concurrent power” to enforce nationwide Prohibition by enacting “appropriate legislation.” The Eighteenth Amendment was partly a response to the Supreme Court’s pre-Prohibition Era Commerce Clause jurisprudence, which limited [the federal](#) and [state governments’](#) power over the liquor traffic. As such, the Eighteenth Amendment’s history provides insight into the judicial evolution of the [Commerce Clause](#), which operates as both a positive grant of legislative power to Congress and a [limit on state authority](#) to regulate commerce. Additional information on this topic will be published in the [Constitution Annotated: Analysis and Interpretation of the U.S. Constitution](#).

The Temperance Movements of the 19th and 20th Centuries

From the 1790s to the early 1830s, Americans drank increasingly large amounts of whiskey and other distilled alcoholic beverages. Heavy consumption of hard liquor offended many social reformers, including Protestant churchgoers, who [viewed drunkenness](#) as a source of crime, family strife, illness, immorality, poverty, and workplace injuries. Concerned about alcoholism’s effects on society, small groups of farmers and Protestant Christians formed some of the first temperance societies in the early 19th century. These societies urged Americans to abstain from drinking distilled alcoholic beverages but did not initially call for “teetotalism”—that is, total abstinence from all alcoholic beverages.

Temperance societies adopted a stricter approach toward alcohol consumption in the 1830s, urging Americans to abstain entirely from drinking. For instance, the American Temperance Society, which Christian clergy founded in 1826, initially [called](#) for Americans to refrain from drinking “ardent spirits.” However, by the late 1830s, the society advocated for [total abstinence](#) from all alcoholic beverages. The society communicated this abstinence message through its writings and lectures, gaining more than a million members nationwide. Partly as a result of the temperance movement, Americans’ drinking declined during the mid-1830s.

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In addition to advocating for abstinence, some pre-Civil War temperance leaders called for Congress or the state legislatures to prohibit the liquor trade. For example, Lyman Beecher, a Presbyterian minister who cofounded the American Temperance Society, [advocated](#) for a ban on the manufacture and sale of liquor to foster individual morality and social order. Answering calls for reform, at least 14 states adopted [prohibition laws](#) in some form by 1855. However, as the nation became embroiled in disagreements over the issue of slavery, Americans' interest in the temperance movement waned, and many state legislatures repealed or weakened their prohibition laws.

After the Civil War, the temperance movement again surged in popularity as the nation grappled with rapid industrialization and urbanization. This renewed social reform movement attracted a diverse group of supporters. For instance, a large number of women [led and participated in](#) temperance and prohibition efforts, believing that lower rates of alcohol abuse and the closure of saloons would strengthen families and decrease the prevalence of domestic violence. Employers, including prominent industrialists such as Andrew Carnegie, sought to stem alcoholism's pernicious effects on productivity and safety in the workplace.

Temperance and prohibition ideals also found expression in the works of some African American writers, such as [Frederick Douglass](#), [F.E.W. Harper](#), and [Booker T. Washington](#), who [argued](#) that the liquor traffic negatively impacted African Americans' economic standing, morals, and welfare. Some Christian clergy preached about the evils of [saloon](#) culture, and physicians warned of alcoholism's health effects. The temperance movement also attained support among nativists who opposed European immigrants' drinking customs.

Several social reform groups played a pivotal role in the Eighteenth Amendment's inception, proposal, and ratification. In 1869, temperance supporters organized one of the earliest of these post-Civil War groups, the [National Prohibition Party](#). This political party called for Congress to propose an amendment to the Constitution banning the liquor traffic. In 1874, a group of women [founded](#) a national temperance organization, the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), in Cleveland, OH. The WCTU staged "pray-ins" outside of establishments that sold alcoholic beverages, forcing some illegal saloons to shut their doors. Frances Willard, the WCTU's second leader, [created programs](#) to educate American students about the dangers of alcoholism and pushed for Congress and the state legislatures to mandate temperance education in schools. The WCTU's lobbying efforts helped to secure restrictions on the liquor traffic in some states and U.S. territories by the late 1800s. However, the National Prohibition Party and WCTU failed to persuade Congress to propose a federal prohibition amendment.

The organization most responsible for the Eighteenth Amendment's proposal and ratification was the Anti-Saloon League. [Founded in 1893](#) in Oberlin, OH, by clergyman Howard Hyde Russell, the League engaged strategically with Protestant churches and both of the major political parties, publishing political pamphlets and giving speeches in support of temperance and Prohibition. League Counsel Wayne B. Wheeler led the organization's lobbying and fundraising efforts, which targeted politicians at all levels of government throughout the United States. Some of the League's efforts exploited World War I-era xenophobia toward German-Americans, who were active in the brewing industry, as well as racism toward African Americans and other minority groups.

Click [here](#) to continue to [Part 4](#).

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