



Temperance Reform in the Early 19th Century

Teacher Introduction

Temperance, the crusade against strong drink, was by far the largest reform movement of the early 1800s, and one of the most successful. It was spearheaded by conservative Calvinist clergy who were concerned about the social disorder that followed in the aftermath of the Revolution—a disorder caused by the disruption of household economies during the war, by deaths of fathers and sons in the war, and the wild inflation that devastated returning farmers and artisans after the war. The movement soon attracted a diverse collection of supporters, more so than any other reform. Temperance advocates ranged from pious churchwomen to militant feminists, from freethinkers to fundamentalists, from the high and mighty to the lowly and degraded. As with other early reform movements and charitable organizations, the movements and charitable organizations, the movement's leadership shifted in the 1820s from conservative to evangelical ministers and lay people. By 1834 there were roughly 5,000 temperance societies in the country. While the movement was strongest in the usual havens for reform—New England, New York, and among transplanted New Englanders the Midwest—it also made headway in the South and West. With such a diverse following temperance advocates began to fractionalize (following various agendas) and support for the movement declined in the mid-1830s. But it surged in 1837 after the financial panic, and the long depression that followed, accelerated the social problems of the times.

Temperance Reform, and the issues that led to the movement, may be used with students to identify social problems and solutions in their own world. Knowledge of such issues will help students (1) see the tangible connections between past and present social conditions, (2) understand an issue on the national and local levels (3) see role(s) they can play individually or collectively in addressing problems of their own times (and in their own lives.) The contextual discussion of reform will help students to understand the causes of social problems and activism in the past and help them identify the same in the present.

The Great “Age of Reform”

The period between the Revolution and the Civil War was tumultuous and contentious, a time of unprecedented growth and change. In the Northeast, industrialization, urbanization, and large-scale immigration, brought new challenges of diversity as well as increasing levels of poverty and violence. In the South, the peculiar institution of slavery became more entrenched even as it was abolished elsewhere in the country. Cultural and political divides deepened dangerously between the regions, and new conflicts arose as the country expanded westward. People everywhere in the Early Republic were unsettled by uncontrolled fluctuations in the spreading market economy, internal migration and the attendant loosening of family and community ties, growing inequality, and many felt that they were no longer masters of their own fate. Some feared the young nation's democratic experiment was in jeopardy.

Men and women throughout the country, but especially in the Northeast, responded to chaos and change by organizing themselves into reform movements. As the nation seemed to be falling apart in uncontrollable ways, reformers—the social activists of the 1800s—strove to set it aright. It was an era so electrically charged with activism that historians call it the “Age of Reform.”

The Impulse for Reform

Religion was the primary motivating force behind organized reform. A wide-sweeping religious revival known as the Second Great Awakening galvanized Protestants, especially women, beginning in the 1790s. The

Awakening began in rural towns in the East, then spread across western New York, and continued to grow through the late 1840s. Under the sway of the Second Great Awakening, the role of churches and ministers in community life began to change. The Awakening was begun by conservative clergymen who wanted to control and shape the direction of the young nation's future. From their pulpits Calvinist ministers stressed the need for self-improvement in the eighteen-teens, female religious charitable societies and temperance societies. By the 1820s, leadership of the Second Great Awakening was the hands of evangelicals who preached not from the pulpit, but outside under tents or in open fields at what were called "revivals." These were intense affairs, full of fiery preaching, singing, tearful confessions, joyous conversions, and pledges to be active in God's name—a religion of the heart, not the head. Revivals drew large numbers of people who became charged with a moral imperative to act to right the wrongs of the world.

The Tools for Reform

While the impulse for reform was the essential first ingredient, the Age of Reform could not have occurred without improvements in transportation and communications. It also required the presence of a—distinct non-agricultural middle class; that is, people with relative leisure time (farm families had virtually none) and a level of economic prosperity that allowed for the life-long devotion to a cause. It was they who led reform movements, while farmers and mechanics, and their wives made up the rank and file.

The Imperatives for Reform

The reform spirit caught a range of social, moral, intellectual, and political issues in its net. The Lyceum movement focused on intellectual stimulation and debate. Hydrotherapy, or water cures, drew national attention. Sylvester Graham introduced a new diet void of meat and ardent spirits. Clara Barton founded the American Red Cross. Dorothea Lynde Dix improved treatment of the insane through the establishment of asylums. Phrenology—the study of the head to determine a person's character—gained wide popularity. Some took up the cause of dress reform for women (the fashion of tight corsets to create "wasp" waists actually broke women's ribs and constricted their breathing.) Citizens formed Peace Societies. Missionaries traveled far and wide to save souls in foreign lands. Bronson Alcott and others established utopian communities to escape the increasingly crass commercializing and industrializing world around them. Horace Mann initiated major education reform. Young women for the first time gained access to higher education with the founding of Mount Holyoke College in 1837. Everywhere people were working to make it a better world.

Temperance Reform

The facts

Was there a problem, a need for a crusade against strong drink? In a word, yes. Drinking was the way of life, at all hours and for any reason. It was more widespread than it is today. Generally speaking, men liked to drink—particularly whiskey, rum, and hard cider. And they drank on all occasions—in the fields, at the shop or office, at a house raising, when socializing or debating at the tavern, at harvests, at elections, at commemorative celebrations. Women of refined classes tended not to drink in public, but many regularly took alcoholic-based medicines. Both sexes enjoyed wine and fortified wines at all times of the day. Women from the lower classes sometimes paralleled male behavior in the consumption of hard liquors (this is dramatized in the movie *Oliver*, based on Charles Dickens's novel, which students may be familiar with.) Children also drank cider, both sweet and hard, wine, and medicinally prescribed doses of whiskey. (Milk—now the common drink for children—was available only from the birthing of calves in April until November, when the cows dried up until the next season of calving, and families generally limited their home consumption of this beverage because milk, in the forms of butter and cheese, was an important market commodity.)

Since the earliest days of settlement drinking had always been an integral part of life in America, but the amount of alcohol consumed greatly accelerated in the 1780s and 1790s, when out of control inflation caused financial chaos and ruin for many. Revolutionary War soldiers came home with worthless pay and many found themselves hopelessly mired in debt as a result of their prolonged absence. Creditors foreclosed on farms and

committed men to debtors' prison, further undermining social and economic stability. Under very real pressures, public intoxication became even more widespread and binge drinking reached new proportions. This trend continued well into the 1800s. Moreover, immigration brought people to this country for whom drinking was a way of life. Levels of alcohol consumption, which peaked in 1830, were so high in the early nineteenth century that historians have dubbed the era "the alcoholic republic."

The goal of early leaders of the temperance movement-conservative clergy and gentlemen of means-was to win people over to the idea of temperate use of alcohol. But as the movement gained momentum, the goal shifted first to voluntary abstinence, and finally to prohibition of the manufacture and sale of ardent spirits. (Shifting goals in the temperance movement coincided with shifting leadership of the Second Great Awakening from conservative clergy to evangelical preachers.) In 1826, adherents to the cause founded the American Society for the Promotion of Temperance, its purpose being to urge people to sign a pledge of abstinence. The Society soon became a pressure group that lobbied for state-level prohibition legislation. By the mid-1830s there were roughly 5,000 state and local temperance societies in the country, and more than a million had signed the pledge. The message was directed to people of all ages and hundreds of thousands of children joined the movement, enlisting in what was called the "Cold Water Army."

Temperance reform proved effective. After peaking in 1830 (at roughly five gallons per capita annually), alcohol consumption sharply declined by the 1840s (to under two.) The movement enjoyed some legal successes. By the mid-1850s, laws prohibiting its manufacture and sale other than for medicinal purposes had passed in New England, Ohio and Northwest territory, New York, and Pennsylvania-legislation that foreshadowed national prohibition in the early twentieth century.

Of course, not all that supported temperance reform advocated total abstention, and not all that supported voluntary abstinence supported the legislation of morality. And there were opponents of the organized movement who supported self-regulated temperate consumption. In addition advocates of abstention did not necessarily adhere to what they preached, even on such public occasions as temperance conventions. It was not a black-and-white issue. As a young lawyer named Christopher Columbus Baldwin explained in a diary entry, when the State Temperance Convention met in Worcester in 1833 some of the nearly five hundred delegates showed clear signs that they had not converted to the doctrine of abstinence that they professed. While he expressed pleasure at efforts "to reform the besotting practices of drunkenness," he personally believed in moderation. Expressing the sentiments of many, he further observed:

I am not a member of a temperance society, contenting myself with the practice of virtue without extra preaching it to others. It is one of the faults of the day to occupy so much of our time in recommending the practice of virtue that we have no time left us to perform it.... So true it is that when mankind undertake a reformation they are always running into extremes.

The Diary of Christopher Columbus Baldwin, 1829-1835 (Worcester: Published by the American Antiquarian Society, 1901), pp. 212-213.