

## Prohibition/Volstead Act

### 1657–1933

Prohibition began in Massachusetts in May 1657. The General Court of Massachusetts made the sales of “strong” liquors such as rum, wine, and brandy illegal in the state. Many people in the community said it was unacceptable for a person to abuse alcohol. They also claimed alcohol abuse was affecting the home life of community members. Religion played a factor as well. Many stated alcohol was a gift from God. At the same time, alcohol abuse was considered a present from the devil. Eventually members of the medical field, most notably Dr. Benjamin Rush in 1784, stated the excessive consumption of alcohol resulted in damage to a person’s physical, social, and mental health.

Members of the community began to form temperance societies. These groups advocated the abolishment of sales and production of alcohol. A group of two hundred farmers in Connecticut formed the first temperance society. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, temperance groups formed in New York and Virginia. Methodists led most of these movements. In addition to alcohol prohibition, this movement called for restraint from all activities involving alcohol. This included going to saloons. The Prohibition Movement saw success during the 1850s. Maine, for example, banned the sale and production of alcohol.

The Prohibition Movement slowed during the Civil War, but in the 1880s, there was a resurgence in interest because of the increase in social problems as America entered a period of urbanization and industrialization. Crime, poverty, and alcohol abuse seemed to plague many people living in the slums of the new cities. People began to think eliminating alcohol would eliminate the other urban problems.

Two of the groups that led the charge in the Prohibition Movement were the Prohibition Party and the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). The WCTU was formed in 1873 and supported national prohibition. The group wanted to educate the public on the dangers and effects of alcohol consumption. In particular, the WCTU wanted to educate children that alcohol was dangerous. If the WCTU were able to do this, it believed an entire generation would be spared the destruction of alcohol abuse. The group also hoped that these children would pass this knowledge to their offspring. Women claimed that much of the abuse they received came when their spouses were under the influence of alcohol. Another prohibition victory came in 1881 when Kansas revised its state constitution to

outlaw the sale of alcoholic drinks. Carrie Nation strongly supported this measure. She was the leader of the Carrie Nation Prohibition Group and was famous for entering saloons, yelling at customers, and smashing bottles of alcohol with a hatchet.

Support for prohibition continued to grow through the Progressive Era as well as World War I. The Anti-Saloon League, formed at the beginning of the twentieth century, put pressure on Congress to add a prohibition amendment in the Constitution. On January 16, 1919, ratification of the Eighteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution imposed national prohibition. On October 28, 1919, the Volstead Act also was passed. It stated that any beverage that contained more than 0.5 percent alcohol was considered an alcoholic beverage. Prohibition began in the United States on January 16, 1920. The sale and consumption of alcohol was banned. A person was allowed to produce up to two hundred gallons of wine or cider per year, however, for home consumption.

More than 1,500 federal prohibition agents were hired to enforce the laws. Prohibition was supported by the three major political parties: Democratic, Republican, and Prohibition. Groups opposing prohibition included German-Americans, Catholics, and the Women's Organization for Prohibition Reform. Some doctors also objected to prohibition because they used alcohol in some medications. Prohibition was a controversial issue.

Prohibition led to the creation of "speakeasies" in the United States. Speakeasies were secret establishments that sold alcohol during prohibition. The term derived from when a person ordered alcohol from a bartender. The bartender would tell the person to stay calm and "speak easy." Speakeasies were notorious for their association with organized crime. They were subject to police and federal prohibition raids. However, some speakeasy owners bribed law enforcement officials so their establishments would not be raided.

Prohibition led to unforeseen problems. In addition to speakeasies, racketeering became prevalent. This led to widespread corruption of law enforcement. Alcohol was sold illegally. Bottles with high-alcohol content would fetch the largest prices. This made the black market a popular site for alcohol sales. Crime, especially in large cities such as New York and Chicago, increased rapidly.

Within time, many Americans supported the repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment. The repeal of prohibition began on March 23, 1933, when United States President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Cullen-Harrison Act. This was

an amendment to the Volstead Act and allowed for the production of alcohol that was four percent in volume. The Eighteenth Amendment was repealed on December 5, 1933, with the passage of the Twenty-first Amendment to the United States Constitution. Individual states now had the right to ban the sale and production of alcohol within their borders.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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*Multiple Choice: Choose the correct answer to each question from the choices below.*

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. How was religion a factor in alcohol prohibition?
- People believed that if one consumed alcohol, he or she would never reach the afterlife.
  - People thought alcohol was a gift from God, but the abuse of it was a present from the devil.
  - Several religions banned alcohol consumption.
  - Many churches held protests and demonstrations, claiming the production and consumption of alcohol were detrimental to society.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Which of the following was the first victory of the Prohibition Movement?
- Maine banned the sale and production of alcohol in the 1850s.
  - Richmond, Virginia, outlawed alcohol sales in the 1840s.
  - New York banned the consumption of alcohol in restaurants in the 1860s.
  - New Jersey banned the sale of alcohol in the 1850s.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. How would early childhood alcohol education affect present and future generations?
- Perhaps these children would not drink alcohol as adults.
  - Perhaps these children would educate their children about the evils of alcohol.
  - Perhaps this early childhood alcohol education would make children more curious about alcohol.
  - both a and b
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. What were the provisions of the Volstead Act?
- The sale and production of alcohol in the United States was legal.
  - It banned the sale of any beverage in the United States with more than one percent of alcohol.
  - Any beverage with more than 0.5 percent alcohol was an alcoholic beverage.
  - It banned the sale of any beverage with more than 0.5 percent alcohol.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. In addition to local authorities, which of the following groups was charged with enforcing the Eighteenth Amendment?
- agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation
  - agents of the Central Intelligence Agency
  - the state governments
  - federal prohibition agents
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. How did speakeasy owners avoid trouble with law enforcement?
- Some speakeasy owners bribed law enforcement officials so their establishments would not be raided.
  - Some speakeasies were operated in the back rooms of stores, so the illegal activities were hidden from law enforcement.
  - Some speakeasy owners had connections with local government officials and offered “kickbacks” which exempted them from law enforcement.
  - Some speakeasy owners were also law enforcement officers, and their fellow officers would not raid their businesses.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. What negative effects did prohibition have on the United States?
- Crime increased.
  - Racketeering became prevalent.
  - Speak-easy owners corrupted law enforcement officials.
  - Black market sales increased.
  - all of the above
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. How did the Cullen-Harrison Act amend the Volstead Act?
- It allowed for the production of alcohol that was four percent in content.
  - It repealed the Eighteenth Amendment of the United States Constitution.
  - It also was known as the Twenty-first Amendment, which gave states the right to ban the sale and production of alcohol.
  - It stated that alcohol could only be as high as six percent in content.