

The Temperance Movement and the Washingtonians

The first organized attempts to grapple with the alcohol problem began in the early 1800s. A temperance society was formed in Massachusetts in 1813, another a few years later in Connecticut, and in 1826 the American Temperance Union was established. The reform spread throughout the United States. By the end of 1828 there were approximately 225 temperance societies, with more than 100,000 members who had signed a pledge of abstinence.

The movement advocated temperance for everyone, not just those who were already problem drinkers, and at first opposed only the use of distilled spirits, not fermented

spirits. Many of the poor objected because they could only afford to drink cider and beer, not wine. In response, a new pledge was initiated, prohibiting the use of all spirits. This was called the teetotal pledge, which, according to one story, was "a name first given to it in England, and which had its origin in the prolonged and incoherent stuttering, by one who was taking the pledge, at the first letter in the word 'total.'" One result of the new pledge was a falling off in membership, since many who were willing to sign the original one balked at the more restrictive version.



Notables in the U.S. temperance movement in the first half of the 19th Century, from the book The Great Events of Our Past Century, published in 1878.

The temperance movement also aimed to wipe out the sale of alcohol. Not only did its members agree to abstain, but they campaigned to close down distilleries and merchants who dealt in liquor and they lobbied for temperance legislation.

The temperance movement, though, took a pivotal turn in April 1840. It was then that six drinking buddies got together and, more or less on a whim, founded a temperance society that in little more than four years would sober up many thousands of drunks and, for the first time, focus attention on the alcoholic as a person. These six comrades were spending Friday evening in Chase's Tavern in Baltimore, drinking as usual, and began discussing a tem-

perance lecture scheduled for that evening. Four of them decided to attend and report back to the others, and when they returned the six talked it over and decided to form their own society. A couple of days later they met, drew up the following pledge, and signed it: "We whose names are annexed, desirous of forming a society for our mutual benefit, and to guard against a pernicious practice, which is injurious to our health, standing, and families, so pledge ourselves as gentlemen, that we will not drink any spirituous or malt liquors, wine, or cider." They named the new organization the Washington Temperance Society, in honor of the nation's first president.

Here for the first time were drunks banding together to solve their own problem, rather than to attack the ills of society as a whole. The movement caught on quickly, especially after the founders decided on a format that A.A. members will find familiar. According to an article published in 1840, "The president . . . suggested that each member should rise in his place and give his experience; and, by way of commencement, he arose and told what he had passed through in the last fifteen years, and the advantages he had derived from signing the total abstinence pledge."

The movement soon spread to other cities and began to hold large public meetings; several powerful speakers rose to prominence in its ranks, and within two or three years the Washingtonians could be found in every part of the country, and claimed thousands of members (the exact number is unknown, but probably came close to 400,000 at the peak of popularity).

But its success, though spectacular, lasted only a short time. As early as 1843, interest was beginning to fade, and by 1848 the Washingtonians had virtually disappeared, except for some lingering activity in Boston. But the impact of this movement went far beyond its success rate, for it introduced two elements that changed alcoholism treatment significantly: the concept that the alcoholic was not simply a moral degenerate but a human being who could and should be helped, and the role play by "reformed" drunkards themselves in their own rehabilitation.