Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Drunkenness: 
An Examination of Alcohol in Early America

One crucial factor of humanity connects all of mankind from the Stone Age to the modern era: the will to get drunk. Humans have been creating and consuming alcohol since the dawn of time, and the American republic is no exception to the rule. The alcohol industry was a staple of the early American economy. Tavern culture created the foundation of American politics, and in fact taverns were most often used as meeting places for revolutionaries. This is evident in the role of taverns during the Constitutional Convention, when it is noted that the Founding Fathers drank more than their fair share of the flask. The beverage industry has greatly influenced the American republic through economic, cultural, and political events.

A number of alcohols became extremely popular in the colonies of North America during the eighteenth century. According to Dr. Benjamin Rush, one of the delegates to sign the Declaration of Independence, there were two categories of alcohol: Temperance and Intemperance. Temperance alcohols included those that were commonly consumed during meals: wines, beers, and ciders. These alcohols had little to no effect on the social behavior, according to Rush. Intemperance alcohols, on the other hand, were those that were consumed only by those that would be met with social consequences: hard liquors, including rum, gin, and brandy. As a delegate to the Second Continental Congress and a medical professional, it can be inferred that Rush was well acquainted with the conservative social atmosphere of alcohol during that time.

Wines were especially popular throughout the eighteenth century in America. Two Portuguese wines, Madeira and Port, became known as the preferred beverages of the American upper class. Madeira gained popularity as a fortified wine from a Portuguese island of the same name. The island was a popular port and this made the wine easily accessible. Madeira actually became so popular that its price rose significantly during the late 1700s as it gained prestige with the American upper classes. By the end of the century, it was worth triple its value at the

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beginning of the 1700s. Madeira was also the wine used as a toast at the First Continental Congress, giving it even more claim to fame. Another Portuguese wine, Port, came from the mainland and was associated with heavy drinking culture. In England, it was not uncommon for men who could afford the wine to drink several bottles in one sitting. An Oxford University scholar, John Porter, could allegedly drink over thirteen bottles at a time. While binge drinking was not overly common, intoxication was considered more socially acceptable than by modern standards due to the commonality of beverages.

Even though Rush declared liquors as “Intemperance” beverages, rum and whiskey were extremely common drinks during the eighteenth century. During the Revolution, every soldier in the Continental Army was issued a daily portion of four ounces of rum. When the British cut off imports of rum to the colonies, the colonists responded by distilling local whiskey to replace the imports. During this time in 1777, the Commissary General that was stationed in Philadelphia ordered by law on the sixth of October that all citizens surrender any rum or spirits in their possession. The same was issued for all cattle or spare livestock. These orders from the Commissary General were an attempt to gather sorely needed supplies for the Continental Army. Continental soldiers were not the only working citizens who were paid in rum; it was also common for farmers to pay their laborers the same. These farmers found paying their laborers became increasingly difficult without the imports of rum. Local whiskey could not be distilled in the same quantities that were demanded in the colonies and it was often significantly more expensive. The American Revolution took a heavy toll on the alcohol industry in the United States, and consequently troubled citizens who relied on the industry in their every day lives.

The culture surrounding the taverns of colonial America was essential to the foundation of American society. At the beginning of the century, taverns were simply public drinking spaces. They were generally referred to as public houses because it was common for large groups

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2 Phillips, Alcohol: A History, 156.
3 Ibid., 158. At a fairly standard alcohol content of 22% per bottle, this feat is impressive even by today’s collegiate standards.
of people to gather at these houses in the cities. Eventually, the culture shifted towards public houses being frequented by specific groups. These included all types of social, political, and business groups. For example, artists in Philadelphia typically met at James’ Coffee House, which was owned by a painter. As these social gatherings grew, ordinary public houses were no longer adequate places to hold the spacious meetings. This caused taverns to gain popularity as meeting places. Citizens of all social classes frequented taverns, as they were a central part of social life in cities. Every state had unique licensing laws for establishments that sold alcohol beverages. In Virginia, there was only one tavern legally allowed per county. More often than not, this tavern was connected to the county courthouse. The taverns of New England were placed close to places of worship due to the heavy influence of religion in New England. While the location of taverns varied throughout the colonies, their purpose and influence remained largely consistent.

Philadelphia is a comparable representation of the general cultural atmosphere of the United States in the eighteenth century. In the early 1750s, Philadelphia was home to more than fourteen rum distilleries. In addition, it was also a major port city for the colonies, which means that a majority of the alcohol imports for the mid-Atlantic region came through the city of Philadelphia. These factors provided a foundation in which a prominent tavern culture could thrive. In less than fifty years, the number of taverns (both licensed and illegal) in the city of Philadelphia increased nearly nine fold. By 1769, Philadelphia had an estimated ratio of one tavern for every 158 people. Many Philadelphians had witnessed firsthand the success of the taverns in the city, and by the mid-eighteenth century they were inspired to join the industry to attempt to earn more profit. The more people who applied for licenses, the stricter the licensing policies became. The city’s officials wanted to curb the growing number of taverns in the city,

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but the strict licensing policies ironically encouraged the illegal establishment of taverns.\textsuperscript{11} By the Revolutionary War, the taverns became so well established in the city that officials could do little to shut down the illegal portions of the industry.

Taverns were the center of both economic and political culture in Philadelphia. City Tavern and the events that occurred there leading up to the American Revolution are a prominent example of the influence of taverns in politics. The City Tavern quickly became a central and important meeting place for the revolutionary cause. After being advertised by a tabloidist as a place of intellectual discussion, many revolutionaries and upper-class patriots became regular patrons at City Tavern. Among these patrons were the delegates from the First Continental Congress, who frequented the tavern during their sessions in Philadelphia. Many of them enjoyed the atmosphere and services of the tavern and became regular patrons. John Adams quickly became a fan upon his arrival in the city, where he was treated to a meal at the City Tavern for dinner before he even went to his room.\textsuperscript{12} These patrons earned a great deal of prestige for the tavern. Although the tavern was the public house of choice for Philadelphia’s upper class, the City Tavern went through a series of ownership changes in the mid-1780s due to behavioral issues. As Thompson says, “Gentlemen were no better able to prevent public political discussion from generating feuds, fistfights, and even duels than were laborers.”\textsuperscript{13} The City Tavern, and taverns like it, maintained their crucial role in the politics and culture of Philadelphia and other American cities.

Alcohol consumption was a part of American culture that affected all social and economic classes. Even a number of the Founding Fathers indulged in the fruit of the vine, much like any other ordinary American citizens of the time. Benjamin Franklin, a Philadelphian, served on several city councils and would often conduct business in the local taverns. In one particular case, Franklin was forced to recognize that discussion held in taverns carried great consequences and therefore must be taken seriously.\textsuperscript{14} Franklin himself did not make a habit of

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 33.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 153.
\textsuperscript{14} Thompson, \textit{Rum Punch and Revolution: Taverngoing and Public Life in Eighteenth Century Philadelphia}, 84.
patronizing the taverns for anything other than business and served on a number of the committees that oversaw the licensing strictures as well as the regulation of tavern policies.

Benjamin Franklin and John Adams served as ambassadors to France during the American Revolution. While in Europe on business, it was not uncommon for the two men to spend a great deal of money on alcohol. In John Adams’s personal ledger, he recorded that he paid seventy-two pounds and six shillings to the Tavern keeper at Nantes. This would be the modern equivalent of over $2,000. These kinds of purchases were not uncommon for the men while in Europe. Adams’s personal ledger often showed that the men would stock up on alcohol provisions before making long journeys or would become frequent patrons of French taverns. Considering the time period, this was not uncommon, nor was it an indication of poor character or judgment. Americans gained a reputation for their frequent alcohol consumption, and the personal ledgers of ambassadors during this period give credence to that reputation.

Another Founding Father who lived up to the American reputation of alcohol consumption was none other than George Washington. Washington was also a regular patron at the City Tavern during the Constitutional Convention. His diary kept during the convention noted that he visited the tavern quite often, almost once a week. When not dining at the City Tavern, Washington was dining with friends, most likely Robert Morris. As was customary at the time, Washington would have been treated to more than one glass of Madeira or Port during his dinners at the homes of friends. At the City Tavern, he was more likely to be served rum punch, which was highly alcoholic. A recipe for Royal Nectar, or “the Prince Regent’s Punch,” from 1819 closely resembles the punch that George Washington and his fellow delegates would have imbibed at the City Tavern. The recipe calls for “4 bottles champagne, 1 bottle Hock, 1 bottle Curraoco (sic), 1 quart Brandy, 1 quart Rum, 2 bottles Madeira, 2 bottles Seltzer Water, 4 pounds Bloom Raisins, Some Seville Oranges, Lemons, Powdered Sugar, Add Green Tea, Highly Iced.” This strong punch was the staple tavern drink for much of the eighteenth century. The Founding Fathers, although gentlemen of the upper class, participated in their fair share of the drinking and tavern-going culture of the eighteenth century.

The Constitutional Convention convened in Philadelphia on May 25, 1787. The object of the convention was to amend and improve the Articles of Confederation. Under rules set by a committee, which included Alexander Hamilton, everything discussed at the convention would remain off the record, including how certain delegations voted on issues. The diary kept by Washington, who served as president of the convention, would be one of the few surviving sources containing any details from inside the Constitutional Convention. While most attempts to significantly amend or replace the Articles of Confederation were immediately shut down by other delegates, the Virginia Plan managed to make headway on the floor of the convention. The plan called for a strong central government, something the Articles of Confederation expressly prevented.\textsuperscript{18} Hamilton delivered an address after the unveiling of the Virginia Plan, in which he urged his fellow delegates to question whether or not the convention should proceed under the Articles of Confederation. The delegates eventually moved to draft and adopt a new system of government, which was outlined by the Constitution of the United States. The Constitution was adopted on September 17, 1787. Washington released an address unveiling the new Constitution to the people on September 26, 1787.\textsuperscript{19} The government set forth by the Constitution still governs America today.

The Constitution was highly controversial at the time, since many delegates did not expect to draft a new form of government during the convention. A number of issues arose during the debates, one of the largest being whether the federal government should have the power to levy taxes. Coming out of the Revolutionary War, this was an extremely sensitive subject for a number of the delegations. Many delegates were concerned about the national debt accumulated by the war for independence, and saw federal taxes as a means of paying off that debt.\textsuperscript{20} Eventually, the power to levy and collect taxes was split between the federal and state governments. This satisfied both the federalists and the champions of states’ rights. Taxes were a pressing issue, especially for distillery owners and spirit merchants. Taxes and importation bans on alcohol during the American Revolution had a devastating effect on American industry and culture. In remedying the national debt, the new federal government would have to tread

\textsuperscript{19} George Washington, “In Convention, September 17, 1787,” \textit{The Carlisle Gazette} (1787).
\textsuperscript{20} Chernow, \textit{Alexander Hamilton}, 229.
carefully in taxing spirits, as Alexander Hamilton would later find out the hard way through the Whiskey Rebellion.

Taxation was not the only issue that disrupted the Constitutional Convention. No issue was more pressing than the division of the delegates within the convention. Distinct factions formed during the convention that would become the predecessors of the American party system. This issue was especially difficult to handle from within state delegations. Hamilton dealt with a divided delegation from New York, which made a huge impact since delegations rather than individuals cast votes. Hamilton was not the only delegate who became frustrated with his own delegation. These issues of division within the convention became a hindrance to the work of the Constitution set forth by the convention.

After the approval of the Constitution, the delegates threw one final get together at the City Tavern. All fifty-five of the delegates from the convention attended the event, as the City Tavern was a popular meeting place for the delegates. John Adams had once said that the tavern was “the most genteel tavern in America.” While it was popular among the delegates of the convention, at this point the City Tavern had been through several changes in ownership because of political intolerance and outright brawls. While most Philadelphians would not describe the City Tavern as “genteel,” they could agree that the historic tavern had earned its place in the history of the United States.

The farewell dinner at the City Tavern turned out to be a massive undertaking. The men dined and drank well into the evening; George Washington noted in his diary that he was not able to return home until ten in the evening. Together, the men dined and toasted the approval of the Constitution. The tab of the night is something quite unprecedented. For fifty-five men and the musicians, the tab read as such: 59 bottles of Madeira, 76 bottles of Claret, 22 bottles of Porter Stock, 14 bowls of alcoholic Punch, 8 bottles of Cider, and 12 bottles of beer. No more than sixty-five men consumed all of this in the course of one night. The bill totaled around eighty-nine pounds. Today the meal and drinks would have cost Washington almost $16,000.

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21 Chernow, Alexander Hamilton, 227.
22 Ibid., 241.
23 Washington, “Extracts from Washington’s Diary, Kept While Attending the Constitutional Convention of 1787,” 308.
24 Thompson, Rum Punch and Revolution: Taverngoing and Public Life in Eighteenth Century Philadelphia, 151. Of course, these figures do not include the extra charges for broken glasses and decanters, of which there were many.
The tab from the City Tavern during the Constitutional Convention was the highest bill paid by any Founding Father for alcoholic beverages.

Many Americans today would be appalled at the amount of consumption at the farewell dinner of the Constitutional Convention. But these levels of consumption were not uncommon for the time. Intoxication and alcoholism was not even acknowledged as an addiction until the very late 1700s. Many people began consuming alcohol from a young age, as there was no legal drinking age. Americans drank alcohol with meals, after meals, and for leisure. Alcohol was even used as medical treatment for common ailments. The industry bolstered the early American economy, provided meeting places that fostered the revolutionary cause, and celebrated American independence both after the signing of the Declaration and the approval of the Constitution. Alcohol was prevalent in all aspects of American society during the eighteenth century, and both its legacy and significance in early American culture was severely damaged by the Temperance movement beginning in the nineteenth century. Without the alcohol industry, the Continental Congress would have been unable to pay its army or begin to remedy its debt accumulated from the war. American industry would have lacked the economic support it gathered from the alcohol industry, and many citizens would have been unable to make a living during the Revolutionary War. It is arguable that the alcohol industry was essential to the foundation of the early United States.

Alcohol has remained a steady staple throughout the history of the world. When the world was turned upside down, the alcohol industry supported the new United States as it gained strength as a new nation. Alcohol has played a significant role in the history of the United States, and while the Temperance movement sought to discredit the industry, it could not erase the profound impact it has had on the foundation of America. The beverage industry has greatly influenced the American republic through economic, cultural, and political events.

Bibliography


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