

Statewide Prohibition ^[1]

By Harry McKown, UNC-Libraries, 2006

On May 26, 1908, by a referendum vote of 62 percent to 38 percent, North Carolina became the first southern state to enact statewide prohibition of alcoholic beverages.

The temperance movement of the antebellum period expressed the concern of many North Carolinians about the social consequences of what was perceived as the wide-spread abuse of wine, beer, and liquor, but the prohibition law of 1908 was the product of a more focused and organized movement which grew in the years following the Civil War. Increasingly after 1865, opposition to the traffic in liquor became a crusade against the saloon, which was depicted as a source of evil and corruption. New or revived organizations such as the Friends of Temperance, the Independent Order of Good Templars, and, most importantly, the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, pressed the state legislature for more control over the sale and consumption of alcohol.

The North Carolina General Assembly responded to the pressure in several ways. The sale of alcohol was forbidden near churches or schools. Townships were permitted to call special elections to decide whether or not to allow the licensing of liquor sales in the township, and special legislation prohibited alcohol in specific towns and counties. In 1881 the prohibition forces felt strong enough to seek a state-wide ban on alcohol through a referendum. They had not counted, however, on the strength of the opposition and the proposition failed by a vote of slightly better than three to one.

Over the next twenty years the dry forces improved their organization and allied themselves closely with the Methodist and Baptist Churches which supported prohibition strongly. They were materially aided by the disfranchisement of African Americans in North Carolina after the "White Supremacy" campaigns of the Democratic Party in 1898. With African Americans barred from voting, Democrats no longer feared splitting the white vote over a volatile issue like prohibition. In 1902 the creation of the Anti-Saloon League brought together many of the strands of the prohibition movement into a strong, politically oriented organization. In 1908 the General Assembly called for a referendum on prohibition which, after an active campaign, the dry forces won. The manufacture and sale of alcoholic beverages in North Carolina thus ended eleven years before the Eighteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution brought prohibition to the entire country.

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In the summer of 1907, ax-wielding temperance leader Carrie Nation toured NC and in fiery speeches advocated strict prohibition laws. She claimed that Salisbury was second only to Chicago as "the whiskeyest-soaked city in the US."

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