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Whiskey in Early America

Cover Page Footnote

Grace Bellino is a graduate student working on her Master's in library and information sciences at the Catholic University of America. She wrote this paper while completing her B.A. at Elmhurst College. This paper was presented at the Pi Gamma Mu Triennial International Convention in Kansas City in 2017.

Whiskey in Early America

As a result of the economic and political rules accompanying British colonization, Europe heavily influenced the alcoholic drink of choice in early America. Rum was the most readily available alcoholic beverage, and the British imported other alcoholic drinks such as Madeira, wine, and port that were heavily consumed by American colonists. Following the Revolution (1775-1781), these drinks were much more difficult to attain. Americans turned to whiskey as their spirit of choice simply because it was readily available. Whiskey would shape the identity of the early republic after the Whiskey Rebellion (1791-1794) and set the precedent for frontier insurrection and the authority of the federal government. Whiskey became a crucial contributor to the budding economy of early America and the establishment of distilleries and the ease of distribution of the drink opened up the development of the West. Whiskey became so prolific in the first few decades of the United States that even today, it remains a significant piece of the American identity.

The Origin of Whiskey

Due to the specificity of whiskey's production methods, there is much disagreement about when the first whiskey emerged. Controlled fermentation processes date back to ancient times (nearly 10,000 BCE) and spread between various ancient civilizations over thousands of years, creating many variations of alcoholic beverages similar to beer, though it was not until the end of the Iron Age that well-documented distillation equipment resembling modern equipment emerged in Egypt.¹ Though mention of fermented liquid distillation for consumption appears throughout history, the strongest evidence for spirit distillation begins in the twelfth century when German monk Albertus Magnus produced a recipe for distilling an alcoholic liquid

for use in alchemy.² From there, alcoholic distillation continued in the name of alchemy, the results typically used in chemical experiments or for medicinal purposes thanks to its supposedly curative properties. This “aquavitae” was produced on a much larger scale in Scotland, where irrefutable evidence of whiskey making was documented in 1494 and within ten years, “whiskey was viewed with such reverence among the learned men of Scotland that the nation’s King James IV began granting government charters to control who was allowed to make whiskey,” effectively creating the first official distillery of whiskey and setting a precedent for whiskey production regulations.³

Whiskey remained a relatively local phenomenon; monks and alchemists distilled whiskey as did farmers and rural communities, but the whiskey industry did not fully develop for several more centuries. Beyond the scope of discovery, not much is recorded about early whiskey production, perhaps because it became a mundane chore of little note to the farmers or alchemists who used production as a means to an end and not a hallowed blend of art and science as modern producers tend to view their craft. Thus it is also unclear when whiskey made its way to Colonial America, though it is assumed that some immigrants brought distilling equipment with them and those who resided in rural areas continued to produce whiskey sporadically, though it was nowhere near the alcoholic drink of choice in America until after the American Revolution.

Drinking in Colonial America

The popular drinking culture of Colonial America mirrored the fashions in British society as the colonies were under Imperial British rule in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In the time before the Revolution, the alcoholic drinks most commonly consumed by colonial citizens were beer and rum; beer for its social standard and ready availability and rum also for its

availability considering its status as a major export from the British Caribbean colonies and later, because legal measures restricted the production and consumption of other, unregulated and untaxed spirits (including whiskey).⁴

Beer was the common drink of choice in Britain—not because drinking water was viewed to be unsafe as perpetuated by the common misconception—but because it distinguished the drinker socially as someone who could afford to buy beer. However, due to lack of a steady supply of alcohol from England, drinking water was a necessity for the early colonists; one Virginian settler reportedly said of water “it is thought there can be no better water in the world, yet dare I not prefer it before good beer but any man will choose it before bad beer... Those that drink it be as healthful, fresh, and lusty as they that drink beer.”⁵ Clean, fresh water was available to the early colonists, and as time progressed steady shipments of beer and other spirits were brought to the colonies, so that by the eighteenth century “Americans were able to do as they would have done in England and refuse to drink water on the grounds that it was fit only for those who could not afford to drink anything better.”⁶ The importance of class distinction in Britain was mirrored in the colonies in their formation of social and drinking customs and beer quickly became the choice beverage for colonists who were able to afford it. Beer was not their only alcoholic option; rum was also readily available and in high demand in the colonies throughout the eighteenth century until the Revolution.

Rum, “a byproduct of sugar production on the island of Barbados,” was largely distilled in New England, where much of the molasses was exported by the British and then prepared for both domestic consumption and export. This process played a substantial part of the Colonial American economy.⁷ Rum became popular in the American colonies out of convenience; workingmen believed that the rum would make them strong as beer supposedly did, but beer

spoiled easily and it was much more difficult than rum to transport.⁸ Rum was easily incorporated into the drinking culture of the colonies and may have maintained its status in American culture and identity if it was not for the tariffs and taxes imposed on the raw sugar cane sent to the distilleries in New England. These taxes would become a cornerstone of the tension between British lawmakers and American colonists leading up to the American Revolution.⁹

The Molasses Tax of 1733 was the first of many excise taxes that would eventually instigate colonist revolt against British rule, ultimately leading to the declaration of independence. This tax “imposed tax on every gallon of foreign molasses imported to America from Africa or the Caribbean,” and was raised several times leading up to the Revolution, leading to a decline in colonists’ demand for rum that was becoming increasingly expensive to consume domestically.”¹⁰ The strained political relationship between the British lawmakers and the colonists who felt they had no representation in the government imposing such stiff regulations began to build as more and more taxes were imposed on the most basic and necessary of goods. Those opposed to the increasingly harsh treatment of the colonies organized massive boycotts, organized smuggling rings, and produced goods illegally in attempts to harm the economic connection between Britain and her American colonies and to make a statement of subversion and independence. Though the most famous boycott was the refusal to drink imported British tea, those sympathetic to the Patriot cause also refused to drink rum as a British import and turned to local beverages, leaving a hole in the market for distilled liquors in the colonies that only whiskey could fill. The British Royal Navy blockade of “American ports barring both rum and molasses imports from the West Indies”¹¹ was the final factor shifting the demand of

hard liquor from imported rum to domestically distilled whiskies; liquors which had emerged decades ago but were only produced and consumed at an isolated, local level, in rural America.

Effects of the Revolution on Drinking in America

Decades earlier, those living on the frontiers had already turned to grain-based alcohols. While rum was easier to transport than beer, it was still shipped at a high cost to the buyer, and thus frontiersmen (especially those of Scotch and Irish descent) turned to distilling hard liquor from local grains in the manner of their ancestors.¹² Living primarily in Pennsylvania and Kentucky on the outskirts of the colonies, they lived self-sustainable lives off the land and distilled whiskey for personal consumption, as opposed to as a product to market and sell. Whiskey flourished in these regions for three reasons: the two regions supported the growth of whiskey grains agriculturally, the distance from the rum distilleries on the East Coast encouraged the development of a more convenient and cheaper hard liquor, and the rural settlers in these areas were often ethnically Scotch and Irish and came to America with the knowledge of distilling whiskey.¹³

Whiskey began to spread from local consumption to a wider group of drinkers during the Revolutionary War. Soldiers began to consume whiskey, especially those closer to the frontier than to the coastal rum region. The Continental Army was given a specific alcohol ration of one gill (about four ounces) before battle, but over-drinking ran rampant in the camps.¹⁴ Men and women alike began distilling more whiskey and setting up shops near camps aimed for soldiers. “At Valley Forge, from 1777 to February 1778, soldiers consumed nearly 16,000 gallons of military issued whiskey and rum” and continued to seek even more whiskey from the nearby sutlers after drinking through their rations.¹⁵ The demand for whiskey prompted more distilleries to open to keep up with the new demand; so much so that the governing body of Virginia

expressed “concern over the present alarming scarcity and great quantity of grain consumed in the distilleries,” prompting a prohibition of the use of wheat, rye, oats, barley, and buckwheat for whiskey mash.¹⁶ George Washington expressed his support in writing saying, “some of the Southern States have already passed Acts prohibiting the distilling of unreasonable quantities of wheat and other grain into whiskey, and I hope Pennsylvania will do the same.”¹⁷ This early expression of the desire and necessity of regulating whiskey production and sales instigated the first major obstacle the early American federal government faced—the outcome would either make or break the new nation.

Early American Politics and Frontier Production

After the Revolution, whiskey production continued to increase as people moved west, seeking larger tracts of inexpensive land. Communities on the frontier of the colonies developed. People moved to the outskirts of America into the modern-day states of Kentucky, Tennessee, and beyond the modern boundaries of Pennsylvania “as part of a frontier population movement, subject to the same allurements—free land—made possible by successive wars, Indian treaties, state cessions, and the largeness of the federal government.”¹⁸ Though American whiskey distillation started in Pennsylvania, those that moved brought distilling with them down the Appalachian Mountains into Western Virginia, the Carolinas, Georgia, and other unmarked territories. Former military officer, the Marquis de François-Jean de Chastellux, recorded his experience in Western Virginia after the war where he reportedly had “an excellent supper, though whiskey was our only drink, we contrived to convert it into a tolerable toddy” and whiskey was all he had to drink for the three days he travelled in this remote region of the country.¹⁹ This illustration of whiskey drinking in the Southern and Western territories highlights the depth at which whiskey had become ingrained in the frontier culture.

After the Revolutionary War had ended, distilling once again resumed for the primary sake of domestic consumption and the occasional local sale of surplus whiskey. This early product was highly inconsistent; ingredients varied as frontier distillers made use of whichever fruits and grains were locally available, which varied by region and by preference of the distiller.²⁰ Rye became the primary grain that was utilized for whiskey production, especially in Pennsylvania where state legislatures had passed laws limiting the types and quantities of grains that could be produced into whiskey.²¹ These early restrictions indicate a concern that too much grain would be used to distill whiskey, foreshadowing the federal government's attempts to regulate the whiskey industry as a taxable commercial enterprise.

The amount of whiskey distilled in the decades after the Revolutionary War increased as more people flocked to the frontiers and the demand for whiskey exceeded the production rates of distillers distilling for home consumption. Eventually it became out of necessity that western and southern frontier farmers distilled whiskey; "inadequate transportation and the potential income offered by whiskey because of its popularity" urged farmers to distill their surplus grain from a perishable good to a long-lasting product to be shipped across the mountains to the east coast.²² Without the steady supply of sugar cane from the British West Indies, most of the rum distilleries along the East Coast had fallen into disrepair not long after the Revolution, and the demand for the domestically produced hard liquor of the west incentivized frontier distillers to start producing whiskey commercially. Though small in scale, the early whiskey industry was booming and farmers were turning a sizable profit from their endeavors; the typical farmstead distillery produced whiskey in the winter months after the harvest, utilizing one or two stills to produce an average of 650 gallons of whiskey, which could turn around \$460 in profits or around \$12,700 in today's currency.²³

The whiskey industry continued to develop and grow in the decades after the war more or less unimpeded until the federal government began to take notice, viewing whiskey as a taxable good to be utilized as a means of paying Revolutionary War debts and to bolster the young government's federal budget. The ensuing conflict between the Federalists influencing George Washington's cabinet and the diametrically opposed frontier distillers venerated by the anti-Federalists became a defining moment for the newly minted United States and set the precedent for the exercise of power of the federal government in civil disputes and insurrections.

Frontier Whiskey Production and the Federal Government

George Washington's concern about the military consumption of whiskey during the Revolutionary War continued well past the end of fighting. Though he himself had authorized the rations of rum and whiskey given to his soldiers at Valley Forge, the uninhibited rates of distillation in the western territories worried the leader of the new nation. Greater still was the threat to the new federal government posed by "the financial pressures brought on by the American Revolution and constant Indian warfare."²⁴ Washington's Secretary of Treasury, Alexander Hamilton, posed the idea of an excise tax that would support the growth of the Federal Government by ensuring a steady stream of revenue. This whiskey excise tax would fill the gap that remained from his previous tariff that failed to cover the national debt, which by 1790, was 27 percent of the federal budget.²⁵ At the start of 1791, Hamilton established "an extensive network of revenue officers, taxation districts, and government agencies to administer and collect the new tax; four cents per gallon of whiskey."²⁶ It was also part of Hamilton's intent that this steep tax would also curb whiskey production and reduces the number of distilleries in the western territories.

Frontier distillers did not take well to this imposition of an excise tax. As Americans who had just fought a war over unfair taxation, they viewed the imposition of the excise tax as a tyrannical oppression of their individual freedom perpetrated by the new American government. Also, during the Revolutionary War, frontier farmers and distillers were the ones who had supplied the rations of whiskey to the Continental Army and this taxation was viewed as an unfair measure against those who had given their services and loyalty to the patriot cause just a few decades ago. Many feared the excise taxes would negatively affect their economic situations; there were not enough people to purchase and consume surplus grains before they rotted, and thus farmers relied, in part, on whiskey production to transform their crops into a product that could be shipped without spoiling. Yet from the Federalist perspective, these complaints were unfounded; frontier communities were still a part of the United States benefiting from this connection and thus they had a duty to pay taxes to help maintain the government that provided them protection.²⁷ The Federalists also counter-argued that the Revolutionary War had been fought over taxation without representation; in the case of the whiskey excise tax, there was fair and adequate representation as citizens in all states had political representatives in the legislative body.²⁸ The Anti-Federalists and frontier distillers refused to buy into the concept; the excise tax was an attempt to stifle their spirit of individual freedom and charge them for the loss of it.

In protest against these “tyrannical” actions taken by the federal government, Anti-Federalists such as Thomas Jefferson placed the frontiersman on a pedestal as a martyr for their political ideology. At the local level, frontiersmen protested with demonstrations and petitions to the federal government with occasional attacks on federal revenue officers. This continued until the summer of 1794 when “this program of non-violence ended and was followed by a systematic attempt to intimidate excise officers and drive them out of the Western counties” of

Pennsylvania and Virginia.²⁹ Attacks on federal officers challenged the authority of the federal government to impose taxes and demonstrated the spirit of individuality and separation frontiers-dwellers felt from the rest of the United States. These actions begged a response from the Federalists who had imposed the tax and from Washington whose every action set the precedent for the boundaries of the role of President of the United States. Stepping up to this role, Washington wrote Hamilton in 1792 saying:

I have no hesitation in declaring, if the evidence of it is clear and unequivocal, that I shall, however reluctantly I exercise them, exert all the legal powers with which the Executive is invested, to check so daring and unwarrantable a spirit. It is my duty to see the Laws executed – to permit them to be trampled upon with impunity would be repugnant to it, nor can the Government longer remain a passive spectator of the contempt with which they are treated.³⁰

Letting the attacks go without consequence could be a crushing blow to the young federal government; if the government could not enforce its laws and maintain its authority, than it would fall by the will of local individual spirit. Taking a stand, Washington rallied 12,950 militiamen from surrounding states to meet the “whiskey rebels” responsible for countless riots and home-burnings employed against revenue officers in order to shut down the insurrection.³¹

Washington and his militia marched west to Pittsburg, the site of the attack on a federal military fort to engage the violent frontiersmen, but by the time they got there nearly all the whiskey insurgents had disappeared.³² Washington’s men apprehended approximately 150 men they hoped to bring to trial for inciting war-like behaviors against the federal government, however only two were convicted.³³ Washington pardoned both men after the trial, but the affair sent a message that war-inciting behaviors against the federal government would not be tolerated and the federal government would seek to maintain law and order over the states.³⁴ This action successfully preserved the whiskey excise tax until 1802 when Thomas Jefferson, the premier

Anti-Federalist politician, repealed the tax and rewarded the spirit of individuality and sense of freedom he admired in the frontiersmen. Although the debt from the Revolutionary War continued to burden the finances of the new nation, Jefferson's administration repealed all federal excise and property taxes and put in their place higher customs duties to keep the net income of the federal government consistent while protecting the interests of the frontiersmen.³⁵

Though the whiskey excise tax was ultimately repealed, its implementation and the ensuing Whiskey Rebellion solidified the federal government's authority over citizens in the various states in the country and set a precedent for how acts of rebellion would be dealt with to preserve the nation. The situation also brought forth important questions posed by Alexander Hamilton including, "Shall the majority govern or be governed? Shall the nation rule or be ruled? Shall the general will prevail, or the will of the faction? Shall there be a government, or no government?"³⁶ While Federalists and Anti-Federalists had different answers for these questions, these fundamental and ideological themes needed to be answered by the federal government in order to maintain a strong image and sense of legitimacy over those governed. Ultimately, the Whiskey Rebellion "created a precedent for the supremacy of law and the suppression of an extreme individualism which, marching under the banner of freedom or state' rights, promotes violent disobedience to constitutional authority."³⁷ The frontiers distillers, while temporarily damped by the results of the Whiskey Rebellion, enjoyed the freedom of untaxed whiskey production that Jefferson reinstated when he took political office. After the Whiskey Rebellion, whiskey distillers of the Early Republic were on the verge of an economic boom brought on by the Industrial Revolution, a greater demand for hard liquor, and the expansion of the west.³⁸

The Birth of the Whiskey Economy: Commercialization of Distilling

The Whiskey Rebellion had not affected the American thirst for whiskey as an alcoholic beverage and the demand for the drink was higher than ever despite the dramatic clashes between the federal government and the distillers in the 1790s. After Jefferson took office as Vice President under John Adams, he abolished the whiskey excise tax. Leading up to the Industrial Revolution, many distillers were in the process of expanding their production equipment from only one whiskey still to several. In many cases, whiskey production began to provide more profits than their farming endeavors, depending on the region. Very few early frontier distillers were able to afford complicated distilling equipment or enough equipment to produce whiskey for a wider commercial audience. Even so, “toward the end of the eighteenth century there was a noticeable trend away from small, family-type distilling. Distilleries increased in size and output, the manufacture of liquor became more sophisticated, and the distillers began to be specialized business men.”³⁹ Distilling whiskey also lent itself well to being operated in conjunction with other types of manufacturing. Drawing from “property for sale” advertisements, historians have gathered that distillers were often times also operating merchant mills, grist mills, sawmills, hemp mills, rope walks, fulling mills, and paper mills in combination with their whiskey distilling.⁴⁰ This tendency for dual production was more convenient for distillers than farming as the equipment for mill trades often overlapped with distilling more closely, and thus it was more cost effective and economically sound as the demand for whiskey increased. It was not until the Industrial Revolution that the industry experienced a true whiskey boom with an increased capacity for production using more innovative equipment and power sources for producing larger amounts of whiskey.

The driving force of the Industrial Revolution was the innovation of utilizing steam for powering machines. Steamboats brought corn, rye, and malted barley to distilling hubs, brought shipments of the finished product to urban centers, and steam-powered pumps supplied cool water for the distilling process.⁴¹ Distillers also developed new technological advancements for their equipment that allowed them to distill larger quantities and a more consistent and quality product. The Hope Distillery in Kentucky is likely to have first applied the use of steam power during the distillation process between the years 1816 and 1820.⁴² In 1831, the invention of the column still allowed for a much larger quantity of whiskey to be distilled than pot stills and allowed for the mash to be used longer because it did not burn, which removed the burned taste from the whiskey increasing the quality.⁴³ The large-scale commercialization of distilling ushered in a new era of whiskey in the United States. “By 1840, nearly every county in the country had a distillery” and some in the western states had several.⁴⁴ The market for whiskey was booming and with it came further standardizations of production methods that ultimately improved the quality of the resulting whiskey and increased the efficiency of the process.

Whiskey Improvements

The advancements of the Industrial Revolution increased production to meet the demand of consumers and left the door open for distillers to perfect their craft into an art. Dr. James Crow, a medical doctor who emigrated from Scotland to Kentucky in 1820, was one of the greatest visionaries that evolved the distillation of whiskey.⁴⁵ Hoping to elevate the production of whiskey by using scientific method to remove questions of quality and allow the more artistic elements to come into the process of distilling, Crow introduced new controls into the distillation process. These breakthroughs include: using a thermometer to help regulate temperature, a hydrometer to test alcohol levels, a test to check pH levels throughout distillation, recognition of

limestone water as critical to the whiskey-making process, improving sour mash and sanitation methods—each contributing to his common designation as the father of modern American whiskey.⁴⁶ These scientific advancements allowed commercial distillers the ability to maintain quality control and consistency over their product so they could focus on the artistry of whiskey production and continue to advance the quality of taste of the product making it more desirable.

Before long, with the amount of money to be made in the whiskey industry and the more complicated and expensive new methods of production, cheap imitation whiskeys began flooding the market.⁴⁷ These “knockoffs” typically consisted of neutral spirits flavored with various natural and chemical additives in order to mimic the original spirits as closely as possible. Those who dealt in counterfeit whiskey, known as rectifiers, would either “purchase cheap whiskey, ‘rectify’ it by adding flavors or purifying it, and then resell it,” or purchase “un-aged white spirits of various proofs that had to be filtered through charcoal and then re-flavored in charred barrels” from farmer distillers.⁴⁸ Rectifying was an attractive moneymaking endeavor because the purified cheap whiskey’s market price was much higher and the whole process took only a few hours, as opposed to the years it took to properly distill and age true whiskey. The cheap whiskies that simulated the fine aged, darker spirits were those that were in the highest demand, though imitations of nearly every type of whiskey at the time had a recipe. One such book, *600 Miscellaneous Valuable Receipts, Worth Their Weight in Gold*, by John Marquart, offered imitation recipes and bluntly stated the fact that imitation whiskey trade had a high potential to make a significant amount of money.⁴⁹ Premium, cheap, or imitation, America had grown an insatiable thirst for whiskey that could not be shaken.

Dominance of Whiskey as an Industry

The popularity of whiskey continued to grow alongside the demand of other hard liquors. Rum was experiencing a resurgence along the East Coast in the former colonial center of rum distillation under British rule. Rum was essentially whiskey's only rival as a commercially-produced hard liquor; though it was nearly double the price of whiskey.⁵⁰ Hoping to raise more revenue for the federal government, Congress sought a way to tax imported alcohol in order to “protect the interests of domestic industry and agriculture from foreign competition,” and passed their first tariff act on alcohol in 1816 on imported liquors. Some congressmen wanted to continue to affect alcohol production in favor of frontier distillers and dampen the business of the Eastern distillers. Congress made the decisive decision of imposing a tax of 15 cents on foreign rums and 2 cents on rum distilled in New England.⁵¹ This demonstrated the importance and universality of whiskey in America in the early 1800s—that Congress would risk the ire of New England distillers and rum traders in order to protect the domestic whiskey industry from taxation. This encouraged the public to choose domestic whiskey as a more affordable and more patriotic option, upholding the republican ideals the frontiersmen and their whiskey represented. In the congressional debates over the proposed tariff bill, Ohio Representative Samuel F. Vinton noted, “whiskey has come into almost universal use throughout the United States, except those sections of the country which carry on a direct and barter trade with the West Indies,” and the only consequence of the tariff bill would be that “a gallon of whiskey would replace every gallon of rum that is forced to leave the market,” allowing for a growth of the domestic economy, the development of the western states, and the expansion of whiskey distillation to regions distilling and trading rum.⁵² The United States continued to avoid taxing whiskey makers until the Gilded

Age for fear of again inciting the whiskey rebels that had challenged the federal government's authority and threatened the security of the vulnerable developing nation.

After the government challenged the rum industry—especially the foreign import of rum—and took a stand with the domestic frontier whiskey industry, distillers were as supported and encouraged as they had ever been before. Whiskey was in high production to meet a high demand, and imitators were trying to get a foothold in the market. The improvements made to whiskey during the Industrial Revolution left one important remaining development: “the public identification of individual distillers with their whiskey and the competitive quality of that whiskey;” competition which bolstered the industry and created new sub-identities among whiskey drinkers who aligned with one another according to choice of brand.⁵³ The demand for whiskey across all social and economic classes solidified the reputation of whiskey as an egalitarian drink demonstrative of the republican ideals of the United States and its legacy as an indicator of the American identity was developed in the days of the Early Republic as the nation matured.

Drinking Whiskey and the Early-American Identify

Whiskey's popularity was two-fold in early American society: medical professionals, taking their advice from scotch distillers a century earlier, swore by the curative properties of regular whiskey drinking, while many enjoyed whiskey simply for the stiff alcohol content and the associated side effects. Whiskey was consumed medicinally as it was thought to stimulate life force and bring vitality to the drinker. “It was common to down a glass of whiskey or other spirits before breakfast, “and so conducive to health was this nostrum esteemed,” noted a journalist in 1830, “that no sex, and scarcely an age, were deemed exempt from its application.”⁵⁴ Many took this to heart, gladly taking the public permission to imbibe daily in

copious amounts; Americans would often take a dram of whiskey or other ardent spirits during each morning and afternoon break rather than coffee or tea. “Even school children took their sip of whisky, the morning and afternoon glasses being considered “absolutely indispensable to man and boy.”⁵⁵ Liquor was a vital part of the diet, and was often taken in the evening as well as a fortifying nightcap to aid sleep and digestion. An Englishman noted while traveling through the south in the 1820s, “north or south, east or west, was the universal practice of sipping a little at a time, but frequently.”⁵⁶

Feeding off this notion of consuming whiskey as a health measure, some whiskey distillers began making false claims about the health benefits of their whiskey in order to exploit the market on medicinal hard liquors. Many of the products promoted with outrageous claims of health and wellbeing were inferior products, rectified whiskies, and sometimes contained dangerous combinations of chemicals. The makers of the infamous Duffy’s Pure Malt Whiskey promised the drink would cure “general debility, overwork, la grippe, colds, bronchitis, consumption, malaria, dyspepsia, depression, exhaustion, and weakness from whatever causes.”⁵⁷ A renowned physician named Dr. Willard H. Morse said “Duffy’s threw off germs because it was chemically pure” and the company further marketed that “Duffy’s Pure Malt Whiskey not only kills germs, but it stimulates the blood, aids digestion, and tones the action of the heart.”⁵⁸ Outrageous claims such as these continued for decades unchecked by any regulatory bodies, and many people bought into the idea of whiskey as a cure-all for their ailments.

Not all early American medical professionals advised drinking whiskey and other hard liquors as detoxifying and revitalizing measures. The renowned doctor, Benjamin Rush, was fascinated by alcohol and alcoholism and conducted an inquiry into the effects of hard liquor on the body to better inform the public. “Before Dr. Rush there had been two clearly defined

attitudes toward drinking in society: drinking was a gift from God, and/or drunkenness was a curse from the devil.”⁵⁹ Dr. Rush’s empirical inquiry was among the first of its kind conducted in the United States and his results were published in a volume entitled “An inquiry into the effects of ardent spirits upon the human body and mind.”⁶⁰ Dr. Rush’s results outlined the many risks of drinking “ardent spirits” or any liquor derived from distillation including everything from stomach sickness to jaundice, bad breath to epilepsy, and madness. His methods for curing drunkenness ranged from the loosening of the collar and tying of a wet napkin around the head to “profuse whipping” or bleeding of the afflicted.⁶¹ Though some of Dr. Rush’s ideas are rooted in reality, much of his research and solutions were a pseudoscience, believed to be true at the time but built upon misunderstandings about the human body and medical science. While his work was printed on behalf of a preacher hoping to instill a deeper temperance into his congregation, it did not have as large impact on the whiskey industry as he had hoped until after the temperance movement gained momentum. After all, Dr. Benjamin Rush himself said, “ardent spirits, when taken in a moderate quantity, often have a friendly influence upon health and life.”⁶²

Social Drinking and the American Identity

As the nineteenth century wore on, the drinking habits Dr. Rush warned against became daily ritual, especially amongst frontier dwellers. “Relatively heavy and frequent drinking, with the very American preference for hard liquor, had become common throughout the nation. The period from the 1790s to the early 1830s was probably the heaviest drinking era in the nation’s history.”⁶³ Both social drinking and drunkenness was much more prevalent after America gained independence than before during colonial times and this developed into a behavioral norm. “This phenomenon was partly a reflection of the newer, non-communal, individualistic orientation that was emerging with the Revolutionary War era—an outlook that put greater emphasis on personal

liberty, self-reliance, and equality of opportunity among free citizens unfettered by unreasonable social and governmental restraints.”⁶⁴ This spirit of freedom and individuality, born in the era after the Revolution, was the most defining character of the American people in the Early Republic, and the ideas were championed by Jeffersonian and Jacksonian ideals. Both presidents were instrumental in establishing whiskey as a “patriotic working-mans’ drink,” and this value added symbolism of whiskey as the type of patriot all Americans should aspire to be was quickly internalized into American social culture.⁶⁵ This concept of patriotic whiskey consumption transferred over into social drinking culture in which Americans acted in defiance of the Old World European ways.

Americans considered European wine culture to be elite and snobbish, just as visiting foreigners often commented on the Americans’ excessive drinking and choice of “homemade” ardent spirits. Frances Trollope, an English writer, traveled to America and recorded her observations of American culture. Throughout her book, she looks down upon the American penchant for whiskey, writing: “whiskey flows every where at the same fatally cheap rate of twenty cents the gallon, and its hideous effects are visible on the countenance of every man you meet.”⁶⁶ Trollope, like many European visitors, was appalled by the amount of drunken Americans they encountered on their travels, and worried for the wives and families of those who overindulged in whiskey. Such visitors wrote of their fears for the civil obedience and order that could be challenged by unfettered drunken habits; a cause that was soon to be taken up by the temperance movement. The Europeans specifically stigmatized whiskey, associating it with drunken, uncivilized, and unmannered frontiersmen, while thirsty Americans drinkers lauded the drink, sometimes for those very same reasons. Americans were generally dismissive of European

commentary on their alcoholic drink of choice; Kentuckian Tom Johnson responded to European worries about his drinking with a wisecrack, emblazoning his tombstone with the words:

“By whiskey grog he lost his breath,
Who would not die so sweet a death?”⁶⁷

The right to drink whiskey was a privilege being American afforded and the idea of freedom reigned supreme over drinking habits; even an alcoholic could argue they were “free under the laws of the nation to pursue his or her own lifestyle no matter what others thought.”⁶⁸ As drinking was such a large part of daily life and was often an activity detonating friendship and equality, the majority of Americans welcomed drinking, especially with guests, and were more willing to look past people who might have a drinking problem owing to the fact that nearly everyone drank a lot; over three times more on average in the early-nineteenth century than Americans drink today. Though most Americans generally accepted this as the norm, not everyone was willing to accept whiskey as a permanent fixture in society, and as the Early Republic matured, the beginnings of the temperance movement were starting to take hold. The rate of drinking began to slow with the temperance movement and the start of a new progressive era, however, the whiskey culture legacy that developed as part of the new nation lives on today.

Conclusion

Though the origin of whiskey is somewhat ambiguous, the incorporation of whiskey into American society both shaped and was shaped by the political, economic, and social cultures of Colonial America, through the Revolution, and into the era of the Early Republic. The American taste for whiskey was largely developed as a remonstrance against the British Empire’s high taxation on rum and flourished as a necessity to quench the American thirst for hard liquor after the Revolution when rum was harder and more expensive to come by. The newfound freedom

and sense of individual liberty clashed with the established federal government and manifested through the Whiskey Rebellion as George Washington was faced with setting the precedent for handling insurrection posed to him by frontier distillers over the taxation of their product. By the dawn of the nineteenth century, whiskey became America's most iconic alcoholic beverage and the spirit of frontier distillers was as strong as ever. The Industrial Revolution brought sweeping changes and vast improvements to the process and final product of whiskey making allowing the whiskey industry to prosper and gave rise to imitators that would eventually inspire the passage of food safety regulations. The federal government sought to protect the domestic whiskey industry and placed a steep tax on other hard liquors, especially foreign imports, in order to ensure the American staple would continue to prosper and thrive. By the 1820s, nearly everyone in the country was drinking whiskey for either medicinal or recreational reasons; all ages and genders consumed whiskey throughout the day as recommended by many physicians for its supposed fortifying and curative features. Europeans looked down upon the egalitarian whiskey drink so many Americans imbibed in and wrote of the uncivilized and drunken ways of Americans. Many dedicated whiskey drinkers, especially those living on the frontier, scoffed at these outsider commentaries on the drink so closely related to their identities as Americans. However these negative comments became the basis for the temperance movement that began to take off towards the end of the era of the Early Republic attempting to limit the proliferation of drunkenness in the country. Throughout the development of the new nation after the Revolution, whiskey was both a product and driving force of political decisions, economic growths, mechanical innovations, and the formation of a national identity that is still recognizable today.

ENDNOTES

¹ Kevin Kosar, *Whiskey: A Global History*, (London: Reaktion Books, 2010), 34-36.

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- ² Norbert Kockmann, "The History of Distillation," in *Distillation Fundamentals and Principles*, edited by Andrzej Gorak and Eva Sorensen, (London: Academic Press, 2014), 7.
- ³ Kevin Kosar, *Whiskey: A Global History*, (London: Reaktion Books, 2010), 38-39.
- ⁴ Andrew Barr, "The Americanization of European Taste," *Drink: A Social History of America*, (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, Inc., 1999), 34-36.
- ⁵ *Ibid*, 33.
- ⁶ *Ibid*, 34.
- ⁷ *Ibid*, 35.
- ⁸ *Ibid*, 36-37.
- ⁹ For more information about the American Revolution, see Gordon S. Wood, *The American Revolution: A History*, (New York: Modern Library, 2003).
- ¹⁰ Susan Cheever, *Drinking in America: Our Secret History*, (New York: Twelve, 2015), 48.
- ¹¹ Mark Edward Lender and James Kirby Martin, *Drinking in America: A History*, (New York: The Free Press, 1987), 31.
- ¹² Fred Minnick, *Whiskey Women: The Untold Story of How Women Saved Bourbon, Scotch, and Irish Whiskey*, (Nebraska: Potomac Books, 1978), 46.
- ¹³ Mark Edward Lender and James Kirby Martin, *Drinking in America: A History*, (New York: The Free Press, 1987), 31.
- ¹⁴ Henry G. Crowgey, *Kentucky Bourbon: The Early Years of Whiskeymaking*, (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1971), 18.
- ¹⁵ Fred Minnick, *Whiskey Women: The Untold Story of How Women Saved Bourbon, Scotch, and Irish Whiskey*, (Nebraska: Potomac Books, 1978), 45.
- ¹⁶ Henry G. Crowgey, *Kentucky Bourbon: The Early Years of Whiskeymaking*, (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1971), 19.
- ¹⁷ John C. Fitzpatrick, *Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745-1799*. (Washington DC: Government Printing Offices, 1941), 7:250.
- ¹⁸ Henry G. Crowgey, *Kentucky Bourbon: The Early Years of Whiskeymaking*, (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1971), 29.
- ¹⁹ François-Jean Chastellux, marquis de, *Travels in North-America in the years 1780-81-82*. (New York: n.p. 1828), 56.
- ²⁰ Henry G. Crowgey, *Kentucky Bourbon: The Early Years of Whiskeymaking*, (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1971), 29.
- ²¹ Susan Cheever, *Drinking in America: Our Secret History*, (New York: Twelve, 2015), 42.
- ²² Kevin T. Barksdale, "Our Rebellious Neighbors: Virginia's Border Counties during Pennsylvania's Whiskey Rebellion," in *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 111, no. 1 (2003): 10.
- ²³ George Washington's Mount Vernon, "Ten Facts About the Distillery," accessed on April 12, 2017, <http://www.mountvernon.org/the-estate-gardens/distillery/ten-facts-about-the-distillery/>; & Samuel H. Williamson, "Seven Ways to Compute the Relative Value of a U.S. Dollar Amount, 1774 to present," *MeasuringWorth*, 2018, <https://www.measuringworth.com/calculators/uscompare>.
- ²⁴ *Ibid*, 10.
- ²⁵ Cynthia L. Krom and Stephanie Krom, "The Whiskey Tax of 1791 and the Consequent Insurrection: "A Wicked and Happy Tumult"" *The Accounting Historians Journal* 40, no. 2 (2013): 91-113. <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.elmhurst.edu/stable/43486736>.

²⁶ Kevin T. Barksdale, "Our Rebellious Neighbors: Virginia's Border Counties during Pennsylvania's Whiskey Rebellion," in *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 111, no. 1 (2003): 10.

²⁷ The Federalist and Anti-Federalist movements in the early United States consisted of two opposing viewpoints for the future of the federal government. The Federalists, led by Hamilton, believed in a strong centralized government and believed the Constitution and the power of the Executive Branch to be critical for the future of the United States. The Anti-Federalists, led by Jefferson and supported by frontiersmen, believed a strong centralized government would be in a position to restrict personal liberties and was prone to collapsing into chaos. They did not want to support a constitution without a bill of rights explicitly protecting individual freedoms and generally believed taxation to be an insult to liberty. See Shlomo Slonim, "The Federalist Papers and the Bill of Rights," in *Constitutional Commentary* 20, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 151-162.

²⁸ Susan Cheever, *Drinking in America: Our Secret History*, (New York: Twelve, 2015), 67-68.

²⁹ Jacob E. Cooke, "The Whiskey Insurrection: A Re-evaluation," in *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 30, no. 3 (1963): 317."

³⁰ "To Alexander Hamilton from George Washington, 7 September 1792." *Founders Online*, National Archives. Last modified March 30, 2017. Accessed April 12, 2017. <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-12-02-0257>.

³¹ Fred Minnick, *Whiskey Women: The Untold Story of How Women Saved Bourbon, Scotch, and Irish Whiskey*, (Nebraska: Potomac Books, 1978), 46.

³² Peter Kotowski, "Whiskey Rebellion," *The Digital Encyclopedia of George Washington*, accessed April 12, 2017. <http://www.mountvernon.org/digital-encyclopedia/article/whiskey-rebellion/>

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Robert F. Moss, *Southern Spirits: Four Hundred Years of Drinking in the South, with Recipes*, (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 2016), 73.

³⁵ Robert E. Wright, "Youth and Maturity: The Public Debt Grows Up, Then Slims Down," in *One Nation Under Debt: Hamilton, Jefferson, and the History of What We Owe*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008), 170-171.

³⁶ Jacob E. Cooke, "The Whiskey Insurrection: A Re-evaluation," *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 30, no. 3 (1963): 326.

³⁷ Ibid, 345.

³⁸ Robert F. Moss, "The Whiskey Boom," *Southern Spirits: Four Hundred Years of Drinking in the South, with Recipes*, (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 2016), 111-123,

³⁹ Henry G. Crowgey, *Kentucky Bourbon: The Early Years of Whiskeymaking*, (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1971), 52.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 53.

⁴¹ Michael R, Veach, *Kentucky Bourbon Whiskey: An American Heritage*. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2013),35.

⁴² Ibid, 36.

⁴³ Ibid, 36-37.

⁴⁴ Fred Minnick, *Whiskey Women: The Untold Story of How Women Saved Bourbon, Scotch, and Irish Whiskey*, (Nebraska: Potomac Books, 1978), 50.

⁴⁵ Michael R, Veach, *Kentucky Bourbon Whiskey: An American Heritage*. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2013), 41.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 42.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 45.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ John Marquart, *600 Miscellaneous Valuable Receipts, Worth Their Weight in Gold*, (Philadelphia: Christian Henry, 1860), <https://archive.org/details/600miscellaneous00marq>.

⁵⁰ Fred Minnick, *Whiskey Women: The Untold Story of How Women Saved Bourbon, Scotch, and Irish Whiskey*, (Nebraska: Potomac Books, 1978), 49.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Samuel F. Vinton, "Tariff Bill," *Of Debates in Congress. From A Century of Lawmaking for a New Nation: U.S. Congressional Documents and Debates, 1774-1875*, (Library of Congress), 2335-2342.

⁵³ Henry G. Crowgey, *Kentucky Bourbon: The Early Years of Whiskeymaking*, (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1971), 121.

⁵⁴ Mark Edward Lender and James Kirby Martin, *Drinking in America: A History*, (New York: The Free Press, 1987), 47.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ "Duffy's Pure Malt Whiskey," (Rochester, New York: *The St. Louis Clinique, n.d.*), vii.

⁵⁸ Fred Minnick, *Whiskey Women: The Untold Story of How Women Saved Bourbon, Scotch, and Irish Whiskey*, (Nebraska: Potomac Books, 1978), 57.

⁵⁹ Susan Cheever, *Drinking in America: Our Secret History*, (New York: Twelve, 2015), 62.

⁶⁰ Benjamin Rush, *An inquiry into the effects of ardent spirits upon the human body and mind*: Josiah Richardson, 1819, accessed April 12, 2017. <https://archive.org/details/2569031R.nlm.nih.gov>.

⁶¹ Ibid, 30-32.

⁶² Ibid, 5.

⁶³ Mark Edward Lender and James Kirby Martin, *Drinking in America: A History*, (New York: The Free Press, 1987), 46.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 53.

⁶⁵ Reid Mitenbuler, *Bourbon Empire: The Past and Future of America's Whiskey*. (New York: Viking, 2015), 70.

⁶⁶ Frances Trollope, *Delphi Collected Works of Frances Trollope* (Hastings: Delphi Classics, 2016).

⁶⁷ Reid Mitenbuler, *Bourbon Empire: The Past and Future of America's Whiskey*. (New York: Viking, 2015), 75.

⁶⁸ Mark Edward Lender and James Kirby Martin, *Drinking in America: A History*, (New York: The Free Press, 1987), 54.