

Coopted and Colonized - Lessons from the Washingtonian Movement

History is not linear. Our movement, the [New Recovery Advocacy Movement](#), like many social movements in the course of history develop and are then subject to decay. This history is important. The past is the pathway that has led to every door available to us in our current era. We can learn from history to understand what strategies worked and gain insight into the mistakes that were made in those bygone eras. Above all else, our own history should ground us in a deep sense of humility. We are the beneficiaries of all the generations of effort that have come before our own.

Every person in America has been impacted by addiction and its consequences. It kills millions. It is just as true that the power of recovery has always had the capacity to heal communities. It is the lesser told truth. Society has long focused on the problem and not the solutions. This may be partially a result that healing often occurs through the common bond of lived experience and not some grand panacea. The fact that people in community can and do help each other heal

is no less remarkable, yet it flies in the face of the negative narrative about who and what we are. Our society has long viewed us as flawed beyond capacity to heal. Our history is replete with us rising up and proving otherwise.

It is remarkable facet of our story, that in the face of daunting challenges over the course of American history groups of recovering people have risen up harnessing the power of recovery to transform lives and heal communities. One such chapter is that of the [Washingtonian Movement](#). Like all such movements, people in recovery formed it. The movement was founded on [April 2, 1840, by six alcoholics at Chase's Tavern in Baltimore, Maryland](#). They found a formula of recovery that we can recognize in our own era, that of mutual support.

It was an early formation of recovery community. The group [taught sobriety](#) and preceded Alcoholics Anonymous by nearly 100 years. Members actively sought out other "drunkards," and shared their experiences with heavy alcohol use. Members of the group helped each other achieve and sustain sobriety. An ageless formula for healing.

The movement rose quickly. Within a few years, the Washingtonian could claim that 600,000 drinkers had taken the pledge to abstain from alcohol. Abraham Lincoln made a speech to a group of Washingtonians on February 22, 1842 in Springfield, Illinois, known as the Temperance Address ([full text here](#)). One of my favorite parts of that speech, upholding our inherent value to society was recited by [Mercedes McCambridge](#) as part of [Operation Understanding](#) in the US Congress on May, 8th 1976. She read this section below and noted for the record that "Lincoln was Right."

"In my judgment, such of us as have never fallen victims, have been spared more by the absence of appetite, than from any mental or moral superiority over those who have. Indeed, I believe, if we take habitual drunkards as a class, their heads and their hearts will bear an advantageous comparison with those of any other class. There seems ever to have been a proneness in the brilliant, and warm-blooded to fall into this vice. The demon of intemperance ever seems to have delighted in sucking the blood of genius and of generosity. What one of us but can call to mind some dear relative, more promising in youth than all his fellows, who has fallen a sacrifice to his rapacity?"

The Washingtonian movement evaporated within a few short years. They became embroiled in the politics of the day. They were a victim of their own decision to support the elimination of all drinking in the US in that era through [the temperance movement](#). The very same movement referenced in the speech by Abraham Lincoln above. At first, it helped them get attention and aligned with the goals of the Washingtonians. But these two groups were never on the same page in respect to what they were pursuing. This recovery history chapter ended in the demise of the Washingtonians.



Over time, the Washingtonians had become an adjunct to the temperance movement, which focused on promoting the legal and mandatory prohibition of alcoholic beverages. The temperance movement was comprised of numerous societies and organizations with a broad range of views. As they were subsumed in Temperance efforts, the Washingtonians [became increasingly divided by their own differing views](#) on temperance, abstinence, prohibition legislation and even matters of religion. To borrow the words of Abraham Lincoln on the most divisive issue of the era, they became a house divided and could no longer stand.

A tent too big

As discussed in the book [Drunks, An American History](#), while membership initially swelled, few members were actually severe alcoholics. People took temperance pledges for a variety of reasons other than having a severe alcohol use disorder (Finan, 2017 pg. 46). The movement lacked a focus on common purpose, a lesson that one hundred years later that the founders of [Alcoholics Anonymous](#) understood was vital. This is perhaps one of the reasons that they have survived nearly one hundred years. Many involved within the Washingtonian movement were fair-weather friends, never fully invested in recovery because they were not alcoholics. People who took the pledge for reasons other than the need to heal from a severe alcohol use disorder deserted the movement over time (Finan, 2017 pg. 48).

Loss of public interest in the movement

Surviving documents from that era and more contemporary writings suggest that the public grew bored of the recovery stories of the day. As noted in [The Washingtonian Movement, Causes of Decline](#), the public tired of the commonplace narratives of recovery. Leaders within the Washingtonians were intent to remain in the public's eye. They focused on the politics of Temperance, which was more divisive than their original focus on recovery from alcoholism. In many ways that we can see in our own era of social media, what they did is get shriller and more divisive for "likes." It is a course that can never be sustained over the long term as the message becomes increasingly divorced from the focus of the movement.

Cooptation & colonization into the larger Temperance movement

As noted by recovery historian William White in his seminal work on recovery history in America, [Slaying the Dragon](#), the political controversies splintered recovery groups as members had differing views on the politics of Temperance. The movement became "coopted and colonized" by the Temperance movement (White, 1998 pg. 13). As interest and efficacy waned because of these changes, leaders in the larger Temperance movement framed the Washingtonians as merely a phase of the Temperance movement. The Washingtonians quickly disbanded.

By 1845, the Washingtonian movement was no longer as prominent for a number of reasons, which included:

1. The movement was internally divided by differing views on temperance and related political issues.
2. The movement lacked strong national leadership which could have kept it focused on recovery efforts and relied too heavily on sensationalism of their stories and not a cohesive focus on binding ideology.
3. Leaders concentrated on their individual careers as professional temperance speakers to ensure their own success, which as White notes in [Slaying the Dragon](#) "shifted their energy from groups survival to individual self-interest."
4. The movement was criticized as unsuccessful due to the number of men who returned to drinking (many of whom, although they signed temperance pledges, may not have been alcoholic as we understand that term now).

What can we learn from history? Perhaps a great deal. As the great writer William Faulkner once penned, "The past is never dead. It's not even past." All of the echoes of those earlier efforts are still very much with us today. We, as humans, have the same emotional software as all those who have come before us. It is the essence of the human condition that we tend to act in ways that are recognizable to us across human history. We can relate to how those who came before us acted because we react similarly. This is what makes our recovery history so critically important to positive forward progress in our own era.

We should be constantly asking questions about our actions in order to sustain a trajectory that takes us where we want to go. History shows us how very easy it is to veer off into a ditch. Some contemporary questions:

1. Without a strong focus on well agreed upon goals, movement leaders can become embroiled in the politics of the era to sustain notoriety or to pursue currency in all senses of the word. Do we have our collective eyes on the prize?
2. As the Washingtonians moved away from recovery and focused on Temperance, they became embroiled in political divisiveness. Temperance was quite controversial. Members divided up into opposing camps, instead of focusing on common ground. Are there third rail issues in our current era, that if latch onto we imperil our common mission?

3. The Washingtonians were the recovery movement in that era. They became a footnote in the hot button political issues of the day – the denormalization and prohibition of alcohol use, which was the focus of the Temperance movement. Are there any parallels in our era for us to take heed of and avoid?

We are destined to make mistakes and veer off into many ditches. We can learn from these errors if we focus on doing so, which is a central recovery tenant. We do tend to learn, eventually. As I reference with regularity, recovery always finds a way in the end. We rise up out of our own ashes each and every time. Perhaps the greatest lesson of all.

The end result of the demise of the Washingtonian movement was the loss of a pathway of recovery for thousands of Americans, which was tragic. We have the opportunity to learn from those who have come before us, because we have access to these chapters of our own history. The question is what is it that we should learn from the chapters of our own history to inform us on what we do to move forward? Will we do so in a timely manner?

What else should be learn from our own history? Are we listening to the echoes of time?

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