

The Drinks That Built America

Out of the cheap molasses of the French Islands, New England made the rum which was the chief source of her wealth—the rum with which she bought slaves for Maryland and the Carolinas, and paid her balances to the English merchants.

—Woodrow Wilson, *U.S. President* (1856–1924)

America's Favorite Drink

ENGLAND'S PLAN TO establish colonies in North America, starting in the late sixteenth century, was founded on a fallacy. It was generally assumed that the region of the North American continent to which England laid claim—the lands between thirty-four degrees and thirty-eight degrees north, named Virginia in honor of Queen Elizabeth I, the virgin queen—would have the same climate as the Mediterranean region of Europe, since it lay at similar latitudes. As a result, the English hoped that the American colonies, once established, would be able to supply Mediterranean goods such as olives and fruit and reduce England's dependence on imports

from continental Europe. One prospectus claimed that the colonies would provide “the Wines, Fruit and Salt of France and Spain . . . the silks of Persia and Italy.” Similarly, abundant timber would do away with the need to import wood from Scandinavia. The colonists and their backers in London also hoped to find precious metals, minerals, and jewels. America, in short, was expected to be a land of plenty that would quickly turn a profit.

The reality turned out to be very different. The harsher-than-expected North American climate meant that Mediterranean crops, and other imports such as sugar and bananas, would not grow. Nor were there any precious metals, minerals, or jewels to be found, and attempts to make silk failed. In the decades after the establishment of the first permanent English colony in 1607, the colonists faced many unexpected difficulties as they struggled to make a living from the land. They had to contend with disease, food shortages, infighting, and constant battles with the local Indians, whose lands they had appropriated.

Amid such hardship, securing a reliable supply of alcohol assumed great importance. When two of the three ships that had brought the first permanent settlers to Virginia in 1607 set off back to England, Thomas Studly, one of the inhabitants of the new colony of Jamestown, complained that “there remained neither tavern, beer house, nor place of relieve.” The first supply ship, arriving that winter, brought some beer, though much of it had been drunk by the crew. Further shipments were often substandard or had spoiled during the voyage. In 1613 a Spanish observer reported that the three hundred colonists had nothing but water to drink, “which is contrary to the nature of the English—on account of which they all wish to return and would

have done so if they had been at liberty." Little had changed by 1620: The population had grown to three thousand, but, noted one observer, "the greatest want they complain of is good drink"—in other words, something other than water.

That same year, a shortage of beer determined the site of the second English colony, established by the Puritan separatists known as the Pilgrims. The *Mayflower* set out in 1620 aiming for the Hudson River but made landfall farther north at Cape Cod. Bad weather prevented the ship from heading south, so the ship's captain dumped his passengers on the shore. William Bradford, a Pilgrim leader who became governor of the colony, noted in his diary, "We could not now take time for further search or consideration, our victuals being much spent, especially our Beere." The sailors were anxious to ensure sufficient supplies of beer for the return journey since it was wrongly believed at the time that drinking beer on a sea voyage provided protection against scurvy. The Pilgrims, like the colonists in Virginia, had to resort to water. "It is thought that there can be no better water in the world, yet dare I not prefer it before good beer, as some have done," a colonist named William Wood observed, "but any man will choose it before bad beer." When a third English colony was established, in Massachusetts, the settlers made sure they brought plenty of beer. In 1628 the ship *Arbella*, which carried the leader of the Puritan colonists, John Winthrop, had among its provisions "42 Tonnes of Beere," or about ten thousand gallons.

Owing to the harsh climate, European cereal crops, which could be used to make beer, were very difficult to cultivate. Rather than rely on imported beer from England, the settlers

tried to make their own from corn, spruce tips, twigs, maple sap, pumpkins, and apple parings. A contemporary song is testimony to the resourcefulness of these brewers: "Oh we can make liquor to sweeten our lips, Of pumpkins, of parsnips, of walnut-tree chips." Nor was wine making an option, as it was for the Spanish and Portuguese colonists farther south. The colonists tried to introduce European vines, but their efforts failed due to the climate, disease, and, since they were from northern Europe, lack of wine-making experience. They tried to make wine from local grapes instead, but the result was revolting. Eventually, the Virginia colonists decided to concentrate on the commercial cultivation of tobacco, and to import malted barley (from which to make beer) from Europe, along with wine and brandy.

Everything changed in the second half of the seventeenth century, however, when rum became available. It was far cheaper than brandy, since it was made from leftover molasses rather than expensive wine, and did not have to be shipped across the Atlantic. As well as being cheaper, rum was stronger too. Rum quickly established itself as the North American colonists' favorite drink. It alleviated hardship, provided a liquid form of central heating in the harsh winters, and conveniently reduced the colonists' dependence on imports from Europe. Rum was generally drunk neat by the poor, and by the better off in the form of punch—a mixture of spirits, sugar, water, lemon juice, and spices served in an elaborately decorated bowl. (This drink, like the cruder naval drink of grog, was a forerunner of the modern cocktail.)

The colonists consumed rum when drawing up a contract, selling a farm, signing a deed, buying goods, or settling a suit.

One custom decreed that anyone who backed out of a contract before signing it had to provide half a barrel of beer, or a gallon of rum, in compensation. Not everyone welcomed the appearance of this cheap, powerful new drink, however. "It is an unhappy thing that in later years a Kind of Drink called Rum has been common among us," lamented the Boston minister Increase Mather in 1686. "They that are poor, and wicked too, can for a penny or two-pence make themselves drunk."

From the late seventeenth century, rum formed the basis of a thriving industry, as New England merchants—primarily in Salem, Newport, Medford, and Boston—began to import raw molasses rather than rum and do the distilling themselves. The resulting rum was not thought to be as good as West Indies rum, but it was even cheaper, which was what mattered to most drinkers. Rum became the most profitable manufactured item produced in New England. In the words of one contemporary observer: "The quantity of spirits which they distil in Boston from the molasses they import is as surprising as the cheapness at which they sell it, which is under two shillings a gallon; but they are more famous for the quantity and cheapness than for the excellency of their rum." Rum became so cheap that in some cases a day's wages could get a laborer drunk for a week.

From Rum to Revolution

In addition to selling rum for local consumption, the New England distillers found a ready market among slave traders, for whom rum had become the preferred form of alcoholic currency with which to purchase slaves on Africa's west coast. Distillers in

Newport even made an extra strong rum specifically for use as a slave currency. Since it packed more alcohol into a given volume, it provided a more concentrated form of wealth. The thriving trade in rum did not sit well with the planters on the British sugar islands or their backers in London, however, for the New England distillers were importing their molasses from the French sugar islands. Since France had banned the manufacture of rum in its colonies in order to protect its domestic brandy industry, French sugar producers were happy to sell their molasses to New England distillers at a low price. At the same time, British sugar producers happened to be losing out to the French in the European sugar market. The New England distillers' use of French molasses added insult to injury. The British producers called for government intervention, and in 1733 a new law, known as the Molasses Act, was passed in London.

The act levied a prohibitive duty of sixpence per gallon on molasses imported into the North American colonies from foreign (in other words, French) colonies or plantations. The idea was to encourage the New England distillers to buy molasses from the British sugar islands, since their exports were not subject to the duty. But the British islands did not produce anywhere near enough molasses to supply the New England rum industry; and the distillers, in any case, regarded the French molasses as superior. If it had been strictly enforced, the act would have forced the distillers both to cut production and to raise their prices, and would have brought a sudden end to New England's prosperity by removing the mainstay of its economy, since rum then accounted for 80 percent of exports. It would also have deprived the North American colonists of their

favorite drink; by this time, rum was being consumed at a rate of nearly four American gallons per year for every man, woman, and child in the colonies.

So the distillers ignored the law almost completely, smuggling in molasses from the French islands, and when necessary bribing the officials who were supposed to collect the duty, though most turned a blind eye. Customs officers were appointed in England, and most of them stayed there, drawing their salaries and paying someone else to carry out their duties overseas. Accordingly, these junior functionaries had more sympathy for their fellow colonists than for their masters in London. Within a few years of the law's passage, the vast majority of rum produced—over five-sixths, according to some estimates—was still being made from smuggled molasses. At the same time, the number of distilleries making rum in Boston grew from eight in 1738 to sixty-three in 1750. Rum continued to flow, maintaining its position in all aspects of colonial life. It played an important role in election campaigns: When George Washington ran for election to Virginia's local assembly, the House of Burgesses, in 1758, his campaign team handed out twenty-eight gallons of rum, fifty gallons of rum punch, thirty-four of wine, forty-six of beer, and two of cider—in a county with only 391 voters.

Although the Molasses Act was not enforced, it was resented. Passing the law was a colossal blunder on the part of the British government. By making smuggling socially acceptable, it undermined respect for British law in general and set a vital precedent: Henceforth, the colonists felt entitled to defy other laws that imposed seemingly unreasonable duties on items shipped to and from the colonies. As a result, the widespread defiance of the

Molasses Act was an early step along the road to American independence.

A subsequent step occurred with the passage of the Sugar Act in 1764, at the end of the French and Indian War, during which British troops and American colonists fought together to defeat the French. (This conflict was the American component of a broader war between France and Britain, fought in Europe, North America, and India, that was arguably the first true world war.) Victory ensured British dominance of the North American continent but left Britain with an enormous public debt. Reasoning that the war had been fought largely for the benefit of the colonists in America, the British government concluded that they should help to foot the bill. Furthermore, many of the colonists had continued to trade with the enemy, France, during the war. So the government decided to strengthen and enforce the Molasses Act. The sixpence-per-gallon duty on molasses was halved, but the government took steps to ensure that it would now be collected in full. Customs officers were no longer allowed to remain in Britain while others collected duties on their behalf. Colonial governors were required to enforce the laws strictly and arrest smugglers, and the Royal Navy was given the power to collect duties in American waters.

The new act, with its explicit goal of raising revenues, rather than merely regulating trade, was deeply unpopular in America. New England's rum distillers led the opposition to the new rules by helping to organize a boycott of imports from Britain. Many Americans, not just those whose livelihoods were affected by the act, regarded it as unfair that they should have to pay taxes to a distant parliament where they had no representation. The

cry of "no taxation without representation" became a popular slogan. Advocates of independence, known as the "Sons of Liberty," began to mobilize public opinion in favor of a break with Britain. These campaigners often met in distilleries and taverns. One revolutionary leader, John Adams, noted in his diary that he attended a meeting of the Sons of Liberty in 1766 in "a counting-room in Chase and Speakman's distillery," where the participants drank rum punch, smoked pipes, and ate cheese and biscuits.

The Sugar Act was followed by a series of other unpopular laws, including the Stamp Act of 1765, the Townshend Acts of 1767, and the Tea Act of 1773. The result was the Boston Tea Party of 1773, in which three shiploads of tea were dumped into Boston harbor in protest at new tax rules. But although tea is the drink associated with the start of the revolution, rum played just as important a role in the decades leading up to the eventual outbreak of the Revolutionary War in 1775. Fittingly, on the eve of the outbreak of hostilities, when Paul Revere made his famous ride from Boston to Lexington to warn John Hancock and Samuel Adams of the approach of British troops, he stopped off for a rum toddy (rum, sugar, and water, heated by plunging a red-hot poker into the mixture) at a tavern in Medford belonging to Isaac Hall, the captain of the local militia.

Once the fighting started, rum was the preferred drink of American soldiers during the six years of hostilities. General Henry Knox, writing to George Washington in 1780 about the procurement of supplies from the northern states, emphasized the particular importance of rum. "Besides beef and Pork, bread & flour, Rum is too material an article, to be omitted,"

he wrote. "No exertions ought to be spar'd to provide ample quantities of it." The taxation of rum and molasses, which began the estrangement of Britain from its American colonies, had given rum a distinctly revolutionary flavor. Many years after the British surrender in 1781 and the establishment of the United States of America, John Adams, by then one of the country's founding fathers, wrote to a friend: "I know not why we should blush to confess that molasses was an essential ingredient in American independence. Many great events have proceeded from much smaller causes."

Pioneer Spirit

Rum was the drink of the colonial period and the American Revolution, but many of the citizens of the young nation soon turned their backs on it in favor of another distilled drink. As settlers moved westward, away from the eastern seaboard, they switched to drinking whiskey, distilled from fermented cereal grains. One reason was that many of the settlers were of Scotch-Irish origin and had experience of grain distilling. The supply of molasses, from which rum was made, had also been disrupted during the war. And while grains such as barley, wheat, rye, and corn were difficult to grow near the coast—hence the early colonists' initial difficulties with making beer—they could be cultivated more easily inland. Rum, in contrast, was a maritime product, made in coastal towns from molasses imported by sea. Moving it inland was expensive. Whiskey could be made almost anywhere and did not depend on imported ingredients that could be taxed or blockaded.

By 1791 there were over five thousand pot stills in western Pennsylvania alone, one for every six people. Whiskey took on the duties that had previously been fulfilled by rum. It was a compact form of wealth: A packhorse could carry four bushels of grain but could carry twenty-four bushels once they had been distilled into whiskey. Whiskey was used as a rural currency, traded for other essentials such as salt, sugar, iron, powder, and shot. It was given to farmworkers, used in birth and death rituals, consumed whenever legal documents were signed, given to jurors in courthouses and to voters by campaigning politicians. Even clergymen were paid in whiskey.

So when the secretary of the U.S. Treasury, Alexander Hamilton, began to look for a way to raise money to pay off the vast



The Whiskey Rebellion of 1794 (*The Capture of the Whiskey-Tax Collectors*)

national debt incurred during the Revolutionary War, imposing a federal excise duty on the production of distilled drinks seemed an obvious choice. The excise would raise money and might discourage people from drinking too much. Hamilton believed that such an excise would be “favourable to the agriculture, to the economy, to the morals, and to the health of the society.” In March 1791 a law was passed: From July 1, distillers could pay either an annual levy or an excise duty of at least seven cents on each gallon of liquor produced, depending on its strength. An immediate outcry arose, particularly along the western frontier. The excise seemed particularly unfair to the inland settlers because it applied to liquor as it left the still, not at the point of sale. This meant that whiskey produced for private consumption or barter was still subject to excise. Furthermore, many of the settlers had come to America to get away from revenue collectors and government interference. They complained that the new federal government was no better than the British government, whose rule America had just shaken off.

The disagreement over the whiskey excise also reflected a deeper divide over the balance of power between the states and the federal government. By and large, the inhabitants of the eastern territories were happier than those of the southern and western ones with the idea that federal law should take precedence over state law. The new law—which specified, among other things, that offenders would be tried in federal court in Philadelphia, rather than in local courts—seemed to favor eastern, federalist interests. James Jackson of Georgia declared in the House of Representatives that the excise would “deprive the mass of the people of almost the only luxury they enjoy, that of

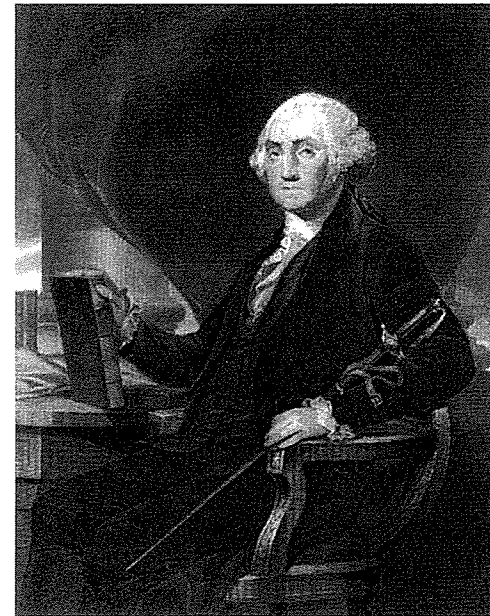
distilled spirits.” If it was not opposed, he asked, what might come next? “The time will come,” Jackson warned, “when a shirt shall not be washed without an excise.”

Once the new law came into force, many farmers refused to pay up. Revenue collectors were attacked, their documents stolen and destroyed, and the saddles taken from their horses and cut into pieces. The opposition was strongest in the fiercely separatist western Pennsylvania frontier counties of Fayette, Allegheny, Westmoreland, and Washington. Groups of farmers opposed to the excise began to coordinate organized resistance. Distillers who paid the excise had holes shot in their stills. Notices advocating disobedience appeared on trees. Congress amended the law in 1792 and 1794 to reduce the tax on rural distillers, and gave the state courts jurisdiction to try offenders. But this failed to quell the opposition. Hamilton, who realized that the authority of the federal government was now at stake, sent federal marshals to western Pennsylvania to serve writs on several farmers who had refused to pay.

Violence flared after one such farmer, William Miller, was served with a writ in July 1794. A shot was fired at the marshal's party by one of Miller's associates, though no one was hurt. Over the next two days the two groups skirmished, the mob of armed “whiskey boys” opposed to the excise swelled to five hundred, and there were deaths on both sides. David Bradford, an ambitious attorney, assumed leadership of the whiskey boys and called on the local people for support. Around six thousand men gathered at Braddock's Field, near Pittsburgh. Bradford was elected major general of this impromptu army. Amid high spirits, military exercises, and target practice, the rebels passed resolutions

advocating secession from the United States and the establishment of a new independent state.

Convinced by Hamilton that decisive action was necessary, President George Washington requisitioned thirteen thousand militiamen from eastern Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Virginia, and Maryland. These troops, along with artillery pieces, baggage, and supplies of tax-paid whiskey, were sent over the mountains to Pittsburgh to demonstrate the preeminence of the federal government to the secessionists. The nascent rebellion was, however, already crumbling. As the army approached, Bradford fled and his supporters melted away. Ironically, the arrival of the militia to take on the whiskey boys did much to resolve the problem: At the



George Washington

end of their march, the federal soldiers wanted more whiskey, which they paid for in hard cash. This provided the distillers of western Pennsylvania the funds with which to pay the excise.

A token group of twenty rebels was taken back to Philadelphia and paraded through the streets. But other than being held in jail for a few months, they escaped punishment. Two of their number were sentenced to death but were pardoned by the president. Ultimately, the liquor excise failed and was repealed a few years later. Paying the federal militia to suppress the rebellion cost \$1.5 million, nearly one-third of the entire excise duties collected during the ten years the excise law was in force. But while both the rebellion and the excise failed, the suppression of the Whiskey Rebellion, the first tax protest to take place since independence, forcefully illustrated that federal law could not be ignored, and was a defining moment in the early history of the United States.

The failure of the rebellion also led to the development of another drink, as Scotch-Irish rebels moved farther west into the new state of Kentucky. There they began to make whiskey from corn as well as rye. The production of this new kind of whiskey was pioneered in Bourbon County, so that the drink became known as bourbon. The use of corn, an indigenous crop, gave it a unique flavor.

In the last years of his life, George Washington himself established a whiskey distillery. The idea came from his farm manager, a Scot who suggested that the grains produced at Washington's estate, Mount Vernon, could be profitably made into whiskey. Two stills began operating in 1797, and at the peak of production, shortly before Washington's death in December 1799, there were five stills. That year he produced eleven thousand gallons of

rye, which he sold locally, making a profit of \$7,500. He also gave barrels of it to family and friends. "Two hundred gallons of Whiskey will be ready this day for your call," Washington wrote to his nephew on October 29, 1799, "and the sooner it is taken the better, as the demand (in these parts) is brisk."

Washington's activities as a whiskey maker presented a stark contrast with the attitudes of another of America's founding fathers, Thomas Jefferson. He denounced "the poison of whiskey" and famously remarked that "no nation is drunken where wine is cheap, and none sober where the dearness of wine substitutes ardent spirits as the common beverage." Jefferson did his best to cultivate vines in America and advocated a reduction in the excise duty charged on imported wine as "the only antidote to the bane of whiskey." But his cause was hopeless. Wine was far more expensive, contained less alcohol, and lacked the American connotations of whiskey, an unpretentious drink associated with independence and self-sufficiency.

Colonialism by the Bottle

Throughout the colonial period, spirits provided an escape from hardship—both the self-imposed kind experienced by the European colonists and the far greater hardships they imposed on African slaves and indigenous peoples. For as well as using spirits to purchase, subdue, and control slaves, European colonists in the Americas deliberately exploited the local Indians' enthusiasm for distilled drinks as a means of subjugation.

The origin of this enthusiasm is the subject of much debate, but it seems to have arisen from the Indian assumption that

spirits, like indigenous hallucinogenic plants, had supernatural powers that the drinker could only access by allowing himself to become completely intoxicated. A late-seventeenth-century observer in New York remarked that the Indian tribesmen were "great lovers of strong drink, yet they do not care for drinking unless they have enough to make themselves drunk." If there was not enough for everyone in a group to get drunk, the alcohol would be shared among a smaller number, while the others became spectators. The insistence on complete intoxication also explains why some Indians found it puzzling that Europeans sometimes preferred wine over rum. "They wonder much of the English for purchasing wine at so dear a rate when Rum is much cheaper & will make them sooner drunk," noted one colonist in 1697.

Whatever its origins, this custom was widely exploited by Europeans, who took care to supply large quantities of alcohol when trading with Indians for goods or land. In practice, this meant rum in British-controlled areas and brandy in French areas. The use of brandy by French fur traders in Canada was criticized by a French missionary, who denounced "the infinity of disorder, brutality, violence . . . and insult, which the deplorable and infamous traffic in brandy has spread universally among the Indians of these parts. . . . In the despair in which we are plunged, nothing remains for us but to abandon them to the brandy sellers as a domain of drunkenness and debauchery." Rather than suppressing the brandy trade, local French troops regarded the maintenance of supply, both for themselves and for sale to the Indians, as their main duty.

In Mexico, the introduction of distillation by the Spanish led

to the development of mescal, a distilled version of pulque, the mildly alcoholic indigenous drink made by the Aztecs from the fermented juice of the agave plant. (Pulque was the everyday, staple drink; Aztec warriors, priests, and nobles drank chocolate, the drink of the elite.) The Aztecs and other local Indians were then encouraged to drink mescal rather than pulque, and indeed to overindulge in this far stronger drink. In 1786 the viceroy of Mexico suggested that the Indian fondness for drink and its effectiveness in fostering dependency on the colonial power meant that the same approach should perhaps be tried with the Apaches to the north. This would, he suggested, create "a new need which forces them to recognize very clearly their obligatory dependence with regard to ourselves."

Distilled drinks, alongside firearms and infectious diseases, helped to shape the modern world by helping the inhabitants of the Old World to establish themselves as rulers of the New World. Spirits played a role in the enslavement and displacement of millions of people, the establishment of new nations, and the subjugation of indigenous cultures. Today, spirits are no longer associated with slavery and exploitation. But other echoes of their uses in colonial times persist. Air passengers who throw a bottle of duty-free spirits into their hand luggage do so because it is a compact form of alcohol that is hardy enough to survive a long journey unspoiled. And in their desire to avoid excise duties, purchasers of duty-free spirits are maintaining the antiestablishment tradition of rum runners and whiskey boys.