

Alcohol in colonial america

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The first settlers arrived to the Americas and staked their claim on this new discovery. Something else was waiting for the settlers, a beverage of intoxication. Almost as quickly as they began to organize and sub-divide the land, the immigrants, and true natives to North America shared their beloved drink: alcohol. Cultures of varied races arrived and shared in this most cherished drink. There were uses for alcohol in the earliest colonial times that went beyond a beverage to drink in festive gatherings.

There are varied beliefs surrounding the conception of alcohol consumption and its effects on British Colonies. Some are true, others are false. I will construct an investigation surrounding the history of alcohol in Colonial America with persuasive evidence to support my findings. Alcohol, also commonly referred to as spirits in Colonial America had many uses. Alcohol, of course, was used in festive times, but it was also used in religious ceremonies as well and providing medicinal properties to aid in curing ailments.

The initial impact of alcohol on the settlers led them to accept it for its varied uses. Although moderate use of alcohol was accepted, society, from its inception into the Americas, frowned upon individuals becoming overly intoxicated. In other words, drunkenness was viewed negatively. Since alcohol was considered a “ gift from the gods” to the natives, the settlers, too, accepted its mind-altering properties as something almost sacred. The growing communities treasured it, just as the natives did. Time and abuse were two components that led to problems for alcohol consumption.

Due to its success in the minds of settlers, they partook in alcohol consumption for all three meals of the day: beer with breakfast, hard cider with lunch, beer with supper. In fact, beer and hard cider were the most popular drinks for colonists. As the drinking continued, they wanted to learn how to brew beer. One of the initial problems—aside from increasing abuse of alcoholic drunkenness—was the lack of sufficient ingredients. Barley, grains, hops, and yeast were the main ingredients in a brewing beer. The colonies did not have an ample selection of hops and grains.

Harvesting of barley and hops was not a common crop among farmers of this era. Many colonists tried different ingredients, but nothing satisfied the perfect blend of hops, barley, yeast, and grain. By the late 1600's, cider became a top choice among colonists, mainly due the apple crops that were prevalent in colonial times. Mass production through efficient farming and harvesting by colonists was seen. Thanks again to England for the apples. Farmers increased their work load mainly due to the reward of the final product: cider matured into hard cider (which included alcohol).

With the increasing popularity of beer and cider, the settlers discovered a need to increase their selection. The settlers started to import inexpensive yields of sugar cane and molasses to brew another popular drink: rum. Rum quickly gained in popularity for the following reasons: it was cheap to produce and tasted good. By 1700, in Boston, the first commercial distillery was opened. The increase in rum consumption was the first challenge to the beer market. Religion and alcohol found a common link. In fact, many

taverns were required to be built near churches or the local town meeting house.

The religious zealots accepted alcohol consumption—strictly in moderation, though. Drunkenness, of course, was viewed as sinful. Alcohol soon became a problem in the eyes of the church and laws were established surrounding alcohol. In 1697, in New York, they enacted a law that required all taverns to be closed on Sunday. They required that the Sabbath be set aside as a day solely for reconciliation with the Lord and prayer. In conjunction with the closure of taverns on Sundays, the church required further regulations against alcohol consumption on Saturday nights as well.

The main concern for the church was that taverns were gaining more popularity than the Sunday services. The Reverend Charles Woodmason went one step further and cautioned parishioners with the thought that there was a competition between the church and tavern for souls. Reverend Charles was quoted as saying the following, the taverns had “ more company of a Saturday, than in the church on Sunday. ” As colonists went into the early part of the 19th century, religion encouraged moderation in any and all alcoholic drinks. Alcohol, aside from the churches persistent concern over drunkenness and a loss of parishioner appeal, had other uses.

Alcohol was also widely used in the field of medicine. Many doctors and medical practitioners believed that some of the stronger spirits could prevent disease, cure some common infections, and offer relief to minor aches and pains such as headaches, sore joints and muscles. In these instances, doctors would prescribe rum, hard cider, or whiskey. Doctors also

encouraged patients to increase alcohol consumption to relieve emotional or stressful problems in their daily life. In fact, doctors went so far as to prescribe families to drink alcohol in lieu of water.

They thought that water brought from Europe was contaminated, and, thus, could lead to serious illness. Alcohol consumption was also prescribed to children suffering from viral infections as well as aiding in their development into a stronger, more physically fit individual. A little whiskey and honey went a long way for a sick child. The unusual, or even outlandish, practices went further still: doctors prescribed hard liquor to women who were in labor, a means of numbing some of the intense pain suffered during labor.

Midwives would brew what was coined “ groaning ale. This groaning ale contained extremely high contents of alcohol and special spices, all in hopes of easing the child bearing pains. A variation to groaning ale was used by some doctors. This was a little less toxin on the mother and baby. Doctors concocted spirits that were used as an anesthetic. This anesthetic was less expensive and more readily available from household to household than the hard spirits used in the groaning ale. Alcohol, as with many new products brought to civilized society, began as an innocent and purely beneficial product.

Beyond the stress-reducing capacity for hard cider or beer, the early nutritionists thought alcohol had great nutritional value and needed to be added to a person's health-conscious daily diet regime. Due to this initial nutritious appeal, politicians did not, initially, write legislation limiting alcohol consumption. It was not until 1619, in the state of Virginia, that the first law

was passed to control alcohol use. Policy maker main objective was to restrict “ drunkenness,” not prohibit the use of alcohol.

This first law enacted a penalty against drunkenness which stated that if you were arrested for being drunk and disorderly, then the fine would be up to 5 shillings or imprisonment. In time, however, politician modified the law to only include a monetary infraction. The reasoning behind this law was because the lower-classes tended to be the ones caught in public, and politicians felt a fine would be viewed as more distressing to the lower-class and curtail drunkenness. The next state to enact legislation surrounding alcohol consumption was Maryland. In Maryland, in 1639, they attempted to limit the amount a person drank.

According to law, it was illegal to be drunk in public: “ drunkenness” was defined as “ drinking with excess to the notable perturbation of any organ or sense of motion. ” The penalty was the same as in Virginia: 5 shillings. In 1645, Massachusetts jumped on the alcohol bandwagon, passing a law that restricted the amount an individual could consume at any period of time. The law stated the following, “ The courts consider it illegal to drink more than a pint of wine at a time. ” Anything over a pint constituted inebriation. On top of this, Massachusetts instituted another statute for ale houses and tavern owners.

This statute made it illegal for owners to serve a customer beyond the legal limit, a difficult law to follow. With this statute, however, both the proprietor and customer could be fined for disobeying this law (Austin, Gregory p. 230). The Plymouth colonies chose a different slant in enacting their alcohol

legislation. Unlike the Virginian definition for “drunkenness,” in the Plymouth colony the focus was on motor skills. Plymouth went so far as to define the term which constituted a universal view—throughout almost every colony—that alcohol is not healthy, nor should it be considered beneficial to a person’s health.

The Plymouth definition was as follows: they viewed being drunk—not by loss of mobility or amount consumed—but instead by the person’s ability speak clearly: “A person that lisps or falters in his speech by reason of drink, or that vomits, or cannot follow his calling.” (Austin, Gregory, p. 240) When we look at gender, women were not considered part of the drinking culture. Most often, women drank in private (Salinger, Sharon p 223). According to historical record, women rarely drank in public in colonial times. It was viewed as unacceptable for a woman.

Policy makers enacted different conditions and consequences for each gender. Women were rarely seen in bars and taverns in this period. The brewing of beer, up until the late 1700’s, was an art left for the women to complete. Men would be off at work during the day and women kept the house in order, which included beer and liquor. Home-brewing was very common. In fact, most households that drank brewed their own ale. The Spaniards arrived in the 1700’s and brought wine to the colonies. At the time, vineyards were unheard of; thus, without grapes they could not cultivate, ferment, and produce wine in the colonies.

It was brought over on ship. The French soon followed and were able to cultivate the grapes on colony soil. Wine consumption gained in popularity,

yet the hard cider was still the preferred drink among the middle class. Germans, too, became part of the alcohol dynamic. The Germans brought better techniques to brewing fine ales and were the first to bring ' lagers' to the Americas. All of these countries brought new ideas and new brewing methods to the colonies. In conclusion, it is apparent that the initial discovery of alcohol for the colonies was viewed as a sacred drink.

The colonists took the vision of the natives and brought it into their lives as a daily staple. The harms and potential for dangerous situations soon became rampant with all the drunken colonists. Laws were passed and changes were made in various colonies in hopes of curtailing the problems associated with drunken behavior. Even the churches got involved. As new cultures landed from various countries, they discovered new varieties on crafting a very popular beverage. Regardless of all the dangers associated with alcohol consumption, I believe it's going to continue to be a drink enjoyed throughout the world.