

A history of u.s. drinking essay

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Throughout history America has been very keen to alcoholic beverages. There were many factors that lead Americans to alcohol in the past relating to health and the availability of certain beverages. In the early 19th century, alcohol was consumed quite frequently by Americans. There was also a time where Americans significantly decreased the amount of alcohol they consumed. Americans started to realize the harmful effects of alcohol and temperance became more and more popular around the 1830's. In the early 19th century Americans believed that drinking a good amount of alcohol every day was not an uncommon thing to do.

Americans followed the beliefs of the British and the Europeans that rum, gin, and brandy had a nutritional value to them and were healthy. They also believed that distilled spirits could cure colds, fevers, snakebites, frosted toes, and broken legs, and as relaxants that would relieve depression, reduce tension, and enable workers to enjoy moments of good fellowship (Rorabaugh 1979, 25). They drank a plentiful amount of alcohol, being unaware of the unhealthy side effects of over indulging in alcohol.

Americans started out drinking spirituous beverages such as rum soon developed a taste for whiskey as it was cheap and did not need to be imported. Americans found it normal to have a glass of whiskey even during breakfast and dinner. American food was very salty and greasy and they found it satisfying to have a drink of whiskey to wash it down. They were also drinking with the intention to become intoxicated quite frequently. It was considered an honor to be the first one done with dinner, in order to get to the bars for hours of drinking (Rorabaugh 1979, 118). Americans would even give their children alcohol very early in their lives so they would develop a

tolerance for alcohol. Americans would even drink during work breaks and reward slaves with alcohol to motivate them. On top of whiskey being cheap and readily available, apple cider was usually plentiful and was easy to make which also contained a high content of alcohol.

Americans were also unaware of the other viable options of non-alcoholic beverages and simply didn't believe they were as healthy as the alcoholic beverages at the time. Sources of water were very limited as most water was not clean. Water that came from the Mississippi River had sediment in it and was not very appealing. Water that came from a well was usually cloudy. The few sources of good water came from springs which were usually at very low points and not very accessible. Americans also believed that water was poisonous and only safe if drunk in moderation. During the first third of the nineteenth century water was often condemned due to the fact that Americans believed it lacked food value and did not aid digestion (Rorabaugh 1979, 97). Americans drank plenty of milk but only when it was available.

When it was readily available it was cheap but it was often not available or was too high due to limited availability. There was no refrigeration at the time which made it very challenging to transport or store milk without it going sour. Even when there was plenty of milk, many didn't drink it for fear of the fatal 'milk sickness' (Rorabaugh 1979, 99). Those who feared the sickness turned to whiskey. Many Americans also rejected tea. This was because it was very expensive due to the fact that it needed to be imported from the British colony of India. Tea cost more than a mixed drink with whiskey.

Up to half of the price of tea came from import duties. Most Americans also considered tea to be an alien ‘foreign luxury’ (Rorabaugh 1979, 99). To drink to was considered unpatriotic. Coffee also wasn’t a very popular drink since it had to be imported from Latin America.

Americans attempted their homemade concoctions of coffee from rye grain, peas, brown bread, or burnt toast but ended up to be unappetizing.

Americans displayed very interesting patterns in their drinking habits. Some would drink in moderation and others would binge drink in order to get intoxicated. They would gather for elections, militia musters, holiday celebrations, or neighborly festivities and drink to intoxication (Rorabaugh 1979, 149). By 1820, drinking in moderation decreased significantly where as drinking in a group with the intention of becoming intoxicated became more prevalent. Drinking in groups and becoming intoxicated became a symbol of egalitarianism (Rorabaugh 1979, 151).

If someone refused a drink, it was considered offensive as it was viewed that the person refusing the drink thought of them self as better than other people. They would then not be invited to another party. The only logical reason for refusing a drink was if a person was passed out. Americans even started to binge drink by themselves during the early nineteenth century. This was thought to be done to relieve anxiety. Temperance organizations started as early as 1789. Not everyone believed heavy doses of alcohol was a healthy choice.

Benjamin Rush, a founding father of the United states, believed that excessive use of alcohol was harmful to a person’s health physically and

psychologically. Temperance groups were generally unsuccessful in convincing Americans of the harmful effects of alcohol. Alcoholic consumption dropped significantly in the 1830's. It is not entirely clear why there was such a sudden drop in the consumption of alcohol at this period of time. Sociologist Joseph R. Gusfield suggested that industrialization led factory owners to advocate abstinence to improve the efficiency of their labor force (Rorabaugh 1979, 188).

A more logical reasoning behind the movement was a reaction to the established patterns of binge drinking. People may have started to realize the health complications that frequent binge drinking caused. Americans who drank alcohol found out that they had to drink more and more in order to become intoxicated. They then realized that this had adverse physical consequences such as nausea, vomiting, delirium tremens, or even death (Rorabaugh 1979, 189). People still consuming alcohol were considered anti-social, and susceptible to fighting. Others stopped drinking in relation to religious purposes. Some believed that liquor was an agent to the devil.

Those who felt motivated and desired to become wealthy started to avoid alcohol as the recognized alcohol hindered productivity and proved to be costly. Upon all these reasons to reduce the amount of alcohol consumed came the Temperance Movement. The consumption of alcohol in America around the early nineteenth century was a very common activity. This was due to the fact the Americans were unaware of the unhealthy side-effects caused by continuous binge drinking.

Many believed that there were significant health benefits to drinking alcohol. The available and cheap costs of alcoholic beverages such as whiskey and apple cider made alcoholic beverages very popular in that era. Americans soon realized the negative effects of binge drinking around the 1830's whether it be health related, economical reasons, or religious purposes. This sparked the Temperance Movement. Citations Rorabaugh, William. 1979.

The Alcoholic Republic – An American Tradition. New York: Oxford University Press