

P178: The Washingtonian Movement

The Washingtonian movement (Washingtonians or Washingtonian Total Abstinence Society) was a 19th century fellowship founded on April 2, 1840 by six hard drinkers (William Mitchell, David Hoss, Charles Anderson, George Steer, Bill M'Curdy, and Tom Campbell) at Chase's Tavern on Liberty Street in Baltimore, Maryland. The idea was that by relying on each other, sharing their alcoholic experiences and relying upon divine help, they could keep each other sober. Total abstinence from alcohol was their goal. The group taught sobriety and preceded Alcoholics Anonymous by 100 years.

The Washingtonians differed from the temperance movement in that they focused on the individual alcoholic rather than on society's greater relationship with liquor. In the mid-1800s a temperance movement was in full sway across the United States and temperance workers advanced their anti-alcohol views on every front. Public temperance meetings were frequent and the main thread was prohibition of alcohol and pledges of sobriety to be made by the individual. Concurrent with this movement, a loose network of facilities both public and private offered treatment to drunkards. Referred to as inebriate asylums and reformatory homes, they included the New York State Inebriate Asylum, The Inebriate Home of Long Island, N.Y., the Home for Incurables in San Francisco, the Franklin Reformatory Home in Philadelphia and the Washingtonian Homes which opened in Boston and Chicago in 1857.

Washingtonians at their peak numbered in the tens of thousands, possibly as high as 300,000. However, in the space of just a few years this society all but disappeared because they became fragmented in their primary purpose, becoming involved with all manner of controversial social reforms including prohibition, sectarian religion, politics and abolition of slavery. It is believed that Abraham Lincoln attended one of the great revivals, presumably not for treatment, but out of interest in various issues being discussed.

The Washingtonians drifted away from their initial purpose of helping the individual alcoholic. Disagreements, controversies and infighting destroyed what was at one time a beneficial resource to the problem drinker, and their good work perished in the swirl of controversy over temperance and prohibition. Their successes, which might have been advanced to treat untold thousands of alcoholics, perished along with them. The Washingtonians became so thoroughly extinct that, some 50 years later in 1935 when William Griffith Wilson and Dr. Robert Smith joined together in forming Alcoholics Anonymous, neither of them had ever heard of the Washingtonians. In the late 1940s through 1950, AA formed and enacted its Twelve Traditions, principles which guide the AA groups from such pitfalls as befell the Washingtonians. The lesson learned from the demise of the Washingtonians was that AA needed to avoid outside, controversial, non-AA issues, thus establishing a tradition of "singleness of purpose."

Glossary

Akin Of similar character. (p178)

Asunder Apart (as in, 'Torn Apart') (p176)

Controversy Prolonged public disagreement or heated discussion. (p176)

Din A loud, unpleasant, and prolonged noise. (p178)

Embattled Beset by problems or difficulties. (p176)

Expenditure The action of spending funds. (p177)

Flourished Develop rapidly and successfully. (p177)

Holocaust Destruction or slaughter on a mass scale (p176)

Imminent About to happen. (p176)

Imperative Of vital importance; crucial. (p177)

Outlay An amount of money spent on something. (p177)

"Part and Parcel" An essential or basic element. (p178)

Peaceable Inclined to avoid conflict or dissent. (p177)

Perish Suffer complete ruin or destruction. (p177)

Pharisee A self-righteous person; a hypocrite. (p177)

Prodigious Remarkably or impressively great in extent, size, or degree. (p177)

Provocation Action or speech that makes someone angry, especially deliberately. (p176)

"Puny Rows" Petty and insignificant fights. (p178)

Squabble Quarrel noisily over a trivial matter. (p177)

Temperance Abstinence from alcoholic drink. (p178)

Toil Exhausting physical labor (p176)

Definitions from Oxford Dictionary