

# **Methodist Women's Autonomy: Roles in the Passage and Repeal of Prohibition**

Kelley Woehl

Religious Studies

The University of North Carolina Asheville

One University Heights

Asheville, North Carolina 28804 USA

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Rodger Payne

## **Abstract**

Religious women were large proponents of the Eighteenth Amendment, which banned the sale and consumption of alcohol in the United States. Often lost in the complex history of the era is discussion on what factors motivated these women, specifically those in the Methodist Church, one of the largest American denominations, to advocate for Prohibition from a theological perspective and, in turn, how theology changed to fit these new perceptions. Conversely, primary sources follow the factors that led many of these same Methodist women to rebel against their former advocacy in order to repeal the Eighteenth Amendment. This caused a rift within the denomination and theology within the Methodist church as a result of changing social and political dynamics. Scholars have analyzed the period of Prohibition from many angles, discussing the theological basis for the church's desire to ban alcohol, to the religious division that some think prompted Protestant support of the ban. However, often overlooked is the role of Methodism as a single denomination, instead grouping together all Protestant affiliations and disregarding the individual changes of each congregation to suit the new social order. Similarly, there is little research on the religiosity of those women who did advocate for Prohibition reform and their motivations behind such. Analyzing Methodist church records and doctrine highlights these shifts in theology in accordance with the findings that women used their new social and religious rights to repeal the Eighteenth Amendment that they once fought to put in place, and that which played a role in their initial acquisition of rights.

## **1. Introduction**

“Temperance is moderation in the things that are good and total abstinence from the things that are foul,” wrote Frances Willard, an educated and very stubborn woman from Wisconsin.<sup>1</sup> Willard was a devoted Methodist, arguably the most famous woman in her denomination at the time of Prohibition movements during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The former professor became the biggest name in Temperance during her time as president of the Woman's Christian Temperance Movement (WCTU), during which she restructured the organization to function strategically, expanding the movement's efforts to include child labor laws, prison reform, and female suffrage. Willard represented the female social and religious perspectives at the time, particularly those that this study will focus on, highlighting the initial unity in Protestant women's support for Prohibition. The movement for alcohol reform, often referred to as Temperance or Prohibition, fully encompassed American life during its time, so much so that between 1920 and 1933, alcohol was completely banned in the United States and its territories. Leading up to the passage of the Prohibition amendment were years of advocacy for social and theological reform in the groups that led in advocacy efforts: women and religious bodies. The Methodist Church, as demonstrated by the efforts of Frances Willard, was a large proponent of women's rights and Prohibition, seeing significant changes in theological interpretation in the years between 1840 and 1935. The following sections argue that the Methodist church played a significant role in women's acquisition of socio-religious liberties, including female suffrage and ordination, in order to aid in the passage of Prohibition; however, once given these rights, women used them to dismantle the very cause they once fought for.

## 2. Review of Literature

Scholarship on Prohibition has increased in the last fifty years, with substantial effort going into research on the causes and effects of such, and, more recently, sparking specific discussions on subgroups within the period and the lasting effects of the era. Arguably the most famous work on Prohibition is Daniel Okrent's *Last Call: The Rise and Fall of Prohibition* (2010), which follows the American relationship with alcohol, examining how that relationship changed to form the Prohibitionist movements, and what happened that led to its repeal. Using contextual analyses of historical documents, Okrent follows the progression of the Temperance and Prohibition movements to develop an argument for which factors caused the fall, including increased crime, globalization, corrupt politics, and movement away from exclusively religious perspectives. Much of the information discussed by Okrent elaborates on the topics of focus in Mark Lender and James Martin's *Drinking in America* (1982), which follows the history of American perceptions of alcohol and how social changes aided in the drastic alterations leading to, and directly following the era of Prohibition. Lender and Martin employ historical-comparative methods for discussing this shift, ultimately arguing that it was America's reliance on alcohol that shaped national social and political responses to the rising issues in the country. Discussing specifically the crime of Prohibition years in a historical analysis of the repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment is Karen Blumenthal's *Bootleg: Murder, Moonshine, and the Lawless Years of Prohibition* (2011). Blumenthal's background and methodology in business history builds her analysis of the ways crime through bootlegging impacted the social economy and politics of the era. Blumenthal's exploration of this subcategory of history provides a unique understanding of the business of producing alcohol during Prohibition, allowing new scholarship to add to this well-defined cause of the social turn against the Eighteenth Amendment.

The discussion on modern-day relationships between religion and alcohol consumption is explored in recent analytical scholarship. James B. Holt's "Religious Affiliation and Alcohol Consumption in the United States" (2006) follows regional drinking patterns when considering religious affiliation. Using analytical approach based in historical context, Holt and his co-authors found that patterns exist between levels of alcohol consumption and factors of religious affiliation and geographic location. Among rural, Protestant individuals, consumption is substantially lower than non-religious or Catholic populations living primarily in urban areas. In a similar, more recent study, John Frenreis' "A Hundred Miles of Dry" (2010) found that demographics, geographic location, and religious prevalence heavily influenced whether a county remained "dry" in modern America. Frenreis used data and anthropological research in drawing his conclusion, researching the history of dry counties, and thoroughly evaluating those that remain sober today. Frenreis traces these patterns of sobriety to the period of Prohibition, noting that the majority of those that remained "dry" for several decades afterward were rural Protestant counties that, at the time of Prohibition, were associated with either the Methodist or Baptist churches. These studies quantify the effects of Prohibition on Americans after the law was legally repealed, demonstrating the lasting impact of religious affiliation and social connections on one's modern-day approach to drinking, either at the county level or as an individual.

The closest major study concerning women and Prohibition involvement is Kenneth D. Roses' *American Women and the Repeal of Prohibition*, which, as the title suggests, discusses the ways women aided in the movement to dismantle Prohibition just a few years after its successful implementation. Rose uses a historical and gender-studies approach, concluding that "the women's repeal movement was to free the female voter from the bonds of convention, the movement also demonstrated the continuing power of a conservative moral appeal to women."<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Catherine Gilbert Murdock's *Domesticating Drink* follows the role of gender in the perception of alcohol and the drastic changes that occurred in these perceptions between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Murdock's study uses sociological-historic research concerning gender roles, ultimately concluding that "it was not simply drink that was domesticated in this decade but men as well."<sup>3</sup> These concepts are built upon claims made in David E. Kyvig's 1978 journal article entitled "Women Against Prohibition," which employs history and sociology to follow women's roles, both within larger movements, and as individual leaders. Kyvig was one of the first to argue that although women once played a large role in the initial passage of Prohibition, it was their changing perception and later involvement in anti-Prohibition efforts that was vital in overturning the Eighteenth Amendment.

Thus, while recent scholarship has explored either the topics of religious affiliation on perceptions of alcohol (both then and now) or women's roles within the pro/anti-Prohibition movements, none focus on where these two topics intersect. This demonstrates a gap in scholarship that foregoes individual denominational study that this research intends to fill by focusing specifically on Methodist discipline, and further by emphasizing women within this tradition. Though scholars on the history of religion often utilize similar methodologies, the slight differences in background and approach make distinct each of the Prohibition studies written by historians and/or scholars of religion. My methodology stems from a perspective emphasizing religious presence through history, particularly the

social and theological changes that religious bodies have undergone. This current research focuses on theology and policy within the Methodist church surrounding women and alcohol around the time of Prohibition, utilizing primary and secondary sources, including all of the referenced works, that aid in my analysis of religious doctrine. I also employ quantitative research through religious censuses and data that discusses the measurable impacts of Prohibition during its enforcement as well as decades later.

### **3. Historical Background**

The religious American's relationship with alcohol is a long one, stemming from as early as the founding of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Aboard John Winthrop's ship to the colonies was more than ten thousand gallons of wine, partially because of the lack of clean drinking water, and partially because the travelers weren't sure how they would make alcohol in the new world.<sup>4</sup> Drinking was so regularly a part of life and religious identity that they could not risk its inaccessibility in America. The use of alcohol in American households steadily increased with time, but boomed in the period of Industrialization, when quality liquor could be mass-produced and distributed. In fact, by 1810 there were more than fourteen thousand distilleries in the United States, and by 1830, people were drinking, on average, seven gallons of liquor every year.<sup>5</sup>

In the early nineteenth century, accompanying Industrialization were large influxes of immigrants, particularly from Catholic countries. Protestant America feared the rise in Catholicism would harm America in immeasurable ways. The sanctity of the nation was at risk, and what posed a direct threat? Alcohol. The Catholic immigrants that were coming to the vulnerable United States brought with them an appreciation for heavy drinking which many Protestant denominations grew to dislike. In an effort to combat Catholicism's growing presence and reassert Protestant superiority, coupled with the altering social and religious opinions of alcohol, denominations doubled down on their stance against alcohol, eventually shifting advisories from maintaining temperance to complete abstinence from mind-altering substances. With this change came increased division, creating disparities between urban and rural, Catholic and Protestant, men and women. With increased rates of alcoholic consumption, crime, and violence, women grew weary of the safety of themselves and their children, and with no legal authority granting them protection from domestic abuse, there was little that wives and mothers could do to combat alcohol-induced violence. This promoted many women's original involvement in the movement for Prohibition. Between churches' growing intolerance towards alcohol and women's desire for social and legal protection, the development of Temperance, and later Prohibition movements was a fast and large one, in just over a century becoming one of the largest social movements at the time and nearly dismantling the entire establishment of drinking.

### **4. Results**

#### **4.1. The Start of the Movement**

Eliza Jane Trimble Thompson was the daughter of the Ohio governor and Temperance activist Allen Trimble, who taught Eliza the dangers of alcohol from a young age. She grew up in the rural town of Hillsboro, Ohio, with her seven siblings, all of whom were devout Methodists. Eliza's faith was a motivating factor for her career, and one of her most notable qualities, as she would go on to lead one of the first major female-led groups to bind the concepts of religion and Prohibition. She sparked early demonstrations against the distribution of alcohol in what was, in 1874, dubbed "the Woman's Holy War."<sup>6</sup> Eliza's early work in the cause began what was later the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), and she is now known as the mother of the Temperance movement, a title that is peculiar for the time, seeing how little social authority women had. Eliza Jane Trimble Thompson, and the movement she sparked, are indicative of the changing roles of women between the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries. The fact that she had the ability and means to create such a reformative organization marks a shift in the roles of women in society. No longer were they idle homebodies, but politically and religiously active revolutionaries. White women within Methodism, such as Thompson, gained unprecedented political and religious power during this period between 1870 and 1920, mostly due to Reconstruction, the shift of religious roles, and the First World War. These changes are demonstrated by the emergence of female-led Temperance organizations, the creation of the Methodist Building, and their movements for suffrage.

Following the emancipation of enslaved people, there was a significant effort to increase the social gap between racial groups. White men manipulated their relationships with women in order to maintain their dominance over the

newly freed Black population. This was the beginning of modern conceptions of race which no longer deny the humanity of black people, but which “[ignore] ‘whiteness’ by treating it simply as a given” in order to systematically bring down those who differ from the norm.<sup>7</sup> This came in the form of allying white men and women together in ways that differed from before the Civil War. The changing perception of race relations almost brought white women to the same level as their male counterparts both socially and legally, while simultaneously bringing black women down even further. This division did not stop at the chapel doors, though. Despite Methodist denominations being particularly popular among people of color, there remained racial tension within the church. The earliest example of this is the formation of the African Methodist Episcopal church, a branch of Methodism that formed in 1787 when the dominant white church demonstrated “just how far American Methodists would go to enforce racial discrimination against African Americans.”<sup>8</sup> Although the denomination declared its support for people of color, social tension within congregations kept churches segregated. Conversely, white women were slowly gaining new rights in the church, becoming more socially acceptable in leadership positions, with most Wesleyan denominations allowing women, such as Helenor M. Davisson, to preach as a deacon in 1866, immediately after the end of the Civil War.<sup>9</sup> These new opportunities for white women as a result of Reconstruction demonstrate how they gained the socio-religious authority to speak out as much as they did in Temperance unions such as the WCTU without being challenged for overstepping their social and religious authority.

Around the same time, there was a shift in perceptions of religion in the home that prioritized women being both caretakers and religious educators of the family. Colleen McDannell describes this “cult of true womanhood” as the change in social and familial dynamics when “it was the mother who, according to social norms, would be expected to nurture the [family’s religion].”<sup>10</sup> Though the change was gradual, it came into fruition when coupled with the other drastic socio-political changes of the time in which women were not yet fully expected to work, but had gained enough authority to firmly speak on matters of religious morality. There are even instances, such as Susan B. Anthony, who was a begrudged Temperance leader early in her career, where religious bodies threw women into positions of power concerning issues the Church found important.<sup>11</sup> Similar evidence is found in Eliza Thompson herself, who, before being put into leadership in the Temperance movement, was soft-spoken and had no experience in political activism. Women, who had been increasingly involved in church affairs, were able to hold leadership positions and more responsibility than in the past. With this shift, particularly in branches of the Methodist Church, came female organization and engagement, most notably in the form of the Methodist Building. Now called the United Methodist Building, this remains the only non-governmental building on Capitol Hill. It was built on a lot bought in 1917 by Rev. Dr. Clarence True Wilson, who saw it as the perfect place “to establish Methodism’s social reform presence in Washington, D.C.”<sup>12</sup> His wife, Maude Akin Wilson, designed the building and “served as [the] financial officer, property manager, and director of operations.” This was not the end of female engagement with the building, however. The \$650,000 building project was largely funded by pledges “from Methodist women concerned about the health of families and the harms of alcohol abuse.” This engagement serves as evidence of the increasing presence of white women in the Church’s social and political affairs, as well as their dedication to the adoption of Prohibition.

Similarly, and possibly most drastically, the Great War marked significant mobility for women, who were given the opportunity to work in new capacities. With such an abrupt shift and return to normalcy after the war, there was tension when few knew what was expected of them. Many women wanted to go to work while men expected their wives to resume exclusively domestic roles. Men at the time would even argue that this return to domesticity indicates the ineffectiveness of the war in gaining women’s rights, affirming that working was the role of a man.<sup>13</sup> However, Janet McCalman in the *Labour History Journal* asserts that:

The apparent loosening of the code of feminine respectability with the decline of chaperonage, rising hemlines, and the acceptance of cigarette smoking and ‘smart talk’ in the flapper generation, has suggested to observers that a radical transformation in the status of women had taken place due to this very short and quite temporary change in their place in the workforce.<sup>14</sup>

McCalman highlights the changing roles of women aside from the numeric quotas which might indicate the opposite. The social roles of women, even after returning home from their temporary employment, had changed significantly. Women had new autonomy over themselves and their households, going to college, holding religious authority, dictating family finances, and advocating for political reform. Stanford scholar Pamela S. Karlan cites that it wasn’t until after the war that Suffragettes “pointed to women’s key role on the home front, to bolster their arguments in favor of domestic expansion of voting rights.”<sup>15</sup> In the religious sect, this pattern remains true as well, with branches of churches, particularly Universalist and Methodist denominations, outwardly supporting women’s suffrage either during or after WWI rather than before it. On May 23, 1916, the Methodist Episcopal Church, the largest Methodist body, voted to be “committed to Women’s suffrage,”<sup>16</sup> asserting the Church’s stance on slavery and alcohol as

evidence of their dedication to the freedoms of all persons, including women. Though progress had been made in women's rights up to this point, it wasn't until after World War I, with the support of major religious bodies, that both suffrage and Prohibition as female-led movements were officially accepted. Women were given the opportunities to demonstrate their vital roles in the nation and further push for these two causes they were so passionate about. The very existence of these opportunities marks changes in the perceived abilities of white women within the church, home, and work. After the war, they never fully returned to their former lifestyles, pushing even harder for the passage of suffrage and Prohibition, and succeeding in both.

The unprecedented increase in social and religious rights of women demonstrated in this period is significant for its role in the initial passage of Prohibition. Though the movement was originally led, in the majority, by men, the roles women played within the movement were unprecedented, further contributing to their coming acquisition of suffrage and new social and religious autonomy. The Temperance and Prohibition movements, particularly through the WCTU, were the first major female-led religious movements in American history and proved to be incredibly successful. As such, there were denominational shifts within the major Protestant churches at the time, particularly Methodism. These changes, both within women's rights and Methodism, occurred simultaneously, with each causing the other. What is peculiar is where the two part ways. While this section demonstrated how women and Methodism existed together, later sections will question the split that occurred when Methodist women began advocating for Prohibition's repeal, using their newly acquired rights to push against the very law they put in place.

#### 4.2. Immediate Impact of the Prohibition Amendment

The Eighteenth Amendment was passed into law on January 16, 1919, followed by the Volstead Act, which legally enforced the prohibition of alcohol. Officially, it banned "the manufacture, sale, or transportation of intoxicating liquors" within the United States and its territories.<sup>17</sup> Leading up to this passage were years of advocacy, largely led by women and religious individuals, and supported by efforts to pass suffrage, which was made into law the next year. Immediately following the implementation of the prohibition of alcohol were rapid changes in the social, economic, and political systems that surrounded it. Data discussing alcohol-related health issues and Methodist attendance records indicate that there was an immediate impact of Prohibition that succeeded in what organizations like the WCTU hoped they would, these changes were beneficial to women in that they temporarily mended relationships at home and further aided in the religious autonomy of Methodist women, most clearly demonstrated by their ability to become ordained.

A 1991 study on the rates of alcohol usage during Prohibition describes a "steep initial decline in consumption followed by a steady incline," citing inaccessibility and poorer quality liquor as possible reasons for such a pattern.<sup>18</sup> As time went on, access and quality no longer became issues in large cities, where alcohol was readily available for those who sought it out. In small towns and among conservative religious populations, however, the patterns differ. Sociologist Joseph Gusfield's research found that beyond political or religious beliefs, people in areas where alcohol was fiercely opposed faced the social pressures to remain sober. "Abstinence was becoming a symbol of middle-class membership and a necessity for ambitious and aspiring young men. It was one of the ways society could distinguish the industrious from the ne'er-dowell; the steady worker from the unreliable drifter."<sup>19</sup> Considering the social, political, and religious pressures for sobriety, it is clear why Prohibition was considered more successful in rural areas. While there were differences in the effectiveness, enforcement, and longevity of Prohibition around the country, its passage was felt by all. There was an initial drop in drinking rates and for the first half of Prohibition, alcohol consumption was lower than it had been in decades. What's more, a 2003 study "compared cirrhosis (liver disease) between a pre-Prohibition year, such as 1915, and a Prohibition year, such as 1925, and concluded that Prohibition reduced the cirrhosis death rate by almost 50%."<sup>20</sup> Though accurate figures regarding the amount of drinking between 1920-1933 are difficult to calculate, the demonstrated decrease in alcohol-related health issues indicates, at the very least, a positive change in the harms caused by excessive drinking, and can serve as evidence of decreased drinking patterns. If the ultimate goal of Prohibition was to get people to stop drinking, it proved successful in doing so, particularly within rural areas, for the greater part of its legal establishment.

But there were other goals behind the Prohibition movement. Particularly, people sought increased church attendance and decreased domestic violence. Religion had long been associated with the Temperance movement, and denominations hoped that after its passage there would be an increase in membership across the board, especially hoping to gain back popularity from the increasingly large Catholic population. The Methodist church was a large proponent of Prohibition efforts, with people advocating in local politics around the country. Within the Methodist denominations, there was a jump in membership with the passage of Prohibition. In 1926 numbers reached 8,070,619, a 904,000 person increase from the decade before, which hosted 7,166,451 members despite almost five-thousand

churches closing their doors within the same period (possibly the result of a more condensed population in cities).<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, but not surprisingly, these numbers drop by the 1936 religious census, after Prohibition's repeal, with membership lower than before at 7,001,637. Given this information, it could be theorized that religious populations, much like sobriety, were thriving at the beginning of Prohibition, but steadily declined through the latter half. Like with drinking patterns, this data holds that the first half of Prohibition proved to be extremely successful for the religious groups who fought for it.

Violence against women had become an issue for households across the country by the mid-late nineteenth century, and little was being done to solve it. In fact, legislation was put in place to protect the abusers from social or political consequences. An 1886 North Carolina Supreme Court case ruled that "the law will not interfere in the domestic government of families [...] unless it produces permanent injury, or is inflicted from malicious motives, and not from an honest purpose."<sup>22</sup> This ruling, and many others like it, set precedence for the legal rights of women that remained for nearly fifty years. It was for this reason that many individual women joined the Temperance movement, they feared for their safety and without any legal defense, the alternative was to cut off what was thought to be the source of violence: alcohol. The rapid growth of Temperance movements across the nation was readily supported by the church, which saw Temperance as a worthy cause. The Methodist Book of Discipline as early as 1840 cites slavery, drunkenness, and violent abuse as forms of evil "which [are] most generally practiced"<sup>23</sup> as the sins opposed by the denomination. With significant efforts by women, aided by support from the church, "wife-beating" was made illegal in the United States in 1920, just after Prohibition's enforcement.<sup>24</sup> Multiple sources credit the 1920 law for making marital abuse illegal on a national scale but argue that it remained ineffective until the 1970s when abuse was more widely condemned. However, one study by Dr. Carolyn Ramsey in the *Michigan Journal of Gender and Law* argues that the 1920's ban on wife-beating, in addition to a decrease in alcoholic tendencies immediately following the passage of Prohibition, was more effective than many give it credit for. It cites that after 1920 "the state and the public condemned abusive husbands for misusing their power— and often for violating prescriptive ideals of Temperance," with harsh legal repercussions for men who were proven guilty of physical abuse.<sup>25</sup> Whether the law was particularly effective or not, its passage indicates the immediate social shift where men in power gave in to pressure from women and religious bodies to make political changes, leading to the passage of Prohibition, suffrage, and domestic violence illegality. Similarly, these changes in attitudes towards domestic violence demonstrate the effectiveness of Prohibition in carrying through, at least initially, the goals of the women who advocated for its passage. These new social and religious rights that emerged within the 1920s are also evident within the church itself, which soon, after women's dedicated fight for Prohibition, changed many of its views on the role of a woman within the church.

Despite decades of involvement and advocacy in the church, it wasn't until 1920 that women were given the right to become licensed as local preachers in the Methodist church. Just four years later, women were able to be considered for ordination. This did not go unchallenged, however, with the Southern Conference refusing to grant women full clergy rights in 1930.<sup>26</sup> Despite pushback from conservative regions, this expedited acquisition of rights was monumental for women within the church. These changes are largely due to the passage of Prohibition and the role women played in advocating for this cause that the church so firmly believed in. Once these female-led groups were successful in gaining political traction where the official church could not, they had demonstrated their value; leading to what can only be considered theological shifts in order to maintain the church's socio-political status. Reshaping the church's stance on female ordination by altering interpretation of scripture was a significant win for the women of the church who, although actually becoming ordained was unlikely, had solidified their place as leaders within the various Methodist denominations. This theological change was prompted by the urge to give women rights so long as they were working in favor of the church, and for a while, this worked.

For at least the first part of Prohibition, the groups that advocated for it seemed to be successful. Health issues and drinking as a whole were the lowest in a century, church membership rose significantly, and new legislation for women proved to progress female equality after the success of the Temperance movement. There were, however, drawbacks that would make many Americans question the effectiveness of the law from the beginning. Steady crime increase and the prevalence of bootleggers drove families apart and, some even questioned the validity of the law, citing its infringement on their Constitutional rights as justification for its repeal. Cracks in the foundation grew to be unavoidable in the middle of Temperance when more people were joining anti-Prohibition "wet" groups than pro-Prohibition "dry" ones.

### 4.3. Growing Opposition to Prohibition

One of the first issues that arose with the Prohibition Amendment was its lack of definition for "intoxicating liquors." This created a loophole where the sale of alcohol could be permitted so long as the state didn't define the sold product

as such. Similarly, the Volstead Act didn't prohibit domestic production and ingestion of alcohol, nor public intoxication. These were some of the earliest ways people discreetly rebelled against the law. Later, however, these "loopholes" caused more problems than Prohibition was intended to solve. At the time of Prohibition's repeal, the nation had plunged into the Great Depression; while families starved and crime rings that grew through access to alcohol sat in better economic positions than most everyone else in the nation. The latter half of Prohibition, which saw rising crime and drinking rates as well as decreased support for churches and the Temperance movement, marked a turning point in the Eighteenth Amendment's short time as law. Though women were one of the last major demographics to turn against Prohibition, their involvement was crucial for its repeal. Many women, particularly those in cities, were motivated by the rising crime rates and obvious ineffectiveness of the law to enforce sobriety, fearing that the disregard for Prohibition would set a precedent for people to break other, arguably more necessary laws. Women's ability to make such assertions for themselves was a relatively new autonomy granted by the sudden increase in women's rights in the 1920s. New legislation, such as suffrage, Prohibition, and the "wife-beater" laws, gave women new social and legal statuses so they could not only have a vote, but a voice. With this voice, there began new efforts to reform and repeal the Prohibition for its apparent ineffectiveness. The rise of anti-Prohibition groups indicated the shift in female perspectives on Prohibition outside of their religious and political affiliations, this conflicted with the growing denominational efforts to advocate in favor of Prohibition in what led to tension between women in the church.

Men had generally opposed the Prohibition movement from the start, though large numbers within the church opposed alcohol, men who did not belong to a denomination enforcing Prohibition often did not have reason to ban alcohol. Though they objected to Prohibition from the start, anti-Prohibition male-led efforts were unsuccessful until large numbers of women began entering the movement, reviving it and bringing new strength to anti-Prohibitionists. Arguably the fiercest opponent of the WCTU was the Women's Organization for National Prohibition Reform, or the WONPR. It was founded in 1929 by a group of women led by former Prohibition activist Pauline Sabin. Sabin, like many other women, feared the increased crime prompted by Prohibition would have negative effects on her children and how they perceived laws. Sabin, a devoted member of the Republican Party, was a key figure in the effort to recruit more women to the anti-Prohibition efforts. Her conversion to an anti-Prohibition stance demonstrated that women could now use their voices to speak for what they thought was right, regardless of what other socio-political "categories" one might belong to. In fact, her critics claimed that the WONPR was a "clever advertising device" used to oppose the popular thought that the majority of women supported Prohibition.<sup>27</sup> This argument is effectively discounted when considering that similar Women's anti-Prohibition movements existed as early as 1922. The Molly Pitcher Club, founded by M. Louise Gross, existed in small congregations around the country, arguing that though the government can restrict the sale of alcohol, its ban was unconstitutional for the personal liberties it infringed upon.<sup>28</sup> These groups, joined by the Association Against the Prohibition Amendment (AAPA) and the Women's Moderation Union, created strong opposition to Prohibition, however, none were explicitly religious. The understanding at the time was that religious women's efforts were dedicated to the continuation of Prohibition rather than its repeal. Explicitly religious efforts in the repeal also risked a backlash from Protestant denominations, which overwhelmingly favored Prohibition. The movement was larger than religious affiliation, however, the female anti-Prohibition push spanned denominations and religion and was defended by arguments not rooted in religious or political doctrine, but social concerns. According to Kenneth D. Rose's *American Women and the Repeal of Prohibition*, the WONPR "was officially nonpartisan and contained within its leadership a mixture of both Democrats and Republicans." Rose goes on to discuss how all who joined had to agree that the "national Prohibition has incited crime, and increased lawlessness, hypocrisy, and corruption," a clear reflection on their priorities for the repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment.<sup>29</sup> The movement for repeal was not centered on the unity of a certain group, religion, or demographic, but rather united in their stance on Prohibition above all other affiliations; this is what set it apart from pro-Prohibitionists who dedicated their work to religious policy.

Female ordination was not the only theological shift the Methodist denominations underwent in this period. The negative perception of alcohol as a whole was a relatively new concept, specifically in how seriously the denomination took sobriety. In the early-mid nineteenth century, Methodist doctrine said little about alcohol and nothing about an effort to ban it. The Methodist *Book of Discipline* mentions alcohol as early as the 1780s, citing alcoholism and abuse of substances as a sin, but Prohibition, Temperance, or a ban on alcohol are not mentioned until the mid-nineteenth century when Temperance became a more mainstream movement and closely aligned with the church.<sup>30</sup> Once this happened, the Methodist denomination as a whole began altering its doctrine and theological approach to better reflect the social alliances that had been created. Though the shift occurred mostly in the late 1800s, it was more fiercely enforced and advocated by the church directly before and during Prohibition. Throughout Prohibition, there was a steady increase in the denomination's direct involvement in advocating for the continuation of the amendment, moving the fight from women within the church, to the church itself. In 1916, the Methodist Episcopal Church, the largest

Methodist body at the time, established the Board of Temperance, Prohibition, and Public Morals, which advocated for Prohibition for the nation, regional conferences, and the individual. The Board of Temperance contributed significantly to the Temperance movement and played an important role in the eventual passage of Prohibition. In fact, the board was so prominent in the church, that it was not disbanded until 1964 and continued to work for Christian sobriety until then. With increasing opposition to Prohibition and attendance numbers dwindling, Methodist churches began increasing efforts to keep involvement up through the second half of Prohibition. In 1925, the church released *The Voice of the Board of Temperance of the Methodist Church*, a periodical that discussed the harms of alcohol and the Church's stance on it. The January 1929 issue counters the anti-Prohibition organizations by arguing that it "is an astonishing economic and social success with unexampled political strength."<sup>31</sup> This perspective was not unique in the periodical, which published opinionated articles about the physical and spiritual harm of alcoholic consumption. While women both within and outside of the church were joining the increasingly prevalent groups calling for action, the Methodist Church, and other Protestant denominations, doubled down on their stance on alcohol, creating new means of distributing propaganda and grasping for maintained influence over the public.

Tension arose around women within Methodism who joined anti-Prohibition efforts, particularly as the church grew stricter in its stance in favor of it. Those who fought Prohibition were pitted against their gender and religion in order to fight for the repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment. Though the anti-Prohibition movement did not designate religion as one of their causes or motivations, their opposition to new religious doctrine marked those who were religious as traitors to their faith. This tension coincided with the Prohibition Amendment's "loopholes" in the case of Mabel Walker Willebrandt, a Los Angeles lawyer who served as Assistant Attorney General from 1921-1929. Willebrandt was responsible for cases concerning Prohibition violations and acting as the legal defense of the Eighteenth Amendment. She was adored by the "drys" for her work as the highest-ranking female in the federal government, earning her the nickname "First Lady of the Law." Her reputation quickly changed as she retired from her position in the Department of Justice to become the attorney for California Fruit Industries, a company which, like many others at the time, took advantage of section 29 of the Volstead Act, which allowed individuals to make up to two-hundred gallons of wine per year for their households.<sup>32</sup> California Fruit Industries was known for selling grape concentrate, which is easily fermentable into wine, to people around the country. Willebrandt received backlash for this as it seemingly contradicted the cause she so faithfully fought for. A New York Times article from 1931 cited the Methodist response of how "disconcerting [it was] that Mrs. Willebrandt, [...] a woman whose eloquent voice [was] raised in Methodist conferences and in the councils of dry Leaders, is the able and energetic attorney of Fruit Industries, Ltd."<sup>33</sup> Though she was not Methodist and remained active in her discussions of the dangers of alcohol, the Church dismissed her as a force working for the wets. Panicking over the loss of legal support, denominations attempted to rally Christian women around the cause they were once so passionate about. Harry Emerson Fosdick published an article in *The Ladies' Home Journal* that pressured women with the fate of the church and the nation, stating that "we have heard a great deal about the breakdown of the church, but no breakdown so threatens the foundations of social order as the collapse of our law (Prohibition)."<sup>34</sup> The WCTU preyed on social pressures, releasing a statement that it "knew of no decent women who wanted a return of the liquor traffic."<sup>35</sup> Dry followers of Protestant denominations, both men and women, saw the repeal movement as an immoral evil, but the damage was done and, to their dismay, the movement would soon come to an end.

On December 5, 1933, President Franklin D. Roosevelt announced the passage of the Twenty-First Amendment, repealing the national ban on alcohol that had begun 13 years earlier. Driven by increased efforts to repeal the Amendment, Prohibition's end was made official, to the dismay of many Protestant congregations across the country. The negative reaction to this repeal lasted decades, with denominations across the country disapproving of the use of alcohol well into the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In an updated *Book of Discipline* after the repeal, the Methodist Church commented on the repeal, stating that:

The annual cost of crime in money is figured in billions, but no estimate is adequate to cover the moral and spiritual price the nation pays. We deplore the enormous increase in criminal activities, responsibility for which rests largely upon indifferent citizenship and inadequate administration of and enforcement of law. We challenge the people called Methodists to have no part in the infamous liquor traffic. Repeal of National Prohibition has been a more ghastly failure than even its most consistent enemies predicted.<sup>36</sup>

In reality, "the nation in 1933 greeted legal alcohol with ringing silence."<sup>37</sup> Alcohol was so easily accessed in cities during the latter half that its repeal only furthered the amount of drinking done by those who were already doing it, and who had likely never stopped. In rural areas, however, the opposite occurred. Protestant churches and their adherents' continued abstinence prompted by social and religious pressures. In fact, denominational sacraments were changed forever by the creation of grape juice by Methodist minister Thomas Welch, which was named as a substitute

for wine in communion ceremonies.<sup>38</sup> Churches maintained their stance on the evils of alcohol, discussing the importance of Prohibition even more after its repeal, but this was often overshadowed by the more pressing social matters at the time, the Great Depression, and the new government taking form in Germany. However, fewer discussions on the topic did not stop the changes that occurred within the church and nation.

#### 4.4. Lasting Effects and Conclusion

Before the implementation of Prohibition, there was no legal minimum age to purchase or consume alcohol, it was a socially accepted tradition to drink when appropriate, and though religious bodies condemned “drunkenness,” they, too, seemed to have no problem with the ways things ran until the early nineteenth century. Given current legislation, it is clear that the stigma around drinking has changed significantly in the last 150 years. Though today the changes are not entirely obvious, the subtle shifts that the era of Prohibition had on American society are quite numerous and have substantially altered the modern approach to alcohol consumption. Prohibition, and its perceived failure, created large rifts between men and women within the church and continued to divide the Protestant denominations in rural areas and the Catholic immigrants in cities, creating dynamics that continue today in the form of Protestant-promoted abstinence programs, dry counties, and strict drinking ages.

Immediately after the Twenty-First Amendment was passed, formally ending Prohibition, social changes tended to mirror those of the decades before Prohibition in a peculiar way. Having partially blamed women for the fall of the Amendment, religious men sought to take back control of their respective denominations. They saw both the nation and the church as being in a worse place after than before, with the country in the midst of the Great Depression, congregation membership dropping substantially, and thousands of church closures in addition to the very fact that alcohol would once again be legal; it seemed that the repeal Prohibition did more harm than good. In the ten years between 1926 and 1936, 18,317 Methodist churches closed their doors, and 1.07 million members formally left.<sup>39</sup> As such, they took it upon themselves to revive the church after women seemed to have failed at viably progressing it. Though just recently, women were given the opportunity to pursue ordination, the Methodist Church reverted the legislation in 1948, ruling that although women could legally seek the title of pastor, “[Central conference] shall have the power to decide the official status and ordination of women” and can remove the legality of female ordination at any time.<sup>40</sup> Female ordination within the Church was not solidified as a right until the early 1960s. It was around this time, and for similar reasons, that men also began taking prevalence in the existing Temperance organizations. Though the WCTU was still functioning, now led by Ella Boole, denominationally instated activism became more prevalent and heavily circulated in media, led and staffed almost entirely by men. One of the male-led efforts by the Methodist Board of Temperance, Prohibition and Public Morals was the church’s annual Cyclopedias, which were to be owned by every pastor or preacher for the purpose of convenient facts and the denomination’s official stance on alcohol.<sup>41</sup> In 1939, William Wilson and Dr. Robert Smith founded Alcoholics Anonymous in Akron, Ohio. The program used 12 steps that moved progressively towards “a spiritual rebirth that will enable them to admit their shortcomings and ‘make amends’ to those they have hurt, and to trust in God as the only means of living without alcohol.”<sup>42</sup> Alcoholics Anonymous ushered in a new relationship between religious individuals and alcohol, one that encourages abstention but does not force it, and that works hard to increase awareness of the dangers of addiction while simultaneously destigmatizing it. Although alcoholism went unmentioned in the years during and immediately after the repeal of Prohibition, addiction services over the past 80 years have advanced to treat the disease safely as opposed to simply ignoring its existence.

Unlike their Protestant neighbors, Catholics, overall, were relieved with the passage of the Twenty-First Amendment. Though sacramental wine was allowed under the Volstead Act, the cultural implications of drinking for many Catholic populations were revived once drinking became legal. This difference in perception of alcohol, coupled with the geographic division between cities and countryside, meant regional and religious division within the nation came to a head by 1934. Protestants, scrambling for authority over the cities that now seemed to dominate the political landscape, found autonomy in their ability to self-legislate the local regulations on alcohol. They could set minimum drinking ages, which often reflected the political and religious patterns of the state, and on the county level, could decide whether to remain “dry” or become “wet.” Minimum drinking ages differed between states, generally between eighteen and twenty-one, with occasional exceptions between alcoholic content and the gender of the purchaser.<sup>43</sup> In 1984 the federal government established the minimum drinking age of 21 in an attempt to decrease the number of fatal car accidents caused by intoxicated driving, but in some counties, even today, the sale of alcohol is not permitted based on regulations set by the municipality. John Frenreis’ study entitled “A Hundred Miles of Dry” focuses on these counties, discussing their reasons for remaining abstinent and exploring patterns between them. Frenreis concluded after “analyzing contemporary county-level data from over 3,000 U.S. counties, the strongest factor

associated with "dry" status of a county is the religious composition, specifically the presence of Evangelical Protestants."<sup>44</sup> These counties were, and still are, primarily Baptist or Methodist, two of the denominations most closely associated with the push for Prohibition, and found to have extreme influence over geographically isolated communities.

This does not only impact counties, however. Across the country, rates of alcohol consumption among individuals who consider themselves to be Christian, particularly Protestants, are shown to drink substantially less than those of other or no religions. James B. Holt's "Religious Affiliation and Alcohol Consumption in the United States" follows the impacts of geography, demographic, and religion on an individual's drinking habits and found that Protestant Christians drink considerably less than others, and among rural areas these numbers drop more, furthering the research by Frenreis while expanding it to discuss the trans-national patterns.<sup>45</sup> These new developments in patterned drinking align clearly with the period of Prohibition, demonstrating the ways in which it altered the perception of alcohol not just within churches, but across the country, where the minimum drinking age is strictly enforced and rates of consumption only recently reached where they were pre-Prohibition.<sup>46</sup> Understanding the current relationship between religion and alcohol is important for the ways it can provide deeper awareness of alcohol-related topics across disciplines. Following the history of these relationships is equally important for the sake of awareness. In the field of religious studies, highlighting the role of a specific denominational approach can grant further conception of that religious organization and, what's more, can make distinct each of the seemingly interchangeable Protestant denominations. Focusing specifically on women within a religious perspective can grant scholars of religion a further understanding of the denominational perception of gender, leading to what relationships exist today.

Though Prohibition as a whole was, and still is, perceived as a failure, there are many complexities within the movement that make the classification of "failure" or "success" difficult to label. Though it proved to be an unsuccessful attempt to ban alcohol, it did change the American relationship with the substance forever, some would say, for the better. With decreased alcohol-related deaths, destigmatized alcoholism, and increased women's rights, the movement for Temperance and Prohibition was so powerful that it changed the course of American history. This is largely due to the women at the center of the movement. Just as Frances Willard hoped, Prohibition and women's suffrage were passed into law with the intent of advancing women's rights in the nation. The religious women who advocated for both of these movements proved their worth to lawmakers and religious leaders, and soon made advances towards equality, most noticeably in their formal ability to apply for ordination in Methodist churches. Most significant, though, is the ability to change their minds when they saw the negative impacts of the ban on alcohol. Though many feared division within the female vote would seem juvenile to male politicians, scores of women went against their former advocacy, even challenging their religion and gender, in order to campaign for Prohibition reform and repeal. The deferring of religious women from one side of the movement to the other marked a shift in female identity and the overall relationship with alcohol that would also last for generations. Today, alcohol consumption is regulated by minimum drinking age laws and programs that aid in curbing alcoholism, but its prevalence within the nation is a constant, with consumption slowly rising to its former rates, now with much more awareness. This progression can be summarized by the Methodist church playing a significant role in acquiring rights for women through its support of women's efforts for suffrage and Prohibition. However, when it became apparent that the Prohibition amendment caused more harm than good, women used their new social, political, and religious autonomy to advocate for Prohibition's repeal, causing tension within the church and shifts in the American perception of alcohol.

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