

Spirited Peacham :
Whiskey, Temperance, and Bootlegging

2016 Historical House Exhibition

Peacham Historical Association

July 4th-September 29th, 2016



Early settlers of Peacham brought barrels of rum with them, and soon filled their cellars with cider made from the many apple trees they planted. Always concerned about the safety of drinking water and needing extra calories to do the extreme hard work of clearing the land, men, women and children drank pitchers of cider—cider that grew steadily stronger as it fermented in its barrels. Farmers also built stills and made whiskey, often from potatoes that grew well here; they drank it themselves, but it also became a lucrative cash crop.

The adverse effect of daily drinking “ardent spirits” soon gave rise, however, to an equally ardent temperance movement. Peacham passed its first temperance pledge in 1830 and became a center of writing and preaching against consumption of alcohol. Boys and girls held “Cold Water Rallies,” and supported the growing national political temperance movement. Indeed, Peacham had, in effect, a long run of abstinence: from the 1830 pledge, through 1853, when statewide prohibition was passed in Vermont, on until 1933, when national prohibition was repealed.

There was always alcohol to be had, however. Most people never stopped making and drinking cider. Many remedies, tinctures, medicines and tonics were always for sale in the general stores, most were very high proof, and men and women both drank them. In the 1920s, Peacham found itself an unintended witness to national Prohibition; current residents still remember their parents peeking through curtains at night to watch big black cars carrying bootleg whiskey bound from Montreal to speakeasies in the south, tearing through back roads to avoid federal agents.

The 2016 Historical House exhibition presents artifacts from Peacham’s history with alcohol.

Stills: Fuel for the Body and for Commerce



Fire!—On Sunday evening, the Gin distillery of Mr. Ephraim Foster, of Peacham, with its valuable contents, was destroyed by fire. It may not be improper to observe that, 27 stills yet remain in operation in the single town of Peacham. If not with “milk and honey,” certainly, this land o’erflows with Gin and Whisky.

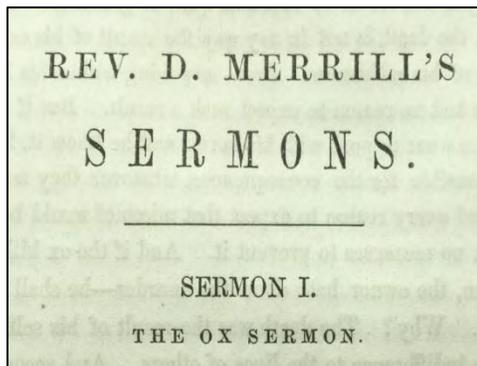
From the *Bennington Reporter*, dated March 18, 1811. Cited by Vermont historian Adam Krakowski in *Teetotalers, Bootleggers & Corruption*.

Peacham was, almost from the very beginning of European settlement, full of stills. One of early Peacham’s most distinguished settlers, General William Chamberlain (1755-1828), served in several major battles of the Revolutionary War and then built a considerable personal fortune trading land in and around Peacham. He served in nearly every possible public office, from Town Clerk to Justice of the Peace to chief Judge of Caledonia Court. Throughout it all, he continued his business activities. While serving in the U.S. Congress, he corresponded with local residents about his design improvements to the stills he manufactured. He probably improved the column still for making

whiskey in larger amounts; the foundation stones of “General’s Still” can still be seen south of his farmhouse on Green Bay Loop.

Chamberlain may have been the most distinguished distiller, but his was only one of many. It was said that every farm had a still. There was also always at least one tavern, and sometimes several; taverns were popular public meeting places where hardworking people could relax and enjoy everything from beer to whisky. The general attitude towards alcohol in the late 18th century appears to have been positive. Many acknowledged the benefits of drinking cider and beer, and even the early whisky, which was reputed to be pure and healthy.

Temperance, Cold Water Rallies and Prohibition



By the 1820's, however, the growing level of drunkenness could not be denied. In 1830, Americans consumed 7.1 gallons of pure alcohol per person per year (an amount it is difficult to comprehend: in 2013 we drank 2.34 gallons). In Peacham, it is documented that there was a growing and fervent sentiment against the production and consumption of “ardent spirits.” The town called for its first temperance pledge in 1830, and had a robust Temperance Society from 1842-1888.

The ministers of both churches were fervent temperance men. In the late 1830's, the minister of the Methodist Church, Reverend J.N. Hume, was known to be a “shouting Methodist” or “rouser,” a fervent speaker for the temperance cause. A story recorded a few years later recounts that in 1839 Hume heard that one of his parishioners, Orman Parker Hooker (1818-1885), was reputed to be the last person who persisted in having a potato still on his farm. Hume paid him a visit, asking at first just to see the barns. Young Farmer Hooker tried to keep him away from the still, but to no avail. Rev. Hume feigned ignorance of distilling and drew from Hooker a detailed description of his still and its workings. Rev. Hume then raised his hand and pronounced the curse of God upon it; the story goes that Farmer Hooker was converted on the spot and so the last of the Peacham distilleries was destroyed.

The other minister at the time grew to national prominence. Peacham native David Merrill (1798-1850) started his career in Urbana, Ohio, and while there wrote two of the most famous and influential temperance sermons, *The Ox Sermon*, and *The Mate to the Ox*. It is estimated that between 2.5 and 3 million copies of *The Ox Sermon* were printed and distributed nationally. In 1841, Rev. Merrill answered a call to return to his native Peacham to assume the post as the second minister of the Congregational Church. Peacham was still growing, nearing its peak population of near 1500 people, and both Merrill and his wife Mary a fervent following for their temperance work.

Temperance was the focus of many social occasions; in the many letters written during this period, Peacham women often recount attending Temperance Meetings as part of their regular activities. They proudly wore their Temperance brooches. The local leader of the Temperance Society, J.N. Kinerson, describes the success of Cold Water Rallies and Temperance parades in engaging young people; delegations including them were sent to national Temperance meetings.

Underground Alcohol



Despite nearly uninterrupted prohibition in Peacham, from 1853 until the repeal of the 18th Amendment in 1933, alcohol was always available. Cider continued to be made, and beer was brewed. Perhaps the most invisible consumption, however, was in the form of medicines and elixirs to be purchased at local general stores. These were advertised both nationally and locally, promising immediate results in curing almost any ailment. One of the most famous, Lydia E. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound, was 40 proof, about half the strength of rum or gin. Many of the bottles in which these remedies were sold still survive; The Peacham Historical House has kept the best of many. One recent donation, a whisky bottle dating from 1934, the year after the repeal of prohibition, still uses the language of beneficial medicinal properties to sell the contents.

Bootlegging operations during national Prohibition were part of daily life in Peacham; the generation that witnessed this is just now passing on. Eloise Miller (1917-2013) was born to a family of farmers, engineers and scholars who had lived for generations in Peacham. Eloise saw big black cars racing through town at night; her home in Peacham Hollow (today called East Peacham) was off the main road running through from Danville to Barnet, and bootleggers drove through at high speeds to avoid revenue officers on the main roads. Apparently they didn't always succeed; Eloise reported one car spun off the road, plowed through a hayrick, regained control and raced on down the road.

Do You Know?



We have marked stills and taverns on this early map of Peacham. We know there must be many more. If you know of any, mark them with the numbered pins provided, and log your site in the notebook below. Sign it and give us contact info so we can follow up.

Thank you!