

FITCHBURG YOUR STORY: Keep Calm and Drop the Rum - Leanna Cox

["Saxifrage" choral music plays, performed by the Fitchburg State University Choirs]

Prof. Kisha Tracy (intro): Welcome to the Fitchburg State University Perseverantia Podcast network. This is the Fitchburg Your Story series in which Fitchburg State students tell the stories that make our city and university unique.

["Saxifrage" fades out]

[Old timey ragtime piano theme plays over the transition and under the narrator]

Leanna Cox: Welcome, history people, my name is Leanna, and today we'll be taking a dive into a fascinating, and let's be completely honest, a little wild, chapter of Fitchburg's temperance history. If you ever thought that temperance was simply the total ban of alcohol, you would be wrong. Temperance was the push for prohibition using religion and moral tactics on the public. This movement had a dramatic impact on the city, changing everything from local taverns to the entire ways of life.

So, if you will, grab a nice cold glass of water and let's do this.

[Old timey ragtime piano theme fades out]

Circa 1841, a time when Fitchburg was just buzzing with industry and there was no surprise people were drinking a lot of alcohol. Drinking was a normal part of people's lives, but then a group of reformed alcoholics who called themselves the Washingtonian Society came along and started to change the way individuals were treating alcohol. Their attitudes were like, hey, we used to be just like you, but we've quit and we're better for it. This movement started in Baltimore, but it didn't take long to travel across the country and eventually spread all the way up to Fitchburg.

Enter John Hawkins, a reformed alcoholic who spoke in 1841 at the Calvinistic Congregational Church in Fitchburg. He wasn't just some random guy preaching about temperance. He was living proof that you could kick the booze and rebuild your life. His words hit deep and many locals started to join the cause shortly after his speech.

[Old timey ragtime piano theme plays under then fades out]

But what really got the movement rolling in Fitchburg? Well, it wasn't just speeches. No, sir, it was about taking action. The Washingtonian Society had a huge impact on the local drinking scene. The Fitchburg Hotel, the Nashua River Hotel, and Woodbury's Tavern, places that were known for their high sales in liquor, started seeing that the sale of their alcohol was decreasing.

Fewer customers were coming in for their daily alcoholic consumption mostly due to the social pressure. Alcohol wasn't just slowing down, it almost came to a complete halt.

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Leanna Cox (cont'd): Then came 1842. Talk about bold moves. The town of Fitchburg voted to forbid the sale of liquor. This wasn't just any vote; this was on behalf of the Washingtonian brethren, who believed that liquor was too tempting for people who couldn't resist. Now, imagine this. You're in a town that votes to ban alcohol, and you're thinking, well, I guess that's it, the temperance movement won, but plot twist, it really didn't.

Fast forward just over a year in 1843, the militia muster in Fitchburg is happening and what do you think we get? A rowdy celebration where, according to Doris Kirkpatrick's *The City in the River*, they poured out enough liquid death to float a 74 gunship. Yikes. Liquid death sounds pretty intense, but I'm guessing that wasn't the canned water sold primarily at concert venues that we know now. It's clear that Fitchburg was still a town that had an alcohol problem.

For those in the temperance movement, it felt like they were running uphill.

[Old timey ragtime piano theme plays under then fades out]

But we can't forget that the push for temperance wasn't just an American movement. In the 1840s, Finnish immigrants started settling in Fitchburg, and there was no denying that they were hard workers with great ethics, but one of the most unique things they did was bring their commitment to the temperance movement. Finnish immigrants were all about sober life.

In fact, according to the books *Around the World in Fitchburg* by Doris Kirkpatrick and *Finnish Immigrants in America* by William A. Huggland, nearly every Finnish group that settled in Fitchburg was either connected to a church or a temperate society. One group, the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church even teamed up with the Finnish Temperance Society to build a church on Mechanic Street in 1893. Talk about community dedication.

[Old timey ragtime piano theme plays under then fades out]

Now let's get into the national temperance brotherhood, the big guns in the movement. They didn't just want to limit alcohol consumption, they wanted to get rid of it entirely. Their philosophy? True reform didn't come from changing your surroundings or your paycheck. True reform didn't come from changing your surroundings or your paycheck. It came from conquering what they saw as humanity's deep, innate flaws. It was like the Temperance Movement was, in their opinion, the superhero of its time, fighting not just the alcohol, but poverty, crime, and mental illness too. But here's the big kicker. Even as people were pledging to stay sober, the National Temperance Brotherhood was serious about keeping their members in check.

[raucous chatter of an angry mob plays under]

We're talking literal investigators showing up at saloons to make sure that you weren't trying to sneak a drink and drinking is not where it stopped, no. No dancing, no card games, and no strike

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Leanna Cox (cont'd): breaking.

[raucous chatter of an angry mob plays under]

If you broke the rules you were out, however those who confessed to breaking the pledge were likely forgiven and brought back into the Brotherhood. It truly was a high-stakes game of sobriety.

Then of course there was W.P. Tilden a key figure in Fitchburg's temperance movement. He delivered a sermon at the First Congregational Church in 1856 where he admired the success of the Washingtonian movement but also acknowledged its limitations. He made it clear that the movement wasn't over but it had evolved. He made it clear that the movement wasn't over but it had evolved. In his sermon he said, "The Washingtonian movement had its day and bright and glorious it was, but it cannot do everything."

This wasn't just about sobering up. It was about creating a better, more wholesome community in accordance with the specific views of the people of the church. One of the most striking things Tilden said about the families who had been healed by temperance. He asked the audience to speak to the wives and the mothers who had seen their husbands and sons come home sober and changed. It was clear from his words that, for many people, the movement had been life-changing for them.

[Old timey ragtime piano theme plays under then fades out]

Now, speaking of life changing moments, let's talk about some of the creative propaganda that helps spread the temperance message. One ad was called, "Will She Let Him In?" In this image, a saloon keeper knocks on the door of a woman's house, the woman who represents Fitchburg, and he's saying, "I'm looking for lodging and will pay well for them. I have a few pets, but they are very fond of children." These pets weren't cute puppies or kittens. No, there were a snake that represented despair, a tiger crime, and a coyote for poverty. This ad was a dramatic way of asking Fitchburg citizens if they wanted these creatures that represented everything bad that comes with alcohol coming into their town. These kind of ads that would show up in newspapers and around the town were used to manipulate the public's opinion by pushing a scary political and religious stance on the consumption of alcohol.

And here's the real kicker. In 1867, kids were getting in on the action. That's right. Children were able to take a pledge called the Child's Temperance Pledge. It was a rhyme, and it went a little like this:

[Nursery rhyme piano plunking plays under the nursery rhyme]

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Leanna Cox (cont'd): “A pledge we make, no wine to take, nor brandy red that burns the head, nor whiskey hot that makes the sot nor fiery rum that ruins home. To quench our thirst we'll always bring cold water from the well or spring.”

And if that doesn't scream I'm committed to the sober life, I don't know what does.

[Nursery rhyme piano ends]

But hold on, there was more. The family temperance pledge was another way to spread the word. This allowed the entire family to pledge not to drink, laying out 12 reasons why temperance was the right choice. Here are the first three.

Number one, moderate drinking leads to drunkenness, but total abstinence prevents it.

Number two, even if no one intends to be a drunkard, over 600,000 people in America are confirmed to be.

Number three, alcohol does no good as a beverage. There are safer remedies for sickness.

And in case you thought alcohol was just a social evil, some people thought it was a medical issue too. According to *Finnish Immigrants in America* by William A. Hugland one man claimed that alcohol turned a man he once knew into a thief and a murderer. They connected drunkenness with crime in the streets. Even an anonymous police chief claimed within the years of when the temperance movement was at its highest peak, he saw less crime and less drunk people roaming the streets of Fitchburg.

However, there were exceptions to drinking liquor. Some people would use it for medicine, which went against the family pledge anyways. And the other exception, of course, was communion at church, but these exceptions were few and far between.

There was also the temperance catechism, where they conducted short interviews to ask about alcohol. Someone asked, “what is the principle evil inflicting the country?” And the answer, “Intemperance.” At first glance, this might seem like a normal Q &A that aims to teach people about the dangers of alcohol. However, this is actually a classic example of propaganda. It mimics a religious catechism which is used to teach moral truths suggesting that not drinking liquor was just for a social preference but It mimics a religious catechism which is used to teach moral truths suggesting that not drinking liquor was not just a social preference but that it's also a moral duty. The interview makes the answer seem like fact rather than opinion, which sways the public opinion out of fear and manipulation.

Before we wrap up, I want to mention the Fitchburg Reform Club, which was organized in 1876. This group was a late addition to the Temperance Movement, but continued the work of what

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Leanna Cox (cont'd): they believed as cleaning up the city and combating the destructive effects of alcohol. However, this tends to be more complex as it is a subjective viewpoint.

[Old timey ragtime piano theme plays under]

So there you have it. from fiery speeches to dramatic ads, temperance in Fitchburg was one of the first steps taken towards national prohibition. It transformed the way people of Fitchburg viewed liquor in their lives, homes, and in their own bodies. It can still be felt today with restaurants based upon speakeasies that have that sneaky bar feeling to them.

So, next time you raise a glass of cold water, remember, there's a long history of people who fought to make a drink of choice and those who fought utterly against it. Thank you for listening and remember, kids, stay sober.

[Old timey ragtime piano theme concludes with a flourish]

[Perseverantia Network theme fades in]

Nikki McToggart: You've been listening to Perseverantia, the Fitchburg State Podcast Network.

[Perseverantia Network theme fades out]