The Liquor Question in Colonial and Revolutionary War Periods*

By Fleming Nevin

The epigram of Mark Twain, that every body talks about the weather, but nobody does anything about it, applies in a large degree to history; everybody knows about it and talks about it to a greater or lesser degree; but very little is done about it, the notable exception is the Historical Society, which decidedly does something about it, something very effective and very important, and through a knowledge of what the stand of our forefathers has been and the reasons back of the particular position, we are able to perpetuate certain principles just as effectually as if they had been written into our constitution and our laws.

There are three major national policies of this sort that stand out in our minds, the doctrine pronounced by Washington that we should engage in no entangling alliances with the European powers; his further precedent and declaration that the best interests of the Country required that he should serve no more than two terms, which has come to be such a matter of faith with us that even the great popularity of Roosevelt was unable to overcome it; and the declaration by President Monroe that no European power should attempt to extend its system to any portion of this hemisphere and that in case they did so it would be considered as the manifestation of an unfriendly disposition toward the United States.

As we are justly interested in such considerations, it appears to me that it might not be without profit to give some attention to the manners and the thought of those early times on a subject that occupies so much space in our daily and periodical literature and so much of the time of our legislative bodies of the present era.

To bring out most clearly the thought and customs of an earlier period the life and work of an individual or a small group is often the most illuminating means of translating the motives that actuate a nation and so we would best consider a few outstanding men who saw the problems

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that were in the path of progress and made the mightiest efforts to overcome them.

The beginning of legislation and control of the traffic in liquor so far as America is concerned, goes back to the earliest settlements by the Colonists. It was very soon discovered that rum was a valuable article for trade with the Indians and it was not long before it was found to be a dangerous commodity to furnish them in quantity. Moderation in its use was never achieved by them and influenced by its ardor and the conviction that the whites could not be trusted to maintain good faith in recognition of title to land reserved to their use, there were constantly recurring wars, sometimes involving only a tribe or two, and again comprising a great league of all the tribes covering thousands of miles of territory.

The Colonists restricted the amount of liquor which was to supply the tribes in their immediate vicinity, but could not regulate its importation by traders. Eleazar Wheelock, the founder of Dartmouth College, is celebrated in song and story, because he went into the wilderness equipped with five hundred gallons of New England rum, clearly for purposes of trade, at least that in excess of the quantity which might be required for their own consumption.

In 1732 James Oglethorpe secured a charter from George II creating a kind of proprietary government, made over to a board of Trustees, prohibiting the sale of intoxicating liquor and slave labor, as Fiske says in his interesting work, "Old Virginia and her Neighbors", "Maine cannot rightfully claim the doubtful honor of having been the first American Commonwealth to try the experiment of a Maine Law." In twenty years time however, Georgia was made a Crown Colony and representative government was introduced, with negro slavery and Jamaica Rum.

Just at the time Oglethorpe was founding the Colony of Georgia, there was born in West Nottingham Township, on the banks of the Octorara river, Chester County, Pennsylvania, Hugh Williamson, who was destined to take an active part in the founding of a new nation and to leave his impress in every community in which he lived thereafter.
Born in 1735, he was sent to the best schools of the day and graduated in the first graduating class of the University of Pennsylvania at the age of twenty one. He then studied for the ministry, his family in the meantime having moved to Shippensburg, Pa. Having completed his courses he was admitted to the Ministry but within a few years he withdrew from his theological pursuits largely by reason of the controversy between the extraordinary evangelist, Mr. Whitfield, who had just come over from England, and the more orthodox party of the Presbyterian Church. Hugh Williamson left the pulpit and studied medicine, at the same time accepting the chair of Professor of Mathematics at the University of Pennsylvania.

His activities from this time occupied an ever widening circle, including membership in the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, the Philadelphia Philosophical Society and various Scientific and Medical Associations. He was appointed a member of a Committee to visit Europe to observe the transits of Venus and Mercury, both occurring in the year 1769. He continued his Medical Studies in Edinburgh and the University of Utrecht, Holland, and after practicing for some years in Philadelphia with great success, he moved to Edenton, N. C. by reason of some pulmonary ailment for which he thought the climate of North Carolina better suited than Philadelphia.

As a resident of this town he became a member of the first and second Continental Congresses and also served as the Surgeon General of the North Carolina troops during the Revolutionary War particularly in the campaign including the battle of Camden, where he went into the enemy's line, under a flag of truce after that sanguinary engagement and for two months attended the wounded of both the enemy and prisoners of his own forces.

He was a member of the Constitutional Convention and signed the Constitution as a delegate from North Carolina and then became a representative in the first and second Congresses.

Dr. David Hosack, before the New York Historical Society in 1819, shortly after Dr. Williamson's death read a Memoir in which he says:—"In 1791, it became his (Dr. Williamson's) duty to vote on the law passed in that year,
imposing an excise on distilled spirits, the celebrated whisky law, which gave rise to the western insurrection."

"On the day of its passage, while leaving the hall, (he) said to a friend, 'sir, my vote was in its favor; I have discharged my duty to my conscience but I have lost my popularity. I shall never again be elected to congress.'"

"He was not without hope that one of its effects would be to lessen the use of a poison which was destructive of the morals and health of a numerous class of the people." (Vol. 2 Williamson's History of North Carolina.)

In the fall of 1817 as his nephew was entering Union College, Schenectady, N. Y., he said to him, "Take care, my boy, that you do not learn to smoke, for smoking will lead you to drinking, and that is the end of all that is good."

Such a stand, at that period of our history, required a rare courage; a celebrated physician, a man of great political prominence, conservative in all his other judgements, he dared risk political oblivion by what was then the most radical sentiment, total abstinence from the use of liquor, not only as to his own personal practice, but as a program to be recommended or even enforced, in some degree, upon others.

That it did not operate to bar him from the Counsels of the Mighty is evidenced by expressions of his contemporaries. John Adams writes in 1820, "My first acquaintance with Dr. Williamson was in Boston, in 1773, when he made a strong impression upon me and gave me a high opinion of the intelligence, as well as the energy of his character." Thomas Jefferson says of his service in Congress, "He was a very useful member, with an acute mind and a high degree of erudition," and Washington in his diary, Friday Feb. 5th, 1790, "Received from Dr. Williamson of North Carolina, a list of names he thought would be proper to fill Revenue office of the State." April 1st, 1790, "The following company dined here today, Gov. Clinton, * * * Baron de Steuben, * * * Mr. Williamson."

In his history of North Carolina, published in Philadelphia in 1812, 2 Vols. Dr. Williamson had a chapter on "Evils to Society in the Increased Consumption of Liquor in the United States" and again in Vol. 1, page 188, he says of the Indians,
"In the progress of 120 years, they had vanished from the consuming touch of ardent spirits like snow beneath a verticle sun. The Chowanokes, who could bring 3,000 bowmen into the field were now reduced to 15 men, who lived in a small town near the mouth of Bennetts Creek."

"The Maratoch Indians, a numerous tribe, had disappeared; and the Mangoacks, who numbered 3,000 bowmen, were now reduced within the compass of a small village."

"Fifteen hundred volunteers from the Indians who lived on the waters of Currituck on the North side of Albemarle Sound, had assembled at Dassamonquipe, to assist at the projected massacre of the little Colony upon Roanoke Island; but all the tribes to which these Indians belonged, were now, (1812), reduced to forty five fencible men." (Vide Standard Ency. of Alcohol Problem, Vol. 5 under N. Car.)

In a treaty with the Indians about 1704, Governor Daniels, of North Carolina, made provisions for a law inflicting a penalty for selling liquor to the Indians, and Dr. Williamson complains of this treaty as a "restraint on their natural liberty," and it is interesting to notice that under date of June 18th, 1894, one Walter R. Benjamin, a dealer in autograph letters, offered a full autograph letter of Dr. Williamson, dated 5 November, 1783, written to Dr. Sam Holton, about engaging a distiller for his (Dr. Williamson's) Rum distillery, at Washington, N. C.

We cannot assume from this that he was insincere in his efforts to regulate its use, as it was the practice of every large plantation of the day to have, as part of the necessary equipment of these self-contained units, their distilleries and brew-houses.

The temper and customs of the times cannot readily be pictured today, but may be illustrated by the story of Tom the Tinker, which appeared in Lippincott's Magazine about fifty years ago. Tom the Tinker was assumed to be a real character, as a leader in the whisky rebellion in Western Pennsylvania, who wrote letters in the Pittsburgh Gazette, posted notices and incited the populace to revolt against the law which took away the only money crop upon which the inhabitants could rely. In describing the life of these Scotch-Irish settlers, the Author says: that they took
a nip in the morning, as an eye opener, carried it to the fields to sustain them in their labor, had an appetizer before dinner, a few social glasses after dinner, a nightcap before they went to bed; and the rest of the time, took it because they liked it.

The Whisky Insurrection assumed an importance in the history of the United States that is not generally recognised today, its greatest significance being that it was the first real test of the power of the government, of which many of the founders, including Hamilton, had the greatest doubt.

It was not a question of prohibition, nor was it, except incidentally, by some few like Dr. Williamson, expected to limit the use of liquor. It was primarily and fundamentally a revenue measure but it bore with particular severity upon the inhabitants of Western Pennsylvania, because the business of distilling was nowhere in the States engaged in as extensively as here, where markets were to be found only by boat to New Orleans, or by pack trains, equally as expensive, if somewhat nearer, to Philadelphia.

After two years of violence, arson, and loss of many lives and much property, and the general disregard of the law, Washington and Hamilton resolved that the most strenuous measures should be taken to establish the authority of the government and ordered the troops from Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Maryland and Virginia, to the number of 12,000. This number was subsequently increased to 15,000.

This force was deemed by many to be wholly unnecessary for the purpose, but was successful in the highest degree in accomplishing, without loss of life, the total submission of those in revolt, and to quote an article in Harper's Magazine, Vol. 24 p. 376, "Hamilton, who had always distrusted the strength of the government in such an emergency, was now perfectly convinced of its inherent power, and both he and Washington regarded the affair as a fortunate circumstance for the nation."

For some years after the Whisky Insurrection, the problem of regulating the sale and manufacturing of liquor was local, Federal taxes were recognized as just and proper regulations and occasioned no more than ordinary administrative problems. That it engaged the thought of many who saw its dangers and abuses, cannot be doubted.
To Dr. Williamson, engaged in work on his History of North Carolina, it was a very live and real problem demanding solution, but he nowhere suggests that the Federal Government should assume the power to deny its use or manufacture. His comment on the Daniels treaty of 1704 indicates that, in common with so many of the Revolutionary Patriots, he was jealous of the Federal Government assuming the powers retained by the States, or that either the Federal Government or the State Governments should encroach upon the personal liberties of its inhabitants, even upon a subject that engaged his strongest convictions.

Just a few years after Dr. Williamson's death, it is related of Chief Justice Marshall, (Current History, Nov. 1926), That in response to a young clergyman who advocated prohibition by Federal authority, he is said to have replied, "Such legislation would be an unjustifiable restriction upon personal liberty and an infringement on the sovereignty of the States in violation of the principle of local self-government, for the preservation of which the participants of the Revolution had risked their all; and that there was as much danger in giving such powers to a Congress in Washington, as it would have been for the Colonists to have yielded the powers claimed by the King and Parliament."

"That any attempt to enforce sumptuary legislation on so large a scale, would lead to bribery and corruption on a still larger one."

The great interest which Dr. Williamson took in the Pennsylvania Historical Society and the New York Historical Society warrants a quotation from his paper on the "Benefits of Civil History" as exemplifying the aims of the Society and as a recognition of the importance of the work which you are carrying on:

"History gives us an astonishing length of days, for it makes us contemporary with every nation that ever flourished."

"It is not only our duty to have it faithfully recorded, how this part of the world was settled by civilized man, but also to show, in what manner and by what means, the inhabitants increased in useful knowledge and virtue."