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‘Habituated to Drunkenness’: Opinions of New Orleanians about Prohibition as Revealed
through Letters to the Editor of The Times-Picayune, 1918-1922

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in
History

by

Ryan P. Bourgeois

B.A. University of New Orleans, 2017

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Abstract

Both popular and scholarly observers have portrayed New Orleans as a city both supported and burdened by its image as a diverse cultural other within the American South, historically tolerant of certain sins of the flesh. This image has been used by proponents and critics alike in order to push their respective agenda regarding the Crescent City. This thesis will not seek to discredit this image that is based largely on fact. However, using Prohibition as a case study, this thesis will use letters to the editor to uncover attitudes of New Orleanians in opposition to this reputation to reveal alternative and historically silenced voices of New Orleans, since for instance people of a certain age, gender, or ethnicity were silenced in the halls of government. This paper will reveal the opinions of New Orleanians regarding Prohibition and what these opinions can tell us about New Orleans's image.

Keywords: New Orleans, Prohibition, newspaper, letters to the editor, *Times-Picayune*, image, tourism

In 1852, George F. Mustard, a visitor to New Orleans, wrote to his son in Maine about the New Orleans penchant for drinking, “The temperate societies [*sic*] are striving hard to get a footing and a hearing here, but the place is so habituated to drunkenness that their task is a hard one.”¹ His assessment of local drinking customs is by no means uncommon. New Orleans’s reputation as a town with relaxed social attitudes towards alcohol is rooted in truth; the Catholic background of many of the city’s immigrants, with its less restrictive attitude towards drink, in contrast to the Puritan ethics of the early English colonizers of the United States, is in part responsible for the city being branded by Puritanical Americans as a place of drunkenness and possibly the assumption of its ambivalence toward Prohibition. However, evidence exists that not all New Orleanians opposed Prohibition. While the assumption of resistance among New Orleanians to Prohibition has been prevalent in the historiographic record, an examination of letters to the editor of *The Times-Picayune* reveals this claim as being far from the complete story. This paper will argue that because of this popular image, the opinions expressed by New Orleanians who supported Prohibition have been silenced by the creators and maintainers of this image, as well as in the historiographic record. Whereas voter suppression and racial discrimination silenced voices in the community, letters to the editor give voice to the otherwise silenced. This historical silence led to an incomplete understanding of Prohibition in New Orleans.

For the purpose of this research, hundreds of issues of *The Times-Picayune* from 1918-1921 are analyzed in search of letters to the editor that reveal opinions of New Orleanians in favor of and in opposition to the issue of Prohibition. Seventy such letters were found and are categorized in four separate ways, yielding these results: thirty-four letters in opposition to

¹ Letter from George F. Mustard to Franklin T. Heating and George F. Mustard, Jr., March 22, 1852, The Historic New Orleans Collection, MSS. 419.66.

Prohibition, twenty-seven letters in favor of Prohibition, five letters taking a moderate stance on the issue, and the final three letters were neutral and contain simple, neutral observations of the Prohibition argument. From the pool of all letters collected, certain letters were included here based on a variety of factors. In order to avoid a skew towards either position on Prohibition, equal numbers of letters were chosen from each side of the argument. Furthermore, well-written, entertaining, and contrasting letters typically were included. In order to shed light on the sentiments expressed by these New Orleanians in favor of Prohibition and to create contrast with the aforementioned prevailing assumption of New Orleans reputation, a full analysis will be given to a sample of letters in opposition and in favor.

Prohibition in New Orleans

Much has been written about Prohibition at a national level with special attention given to the nation's largest cities – New York City and Chicago. These works are broad in scope and expansive in terms of coverage of both time and place. A contemporary example is Daniel Okrent's *Last Call: The Rise and Fall of Prohibition*.² Although useful, works such as these do not include New Orleans on a scale that is needed for this research. To locate New Orleans in this discussion, three key sources were used: Joy Jackson's article "Prohibition in New Orleans: The Unlikeliest Crusade," Louis Vyhnanek's *Unorganized Crime: New Orleans in the 1920s*, and Robert Hartsell Russell's "New Orleans and Nation-Wide Prohibition as Reflected in *The Times-Picayune*, 1918-20."³

² Daniel Okrent, *Last Call: The Rise and Fall of Prohibition* (New York: Scribner, 2010).

³ Joy Jackson, "Prohibition in New Orleans: The Unlikeliest Crusade," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association*, 19, No. 3 (Summer, 1978), 261-284. Louis Vyhnanek, *Unorganized Crime: New Orleans in the 1920s* (Lafayette, LA: The Center for Louisiana Studies, 1998). Robert Hartsell Russell, "New Orleans and Nation-Wide Prohibition as Reflected in *The Times-Picayune*, 1918-20," master's thesis, Louisiana State University, 1956.

Jackson's article serves as a broad overview of the topic. In it, Jackson discusses a number of pertinent topics including the legal history of Prohibition in Louisiana and New Orleans; rumrunning operations through the bayous and marshes surrounding the city; enforcement efforts of local, state, and federal officials; how, where, and what New Orleanians drank during Prohibition; and the occasion of repeal in 1933. While much of her work utilizes various New Orleans newspapers, her utilization is fact supporting, rather than analytical in nature.

Vyhnanek's book, *Unorganized Crime: New Orleans in the 1920s*, is an in-depth look at all types of crime in New Orleans during the decade. Vyhnanek includes chapters discussing New Orleans demographics and physical shape, the political and law enforcement response to crime in the Twenties, and drug use and smuggling, among others. Vyhnanek's chapter on Prohibition, entitled "The Wettest Dry City in America," points out a reason Prohibition laws were not strictly enforced. Unlike other crimes in the city that fell under local police jurisdiction, enforcement of Prohibition laws came under the jurisdiction of the federal government and an agency called the Prohibition Unit, later to be known as the Bureau of Prohibition.⁴ The chapter focuses on the efforts of federal Prohibition agents to enforce Prohibition. A crucial point of Vyhnanek's work is his discussion of the lack of federal agents available to enforce the law during the early years of the era. He writes, "In New Orleans the total number of agents never exceeded forty...during the early part of the decade Louisiana had a force of less than ten agents assigned to cover the entire state. At one point in 1921, Theodore Jacques, then head of enforcement in New Orleans, was the only active agent in the city."⁵ This lack of agents, coupled

⁴ Vyhnanek, *Unorganized Crime: New Orleans in the 1920s*, 49-50.

⁵ *Ibid*, 51.

with minimal help from the New Orleans police force – more concerned with policing gambling and prostitution – ensured that Prohibition enforcement in New Orleans was weak at best.⁶



Figure 1 Chronically short-staffed federal Prohibition agents worked out of the U.S. Custom House near the foot of Canal Street. (*The Charles L. Franck Collection at the Historic New Orleans Collection, 1979.325.1161*)

Russell’s 1956 master’s thesis, “New Orleans and Nation-Wide Prohibition as Reflected in *The Times-Picayune*, 1918-20,” is the source most similar to this work. Many of the same letters to the editor analyzed in this paper were viewed by Russell in his study. However, Russell, a journalist by profession, focuses on complete coverage of Prohibition by the *Picayune*, particularly to news and editorials, as well as reader opinion, and what he termed “loyalties of the publication,” in order to make his argument that Prohibition “was effective only where it enjoyed overwhelming public support...It is also doubtful that a nation of great size and diverse culture could educate its citizens to accept such intimate regulation of social conduct.”⁷

⁶ Ibid, 84.

⁷ Russell, “New Orleans and Nation-Wide Prohibition,” iv.

Popular Images of New Orleans

Because the purpose of this paper is two-fold – to find and analyze letters to the editor of the *Picayune* while attempting to come to a conclusion on what these letters might reveal about the popular image of New Orleans – the historiography must also be multi-faceted. While Jackson, Vyhnanek, and Russell help to contextualize New Orleans’s experience with Prohibition, other sources used here will illustrate what has been said of the image of New Orleans going back to the city’s colonial period and are helpful for an understanding of how these letters might support or disrupt popular beliefs regarding the city’s image. These works include: Shannon Dawdy’s *Building the Devil’s Empire: French Colonial New Orleans*; Judith Schafer’s *Brothels, Depravity, and Abandoned Women: Illegal Sex in Antebellum New Orleans*; Alecia Long’s *The Great Southern Babylon: Sex, Race, and Respectability in New Orleans 1865-1920*; Anthony Stanonis’s *Creating the Big Easy: New Orleans and the Emergence of Modern Tourism, 1918-1945*; and Vyhnanek’s *Unorganized Crime*.⁸

In the preface to her study of French Colonial New Orleans, Shannon Dawdy concludes that negative images of New Orleans have persisted since its founding in 1718. In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, Dawdy views media reports that “painted New Orleans as a highly racialized, backwards place where public disorders such as looting and shooting were sadly expected, even natural.”⁹ Dawdy expresses a feeling of “*déjà vu*... The combined moral and material failure of New Orleans, and the shameful abandonment of the city by its parent nation, was likewise

⁸ Shannon Lee Dawdy, *Building the Devil’s Empire: French Colonial New Orleans* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008). Judith Kelleher Schafer, *Brothels, Depravity, and Abandoned Women: Illegal Sex in Antebellum New Orleans* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009). Alecia P. Long, *The Great Southern Babylon: Sex, Race, and Respectability in New Orleans 1865-1920* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 2004). Anthony J. Stanonis, *Creating the Big Easy: New Orleans and the Emergence of Modern Tourism 1918-1945* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2006).

⁹ Dawdy, *Building the Devil’s Empire*, xiv.

headline news in the Atlantic world of the 1720s and 1730s.”¹⁰ Governmental disinterest and failure amid perceived social breakdown has given way to the image of New Orleans as civically handicapped that, in concurrence with Dawdy’s belief, has persisted for three centuries.

The prevalence of Antebellum and postbellum prostitution in New Orleans cultivated an image of sexual licentiousness that helped establish ribald, drunken images of the city’s citizens. In her study of Antebellum illegal sex in the city, Judith Schafer establishes that this image has prevailed since the 1700s. Schafer asserts that because the “primitive, mosquito-infested, and disease enclave...offered few attractions to entice people, especially respectable women, to become its residents,” nearly 100 prostitutes and other undesirable women were shipped from France’s prisons to New Orleans in 1721 to “become the founding mothers of the city.”¹¹ Although the widely told story is that all women coming to New Orleans in the earliest years were prostitutes, beggars, and homeless, the truth is that only seven years after these 100 prostitutes arrived, New Orleans accepted its first arrival of *les filles à la cassette*, or casquette girls. Often confused with their undesirable counterparts for the purpose of promoting an image of sexual licentiousness, these women, though poor, were guaranteed to be virgins and were recruited from Church-sponsored orphanages and convents in France. The crown and the church considered these women as suitable for marriage to New Orleans’s colonial ruling class.¹² The suppression of the history of these later arrivals illustrates how a particular image of the city has perpetuated for centuries.

Schafer, citing the work of Phil Johnson, claims that by the 1850s New Orleans had become the “‘prostitution capital of all America’...[and that] the income generated by the sex

¹⁰ Ibid, xiv.

¹¹ Schafer, *Brothels, Depravity, and Abandoned Women*, 1.

¹² Contemporary New Orleanians proudly trace their heritage to these casquette, or the Americanized ‘casket,’ girls.

market ranked second only to that of the port of New Orleans in dollar value.”¹³ Schafer couples the history of prostitution with the shrinking wages and the subsequent sagging morale and insufficient number of patrols of the city’s police force in the 1850s that led to the city’s “reputation of being one of the most violent, vice-ridden, and dangerous cities in the country.”¹⁴ While these images would persist in postbellum New Orleans, a shift occurred that made such dangers seductive and marketable to tourists. And though prostitution diminished, the image remained.

According to Alecia Long, after the American Civil War, with the closure of the nation’s largest and most profitable slave markets, New Orleans rebranded itself as “a tourist destination that encouraged and facilitated indulgence, especially in prostitution and sex across the color line.”¹⁵ According to Long, in 1897, with the establishment of a legal red-light district known as Storyville, New Orleans city leaders cemented New Orleans image as sexually permissive “in perpetuity”; ironically, and lost amid promotion, Storyville was the final and smallest prostitution district in the city.¹⁶ Long discusses various anti-prostitution ordinances passed by city leaders before the establishment of Storyville that were unable to “diminish the city’s reputation as the Great Southern Babylon.”¹⁷ As a contrast to the Protestant Bible Belt South, she argues that New Orleans served a role in the Southern experience, saying:

[New Orleans acts] as a geographic and metaphoric safety valve – a place where southern came to escape, if only temporarily, from the racial, religious, and behavioral strictures that dominated their home communities...In New Orleans, southern pieties and pretensions became more obvious in the glaring contrast between the city and its rural surroundings. New Orleans was the South redux,

¹³ Schafer, *Brothels, Depravity, and Abandoned Women*, 3.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 4.

¹⁵ Long, *The Great Southern Babylon*, 1.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 3.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 4.

tarted up and trotted out for visitors to see, experience and enjoy. It was and remains a permissive playground for the masses from the immediate region and beyond.¹⁸

This image of the city and its citizens was embraced by locals and visitors alike, despite the realities of daily life experienced by New Orleanians. Any story contrary to this image would be suppressed or simply ignored.

Vyhnanek is also helpful in defining the origins of the New Orleans image as a place of decay. In his opening chapter, “The City That Care Forgot,” Vyhnanek provides his reader with a portrait of New Orleans as it was during the 1920s, including census data that show New Orleans as the largest Southern city throughout the decade and a discussion of its robust economy due in large part to its port being the largest in the United States at the time. Most important to this work, however, is Vyhnanek’s thoughts concerning the image of New Orleans. Vyhnanek describes the French Quarter with its “dank, foul smelling alleys...littered with garbage...[and] beautiful over-hanging wrought-iron balconies,” as reflective of “the wealth and craftsmanship of a by-gone era.”¹⁹ This image of New Orleans as a place rooted in the past has allowed for the popular image of a place of urban decay to flourish. Vyhnanek then expands this image of urban decay to ideas of social decay and decadence. Taken from a city guide published in 1938 by the WPA’s Federal Writer’s Project, Vyhnanek writes, “New Orleans throughout its history had maintained a liberal attitude towards the joys of the flesh.”²⁰ According to Vyhnanek, this *joie de vivre* was reflected in New Orleanians’ historic tolerant attitude towards drinking, gambling, and prostitution in comparison to other parts of the country.²¹ This cultural otherness is expressed often in the historiography of New Orleans’ image.

¹⁸ Ibid, 5-6.

¹⁹ Vyhnanek, *Unorganized Crime*, 1.

²⁰ Ibid, 4.

²¹ Ibid, 4.

The work of Anthony Stanonis encapsulates many of the images associated with New Orleans throughout its history as they relate to the emergence of tourism in New Orleans. In his introduction to *Creating the Big Easy: New Orleans and the Emergence of Modern Tourism 1918-1945*, entitled “The City of Myths,” he discusses the shift of image of New Orleans. From a dangerous city through the American Civil War into a carnival town by the 1870s before the rise of mass tourism – which Stanonis defines as “a tourist trade inclusive of the middle- and lower-class members of both sexes in which urban communities facilitated public access to promoted sites” during the interwar years from 1918-1945.²²

According to Stanonis, throughout much of the nineteenth century, New Orleans had been imagined as a place of vice, immorality, danger, and death. He includes a report by a visitor to New Orleans in 1807 who observed “the inhabitants were dying there so much faster than they could be buried, that the negroes were provided with long poles and hooks, with which they dragged the bodies of the dead to the Mississippi, and there committed them to the flood.”²³ This image of death did not hinder the city’s economic growth based around its international port, in fact, Stanonis asserts that the commercial prosperity experienced by New Orleans in the nineteenth century “aided in the creation of a conformist middle class while reinforcing the popularity of vices, including gambling and prostitution.”²⁴ Stanonis claims the immorality associated with these vices was strengthened by the high population of immigrant Irish and Italian Catholics in the city. Many Protestant observers of New Orleans in the nineteenth century, Stanonis states, “considered Catholicism morally dangerous because the faith seemed to encourage indolence and to erode Protestant stoutness.”²⁵ Stanonis argues that the reputation as a

²² Stanonis, *Creating the Big Easy*, 22.

²³ *Ibid*, 4.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 5.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 9.

dangerous place continued to make New Orleans unattractive to visitors during Reconstruction. Stanonis points to “the linkage of post-Civil War racial violence to Catholicism” as a cause of this reputation.²⁶

These negative images of New Orleans, though detrimental to the city and its people’s reputation during the 18th and 19th centuries, would be retooled in the 20th century in order to promote New Orleans to an ever-growing class of Americans willing and able to travel the country. The Industrial Revolution in the West had created a rising middle class with the means to travel, and New Orleans took advantage of this moment to brand itself as a Carnival town. During the late 19th century, romanticist writers such as George Washington Cable and Lafcadio Hearn produced books that conjured up romantic, exotic images of New Orleans which were read by a wide audience of American readers as Northern publishers realized a growing market for books on the South. Through these literary efforts, Stanonis states, “a business-driven, dangerous city slowly became more enticing, more accessible, and safer – at least in literary accounts.”²⁷ Interest in the city stirred by these romanticists combined with increased accessibility by railroad created an attractive place for rural Americans to visit. The rise of Mardi Gras in the 1870s and the Cotton Centennial Exposition in 1884 were byproducts of this new interest in New Orleans.

With the arrival of mass tourism coming in the wake of the Great Depression, Stanonis argues that as the collapse of the national economy forced New Orleans business and political leaders to focus on tourism as a major source of income and growth. Instead of choosing to promote the image of a modern city, they “opted for an urban image that cast the city as a relic, a

²⁶ Ibid, 10. The author includes an excerpt from an 1877 edition of *Harper’s Weekly* to demonstrate this. It reads, “And to the various acts of cruelty and violence which have marked the lawless classes of the country for ten years past, the Roman Catholic priesthood have given an open approval.”

²⁷ Ibid, 17-18.

leftover still mired in French Catholic traditions.”²⁸ Stanonis argues that this choice – made almost a century ago – to package New Orleans as a permissive, romantic city, persists today and cost New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 when initial news coverage focused only on what he calls New Orleans’s “iconic locations,” mainly tourist centers such as the St. Louis Cathedral, Bourbon Street, and Café du Monde before beginning to focus on the dire circumstances that were unfolding across the city and its surrounding areas.²⁹ He offers a possible reason why this happened, saying, “Perhaps the delayed reaction was the cost of being too dependent on tourism. How could anything serious happen in New Orleans? How important, after all, is a tourist town?”³⁰ By tracing the roots of the city’s reputation from its earliest iteration into the modern age, Stanonis is able to provide the clearest indication that the city and its people have greatly shaped and been shaped by their reputation.

Early Attempts at Prohibition in New Orleans

These prevalent views of New Orleans as a place of danger, vice, corruption have strengthened a popular belief that Prohibition in New Orleans would be rejected by its citizens. Furthermore, it could support an assumption that no attempt at Prohibition had occurred in the city prior to the Wartime Prohibition Act of 1918. The historiographical record contradicts this assumption. For example, a newspaper article in the Sunday morning edition of the *New Orleans Item-Tribune* on April 14, 1929, discussed the first prohibition attempt by French colonial governor Vaudreil in 1751. According to the article, Vaudreil implemented a police code that

²⁸ Ibid, 26.

²⁹ Ibid, 25.

³⁰ Ibid, 25.

limited the numbers of taverns in New Orleans to six. In these taverns, liquor was served in a prescribed dose smaller than colonial New Orleanians had been accustomed.³¹

On June 11, 1838, nearly ninety years after the passage of Vaudreil's code, at a meeting held in the First Presbyterian Church on Lafayette Square, the first State Temperance Society was founded by members of various temperance groups from around the Louisiana. According to an article published in the predecessor to the *Times-Picayune*, the *Daily Picayune*, the newly organized group recognized the lack of temperance success in Louisiana, but were encouraged by the "cheering indications" of the public toward the founding of the society and had "reason to hope that the auspicious day is rapidly approaching when the principle of total abstinence from the use of ardent spirits shall here also obtain a complete triumph."³²

During the Antebellum period, the Temperance movement continued in the city. In 1850, according to the *Daily Picayune*, a "brilliant temperance festival" was put on by the ladies of St. Joseph's Church at the Commercial Exchange on St. Charles Avenue. The event seemed to be quite the social affair as the paper advertised to its male readership, "There will be plenty of music furnished and throngs of ladies present."³³ However, as George Mustard wrote in his letter to his son in 1852, temperate societies had trouble gaining much traction in New Orleans in the Antebellum years. At least one group, the Sons of Temperance, was active in New Orleans during the 1850s as is evidenced by their published advertisements inviting New Orleanians to attend their meetings and join in their cause. Based upon the record available in the *Daily Picayune*, the New Orleans chapter did not achieve as much as other temperance groups from

³¹ George C.H. Kernion, "Louisiana's First Prohibition Attempt," *Item-Tribune* (New Orleans), April 14, 1929.

³² "State Temperance Convention." *The Daily Picayune* (New Orleans), July 14, 1838.

³³ "Temperance Festival." *The Daily Picayune* (New Orleans), May 3, 1850.

around the country. The paper's extensive coverage of temperance efforts outside of Louisiana is evidence of this.

During the American Civil War, Confederate state and federal governments also made efforts to restrict alcohol. While William J. Robinson, Jr.'s journal article "Prohibition in the Confederacy" does not offer much information specifically about New Orleans or elsewhere in Louisiana, as New Orleans spent most of the war under Union occupation. However, New Orleans was a Confederate city from 1860 to 1862 and therefore was affected by the situation of the Confederacy. Robinson wrote, "Prohibition [in the Confederacy] arose from the two-fold necessity of conserving grain supplies in order to feed the armed forces and of conserving the inbound tonnage of the blockade-runners in order to increase the importation of war supplies."³⁴ These two prohibitory factors on access to and the importation of liquor were reflected by the increase in the price of alcohol in Confederate New Orleans. During the winter of 1860-1861, the market price of whiskey stood at 25 cents per gallon. By the summer of 1861, it had jumped to 55 cents per gallon and the supply was scarce. By the time Union forces captured New Orleans in the spring of 1862, a gallon of whisky in New Orleans sold for \$1.20.³⁵

A final source that speaks to the existence of Prohibition forces at work in New Orleans long before 1918 is Miki Pfeffer's book *Southern Ladies and Suffragists: Julia Ward Howe and Women's Rights at the 1884 New Orleans World's Fair*. According to Pfeffer, not only were women in post-Reconstruction New Orleans accepting of the temperance movement, but some of the nation's most prominent temperance leaders made their first forays into the South as guest

³⁴ William Robinson, Jr., "Prohibition in the Confederacy," *The American Historical Review*, 37, no. 1 (Oct., 1931), 50-58.

³⁵ Robinson Jr., "Prohibition in the Confederacy," 50.

speakers in the Women’s Department of New Orleans World Cotton Centennial.³⁶ One such speaker was Francis T. Willard, president of the national Women’s Christian Temperance Union, who extolled the audience for having “met the women of the North half way” in the temperance crusade with “warmth and steadfastness,” before rousing the crowd into gratuitous applause at the insistence that New Orleans and other Southern women would continue political agitation for the cause.³⁷ According to Pfeffer, the *Daily Picayune*, owned and operated by Eliza Nicholson at the time, called Willard’s speech “the best temperance speech of the two days’ meetings.”³⁸ Coupled with the success of the Women’s Department, the lack of women’s voices in government and the inability to cast a vote at the time of the Cotton Centennial suggests that the number of New Orleanians supporting temperance could have been much higher.



Figure 2 Supporters of temperance seen here in Louisiana in 1908. (Frazar Memorial Library, McNeese State University)

Beginning with the Louisiana Local Option Law in 1902 and culminating with the ratification of the Eighteenth Amendment by the Louisiana State Legislature in 1918, Prohibition and its regulatory effects were beginning to be felt throughout Louisiana in the early years of the

³⁶ Miki Pfeffer, *Southern Ladies and Suffragists: Julia Ward Howe and Women’s Rights at the 1884 New Orleans World’s Fair* (Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi), 12.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 131-32.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 131.

twentieth century. Through efforts by dry supporters in the Louisiana state legislature, by the time national Prohibition went into effect in January 1920, 30 Louisiana parishes were already dry.³⁹ Through the Wartime Prohibition Act, Prohibition arrived at a national level months before the Eighteenth Amendment went into effect. Aimed at conserving grain for the war effort and put into effect on June 30, 1919, the wartime act outlawed beer, wine and liquor. However, as Jackson points out, the bill was passed ten days after the armistice and was not clear on what was considered an intoxicating beverage.⁴⁰ So despite the negative image of New Orleans as a civically handicapped place of drunkenness, excess, sexual depravity, evidence exists that not only did prior attempts at Prohibition exist in New Orleans, but also that not all New Orleanians were against Prohibition and opinions on Prohibition varied widely within the community.

Letters in Opposition to Prohibition

While New Orleanians wrote letters to the editor opposing Prohibition, the reasons were often related to ideals that contradict an image of the city's citizens as disinterested in Prohibition and supportive of heavy drinking. In fact, people opposed Prohibition for a variety of reasons from fears that Prohibition distracted from the war effort and restrict personal liberties, to concerns that Prohibition did not reflect the mood of the national majority and that restricting alcohol consumption was unconstitutional. Along with a number of other reasons, New Orleanians opposition to Prohibition challenged the notion of a city full of drunkards.

As the debate regarding Prohibition was raging across the United States in the final months of World War I, many New Orleanians wrote letters to *The Times-Picayune* opposing Prohibition based on their feelings that it distracted from the war effort. In a letter published on

³⁹ Jackson, "Prohibition in New Orleans: The Unlikeliest Crusade," 262-263.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 263.

April 14, 1918, L.B. Fields claimed that the fights for Prohibition and Women’s Suffrage evidenced that some people ignored the conflict in Europe. Fields wrote, “... any woman or any man who... endeavors to divert the minds of the people of this country from the one... issue – the winning of the war – are either cranks, fanatics, or disloyal citizens of pro-German or pacifist type.”⁴¹ Fields was not alone in opposing Prohibition in defense of the war effort. Servicemen submitted letters expressing their disapproval of the abolition of alcohol as well. In a letter published February 14, 1919, deployed Private J.E. Toups of the United States Marine Corps wondered if his and his brothers-in-arms’ absence from the city to the battlefield had “helped to foist this fad [Prohibition] upon our beloved Columbia,” and suggests letting the “doughboys, gobs, and devil dogs settle the whole question of prohibition,” before making several threats to “Mr. Prohibitionist” and “Mr. Anti-Saloon League.” Toups warned:

...out of about 8000 marines at Chateau Thierry, only ninety of them had not qualified as marksmen on the target range... While more than half of these 8000 men were bleeding on the battlefield, what were you doing to deprive them of their personal liberty? Do you remember that, once upon a time, states rights brought about a four-year war... and [we] would thank you...if you would kindly refrain from telling us that there is something wrong with the twentieth century glass of beer.⁴²

Writing from the Jackson Barracks, on the downriver border of New Orleans with St. Bernard Parish, “A Soldier Who Loves Fair Play” questioned a pro-Prohibition article by former Louisiana governor Jared Y. Sanders that asserted that the two billion dollars spent by Americans on alcohol in the United States would be better spent on charitable donations. The soldier argues that the same could be said for money spent on soft drinks and candy saying, “Both are absolutely non-essential and soft drinks have far less food value than beer.”⁴³ In a

⁴¹ L.B. Fields, Letter to the editor, *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), April 14, 1918.

⁴² J.E. Toups, Letter to the editor, *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), February 14, 1919.

⁴³ F.M.H., Letter to the editor, *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), May 18, 1918.

letter published June 18, 1919, a third, “One Who Was Over There,” attacks prohibitionists saying, “It is a very poor man who has to destroy the cause so as to not give way to temptation.” He continues, “America entered the war for democracy and humanity’s sake... We come home from the battlefield to find a bunch of reformers ready to create exactly what we went to Europe to destroy. Must we stand for such a thing in ‘our land of the free?’”⁴⁴

Like “One Who Was Over There,” many writers who opposed Prohibition framed it as an assault on their personal liberties headed by a minority of fanatical reformers. In a letter published January 19, 1919, “Free Citizen” uses the domino effect, “Now that the prohibition amendment has been passed... there is evidently no limit to the restrictions which fanatics and reformers would impose... Probably coffee, tea and chocolate will be attacked in due time.” The writer calls on citizens to “free ourselves from the invaders of our personal liberty within our own borders.”⁴⁵ One letter published May 1, 1920, reads, “Man was created a free moral agent, but the reformers are going to relieve him of all responsibility of his moral welfare and legislate him into the Kingdom of Heaven.”⁴⁶

In a letter written on June 26, 1919, Edward Sanchez viewed Prohibition as an effort to “deprive its citizens of a privilege and liberty that was our forefathers’ when they first trod New England’s strand.”⁴⁷ Sanchez believed that the question of Prohibition should be put up for a popular referendum, stating, “that the vast majority of patriotic and honest Americans are against such a despotic law.”⁴⁸ Similarly, a letter published on March 2, 1918, decries the efforts of Prohibitionists to enforce their will on the majority of the population in opposition. The letter

⁴⁴ One Who Was Over There, Letter to the editor, *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), June 18, 1919.

⁴⁵ Free Citizen, Letter to the editor, *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), January 19, 1919.

⁴⁶ One Hundred Proof, Letter to the editor, *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), May 1, 1920.

⁴⁷ Edward Sanchez, Letter to the editor. *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), June 28, 1919.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

reads, “we find a section of our people trying to thrust upon numerous fellow citizens their idea that they can regenerate the world by forcing their doctrine of prohibition upon their fellow citizens who are opposed to it,” before making the claim that while “Prohibition may not be a religion but many think that it is, and have made it their creed, a creed which they try to enforce by laws upon those who oppose it.”⁴⁹

Published on June 29, 1919, E.C.W., “An American born citizen, willing to fight for life and liberty,” stridently calls for revolution saying, “The handwriting is on the wall if Congress refuses to appeal the prohibition amendment...Before long this country will be in the throes of a revolution – a revolt of the people to establish their God-given rights.”⁵⁰ A month later, a letter appeared in the *Picayune* that seemed to finish E.C.W.’s thoughts. The writer of this letter, G.J. Labarre, believed that E.C.W.’s revolt would be fought against Socialism. Labarre wrote, “We have sowed the wind. We will in all likelihood reap a hurricane...Prohibition is kindling the fires of Socialism...[if Prohibition] is ultimately carried out and enforced, labor unions...will organize politically and will change our Constitution very materially.”⁵¹

As a city with a considerable number of Catholics and in which alcohol was, for many, a social custom, it is no surprise that some opposed Prohibition from such cultural positions. In a letter published on May 23, 1919, “A Catholic” discussed President Woodrow Wilson’s favorable attitude toward beer and wine as “a great victory for Cardinal Gibbons and the majority of the Roman Catholic Church, who stand in favor of wins.”⁵² Alluding to the large number of Catholics in New Orleans, J.J. Lawler asked that state legislatures “remember that

⁴⁹ R.C., Letter to the editor, *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), March 2, 1918.

⁵⁰ E.C.W. 1919. Letter to the editor. *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), June 29, 1919.

⁵¹ G.J. Labarre, Letter to the editor, *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), July 29, 1919.

⁵² A Catholic, Letter to the editor, *Times Picayune* (New Orleans), May 23, 1919. The writer is likely referring to Cardinal James Gibbons. Gibbons was the Archbishop of the powerful Catholic Diocese of Baltimore during the early years of Prohibition.

there are over 30,000 or 40,000 moderate drinkers of wine, whiskey and beer in New Orleans...that don't patronize saloons, but take their little drink at home" before attempting to enforce Prohibition. Lawler believed that these people will not accept such a law and will oppose it "before they part with what they have been accustomed to all their lives and is a part of their lives."⁵³ A third writer concerned with the cultural effects of Prohibition on New Orleans notes the effects Prohibition has had on the city's restaurants, writing, "Friday I had lunch at one of the largest restaurants. I was alone in that immense dining room...Saturday...I lunched on the French side of Canal street, and was alone in the dining room, one of the most comfortable in New Orleans."⁵⁴



Figure 3 The Old Absinthe House on Bourbon Street, padlocked by federal dry agents. (*The Charles L. Franck Studio Collection at the Historic New Orleans Collection, 1979.325.2012*)

⁵³ J.J. Lawler, Letter to the editor, *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), May 11, 1918.

⁵⁴ G.J. Labarre, Letter to the editor, *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), July 29, 1919.

In a letter published in February 1920, Charles R. Pike sums up all of the aforementioned opinions and frustrations of his fellow New Orleanians in his plea for a drink, writing:

What the country needs is a tonic. We're all sick of the lengthy discussion of the peace treaty. We're sick of being "technically in a state of war" and continuing to pay war prices. We are badly in need of something to dispel gloom and the desire to go to Cuba. We are of the opinion that nothing could answer the purpose better than real beer and wine.⁵⁵

Other New Orleanians took to lambasting the claims made by letters supporting Prohibition in order to strengthen their own position in opposition. In a letter published on March 7, 1919, *Vox Populi* (Latin for *Voice of the People*) attacked the average prohibitionist as a "poor logician" who for fifty years could not convince the American people of their cause, only finding success when the "Anti-Saloon League made its debut with its mysterious bankroll and by the same steam-roller political methods they condemn in their opponents made prohibition a fact."⁵⁶

Furthermore, *Vox Populi* scoffed at the idea made by a fellow letter writer in support of Prohibition who claimed that "the staggering sum of \$22,000,000.000" was spent yearly in America for liquors, "as though that money was taken out of circulation and dropped in the ocean!"⁵⁷ Without this revenue, the writer believed, America would "groan under the weight of new taxations and be the jokes of the civilized world."⁵⁸ Finally, *Vox Populi* aimed his argument against the Prohibition supporter's claim that Prohibition would rid the nation of sin, claiming that if the argument were true, bone-dry states would "show symptoms of this wonderful reformation"; however, the many lynchings occurring at the time across the American South

⁵⁵ Charles R. Pike, Letter to the editor, *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), February 22, 1920.

⁵⁶ *Vox Populi*, Letter to the editor, *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), March 7, 1919.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

made the idea that “prohibition will make a Utopia of this world a dream that is contrary to facts as shown by past and contemporary history.”⁵⁹

Twelve days later, on March 19, a similar letter appeared in the *Picayune* once again rejecting claims made by a Prohibitionist. The letter’s author believed that his opponent argued his case “as in the days of the old temperance societies. Strong drink makes criminals. Enforce prohibition and the criminal class disappears.”⁶⁰ The writer refuted the claim by pointing out the fact that jails in dry states were as full as those in wet states. A third letter scoffed at the belief among Prohibitionists that the Eighteenth Amendment could cure many societal ills. The writer asked, “Has anyone (prohibitionists excepted) noticed any decrease in the number of felonies and serious crimes?” before answering said question, “Murder ranks next to baseball and golf as a popular sport, the forgers are not all dead, and burglary and highway robbery are almost too common to attract attention.”⁶¹

A final letter that takes aim at Prohibitionist beliefs appeared in the *Picayune* on March 9, 1919. The writer of this letter, Kate Abel, felt that many Prohibitionists insinuated that Prohibition was, as she wrote, “the cause of advancement in the United States.” Abel refutes this belief saying:

Everyone acknowledges that the railroads are the arteries of commerce. All the railroads have been built by men who drank. I know, because I lived forty years with the progress-makers. In clearing up the wilderness, good drinking water was hard to obtain, so whiskey and beer took its place. Some men never drank water, thereby escaping the fever which carried off the water drinkers by the thousands. The builders of the Panama Canal knew what the men needed and let them have their “drink.” They have passed away – most of the old-timers, but what they have labored for will outlast time and prohibition. ⁶²

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Still Another Frenchman, Letter to the editor, *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), March 19, 1919.

⁶¹ Anti-Prohibition, Letter to the editor, *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), July 16, 1920.

⁶² Kate Abel, Letter to the editor, *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), March 9, 1919.

Letters in Favor of Prohibition

As fervently and as in as many ways that people opposed Prohibition, those in support of Prohibition also pled their case in the *Picayune*. Like those in opposition, New Orleanians often used the war effort or the cause of personal liberties to defend their stance on Prohibition. Others defended Prohibition morally while others defended the anti-alcohol platform from a medical viewpoint.



Figure 4 A ribbon supporting Prohibition (*Louisiana State Museum*)

Unlike those in opposition, many proponents of Prohibition believed that an anti-alcohol platform would help win the war; however, they, like their counterparts, used the war to illustrate their own agendas, as well. A letter published on March 11, 1918, reads, “It is not a question of state or individual rights, but a question of winning the war. And it may be said of the Democratic party that she helped to put the job over by adopting a prohibition plank in her platform.”⁶³ In a letter published on April 7, 1919, Mrs. Margaret A. Collins used World War I to illustrate her moral defense of Prohibition saying, “Long before the war began a man said, ‘Beer doesn’t hurt anybody. Just look at the Germans. They all drink beer, and they are the smartest people in the world.’ Now the world stands aghast at the atrocities committed by these beer-stupefied white savages.” Collins then invokes militarized religious images to make her moral

⁶³ H.F.C., Letter to the editor, *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), March 11, 1918.

stand, “God help us to be true soldiers in the greatest moral battle that has been fought since twelve unlearned fishermen went out to convert a heathen world.”⁶⁴

After the war ended, D.S. Harmon had a letter published on March 31, 1919, that described the jubilation of Armistice Day in America. Harmon declared that the day Prohibition is eventually enacted on a nationwide level such a jubilee should break out once more, “because that day the instrument of death [liquor] that has claimed more fathers and husbands, sons and brothers made more widows and orphans, wrecked more homes, and caused more misery than all the wars since the world began, will have been outlawed.”⁶⁵ Finally, on March 3, 1919, a letter appeared in the *Picayune* written by a member of the United States Navy, W.G. Gleason, defending Prohibition based on conditions he observed while stationed in France. Gleason blamed France’s “poverty, unsanitary living conditions, primitive working methods” not on World War I, but on its flourishing wine industry. Furthermore, Gleason claimed that the wine industry had stunted France’s growth – 100 years behind America, by his estimate – because it “removes from the people all incentive for better living conditions.”⁶⁶ These poor living conditions discussed by Gleason were also on the minds of letter writers concerned with the moral decay of society caused by alcohol consumption.

Supporters of Prohibition quickly defended their position by describing the amorality associated with alcohol and the morality they believed would accompany its abolition. Published on June 27, 1919, V.L.G wrote a letter highlighting the evils associated with drunkenness. V.L.G. wrote, “all womankind will rejoice [at Prohibition] especially the poor wives of habitual drunkards, whose lives have always been one continual nightmare of terror, blows, poverty, and

⁶⁴ Margaret A. Collins, Letter to the editor, *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), April 7, 1919.

⁶⁵ D.S. Harmon, Letter to the editor, *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), March 31, 1919.

⁶⁶ W.G. Gleason, Letter to the editor, *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), March 7, 1919.

suffering,” before describing in detail a scene like the one he described. The letter reads, after a visit to the saloon with his week’s salary “he reaches home with most of his money gone, intoxicated, and starts to beat his wife and break up the furniture...the children suffer from pangs of hunger and the wife and mother worries herself ill in consequence.” The author then continues, “the drinking of liquor is not conducive to refinement or intellectuality. On the contrary, it makes beasts of men, for while under its influence the most refined man will act like a cad.”⁶⁷

A letter published on May 28, 1919, contrasted greatly with V.L.G.’s letter, in it, E.S. Boyd stated that, “Prohibition is good for the nations,” before supporting his claim with several reasons he believes Prohibition will save American families and wider society. First, he believed that “Prohibition is the death warrant to the divorce proceedings.” Second, he reasoned that “children through strong, healthy parentage [free of drink] will be born physically strong and grow morally good...and the old refrain of ‘Home, Sweet Home’ shall have a sweeter melody for husband and wife.” Thirdly, Boyd claimed that “art, science, literature which have lagged on a large basis shall startle the world in a few years hence...buried talents will be exhumed and see the light of day.” Finally, Boyd wrote that Prohibition would aid in arming the government in the event of war seeing that “[armament] has proven a failure in numbers on account of disability caused through the excess of alcoholic drinks. When examined during the drafting of young men for service in the world’s greatest war, thousands were turned down as unfit.”⁶⁸

On May 15, 1919, a letter appeared in the *Picayune* shaming moderate drinkers for their opposition to Prohibition in fear that it would curtail their personal liberties. The letter’s author asked of the moderate drinkers, “Do they take in consideration the millions of alcoholic wrecks

⁶⁷ V.L.G., Letter to the editor, *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), June 27, 1919.

⁶⁸ E.S. Boyd, Letter to the editor, *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), May 28, 1919.

in the prime of life who are fathers of invalid and sick children[?],” before continuing to say, “But the welfare of the future generation is at stake. Our children when they grow up and come in contact with the saloon learn the habit of drinking and gambling and are brought into dens of vice where they poison their bodies and souls.”⁶⁹ The writer finished the letter with an appeal to the moderate drinkers writing, “Isn’t it worth while...to deprive themselves of the drink which they imagine they can’t do without in order to raise a healthy, clean and moral people?”⁷⁰ These moral pleas were often strengthened by practical claims from medical professionals.

However, the medical opinion, like the larger public opinion, was also split. One physician, Fred Turney, penned a letter dated April 5, 1921, listing several accidents that had occurred as a result of dangerous homemade brew. He mentioned three in particular: one man “buys a quart of overnight brew, gets drunk, goes to bed with a cigarette or lights one, then the car burns with him in it, only a torso left.” Another man “beats up the family, breaks everything...does not remember a thing about it.” A final man on a street car “so drunk he could scarcely talk finally said: ‘Esplanade,’ ... On the way his legs gave and he fell.”⁷¹ Turney, though initially seemingly against alcohol, revealed himself to be against only dangerous home brew when he suggested that the only way to stop this problem would be if the government should sell alcohol to families once every two weeks and use the revenue to pay off debts accrued during World War I.

⁶⁹ A Patriotic Citizen, Letter to the editor, *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), May 15, 1918.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Fred Turney, M.D., Letter to the editor, *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), April 5, 1921.



Figure 5 Secret distilleries such as this one in Detroit were common in New Orleans and often produced poisonous alcohol. (Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University)

Published on August 19, 1918, another member of the scientific community, Alonto T.

Etheridge, strongly supported Prohibition and wrote of the practical dangers of liquor:

Alcohol is a poison...I put some on some paramecia (one-celled animals) on a slide under the microscope and...it killed them... Alcohol has a similar effect on them [humans] and if enough be taken death will result to the person. Enlightened medical opinion tells us that epilepsy (what the Kaiser is suffering from) and insanity can be traced back to drinking parents or grandparents. Why then...should we continue the liquor traffic? Just to have a little fun now and then? It's too much like playing with dynamite.⁷²

In a letter published May 12, 1918, A.F. Quebodeau – a self-professed “good Cajan [*sic*] boy” – refuted the claims made by Louisiana State Senator Albin O. Boyers of Avoyelles Parish

⁷² Alonto T. Etheridge Letter to the editor, *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), August 19, 1918.

concerning the medical benefits of alcohol as a “stimulant.” Quebodeau wrote, “It is a known fact that there is more stimulus in a cup of strong black coffee than in a pint of whiskey, and no poisonous after affects.” He then threatened Senator Boyers and the legislature if they “sidestep” the Prohibition amendment based on the Senator’s argument, warning, “There is going to be a ‘wet’ and ‘dry’ scrap all along the line, and it will be like the one when the backwoodsman met the bear and prayed the Lord to referee it.”⁷³

A final letter regarding the medical benefits of Prohibition appeared in the *Picayune* on March 30, 1919, written by “Summum Bonum” refuting a claim published in an earlier letter written in opposition to Prohibition. According to “Summum Bonum,” the previous letter claimed that because alcohol could lead to death and should be abolished, so should automobiles, causing “Bonum” to write, “There is no similarity in the cases...No one becomes an ‘accident addict.’ In the case of the inebriate, the injury is self-inflicted and premeditated.”⁷⁴ Using the comparison between the “inebriate” and the “accident addict,” the writer made his medical conclusion, writing, “Alcoholic beverages...have no food value and the medical profession long ago decided that their therapeutic values was [sic] doubtful. Automobiles, industrially are of the greatest important while the health-giving pleasure of riding is unquestioned, without the depressing reaction invariably following the indulgence of drinks.”⁷⁵

In contrast to those who feared that Prohibition inhibited their rights, many supported Prohibition as a guarantee for the upholding of their civil liberties and personal rights. A letter signed “Liberty” appeared in *The Times-Picayune* on May 15, 1918. The letter’s author refuted wet claims of defending states’ rights in their efforts to stave off Prohibition saying, “What

⁷³ A.F. Quebodeau, Letter to the editor, *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), May 12, 1918.

⁷⁴ Summum Bonum, Letter to the editor, *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), March 30, 1919.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

respect did this [liquor] traffic have for states' rights as states voted dry? Did it attempt to keep brain-affecting drink out? No. On the contrary...it smuggled liquor into the territory under all kinds of camouflage, labeled medicine, groceries and everything else but whiskey."⁷⁶ The writer had a second letter published two weeks later on May 28 adding an example of what liquor advocates were doing to states' rights. Liberty writes,

We have a law separating whites and blacks in trains. Suppose that states adjoining had no such law and negroes were to whitewash themselves as trains approach our state line so they could continue to travel in the same coaches with whites. Would we submit supinely to this deception, or, if a sufficient number of states with the law and deceived the same were to appeal to the nation, would we be with them?...The liquor people are guilty of just such tricks to defeat the rights of dry states...⁷⁷

In equating Jim Crow laws with Prohibition laws, this writer emphasized the issue's importance in the early stages of nationwide Prohibition. "Liberty" wrote again to the *Picayune* a few months later following news that the Prohibition Amendment to the Constitution would be ratified, paying his respects to the death of alcohol saying, "Before this curtain finally falls we wish to place a laurel on the grave of old John Barlecorn [*sic*] and we hope that he will rest in peace or in pieces as he will be before the other states get through with him."⁷⁸

Another letter published in the *Picayune* on March 23, 1919, also confronted the claims of Anti-Prohibitionists that Prohibition was an attack on personal liberty and was therefore unconstitutional. In this letter, the author claimed that the motive of Prohibition was altruistic, writing to its opponents, "Prohibition is not for the man who drinks in moderation...For the comfort derived from a glass of wine by the average man, he has not the right to imperil the life and happiness of the one who cannot resist overindulgence."⁷⁹ The writer then addressed the

⁷⁶ Liberty, Letter to the editor, *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), May 15, 1918.

⁷⁷ Liberty, Letter to the editor, *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), May 28, 1918.

⁷⁸ Liberty, Letter to the editor, *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), August 10, 1918.

⁷⁹ Summum Bonum, Letter to the editor, *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), March 23, 1919.

constitutionality of Prohibition with this observation: “Is prohibition unconstitutional? So was abolition in 1860. To free a slave was confiscation of personal property, but the Fourteenth Amendment straightened that out and no one now denies the injustice of slavery nor will one be found to support the curse of drink ten years after prohibition is established.”⁸⁰

Others in favor of Prohibition believed that the law would lead to economic uplift in the country which would, in turn, suppress many social problems. In a letter published on February 28, 1919, writer Mrs. Greg, rather than “attempt to rehearse the facts, which have been gone over so many thousands of time [in favor of the successes of Prohibition],” chose to give an economic defense of Prohibition.⁸¹ Mrs. Greg claimed that a combined sum of \$3.4 billion is spent annually in America on liquor and tobacco in comparison to the \$262 million spent on church missions and foreign aid. Greg asked the reader to “consider the fact that if the above \$3.4 billion were expended on church, missions and other reforms, just what a kind of paradise would this old world be.”⁸² Published on June 16, 1919, a letter written by One Who Knows appeared in the *Picayune* praising the positive effect of Prohibition on the economy. The writer states:

Many, many young men will then be able to walk around the streets with money in their pockets, better off, and money in the bank, with nothing at all to worry them...A man...when he makes the next pay day, will be able to, I am sure, run until the next pay day without having to borrow money. The saloon is the cause of most men being continually in debt and borrowing, everybody knows that.⁸³

A third letter, appearing in the *Picayune* on July 20, 1922, challenged the notion by Prohibition’s opponents that the revenue collected by the liquor interests was too important to the American economy to be lost. The letter’s author, W.J. Young, offers to concede to this point “if they could

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Mrs. Greg, Letter to the editor, *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), February 28, 1919.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ One Who Knows, Letter to the editor, *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), June 16, 1919.

show that the money the government collected from the liquor interests would defray the continual cost to the state of crime originating in liquor.” However, “the challenge still stands unrefuted.”⁸⁴

Neutral Letters

Not all letters took a strong stand either in favor of or against Prohibition. Some writers sought a moderation of the Prohibition law while others expressed concerns about its effectiveness and the fairness of its implementation. Of the small sample of this type of letter, the majority suggested temperance as a solution to the ills of alcohol rather than the complete abolition of alcohol. A letter published on March 29, 1919, offered several suggestions on how to “check the evil” associated with liquor. The writer wished to “destroy the temptations, abolish saloons, those gateways to perdition,” allow restaurants to serve drinks only with meals, and to “limit the use of liquor in the home just as the consumption of sugar was limited during the war.”⁸⁵ Similarly, “An Old Subscriber” wrote to the *Picayune* pleading for temperance, claiming that Prohibition had led to “more prisoners, more crime, more bigoted intolerance on all sides... More people are drinking worse liquor than before and the country is...losing the bootleggers’ income tax.” By doing away with the “intemperance of prohibition by legalizing the sale of good wine and beer,” the writer asserted that the problems caused by Prohibition would assuredly be solved.⁸⁶ A third writer observed differences in ease of enforcement in the cities and in rural areas. The writer claimed that lawbreakers in the cities existed in both the underworld and in the upper crust of society, making enforcement much more difficult. After acknowledging the success of enforcement in rural areas, the writer stated, “Experience seems to show that it might

⁸⁴ W.J. Young, Letter to the editor, *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), July 20, 1922.

⁸⁵ M.R., Letter to the editor, *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), March 29, 1919.

⁸⁶ An Old Subscriber, Letter to the editor, *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), October 7, 1921.

have been the wiser policy to attempt the elimination of the abuses of an existing problem, instead of going to the extreme of attempting its absolute prohibition.”⁸⁷

Still others believed that the issue remained up in the air. In a letter published on July 16, 1920, H.S. Johns, Chaplain, Louisiana State Penitentiary, wrote of his hopes and concerns for Prohibition stating, “This is a beautiful world in which to live, if carefulness, prudence and diligence are but duly observed... I believe that prohibition will make good if tried out for long enough...but with the growing population and the human heart as susceptible as it is to temptation, it will be a long time before the penitentiary can be called a ‘closed institution.’”⁸⁸ Similarly, a letter published on September 26, 1921, expressed doubts regarding the effectiveness of Prohibition, the author stated:

I myself had high hopes of the wonders of prohibition was going to work, and imagined a world where one would...be shocked by the sight of a drunkard...do we not see daily in the newspapers, of accounts of persons who have acted violently “under the influence of liquor?” And do we not see our own well-to-do acquaintances getting all the liquor they want, and drinking more of it than they did, simply because it is not a forbidding thing? The truthful answer would be: Yes. I am beginning to think, with the periodical, *Life*, that prohibition in America is “just a poetic figure.”⁸⁹

Lastly, a letter appeared that, although its author was in favor of Prohibition, suggested a vote the issue to establish fair play in determining the Prohibition question. Published on May 15, 1918, the letter pointed to a religious impasse that made necessary a vote on the issue:

A drunkard is an abomination. Scripture is full of condemnations of the drunkard. That is the moral law. But the moderate drinker is nowhere condemned, nor is wine condemned. Therefore, let the people as a whole say whether this shall be a bone-dry state or not. This is a Democratic republican state and only the majority should rule. But let the people say what that rule shall be.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ H. Teid, Letter to the editor, *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), May 28, 1921.

⁸⁸ H.S. Johns. Chaplain, Louisiana State Penitentiary, Letter to the editor, *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), July 16, 1920.

⁸⁹ A Woman, Letter to the editor, *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), September 26, 1921.

⁹⁰ Fair Play, Letter to the editor, *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), May 15, 1918.

That these moderate positions were written is evidence that not all New Orleanians were quite sure of what to make of Prohibition and were voicing their opinions saying so. These moderate letters, together with the letters opposing and favoring Prohibition, reflect the diversity of opinion that existed on the topic and suggests that despite a reputation for support of drunkenness and excess New Orleanians held a variety of views.

Conclusion

The letters opposing Prohibition and smearing its supporters seem to support the argument that New Orleanians fully opposed a check on drinking and, as a result, they strengthen the popular image of New Orleans as a place of riotous and drunken living. Standing in contrast to these letters, and to the city's image, however, are the voices in favor of Prohibition, voices mostly silenced in the historiographical record in order to preserve and maintain an image of New Orleans. In various strategies to promote profit, New Orleanians tasked with selling the city to tourists have relied extensively on this image of the city as a place of excess and drunkenness. This image persists today and, at least in the case of Prohibition, is supported in part by historical fact. Historians have concluded that Prohibition in New Orleans failed, usually citing lack of enforcement, the success of bootleggers, and the ease of procuring a drink throughout the period – all suggestions for a population that was largely against Prohibition. However, most have failed to question the possibility that, even in its failure, Prohibition was also met with the support of many New Orleanians for many reasons. As this study has shown, some New Orleanians supported Prohibition just as fervently as others who opposed it. By viewing the variety of opinions written to the editor of the *Picayune*, this paper shows that the city's inhabitants did not adhere to any singular attitude when they penned their letters but were bringing a variety of responses to the national debate as were people throughout the United States. In this respect, it

can be determined that the popular image, while rooted in some truth, is an incomplete reflection of the attitudes of the city's people and argues that this image has been so prevalent that historians have effectively silenced alternative voices.

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