Portland, Maine: Rum Tycoon to Temperance Trailblazer

By Denali Garson

Portland is a peaceful and beautiful city, popular to tourists and a frequent spot for restaurants, boating, and tours. But buried beneath its current prosperity, it has been a host to conflict, war, and a rich history that many of its people don't know. One such example is the temperance movement in Maine. Many people aren't aware that, long before the nationwide temperance laws in the 20th century, Maine was one of the first states to try experimenting with regulations on alcohol. As people found ways around the laws and discovered classist elements within them, tensions rose, which helped cause the Portland Rum Riot on June 2nd in 1855, an event at the old Portland Town Hall that left one person killed and seven wounded, and forced the city to ask questions about temperance, and how to properly hold officials accountable when they break their own laws.

To understand how the temperance movement started in Maine, it is crucial to understand Portland's culture and involvement in the rum trade. For this, one must go back in time a little farther. Before and during the early 1800s, Portland was deeply ingrained maritime trade. While it didn't transport slaves or heavily rely on slave labour, ships would take molasses from slave plantations in the Caribbean and transport it to the city to be distilled into rum. This was an essential part of Portland’s economy, with up to 20 rum distilleries in its city alone at the time. It was in high demand among sailors and labourers, and the world needed a producer. New England was not the only major rum producer but was still heavily impacted by the production and sale of alcohol.

Alcohol was also an important part of the life of the everyday citizen in Portland. Many worked at the distilleries, were involved in the ships transporting rum from the harbour, or buying their own at the local store, often for medicinal reasons. But all of this would soon come to a grinding halt. Many know that the temperance movement in the early 1900s, a

nationwide movement against intoxicating liqueurs, led congress to ban alcohol in America in 1919. What many people don’t know is that the temperance movement started over 100 years before that in New York (Brittanica) and quickly spread to New England. It was a movement deeply rooted in Christianity, which had started to become more zealous in recent years. This caused many churches throughout the northeast to push harder for alcohol bans. (Britannica). And it especially took off in Maine, for social reasons. In the early nineteenth century, alcoholism was a crisis. It often came with family and employment issues, leading many to believe that it was the biggest reason for many civil problems in America. It was especially easy to point fingers at rum. Before, cheap but weak alcohols were used by chronic drinkers, but realized the strength of rum, at about 45% alcohol, made it last longer. People were nervous about the excessive alcohol consumption, which was much higher than it is today. At its height in 1830, alcohol consumption was around 7 gallons a year per capita, while today, it is roughly 2.42. (Royal Rum Society). While rum had been previously outrun by whiskey production in the 1790s, due to the British taxing rum starting in 1790 and the large supply of corn in the west making whisky cheaper to make, it was still important in Maine. The backlash was expected. By 1815, Portland formed the world's first Total Abstinence society with many supporters, many of whom had the political clout to push the movement to the legislature. In 1846, they convinced state lawmakers to pass the Twenty-Eight Gallon Law, which stated that alcohol can only be bought in quantities of twenty-eight gallons or more at a time. While this may seem like an oddly specific amount, the prohibitionists wanted to keep the drink away from the poor in hopes it would fix some of society’s problems while preventing the crash of the distilling industry. The lower classes, who couldn’t afford to buy quantities of liquor that large, would instead be forced away from it. (Smithsonian Magazine). This showed a less restrictive policy than the prohibition laws that would come later, seeing as they were actively trying to protect rum infrastructure.

However, the law still caused political strife and didn't prove to be very effective. There was no good way to enforce the Twenty-Eight-Gallon law, because Maine didn’t have

a well-structured police system at the time. This meant that while the law existed on paper, people could continue buying and drinking as usual, albeit more secretly. The law was passed and signed by the majority party in the state legislature, the Whigs. They were more popular among the upper class, and the decision to let the rich indulge while the poor were barred from a drink only made them more hated.

But one man, Neal Dow, was especially important to the story of Maine's temperance movement, he himself being named the "Napoleon of Temperance" and "Father of Prohibition." (Wikipedia). Due to his upbringing and experience with alcohol abuse in Maine, he devoted himself to becoming a leader in the prohibitionist movement. He became the president of the Maine Temperance Union in 1850, and after securing the position as the mayor of Portland the next year, he managed to pass the Maine Liquor Law, which officially prohibited the manufacture, sale, and possession with intent to sell intoxicating liquors, except for medicinal and mechanical purposes, making Maine the first "dry" state. Criticism, especially in the Irish community, arose about the law and Neal Dow himself. Many felt it was racist on the Irish because Dow had expressed xenophobia towards them. Being generally in the poorer classes, they took much of the blame for alcohol related social issues and had a stereotypical reputation for being heavy drinkers. (Maine Historical Society). That, coupled with a different scandal about Neal Dow, made the environment heated. People were bitter about his handling of prohibition and harsh polices. When a rumour popped up that Dow was keeping 1600 dollars of alcohol in Portland, it had the power to incite the crowd to violence. Although Dow verified that there was alcohol, but it was “medicinal and mechanical,” many distrusted him and believed he was a hypocrite. Portland’s citizens applied for a search warrant to check the liquor supply. On June 2, after the warrant was given, a crowd began to gather at the old Portland City Hall, where the spirits were being held. It became a mob of about 3000 people. They started to shove and throw rocks. A local paper wrote that the citizens should “seize Neal Dow’s liquors and pour them into the street.” (Smithsonian Magazine). The people of Portland acted on those words. According to

Madeline Bilis, a writer for the Boston magazine at the time, “bottles of alcohol in the storage area were broken.”

In retaliation, Dow called upon the militia, a group of Maine's informal soldiers. The details become debated, but after failing to disperse the crowds, the militia fired when Dow instructed them to. One man was killed, and seven others were injured. Dow was eventually prosecuted for the illegal storage of alcohol. According to Madeline Bilis for the Boston magazine, he intended to distribute the alcohol to doctors on behalf of the city but was prosecuted for not being a legal distributor. (Wikipedia). He, who supported the law, was caught in it for failing to obey its requirements, although he didn't specifically act against the intent of his movement.

In 1856, the Maine law was repealed by the Whigs and Democrats and substituted with a more relaxed policy that allowed for a wider, but still limited sale of alcohol. Maine had experimented with temperance, and after a messy process, found itself in a position that was neither a success nor a complete failure. Alcohol was still drunk, but the culture around it had changed during its foray. People had begun to see alcohol moderation as virtuous and started drinking less. Other states saw Maine's attempts at temperance laws and soon followed, continuing the wave and cementing Portland's role in the movement, not as singular, but as a trailblazer, grappling with the economic circumstances of the rum trade, social issues, and the growing morals of the temperance movement.

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