

A reminder and a warning.

ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS was only ten years old when Bill W., AA's co-founder, wrote: "Those who read the July [1945] Grapevine were startled, then sobered, by the account which it carried of the Washingtonian movement. It was hard for us to believe that 100 years ago the newspapers of this country were carrying enthusiastic accounts about 100,000 alcoholics who were helping each other stay sober; that today the influence of this good work has so completely disappeared that few of us had ever heard of it—"

"May we always be willing to learn from experience!" Bill cautioned.

*The quotations in this article
are from material in AA's
archives.*

Founded by six drunks in 1840, the Washingtonians had grown in membership to hundreds of thousands in a short twelve years, and then destroyed themselves as an organization and dropped out of sight. By 1852, all that remained of their spectacular power as a method of treatment was the Home for the Fallen in Boston.

In a talk on the Traditions shortly



*They flourished when
they helped one another*

before his death, Bill said that the Washingtonians had done things "which were very natural to do, but which had turned out to be utterly destructive. And it was this spectacle of the past, brought before us as our Traditions were evolving, that confirmed that we were probably very much on the right track in this matter of no public controversy; in this question of paying our own bills; in this question of not becoming involved with other enterprises, and so on down the line. And above all, it confirmed the great protective guide of our anonymity Tradition."

Later, in the book *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, Bill wrote: "In many respects the Washingtonians were akin to AA—Had they stuck to their one goal, they might have found the full answer. Instead, the Washingtonians per-

The Washingtonians

*And they died when they
abandoned certain timeless principles*

mitted politicians and reformers, both alcoholic and nonalcoholic, to use the society for their own purposes.... Within a very few years they had completely lost their effectiveness in helping alcoholics, and the society collapsed.

"The lesson to be learned from the Washingtonians was not overlooked by Alcoholics Anonymous. As we surveyed the wreck of that movement, early AA members resolved to keep our Society out of public controversy."

And to a friend he wrote, "I wish every AA could indelibly burn the history of the Washingtonians into his memory. It is an outstanding example of how, and how not, we ought to conduct ourselves. In a sense, Alcoholics Anonymous has never had a problem seriously threatening our overall unity. Yet I notice

that some AAs are complacent enough to suppose we never shall."

Bill also recalled the fate of the Washingtonians before 1,500 AAs gathered at the annual banquet in New York City on November 7, 1945. "In short, the Washingtonians went out to settle the world's affairs before they had learned to manage themselves. They had no capacity for minding their own business.... The negatives within them overthrew the positives.

"That won't happen here," Bill urged in closing, "if we remember, publicly and privately, our own simple principles of honesty, tolerance, and humility, and that we live only by the Grace of God."

Traditions! Words to remember! Thanks, Bill. Thank you, Washingtonians.

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