

AA Grapevine, February 1971

The Washingtonians

*A brief history of the organization
that grew strong helping suffering alcoholics
and then withered away when it lost track
of its primary purpose*



ONE THURSDAY evening, April 2, 1840, nearly 100 years before the advent of Alcoholics Anonymous, six good drinking buddies were gathered at Chase's Tavern on Liberty Street in Baltimore, Md.

The more they drank, the more their discussion centered on temperance, which was one of the most popular topics of the day. This meeting and subsequent discussions led to the formation and brief, spectacular life of the Washingtonian movement, which grew in membership to over 400,000 "reformed drunkards" and then destroyed it-

self overnight and dropped out of sight.

The story of the Washingtonian movement brings sharply into focus the importance of the Twelve Traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous as guidelines of group behavior designed to protect us against a similar fate. To take our Traditions for granted or to ignore them should at least justify a check mark on the debit side of our inventory charts.

Until the time of this meeting at Chase's Tavern, it was the prevailing opinion that nothing could be done to help the drunkard. (The

terms "alcoholic" and "alcoholism" were not yet in general use.) The few occasions when drunkards did reform did not erase the general pessimism over the possibility of rehabilitating drunks. Since alcohol was assumed to be the cause of alcoholism, many temperance movements of that day were aimed solely at keeping the nonalcoholic from becoming alcoholic. The rallying cry was: "Keep the temperate people temperate; the drunkards will soon die and the land be free!"

On April 5, 1840, our six good drinking buddies once again gathered

at this same tavern around another jug of spirits and were liberally toasting the great advantages of temperance and condemning the curse of drink. Although a number of active temperance groups was already in existence, none was acceptable to our friends. Good drunks that they were, they decided to form a group of their own. They elected officers and drew up a pledge of total abstinence:

"We, whose names are annexed, desirous of forming for our mutual benefit and to guard against a pernicious practice which is injurious to

our health, standing, and families, do pledge ourselves as gentlemen that we will not drink any spiritous or malt liquors, wine or cider."

They chose the name Washington Temperance Society in honor of George Washington, and a membership fee of twenty-five cents was established, together with monthly dues of twelve and a half cents. With fond embraces they parted, each agreeing to bring one new member to the next meeting at the tavern. And they stayed sober!

In response to membership growth and at the frantic urging of the tavern owner, the group eventually rented its own hall and decided to meet weekly. At these meetings, a unique format developed. Each speaker told his own story: "what I used to be like — what happened — and what I am like now." The idea was greeted with explosive acceptance. It gave new impact to the entire temperance movement. Total abstinence had created the miracle of the man at the podium!

In November 1840, the group held its first public meeting. Newspaper editors were liberal with coverage, complete with names of members. The audience was standing-room-only. Both alcoholics and nonalcoholics — all who pledged themselves to total abstinence — were welcomed into the group. Five months later, Washingtonian membership claimed over 1,000 "reformed drunkards" and 5,000 members who were not sure whether they

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were drunkards or not, but were also pledged to total abstinence, plus thousands of temperance advocates who welcomed the Washingtonian crusade.

Enthusiastic promoters that they were, members of the group organized and marched in a parade. It flaunted bands and banners and was witnessed by more than 40,000 spectators in Baltimore. Following the parade, there was a great open-air park meeting to spread the Washingtonian "Twelfth Step" message: "Drunkard! Come up here! You can reform. I met a gentleman this morning who reformed four weeks ago and was rejoicing in his reformation. We don't slight the drunkard. We love him! We nurse him as a mother does her infant learning to walk!"

Tears flowed freely around the secretary's table as hundreds moved to the platform and signed the pledge of total abstinence. The emotional atmosphere was saturated with contagious salvation. Religious groups embraced the program.

Samuel F. Holbrook, the first president of the society, thundered of God's part in reclaiming drunks: "The reeling drunkard is met in the

street or drawn out from some old filthy shed, taken by the arm, spoken kindly to, invited to the hall, and with reluctance dragged there or carried in a carriage if not too filthy; and there he sees himself surrounded by friends and not what he most feared . . . police officers. Everyone takes him by the hand; he begins to come to and when sober signs the pledge and goes away a reformed man. And it does not end there. The man takes the pledge and from his bottle companions obtains a number of signers who likewise become sober men. Positively these are the facts.

"Now, can any human agency alone do this? All will answer 'No!'; for we have invariably the testimony of vast numbers of reformed men who have spoken in public and declared they have broken off a number of times, but have as often relapsed again; and the reason they give for doing this is that they wholly rely on the strength of their resolution without looking any higher. Now they feel the need of God's assistance, which having been obtained, their reform is genuine. Praise God!"

The Washingtonian manifestation of miracles could not be contained geographically. Members were sure it was within their power to meet widespread, pressing needs. The reclaimed drunks active in the movement proved by their example that drunkards could be helped, and they had an overwhelming drive to carry their message of hope to other

drunks who still suffered. This drive spilled over into a desire to *prevent* such suffering by persuading those not addicted to insure their sobriety through total abstinence. Influential temperance leaders of the day needed salesmen to sell this message of prevention, and the Washingtonians provided a waiting list of available manpower.

New York City beckoned. In March of the following year, Washingtonians and spectators gathered at the Methodist Episcopal church on Green Street. During the very first speech, a young man in the gallery staggered to his feet and cried out, "Is there no hope for me? God in heaven! Is there no hope for me? Will you help me?" He was helped to the platform and expressed his willingness and readiness to bind himself from that hour to total abstinence. Others followed. Some were young men; others were old and gray-headed. The Washington-

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ians embraced them all. An organization of women within the group, known as Martha Washington Societies, fed and clothed the poor and reclaimed the intemperate of their own sex.

In less than four years from the



first meeting of our alcoholic friends at Chase's Tavern, Washingtonian membership hit its peak. At that point, it is commonly computed, the movement included at least 100,000 "reformed common drunkards," 300,000 "common tipplers" who also became total abstainers, and untold thousands who were simply enthusiastic temperance advocates.

And then came oblivion.

By 1848, all that remained of the organization's spectacular power as a method of treatment was its Home for the Fallen in Boston. That institution has undergone a number of changes in name and policy, now functions as the Washingtonian Hospital, and engages in the treatment of alcoholism by modern medical and social techniques. Otherwise,

the movement destroyed itself completely and dropped out of sight. With it went the hope it had held out for thousands of drunks of that day.

Against this brief background, it is possible to make a limited comparison between the Washingtonian movement and Alcoholics Anonymous and to reflect on the possibility of AA's suffering a similar fate. The similarities between the earlier movement and AA might be listed as follows:

1. Alcoholics helping each other
2. Weekly meetings
3. The sharing of experiences
4. Constant availability of fellowship with the group or its members
5. Reliance upon a Higher Power
6. Total abstention from alcohol

Although it is obvious that this program of the Washingtonians was incomplete and possessed only limited opportunity for personality change, as compared with AA's Twelve Steps, it did provide the tools for at least short-lived sobriety for thousands of drunks. But it failed to provide any standards at all that were comparable to AA's Twelve Traditions. Because there were no such safeguards for the movement as a whole, it died. Most of the Washingtonians' problems lay in areas now covered in our Traditions:

1. The AA Preamble and Tradition Five advise us to protect our singleness of purpose; Tradition One cautions us to protect our unity. Without these guidelines, the Washingtonian movement developed into a three-headed monster. First was the program of reclaiming suffering alcoholics. Second was the call to the general public for temperance through moral suasion. Third was the call for temperance through legal suasion. Influential men controlled the action of each head, and it was not long until the heads were fighting each other.

2. The carnival tactics for promotion and the lack of any spiritual

principle of anonymity created an atmosphere for spectacular growth — but also led to battles among personalities competing for prestige and power. One hundred years later, AA adopted Traditions Eleven and Twelve, which guide us to base our public-relations policy on attraction rather than promotion; always to maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, broadcasting, and films; and to regard anonymity as our "spiritual foundation . . . ever reminding us to place principles before personalities."

3. Nothing can divide and destroy groups more quickly than theological and political controversy. Tradition Ten states that AA "has no opinion on outside issues" and that "the AA name ought never be drawn into public controversy." Without this Tradition the Washingtonians walked right into a Donnybrook. A few key church leaders heard Washingtonian reformed drunks proclaiming publicly that, among other things, they were *living* Christ's program — not just giving it lip service, like a lot of pastors they knew. In retaliation, the Rev. Hiram Mattison, minister of the Methodist Episcopal church of Watertown, N.Y., fired this theologi-

cal blockbuster: "No Christian is at liberty to select or adopt any general system, organization, agencies, or means for moral reformation of mankind, except those prescribed and recognized by Jesus Christ." He added that *his* church had been chosen, together with his gospel, as the system of truth and the only system to reform mankind. It was war! Other churches reacted in the same way and finally closed their doors to Washingtonians.

4. As if that were not enough, some of the Washingtonians' oratorical circuit riders turned professional, having no Eighth Tradition to guide them. So their one-drunk-to-another message lost a great deal of its impact.

A final destructive note came when influential leaders of non-alcoholic groups decided that the need for ex-drunks to reform other

drunks was past, and that emphasis should be placed instead on the importance of laws to promote temperance.

In doing the research and writing this article for the Grapevine, my thoughts have kept returning to this question: After the movement destroyed itself, what happened to all the thousands of alcoholics who had found sobriety through the Washingtonians?

It becomes a personal question when I add: What would have happened to me?

During the early days of the AA program, especially prior to the adoption of our Twelve Traditions, AA did suffer some of the same symptoms that destroyed the Washingtonians. The fact that we survived those hazards is one of AA's many miracles.

But it is still a 24-hour day.

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