

Introduction: The Spirits of the World

Thousands of years ago, before Christ or Buddha or Muhammad, before democracy or industry or technology as we know the terms today, before the Roman Empire rose or the Colossus of Rhodes fell, before water wheels or paddle wheel boats, before decimals or compasses, before the first dice were rolled or the first sheet music was carved into a cuneiform tablet, before sundials were invented or silver coins minted or stone bridges built across rivers—before any of this happened and before most of it was even a flash in the minds of madmen, there were people in Asia Minor drinking beer. They were drinking it after they ate and after they worked their fields. They were drinking it to warm their chills and to cool their fevers and to produce sensations that they could produce in no other way, with no other food or beverage or plant of the age. They were drinking it when they conversed with one another and when they conversed with their gods and sometimes, especially when they had gotten carried away and imbibed too much of the stuff, gulping it like water and paying no attention to the consequences, they were drinking it when they conversed with themselves.

And, thousands of years ago, there were people in Sumer drinking beer. If a man worked at one of the temples, he received a ration of two pints a day. Others, “senior dignitaries” at the temples, were provided with ten pints, enough to rid them of sobriety as well as thirst. Sometimes they

drank for the simple pleasure of drinking; sometimes they drank to pay homage to the goddess Ninkasi, “the lady who fills the mouth,” and who, in her role as celestial brewmistress par excellence, presided over the country’s production of malt beverage. It was, to say the least, extensive; the Sumerians made eight different kinds of beer from barley, another eight from wheat, and at least three from a mixture of grains. The more of the refreshment that Ninkasi’s subjects drank, the more they honored her. The subjects were very fond of honoring.

Also at the time, there were people in Egypt drinking beer, which they called *hek*. For them, the beverage was a by-product—or, more appropriately, a bonus—of bread-baking. The Egyptians began by steeping barley in water, allowing the grain and the liquid to mingle in unhurried fashion. The result was a kind of paste, which was then stored in the open air in a vat of some sort, allowing warm Nile breezes to blow over it until it achieved the perfect consistency.

Then [the Egyptians] kneaded [it] into a dough. Next, it was lightly baked to turn it into bread and then soaked in water; dates may have been added at this stage to sweeten the mixture. Then, it was put into a warm place to allow fermentation to occur and finally squeezed through a cloth or fine sieve so that the sweet liquid could be drained off into a pot.

After all this the pot was raised to the lips of the thirsty—perhaps too many sets of lips, perhaps too many times. “Banquets frequently ended with the guests, men and women, being sick,” it has been noted, “and this did not in any way seem shocking.” Further, alcohol-induced illness “was considered a suitable subject for art. A recovered fresco of the second millennium B.C. shows a woman banqueter turning from the table to vomit into a bowl held by a servant.”

A lot of bowls were filled this way. So many, in fact, that after a while a backlash set in, and the Egyptians became one of the world’s first populations to encourage abstinence, at least on a part-time basis. “Do not get drunk in the taverns in which they drink beer,” cautions *Wisdom of Ani*, written about 1400 B.C.; if you do, your companions are likely to “repeat words which may have gone out of your mouth, without your being aware of having uttered them.”

There were people in the northern lands drinking beer. Some of them were alive, some were not. The Scandinavians believed that “the spirits of their dead warriors were taken to an enormous banquet hall, Valhalla, where they feasted every day on copious amounts of ale.” Thus

they would remain valorous, or perhaps foolhardy, as ready to do battle in the afterlife as they had been on earth.

There were people along the banks of the Danube and the Rhine, between the North and Baltic Seas, early Germans and very much alive, also feasting copiously, “drinking rivers of beer,” allowing the rivers to overflow within them and delighting in the sensations of flood.

There were people in Babylonia overflowing. Hammurabi, the most famous of their lawgivers, was troubled by their excesses but even more by the unscrupulous practices of the establishments in which his countrymen raised their mugs. His code condemned alehouses for selling beverages that were priced excessively and brewed weakly, finding the former fraudulent and the latter inimical to the whole point of drinking. He put some of these places out of business, while forcing others to change their ways. He was a consumer advocate long before the notion of consumers.

But he did not deny either the pleasures or the importance of beer, which “some authorities regard . . . as the critically important product, demand for which induced people to practice agriculture in the first place.”

In India, wine seems to have been the preferred libation. Husbands downed it; their mistresses downed it; their wives did not. For reasons unknown to posterity, the wives were not allowed to quench their thirsts with alcohol; rather, they had to satisfy themselves olfactorily. The glasses would be filled and the wives would lower their noses, take a few deep breaths, then pass the glasses along and watch the others imbibe. It was a demeaning practice. It must also have been a pleasant consolation; the Indians concocted their wine from rice, grain, sugar, molasses, and honey, so that the potion was as fragrant to inhale as it was sassy to consume.

There were people in China drinking wine, and they sometimes sacrificed their fellow Chinese to the gods in the process, the earth on these occasions becoming moist with a combination of fermented grape juice and fresh blood. The Chinese also drank wine when they worshiped their ancestors, which is to say that they took their potion seriously, not socially. In fact, they tried to discourage merriment of any kind in the act of slaking thirst, the Han Dynasty going so far as to fine citizens for drinking in groups of more than three—unless, that is, one of the three was on his way to eternity.

There were people in Persia drinking wine, and a myth came to be told about how the beverage was discovered. One year, it seems, the grape harvest was so bountiful that the Persians, lovers of fine fruit though they were, could not make use of it all. Fearful of waste, old King Jamshid ordered the surplus to be stored in large jars in the cellar of his palace. Servants filled dozens of such jars, hundreds of them, sealing them tightly and then stacking them on the shelves that lined the walls of the underground corridors next to the dungeons. The jars were guarded as zealously as the prisoners with whom they shared the space.

Several months later, when the king ordered the fruit to be brought to him so that the men and women of his court might enjoy it out of season, he made a shocking discovery. The jars were still there but the grapes were not; they had been replaced with “a strange-tasting dark purple juice,” of which the king took a single whiff and gasped. Mystified and disappointed, he ordered his servants to get rid of the stuff. They were to return the jars to the basement and, in large letters, write the word poison on each. If the grapes could not be reclaimed—which is to say, if this perverse process of alchemy could not somehow be reversed—at least the members of the royal household could be warned of the vile product that had so inexplicably been created.

Shortly afterward, one of the women in Jamshid’s court, distraught at the betrayal of her lover, decided to commit suicide.

She wandered down to the king’s cellars, found the jars labeled poison, and helped herself to a few swallows from one of them. She immediately began to feel better. Then, after a few more swallows, she grew drowsy and fell asleep. When she awoke the next morning, she rushed to tell the king that his “poison” was not poison at all but was actually a pleasant and unusual drink.

King Jamshid promptly sent for some of the “poison” and sampled it himself. He, too, began to feel relaxed and lighthearted. Jamshid thereupon rechristened the mysterious beverage *zeber-e-koosh*, or “the delightful poison,” and decreed that henceforth a share of grapes from every harvest should be preserved in exactly the same manner.

There were people in Greece drinking wine, no less a figure than Socrates supposedly swearing that it “does of a truth ‘moisten the soul’ and lull our griefs to sleep.” The Greeks found that their griefs slept even more soundly when they blended their wine with spices and flavorings, perfumes and unguents. Then they diluted it further, the usual formula being three parts water to two parts grape.

There were people in Rome drinking wine. They, too, watered the potion. But as time went on this seemed to them counterproductive: diluted wine, diluted pleasure. So the Romans began to add less water, making their wine stronger and stronger as the empire got weaker and weaker, the beverage perhaps not a cause of the empire's eventual fall but almost surely an effect.

There were people in Etruria drinking wine, probably taking it straight, and afterward, with as steady a hand as possible, recording their euphoria by drawing "scenes of bibulous merriment" on the walls of their caves. Then, inspired by their art, they created more bibulous merriment in real life.

There was no one drinking liquor in the ancient world; the principles of distillation would not be discovered until much later—the first century A.D. according to one account, but more likely the seventh. The first distilled libation, brandy, was probably not blended until the eleventh century by a Spanish physician, a gentleman who seems not to have cared what his invention cured so much as what it momentarily alleviated.

But half a millennium later, by the time the British had begun to colonize North America, setting up outposts in Virginia and Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Pennsylvania and the Carolinas, there would be a variety of distilled drinks available to men and women, not just brandy, and there would be improved means of brewing grains for beer and processing grapes for wine. The Americans would welcome them all. The Americans would drink them all, rivers of mind-altering potables of their own that produced scenes of bibulous merriment of their own, not to mention inspiration and stimulation and comfort, as well as heartache and illness and dissolution and, finally, early in the twentieth century, the Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States, perhaps the worst idea ever proposed by a legislative body anywhere in the world for the ostensible goal of a better society.

In fact, alcoholic beverages would come to be more than just a staple of diet for the New World colonists; they would serve as an almost indispensable accompaniment to liberty: sparking the urge to separate from the Motherland, igniting patriotism, stoking the passion for growth and prosperity and a government that was the perfect reflection of its citizens' desires.

It was, or so it seems in retrospect, as if freedom were an engine and spirits the fuel of highest octane.



The First National Pastime

We read in our histories that the Revolutionary War was conceived in the watering holes of colonial America, but almost as an aside, and we never ask why.

Why did New York merchants gather at Burns's Tavern on Broadway to plan a boycott of British goods in response to the Stamp Act?

Why did Bostonians organize their tea party at the Green Dragon Tavern?

Why did Virginia's Committee of Correspondence, and later the Intercolonial Committees, conduct their insurrectionary business at the Sir Walter Raleigh Tavern in Williamsburg?

Why did Samuel Adams and John Hancock and their friends fan the flames of independence at the Black Horse Inn in Winchester, Massachusetts?

Why did Captain John Parker make Buckman's Tavern on Lexington Green the headquarters for the Minutemen?

Why did Ethan Allen and the Green Mountain Boys convene at the Catamount in Bennington, Vermont?

Why did John Adams meet George Washington for the first time at the City Tavern in Philadelphia? Why, in fact, was it considered "the great gathering place for members of Congress"?

Why did Thomas Jefferson begin writing the Declaration of Independence at the Indian Queen Tavern in the same city, a brimming glass of Madeira next to his bottle of ink?

Why did Jack Jouett, “a Southern counterpart to Paul Revere,” mount his horse outside the Cuckoo Inn for a ride to Monticello, his goal to warn Jefferson of a British attack on Virginia?

Why did “disgruntled artisans, storekeepers, and militiamen” congregate at Philadelphia’s Four All’s Tavern, or the Wilkes and Liberty, to rail about the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few?

Why did other colonists whose names have not survived the years assemble at other drinking houses to express their grievances and decide on their actions and form more tightly the bonds of their resolve? Why did they swarm into the Bunch of Grapes and the King’s Head and the Blue Anchor and the Indian King, reading aloud the latest news of rebellion in the newspapers “and either applauding or howling with rage”? Why, in fact, would Henry David Thoreau one day write that “the gods who are most interested in the human race preside over the tavern”?

Why did none of these councils take place in the gods’ more traditional home, the church, or in town halls or schoolhouses, places of business or private residences?

Some of them did, of course, but not many and not often, for no other meeting place of the time offered the same guarantee of high attendance and devout attention as a tavern, even when the topic was as important as relations with England. Which is to say that no other activity of the time, perhaps not even the conceiving and implementing of freedom itself, was as important to the colonists as the consumption of alcoholic beverages. Booze was food, medicine, and companionship in the early days of America: ichor, elixir, and *aqua vitae*. It was how the tongue got loose and the mind receptive, how the body unlimbered and the future grew bright. It was a boost for one’s courage, a shield against loneliness, a light in the midnight hours when the stars were hidden and the moon otherwise occupied. Even the Pilgrims, thought to be so ascetic, so unwilling to yield to temptations of either the flesh or palate, packed a plentiful supply of “hot waters,” probably gin and brandy, into the cargo hold of the *Mayflower*.

Most of it survived the voyage. Not so on future trips. “William Bradford, in 1630, was expecting a consignment of two hogsheads of mead for his colonists, but found no more than six gallons when the boat arrived, the remainder, which was about 100 gallons, ‘being drunke up under ye name of leakage and so lost.’”

In fact, booze of one sort or another was attendant to so many activ-

ities of the time that it sometimes seemed as if the activities were but an excuse for the booze, a kind of cover story. Specifically, it was beer that made grain worthwhile and wine that gave sanction to grapes. Cider was “the main point of every apple tree north of the Carolinas” and rum the “only prayer for the present world.”

The latter was certainly the most popular beverage in the present world, or at least that portion of the world bordered by the Atlantic on one side and the Appalachians on the other. South and west of it, on various islands in the Caribbean, molasses was being produced in large quantities from sugarcane. Much of it was exported to the colonies to be distilled into rum. “What wasn’t consumed in New England,” writes Edward Hamilton, “was shipped to Africa and traded for slaves to provide the labor to grow more cane in the Caribbean.”

But these islands manufactured their own rum, too, and like Cuban cigars a few centuries later, it was both illegal for Americans to purchase and irresistible for them to consume. “As the first president of the United States, George Washington ordered a barrel of the best Barbados rum for the inauguration party.”

What it all meant was that the tavern could not help but be the most venerated of early American institutions. The best people went to them. The best people owned them. In seventeenth-century Massachusetts, for example, only voters and church members, “the colony’s elite,” were allowed to purchase and operate taverns, and they often became a home away from home for those who inhabited them. To elected officials they were an after-hours seat of government, to shopkeepers a shop at which they could enjoy the indulgences of being a customer, to members of the clergy a place to contemplate the Almighty’s designs without being plagued by thirst of denomic proportions.

This does not mean, however, that our forebears were a collection of tumble-down drunks and back-street hooligans. A few were, of course; that was inevitable. Even the best taverns suffered from the occasional outbreak of “Drunkenness, Swearing, Cursing, Perjury, Blasphemy, Cheating, Lying, and Fighting,” and at taverns that were not the best, this kind of rowdiness was as common as a refill. In fact, early in the eighteenth century, the Massachusetts General Court and the Boston Town Council began suspending the licenses of owners who permitted inappropriate behavior on their premises, and the definition of “inappropriate” became more and more expansive as the years went by.

But there were also colonists who, for reasons of their own, did not partake at all, looking upon those who did with bemusement or disgust or a combination of both. And there were colonists who liked their liquor in moderation, putting away their bottles short of the point of full inebriation—social drinkers, we would call them today. William Bradford might have bemoaned the mead that did not arrive, but neither did he “want his people to be too drunk, complaining when, as he served as governor of Plymouth, his soldiers were ‘so steeld with drinke as their peeces were too heavie for them.’”

And then there were colonists who became *so* “steeld” that they built up a kind of homeopathic resistance to glazed eyes, slurred speech, and an unsteady gait. They were “in a certain degree *seasoned*,” as a contemporary observer put it, “and consequently it [was] by no means common to see an American *very* much intoxicated.”

But a human being who seasoned himself undertook a difficult process, one that was expensive and imprecise and required vast quantities of alcohol for the proper results. How vast no one can say; in the years before independence, neither beer nor wine nor liquor was taxed, and thus the colonies had no reason to keep records of sale or consumption. The first educated guess is for the 1790s. There is, however, no reason to think that the figures were much different a decade or two, or even a century, earlier.

An average American over fifteen years old drank just under six gallons of absolute alcohol each year. That represented some thirty-four gallons of beer and cider (about 3.4 gallons of absolute alcohol), slightly over five gallons of distilled liquors (2.3 gallons of absolute alcohol), and under a gallon of wine (possibly .10 gallons absolute).

It took a lot of dedication to put away so much hooch, not to mention a lot of time. Some of the colonists bent their elbows before the cock’s first crow in the morning and did not straighten them again until the sun had grown weary and been several hours gone.

6:30 *A.M.* The instant they awoke, many Americans reached for bottles of rum or brandy and poured themselves a healthy serving. The object was to open the eyes wide and quickly, jarring the innards to abrupt alertness, hot waters instead of a cold shower. “The custom,” it has been supposed, “owes something to the dram of whiskey on which the Highland Scot counted to set the system going after the stagnation of sleep.” It might also owe something to the belief that so strong a jolt to the system so early in the day could not help but keep the system

running at peak efficiency. And possibly, since rum was known in its native West Indies as “killdevil,” the imbiber sought a spiritual, as well as spirituous, state for the sunrise hours.

Then again, it might simply have been that Americans loved their liquor so much they could not wait to get started. After all, the British from whom they were descended, whom in reality they still *were*, had long thought of alcoholic beverages as essentials; “the consumption of strong drink,” in fact, “was connected with every phase of life from apprenticeship.” For this reason, it is estimated that there were some 17,000 “gin-houses” in London alone in the mid-eighteenth century, and if some critics at the time thought the beverage they provided was a “liquid fire by which men drink their hell beforehand,” others thought of it as a brief taste of heaven on earth, an antidote, crisp and bracing, for “the thickness and dampness of the atmosphere.” And a modern historian, writing about England in the same era, has guessed that “drink, like gambling and violence, was a palliative at a time when life was so precarious.”

7:00 *A.M.* Now that they had prepared their internal organs for the day, the colonists washed down their breakfasts with more alcohol, possibly a second portion of rum, which they either drank or sloshed over their bacon as it cooked. Or they might do their sloshing with beer, it being the habit of some women of the era to break their toast into small pieces and put them into a bowl and then liberally douse them with brew. If, for some reason, neither rum nor beer was available, our ancestors would find something else to pick them up, “anything from cherry brandy to wine mixed with sugar and water.”

Perhaps there was an infant in the house. If so, he would be given the last few drops of alcohol. As he got older, he would graduate to larger amounts. “I have frequently seen fathers,” wrote a colonist who was not disapproving, “wake their child of a year old from a sound sleep to make it drink Rum, or brandy.” No less an authority than John Locke, the British philosopher who so inspired Thomas Jefferson and other architects of American independence, believed in the benefits of toddies for toddlers. Even better, though, was something known as “small beer,” a weaker version of its namesake, although Locke cautioned that a child should drink it only “after he has eaten a piece of bread.”

The first Americans were not trying to make sots of their offspring. They were providing them with spirits because spirits were the beverages of the household, not to mention the society. In fact, in the case of

older children, the colonists were trying to prevent a sottish future by “seasoning” their hostages to fortune, accustoming them to alcohol in the hope that they would become so used to it in its various forms that it would not affect them much as young men and adults. It seemed like a good idea at the time. It seemed like an even better one when a cantankerous adolescent, rebelling at the demands of his dependent state, sipped a little early morning intoxicant and suddenly turned mellow, if not even beatific.

11:00 A.M. Gunsmiths and glassblowers, coopers and farmers, educators and preachers—almost all men who worked for a living, and more than a few women, put aside their labors for a few minutes to enjoy what they called the “eleven o’clock bitters,” a cross between, and predecessor of, the modern coffee break and happy hour. Tension dissolved in the solvent of alcohol; energy, or at least the illusion of it, returned to the honest toiler, and the day’s labors could continue. Did they continue a little less efficiently? Perhaps, but then no one can say how they would have continued *without* the respite for hooch.

1:00 or 2:00 P.M. If the colonists were having dinner at the local tavern, as was often the case, they might begin with a rum flip, which seems to have been the most popular mixed drink of the time. The recipe called for two parts beer, one part rum, an egg or small amount of cream if desired, and sugar to taste. The ingredients were poured into a tankard, then stirred and brought to a near-boil by a poker that had been heating in the tavern’s fireplace. The poker was called a loggerhead, and sometimes a customer would have a flip or two too many and begin to argue with another customer; the men would raise their voices, redden in the jowls, curse at each other in unforgiving tones. Soon one would reach for the poker to settle the issue. The other would try to wrest the instrument from him, or to secure one of his own to even the odds. Thus the expression “at loggerheads.”

Other popular mixed drinks in colonial America—the word “cocktail” does not make its English language debut until early in the nineteenth century—sound as if they could just as easily be served today at one of our franchised singles bars, a paper umbrella in the glass and a plastic toothpick, spearing pieces of canned, syrupy fruit, on the side.

Rattle-skull: Brandy, wine, porter, nutmeg, and lime

Meridian: Brandy and tea

Calibogus: Rum and white spruce beer

Bombo: Rum, sugar, water, and nutmeg
 Mimbo: Rum, sugar, water, and no nutmeg
 Stonewall: Rum and cider
 Cherry bounce: Rum and cherry juice
 Sitchell: Rum, whiskey, water, vinegar, and molasses
 Manathan: Rum, beer, and sugar
 Whistlebelly: Sour beer, molasses, and bread crumbs
 Sillabub: Warm cream, wine, and sugar
 Sangaree: Madeira, water, sugar, and nutmeg (or some other
 spice)

4:00 P.M. This was the afternoon version of the “eleven o’clock bit-
 ters,” a companion period of refreshment and relaxation. In Portland,
 Maine, among other places, the two drinking times were so important
 to the populace that they were fixed into the day by the bells in the town
 hall tower. No other sounds were so eagerly awaited, unless they were
 the opening of a bottle and the splashing of liquid into a glass.

6:00 P.M. The choice at supper might be small beer or a hard pear
 juice called perry. Then again, it might be cider, wine, or a liquor made
 from almost anything that could be distilled. As an amateur poet from
 Massachusetts wrote to a friend in England:

If barley be wanting to make into malt,
 We must be content and think it no fault,
 For we can make liquor to sweeten our lips,
 Of pumpkins, and parsnips, and walnut-tree chips.

8:00 P.M. At the tavern in the evening, a variety of alcoholic bever-
 ages served as raw materials of colonial dissent, juices to get the juices
 flowing when the talk turned, as it almost always did, to policies of the
 Crown and their effect on the New World. It might be export duties or
 some other form of taxation; it might be the paltry sums of money that
 England was willing to pay for fine Virginia tobacco and the Mother-
 land’s insistence that the crop not be sold to other countries at higher
 rates; it might be the certainty of abuses yet to come.

Booze also had a tendency to make those expressing their discon-
 tent think of themselves as more eloquent than the normal run of pa-
 triot and more sagacious than the common brand of philosopher. In
 fact, so closely were alcohol and rebellion linked in the minds of many
 that a person who refrained from the former was sometimes thought

to be too weak-willed for the latter. “In Charleston,” writes historian Norman Gelb of one such fellow, “George Walker refused to drink damnation to the king of England. It was enough reason for him to be tarred and feathered, paraded through the town and pelted by onlookers with whatever came to hand.”

11:00 P.M. As a shield against nocturnal chills, the colonists might employ a hotchpotch, which was a manathan served warm. Or they might lift a mug of something else to inoculate themselves against heat, humidity, snow, rain, the blackness of night, the rigors of the forthcoming day—or perhaps just to toast themselves for having made it through another twenty-four hours in the punishing wilds of the New World. Americans enjoyed toasting one another and were diligent in seeking excuses, although no one is quite sure when the practice began. It probably goes back at least to the Middle Ages, “when people were baffled by drunkenness,” and might have believed “that the Devil entered a person’s body when he opened his mouth to drink. Clinking glasses supposedly frightened him away.” If so, there was enough of a din in the New World colonies to keep Satan and his entire army of fallen angels cowering in a corner until the final judgment.

And, oh yes, a glass of mulled cider “was particularly good for infants at bedtime; it guaranteed parents a restful night.”

Of course, not all Americans drank at all these times; schedules varied widely from place to place, even from day to day. Some people, though, drank at still other times, it having become customary in the future United States for alcoholic beverages to be lapped up by the occasion as well as by the clock.

Working. Not only were laborers rewarded for their efforts with two official booze breaks a day, they were encouraged to take a nip here and there in between, whenever thirst beset them; and to build a society from scratch—clearing a wilderness that did not want to be cleared, raising structures in the midst of the clearings, forming societies without appropriate models or reasons to believe they could ever endure—was to develop a thirst of the profoundest dimensions. In Northampton, Massachusetts, in 1737, sixty men set to work on a new meeting house, and were told by town officials that speed was of the essence. Could they finish in three weeks? How about two?

They finished in one. The secret to their success? They also finished, in the process of construction, sixty-nine gallons of rum and more barrels of beer and cider than anyone could count; they worked, in other

words, in an almost constant state of inebriation, from the pounding of the first nail in the morning to the sawing of the last plank at night. As a result, it is not known how long the building remained upright, nor whether the corners were squared or the floors level or the roof strong enough to support the weight of even so insubstantial a creature as a sparrow. The men, one assumes, did *not* remain upright after finishing their tasks.

“Farmers,” writes Alice Fleming in *Alcohol: The Delightful Poison*, “equally solicitous of their hired hands, placed jugs of rum behind the bushes and let the men help themselves as they toiled in the fields.” And there were clerks who kept a jug in the desk and smithies who hid one near the forge; there were wagoners who slipped a bottle into a pocket and even the occasional seamstress who positioned a glass at the foot of her spinning wheel, and sometimes took so many sips that she began to spin herself.

Few people questioned these practices. Many endorsed them. Even so piously sober a figure as Increase Mather, the esteemed Congregationalist minister and one-time president of Harvard College, admitted that the trials of the working person were so great that he or she was entitled to the momentary salvation of liquor. It is “a good creature of God,” Mather believed, and in small amounts would enable the builder or farmer or smithy to regain his strength and carry on with his tasks, thereby serving his Maker in a suitable manner.

But beer and wine and whiskey did not just revive the tiring toiler; in some cases they compensated him. Like tobacco, the subject of this author’s next historical volume, alcoholic beverages were a form of currency in most of the colonies at one time or another, their status acknowledged by all and attempts to devalue it few, far between, and unsuccessful. One such attempt was made in Boston near the midpoint of the seventeenth century. The town fathers, believing that their employees labored with insufficient efficacy when they drank their pay, decided henceforth to remunerate in coin. Whereupon the employees came to a decision of their own. They would no longer work. It may have been the first American strike. It did not last long, however; the town fathers soon relented, and wages returned to liquid form.

Shopping. A storekeeper would often stand a keg of rum or whiskey near the front door of his establishment, a drinking cup attached to it by a chain. Customers and passersby alike were invited to help themselves. A large purchase almost always brought an invitation for seconds, and

seconds often led to thirds, which, in turn, led to further, and sometimes totally unnecessary, purchases. The keg was, in many cases, as important to the success of a business as the products or services that it offered. It was a sign that the businessman valued his customer, and that the latter's preferences would be met.

Visiting. It was not considered hospitable in early America to allow a neighbor to drop in without offering him some refreshment. Sometimes, it has been noted, the neighbor would stop by for no other reason than the welcoming beverages. He would be offered a few sips by way of greeting and another few for farewell; in between the host might drink to his guest's health and the guest to his host's and the two of them might go back and forth like this so many times, each drinking to the other's health, that neither was feeling healthy anymore.

Soldiering. During the Revolutionary War, George Washington insisted on alcohol for his men, and once, when a shipment was delayed, he wrote an anguished letter to the president of the Continental Congress. "The benefits arising from the moderate use of strong Liquor," Washington stated, "have been experienced in all Armies and are not to be disputed."

Nor were they. Booze was dispensed daily to the colonial fighting forces, the usual amount being four ounces, although twice as much was handed out during the horrible winter of 1777–78 at Valley Forge, the men drinking for warmth or numbness or, if they were lucky, both. There and elsewhere, the rations were doled out without delay, and it seems, according to journals of the time, that many soldiers talked about their beverages and the blessings they conferred as much as they talked about their foe. For instance, it was said of William Bacon, a captain during the French and Indian War, that he "showed more interest in recording the arrival of a new supply of rum than in what 'sacrifices' attended the troops once they were settled down in the wilderness."

By the time the war ended, there were 2,579 registered distilleries in the United States, with thirst enough in the newly created nation to support even more.

Marrying. A punch made from Jamaican spirits was commonly served at weddings, and after the bowl had been emptied, the men would sometimes throw their coats aside, roll up their shirtsleeves, and form themselves into a line, there to begin racing one another under the spell of alcohol-induced exuberance. The winner, he who sprinted the fastest while stumbling and weaving the least, was presented with a bottle of

wine, which he might well decide to uncork immediately so that he could get a head start on the next spell.

Less commonly, and perhaps with the effects of Jamaican spirits intensified by beer, cider, and rum, the groom's friends might steal the bride, hiding her in the church basement or nearby woods and forcing the groom to find her before he could officially begin connubial life. Since the groom was as inebriated as the friends by this time, his attempts to locate the young woman were likely to turn into a kind of floor show; he would search in impossible places, utter rollicking oaths, trip over his own feet more often than he would manipulate them correctly. Those in attendance would hoot and whoop and laugh and cheer. Then they would fill up their glasses again, and almost surely do the same to his.

In truth, it might have been alcohol that contributed to the bride's appearance at the altar in the first place, for it has been said that the eighteenth century was a time in the American colonies "when kisses and drams set the virgins aflame."

Burying. Men and women from all stations of life were laid to rest with portions of rum in their caskets, a little something to ease the passage from one world to the next. Even paupers were so equipped, the thought being that a few postmortem belts would give them hope that the afterlife would be a more congenial experience for them than the one so recently terminated. But, understandably, most of the liquor at a funeral went to the mourners, who, still in the throes of mortality, found themselves chugging it in such quantity that there were times when they could no longer recall the cause of their bereavement or the extent to which it affected them. At the 1678 funeral of David Porter in Hartford, Connecticut, to mention but one case, the chugging went on for hours. The winding sheet and coffin, reported a man who stood at graveside, cost thirty shillings, but the hooch consumed by the rest of those at the service added up to more than twice as much. And when, in the same year in Boston, the wife of a noted Puritan minister passed away, more than fifty gallons of fine wine were imbibed by grieving attendees.

It was because of incidents like this that a noted Virginian, approaching the end of his life a few years later, gave his friends some instructions. "The debauched drinking used at burials, tending to the dishonor of God and religion, my will is that no strong drink be provided or spent at my burial."

Learning. In some colonial schools, the books were put aside for a few minutes each morning and afternoon so that the children, who might not have gotten enough liquor upon awakening, could be given a few more tastes to revive their flagging attention. The teachers joined in, just to be polite. The practice was considered as important a part of the classroom ritual as the rod and reader. When the students left for home, the teachers would often lock the door behind them and raise a glass in private.

Booze was no less important in the world of higher education, where students and faculty alike tended to satisfy their thirsts in greater quantity. Harvard, for a time, had its own brewery, eagerly patronized by all within the school's orbit, as a result of which lectures sometimes became unintelligible and commencement exercises so boisterous that rules had to be put into effect to limit "the Excesses, Immoralities and Disorders." There were no rules, however, to limit the brewery's production, and the occasional attempt by nondrinkers to do so was met with derision, even hostility. In fact, early in the college's history, some students complained to administrators that even without rules the production was insufficient; they were often deprived, sometimes "wanting beer betwixt brewings a week and a half together."

Something had to be done. Something was. Master Nathaniel Eaton and his wife, who supervised all food and beverage in college precincts for a time, were fired.

Adjudicating. A spectator at a trial would, if so moved, bring a bottle of cider to the courtroom with him. He would seat himself on a bench in back, take a sip, and pass the bottle up to the plaintiff. The plaintiff would empty a bit of the vessel himself, then forward it to his lawyer, who would, in turn, gulp down his own share of the pick-me-up and send the remainder along to the defendant. From the defendant, the cider was relayed to the defendant's counsel and from him perhaps even to the judge and jury, who were as likely to finish off the beverage and toss the bottle away as they were to return it to the spectator who had started it on its journey in the first place. "If the foreman of the jury became mellow in his cups," writes W. J. Rorabaugh, the foremost scholar of early American tipping, "the defendant stood an excellent chance for acquittal."

This being so, it seems that the distinguishing characteristic of colonial justice was probably not blindness as much as double vision.

Governing. According to some historians, town meetings would on

occasion begin with a slug or two, the purpose being to focus the mind on the business at hand. If attendance was compulsory at these events, which seems to have been the case in at least a few places, a person who missed one without good reason was likely to be fined a certain amount of whiskey. The assessment would be added to the supply of spirits on hand at the next gathering, and the miscreant, assuming he showed up then, was welcome to join his fellow townsmen in a few nips before the session came to order. Or, if there were too many assessments, *disorder*.

Celebrating nationhood. In New York City, when the Constitution was ratified, “a brewer’s wagon carrying a three-hundred-gallon cask of ale topped by a live Bacchus” rode through the streets. The banner on the side of it read: “Ale, proper drink for Americans.”

Public gathering. In some communities, it was thought to be good luck to seal a full bottle of liquor into the cornerstone of a new church, school, or other communal building when a ceremony was held at the start of construction. There were, however, always a few who complained of the waste, insisting that an empty bottle, whose contents now resided in the stomachs of a few appreciative citizens, would do just as well. In Philadelphia, anyone who made a bid at an auction was rewarded with a drink. And at almost every other assembly of the time, from barn-raising to woodcutting bee to groundbreaking for a new road, from harvesting to husking to quilting, a vat of alcoholic beverages, prominently placed, served as the hearth, and bonhomie radiated outward from it in waves. No vat, no waves. This was a lesson that George Washington learned as a young man, and it enabled him, after a shaky start, to salvage what turned out to be a notable career in politics.

In his early twenties, he was an even more imposing figure than he came to be in later years, although the later years were when the painters and sculptors caught up to him, insisting that he pose for them and thereby make his immortality visible. He was “straight as an Indian,” said his friend George Mercer, “measuring six feet two inches in his stockings and weighing 175 pounds. . . . In conversation he looks you full in the face, is deliberate, deferential, and engaging. His demeanor is at all times composed and dignified. His movements and features are graceful, his walk majestic, and he is a speeding horseman.”

He was, in other words, a charismatic man in a critical time, an ideal candidate for public office.

Washington made his first attempt at such a position in 1755, at the age of twenty-three, seeking a seat in the Virginia Assembly. Although he would never express such a sentiment publicly, he believed that, despite his youth, he was the best man for the job in terms of both ability and attitude. The voters, however, did not; they rejected Washington overwhelmingly. There were several reasons for the defeat, but none more important than the fact that, a year or so earlier, the aspiring legislator had insulted the very people he hoped would elect him.

The French and Indian War was raging at the time, the two title groups allied against British territorial interests in the New World, hoping at the least to stop further expansion, at most to reclaim lands that the colonists had already usurped and settled. Washington distinguished himself quickly, forcing a French evacuation of Fort Duquesne, within the boundaries of today's city of Pittsburgh, and leading his men with a daring and grasp of strategy far beyond what could be expected from one with such limited military experience. Word of his triumph spread quickly; all who knew the young soldier assumed a bright future.

Shortly afterward, there was a lull in the fighting and Washington returned to his home colony of Virginia, hoping to rest, tend to his farm, and renew some friendships. It was not to be. Through one of those friends he learned that the nearby county of Frederick was about to be attacked by small, guerrilla-like bands of Native Americans. Some of them were already on the march, and were expected to join forces with others in a day or so, pooling their weapons and their wills. They would attack, Washington's friend told him, in less than a week.

The young soldier made his way to the county's largest town, Winchester, and not only warned the residents of the danger but urged them to resist it, to take up arms and hold their ground. He even offered to lead the local militia into battle himself, despite the fact that the jurisdiction was not his. He spoke to the men as inspirationally as he could, talking of duty and courage and responsibility to future generations.

Winchester wanted none of it. The militia colonel told Washington that his men had already heard rumors of the impending assault, and had decided on flight, not fight. Only if the natives cut off their routes of escape would they put up resistance, and most of them assumed it would not be enough, that the aggressors would overpower them and

they would die with their families. It was not what they wanted, they said to their colonel, but if it was what fate had in store, so be it.

Washington was incensed. What kind of soldiers *were* these? He berated them for their pessimism, their cowardice, their unwillingness to act in their own behalf; it was a monologue of uncharacteristic severity and passion. Biographer James Thomas Flexner tells what happened next:

Washington then went to a stable and tried to impress [the word, in this context, means to compel service for military purposes] a horse. The owner barred his way. He drew his sword and took the horse. Immediately, he was surrounded by a mob of inhabitants who, wishing to keep their animals for their own personal escapes, offered to “blow out my brains.”

Washington managed to “stare them down,” however, and rode out of Winchester as fast as he could, cursing the mob of inhabitants for their lack of fortitude.

But when the next election came along, the mob found itself with an unexpected chance to get even, for there on the ballot, next to the names of people that Winchesterites either admired or tolerated, was a single name they had lately come to revile: George Washington. For abusing them verbally, they avenged themselves electorally. Hugh West won the assembly seat that year with 271 votes. Thomas Swearingen came in second with 270. Washington finished a distant and discredited fourth with 40, which perhaps comprised the total number of Frederick Countians unfamiliar with the details of the Winchester incident. Washington was bitterly disappointed; he had not realized how deeply the feelings against him were running. He was also determined not to fail the next time.

Two years later, and two years wiser, Washington stood again for the Virginia Assembly, relying on the passage of time and the growth of his reputation to have eased hard feelings, and on rum, punch, cider, wine, and beer to have persuaded those who still *did* resent him to let bygones be bygones. Washington saw to it that 144 gallons of these beverages, in all their glorious potency, were delivered to as many polling places as possible, and he further made sure that supporters of his were stationed alongside the beverages to invite voters to indulge before making up their minds about the candidates.

Dip your mug, friend, one would say.