

Just who were those Washingtonians?

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Editor's Note: In the *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, Tradition 10 speaks of The Washingtonian Society. A copy of the society's pamphlet was recently found on the internet. Frequent *Unity* contributor Bill F. compares the Washingtonians and Alcoholics Anonymous in the following article.

"...that the society, as such, was to recognize no creed of religion, nor party in politics; and that neither political nor religious action of any kind, should ever be introduced into the society's operations. Personal abstinence from all intoxicating drinks was to be the basis, and *only requisite* of membership.

"Moreover they determined that the regular meetings of the society should be meetings for the detail of personal experience, and not for debates, lectures and speeches...."

Sounds like a rough draft of the AA Preamble to me, but it's not. The quotes were lifted from a text titled *The Foundation, Progress and Principles of the WASHINGTON TEMPERANCE SOCIETY OF BALTIMORE*, written in 1842, two years after the group, known as the Washingtonians, formed.

The 30-page publication gave background on the temperance organization and outlined its program. Although written in the formal, flowery style of the era, the publication sparks comparisons to Alcoholics Anonymous' principles and stories told around the tables of the Fellowship.

Six drinking pals met the night of April 5, 1840, at their favorite Baltimore tavern and resolved "they would drink no more of the poisonous draught forever, and that to carry out their resolutions, they would form a society with a pledge to that effect, and bind themselves under it to each other for life."

According to the text, the six felt the movement would be "great and important" so it needed a "great name." Thus a Baltimore temperance group became associated with the nearby nation's capital.

While the writer described the six co-founders as neither outcasts nor sots, he recounted that

"They knew (their drinking) was wrong. They saw the evil; they felt it; they lamented it; and times without number did they promise wife and friend and self that they would drink no more. They were sincere. They meant to be sober. But at some fatal hour they would take *one glass again, just one glass*; and they found themselves as powerless and debased as ever."

Similarities with A.A. found in the text include:

Not drinking should be primary.

Don't lecture or talk down to prospective members.

Steer clear of politics and religion in meeting discussion.

"A reformed man has the best access to a drunkard's mind and heart, because he best knows, and can enter into all a drunkard's feelings."

"Our true motto should be: action, constant untiring action."

"The Washington Society occupies no offensive ground; because she occupies neutral ground."

The group was open to all on the "one common platform of total abstinence."

Differences included the Washingtonians' efforts as "missionaries," recruiting members; no mention of the need for a spiritual or psychic change to recover; allowing non-members to be actively involved in their meetings; a lack of humility evidenced by the society's need for a "great" name and its founders' public postures; and the signing of a pledge, which reads:

"We, whose names are annexed, desirous of forming a society for our mutual benefit, and to guard against a pernicious practice, which is injurious to our health, standing and families – we do pledge ourselves as gentlemen, not to drink any spirituous or malt liquors, wine or cider."

Sadly, the Washingtonians fell apart after a brief period of phenomenal success. In *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* the society is cited as the "cornerstone" for the Tenth Tradition. The *12 and 12* notes:

"The Washingtonian Society, a movement among alcoholics which started in Baltimore a century ago, almost discovered the answer to alcoholism. At first, the society was composed entirely of alcoholics trying to help one another. The early members foresaw that they should dedicate themselves to this sole aim. In many respects, the Washingtonians were akin to A.A. of today. Their membership passed the hundred thousand mark. Had they been left to themselves, and had they stuck to their one goal, they might have found the rest of the answer. But this didn't happen. Instead, the Washingtonians permitted politicians and reformers, both alcoholic and non-alcoholic, to use the society for their own purposes. Abolition of slavery, for example, was a stormy political issue then. Soon, Washingtonian speakers violently and publicly took sides on the question. Maybe the society could have survived the abolition controversy, but it didn't have a chance from the moment it determined to reform America's drinking habits. When the Washingtonians became temperance crusaders, within a very few years they had completely lost their effectiveness in helping alcoholics. "The lesson to be learned from the Washingtonians was not overlooked by Alcoholics Anonymous. As we surveyed the wreck of that movement, early A.A. members resolved to keep our Society out of public controversy."

In writing the *12 and 12*, Bill W. pointed out how A.A. learned from the Washingtonians' failure. How much of the Washingtonians' program may have contributed to A.A. principles and practices is unknown. However, in a speech to the 1955 International Convention in St. Louis, Bill said:

"Some of us may think that, structurally speaking, we are quite unique. But this is not entirely so. Our principles of recovery are borrowed, and so are most of our structural ideas. In A.A. we can see many of the means by which men and women over the centuries have tried to unite themselves, and each of these techniques of association has its assets and its liabilities."

-- Bill F

