



# PROHIBITION ERA DINNER PARTY

## OVERVIEW

Many notable Americans played many roles during the Prohibition era, from government officials and social reformers to bootleggers and crime bosses. Each person had his or her own reasons for supporting or opposing Prohibition. What stances did these individuals take? What legal, moral, and ethical questions did they have to wrestle with? Why were their actions important? And how might a "dinner party" attended by them bring some of these questions to the surface?



### *related activities*

#### PROHIBITION PICTIONARY

Use your skills to get classmates to identify and define which Prohibition era term you draw.

#### SMART BOARD ACTIVITY

Learn about Prohibition through informational slides and activities using the SMART platform.

#### WHO SAID IT? QUOTE SORTING

Learn about the differences between the Founders' and Progressives' beliefs about government by sorting quotes from each group.

#### THE RISE & FALL OF PROHIBITION ESSAY

Learn about the background of the 18th Amendment, the players in the movement, and its eventual repeal.



# TEACHER NOTES

## LEARNING GOALS

Students will:

- Understand the significance of historical figures during the Prohibition era.
- Understand the connections between different groups during the Prohibition era.
- Evaluate the tension that sometimes exists between following the law and following one's conscience.

## HOMEWORK

- A. After students complete the activity, have them write an essay about their historical figure's role in Prohibition and why it was significant.
- B. Choose other historical figures not on the list from the Prohibition era and have students research their significance. Students can then report their findings to the class through a presentation using visual aids.
- C. Have students sort the list of historical figures into categories of their own choosing (Organized Crime, Progressive, Anti-Prohibition) and then explain why they put each person into the category.

## EXTENSION

The son of Roy Olmstead said about his father: "My dad thought that Prohibition was an immoral law. So he had no compunction [misgivings or guilt] about breaking that law." Discuss the statement as a large group. Then have students respond to the statement in a short essay. They should consider the following questions:

- How can you know if a law is immoral?
- Should you feel misgivings for violating laws you believe are immoral?
- What tension can sometimes exist between following the law and following one's beliefs?
- Americans including Henry David Thoreau and Martin Luther King, Jr. have stated that not only is there no duty to obey unjust laws, but there is actually a *duty to disobey* them. Would that idea apply in the case of Roy Olmstead (who was known as a "good" bootlegger because he did not sell low-quality or potentially poisonous alcohol, and avoided crimes associated with large-scale bootlegging)? Explain why or why not.
- What avenues are available for citizens who want to change unjust laws?

# PROHIBITION ERA DINNER PARTY

## ACTIVITY DIRECTIONS

- A. From the cards that follow, assign each student a role as an important person from the Prohibition era.
- B. Divide students into small groups, making sure no one should have the same role in each group. The students should take on the identity of their historical figure and learn more about the other historical figures in their group.
- C. Have students complete the Activity Guide as "dinner" progresses.

**VARIATION:** Include some character cards from the American Heroes activity in the Being an American curriculum available at [Teachers.BillofRightsInstitute.org](http://Teachers.BillofRightsInstitute.org). For example, what might a dinner conversation look like between Thomas Jefferson and Eliot Ness? Between George Washington and Al Capone? Have students prepare some discussion questions for historical figures ahead of time.

### SUGGESTED GROUPINGS

Capone  
Ness  
Nation  
Sunday

Olmstead  
Willebrandt  
Thompson  
Wheeler

Willard  
Sabin  
Anthony  
Hobson

Roosevelt  
Du Pont  
Barnum  
Russell  
Bryan

*American Heroes: Past and Present* is available  
at [Teachers.BillofRightsInstitute.org](http://Teachers.BillofRightsInstitute.org)

# PROHIBITION ERA DINNER PARTY

## ACTIVITY GUIDE

**DIRECTIONS:** Choose a new identity as an individual from the Prohibition era. Research the life of this person and answer these questions.

1. What is your person's name and historical significance?
2. What was this person's role leading up to, during, or after the Prohibition era?
3. Did their beliefs about temperance or Prohibition change over time? If so, how?
4. How is this person similar to you? How is he or she different?

After learning more about your historical figure, you will participate in a "dinner party" where all of the guests take on the identity of their historical figure. Discuss your answers to the above questions with the other guests and learn about the other historical figures in the group.

---

After greeting your fellow dinner guests, fill their names in the spaces below, and write at least one question your "character" would have for him/her.

HISTORICAL FIGURE: \_\_\_\_\_

HISTORICAL FIGURE: \_\_\_\_\_

YOUR QUESTION:

YOUR QUESTION:

HISTORICAL FIGURE: \_\_\_\_\_

YOUR QUESTION:

## FOOD FOR THOUGHT

As you talk to the other participants in character, think about these questions:

- Are there connections between the historical figures at your table? Why are these connections significant to the Prohibition era?
- Would your historical figure agree or disagree with the others at the table? Why or why not?
- How has your historical figure claimed a place in history?

# HISTORICAL FIGURES



## AL CAPONE

Al Capone was born in 1899 to an immigrant family in Brooklyn, New York. He earned his nickname “Scarface” after a brawl with a guest at the saloon where he worked. Capone’s gangster boss sent him to Chicago after he murdered two people in New York and put a third in the hospital. Working closely with a mentor, he was soon heading up a number of illegal businesses. Between 1925 and 1930, the income from Capone’s speakeasies, gambling houses, distilleries, and brothels was topping \$100 million a year. He protected his interests with murder—his men would gun down rivals and enemies—while Capone always had an alibi. Despite the many killings he was involved in, Capone was never tried for the crime of murder.

In 1930, he became Chicago’s “Public Enemy Number One.” President Herbert Hoover launched a double attack on Capone with the Bureau of Prohibition on one front, and the Bureau of Internal Revenue on the other. In 1932, Capone was convicted of tax evasion and sentenced to 11 years in federal prison. He became one of Alcatraz’s most famous inmates, conducting himself as a model prisoner.

The reputation Chicago gained for illegal activities during Prohibition is largely due to Capone. He has come to symbolize the collapse of the rule of law during the Prohibition era. After his release from Alcatraz in 1939, Capone’s health was in decline due to neurosyphilis. He spent the rest of his life at his estate in Florida where he died in 1947.



## FRANCES WILLARD

Frances Willard was born to educator parents in New York in 1839. She grew up in Wisconsin where she and her brother were educated by their mother. After graduating from college, she took leadership roles in education and began to turn her attention towards promoting temperance and the rights of women. In 1874, she co-founded the Women's Christian Temperance Union, whose mission was to create a "sober and pure world." She headed the organization from 1879 until her death.

Willard embraced the Progressive idea that government should work to bring about conditions that would elevate men's characters. She said, "The small meannesses bred by the law of competition corrode men's character as rust spoils steel." As President of the WCTU, Willard broadened the mission of the organization. The group advocated for reform on a number of issues including worker's rights, prison, school reform, and international peace. It lobbied legislatures to pass laws keeping the Sabbath Day holy, arguing that activities such as golf should be prohibited on Sundays. Believing that immigrants were more prone to alcoholism, the group supported Ellis Island's Americanization efforts.

Unlike other feminists of the time who argued women deserved the right to vote because of their natural equality with men, Willard argued for the vote because men and women were fundamentally different. Women, Willard believed, were morally superior to men. Therefore, she reasoned, giving women the right to vote would help cleanse society of its ills.

The WCTU is an active international organization to this day, and works in several countries including the United States in support of laws against alcohol, tobacco,



## ELIOT NESS

Eliot Ness was born in Chicago in 1903 to a family of Norwegian immigrants. After graduating from the University of Chicago with degrees in business and law, he became an investigator for a credit company before returning for a Master's degree in criminology.

Ness headed up a team of investigators at the Bureau of Prohibition charged with bringing down Al Capone. Battling corruption within the Bureau itself, he whittled a group of 51 investigators to an elite team of 10. They worked tirelessly and at great personal risk. They used wiretaps to listen in on conversations and trailed his men in their vehicles. Within six months, Ness's team had shut down 19 illegal breweries. When rumors spread that he and his men had refused bribes from Capone (bribes greater than the men's annual salaries) they earned the nickname "The Untouchables."

Though Ness himself was not directly involved with his capture, Capone was eventually convicted on tax evasion charges. After Capone's conviction, Ness continued his fight against violations of the Volstead Act. When Prohibition ended in 1934, he worked to battle labor racketeers, organized crime, and a corrupt police force in Cleveland, Ohio.



## ROY OLMSTEAD

Roy Olmstead was born on a Nebraska farm in 1886. He moved to Seattle to work in a shipyard in 1904 and joined the police force three years later. In 1916, Washington became one of 23 “dry” states enforcing laws against alcohol. As a police officer, Olmstead learned about the business of illegally importing alcohol. By 1919, he began illegally importing alcohol himself. When the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment was passed and a more stringent federal law was enforced, Olmstead was caught bringing in Canadian whisky by Prohibition Bureau agents. He was fined and fired from the police force; he then turned to bootlegging full time.

Olmstead regularly paid off policemen and city officials, and soon his bootlegging business was earning him more money in one week than he would have earned in 20 years on the force. Because his whiskey was always top-quality and he forbade his men from carrying weapons, he became known in Seattle as “The Good Bootlegger.” Olmstead’s son would later say about him, “My dad thought that Prohibition was an immoral law. So he had no compunction about breaking that law.”

Federal agents, suspecting Olmstead of violating the Volstead Act, placed wiretaps to listen in on conversations in his home and his office. They installed the eavesdropping devices on the streets without getting a judge-approved search warrant. Olmstead was convicted and sentenced to four years of hard labor. Olmstead challenged his conviction on the basis that the wiretaps used to gain evidence against him were illegal under the Fourth and Fifth Amendments. The Supreme Court ruled against Olmstead in *Olmstead v. U.S.* (1928). The Court held that a wiretap was not a “search and seizure” under the Fourth Amendment because phone conversations were no different from casual conversations overheard in a public place. The Court also held that since Olmstead was not forced to give a confession, Fifth Amendment protection from self-incrimination did not apply.

After serving his sentence, Olmstead was granted a full presidential pardon by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1935. The *Olmstead* decision was overturned in the 1967 case of *Katz v. U.S.*, which held that warrants were required to wiretap public payphones, and introduced the idea of “reasonable expectations of privacy” into Fourth Amendment law.



## FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT

Franklin D. Roosevelt, born in New York in 1882, was involved in politics from an early age. He served as a state senator, as Assistant Secretary of the Navy under President Woodrow Wilson, and as Governor of New York. He originally supported Prohibition, but changed his mind after he saw the problems associated with enforcement. He ran for president in 1932, promising a “New Deal” for the American people, including his support for a repeal of Prohibition.

The President has no official role in the constitutional amendment process. Campaigning for president in 1932, Roosevelt asserted his personal belief in temperance as a cardinal virtue, but criticized the enforcement of Prohibition. He agreed that the “use of intoxicants has no place in this new mechanized civilization of ours,” but argued that the enforcing of Prohibition had been, in most parts of the country, a “complete and tragic failure.” Further, he explained, legalizing alcohol would provide more tax revenue for the federal government.

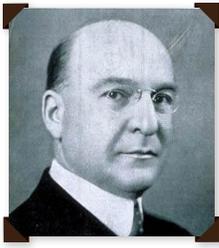
In March of 1933, Roosevelt signed an amendment to the Volstead Act permitting the manufacture and sale of beers and light wines that fell below a new, higher legal definition of “intoxicating” beverages. On December 5, 1933, the 21<sup>st</sup> Amendment was ratified, and Roosevelt issued a proclamation announcing the repeal of Prohibition.



## PAULINE SABIN

Pauline Sabin was born to a wealthy, politically active family in New York family in 1887. Her father and grandfather were cabinet members in earlier administrations. She married into a politically active family as well – her husband was the treasurer of the Association Against the Prohibition Amendment (AAPA). In 1921, she founded the Women’s National Republican Club, and in 1928, she worked for the election of presidential candidate Herbert Hoover, despite feeling uncertain about his stance on Prohibition. Originally in favor of Prohibition, Sabin began to question it as she saw its effects and the growth of government it caused. In 1929, when she decided that President Hoover had failed to deliver on a promise to re-evaluate Prohibition, she resigned from the Republican National Committee and founded the Women’s Organization for National Prohibition Reform (WONPR).

The WONPR borrowed many of the arguments used in favor of Prohibition that had been used by the group Women’s Christian Temperance Union to argue for its repeal. Sabin argued that the lawlessness spurred by Prohibition was a threat to families. She believed the idea that Prohibition laws would eliminate peoples’ desire to drink was dangerous. She said, “Children are growing up with a total lack of respect for the Constitution and the law .... The young see the law broken at home and upon the street. Can we expect them to be lawful?” She also asserted that repeal of Prohibition would return control over personal decisions where it belonged – families.



## PIERRE S. DU PONT

Pierre du Pont was born on his family's estate in Delaware in 1870 and graduated from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology with a degree in chemistry when he was 20. After first going into the family's business, he became Chairman of General Motors as well in 1915.

Du Pont became active in the Association Against the Prohibition Amendment (AAPA) in 1925. He was concerned about the growth in government he saw during World War I and the Progressive Era. He saw that the result of Prohibition had been more alcohol abuse, not less. It had created opportunities for organized crime. The federal government had lost a revenue stream from excise taxes on liquor. Du Pont was concerned that the new income tax, which had been ushered in with the passage of the 16th Amendment in 1913, as well as a new tax on inheritances, would damage American industry.

Like some other Americans, Du Pont found himself at odds with both major parties during and after Prohibition. He broke from the Republican Party in 1928 due to its stance on Prohibition and was also at odds with the Democratic Party and President Roosevelt because of his philosophical disagreement with New Deal policies. He helped found the American Liberty League in 1934, a group which opposed the New Deal and emphasized economic freedom.

After repeal, Congress did cut taxes for workers making less than \$3,000 per year, while raising taxes on the wealthy. In 1936, Du Pont expressed his wish that he had focused more attention on repealing the 16th Amendment, which empowered the federal government to tax incomes.



## MABEL WALKER WILLEBRANDT

Mabel Walker Willebrandt was born in Kansas in 1889. After graduating from college she worked as a teacher while attending law school at night. After finishing her law degree, she went on to earn a Master's degree as well. In 1921 she was appointed to the position of Assistant Attorney General of the United States, the second woman to hold that post. The highest ranking woman in the federal government at that time, she was responsible for prosecuting, among other crimes, violations of the Volstead Act.

Though Willebrandt personally opposed Prohibition, she carried out her duties to enforce the law. "Give me the authority and let me have my pick of 300 men and I'll make this country as dry as it is humanly possible to get it," she said. Her commitment to upholding the unpopular Volstead Act did not always win her friends, particularly when she exposed political interference and weak enforcement in state governments and federal agencies. She had little patience for the men who ran the Prohibition Bureau. She helped oversee growth in the federal government's ability to investigate and punish criminals. The first federal prison for women was established under her administration, and her office oversaw close to 50,000 prosecutions for Volstead Act violations. She argued more than 40 cases before the Supreme Court. All of these achievements made her known as the "First Lady of the Law."

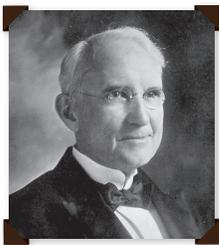
She campaigned for Herbert Hoover in 1928, earning the nickname "Prohibition Portia" from the opposition. She was fired by Hoover in 1929 because her outspoken ways had her in the headlines too much.



## SUSAN B. ANTHONY

Susan B. Anthony grew up as a Quaker and believed that drinking was a sin. She was a leader of the Daughters of Temperance group in the state of New York. With Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Anthony formed the Women's State Temperance Society in 1853. The goal of the Society was to get the state legislature to pass a law limiting liquor sales, but the state wouldn't accept its petition because most of the signatures were from women and children. Anthony became determined to gain women's suffrage so that women's views would be taken seriously.

Anthony published a women's rights journal titled *The Revolution*, but she refused to allow advertisements from patent medicines that contained alcohol or opiates. Anthony and Stanton ended up resigning from the Women's State Temperance Society because other members believed they were too concerned with women's rights and not with temperance.

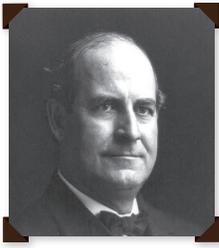


## HOWARD HYDE RUSSELL

Howard Hyde Russell was a lawyer who gave up his practice to become a minister. He was adamantly against alcohol and saloons. He founded the Anti-Saloon League (ASL) in Ohio in 1893. In 1895, the ASL became a national organization and Russell was elected as superintendent.

The ASL called itself "The Church in Action Against the Saloon." Russell wrote, "In the awed silence of my heart, I was compelled to believe the statement was true, "The ASL movement was begun by Almighty God."

After the turn of the twentieth century, he formed the Lincoln Lee Legion which promoted temperance by having young people sign pledges to abstain from alcohol use. Russell raised five million dollars to support the prohibition movement. Russell and the ASL claimed a victory with the ratification of the 18th Amendment in 1919. Even after the repeal of Prohibition 13 years later, Russell continued to fight for prohibition of alcohol until his death in 1946.



## WILLIAM JENNINGS BRYAN

William Jennings Bryan was born in Illinois and moved to Nebraska in 1887 where he practiced law. Running on a populist platform, he was the first Democrat ever elected from Nebraska to the House of Representatives. He lost his bid for Senate in 1894, and became editor of the Democratic newspaper, the *Omaha World-Herald*.

The most famous orator of his day, Bryan was a major player in progressive politics. He served as a member of Congress, Secretary of State under President Woodrow Wilson, and ran for president three times. Bryan originally remained neutral in the prohibition debate, but by 1910, he had come out in favor of it. He campaigned throughout the country for the passage of the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment. He also supported the other progressive amendments – the 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup>, and 19<sup>th</sup>.

Bryan was also very concerned about the teaching of evolution, calling it “consummately dangerous.” He argued against Clarence Darrow for a literal interpretation of the Bible and in opposition to the teaching of evolution in what became known as the Scopes Monkey Trial. He died five days after that trial ended.



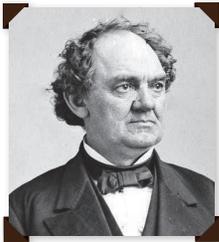
## CARRY NATION

After her first husband, Charles Gloyd, died from alcoholism in 1868, Carry Nation began to vehemently fight for Prohibition of alcohol. She married David Nation in 1874, and they moved to Kansas where Carry started a local chapter of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union. To protest bars and saloons that served alcohol, Nation resorted to vandalism and destruction of property, using a hatchet to smash the establishments. Nation created a new organization called the Prohibition Federation, published a newspaper called *The Hatchet*, and sold miniature hatchets as souvenirs. Though she brought the cause a lot of publicity, she had little to no impact on the main events of prohibition.



## WILLIAM ASHLEY SUNDAY

Billy Sunday started out as a baseball player in the National League, but he left for the evangelical Christian ministry in the early 1890s. Sunday became a champion of temperance and used his sermons and revivals to promote prohibition. "I'll fight them till hell freezes over. Then I'll buy a pair of skates and fight them on ice!" he said at a University of Michigan rally. One of his most famous sermons was titled "Get on the Water Wagon" in which he preached against the liquor industry. After the 18th Amendment passed, Sunday continued to work to support the movement. Even after its repeal, Sunday called for Prohibition to be reintroduced.



## P.T. BARNUM

Barnum is best known as the founder of what became the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus, and for statements like "Nobody ever lost a dollar by underestimating the taste of the American public." He was also a staunch supporter of temperance. At Barnum's American Museum, an 1849 melodrama titled *The Drunkard, or the Fallen Saved* showed the evils of alcohol to the audience in the Lecture Room. No alcohol was allowed in the American Museum, and Barnum would even require those patrons who left for a nearby saloon during intermission to pay the admission fee again in order to return for the second act. Barnum lectured widely on temperance throughout the mid-nineteenth century.

Barnum also became involved in politics. Originally a Democrat, he switched to the Republican Party in support of Abraham Lincoln. He served two terms in the Connecticut legislature. He ran for a seat in the U.S. Congress but was unsuccessful.



## ELIZA THOMPSON

Thompson became involved in the temperance movement after her son died from an alcohol addiction. In December 1873, "Mother" Thompson and 75 other women protested at bars and saloons in her hometown in Ohio. They went to each establishment, knelt in the snow, and prayed for its closure. The group also demanded that saloon owners sign a pledge to stop serving alcohol. Within days, nine of 13 establishments had closed their doors. The movement spread across the state of Ohio and the rest of the country. Thompson was elected chairman of the Women's Crusade at a state convention in 1874, and many members of that group went on to join the Woman's Christian Temperance Union.



## RICHMOND P. HOBSON

Hobson was a United States Navy officer and served as a U.S. Representative from Alabama from 1907-1915. In 1914, Hobson introduced a bill that would call for an amendment banning alcohol in the United States. The measure received a majority of votes in each house, but it did not receive the two-thirds super-majority necessary to be passed. The Anti-Saloon League was watching, and learned which congressional seats they would need to target to get what would be the 18th Amendment passed a few years later.

Upon leaving Congress, Hobson continued his crusade against alcohol and drugs and became known as "The Father of American Prohibition." Hobson wrote several books on the subject, gave speeches on radio programs, and lobbied Congress for more laws to restrict drugs and alcohol. Hobson was the ASL's highest-paid speaker and he founded his own organization, the International Narcotic Education Association.



## WAYNE B. WHEELER

Wayne Wheeler was born in Brookfield, Ohio and graduated from Oberlin College. He first became involved in the temperance movement during his college days when he heard Howard Hyde Russell speak. Russell recruited the young college graduate, and Wheeler became one of the first full-time employees of the Anti-Saloon League in 1893.

Wheeler moved up through the ranks of the organization, becoming superintendent in 1902. When it became clear that the ASL needed legal counsel, Wheeler went to law school. As an attorney, Wheeler handled hundreds of dry law cases. He headed up efforts to defeat candidates who refused to support prohibition. After one particularly dramatic campaign victory, he declared, “Never again will any political party ignore the protests of the church and the moral forces of the state.”

Wheeler’s greatest notoriety came from his work as the ASL’s chief lobbyist. He became famous for his use of pressure politics, keeping note card files of politicians to target. He used mass media to his advantage, striking fear into politicians worried about keeping their offices. The editors of the *New York World* called him “the legislative bully before whom the Senate of the United States sits up and begs.” He was instrumental in helping to draft the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment and the Volstead Act.

By 1926 Wheeler was at the center of controversy when some in the ASL questioned the League’s spending in some political campaigns. Suffering from ill health, he died at his Michigan vacation home the following year. Upon his death, the *Washington Post* wrote that “no other private citizen of the United States has left such an impression upon national history.” The *New York Herald Tribune* wrote, “Without Wayne B. Wheeler’s generalship it is more than likely we should never have had the Eighteenth Amendment.”