

Prohibition

In Fitzgerald’s novel, Jay Gatsby is a mythic figure in the Long Island landscape. All-night parties at his mansion include servants, famous guests, live music, and enough alcohol to make each event unpredictable. While Gatsby’s occupation is a mystery, some speculate that he must have questionable associations in order to obtain such generous amounts of wealth and liquor.

In January 1920, Congress enacted the 18th Amendment to the Constitution in order to control the abuse of alcohol and limit political benefits that emerged from the liquor business. This amendment stated that it was no longer legal to sell, manufacture, or transport alcohol for the purpose of consumption. While owning and drinking alcohol was legal, one could not import alcohol from another country, nor could one transport alcohol anywhere within the United States. Prohibition was intended to increase the general health of Americans while decreasing alcoholism, corruption, and crime.

While organized crime existed prior to the 18th Amendment, Prohibition enabled Al “Scarface” Capone to expand his Chicago crime syndicate to include “bootlegging,” the illegal trafficking of alcohol. In 1925, Capone may have been the most powerful mob boss in the nation. Prohibition only amplified crime in cities such as Chicago, where mob bosses like Capone freely murdered those who got in their way.

The spirit of Prohibition had been building in the United States for years. McGuffey Readers, the most widely used schoolbook between 1830 and 1960, advocated temperance. This included rhyming poems that decried liquor stores as sources of robbery, murder, and harming one’s neighbors. In 1879, the Department of Scientific Temperance Instruction guided every state including the District of Columbia to require “anti-alcohol education.” The leader of this movement, Mary Hunt, was later criticized for distorting scientific facts to support her platform. Nonetheless, many believe that Hunt established the support necessary to ratify the 18th Amendment.

In 1933, the 21st Amendment to the Constitution repealed the Prohibition Act. Prohibition no longer provided a solution to personal indulgence, political corruption, or organized crime. Some Americans questioned whether Prohibition restricted individual liberty by enforcing specific moral values. The dire conditions of the Great Depression, however, argued in favor of legalizing alcohol to collect revenues from liquor sales. Not only did legal sales boost the economy and undermine the mobs, millions of government dollars spent on law enforcement could be otherwise invested.