

## An 1878 View of the Washingtonians

The following, rather long, extract describes the Washingtonians and one of their star speakers as they were seen from the perspective of the latter part of the 19th century – years after their decline to little more than a fond memory in the minds of temperance advocates. The extract is from “The Temperance Reform and its Great Reformers” by Rev. W.H. Daniels, A.M., published 1878.

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Excerpted from "The Temperance Reform and its Great Reformers" by Rev. W.H. Daniels, A.M., published 1878.

### Chapter VI – The Washingtonians

The Washingtonian movement had its origin in a tippling house, in the city of Baltimore, in the year 1840, with a company of half a dozen hard drinkers who had formed themselves into a club, and who used to meet for drinking bouts at Chase’s tavern.

One night the Rev. Matthew Hale Smith, a noted lecturer on temperance, was announced to speak in one of the churches, and they appointed two of their number a committee to go and hear him. The committee brought back a favorable report of the man and his doctrines, upon which a warm discussion arose. This being overheard by the landlord, he at once broke into a tirade against all temperance lecturers, and denounced them as hypocrites and fools.

To this storm of abuse one of the old toppers replied, "Of course it is for your interest to cry them down;" whereupon the discussion waxed hotter and hotter, and resulted in the six men forming themselves into a temperance club which they styled the "Washingtonian Total Abstinence Society," and adopted a pledge requiring total abstinence from the use of all intoxicating liquors.

The names of those six individuals were William Mitchell, David Hoss, Charles Anderson, George Steer, Bill M’Curdy, and Tom Campbell. John Hawkins early became a member, but was not one of the original six.

They then voted to meet the next night in a carpenter shop, and each agreed to bring a new member. These meetings were held almost nightly, at which each man related his own experience at the court of death. As might be expected, the meetings soon began to attract public attention.

These reformed men were soon invited to visit other cities and towns; and who of our older citizens has not listened to the thrilling and simple experience of John Hawkins as he

portrayed the misery of the drunkard, and told the touching story of his little daughter, Hannah, persuading him to reform? This new movement spread from city to city, and from town to town, until there was scarcely a place in the United States that did not have its Washingtonian Total Abstinence Society. Men who had been drunkards for years burst the bonds that had so long bound them, and became temperance reformers. The name being quite long, it soon became shortened by daily use, and these organizations became known throughout the country as "Washingtonians."

This was a rebellion of the subjects of King Alcohol against his tyranny, and as such it immediately became famous. It was a reform, commencing with the people who most needed reformation, and carried with it so much of sound sense, and so little of mere rhetoric, that every-where the reformed men who went about telling their own experience and salvation from the power of liquor found large and attentive audiences, and the Washingtonian movement became the chief topic both in religious and social circles.

It was quite a wonderful thing to hear a man in plain clothes, and without any of the graces of speech, declare what had been done for him, and exhorting with all simplicity and boldness that others should give up liquor as he had done.

The common people heard these men gladly, and drunkards by thousands and tens of thousands signed the total abstinence pledge.

In this movement there was no exception made in favor of the man who could buy fifteen gallons over the man who could buy a single glass.

Ale, wine, beer, cider, every thing else that had alcohol in it, was rejected, and for motives of domestic peace and plenty, self-respect and personal honor, men were persuaded to sign this pledge.

It was assumed that every man who wished to do so was able to break off his habits of drink. The religious feature of the movement, which is its latest and crowning glory, had not then appeared. Personal experiences, droll stories, and sharp jokes at the expense of drunkards and drunkard makers; imitations of the antics and fooleries of men under the influence of liquor; sharp thrusts at the avariciousness and meanness of the liquor sellers, and at the tricks of liquor makers, formed the staple of the lecturing under the Washingtonian movement.

When this movement began, Dr. Jewitt, who was himself one of the chief agents of the reformation in Massachusetts, says, "Nineteen twentieths of the clergy were total abstainers;" and what was true of Massachusetts was substantially true throughout New England.

The progress of the temperance reform for the nine years from 1831 to 1840 may be indicated by the following figures: In the first-mentioned year twelve millions of people drank seventy millions of gallons of liquor – an average of six gallons a year to every man,

woman, and child – besides wine, beer and cider. In 1840 seventeen millions of people drank forty-three millions of gallons – a reduction of more than one half /per capita/.

Still more manifest were the signs of progress after the Washingtonian movement fairly got under way, and the reformed men had commenced their tour of the principal cities, relating their experience to assembled multitudes, and gathering in the people by thousands to the new society. It is estimated that under the impetus of this movement one hundred and fifty thousand drunkards signed the pledge, besides uncounted thousands of other classes of society.

Some of the leaders in this movement, so far from feeling the need of religion, declared that religious exercises of every kind were out of place in temperance meetings. They were not even opened with prayer.

It seemed to be a part of the policy to avoid every possible question that might arise concerning religion, in order that men might be the more deeply impressed with the duty of temperance. But this effort to divorce temperance from religion was the chief weakness of the Washingtonian movement. Nevertheless, in spite of this coldness toward Christ and his Church, the actual reform wrought by this means was oftentimes the forerunner of revivals of religion in local churches, and many a man was saved from his other sins through his effort to save himself from drunkenness.

Few names were more familiar to the people of the United States during the early years of the great Washingtonian movement than that of John Hawkins, of Baltimore. He was not one of the original club by which the reform was inaugurated, but joined them soon after, and presently developed such talent for temperance oratory that his services were in demand from Maine to Louisiana. During the eighteen years of his life after his reformation he spoke and organized Washingtonian societies in all the principal cities and towns of New England; and in New York, Philadelphia, Washington, Harrisburgh, Cincinnati, Louisville, Ky., Charleston, S.C., New Orleans, etc.

In his journal, which was published after his death, the record of the number of signers of the total abstinence pledge at a large number of his meetings are given, usually reaching into the hundreds, a considerable portion of them being men whose bloated countenances and trembling nerves showed how much they were in need of this salvation.

At Springfield, Mass., Newport, R.I., Saratoga, N.Y., and Portland, Maine, his efforts were notably blessed; but perhaps his most remarkable triumph was in Boston, then a city of a hundred thousand inhabitants, in which it was declared at one of the Washingtonian Conventions that "four fifths of all the Boston drunkards had signed the temperance pledge."

The enthusiasm of these Washingtonian meetings was something wonderful. The experiences of men actually reformed from the lowest depths of drunkenness were arguments that nothing could resist, and the presence of such a man before an audience

was as if one had risen from the dead. Poor wretches would rise to their feet in the midst of great assemblies, and, with a look of desperation on their bloated faces, would ask,

"Do you think I could reform? Do you think there is any hope for me?"

"Yes, brother. Sign the pledge, and it will make a sober man of you," would be the reply.

Then, amid the sobs, and "God bless yous!" of his family and friends, the poor drunkard would crowd up to the platform, take the pen in his trembling hand, and sign, the vast congregation holding their breath as they watched him through their tears. Then, with a heavy sigh, the man, with a new hope in him, would, perhaps, try to speak a few words, confessing his own sins, and the sorrows he had brought upon his wife and children – always the same sad story, but always new and touching – and then the older Washingtonians would gather round him, talk encouragingly to him, find out his most pressing necessities and relieve them, and the poor, lost wretch would feel as if he had suddenly been lifted to a mountain top where on the one hand he could look down into the abyss from which he had just been taken, and on the other he could catch a glimpse of the distant glories of the city of God, whose snowy, shining towers he dimly remembered in childhood's visions, but which he had wholly lost sight of in his long years of degradation, and which he had never again expected to see.

The following, from one of Mr. Hawkins's addresses at Faneuil Hall, Boston, shows the tone and spirit of that brotherly work:

"When I compare the past with the present, my days of intemperance with my present peace and sobriety, my past degradation with my present position in this hall – the Cradle of Liberty – I am overwhelmed. It seems to me holy ground.

"I never expected to see this hall. I heard of it in my boyhood. 'Twas here that Otis and the elder Adams argued the principles of independence, and we now meet here to make a second declaration of independence, not quite so lengthy as the old one, but it promises life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Our forefathers pledged their lives, their fortunes and their sacred honor; we, too, will pledge our honor and our lives, but our fortunes – they have gone for rum!

"Drunkard! come up here, you can reform. I met a gentleman this morning who reformed four weeks ago, rejoicing in his reformation; he brought a man with him who took the pledge, and this man brought two others. This is the way we do the business up in Baltimore; we reformed drunkards are a Committee of the Whole on the State of the Union. We are all missionaries. We don't slight the drunkard; we love him, we nurse him, as a mother does her infant learning to walk.

"I tell you, be kind to those men; they have peculiar feelings when the boys run after them and hoot at them. Don't lay a stumbling block in the way of such a man; he has

better feelings than many a moderate drinker. Go up to him, stretch out your hand to him and say, 'How do you do, sir?'

"Just let me tell you about one of our reformed men. We all of us changed a great deal in our appearance; some grew thin, some grew pale, but a certain dark-complexioned man grew yellow; and the old grog-seller noticing the change in the others and seeing this old customer not becoming "white", declared he did not believe but what he was a hypocrite, still drinking behind the door. One day the two men met, and the taverner said to the teetotaler,

"'It appears to me you don't alter quite so much as the rest'

"'Don't I? Well, why don't I?'

"'Why you don't grow pale, you only grow yaller.'

"'Yes', said the reformed drunkard, putting his hand in his pocket and pulling out a handful of gold pieces, 'these look "yaller", too, but you don't get any more of 'em from me!'

"Go to Baltimore now and see our happy wives and children. Just think of our procession on the 5th of April, when we celebrated our anniversary. Six thousand men, nearly half of them reformed within a year, followed by two thousand boys of all ages, to give assurance to the world that the next generation shall be sober.

"But where were our wives on that occasion? At home, shut up with hungry children in rags, the way they were a year ago? No, no; but in carriages, riding round the streets to see and rejoice over their sober husbands!"

Mr. Hawkins, like the other temperance orators of those days, relied chiefly on the force and value of his own experience before the great crowds that flocked to hear him; but all the time he had new miracles of deliverances to relate, new stories of reformation to tell out of the rich successes that crowned his temperance ministry.

The following, gathered mostly from his published memoirs, is the story of [Hawkins'] life:

"I was born in Baltimore, on the 28th of September, 1797. After some years at the school of the Rev. Mr. Coxe, at the age of fourteen I was apprenticed for eight years to learn the trade of a hatter with a master whose place of business was a regular den of drunkenness. A few days ago I found the old books of my master; there were the names of sixty men upon them, and we could not recollect but one who did not go to a drunkard's grave."

When the British made a landing at Baltimore during the war of 1812, young Hawkins borrowed a musket and joined the ranks of the volunteers, exposing himself with all the rashness and abandon of southern youth in the very front of the battle, from which, however, he escaped unhurt. In 1815 he was brought under the influence of divine grace in

a revival of religion, united on probation with the Methodist Episcopal Church, and for some years was a zealous and useful Sunday-school teacher and Christian worker. But hard times came, employment failed, and in 1818 he went to seek his fortune at the West.

Of these days he says:

"As soon as I was away from paternal care I fell away. All went by the board, and my sufferings commenced. For six months I had no shoes, and only one shirt and one pair of pantaloons. Then I was a vagabond indeed. But I returned, ragged and bloated, to my mother's home. It was customary in those days to let the young people drink with their parents, but neither they nor I thought of my becoming a miserable drunkard.

"When I got to the edge of my native town I was so ashamed that I waited till the dusk of the evening, and then I crept along to the house of my mother. She dressed me up decently, did not upbraid me, but only said, 'John, I am afraid you are bloated!'"

Mr. Hawkins having temporarily reformed, was married on Christmas day, 1822, to Miss Rachel Thompson, of Baltimore, of which marriage two children were born, Elizabeth and Hannah. The latter name will recall to many of the readers of this history a little temperance book of Washingtonian days entitled "Hannah Hawkins; or, the Reformed Drunkard's Daughter," a book over which many tears have been shed and many good resolutions made.

"For fifteen years," continues Mr. H., "I rose and fell, was up and down. I would earn fifteen dollars a week and be well and happy, and with my money in hand would start for home, but in some unaccountable way would fall into a tavern, thinking one glass would do me good. But a single glass would conquer all my resolutions. I appeal to all my fellow drunkards if it is not exactly so.

"During the first two weeks of June (1840) I drank dreadfully, bought liquor by the gallon and drank and drank. I cannot tell how I suffered; in body every thing, but in mind more!

"By the fourteenth of the month – drunk all the time – I was a wonder to myself, astonished that I had any mind left; and yet it seemed, in the goodness of God, uncommonly clear. My conscience drove me to madness. I hated the darkness of the night, and when morning came I hated the light, I hated myself, hated existence; was about taking my own life. I asked myself, 'Can I restrain? Is it possible?' But there was no one to take me by the hand and say 'You can.' I had a pint of whisky in my room, where I lay in bed, and thought I would drink it, but this seemed to be a turning point with me. I knew it was life or death as I decided to drink it or not.

"My wife came up knowing how I was suffering, and asked me to come down to breakfast. I said I would some presently. Then my daughter, Hannah, came up – my

only friend, I always loved her the most – and she said, ‘Father, don’t send me after whisky today!’

"I was tormented before; this was agony. I could not stand it, so I told her to leave, and she went down stairs crying, and saying, ‘Father is angry with me.’ My wife came up again and asked me to take some coffee. I told her I did not want any thing of her and covered myself up in the bed. Pretty soon I heard some one in the room, and, peeping out, I saw it was my daughter.

“‘Hannah,’ said I, ‘I am not angry with you – and – I SHALL NOT DRINK ANY MORE.’ Then we wept together.

"I got up, went to the cupboard, and looked on my enemy, the whisky bottle, and thought, ‘Is it possible I can be restored?’ Several times while dressing I looked at the bottle, but I thought, ‘I shall be lost if I yield.’

"Poor drunkard! There is hope for you. You cannot be worse off than I was, not more degraded or more of a slave to appetite. You can return if you will. Try it! TRY IT!

"Well, I went to the society of reformed drunkards, where I found all my old bottle companions. I did not tell any one, not even my wife, that I was going. I had got out of difficulty, but did not know how long I could keep out.

The six founders of [The Washingtonians] were there. We had worked together, got drunk together, we stuck together like brothers; and so we do now that we are sober.

"One of them said, ‘Here’s Hawkins, the regulator, the old bruiser,’ and they clapped and laughed. But there was no laugh in me, I was too solemn and sober for that. Then they read the pledge:

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

"They all looked over my shoulder to see me write my name. It was a great battle. I never had such feelings before.

"At eleven o’clock I went home. Before when I stayed out late I always went home drunk. My yard is covered with brick, and my wife could easily tell as I walked over it whether I were drunk or sober. She could even tell whether the gate opened drunk or sober.

"Well, this time it opened sober, and when I entered she was astonished. I smiled, and she smiled; and then I told her quick, "I could not keep it back; I have put my name to the temperance pledge, never to drink as long as I live."

"It was a happy time. I cried and she cried – we couldn't help it; the crying woke up my daughter, and she cried too for joy. I slept none that night; my thoughts were better than sleep. Next morning I went to see my mother. She had been praying twenty years for her drunken son. When she heard the good news she said, 'It is enough. Now I am ready to die.'

"Now what was I to do? My mind was blunted, my character gone; I was bloated, and getting old; but men who had slighted me came to my help again, took me by the hand, encouraged me, held me up, and comforted me.

"I'll never slight a drunkard as long as I live; he needs sympathy and is worthy of it. Poor and miserable as he is, he did not design to become a drunkard, and people have too long told him he cannot reform. But now we assure him he can reform, and we show ourselves, the Baltimore Washingtonians, two hundred in one year, as evidence of that fact.

"Drunkard, come up here! You can reform. Take the pledge and be forever free!"

The Washingtonian meetings might have been called temperance class-meetings, with a missionary outlook. One of the first records of the work is a letter to the original Baltimore Washingtonians, asking them to send a delegation of reformed men to New York, "to tell their experience." Five men were sent, men wholly without oratorical powers, but who had been slaves to drink, and had felt how good it was to be free; and the testimony of these five men was all that was required to kindle the enthusiasm in that great city.

A number of new temperance newspapers sprang into existence. Nineteen such publications are named in Mr. Hawkins' memoirs, while the regular newspaper press was largely occupied with the strange work of reform among the drunkards and the individual histories that the meetings developed. Some of the ablest speakers and writers of the day, in prose and poetry, devoted their genius to this great moral reform; among them Rev. Mr. Pierpont, of Boston, Wm. B. Tappen, Rev. Edward N. Kirk, D.D., and a large number of other leading clergymen. Dr. Lyman Beecher, in his mature age, saw and rejoiced over this temperance tidal wave, which was a fulfillment of his own prophecy, and a result for which he had well prepared the way.

Mr. Hawkins, toward the close of his brilliant career as a temperance worker, was licensed as a preacher of the Gospel by the Methodist Protestant Church, though he seems to have made little use of his commission.

His death occurred suddenly at Piqua, Pennsylvania, August 26, 1858, in the sixty-first year of his age, in the full possession of his mental power, and in the glorious hope of everlasting life.