

Prohibition & the Anti-Saloon League Letter, 1912

The Anti-Saloon League of Virginia, founded at Richmond's Second Baptist Church in 1901, was one of the movements that brought Prohibition to the state in 1916, three years before the 18th Amendment to the US Constitution was passed. The league became a major force in Virginia politics, especially within the Democratic Party during the first two decades of the 20th century. Based in Ohio, the Anti-Saloon League was supported in Virginia by protestant evangelicals, especially Baptists and Methodists. Its aims were to close saloons and ultimately to prohibit outright the manufacture and sale of alcohol in the state.

A Prohibition timeline for Virginia:

1901

The Anti-Saloon League of Virginia, a group that will lead the movement bringing prohibition to the state, is established.

1904

The Anti-Saloon League of Virginia comes under the leadership of its most forceful member, James Cannon Jr. [a Methodist minister].

1908

The Anti-Saloon League of Virginia's James Cannon Jr. helps draft legislation to close notoriously unruly rural saloons.

1912

The Anti-Saloon League of Virginia demands passage of an enabling act to allow a state prohibition referendum. [The purpose was to let the people vote and decide the issue!]

September 22, 1914

Virginians endorse an act that makes a statewide referendum on alcohol law, an act that the Anti-Saloon League of Virginia has been pushing for the past several years.”¹

“Virginia went dry in November 1916, three years before national prohibition began. Although Virginia established statewide prohibition through a popular referendum, it nonetheless faced several challenges in enforcing the new law. Its long coastline made it difficult to prevent smuggling, i.e. rum-running. It bordered on a wet state, Maryland, which made barely an effort to enforce national dry laws from 1920-1933. Virginia contained several cities which were reluctantly dry, most notably Alexandria, Richmond and Norfolk. In addition, Virginia had a long-established moonshining tradition in the mountainous western part of the state. As a result, Virginia struggled to live up to the dry ideal it set for itself in 1916.

¹ Pegram, Thomas. "Anti-Saloon League of Virginia" *Encyclopedia Virginia*. Virginia Humanities, (07 Dec. 2020). Web. 23 May. 2021

“Virginia’s experiment with prohibition did not come about suddenly. As was often the case throughout the country, Virginia went dry only after a long, protected political battle led by groups such as the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) and the Anti-Saloon League (ASL). It was these interest groups that provided the leadership, the voters, and the impetus behind the dry campaign that led to Virginia’s attempt to ban alcoholic beverages.”²

When the Anti-Saloon League of Virginia organized to lead the fight to ban alcohol, the state was divided into districts. Ed J. Richardson, Superintendent of the Northern Virginia district, wrote the following letter in 1912 during the prohibition fight. In the letter Richardson encouraged Orange citizens to contact their State Senator and request passage of the Enabling Act which had just been passed by the House of Delegates. Virginia eventually endorsed prohibition laws statewide that went into effect in 1918 ahead of the passage of the 18th amendment banning alcohol nationally. The Anti-Saloon League remained a powerful political force in Virginia until the 21st Amendment (1933) was passed by the US Congress.

This primary source document below shows “territories” (counties) of the Northern District and various state officials connected to the League. The original letter is on file at the Orange County Historical Society. The photo of the letter is courtesy of Linda Carlton.

² Author Unknown. “Prohibition in Virginia”. *RustyCans.Com*, Google, Accessed May 23, 2021, <https://www.rustycans.com/HISTORY/virginia.html#:~:text=Virginia%20went%20dry%20in%20November,smuggling%2C%20i.e.%20rum%2Drunning>.

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NORTHERN DISTRICT OF

The Anti-Saloon League of Virginia

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ORGAN VIRGINIA ANTI-SALOON LEAGUE. BI-WEEKLY.
DEVOTED TO TEMPERANCE REFORM BY CHRISTIAN METHODS.
SUBSCRIPTION PRICE, 50 CENTS PER YEAR.

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Prof. C. T. Jordan, Staunton.

Rev. H. D. C. MacLachlan, D. D., Richmond.

Mr. Tim. F. Sheehan, Roanoke.

Feb. 27, 1912.

Falls Church, Fairfax Co., Va.,

Dear Sir:

TERRITORIES OF THE
NORTHERN DISTRICT.

CITIES.

Alexandria

Fredericksburg

Staunton

Winchester

COUNTIES

Alexandria

Augusta

Bath

Clarke

Culpeper

Essex

Fairfax

Fauquier

Frederick

Greene

Highland

King George

Lancaster

Loudoun

Madison

Middlesex

Northumberland

Orange

Page

Prince William

Rappahannock

Richmond

Rockingham

Shenandoah

Spotsylvania

Stafford

Warren

Westmoreland

After conferring with citizens of Rappahannock County

I am writing you. The Enabling Act has passed the House of Delegates by 62 to 30 votes. This shows the great sentiment for the measure. It is now before the Senate. We believe it will pass that body if the senators hear from their people promptly. The bill will simply give the people of Virginia the right to vote on Statewide Prohibition, TO LET THE PEOPLE THEMSELVES SETTLE THE QUESTION. The bill provides that if the state goes dry liquor can be kept for personal use, and for medicinal, mechanical and sacramental purposes. As it is a fair proposition to let the people vote on the question, please sign and mail the enclosed card AT ONCE. By so doing you do not pledge yourself to vote for Statewide Prohibition, but simply to ask your senator to let the people settle the question themselves.

Believing that you are willing to send this card as requested, and thanking you in advance, I am,

Sincerely yours,

Ed. J. Richardson

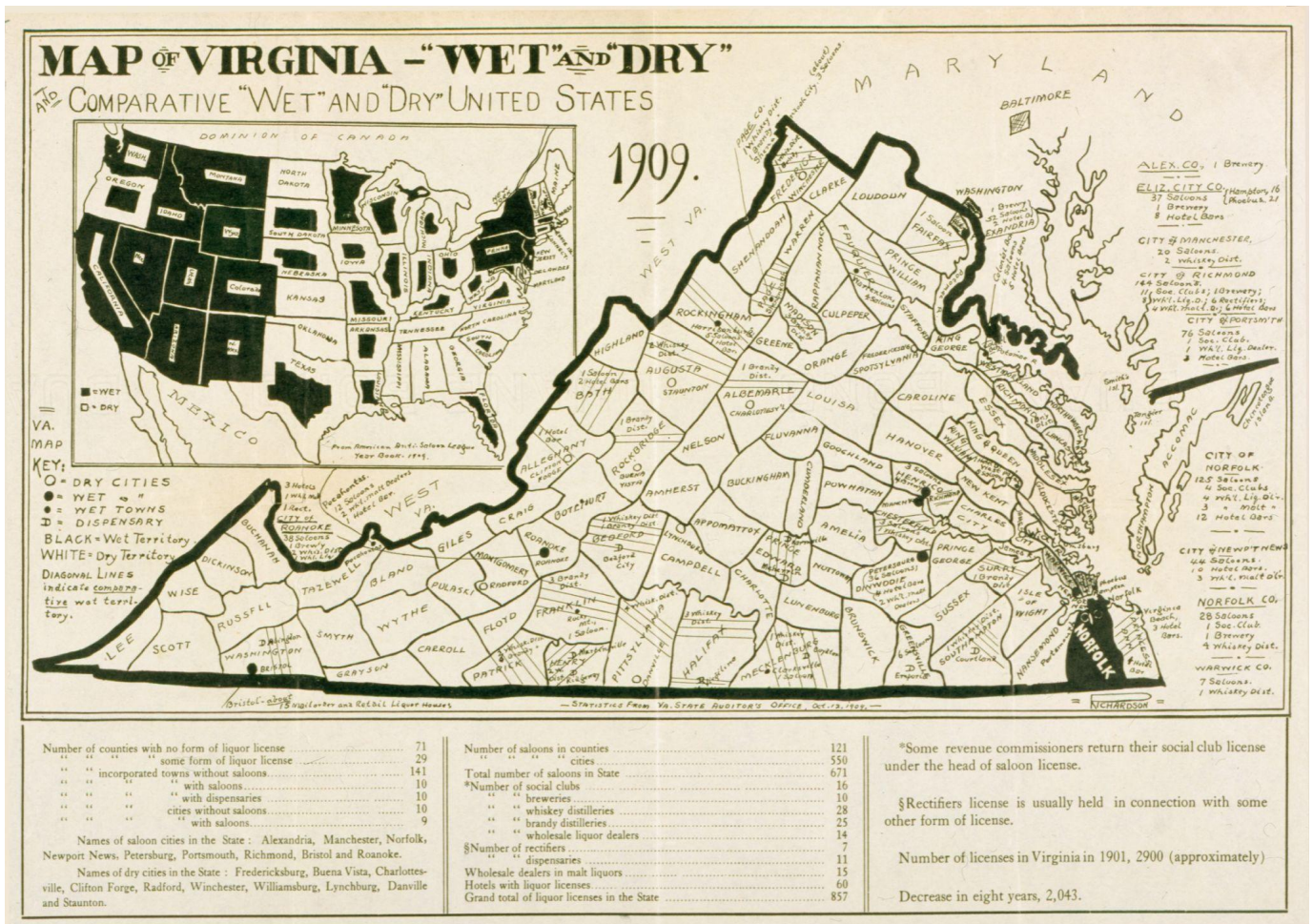
Supt. N. Va. Dist.

The map below was obtained from the website *Bootleggers, Bandits, and the History of Prohibition in Virginia* by David Pettyjohn. The original map is with the Library of Virginia in Richmond.

The Map Key:

White colored county = Dry Territory
 Black colored county = Wet Territory
 Diagonal Lines = Comparative Wet Territory

Clear dot = Dry Cities
 Black dot = Wet Cities



In Central Virginia, Madison and Albemarle had "Diagonal Lines" while Culpeper, Orange, Spotsylvania, Louisa, Fluvanna and Greene were "white" or dry. Names of Saloon cities were Alexandria, Manchester, Norfolk, Newport News, Petersburg, Portsmouth, Richmond, Bristol and Roanoke. Names of Dry cities in the state were Fredericksburg, Buena Vista, Charlottesville, Clifton Forge, Radford, Winchester, Williamsburg, Lynchburg, Danville, and Staunton.³

³ Pettyjohn, David. "Bootleggers, Bandits, and the history of Prohibition in Virginia." Google, Accessed May 25, <https://rvamag.com/art/gallery-news/bootleggers-bandits-and-the-history-of-prohibition-in-virginia.html>

MAP OF VIRGINIA - "WET" AND "DRY"

COMPARATIVE "WET" AND "DRY" UNITED STATES



Number of counties with no form of liquor license	71
" " incorporated towns without saloons	29
" " with saloons	141
" " with dispensaries	10
" " cities without saloons	10
" " with saloons	9

Names of saloon cities in the State : Alexandria, Manchester, Norfolk, Newport News, Petersburg, Portsmouth, Richmond, Bristol and Roanoke.
 Names of dry cities in the State : Fredericksburg, Beem Vista, Charlottesville, Clifton Forge, Radford, Winchester, Williamsburg, Lynchburg, Danville and Staunton.

Number of saloons in counties	121
" " cities	550
Total number of saloons in State	671
Number of social clubs	10
" " breweries	10
" " whiskey distilleries	28
" " brandy distilleries	25
" " wholesale liquor dealers	14
Number of rectifiers	7
" " dispensaries	11
Wholesale dealers in malt liquors	15
Hotels with liquor licenses	60
Grand total of liquor licenses in the State	857

*Some revenue commissioners return their social club license under the head of saloon license.

§Rectifiers license is usually held in connection with some other form of license.

Number of licenses in Virginia in 1901, 2900 (approximately)

Decrease in eight years, 2,043.