

Flying the Banner for Temperance

By Julie Frey

The Litchfield Historical Society's collections include a large banner for the Bantam Division of the Sons of Temperance, an artifact representing a fascinating episode in Connecticut's, and America's, history.

In 1784, Dr. Benjamin Rush, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, treasurer of the United States Mint, and nationally recognized physician, published an article titled *An Inquiry into the Effects of Spirituous Liquors on the Human Body and the Mind*. The article was expanded into a book in 1790 and widely published throughout the United States. His findings galvanized local ministers, medical professionals, and ordinary citizens to publicly advocate for the restriction and even complete abolition of the manufacture, sale, and use of alcoholic beverages.

On May 9, 1789 a temperance association was formed in Litchfield. Signed by 35 men including town leaders Julius Deming, Tapping Reeve, Benjamin Tallmadge, Uriah Tracy, Ephraim Kirby, Elijah Wadsworth, and Frederick Wolcott, the association promised to "carry on our business, without the use of distilled spirits, as an article of refreshment, either for ourselves, or those whom we employ, and that instead thereof we will serve our workmen with wholesome food, and the common simple drinks of our own production." It appears that the men never met formally or regularly to discuss the state of temperance in their community, but the pledge represented these individuals' acknowledgment of the negative effects of alcohol. Some, including Benjamin Tallmadge, appear on the rosters of future temperance organizations, advocated publicly for the abolition of alcohol, and financially supported the cause.

Forty years later, in 1829, the organization formalized and was chartered as the Temperance Society of Litchfield County. Town chapters held monthly meetings in

which members would discuss strategies for furthering their cause, create committees, distribute literature, and maintain membership rolls. Begun with 961 members, the Society in just five years had grown to more than 10,000 members and had chapters in almost every one of the 31 towns in the county.

A second temperance organization, the Bantam Division of the Sons of Temperance, formed in 1847. The Sons of Temperance was a national organization founded in New York City in 1842. It differed from other temperance organizations in that it was a fraternal organization. Initially, it was open only to men; to join, a man had to be nominated by an existing member and then allow three other members to conduct a thorough examination into his life and character. After his nomination was approved, his membership was decided by secret ballot. To join the Temperance Society of Litchfield County, one simply had to sign a pledge to not drink or serve alcohol.

The Sons of Temperance had a three-part mission that went beyond shielding its members "from the evils of intemperance." The society also sought to "afford mutual assistance in case of sickness and elevate our characters as men." Members were required to pay weekly dues of six and one quarter cents. These funds were used to support fellow members who had fallen ill or to defray the funeral expenses of a member or his wife.

This organization was criticized by other temperance groups for its restrictive membership and secretive meetings that included special handshakes, signs, passwords, and regalia. These activities led to its often being viewed as closely tied to the Masonic organization. While there was no direct affiliation between the two groups, 5 of the 12 founding members of the Bantam Division of the Sons of Temperance were also members of the St.

Paul's Masonic Lodge in Litchfield. With temperance as only one of their main tenets, these men also provided a social service to members by providing funeral expenses or allowances if a member was unable to work.

The imagery on the banner mirrors many of the symbols used by the Masons. In the center of the banner is a large triangle with an eye encircled by a snake. The eye, also known as the all-seeing eye, is a popular symbol in Masonry and Christianity. It represents the Supreme Being and wisdom. All sides and angles of the triangle are equal; it represents the Holy Trinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. While the snake can represent evil and temptation, it has also been used to signify regeneration or rebirth.

The Sons of Temperance banner owned by the Historical Society was made in 1846 of oil and gilt on silk. The banner was made by James Ackerman of Ackerman & Miller of New York City. It is signed at the bottom "Ackerman New York."

The Bantam Chapter of the Sons of Temperance disbanded in the late 19th century, though there are still chapters of the umbrella organization in England. The banner was donated to the Historical Society by one of the founding members, James Bidwell Peck, when the chapter disbanded. The temperance movement, including the Temperance Society of Litchfield County, continued into the 20th century, lobbying for legislation and eventually succeeding in seeing the 18th Amendment added to the Constitution on January 29, 1919. The amendment prohibited the manufacture, sale, and distribution of alcohol in the United States. It was repealed in 1933, by which time the temperance movement had completely disbanded.

