

The Women's Christian Temperance Union: Not a Union

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“We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men *and women* are created equal” were the very words read aloud by suffragist Elizabeth Cady Stanton on July 19th, 1848 (Stanton 1). Arranged in the grand Wesleyan Chapel of New York, with a beaming hope for a more inclusive society, the 300 attendees of the Seneca Falls Convention knew little of the impending century-long struggle that would soon fall to their fingertips as they convened. With issues of abolition, temperance, female equity, and suffrage at the forefronts of their hopeful minds, these women's rights activists forged a new feminist movement that later suffragists long remember. Despite the great power of their intentions, these champions, courageous and optimistic, represented only a mere fraction of the population (McMillen 71). That is, much of America remained content living in separate Victorian gender spheres, where women rarely interacted with others outside of the home (Hughes 1). Under this restrictive system, those women who were rebellious enough to secure legitimate professions were limited to domestic roles like teaching, with little function in the public eye. As the United States approached a tempestuous Civil War, however, women soon began to question the value of their domestic roles in a war-torn society. After all, while their fathers, brothers, and husbands were off risking their lives for a precarious pursuit of liberty on the battlefield, only the women were left to fend for themselves and for society. Clara Barton, for one, arose as a prominent advocate for prisoners and a nurse both on and off the battlefield, roles practically unheard of before the affair of war (Fisher 2). In a war so detrimental to the security of the nation, women like Barton soon found great value in their newfound public roles, resulting in drastic social changes for the women of the divided nation. When Robert E. Lee surrendered to the victorious Union on April 9, 1865, reconstructed America would soon face changes in the political realm too. In 1869, the 15th Amendment was ratified, guaranteeing suffrage for all those African American men who were once bound to the slave system (Brown). Now involved in public affairs, many women wished to be invited to the polls as well (Harper 310). Indeed, with the looming return of pre-war separate spheres and the inequities of the 15th

amendment, women soon found themselves extremely interested in having a vote. For some, mere equity was motivation sufficient for advocating for suffrage. For others, suffrage would solve other issues, like the struggles of bringing more Americans to temperance from alcohol. One woman who believed that universal suffrage could achieve temperance was Frances Willard, the eventual president of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, or the WCTU. Although the Woman's Christian Temperance Union made some progress in the realms of encouraging temperance, abolishing separate gender spheres, and promoting religious values, Frances Willard's highly criticized decisions to promote nativism and segregation of the Union ultimately undermined any chance that the Union had at initiating immediate women's suffrage.

Willard's religious and professional backgrounds fueled much of her work in the Union. She began her long career as a schoolteacher in the Midwest (Bordin 71). This was not a unique role, as many women of her era also pursued teaching before marriage. Her limited role of teaching, however, soon inspired her to transition to travel beyond the constrictive bounds of Ohio to spread her Methodist values in New York and around Europe, while teaching in public schools and Universities (Valentine 1). Throughout her travel experiences, she inherited confidence and an ability to persuade others, two qualities that would contribute to her unique leadership ensemble. In 1871, she returned to the Midwest, becoming "the first female president of a college granting degrees to women – the newly-formed Evanston College for Ladies" which was later combined with the modern Northwestern University (Willard, Frances E. 1). Committed to advocating for her female students and surrounded by an extremely supportive community, Willard was incredibly influential on the lives of her students which gave her a strong reputation. Three years later, she once again switched careers and brought her extensive leadership skills, biblical faith, and passion for social justice to serve in the field of political activism. In 1874, she became one of the few founders of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, originally starting as the Union's primary corresponding secretary (Willard, Frances E. 2). Once the Union, or the WCTU, was established, Willard and the other members defined specific goals that would drive the basis of their programs for the coming years.

The initial intent of the WCTU was to encourage temperance from alcohol in America. When Willard and the others actually founded the Union, a temperance movement had already been impending for quite some time. This blooming urge for temperance was fueled by an eruption of excessive alcoholism. By 1871, the average American consumed well over 2.55 gallons of alcohol annually. In 2013, for comparison, even after significant increased efficiency in alcohol production, the consumption was only around 2.35 gallons per capita annually (Staff). Thus, the Union's formation arose amidst a time of unrestrained alcohol consumption. In the Union's "Declaration of Principles" of 1874, the Union wrote to require that all members agree to "solemnly promise...to abstain from all distilled, fermented and malt liquors" (Declaration of Principles 1). Nearly a direct response to the overwhelmingly high trend of consumption of alcohol, this repelled all members from alcohol immediately. For many women, such a promise was made as intoxication often introduced domestic violence between husband and wife, and other issues of abuse (Frances Willard House Museum). Women felt that if their family was to abstain, these issues would be solved and abuse would be avoided. Many in the WCTU were also motivated to encourage temperance by the principles of religious beliefs. In the 19th century, and even in some regard today, both the Methodist Church and Baptist Church strictly discouraged alcohol consumption (Roots of Prohibition 2). Willard herself was a devoted Methodist, so many of her programs as the leader were influenced by her faith. In the "Declaration of Principles," she further outlined encouraging reform not only through "ethical and scientific means" but more so through "so far as possible, by religious" means (Declaration of Principles 1). On these premises, the Union believed religious persuasion was more important than providing scientific evidence. Carrying this belief, the Union began implementing religious activism programs throughout the nation.

Willard brought her activism for temperance to public settings, which was highly successful. In 1887, the Union was almost entirely in charge of introducing the "Scientific Temperance Instruction Law" which required immediate temperance education in all national public schools (McDaniels 1). This instruction involved discussion of temperance, with religious references influencing students to feel obligated to abstain from supposedly sinful consumption. Leaders believed that if the students were to

refrain from alcohol early on in their lives, they would be more likely to abstain in adulthood. A primary component of the WCTU's role in the program was to publish textbooks for schools. As a Christian organization with a focus on morals rather than reason, the WCTU wrote these books with inaccurate propaganda and biblical references. In one section of an approved textbook, alcohol was described as "a colorless liquid poison" that will "gradually eat away the flesh" while "ruining the character-as well as the health" (Billings 1). Propaganda such as this, while fear-inducing, was successful in convincing students to stay away from alcohol, especially those with alcoholic relatives who knew too well the peril of alcoholism. However, these biased practices did face criticism from both teachers and scientists. After all, much of the information supported by this law was false. Unlike the biased writers of WCTU textbooks, scientists on the "Committee of Fifty," a committee of scientists and doctors from leading Universities, wished to encourage temperance on the premise that "Intoxication is not the wine's fault, but the man's" with scientifically-backed evidence rather than religious rationale (Billings 2). They wrote directly to the Union, discouraging their practices, claiming that students "should not be taught that the drinking of a glass or two of wine by a grown-up person is very dangerous." Still, the WCTU refused to remove the moral implications of alcohol from their teachings. In fact, during the 1901-1902 year, 22 million students received this distorted indoctrination (Billings 2). By 1907, the content of the programs was reevaluated and fit to scientific standards. Nonetheless, it scarred the ignorance of many young minds, leaving a lasting impact of a fear of alcohol on millions of Americans.

Beyond school settings, the Union encouraged temperance directly at locations like taverns and saloons, which supported both their prohibitionist goals and their goals to abolish separate gender spheres. By diverting the attention of consumers at saloons before an alcoholic purchase was made through pray-ins and other religious digressions, and even taking harsh verbal action to try and shut down saloons, Union members were able to successfully prevent alcoholic purchases (Evans 152). Some instances were violent, however, leaders discouraged violence in these diversions. In an annual meeting of the WCTU chapter of Iowa, the leader of the chapter, Mary J. Aldrich, addressed a concern that the closing of an Iowa Saloon "The Bottomless Saloon" was highly violent and committed by "an army to slaughter or

distress our fellow citizens” (Aldrich 41). In response, Aldrich shouted “give up quarter to the enemy, inflexibly adhere to our motto, total abstinence from all that intoxicates death to the liquor traffic!” Her demands to disregard the violence and focus on the goal of abstinence were brought forth by a hope to remain a peaceful organization, despite the inherent complexity of closing a business with religious force. Regardless of the implications of the violence, closures such as these certainly discouraged separate gender spheres as women would leave their homes, using strength and courage to fight for temperance. And, in doing so, these female activists networked and interacted with the public. Naturally, this networking supported WCTU activist goals as it opposed the patriarchal separation of spheres, influencing the Union’s second goal: Women’s Suffrage.

Motivated by the struggles of bringing America to temperance, the women of the WCTU, like many other women of the time, wished for immediate women’s suffrage. Unlike the Union’s prohibitionist goals, however, the goal of suffrage was ultimately unsuccessful. Some women began to support universal suffrage as a result of surrounding suffrage developments for African American men. Still, women’s suffrage was a progressive interest, and many women remained removed from the movement (Marino). Originally, the WCTU as a whole was uninterested in suffrage. However, once the organization formed a general consensus that suffrage would be beneficial to the temperance movement, the organization began suffrage programs in some states (Woman's Christian Temperance Union 1). Still though, some chapters chose not to associate their temperance programs with suffrage as the temperance movement also opposed the suffrage movement in some regard. Male owners of saloons, for one, were often major opponents to a suffrage movement, worried that “if women could vote, their livelihoods were at risk” (McMillen 196). Worried of losing support for both movements, some women focused the entirety of their attention on temperance. Other chapters, particularly those in the South, also remained removed from the suffrage movement as it opposed their traditional beliefs supportive of separate spheres and domesticity for women (Marino). Thus, some chapters, whether for the sake of the security of their temperance movement, or for the sake of leaders’ personal values, allowed individual members to decide for themselves rather than associating themselves entirely with universal suffrage. As time went on,

however, suffrage became more popular amongst chapters, especially following the highly publicized National Women's Rights Convention of 1880, where suffrage and women's activism became more relevant (McMillen 200).

Willard, for one, believed suffrage was essential for temperance as women would be able to vote for prohibition and other regulations. In her annual presidential address of 1880, she described how "Women would provide 'an army of voters which absenteeism will not decimate and money cannot buy,'" (Bordin 110). This address encouraged women to yearn for a vote, bringing about great support from female listeners, and making suffrage one of the Union's most pressing concerns. For a decade, the WCTU organized protests and annual correspondence meetings to contribute to this suffrage movement. Meanwhile, suffragists like the aging Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony were leading progressive feminist movements of their own, gathering annually in Worcester, MA at the esteemed National Woman's Rights Convention (McMillen 198). Amplified voices like those of Stanton and Anthony drew great attention from the press, and soon they began to work with others to widen the cause of suffrage across further groups. Willard, too, began working directly with other suffragists to gather greater support for her movement (Roots of Prohibition 2). In 1893, suffragist Henrietta Briggs-Wall published a political poster displaying the text "American Woman and her Public Press," as a thoroughly orchestrated propaganda scheme (Briggs- Wall 1). Working with Willard, she successfully brought suffrage to the attention of many. On the poster, Frances Willard herself was depicted amongst her alleged equals which included "the feeble-minded, convicts, lunatics, and wild (as opposed to assimilated) American Indians," (Briggs- Wall 1). All of such groups, while unique, shared the struggle of not having the right to vote. Upon viewing the poster, skeptics of the suffrage movement would disassociate the much larger and more "civil" appearing woman, Willard, with the other groups, making them consider that women deserved more than the rights of the surrounding uncivilized groups (Kamensky 1). With Willard being the center of attention, viewers would also associate the WCTU with suffrage, a successful tactic in bringing in Union support. However, due to the Union's choices to make a series of drastic

mistakes in policies of inclusion, the WCTU as a Union ultimately had limited impact on the women's suffrage movement, and voting rights were not granted to women until August of 1920.

Nativist policies and anti-immigration propaganda in the WCTU limited suffrage initiatives to spread. With women on an international scope being inspired by Willard's work, the WCTU grew to be an international movement, with chapters developing in over 40 countries and British colonies (Marino). However, despite the growing international acceptance of Willard's policies, and Willard's supposed support for these foreign groups, the WCTU was widely against immigration to the United States. The Union was generally unsupportive of immigrants because "they were too fond of the drink" (Walsh 51). This generalization that foreigners tended to be heavy drinkers drew a concern that immigrants would bring their habits to the United States and threaten the prohibitionist progress of the WCTU. However, the Union expressed nativism for reasons beyond that of maintaining prohibitionist values as well. To appeal to nativist followers and draw public support for their movements, the Union expressed nativism publicly, a detrimental mistake in the fight for suffrage. In her public speech to the National Council of Women in February of 1891, Willard described high mortality rates in Asia through the brutal statement: "In Oriental countries they [The deceased] swarm thick as flies" which was followed by a more peaceful discussion of the purity of "the Anglo-Saxon race" (Valentine 2). In her speech, she conveyed a pro-Anglo Saxon and anti-Asian bias. Later, in Willard's address to the National Convention she directly addressed the Congress, asking them to "enact a stringent immigration law prohibiting the influx into our land of more of the scum of the Old World" (Walsh 53). Needless to say, following this ruthless request to ban immigration, Willard appealed to nativist southerners, attempting to draw in their support for her movement. However, even after initiating this propaganda, often southerners were stuck in their traditional ways and remained unwilling to support suffrage at all (Valentine 1). Indeed, this nativist propaganda proved to be detrimental. Not only did she not gain much support from southerners, but she also lost a great deal of more progressive supporters of the WCTU, who tended to be the bulk of the audience at Northern Conventions such as these. Those urban northerners who often supported immigration for labor in their corporations were then drawn away from Willard's women's suffrage

policies since they had so closely associated them with a nativist organization, who might threaten their employees.

Even more harmful to the Union's reputation than nativist policies, the Union's racist policies were highly detrimental to the goal of women's suffrage for both black and white women. Although Willard, in her speech to the National Council of Women in 1891, claimed to be "committed to the overthrow of all forms of ignorance and injustice," she was a known racist, and her goal of being a progressive organization that would encourage temperance for all, and reach universal suffrage for all, was compromised by her racist tactics (Valentine 2). In one interview in New York in 1890, Willard was recorded saying: "The colored race multiplies like the locusts of Egypt. The grog shop is its center of power. The safety of women, of childhood, of the home, is menaced in a thousand localities at this moment" (Gunderson 1). Her racist remarks speak to her inability to support those who were not white, fueled by her belief of the common assumption that all black men were alcoholics who would threaten the progress of the union; an untrue misconception created to mask the systemic racism in the program. As president of the organization, Willard also made the decision to racially segregate the Union into distinct chapters. This decision was made not because she had to, but because she wanted support from southern white racists who were unwilling to work with black women directly (Frances Willard House Museum 2). By segregating however, she continued to feed into the Jim-Crow racism of post-Civil War America, and only lead the path of women's suffrage towards the wrong direction. Further, Willard was known for supporting lynching practices. Despite how she claimed to be "unalterably opposed to lynching" in 1897, for the years before she was heavily supportive of this violent method of murder (Galladora). In 1890, she described in a press release how when a black man committed rape and was lynched, it was a positive good (Frances Willard House Museum). She also was known for "deliberately encouraging actions in the group that would prevent it from taking a formal stand against lynching" in order to gain support from pro-lynching Americans (Willard, the WCTU and Race 1). Willard's consideration that all African Americans imposed a danger to white women, and that lynching was worth supporting if it meant gaining racist supporters for her temperance movement, implied that she believed that women who were

not white were not deserving of equal rights, or suffrage in its entirety. Consequently, her racist policies, which she had tried to camouflage under the promise of an organization founded to fight injustice, faced extreme criticism from other progressives, leading to collapse later on.

Ida Wells held an imperative role in Willard's downfall, which ultimately ruined the reputation of the entire Union. A renowned African-American muckraker, interested in anti-lynching and progressive interests like women's suffrage, Wells was a highly influential journalist of her time. After meeting Willard at a conference, Wells was immediately upset by Willard's pro-lynching attitude and subtle racism she expressed in conversation (Frances Willard House Museum 1). Naturally, as a journalist devoted to bringing issues of racism to attention, she responded diligently at the next chance she could get. In response to one of Willard's interviews where Willard made racist remarks, Wells claimed that Ms. Willard "unhesitatingly slandered the entire Negro race in order to gain favor with those who are hanging, shooting, and burning Negroes alive," (Gunderson 1). That is, Wells wished to bring attention to Willard's wishes of gaining the support of racist southerners in the fight for suffrage, by enticing them with racism. Because Wells had such a large platform, which included progressive Northerners, Willard was angered by Wells' publications as they surely did not dignify her organization. And, these remarks certainly impeded on her plan for the Union to achieve universal suffrage in America. After all, universal suffrage implies that suffrage would be granted universally, not just to white Americans. Willard later responded in a press interview, claiming that Wells' remarks were "absurd, impulsive, and untrue" (Gunderson 1). However, Wells' large platform proved to win, and the Union's societal power eventually diminished in 1907.

The success of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union can not be measured in terms of the Union's impact on the fight for women's suffrage. After all, it was not Willard and other nativist and racist union members who can be owed for the ratification of the 19th amendment, guaranteeing suffrage for all black and white Americans regardless of sex. Rather, it is the progressive reformers, like Ida Wells, who forged the way for the movement while proudly facing criticism. That is not to profess that the WCTU made no impact on the state of the nation. After all, the WCTU certainly made progress in the

prohibition movement, drawing millions from alcohol into the light of the passage of the 18th amendment. However, if the Woman's Christian Temperance Union really wished to make the rapid and drastic changes in the inclusion of voting in the United States that their leaders so loudly advocated for, they should have remained a true Union; inclusive and universally accepting.

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Picture "American Woman and Her Political Peers" Cabinet Photo Features Willard.,

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