



## *Temperance Reform in the Early 19th Century*

### **Student Introduction**

Have you ever-trying alcohol? Has anyone ever asked you to try it? Has anyone ever asked you not to drink? Well, in the 1800s many people took a pledge to never drink alcohol. They were part of a movement called Temperance that was to have an enormous impact on our country.

In the period following the American Revolution many Americans drank to excess. This was due in part to economic and social problems that occurred as a result of rapid inflation following the war for independence. But widespread drinking was also a way of life. People accustomed to hard physical labor often drank when working - indeed it was often customary to pay workers with drink as well as money. Alcohol was an important part of all kinds of social functions from marriage ceremonies to elections to militia musters. In many parts of the country few drinks existed that did not contain alcohol, and it was often considered healthier to drink fermented and distilled beverages than water, which was often contaminated.

The Temperance Movement began to solve this growing problem. Beginning in the early 1800s the movement first tried to make people temperate in their drinking - that is to make them drink less. But by the 1820s the movement started to advocate for the total abstinence of all alcohol - that is, to urge people to stop drinking completely. The movement was also influential in passing laws that prohibited the sale of liquor in several states. When people took the pledge to stop drinking they joined what was called the "Cold Water Army".

Temperance was also important because it connected to many other reform movements that sprang up in the country during the years between the American Revolution and the Civil War. Many of these movements were motivated by a renewed interest in religion called the Second Great Awakening. The ministers of the Second Great Awakening preached in an energetic and emotional manner that appealed to the heart as well as the mind. These intense religious experiences occurred not just in churches but also in tents and in open-air meetings called "revivals." The Second Great Awakening inspired people to try to change the world and make it better.

A wide variety of reform movements developed to improve all aspects of society including diet, fashion, care of the mentally ill, treatment of prisoners, world peace, the rights of women, and the end to slavery. Temperance was at the center of most of these reform movements. Many reformers believed in abstinence, and it was through their early association with temperance societies that they met other reformers and began to seek ways to improve other aspects of society.

The temperance movement was also important because it was fundamental to the concept of individual choice and responsibility. Taking the pledge was a conscious, deliberate act that one person did in an effort to make himself or herself a better human being. Temperance also embodied one of the great historical trends of the nineteenth century - the rising power and influence of the individual in politics, philosophy, and economics. Over the course of the 1800s voting laws changed to allow all free white males to vote regardless of their ownership of land.

Uniquely American religions such as Unitarianism and philosophies such as Transcendentalism placed a greater emphasis on individual thought and perception than on scripture and dogma. An emerging consumer economy gave greater authority and power to individual purchasing power. And the nation faced its greatest crisis - the Civil War - over individual freedom. Central to all of these trends and events were the questions: "How should individual human beings behave" and "How does that behavior influence others?" That behavior included making promises - like taking the pledge - and sticking to them. These are questions we continue to ask today, and we continue to answer them in our decisions and attitudes about the use of alcohol.