

Prohibitionists/Anti-Saloonists Advocate for the Shut Down of the Cameron House and Baker House in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania

By Linda Rhoades-Swartz

At the turn of the 20th Century, Lewisburg had two prominent hotels, the Cameron House and Baker House. Both provided accommodations not only to the local folks but also to weary travelers and visitors to the county. Along with accommodations, both hotels provided meals and as well as alcoholic beverages. In 1916, both establishments filed with the county to have their liquor licenses renewed. This was the customary law in the state of Pennsylvania. In order to serve any type of alcoholic beverage in a public establishment, a liquor license had to be obtained from the state and then renewed every other year. Both hotel establishments' liquor licenses expired on April 1, 1916. Renewal was required prior expiration. This was not going to be an easy task.

Throughout history, there has been some sort of prohibition movement to curb drinking, especially among married men. Prohibitionists believed that if they could outlaw alcohol completely, married men would go home after work to be with their wives and children instead of wasting their money in a bars and cavorting with women of ill-repute. No matter what they did, the Anti-Saloonists found it difficult to ban the drinking, manufacturing and selling of alcoholic beverages.



Baker House – North 2nd Street
(UCHS 92.9.91.48)

This would change as the world entered the 20th Century. As World War I ravaged the European countryside, the issue of alcohol consumption became a concern for many world leaders. They felt that drunkenness hindered the war effort and began to restrict the buying of alcohol to certain times of the day. Some nations took this one step further and outlawed alcohol altogether. The United States joined this effort in 1919 with the passage of the 18th Amendment which banned the production and sale of alcohol.

The 18th Amendment was the ultimate goal of the Prohibitionists who had been working towards this end beginning in the early 19th Century. In 19th Century America, alcohol consumption was seen as a menace to society. 'Pious' Protestants sought to eliminate it all together, giving rise to the Temperance Movement which ultimately resulted in the passage of the Amendment and the law going into effect on January 16, 1919. Prior to 1919, some states and local governments had already begun to ban the sale of alcohol.

Union County was not immune to the Prohibition Movement. Also called the Anti-Saloon or Temperance Movement, it had its beginnings in the 19th century, but was escalated in the first two decades of the 20th Century. It was spurred on by Bucknell Professor Bromley Smith and his friends from outside the county. This group of Anti-Saloonists took the owners of both the Cameron House and Baker House to court to fight the renewal of their liquor licenses. They wanted a legal stand on Prohibition. If they were successful in their case, both hotels would be banned from selling alcohol. As some speculated at the time, Professor Smith and his league of Anti-Saloonists intended to open a prohibition accommodation.



Cameron House – East Market Street
(Courtesy of PHM)

The Anti-Saloonists stated from the beginning their objection was to the sale of alcohol and not to shut down the two hostelrys. They stated that both hotels “were model inns properly conducted for public accommodation,” as noted in the Lewisburg Journal (1916), but they also believed that both hotels were businesses of ill-repute. These hotels did not need a liquor license to conduct their hotel business, thus the reason for the court case.

On February 19, 1916 Judge Albert Johnson and his Associate Justices Gottlieb Rowe and A.K. Dieffenderfer voted against the renewal of the liquor licenses of both hotels. They had listened to both sides argue their points on Friday, February 18 and Saturday, February 19. The decision was quite amazing because both hotels presented witnesses in their favor. These were travelers, traveling salesman and towns folk, not only from Lewisburg, but also from surrounding towns. All proclaimed that the hotels were upstanding business and they saw no unsavory behavior due to the selling of alcohol. Those who were witnesses against the hotels were Professors from Bucknell University such as Bromley Smith, various local business owners and Reverend Crumbling. No matter how much evidence was presented for the keeping of the liquor license for the hotels and no evidence produced by the prohibitionists, the justices voted in favor of not renewing these licenses.

What was also interesting about the decisions was that the Justices refused to take responsibility for their verdict and admonished the lawyers who brought this case before them, stating that the case had in effect tarnished their (the judges’) reputation. This decision should have been the people’s and not the courts according to Judge Johnson. Johnson also noted that the peoples’ work had now begun because he believed it was their responsibility to make sure Union County stayed a dry county and were to be on the lookout for illegal sale of alcohol, especially in speakeasies.

Union County became the ninth county in the state of Pennsylvania to go ‘dry’. It was a celebratory time for the Prohibitionists who waged their war against both these hotels as early as 1912, yet a defeat at the same time. Why? Snyder County justices headed by Judge Johnson refused to vote in favor of Prohibition leaving Judge Johnson the only justice to do so for the Union County neighbor to the southwest.

While the Prohibitionists were celebrating the decision, they did not realize the consequence of this action. Both the Baker House and Cameron House declared that they would close their doors to the public on April 1, 1916 offering no more accommodations for travelers, vacationers, visitors or workers. The Anti-Saloon movement might have won the day, but the closing of these two businesses created an economic hole for Lewisburg and the county. Businessmen and travelers who visited Lewisburg went elsewhere for lodging.