

Andrew Volstead:

**PROHIBITION'S PUBLIC FACE**



## Rae Katherine Eighmey

**I**N NOVEMBER 1933, ON THE EVE OF THE REPEAL of Prohibition, a *New York Times* reporter sat in Andrew J. Volstead's Granite Falls law office. The two men talked for an hour. The tall, thin former congressman with a bushy moustache put his feet up on his roll-top desk and offered opinions about topics of the day but spoke very little about the law that carried his name.<sup>1</sup>

The so-called Volstead Act of 1919 (its proper name is the National Prohibition Act) provided the regulations to enact the Eighteenth Amendment: Prohibition, or the end to manufacturing, transporting, and selling intoxicating alcoholic beverages. Its restrictions and limits redefined American life. Other significant laws are familiarly known by the names of their congressional authors—Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act, Morrill Land Grant Act, Sherman Anti-Trust Act, Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform. But the Volstead Act never needed an explanatory modifier. From the very beginning, it clearly stood for Prohibition and its enforcement.

The law made Volstead a nationally recognized figure and defined his last years of government service. Defeated for reelection in 1922, he continued to serve the Prohibition cause, quietly, as a legal consultant to the National Prohibition Enforcement Bureau's upper Midwest region from 1924 until a few months before repeal in 1933.<sup>2</sup> Volstead did not speak or write about his place in history, but his papers, housed at the Minnesota His-

torical Society, reveal the large impact that the law and Prohibition made on a seemingly reticent public servant who was caught up in the leading social-change movements of the twentieth century.

**VOLSTEAD NEVER ESCAPED HIS CONNECTION TO** Prohibition. Before repeal, whenever major events involved alcoholic beverages, national media sought his opinion, frequently identifying him as “the father of Prohibition.” He did not seek attention. He gave few speeches, primarily to Prohibition-supporting groups including the Women's Christian Temperance Union and the Anti-Saloon League. Nevertheless, those speeches and newspaper interviews portray his steadfast belief that Prohibition was the best course for the nation. The conclusion of an undated speech from the early days of Prohibition highlights Volstead's perspective on the law's place in the arc of history.

I am proud that America is leading in this great movement. The eyes of the world are upon us, and from innumerable homes, here and beyond the seas, prayers go up

*FACING AND ABOVE: Andrew J. Volstead, ca. 1933, when the Prohibition amendment was about to be repealed; metal bumper plate, about 1925, and button, undated, part of the long-running campaign to save it.*

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*“While they’re going into ecstasies over beer . . . they don’t say anything about the saloons, the stink of beer out in front, the barflies and drunkard husbands. They forget to give us that picture.”*

for the success of the cause. Are we going to disappoint them? No! A thousand times no! The men and women who wrote the prohibition amendment into the National Constitution will, I am sure, sustain it. A nation that was brave enough and generous enough to give millions of its men and billions of its money in the World War will turn aside with contempt from the sneers and taunts of those who selfishly and petulantly insist that their right to indulge in intoxicating drinks is superior to all law and more important than the public good.<sup>3</sup>

In January 1933, a reporter asked Volstead’s opinion about renewed efforts to legalize beer with pre-Prohibition alcohol levels. The article, headlined “Volstead Derides Wholesome Beer,” shows that he remained firm in his convictions.

“Nice wholesome healthful beer, containing all the ingredients of milk—but not intoxicating!” Andrew J. Volstead, “father of prohibition” having uttered those words, leaned back in his chair and laughed scornfully. He was thinking of those men down in Congress who are trying to legalize beer with 3.2 per cent alcoholic content. He shrugged his aging shoulders. . . . “But while they’re going into ecstasies over beer—its wonderful qualities, the enormous revenues and the rejuvenation of business—they don’t say anything about the saloons, the stink of beer out in front, the barflies and drunkard husbands. They forget to give us that picture.”<sup>4</sup>

Times had changed, however. After 13 years without legal beer, wine, or hard liquor but with increasing supplies of bootleg booze, special state conventions in late 1933 ratified the Twenty-First Amendment. In 89

words, it restored drinks to the nation. Volstead was philosophical. A month before repeal, he told the *New York Times*: “If I were to say that prohibition had been a mistake, there would be an awful uproar. And if I defended prohibition the other side would be after me. I have had experience enough to know that anything I say will be broadcast widely.” He concluded, “I am not even a spectator.”<sup>5</sup>

**BORN IN GOODHUE COUNTY, VOLSTEAD ARRIVED IN** Granite Falls, Yellow Medicine County, in 1886 and began a life of public service. He was elected county attorney, holding that office for 14 years. He was a member of the Granite Falls board of education and served as its president, became the city’s prosecuting attorney, and then was mayor from 1900 to 1902 before being elected to the first of ten terms in Congress (1903–23). Back in Granite Falls after his congressional defeat, the man whose name had been bannered in newspaper headlines preferred to avoid community activities and the press. Widowed in 1918, he remained in Granite Falls until his death in 1947, at age 87. Until stopped by ill health in 1943, he practiced small-town law—handling probate cases and the like—from his “hard-to-find” law office described by a *Times* reporter as “one flight up a dimly lighted stairway, in which he has the bookcases and age-worn law books that he used before going to congress in 1903.”<sup>6</sup>

Once out of the public eye, Volstead did retain some materials from his congressional years, especially from his Prohibition involvement. Those papers provide a window into what he thought worth saving. And they convey the intense emotions of people on both sides of the Prohibition experiment during that tempestuous era.

These documents fill just seven small archival boxes, each about six inches deep. Many of them came to the Minnesota Historical Society shortly after Volstead’s death; others were acquired in the 1960s. The collection holds just a portion of the letters Volstead received. Laura E. Lomen, the congressman’s only child, wrote in a May 1965 letter to the Society’s director that “a tremendous amount of letters etc. which were sent to G. F. [Granite Falls] after my father was no longer in Congress had been destroyed.”<sup>7</sup> Volstead, and possibly his daughter, selected the balanced collection that remains. These



For a wide-angle view of this social experiment, visit *American Spirits: The Rise and Fall of Prohibition*, on view at the History Center, St. Paul, until March 16, 2014; [www.minnesotahistorycenter.org/exhibits](http://www.minnesotahistorycenter.org/exhibits).



*Madison (Lac Qui Parle County) members of the Women's Christian Temperance Union supporting the cause, about 1917, before women could vote*

materials provide important insights into the dedication, strength, and courage of the mild-mannered representative from Minnesota's Seventh Congressional District.

Most of the archived papers are from 1919 to 1922, the months immediately before and after Prohibition took effect. They vividly demonstrate that Volstead became both a person to thank and a lightning rod for blame. Although other congressmen had introduced and fully supported the Eighteenth Amendment legislation—and all but one state legislature (Rhode Island) quickly voted to ratify it—Volstead was the public face for all that was good and bad about Prohibition and the enforcement law dubbed the Volstead Act.

**"TO BE KEPT." THIS NOTATION WAS NEATLY PENCILED** along the side of a typed, undated, untitled, and unidentified song lyric or poem. Its verses highlight the interconnections of progressive reforms in the early-twentieth century, when two key social movements led to constitutional amendments and ushered in change. A year after the Eighteenth Amendment brought about Prohibition, the woman's suffrage movement culminated in the pas-

sage of the Nineteenth Amendment giving women the vote. These two causes were frequently linked, and these lines celebrate Volstead's regard for both.

We are for Volstead his name we bear,  
All true Suffragettes are we,  
Members all of his great club in town,  
All one common cause have we.

**Chorus:**

All for Volstead banded firmly together,  
Boost—our watchword ere shall be,  
All for Volstead true and loyal forever,  
Just one common cause have we.

When we have a clean and happy land,  
Let our hearts united be.  
We will give to him our best support,  
Just one common cause have we.<sup>8</sup>

Volstead believed women's votes were essential for maintaining Prohibition. In a December 1921 speech to the Anti-Saloon League, the activist organization that

had led the Prohibition fight, he directly addressed the importance of women and their votes to the long-term success of the cause: “Since they have been given the ballot they have always been the foe of the saloon, they suffered the most from it, and they will never consent that it be restored.”

The Minnesota congressman had not been a temperance activist. He was simply doing his job as chairman of the House Judiciary Committee when the Prohibition amendment was ratified. Since 1913 Volstead had been the ranking Republican on that committee. When the GOP regained the majority in the 1918 election, he became chairman for the Sixty-Sixth and Sixty-Seventh sessions of Congress (1919–21 and 1921–23). So, the responsibility for writing the nearly 12,000-word law that gave specificity and teeth to the 106-word amendment fell to him in his ninth congressional term.<sup>9</sup>

A January 1920 letter from Wayne Wheeler, legal liaison for the Anti-Saloon League, underscored Volstead’s contribution to the law. “I know the hard work you did on the Code. You have taken part in many influential matters and you did more work, many times over, than any man in Congress, to secure the enactment of what will go down in history as the Volstead Prohibition Code. The nation will be increasingly grateful to you in years to come.”

**PROHIBITION DID NOT HAPPEN SUDDENLY. CITIZENS** had nearly two years to get used to the idea of living without liquor, defined as beverages containing more than one-half of one percent alcohol. After passing both houses of Congress, the Eighteenth Amendment was sent

to the states in December 1917. Two-thirds of the nation’s 48 state legislatures had to ratify it before the amendment could become part of the Constitution. Congress had allowed seven years for that process; however, in just 13 months “Dry” supporters achieved their goal when Nebraska became the thirty-sixth ratifying state. Then, it took another year for the specific regulations and penalties to be written, passed by both houses of Congress, and signed into law by President Woodrow Wilson.<sup>10</sup>

So, businesses had time to liquidate their stocks and restructure, and alcohol lovers had months of opportunity to lay in a legal stockpile. Prohibition allowed individuals to enjoy alcoholic beverages; they just could not buy or make them. People who had purchased wine, beer, or hard liquor before Saturday, January 17, 1920, were free to drink it when Prohibition went into effect.

**WHILE LIFE CHANGED FOR MOST AMERICANS WHO** enjoyed a nip of alcohol or a draft of beer, it altered more dramatically for Andrew Volstead. His reaction to a newspaper story printed three months after Prohibition began clearly shows how that change concerned him. This and subsequent articles and letters must have been meaningful; Volstead kept all of them.

Early in the first election year after Prohibition, on March 17, 1920, the *Baltimore Sun*, a “pro-whisky” newspaper according to Volstead, published a chatty, seem-

*Last call: Inside a New York City bar minutes before midnight, June 30, 1919, when wartime prohibition (which preceded enforcement of the Eighteenth Amendment) began.*



*“How does it feel to be ‘cussed’ from coast to coast as a rabid and fanatical ‘dry’ when really you are ‘half wet,’ and it was merely the fortunes of politics that caused your name to go on a prohibition law?”*

ingly lighthearted article presenting the congressman as a man who was wavering—even compromised—in his support for Prohibition. The *Sun* and other papers then wrote editorials—based on the “facts” in the interview—accusing Volstead, as he said in self-defense, of “hedging, getting scared, and . . . lacking convictions in his dedication to the Prohibition movement and law.”<sup>11</sup>

On March 22, the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* reprinted the *Sun* article on page two under the headline, “Volstead Abused as Fanatical ‘Dry’ Declares He Really is Half ‘Wet.’” The story, which ran in both papers without a byline, began with the question: “How does it feel to be ‘cussed’ from coast to coast as a rabid and fanatical ‘dry’ when really you are ‘half wet,’ and it was merely the fortunes of politics that caused your name to go on a prohibition law?” The unnamed author couched Volstead’s answers in a cheerful, bantering tone and described the congressman as “mild-mannered” and having “twinkling” blue eyes. He stroked his “drooping mustache before he answered” or “scratched his chin a bit and seemed inclined to proceed.” Volstead’s language was reportedly casual, too: “Mebbe, if you want to put it that way.” Or, allegedly describing his own wet behavior, “I have never hesitated to take a little drink when I wanted it.”

Volstead was outraged when the article appeared and sent sternly worded letters to both newspapers’ editors. On March 27 he told the *Pioneer Press*: “This article adroitly insinuates if it does not directly charge that I have represented myself as opposed to prohibition; that I am half Wet, and that I drew the National Prohibition Act unwillingly under some sort of compulsion.” In addition, he protested that, not knowing the name of the reporter, he could not remember giving an interview on the topic. And “the language in this alleged interview is not mine and the quotation marks are without any authority or justification.” Further, Volstead defined the nature and degree of harm the article’s misrepresentation did to his reputation and dedication.



*Volstead, still in Washington but identified as the “former chair of the House Judiciary Committee,” 1923*

The evident purpose of the article is to create the impression that I am scared because of threats and abuse by those opposed to prohibition and that I am apologizing for my share in drafting and passing the law. Nothing is further from the truth. I do not know who claims to have obtained this alleged interview nor upon what occasions. . . . Try to explain . . . that the National Prohibition Act is not drastic or extreme and you are immediately charged with hedging, getting scared, and lacking convictions. . . . I have never said anything that would justify an inference that I do not believe in prohibition, nor have I ever apologized in any fashion for the National Prohibition Act or for my share in drafting or passing it. . . . Instead of being unwilling to draw and pass this Act, it was a labor in which I felt the deepest interest and to which I gladly contributed months of the hardest kind of work.

After receiving a similar letter, the *Sun* editor invited the reporter, Theodore Tiller, to respond. Feeling “somewhat angry” that Volstead did not recall giving the interview, Tiller replied on March 29, describing in detail how he questioned the congressman as they traveled back from the House chambers to his office, where Volstead

“stretched out his legs and talked to me for twenty or thirty minutes.” Tiller also explained the rationale behind the story and its tone.

I used this in a semi-serious way, not offensively. My entire story was an endeavor to write in a rather light than serious, vein of the tribulations of the author of the prohibition act who was neither “dry” as some of his colleagues, nor as “wet” as gentlemen with thirst would have him be. I showed that he leaned backward neither way, but had framed a law which he thought followed Constitutional mandate.

The *Sun* then printed Volstead’s objections along with Tiller’s defense.

Volstead was even more specific in a second letter to the *Pioneer Press*. This seven-page missive on April 10 fully explained the reasons for his outrage and concluded: “This whole miserable business is but another illustration of familiar saloon methods. If a person is opposed to the saloon, he is accused of being a hypocrite and of getting drunk on all occasions when he can do so unobserved.”

If the *Pioneer Press* responded, that response is lost to history. Volstead’s papers do not contain it nor was the correspondence published. The newspaper’s only article involving Volstead during the following month was a front-page story praising his legislation protecting agricultural cooperatives from being held in violation of anti-trust laws.

#### NEWSPAPERS WERE NOT ALONE IN TARGETING THE

congressman. Individuals of dry and wet persuasion from across the nation sent hundreds of letters and penny postcards directly to Volstead. Their raw emotions come to life in the letters Volstead saved. On page after page, the personalities of liquor lovers and law abiders bring vitality to history’s understanding of the times and the accomplishment of Minnesota’s representative. These letters—precisely penned or scrawled in pencil; neatly typed or furiously pounded out in all capital letters, sometimes shifting into the red half of the typewriter ribbon—reveal the tone and tenor of the era when the idealized notion of sobriety became the law of the land.

Some gentle writers urged modification of aspects of the law to narrow its scope or make it more effective or fair. They argued that the temperance cause would be better served, for example, by raising the percentage

of alcohol in beer from the legal one-half of one percent to the still-low 2.75 percent of the temporary World War I limit; or by lifting the restriction on the number of alcohol-related prescriptions a doctor could write or a pharmacist could fill; or by allowing ships that served alcoholic beverages on the high seas to dock in the United States. In June 1921 one anonymous petitioner from Milwaukee mildly requested what many others also desired: the return of real beer. “Dear Mr. Volstead, Will you be kind enough to help the good people to get the return of Beer good Beer hurts no one But poor Beer will and Oblige a Sick Man.”

But the bulk of the archived letters get right to each writer’s attitude toward Prohibition, with about half of the correspondents praising Volstead and the others vilifying him. Many of the negative letters are appalling examples of hate speech. Some were anonymous but others were boldly signed. A few writers went so far as to enclose pictures of Volstead cut from the newspaper, mounted on cardboard, and then tied around the neck with a kitchen-string noose.

It is no wonder that Volstead took comfort in the positive letters, such as one from a business owner in Bradford, Pennsylvania. Mr. Hamilton of the Tuna Iron

Milwaukee Wis  
June 11-21  
Dear Mr Volstead.  
Will you be kind  
enough to help the  
good people to get  
the return of Beer  
good Beer hurts no  
one But poor Beer  
will  
and Oblige  
a Sick Man.

*"You have my permission to go the limit and give booze the sword clear to the hilt. Medicinal beer is the beer for boozers nothing else. We are done with booze in every form."*

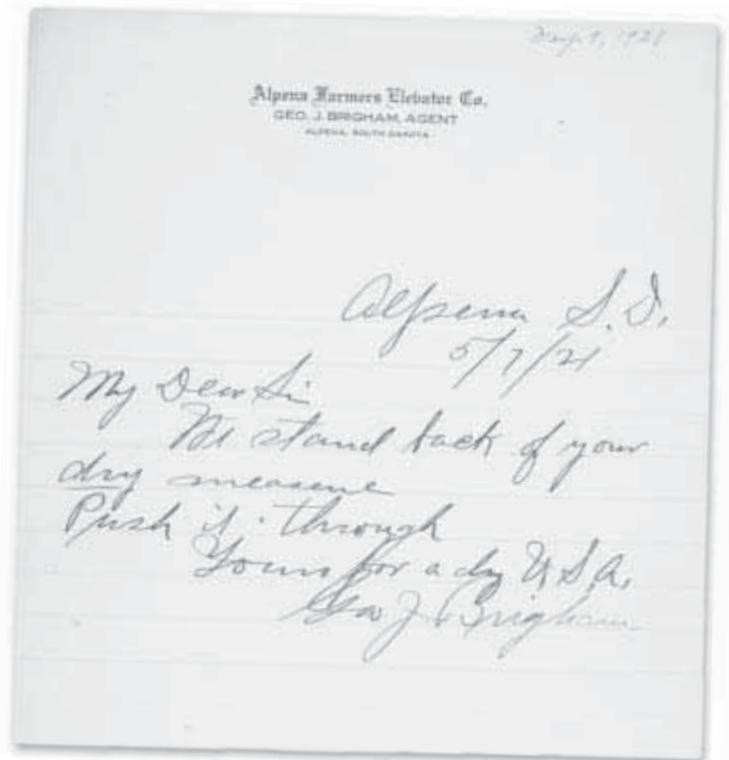
Works wrote in April 1921, commenting on more than a year's worth of Prohibition progress: "There has been so much good derived from Prohibition that nobody of any conscience would want to go back to the old reign of whiskey." He continued, praising the law's effect on his workers: "Employees now have a little bank account, and their children are better clothed and fed than they were previous to the Volstead act."

Volstead kept a carbon copy of his response, filed next to the original letter: "Allow me to thank you for your very kind letter of recent date. It is indeed gratifying to occasionally receive a communication from an individual who has had an opportunity to observe the effect of prohibition amongst the working classes particularly."

E. H. Conibear's May 1921 letter from Dallas urged Volstead to "continue the same Vigilance for purity and clean lives. . . . Texas is much better than before Prohibition and now if we can have the bums and scallawags driven from our fair state we will be a happy and prosperous people. I am taking this method of telling you that your work is appreciated by thousands that you will never meet nor hear from but they will praise you just the same."

Judging from the letterhead on some of the correspondence, a few individuals' wholehearted praise for Prohibition coincided with their business interests. K. H. Ely wrote from De Smet, South Dakota, on letterhead that advertised "Eats, and Drinks, Ice Cream Confections, Cigars and Tobacco." His May 1921 message was unequivocal: "You have my permission to go the limit and give booze the sword clear to the hilt. Medicinal beer is the beer for boozers nothing else. We are done with booze in every form."

Temperance activists kept up the pressure to remove *all* alcoholic temptations. Even common flavoring extracts attracted attention. N. W. Brown, a real estate agent from Hillsboro, North Carolina, sent two lemon extract bottles to Volstead in May 1921, seeking his intervention: "The contents was drunk by a young man who has been drinking this kind of stuff for the past twelve



months. I picked these up just after the poor fellow had taken the contents. I showed the bottles to the prohibition officer and asked him if something could not be done with the seller of lemon extract showing 90 per cent alcohol. . . . The young man referred to has since died."

Some correspondents, such as the writer of this unsigned and undated letter from early 1921 expressed thanks for the law in an increasingly complex time.

Prohibition is a great Blessing for our Nation. Intricate national problems are multiplying and excited minds should at least be sober. . . . In these days of Automobiles it is more necessary than ever that ours should be a Sober Nation. With the greatest of care auto accidents can not be entirely averted: but the whirling dizzy intoxicated brains of auto drivers can not but increase automobile accidents greatly. You are certainly entitled to great credit for what you have done.

John M. Taylor, who signed his May 1922 letter "A Farmer Claremore, Ok.," shared Volstead's interest in progressive legislation. Enacting Prohibition, he said, "was the greatest blessing to the mothers, daughters, and sons of America. The passage of the Women's Suffrage Act and the Amendment to the Constitution . . . will forever perpetuate prohibition in America as it protects children from the evils of drink and use of narcotics in the future, which has ruined many a home of true happiness by its effects."

**AFTER NEARLY TWO YEARS OF ENFORCEMENT,**

Volstead spoke to another reporter, one he evidently trusted to get the story right. James B. Morrow of the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* explained the congressman's authorship of the law, saying that he "never signed a pledge nor has he ever been identified with any temperance society but he drew the bill that bears his name solely because the law must have a strong arm."<sup>12</sup>

Morrow went on to describe the outpouring of letters written with stunning candor and hatred. "The goat of liquor makers, liquor dealers, and liquor drinkers is Andrew J. Volstead . . . Letters that he has received and is receiving unsigned largely show vigorously enough and even profanely, that the wrath of the alcoholic hosts of the republic center upon him."

Those outspoken criticisms began even before restrictions were in full force. An "honest working man" sent a penny postcard in October 1919, wrapping several politi-

*"I am not a Saloon man but I like my beer and wine. I never was a Drunk in my life. I have family but you made a Bolshevik out of me. We will clean the Country of ALL TRAITORS. You shall not enjoy the bribes you took. You say the war is over? Well in war time TRAITORS are shot."*

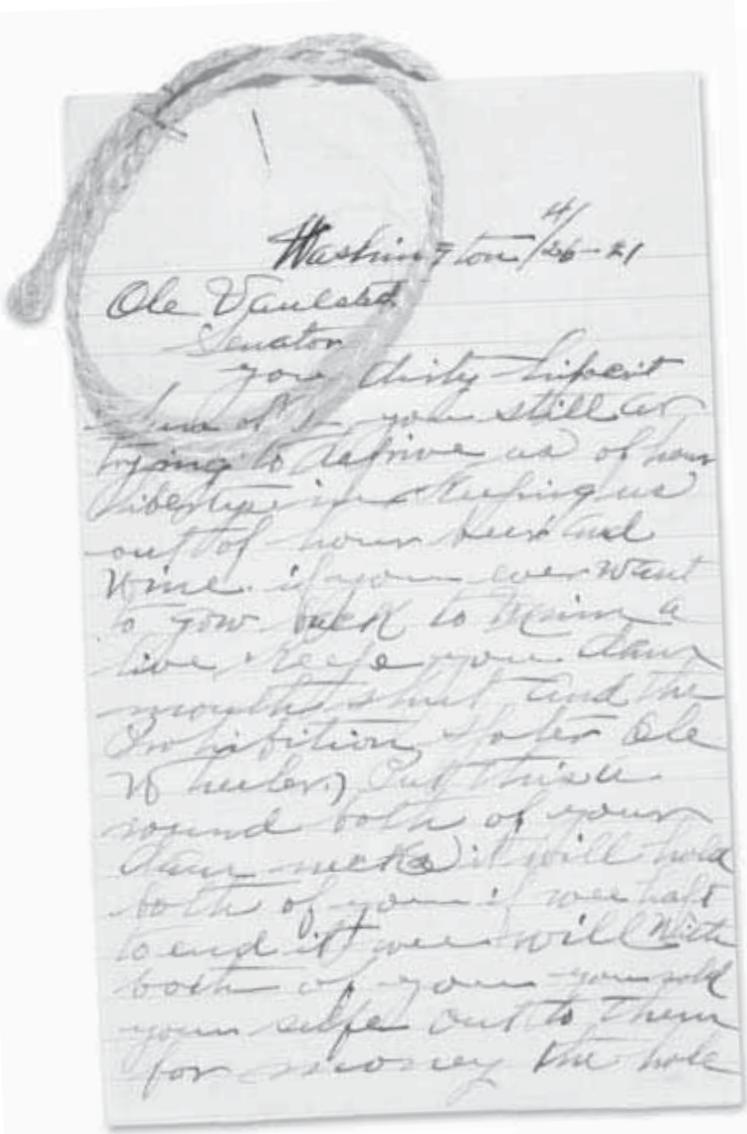
cal concerns into his anti-Prohibition threat: "Now your dirty war is finished but the money you and others got for it will do you NO GOOD. I am not a Saloon man but I like my beer and wine. I never was a Drunk in my life. I have family but you made a Bolshevik out of me. We will clean the Country of ALL TRAITORS. You shall not enjoy the bribes you took. You say the war is over? Well in war time TRAITORS are shot."

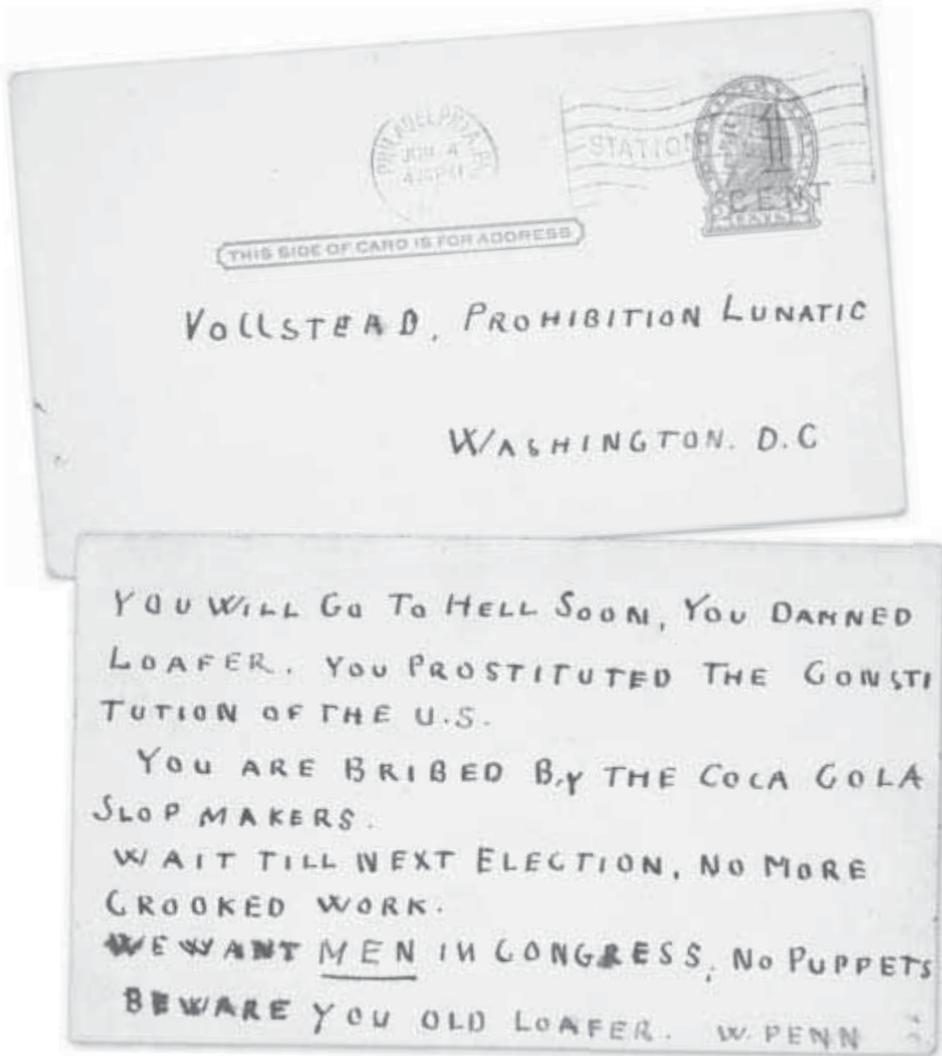
Beer was on the minds of many. A June 3, 1921, postcard from Zanesville, Ohio, began without salutation: "Free America? (for some)." Its author went on: "If it were not for a bunch of nuts like you and a few more, we would be enjoying a nice cool glass of beer these hot days. Yours, Ed. McHoltz 100% American."

Another postcard sent on April 26, 1921, from Philadelphia speculated about why Volstead was involved with Prohibition: "Did your father, or did your mother die a drunkard? If such is the case, wasn't it whiskey that did it? And if it was whiskey, why appear so relentless against harmless 5% Lager Beer—the poor man's, the middle man's, and the merchant's healthful beverage."

Several class-conscious correspondents boldly reproached Volstead. In January 1921, "American citizen" wrote, "This prohibition is only for the poor. Rich can have anything they want. Some of your agents never knew what it was or is to earn honest dollars that is why they have these jobs. This is all for now. The next will be stronger." A month later, an unsigned note admonished, "You don't have real men who do the hard real work of the country talking prohibition. It is such as you with white hands and white collars who sit on their ass all day preaching while real flesh and blood men do the work."

*One of several missives to include a noose. This one was meant for both Volstead and the Anti-Saloon League's Wayne Wheeler.*





A man who signed as “W. Penn” linked Volstead and Prohibition to soft-drink manufacturers who saw their business soar as people turned to Coca Cola and other fizzy, flavored drinks for refreshment. “You will go to Hell soon, you damned loafer. You prostituted the constitution of the U.S. You are bribed by the Coca Cola slop makers. Wait till next election. . . . We want men in congress. No puppets. Beware you old loafer.” Another writer made his threat more directly: “Representative Volstead speaking in Minnesota says that his life has been threatened. Perhaps he ought to get the soft drink profiteers to finance a guard of honor for him.”<sup>13</sup>

One letter from October 1921 contains shocking language, but even more scandalous is the letterhead on which it was written: the City of New York Department of Police Headquarters. The author hid behind the name “Democritus,” but his meaning was all too clear: “Who, in God’s name would waste a perfectly good bullet, a knife thrust or even a cup of ‘hemlock’ on such an infinitely de-

spicable specimen of the genus vermin as Andrew J. Volstead? No, you are not worth it. Even the nit that preys on a cootie . . . has a greater sense of shame, or honor, and self-respect than has Andrew J. Volstead! Yours in disgust.”

While carbon copies of responses are filed adjacent to letters of appreciation and some with suggestions for improvement, the collection holds no evidence that Volstead responded to most of the critical letters. He did refute some points in a May 31, 1922, letter to Jerome Weir of Victoria, Texas, expanding upon a theme he used in speeches: the connection between crime and the prevalence of street-corner saloons.

The cases of crimes cited by you have little connection with liquor or the prohibition of liquor. As a matter of fact, the criminal records clearly show that the prohibition law has greatly reduced crimes in this country. It is a matter of common knowledge that the saloon and its wares were directly responsible for a great deal of the

criminal courts’ work prior to the enactment of the prohibition law. Not only has it reduced the class of crimes due to the liquor traffic, but the testimony as to its beneficial effect in saving people from poverty and general debauchery stands undisputed. The wares bought in a saloon never saved a man from either hunger or cold and never put a dollar in a savings bank.

We do have one Volstead-written response to a vituperative letter from A. D. Downder, M.D., of Princeton, Illinois. In his January 10, 1920, missive, sent just before Prohibition went into effect, the doctor was so furious that he did not consistently type out “Prohibition.”

For all the jokes and humbugs yet played on the American people this so called Prohibition act is the most farsacical [*sic*]. . . . We have been a dry town for years, but nowhere is more liquor used than I ever saw under our no saloon town. I have always been in favor of regu-

lation of the liquor traffic, But Not a PROHI!!!! AND now I see the foolish humbug of it all. I have always voted a dry ticket, but now I would vote Wet WET! Liquor is not needed in medical practice much but as in the influenza cases about one in eight needs the stimulation to carry them over to save life. I am not a booze-fighter never was, never used liquor only in a cold a wee bit, but I suppose you do not care how many die if only you can put your Prohi humbug over for it is a FARCE ALL OF IT AND SIR YOU KNOW IT!

The normally circumspect congressman, in a moment of candor, penned an answer on the back of the letter—so forcefully, it seems, that his handwriting is hard to decipher. Apparently, his secretary did not type and send it. Volstead scrawled, “I have your letter complaining of prohibition. You say you are dry or at least that you have voted dry but that now since prohibition is not being enforced to suit you[,] wet is your vote. Sure. I should guess that reading from your letter, if I am permitted to make an observation, it would be that at the time you wrote your letter you were not greatly in need of liquor.”



*Legal beer, purchased at Gluek's Brewery, Minneapolis, 1933*

**VOLSTEAD SERVED MOST OF HIS YEARS IN CONGRESS** as a “back-bencher,” one who quietly did his best for his constituents. A look at the *New York Times* to gauge his national impact shows only three articles about his congressional career—until Prohibition. Then, during the years the Eighteenth Amendment was in force, more than 200 *Times* articles mention Volstead.

Flung into the national, and even international, spotlight, Volstead did not seek to capitalize upon fame. Once, the camera-shy congressman ran across the White House lawn trying to escape the Washington press corps positioned to capture his farewell visit to President Warren G. Harding. Splitting their ranks, the journalists caught up with him, and he reluctantly stood to have

his picture taken. Six months after leaving office, he was hailed with a standing ovation when he rose to speak at the Congress Against Alcohol convention in Copenhagen, but upon his return to the United States three months later, he declared that he would not speak about Prohibition again. The pragmatic Minnesotan returned to Granite Falls. And he mostly kept his word.<sup>14</sup>

Volstead's last major piece of legislation, like Prohibition, had a significant effect on the nation. The Capper-Volstead Act, signed into law February 16, 1922, transformed the way farmers could do the business of bringing food to the table by allowing agricultural cooperatives to function without concern of violating anti-trust laws. His papers preserve a handful of neatly typed

letters from agricultural organizations sent in the days immediately following the bill's passage. "I know of no measure ever passed by Congress that will be more helpful or far reaching than this bill. . . . I am not thinking of farmer folks only, for the consumer is as much benefited as the producers by the measure, so you have in a broad, statesmanlike way served the people of our national life."<sup>15</sup>

#### FOR THOSE WHO BRIEFLY PONDER HISTORY,

Volstead's name is tied to a failed social experiment. Yet closer reflection shows that the 13 years of national Prohibition resulted in societal changes for the better. Alcohol-consumption habits changed, and drinking levels remained significantly lower after repeal. Not until the 1970s did they again reach pre-Prohibition levels.<sup>16</sup> The stranglehold of major brewers on the business prac-

tices of local saloons was broken. Soda fountains became a fixture on the nation's main streets, changing the landscape. For good or ill, men and women shared social drinking in speakeasies and later in the reopened bars, lending civility to the cocktail hour.

The Capper-Volstead Act continues to bear fruit today, too. In the 1940s, shortly before Volstead's death, Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace stated that the legislation resulted in "a co-operative commonwealth" achieved by a "bloodless revolution." In 2013 a leading agricultural attorney said that he was "convinced that Capper-Volstead was and continues to be essential legislation for agriculture."<sup>17</sup>

Andrew Volstead, the quiet representative from Minnesota's Seventh Congressional District, brought lasting and positive change to the nation. The papers he chose to save testify to the impact of his accomplishments and thoughtful approach to governance. □

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## Notes

1. "Volstead Ignores Returns on Repeal," *New York Times*, Nov. 8, 1933.

2. John Knobler, *Ardent Spirits: The Rise and Fall of Prohibition* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1973); Bruce M. White et al., *Minnesota Votes* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1977), 226.

3. Undated speech, p. 14, box 4, Andrew J. Volstead and Family Papers, Minnesota Historical Society (MHS). Unless otherwise noted, all documents quoted in this article are in this collection. Only hard-to-find items are annotated.

4. *New York Times*, Jan. 15, 1933.

5. "Volstead Ignores Returns," *New York Times*, Nov. 8, 1933.

6. Arthur P. Rose, *An Illustrated History of Yellow Medicine County, Minnesota* (Marshall, MN: Northern History, 1914), 319, also available online; "A. J. Volstead Dies," *New York Times*, Jan. 21, 1947; "Volstead Ignores Returns," *New York Times*, Nov. 8, 1933.

7. Duane Swanson, manuscripts curator, MHS, e-mail to author, Apr. 8, 2013 (including quote).

8. Box 1, Volstead papers.

9. "A History of the Committee on the Judiciary, 1813–2006," <http://judiciary.house.gov/about/history.html>.

10. Charles Mertz, *The Dry Decade* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1969), 40–50. By the time Wilson signed, the temporary Wartime Prohibition Act, mandating a legal limit of 2.75 percent alcohol content beginning on July 1, 1919, was in effect. Although enacted after the armistice with Germany, it remained in force until the nation was "at peace"—and the peace treaty was in dispute throughout 1919. "Wartime Prohibition Law is Upheld," *New York Times*, Dec. 16, 1919.

11. In his April 10, 1920, letter to the *Pioneer Press*, Volstead said he had placed this defense in the *Congressional Record*.

12. Here and below, *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, Nov. 15, 1921, clipping in Volstead papers.

13. Undated postcard and unsigned, undated letter, both filed with Sept. 1921 correspondence.

14. *New York Times*: "Volstead Loses Fight to Cameras at White House," Apr. 13, 1923; "World Dry Parlay Acclaims Volstead," Aug. 22, 1923; "Volstead Back, Taciturn," Nov. 12, 1923.

15. Gray Silver, American Farm Bureau Federation, to Volstead, Feb. 15, 1922.

16. Daniel Okrent, *Last Call: The Rise and Fall of Prohibition* (New York: Scribner, 2010), 373.

17. "30-Year Advance by Cooperatives," *New York Times*, Mar. 18, 1946; Randon W. Wilson, "The Evolution of Farmers, Their Cooperatives and the Capper-Volstead Act," *Agriculture and Food Committee e-Bulletin* (Spring 2013), 5, also available online.

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