

## **The Red Tape Cocktail: Charleston's Reaction to the South Carolina Dispensary System**

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On June 30, 1893 King Street was crowded with a mass of humanity who wandered the street consuming large amounts of intoxicating liquors in various bar rooms and restaurants. Throngs of people littered the street calling and shouting to one another. The night was compared to a Christmas Eve. The scene must have appeared jovial, but the city was deep in mourning. Gas jets illuminated windows that bore bottles and decanters draped in black. On the corner of King and Calhoun Streets, the outrage of the city of Charleston was embodied in an effigy of Governor Ben Tillman hanging from a lamppost. Its appearance "was not striking of His Highness," except that one of the creators had punched out an eye. Around his neck hung a whiskey bottle, and a great crowd gathered to jeer and laugh at the display. Charlestonians packed the street until twelve o'clock, when the city's private bars and saloons shut and the South Carolina Dispensary Law took effect.<sup>1</sup>

This scene vividly showed the sentiment of the people of Charleston toward both the Dispensary Law and their governor, Ben Tillman. On July 1, 1893 the state of South Carolina became the only licensed agency that could legally sell alcohol or liquor within the state. All private businesses that sold intoxicating substances closed, and state-run dispensaries replaced them. These government agencies sold liquor under a rigid set of rules that angered the general population of Charleston. After the enactment of the law, the people of the city refused to adhere to its regulations. Charlestonians, in their attitudes and politics, were wholly different from the agrarian, fundamentalist

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residents of the South Carolina Upcountry. This urban vs. rural conflict was played out by the enactment of this legislation and its enforcer, “Pitchfork” Ben Tillman. The dispensary system came to represent all that Charleston was not, and the law ultimately failed in Charleston because of both the city’s unique culture and its dislike of Governor Ben Tillman.

After several attempts at passing a prohibition bill, the Evans Dispensary Bill was pushed through the Senate. The measure was passed just a few days before the closing session of the legislature for Christmas. Several accounts circulated as to the exact origins of the dispensary plan, but it was certainly Governor Tillman’s doing. Historian John Evans Eubank wrote that Tillman became enamored with the system and called it his “baby.” The dispensary bill closed down the private selling or manufacturing of alcohol or intoxicating substances, turning the buying, bottling and distributing of liquor over to the state. The substances could be bought at any state dispensary run by a state employee. Patrons of the dispensary could not consume their purchase on the premises. Through local option, a dispensary could be established if the majority of the freeholders of an area or community signed a petition in favor of it. In addition, the law created a state police force of sorts, the dispensary constables, to enforce the law and to stop the illegal selling of alcohol. The law would become effective on July 1, 1893.<sup>2</sup>

The dispensary bill was unpopular in the Lowcountry because Charleston’s culture was distinct from the rest of the state in several respects. One obvious difference was its function as a major port city. In 1890 to 1891 the volume of trade through the harbor was estimated at 98.5 million dollars. As with most other port cities, Charleston was frequented by hordes of rowdy sailors. Prostitution, gambling and drinking became associated with Charleston and its seafaring visitors. The city’s tolerance of these activities clashed with the fundamentalist and rural attitudes of the majority of the state. The varied nationalities and religions of the sailors also brought diversity to Charleston. Charleston had been catering to the needs of sailors since its founding. The constant influx of thousands of young, single men into the city altered the culture and environment of Charleston. Its economy was based largely on the success of the port,<sup>3</sup> and the city must have seen

the closing of barrooms as detrimental.

The reputation of the city came also from its numerous social events, clubs and celebrations. The city council issued an average of two hundred licenses for entertainment each year in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Charleston's urban atmosphere gave rise to exhibits, parties, concerts and theater, which distinguished the city from the rest of South Carolina. The Opera House on Meeting Street held over 1,500 seats; it was lit with gas, heated with hot air and featured a drop curtain adorned with scenes of Venice. A travel magazine from 1895 describes the social season as "exceedingly brilliant." The author wrote glowingly of the Southern charm, hospitality and social circles in the city, and that hard times did not seem to dampen Charlestonians' gaiety. The Charleston Amusement Association sponsored events in order to "cultivate the tastes of the Charleston public," and these events often included drink. The elite Charleston Club held a membership of one hundred and twenty during the 1890s, and when the club-rooms were filled the "bottle was passed freely."<sup>4</sup>

Not only did private clubs enjoy alcohol at functions, but balls and parties in Charleston offered an abundant supply of drink. A recipe for Champagne Punch taken from "A Charleston Lady's Receipt Book of the 1890s" provides a typical alcoholic concoction to be served by a proper hostess. The recipe called for, along with other non-alcoholic ingredients, ten bottles of brandy, ten bottles of light rum, and twelve quarts of champagne. This drink was to provide six hundred to six hundred and fifty servings. It is significant that a libation with such a high alcoholic content would be found in a cookbook for a Charleston lady. Sarah Rutledge's cookbook, *The Carolina Housewife*, instructed young women in South Carolina how to host a proper dinner party. In this book, there are several recipes for wine and party drinks.<sup>5</sup> Clearly ladies were taught that Charlestonians celebrated with strong drink.

Over two hundred and fifty licenses for retail liquor or bar rooms were issued by the city council in the 1880s. Licensing in this large amount continued annually until the enactment of the dispensary law. William Watts Ball in his work *The State that Forgot* describes Charleston as known from its infancy as a "Madeira town." Wholesale whiskey

merchants, saloons and retail grocery stores sold fine wines and liquors from Charleston to customers from all over. The reputation of Charleston as a large dealer in liquor was widely known not only within South Carolina but also throughout the South. Ball goes on to say that Charleston was unlike all other communities in South Carolina in regard to liquor, and that this impacted the rest of the state's view of the city. The tradition of drinking in Charleston would not be given up easily by the enactment of a liquor-limiting law. One Charleston historian, Walter J. Fraser, Jr., describes the attitude of the citizens toward the dispensary law as "shocked."<sup>6</sup> The entrenchment of a culture of liquor in the city's society made the enforcement of the dispensary bill extremely difficult. The people of the city viewed the use of alcohol not only as a tradition but as a right.

The city's history of being immersed in liquor was a scandal for the more rural, more fundamentalist Upcountry. Ball wrote that residents of the state outside of Charleston thought that the city "was not only the residence of the devil but of an outlandish devil." Charleston, seen as evil, reflected the growing push for a purification of society in the temperance movement that swept the state in the 1880s. Temperance organizations formed to promote a moral, religious and pure life. Groups such as the Lodges of the Sons of Temperance, Good Templars and the influential Women's Christian Temperance Union spread throughout the South and found their way into every community. Composed mainly of Methodists and Baptists, their appeal was more in the upstate than in the Episcopalian stronghold of Charleston. Though such groups did exist and held membership in the city, the cause of temperance lacked vigorous support in the local community.<sup>7</sup>

The leader of the South Carolina's Women's Christian Temperance Union, Sallie Chapin, was not well received in Charleston's newspaper, the *News and Courier*. In a letter to the editor of the paper, she responded to an apparent attack by one of the writers on the staff known as "B.O.D." She wrote that the enactment of the dispensary law had been a godsend to the reporters and newspapers: they were given the opportunity to vilify ladies for what Chapin described as "no cause in the world than a simple expression of their opinion." The letter is embedded with language that sets up Chapin and her work as

persecuted and constantly under attack. She referred often to the paper's and "B.O.D.'s" criticism of her and the work of the Women's Christian Temperance Union. She praised the state government and the governor for being brave enough to carry out such a moral law. Furthermore, she claimed that if the reporter had been there he would have witnessed the relief that the closing of one hundred and ninety bar rooms had on the wives and mothers in Charleston. While the Women's Christian Temperance Union held membership in Charleston, however, Chapin did not boast of its size or strength. Instead, she described the threats that she received from "Demijohn and his confreres" that stated if their work continued their lives will be held accountable. She concluded her portrayal of persecution by claiming that there were many in the city who had nothing better to do than to use their time to hinder the good work of the Women's Christian Temperance Union.<sup>8</sup>

Charleston, from its founding, was dominated by the Church of England, which after the American Revolution became the Episcopal Church of the United States. The political system of representation during the 1890s was still based on the "parish system," which had once revolved around the Episcopal parishes on the peninsula. The prominence of Episcopalianism in Charleston deepened the divide between urban and rural South Carolina. In the Upcountry, evangelicals dominated small communities and sought to shape public order. By promoting strict morality from the "Old Testament," Baptists and Methodists molded rural citizens. Ben Robertson in his memoir *Red Hills and Cotton*, though writing years after the temperance movement, reflected a typical Upcountry outlook on wicked Charleston. He reported a conversation with a woman who believed that most Charlestonians belonged to the Episcopal Church because "they ran about all the week having such a good time that when Sunday came they were so worn out they wanted to rest, they wanted a church that would not disturb them, that would leave them to their quiet."<sup>9</sup>

Another factor in Charleston's rejection of the dispensary law was the city's strong ethnic population. In the 1860 census, the city had a total white population of 29,136 and a foreign-born population of 6,533. The records at this time did not indicate the exact numbers of the nationalities, but it is noteworthy that the foreign population was

twenty-two percent of the white population of Charleston. Immigration numbers remained high throughout the rest of the nineteenth century. Ethnic diversity added another defining element to the character of Charleston. Though immigrants were not limited to Charleston and settled in other areas of the state, the bustling port city had ample opportunities for immigrants and established ethnic communities. In Ward Seven, located on the East Side of the neck of the city, thirty percent of the neighborhood was foreign-born by 1870. Irish and German immigrants dominated the foreign-born population. For instance out of 5,037 foreign-born whites in 1870, the German population was 1,886 and the Irish accounted for 2,209. In the 1880s the number of whites born outside of America was lower, but the percentages of Irish and Germans remained the dominating force. One editor of the *News and Courier* wrote of Charleston that “The Germans own it, the Irish control it, and the Negroes enjoy it.” The municipalities of the Upstate were not as highly infused with ethnics. From the 1870s to the 1890s, only 378 foreign whites were living in Spartanburg County. In the same thirty-year span, Greenville could only claim 537 foreign-born whites.<sup>10</sup>

The ethnic influence did not go unrecognized as a major factor in Charleston’s defiance of the dispensary law. A state senator from Clarendon County, Louis Appelt, delivered a speech to the South Carolina Senate on January 30, 1900 about the ineffectiveness of the law. The senator supported a bill that would make the dispensary and prohibition a local option rather than a statewide law. Appelt identified many of the fissures in the enforcement of the law. He used Charleston as a prime example of why each community should decide how its people could buy and sell alcohol. In his speech, Appelt gave examples of the counties that favored prohibition, such as Marlboro, Anderson and York. All were upstate counties. He then discussed others that favored the dispensary, and finally he arrived at Charleston. Appelt told his fellow senator that Charleston County’s liquor business was the basis of her commercial interest, property and even her wealth. He claimed that the people of the city would never tolerate prohibition and that the present system did not suit their inclinations. More specifically, he argued that it was an “utter impossibility” that the dispensary law could be enforced in a city with a substantial ethnic

population: “native customs are a part of their very nature; to hinder a German from his beer, a Frenchman or an Italian from his wine, an Irishman or Scotchman from his whiskey is as much a cause for indignant resentment as it would be to hinder a prohibitionist from drinking his coffee.”<sup>11</sup> Therefore, to enforce this law was to subvert the inborn qualities of Charlestonians: the more the dispensary law was enforced, the more the people of the city would violate it. In this speech, the ethnic community’s influence on Charleston taken to be a widely understood part of its culture.<sup>12</sup>

John Eubanks, a historian of the South Carolina Dispensary, wrote that the influence of Charleston’s foreign population contributed to the strength of the city’s later opposition to the bill. In December 1891, John Ficken, a friend of Tillman, won the office of mayor of the conservative-dominated city. Born of German immigrants, Ficken kept his relationship with the ethnic community intact by belonging to St. John’s Lutheran Church and by participating in the local political scene. The savvy politico won by building up a support group among the working class and labor groups in the uptown wards. These areas were often populated by a number of immigrants who held resentment toward the elite oligarchy that ruled Charleston. By advertising himself as a “reform” party candidate, Ficken played upon the working class’ frustrations. Ficken and his ticket won the leadership of the city. His relations to the ethnic community and his strong network among the working class contributed to his election as mayor.<sup>13</sup>

Ficken’s victory was surprising because of the conservative nature of the city. Charleston, the city that essentially began the Civil War, continued to rely upon its former Confederate leaders and its antebellum political clout in Columbia. The aristocratic power of the port city was one of the problems Tillman had with Charleston. In fact, the Upcountry held a grievance against Charleston after the war that again reflected the divide between rural and urban. From 1865 to 1938, the agrarian population of the Upcountry refused to elect any Charlestonian governor of South Carolina. The cosmopolitan city was now feeling the frustration from the upstate for hundreds of years of Charleston domination. Ben Robertson, an Upcountry author writing in the 1940s, noted that Charleston was “hard on us for a hundred and ten years and we been hard on it for the past eighty.”

Furthermore, Robertson recounted a sentiment that was a common Upcountry feeling: that they had been beaten by Charleston long before the Yankees.<sup>14</sup> It was this attitude that brought the rise of the immense power of “Pitchfork” Ben Tillman. His agrarian attitude was not welcomed by conservative Charleston.

Charleston’s conservative elite fought diligently to preserve their power. At an 1887 commencement speech at the Citadel, a military college in Charleston traditionally attended by aristocrats, Edward McCrady, Jr., openly argued for the need to maintain the conservative Lowcountry oligarchy. He expressed his doubts about modern politicians such as Tillman. During the speech, McCrady reasoned that “we generally leave the rule to a few, whose personal interest make it their business to attend to public affairs.” The graduating class of the Citadel was regarded by McCrady as the chosen few, destined to become the future ruling class of Charleston and of South Carolina. . Political historian Charles Holden argues that McCrady’s choice of words was clearly intentional. The graduates were reminded that the purpose of their education was to make them “the better citizens.” Holden points out that it was not simply “better citizens” but that McCrady wanted emphasis placed on *the*.<sup>15</sup> This openly aristocratic argument was the opposite of Tillman’s populism, and it enraged the citizens of the Upcountry.

It was in this climate of hostility toward Lowcountry politicians that Tillman gained a foothold in South Carolina politics. Tillman, a farmer from Edgefield, South Carolina, championed the rights and needs of the agricultural regions in the state. His platform set out to challenge what Charleston held so dearly, “the sanctity of Confederate gray.” He found no interest in Charleston, other than criticizing its leaders and defaming its people. As chief of the populist demagogues, Tillman targeted the reason for the farmers’ woes as urban Charleston. The urban and rural divide can be clearly seen in Tillman’s editorial war with Charleston’s *News and Courier*. “Single handed and alone,” Tillman spoke out against the aristocratic controllers of the state. Charlestonians read every word that the Populist radical lodged against their city and their way of life. The newspaper’s exposure of Tillman built a festering dislike for the future governor who cared little about the city’s interests. Tillman even referred to the stronghold of

Charleston conservatism, the Citadel, as “that military dude factory.” Not only did the *News and Courier* rage against Tillman; *The State*, a Columbia newspaper, also attacked Tillman at every turn. *The State’s* editor, N.G. Gonzales, who was born and raised in one of Charleston’s antebellum aristocratic families, fought the agrarian reformer bitterly, defending the old Bourbon order and lending his paper’s support to conservative Democrats.<sup>16</sup>

In 1888, Tillman came to Charleston and spoke to a crowd that the *News and Courier* reported to be between 2,500 and 3,000 people. The reporters quoted Tillman as saying, “I’ve always heard that you were the most self-idolatrous people in the world. I want to tell you that the sun don’t rise and set in Charleston.” Furthermore, he described “you people of Charleston” as “peculiar” and as “cowards.” If the people of Charleston were not getting rich off of the labor of the back country, Tillman claimed “you couldn’t stand it.”<sup>17</sup>

On the same day the paper reported on Tillman’s speech, the *News and Courier’s* editor, Francis Dawson, published a retort to Tillman’s attacks. Dawson claimed that all the people of Charleston stood together for the good of the city, and that what was good for the city was good for the entire state. Dawson warned the people of Charleston that Tillman sought to array all the people of South Carolina against them and “everything that we have been taught to honor and love.”<sup>18</sup>

A. G. Haskell, President of the Democratic Campaign Club in Richland County, wrote to Joseph Barnwell in Charleston about the 1890 gubernatorial race. The letters contain personal language in which Haskell pled with Barnwell to drum up support for the anti-Tillman Democratic Party. Haskell told the Charlestonian to encourage the people to “lay down all other work for the short time that is before us and gather together all patriotic men, who recognizing the peril now pending over our state, will apply their faithful and devoted energy and by organization, save her.” The anti-Tillman Charleston and Richland Counties commiserated and worked toward curbing Tillman’s power. But the anti-Tillman efforts did not win over the majority of South Carolinians, and the Edgefield farmer was inaugurated governor on December 4, 1890.<sup>19</sup>

Thus the stage was set for the unsuccessful enforcement of the dispensary law in Charleston. The people of the city, religiously and

politically conservative, fought the intrusion of Tillman and the Upcountry's moral influence. This division can be seen in the prohibition movements and referenda that swept the state. By 1891 seventy-eight communities throughout the state had voted to become dry by local option. Charleston, however, remained "wet." As the prohibition movement grew, Charlestonians obviously had fewer moral objections to the use of alcohol than the fundamentalists. Despite Charleston's views, a statewide non-binding referendum approving prohibition passed. But seeing the potential for revenue, Tillman suggested a state dispensary system.<sup>20</sup>

After the passage of the bill, "[t]he drinking population of Charleston waked up to the fact that the festive Christmas tide had arrived, and possibly that next year they would have to imbibe the red tape Tillman cocktail." The city was shocked and outraged by the passage of a bill regulating alcohol. The *News and Courier* worked to show the injustice and fallacy of the bill that had passed hastily in Columbia. The drinking city's representatives in the state Senate, Augustine Smythe and George Buist, fought the Evans Dispensary Bill with vigor. Senator Smythe claimed that he represented all those who were opposed to the bill and who held business interests in the liquor industry. Smythe argued on the Senate floor that the dispensary could not possibly match the three to four hundred thousand dollars that was invested in the wholesale liquor business in Charleston alone. The opposing senators tried to play on the hypocrisy of the bill and on the potential profit for the state. Smythe moved to rename the bill, citing this hypocrisy, and proposed an amendment that Charleston County be exempt. The motions were tabled. Mr. David A. J. Sullivan of Charleston predicted that the law would be defied from the start: "we don't want to be forced to carry a flask." The only concession Senator Smythe could win was that Charleston would receive ten dispensaries, as opposed to the one or two given to other counties.<sup>21</sup>

The news of the law hit Charleston's citizens hard, and the *News and Courier* reported that the local police pulled in many "victims of cheap whiskey." Their offenses were not malicious, "so they were allowed to go out, get drunk and come back again." Following the bill's passage, the Charleston *News and Courier* unceasingly bashed Tillman and his law, which the paper called a "suicide of liberty" and

“especially injurious” to the city. Articles continuously raised doubts about whether the law would ever go into effect. The city council of Charleston seemed to cast the same doubts, attempting to circumvent the law by issuing liquor licenses. Expecting that the populace would not adhere to the law, in 1893 the city council issued both six-month and full-year licenses to breweries, retail and wholesale dealers. 107 retailers took out full-year licenses at \$100 apiece, while 128 took out six-month licenses.<sup>22</sup> Leaders in Charleston openly challenged the law before it even had a chance to take effect in July; they knew that retailers in Charleston were ready to challenge Tillman as well. On January 24, 1893, a convention of liquor dealers of South Carolina met at the German Artillery Hall in Charleston to find a way to fight the dispensary law. (In 1885, 241 of the 319 grocers in Charleston were German or of German descent.) The largest delegation at the convention represented Charleston’s dealers. In order to obtain the best legal counsel possible, they set a goal to raise ten to twelve thousand dollars. This amount was necessary to engage in a “simple fight for our common rights.”<sup>23</sup>

Political leaders worried that the dispensary law would not be enforced in Charleston. John Gary Evans, the author of the bill and a friend of Tillman’s, vented the state’s frustration with the city. He assured one Charlestonian on a train ride that the law would be enforced because the city no longer ruled the state. Then Evans finally spat, “The whole damned coast of this State ought to be cut off and made a separate colony; it would soon become attached to Africa. Everybody would be glad to get rid of it.” The Charlestonian replied to Evans that if the city had voted for Tillman then the law would have been accepted in the city; since the city did not popularly elect the governor, the city did not have to uphold the law. Tillman himself realized that Charleston and other municipalities would do all in their might to ignore the law. In an interview with the *New York Sun* only seven days after the dispensary bill went into effect, Tillman told the paper that he would make the areas defying the law “dry enough to burn.”<sup>24</sup>

Once the dispensary bill became law on July 1, 1893, Charlestonians labored to circumvent the law in any way possible. “Blind tigers” became the main form of defiance in the city. By paying an entrance fee, one was allowed to enter these private drinking parlors and drink

“complimentary” cocktails while waiting on the mystical beast, which never made an appearance. The *News and Courier* made no pretense about the presence of the illegal saloons and in fact supported them. Though a plentiful number of dispensaries were established in Charleston, William Watts Ball recalled that unlawful bar rooms by the fifties and hundreds “slaked thirst by the drink.” Whether Ball’s estimate of the amount of saloons in operation is accurate, it is significant that Ball remembered them to number in the hundreds. In an article on July 4, 1893, the journalist openly described them as “nourishing,” noting that many locals had partaken of a drop or two for their “stomach’s sake.” The locations of the “lairs” were protected, he continued, but anyone seeking alcohol would have no trouble locating the bars. The forthright support of the city newspaper and the establishment of the illegal saloons show that the city had no intentions of obeying Tillman’s command.<sup>25</sup> If the governor was to make the city “dry enough to burn,” Charleston was going to force Tillman to prove it.

Aside from the underground barkeepers in the “blind tigers,” rice beer became a popular public drink on the streets of Charleston. According to the provisions of the bill, a drink with less than two and a half percent alcohol could be legally sold, and rice beer, which was relatively low in alcohol content, apparently fit this description. The governor fueled the fire of discontent by declaring that the drink could not be sold under the law, and that he refused to have it tested for its alcoholic proof.<sup>26</sup>

The “king of the blind tigers,” Vincent Chicco, personified Charleston’s reaction to the dispensary system. Chicco, an Italian immigrant, ran a number of saloons and built a reputation on his claims to defy Tillman’s law. Two weeks after the enactment of the bill, Tillman’s constables arrested Chicco for violation of the dispensary bill. His case became infamous, and other barkeepers were reportedly jealous of his instant fame. The *News and Courier* ran detailed articles describing the events of the arrest and trial. It even went as far as to describe the physical appearance of the constables or “sneaks” so that their further investigations would prove to be more difficult. One constable was referred to being as “big enough to be a museum freak.” During the search at 89 Market Street, Chicco’s main “tiger,” large

numbers of Charlestonians crowded the sidewalk, jeering the constables. Reinforcements were brought out on horseback in order to control the mob. The people of Charleston were even more outraged by the constables' barging in on Chicco's wife, apparently sick and in bed. The infamous saloon keeper did not let anyone forget this incident, and the papers ran wild with this breach of liberty. The result was that the city of Charleston elected Vincent Chicco to city council for four consecutive terms.<sup>27</sup>

The Evans bill provided that in order for a dispensary to be opened in a community, a majority of the people had to vote for its establishment. This opened a way for prohibitionist counties to keep their communities dry, but it also allowed "wet" Charleston to give Tillman a slap in the face. The freeholders of Charleston rejected the opening of the dispensary, preferring to frequent illegal saloons rather than donate money to the state. The newspaper even published a number of names who had voted in favor of the dispensary in Charleston. For weeks following, letters poured in from people denying that they had signed any such petition. The fact that Charleston refused to vote in favor of a dispensary enraged Tillman. He swore that if the people of the drinking city would not accept state liquor, then they should have none at all. In the *New York Sun*, he threatened to send special constables to cover every block with a man committed to enforcing the law. Tillman did send a large force of detectives to the city.<sup>28</sup> This special task force obtained permission to enter private residences with the intention of arresting those in violation of the law. Resentment of Tillman deepened as these constables took their new power and enforced the law with what Edgar describes as "zeal and arrogance." Several deaths were attributed to their raids, but the governor promptly issued pardons. Angered by these abuses of power, Charlestonians commonly referred to the constables as "sneaks" and "spies." A popular rhyme, "Tillman spies/Eat flies/And tell lies," followed constables as they attempted to perform their duties. Mobs gathered in Charleston and other cities to resist raids on the "blind tigers." After one meeting dealing with dispensary enforcement, an angry crowd banded together and marched on a house in the city where three constables lived. Tillman complained to the legislature that "[a]lmost all the people of Charleston are in league against the law

and determined to overthrow it.”<sup>29</sup>

In *Ben Tillman and the Reconstruction of White Supremacy*, Stephen Kantrowitz shows that the Dispensary system was one of Tillman’s tools in battling the farmer’s “enemies.” The governor felt that alcohol and urban interests were barriers to the success of a rural society, and therefore Tillman used the dispensary in order to diminish the power of the city. The use of a mob was one of Tillman’s strongest weapons, according to Kantrowitz, and the governor wielded it to further entrench his power over the state. Tillman used constables to incite anger from the cities, and he found that their contempt helped to increase his political supremacy over white, urban opponents. With this in mind, Kantrowitz describes how Tillman took the police powers of the state and dragged the conflict into the city. The *Columbia Register*, a pro-Tillman newspaper, suggested that the good behavior of the constables resulted from their background as solid country people. The reaction of the *News and Courier* was that the *Register* attempted to pit the Upcountry against the Lowcountry.<sup>30</sup>

Although the Charleston mayor, Ficken, and the police chief, Martin, were Tillman supporters, they did not like the constables in the city. In the *Yearbook of the City of Charleston* for 1894, Mayor Ficken discussed the enforcement of the dispensary law. The largest issue concerned the city police department’s involvement in the search and seizure of public homes. The mayor and the chief of police expressed hesitation in allowing the local force to engage in all of the activities of the constables. Feeling that “it would be unlawful for the police of the city to pursue the course desired,” both Martin and Ficken advised against direct Charleston police involvement. Ficken understood that arrogant representatives of this despised law would not be welcomed in the homes of Charleston. However, the mayor did make clear that duty of the police department was to uphold the law and sustain the actions of the governor’s force. The police were also there to protect the constables should an altercation arise. At the end of the review, Ficken challenged Tillman’s statement (during his own Annual Message) that the mayor had not acted to enforce the law. The mayor argued that in fact he did comply with the law, but did not let the Charleston police force’s duty extend into that of the constables.<sup>31</sup>

The fact that the mayor of Charleston had to defend the police

and the city from Tillman's attacks shows that the enforcement of the law in the city was in question. Ball recollected that spectacular raids were planned, but that once the raiders departed, the "blind tigers" reopened for business. Historian Layton Wayne Jordan notes that the city authorities and police made a show with infrequent and largely ineffectual raids.<sup>32</sup> In an effort to appease Tillman, the city made some arrests, yet they were insufficient at best.

The hatred of Tillman and his constables by Charlestonians came to a head in the "Dispensary War" that occurred in Darlington in March of 1894. The town of Darlington in the Pee Dee region had also refused to adhere to the dispensary law, and its residents continued to patronize local saloons. The anti-Tillman sentiment there had not reached an extreme until the news broke that two Darlington citizens had died at the hands of dispensary constables. The papers bashed Tillman as being a "tyrant" and "murderer;" people supported these claims in various letters to the *News and Courier*. The governor, feeling his authority threatened, sent extra constables to Darlington to enforce the law. Tensions mounted over the course of several days, erupting into a gunfight between the townspeople and the dispensary constables. After the smoke settled, the constables fled for their lives into the surrounding woods and were followed by an angry lynch mob. Upon hearing the news, Tillman sent out a call to all state militia companies to assemble and head to Columbia.<sup>33</sup>

The Washington Light Infantry from Charleston refused to respond to the call. These citizen-soldiers could not commit to going to Darlington to defend a law that was so hated in their city. The reply to Tillman from T. A. Huguenin, Brigadier General, was scathing. No company, he claimed, would sustain the actions of the constabulary and their methods of law enforcement. Instead, he contended that the Washington Light Infantry would "uphold and defend the honor of the State, but will not lend itself to foment civil war among our own brethren." The announcement of the refusal caused the soldiers to break out in cheers. Even Episcopal Bishop Ellison Capers was adamant about violating Tillman's demand. An old Confederate general, Capers had military experience, and understood the honor in following orders and respecting command. Still he told militiamen that if he were an officer, he would surrender his position and refuse

to act.<sup>34</sup> The angry citizens in Charleston must have been buoyed by this exclamation from the head of their church. With the backing of the Bishop, Charlestonians must have felt that their outrage was completely justified.

Great crowds surrounded the *News and Courier* bulletin boards on Broad Street for the latest updates on the “war.” Anti-Tillman language and sentiment was abundant; Tillman was now referred to as “our bloody governor.” The paper used revolutionary language in its articles, telling the citizens of Charleston to protect their homes and liberties at all costs. According to Tillman, the sight of constables so outraged the port city’s citizens that the governor’s forces were nearly mobbed to death. Tillman blamed the deaths in Darlington on the *News and Courier* and *The State*. Calling them “a thorn in the flesh which continues to fester,” he pointed to the articles written by anti-Tillman reporters as the true cause of the tragedy. However, these papers would not survive if people did not continue to purchase and support the publications. The governor could not deny the fact that the public itself encouraged the papers to “pour poison” into the sore that Tillman’s election left for Charleston.<sup>35</sup>

Only weeks after the Darlington riot was quelled, the South Carolina State Supreme Court handed down a decision that the dispensary law was unconstitutional because it was a monopoly. The Supreme Court ruled that the state could not declare an action illegal and then engage in it. Jubilant celebrations erupted all over the state. In Charleston, this was the verdict that they had fought for legally and illegally. A great bonfire was kindled; at the front of the procession was a whiskey barrel decorated with a garland of flowers. This symbol of Charleston’s battle was paraded up and down the streets. Finally, the “tyrant” was overruled and made a fool. Unfortunately, the celebrations did not last long. Tillman waited until conservative Justice McGowan left office and then reinstated the dispensaries in August. The governor used his political power to push through the legislature the Metropolitan Police Act, which placed local police forces under the control of the state.<sup>36</sup>

In November 1894 Tillman relinquished the governorship and was elected to the United States Senate. His legacy lived on in his successor, John Gary Evans. Evans, the author of the dispensary bill, shared

many of Tillman's sentiments. Charleston continued to resent the state's regulation of alcohol and the Upcountry's control over state government. Once the dispensary was reenacted, the battle between the bootleggers and the constables intensified, but further violators of the act could not be convicted. In a period of four months between December 1894 to April 1895, 204 arrests were made in Charleston. No one was convicted and case after case was thrown out. The juries refused to convict anyone although the evidence clearly showed them to be guilty. (Days after the passage of the Evans Bill on December 27, 1892, the *News and Courier* had encouraged the citizens of Charleston to engage in illegal intoxication, claiming that "[n]o liberty-loving jury of freemen will ever render a verdict of guilty.") The aristocratic mayor James Adger Smyth, who replaced Ficken in 1895 and who fought for local enforcement of the dispensary, wrote that from October 1, 1897 to July 1, 1901, Charleston police made 433 arrests for dispensary violations. Out of those cases, the courts convicted no one. He proclaimed that had there been one or even three thousand, there is no reason to believe that the grand juries would have returned a guilty verdict.<sup>37</sup>

Thus despite the intended power of the Metropolitan Police Act, the hated law remained difficult to enforce. Smyth wrote that the regulation of liquor in Charleston had been and would always be a more arduous task than in any other part of the state. Along with other various reasons, the mayor cited the geography of the city, with its rivers and creeks, as an inherent problem in controlling bootleggers. He sympathized with former Mayor Ficken, because the same issues of enforcement had plagued his administration. At one point in Smyth's plea, he confessed that he and the city had turned over a list of names to the Metropolitan Police Force, but they could do little more with the perpetrators than he could. In the late 1890s, Governor William Ellerbe attempted to put control back into the hands of the Charleston police force by getting the city council to sign a statement pledging their support of the dispensary law. Seven out of the twenty-three councilmen flatly refused, and the state police force stayed.<sup>38</sup>

After the excitement of the Dispensary War, the rest of the nineteenth century followed a routine of defiance and criticism of the dispensary. Despite the efforts of local and state police forces, alcohol

could not be regulated in Charleston. Its citizens took pleasure in the public violation of the law. Luckily for Charlestonians, in 1897 another loophole emerged that gave relief to the thirsty city. Judge H. Simonton of the United States Circuit Court ruled that the state could not stop saloons from selling liquor in their “original packages” brought from outside South Carolina. Of course, Charleston opened the first “Original Package” saloons advertising for sale thousands of dollars worth of wine and whiskey. Tillman, now in the United States Senate, tried to manipulate Federal law to give the state of South Carolina control over the situation. The bill, however, was tabled. This victory over Tillman must have been celebrated with Charlestonians sharing an “original package.”<sup>39</sup> As with all other small triumphs in the liquor battle, however, the “original package” loophole eventually closed and Charlestonians consumed again in relative secrecy.

The state became resigned to the fact that Charleston could not be governed totally by the agrarian Upcountry, and Charleston became resigned to the fact that the dispensary seemed here to stay. As the nineteenth century came to a close the strength of the dispensary seemed to increase with each year, but so did its corruption. Anti-Tillman and anti-dispensary factions continued to be elected mayor of Charleston as the leadership passed from Smyth to Robert Goodwyn Rhett in 1900. Rhett pursued a “laissez-faire enforcement of liquor laws” which satisfied Charleston politics and continued the rift between the upstate and the Lowcountry. Criticism of the system began to increase from both temperance and anti-dispensary groups. Conditions in Charleston became so bad that the city lost its share of the dispensary’s funds. By 1903, the Charleston police began the practice of fining “blind tigers” twenty-five dollars every three months. Corruption and criticism continued to build until the system began to crumble. Charleston used its weakness to defy the law even more outwardly. Governor Duncan Heyward wrote in the early 1900s that the only headway he could make in Charleston was to suppress open and flagrant violations of the law.<sup>40</sup>

South Carolina and Charleston politics continued to be haunted by the liquor problem, and a subsequent Charleston mayor, John Patrick Grace, renewed the battle during his term in office. On December 18, 1911 he promised the city council, in his inaugural address, that

he would “waste little energy in a literal enforcement of the liquor laws.” Governor Cole Blease attempted to negotiate and compromise with Grace, but the “wet” mayor of the city refused to surrender the rights of Charlestonians to drink. His policies were accompanied by occasional raids, but they were not intended to freeze the business of the “blind tigers.” This relaxed attitude toward the liquor laws was challenged by Governor Richard Irvine Manning, who refused even to negotiate with Grace. Manning and Grace continued to fight over the situation until the state, exhausted from the failures and shortcomings of the dispensary bill and with support for temperance growing, passed a state-wide prohibition act that went into effect on January 1, 1916. Ironically, in the referendum over the issue, Charleston had been the only county in the state to return a majority (of ten to one) in favor of keeping the dispensary. The reason for its support of the diseased system came full circle from the beginning of the city’s battle with the law. The city operated both the dispensary and saloons peacefully side by side and reaped the benefits.<sup>41</sup> Perhaps Charlestonians favored the dispensary so heavily because they were getting the best of Tillman in his own system

The South Carolina Dispensary System was a failure in Charleston. The failure stemmed from the fact that the governor of the state and his system stood for everything that Charleston did not. Its people had different origins and backgrounds that lent the city a vibrantly different cultural atmosphere. Religiously, Charleston from its founding was dominated by the Episcopal Church which held vastly different traditions from the Upcountry fundamentalists. Local tradition could also be found in the city’s desire for independence and in its culture of drinking. When “Pitchfork” Ben Tillman’s battle against the conservative aristocracy became the state’s battle as well, the city looked inward. Its residents were not going to let a man who represented the hatred of Charleston tell them when and where to drink. The port city defied the governor and his politics while simultaneously fighting against the frustration of the rest of South Carolina. Their culture, politics and freedom, Charlestonians felt, were under attack. Tillman and the dispensary system were an attempt to usher in a political power that was not dominated by Charleston. Because of this, Charlestonians violated the law as flagrantly as possible

to show the state of South Carolina and the world that this city was not ruled by a man they saw as a “tyrant.”

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Charleston (SC) News and Courier*, 1 July 1893.

<sup>2</sup> Ernest McPherson Lander, Jr. *A History of South Carolina, 1865-1960* (University of North Carolina Press, 1960), p. 38; John Eubanks, “Ben Tillman’s Baby,” in Phillip Kenneth Huggins (ed.), *The South Carolina Dispensary: A Bottle Collector’s Atlas and History of the System* (Sandlapper Publishing, 1997), pp. 123-126.

<sup>3</sup> Walter F. Fraser, t□ *Charleston! Charleston! The History of a Southern City* (University of South Carolina Press, 1998), p. 327; Laylon Wayne Jordan, “Police and Politics: Charleston in the Gilded Age, 1880-1900,” *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 81 (Winter 1980), p. 45.

<sup>4</sup> *Yearbooks of the City of Charleston: 1880-1900* (Walker, Evans and Cogswell, 1880-1900); George Marshall Allen, “Charleston: A Typical City in the South,” *The Magazine of Travel* 1 (February 1895), p. 108; Fraser, *Charleston! Charleston!*, pp. 324-325.

<sup>5</sup> *Charleston (SC) Post and Courier*, 24 February 1889; Sarah Rutledge, *The Carolina Housewife, or House and Home: By a Lady of Charleston* (W.R. Babcock and Co., 1847), pp. iii-iv.

<sup>6</sup> *Yearbooks: 1880-1900*; William Watts Ball, *The State That Forgot: South Carolina’s Surrender to Democracy* (Bobbs-Merrill, 1932), p. 243; Fraser, *Charleston! Charleston!*, pp. 325-26.

<sup>7</sup> Kevin Lewis, “Religion in South Carolina Addresses the Public Order,” in Charles H. Lippy (ed.), *Religion in South Carolina* (University of South Carolina Press, 1993), p. 189; Ball, *The State That Forgot*, p. 243; Francis Butler Simkins, *South Carolina During Reconstruction* (University of North Carolina Press, 1932), p. 406.

<sup>8</sup> *News and Courier*, 17 July 1893.

<sup>9</sup> Lewis, “Religion in South Carolina,” —p. 189; Ernest McPherson Lander, *A History of South Carolina, 1865-1960* (University of North Carolina Press, 1960), p. 160; Ball, *The State That Forgot*, p. 243; Simkins, *South Carolina During Reconstruction*, p. 406; Fredrick M. Heath and Harriett H. Kinard, “Prohibition in South Carolina, 1880-1900: An Overview,” in *Proceedings of the South Carolina Historical Association* (1980),

p. 117; Ben Robertson, *Red Hills and Cotton: An Upcountry Memory* (University of South Carolina Press, 1942), p. 103.

<sup>10</sup> Dale Rosengarten et al., *Between the Tracks: Charleston's East Side During the Nineteenth Century* (Charleston Museum and Avery Research Center, 1987), p. 146; *Historical Census Data Browser*, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, University of Virginia Library, accessed 19 October 2004, <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/census>.

<sup>11</sup> Louis Appelt, "The Liquor Question" (speech delivered in the South Carolina State Senate, Columbia, South Carolina, 30 January 1900), South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, South Carolina.

<sup>12</sup> Appelt, "The Liquor Question"; Robert Rosen, *A Short History of Charleston* (San Lexikos, 1982), p. 128.

<sup>13</sup> Eubanks, "Ben Tillman's Baby," p. 138; Fraser, *Charleston! Charleston!*, pp. 323-324.

<sup>14</sup> Rosen, *A Short History of Charleston*, p. 127; Robertson, *Red Hills and Cotton*, pp. 104-106.

<sup>15</sup> Charles J. Holden, *In the Great Malestrom: Conservatives in Post-Civil War South Carolina* (University of South Carolina Press, 2002), pp. 58-59; Edward McCrady, quoted in Holden, p. 60.

<sup>16</sup> William J. Cooper, *The Conservative Regime in South Carolina* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968), p. 393; Tillman, quoted in Francis Butler Simkins, *Pitchfork Ben Tillman: South Carolinian* (University of South Carolina Press, 1944), pp. 99, 105; Lewis Pickney Jones, *South Carolina: A Synoptic History for Laymen* (Sandlapper Publishing, 1971), p. 393.

<sup>17</sup> *News and Courier*, 5 September 1888.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Joseph W. Barnwell Papers, 1734-1930, South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston SC; Simkins, *Pitchfork Ben Tillman*, p. 169.

<sup>20</sup> Walter Edgar, *South Carolina: A History* (University of South Carolina Press, 1998), p. 441.

<sup>21</sup> *News and Courier*, 23 December 1892; Eubanks, "Ben Tillman's Baby," pp. 123-26; *News and Courier*, 22 December 1892, 24 December 1892; Eubanks, "Ben Tillman's Baby," p. 123; *News and Courier*, 23 December 1892, 27 December 1892.

<sup>22</sup> *News and Courier*, 23 December 1892, 27 December 1892, 25 December 1892; *Yearbook, 1893*.

<sup>23</sup> *Yearbook, 1893*; *News and Courier*, 25 January 1893.

<sup>24</sup> *News and Courier*, 8 January 1893; Rosen, *A Short History of Charleston*, p. 128; Ben Tillman, quoted in the *New York (NY) Sun*, 8 July 1893.

<sup>25</sup> Ball, *The State That Forgot*, p. 249; *News and Courier*, 4 July 1893; Fraser, *Charleston! Charleston!*, pp. 325-326.

<sup>26</sup> Eubanks, "Ben Tillman's Baby," p. 134; *News and Courier*, 11 July 1893.

<sup>27</sup> *News and Courier*, 15 July, 16 July, 17 July 1893; Fraser, *Charleston! Charleston!*, p. 326; Doyle Willard Boggs, "John Patrick Grace and the Politics of Reform in South Carolina, 1900-1931" (Ph.D. thesis, University of South Carolina, 1977), p. 15.

<sup>28</sup> *News and Courier*, 7 July 1893; Francis Butler Simkins, *The Tillman Movement in South Carolina* (Duke University Press, 1926), pp. 191, 139; *New York Sun*, 8 July 1893; Eubanks, "Ben Tillman's Baby," p.134.

<sup>29</sup> Edgar, *South Carolina: A History*, pp. 441, 443; Simkins, *Pitchfork Ben Tillman*, p. 230; Stephen Kantrowitz, *Ben Tillman and the Reconstruction of White Supremacy* (University of North Carolina Press, 2000), p. 192.

<sup>30</sup> Kantrowitz, *Ben Tillman*, pp. 189-191.

<sup>31</sup> *Yearbook, 1893*.

<sup>32</sup> Ball, *The State That Forgot*, p. 249; Jordan, "Police and Politics," pp. 44-45.

<sup>33</sup> Edgar, *South Carolina: A History*, p. 442; Simkins, *Pitchfork Ben Tillman*, pp. 252-52; Eubanks, "Ben Tillman's Baby," p. 148.

<sup>34</sup> *News and Courier*, 2 April 1894; Simkins, *Pitchfork Ben Tillman*, pp. 252-53; *News and Courier*, 2 April 1893.

<sup>35</sup> *News and Courier*, 1 April 1894, 2 April 1894, 3 April 1894, 4 April 1894.

<sup>36</sup> Simkins, *Pitchfork Ben Tillman*, p. 258; Eubanks, "Ben Tillman's Baby," pp. 157-58.

<sup>37</sup> Eubanks, "Ben Tillman's Baby," p. 163; *News and Courier*, 27 December 1892; Boggs, "John Patrick Grace," p. 16; James Adger Smyth Family Papers, 1835-1920, South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston SC.

<sup>38</sup> Smyth Papers; Eubanks, "Ben Tillman's Baby," pp. 165-167.

<sup>39</sup> Boggs, "John Patrick Grace," p. 16; Eubanks, "Ben Tillman's Baby," p. 167.

<sup>40</sup> Eubanks, "Ben Tillman's Baby," p. 183; A. Baron Wallace, *The History of South Carolina*, Vol. 3 (Higginson Book Company, 2001), p. 420; Eubanks, "Ben Tillman's Baby," p. 184.

<sup>41</sup> Boggs, "John Patrick Grace," pp. 74, 86-88; Eubanks, "Ben Tillman's Baby," pp. 193-4.

In Charleston, food and history are inseparable. Its unique culinary style was created, in large part, by turning to the past and embracing the ingredients and dishes found in South Carolina's Lowcountry for centuries. Forward-looking cooks have taken the rest of the world as inspiration, blending traditional local fish and produce with techniques and flourishes from around the globe. Charleston's signature dishes, such as shrimp and grits and she-crab soup, were once barely known outside the Lowcountry. Now they have spread far beyond the city, becoming part of the evolving canon of "New Southern" cuisine served in restaurants from Louisville to Tampa. Still, Charleston's food remains particular to the place. The South Carolina Dispensary system was a state-run monopoly on liquor sales in the United States state of South Carolina which operated from 1893 to 1907 statewide and until 1916 in some counties. The system was the brainchild of Governor Benjamin Tillman, a farmer from Edgefield known as "Pitchfork Ben," who served as governor from 1890-1894 and as a U.S. Senator from 1895 until his death in 1918. This interesting experiment had never before been tried at the state level, and proved to be the last... Gastropub in Charleston, South Carolina. People talk about steak frites, crispy tempura shrimp and bavarian pretzels. See reviews and recommendations. King Street Dispensary. Gastropub in Charleston, South Carolina. 4.4 out of 5 stars. 2. South Carolina's dispensary system In 1893 South Carolina controlled liquor sales through a local-option law in which counties and incorporated municipalities determined by referendum whether saloons or taverns, separate from restaurants and hotels, would be licensed. A series of prohibition laws and amendments to the license system were proposed. Governor Benjamin Tillman opposed prohibition, in part because he considered it unenforceable and, in part, because he wanted to capture the profits of the alcohol trade for the state treasury. Compared to Spartanburg, Charleston's grand juries and prosecutors were less likely to indict or prosecute violations of the dispensary law. Of the cases actually prosecuted, petit juries were less likely to convict. The Prince throws a party in his abbey and invites 1000 people to the party. He will lock the guests in because of the disease; he is afraid of the "Red Death." He doesn't care about his people; he's selfish. What does Prince Prospero do after the last guest enters his abbey? The seventh room is black with a red window, which makes the people look like they have the "Red Death". No one goes in that room bc they're scared of it. This tells us that the people know they aren't safe from the "Red Death"; they are still afraid. What are the guests' reactions to the chiming of the clock? They stop everything and listen. When the clock chimes at midnight, some of the guests notice someone whom no one has seen before. Describe the masked "intruder."