

# Temperance Fountain

The nectar dispensed by Hebe in her role as cup-bearer to the gods may not have been water, but that was apparently an unexplored detail in 1896 when the Women's Christian Temperance Union sought funds to erect a fountain at Ithaca's busiest intersection. They wanted something



both practical and showy and selected a copy of a statue originally created by Bertel Thorvaldsen in 1806. The original version featured Hebe, the cup-bearer to the gods, with one pretty breast bared. However, the J. L. Mott Company was presenting copies with slight modifications to her attire and the Hebe of Ithaca and of Tompkins Square Park in New York City was modestly draped. Along with the extra drapery came a pedestal and separate basins for humans, horses, and smaller animals.

On June 11, 1896, Mrs. Mary R. Marsh of the Women's Christian Temperance Union wrote to A. D. White, former president of Cornell and then U. S. Ambassador to Germany, asking him to make a donation towards erecting a fountain next to the Ithaca City Hall. The letter explained that there was nowhere in Ithaca that a person could easily obtain a simple drink of clean water.

The WHCTU was an organization working to address the harm done by alcoholics and alcoholism. Something more than a group of moralistic cranks, the WCTU were well-intentioned reformers trying to address a very real social problem. They intended to build community and eventually legal sanctions against the sale of alcoholic beverages. The fountain was to be a symbolic showpiece for their aspirations. Offering an easily available alternative to alcohol was a practical and decorative public statement of their intentions and purposes.

In the late 19th Century there were no social protections, no safety nets of any kind for the families of alcoholics. When most men were the income earners and most women provided domestic labor and child care, and laboring men made barely enough to pay for food and shelter, alcohol use by a man was a serious problem. If a man spent his pay at a saloon, his wife and children went without food and fuel. Employment for women was very limited and pay was insufficient. Alcohol abuse wasn't just a problem of the working class. If a wealthy man drank and made bad business decisions his family could lose their home and all of their privileges, and could be brought to poverty very quickly with little hope of regaining their advantages. Poorer families had few chances of even

minimal nutrition if a wage-earner drank. The children of alcoholics were likely to be denied education and pressed into the workforce at early ages, thus perpetuating a cycle of hopelessness.

The money was collected and the fountain generously and proudly served the public at the corner of Tioga and Seneca. Whatever various individuals felt about the restriction of alcohol, certainly the local horses and dogs were grateful to the WCTU.

It is uncertain just how long Hebe stood on her downtown corner. She may not have stood there through the excitement of the Prohibition era when a social experiment was attempted and failed.

It was finally agreed that criminalizing alcohol was more effective at creating an active and inventive criminal class with all its burdens than it was at eradicating alcohol use. There were still alcoholics and there were still destitute families, now those of both drinkers and of vendors.

The 18th Amendment was reversed in 1933 and alcohol once more became legal. The WCTU for all its good intentions became subject to ridicule.

And the fountain became old, and the ideas she stood for passé. There are rumors of pranks and vandalism with various substances added to her outflow. There were hygienic drinking fountains in other locations and most of the horses were replaced by cars and trucks; dogs were supposed to be leashed and kept off the streets. The fountain was in the way.

She may have been moved to Tompkins Park on North Cayuga Street as early as 1919, the year that the 18th Amendment was passed. According to an Ithaca Journal writer of the 1950s, her grace and beauty did not deter the Tompkins County Salvage for Victory Committee from claiming her as scrap metal in 1942. It seemed the thing to do at the time. The urgency of war preparations superseded any other considerations.

So now in Ithaca she is only a curious memory in old photographs. There are fewer and fewer persons living who remember getting a drink from beneath her graceful feet. In New York City, and possibly a few other places, her sisters remain.

*Mary L White, former librarian of The History Center in Tompkins County*

*Photo caption:*

This photograph, taken ca. 1900, shows the water fountain erected by the Women's Christian Temperance Union which stood at the corner of Tioga and Seneca streets in Ithaca.