

Health, Luxury, or Vice?: An Objects-Based Exploration of the 1894 Cambridge Drug Store Crisis

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Learning Objectives

1. **Synthesize evidence** from both the archival and material record to make an argument
2. **Bring to life** the 1894 Cambridge Drug Store Crisis, a fascinating incident in Cambridge and Harvard history
3. **Ask larger questions** about the significance of categories and the attitudes they reflect

Time

- 15-20 minutes with minimal discussion; can be extended for further discussion time

Recommended Number of Participants

- Ideally 6-15 students; can accommodate 3-30

Materials

- Collections:
 1. 987-22-10/100200: White kaolin figural pipe bowl fragment
 - Recommendation: Place this object on a soft bean bag so that it can be angled with the “face” toward the ceiling.
 2. 992-9-10/103655: Machine-made, three-piece mold blue glass bottle
 - Recommendation: Place this object on its side so that the maker’s mark on the bottom is visible.
 3. 2016.29.121: Cobalt blue glass bottle body fragment
 - Recommendation: Place a magnifying glass next to this object so that students can examine the lettering closely.
- Slideshow
- Slideshow instructor notes.
- Printed handouts.



Lesson Outline

This lesson can be divided into four sections: “Introduction,” “Debate Prep,” “Debate,” and “Lecture.” In this outline, estimated times for each section are in parentheses, while corresponding slides in the slideshow are indicated in brackets.

It is recommended that collections are prepared prior to the start of class, placing them in the center of the table and distributing them evenly so that they can be seen by all students.

- Introduction (4-8 minutes) [Slides 1-8]
 - **Introduce** objects and have students **examine** objects (1-2 minutes) [Slides 1-2]
 - **Reveal** each object (½-1 minutes per item) [Slides 3-5]
 - **Discuss** drug store connection (½-1 minutes) [Slide 6]
 - **Consider** shifting purposes (½-1 minutes) [Slide 7]
 - **Transition** to debate (½-1 minutes) [Slide 8]

- Debate Prep (5-10 minutes) [Slide 9]
 - **Assign** groups, **distribute** handouts, and **explain** activity (1 minute) [Slide 9]
 - Students **read** handouts individually (2-5 minutes) [Slide 9]
 - Students **discuss** debate within their group (2-4 minutes) [Slide 9]

- Debate (7-16 minutes) [Slides 10-13]
 - Each group argues for how each object should be classified and why (½-1 minutes per group per item, with 1 additional minute for transition time) [Slides 10-12]
 - Each group presents a closing argument (½-2 minutes per group) [Slide 13]

- Lecture (4-6 minutes) [Slides 14-17]
 - Reveal aftermath (1.5-2 minutes) [Slides 14-16]
 - Discuss takeaways (½-1 minutes) [Slide 17]
 - Facilitate open-ended discussion of lesson (2-3 minutes) [Slide 17]

Who are you?

You are J.H. Hubbard, a Harvard Square druggist. You rely on Sunday sales to make ends meet. On the back of this handout, you'll find two recent articles in the *Cambridge Chronicle* that explain your perspective.

How do you feel about these objects?

You interpret the tobacco pipe, soda fountain, and patent medicine as drugs and medicines exempt from the Sunday laws. Banning the sale of these objects on Sunday could put you out of business and put the city's health on the line for the sake of enforcing archaic statutes.

Your **tobacco pipes** are tools with medicinal value. For centuries, tobacco has been smoked for spiritual and salutary benefits. Physicians still prescribe tobacco for a number of illnesses.

Your **soda fountain** should also be considered medicinal, because carbonic-acid water is known to have therapeutic benefits. Naturally carbonated water is a wholesome, hydrating beverage that can ease an upset stomach, while sweetened soda water can help mask the bitter taste of certain drugs.

Finally, your **patent medicine** is *medicine!* You have years of training and your elixirs really work (even if liquor is a primary ingredient). You can't imagine telling a mother that she must wait until Monday to give her sick child medicine. There may be some unscrupulous druggists out there, but you are insulted by implications of widespread vice, as shown in an 1890 article about an undercover reporter trying to procure alcohol from your store on a Sunday:

“Will you put me up a half pint of rum?” was asked the elderly proprietor of the next place entered.
 “Sir, do you take this for a rum shop,” indignantly demanded the man, as he glared at the reporter. “I do not sell liquor on Sunday unless ordered by a doctor. This is an apothecary store not a rum shop,” and he turned his back on the reporter and walked behind his prescription case in apparent high dudgeon.

WHAT ARE DRUGS AND MEDICINES?

The Century dictionary says: "Drug—any vegetable, animal or mineral substance used in the composition or preparation of medicines. Medicine—a substance used as a remedy for disease; a substance having or supposed to have curative properties." In this work we find in regard to tobacco the following: "Medicinally considered,

tobacco is a powerful sedative poison and a local stimulant, not now used internally unless in chronic asthma, but applied in some skin diseases, hemorrhoids, etc. In its ordinary use as a narcotic it induces a physical and mental quiet very gratifying to the habituated, overcoming the distaste for its obnoxious properties, and making it the most nearly universal of narcotics."

So we may consider tobacco "a vegetable substance," having "curative properties," it being a "powerful sedative poison and local stimulant," used "internally in some diseases," and "in its ordinary use as a narcotic," "it induces a physical and mental quiet which is very gratifying to those who are in the habit of using it."

The Century dictionary says that soda water is a drink, generally consisting of ordinary water, into which carbonic acid has been forced under pressure. Has it not "curative properties," and if it has, and is so used, is it not a medicine or drug?

In regard to the confectionery let me say this: Will not certain kinds of candy, such as trouches, tablets, etc., cure a dryness or soariness in the throat? And if so, have they not "curative properties," and why are they not drugs or medicines?

J.J. Scott, *Cambridge Chronicle*,
July 14, 1894, 2.

NOT BACKED UP BY PUBLIC SENTIMENT.

We don't believe the ministers of Cambridge are backed up by public sentiment in their crusade against the druggists; nor the mayor in his orders for the enforcement of the Sunday law. We believe that certain elements of offence and annoyance connected with the opening of drug stores on Sunday should be removed. But depriving the public of an opportunity to procure soda, cigars or confectionery on Sunday, is no worse, to our mind, than many other things which, although the law forbids, are allowed to go unchallenged.

We believe that sooner or later public sentiment in this city will demand that the drug stores be allowed to sell soda and cigars on Sunday as they have been doing, notwithstanding the existence of the Sunday law. The repeal of this obnoxious law may not come at once but it will come eventually.

Cambridge Chronicle, July 14, 1894, 5.

Who are you?

You are **Alexander Blackburn, a prominent reverend in Cambridge**. Last week, you sent a petition to Mayor Bancroft asking him to enforce Public Statute Chapter 98, Section 2:

SECT. 2. Whoever on the Lord's day keeps open his shop, warehouse, or workhouse, or does any manner of labor, business, or work, except works of necessity and charity, shall be punished by fine not exceeding fifty dollars for each offence.

On the back of this handout, you'll find an article about your petition and an article in which you respond to a reporter.

How do you feel about these objects?

You interpret the **tobacco pipe, soda fountain, and patent medicine as luxury goods that should not be sold on Sundays**. You're not some extremist on a war against smoking, soda, and medicine. You merely want Mayor Bancroft to enforce the laws as they are written.

Tobacco pipes are not sinful, so long as they are used in moderation. However, the Gambier pipes are clearly luxury items, since the expensive added features are purely ornamental. Looking at the pipe, you can't see this object as some dire necessity.

The **soda fountain** has helped steer young people away from the taproom, which pleases you as a strong supporter of temperance. That being said, you don't think it's unreasonable to ask people to refrain from drinking soda for one day.

When it comes to **patent medicine**, sick people should be able to get medicine for urgent matters, so long as they have a doctor's prescription. Otherwise, it can wait until Monday. You advise people with non-urgent medical needs to visit you at Hope Church. They might just find that prayer is the best medicine.

THE SUNDAY LAW.

The following communication was sent to Mayor Bancroft by a committee from the different churches of the city, urging him to enforce the Sunday laws and to even stop street sprinkling:

To His Honor Wm. A. Bancroft, Mayor.
Dear Sir:—With a feeling that the growing tendency to violate the laws concerning the observance of the christian Sabbath required earnest attention, a meeting, representing the different churches of the city, was held on Thursday, June 28, ultimo, and after extended discussion, adjourned to Thursday, July 5. At the latter meeting the following action was taken by a unanimous vote.

Resolved, that his honor the mayor be respectfully requested to execute all laws which are designed to secure the keeping and sanctity of the christian Sabbath; such as prohibiting the sprinkling of the streets, the sale of tobacco and confectionery by druggists, and any other statutes which aim at practices that are known and acknowledged to be violations of the law.

Resolved, that the committee which formerly waited on the mayor, present to him the action of this body, over the signatures of the president and secretary.

In conformity with the above action, this document is hereby submitted.

ALEXANDER BLACKBURN, Chairman.
CHARLES M. CARPENTER, Scribe.

Cambridge Chronicle, July 7, 1894, 1.

BACK TO BLUE LAWS.

Rev Alexander Blackburn, who was chairman of the ministers' committee, said that he was in no way a Sunday extremist. The law is, in his opinion, an excellent one for the public welfare. Everyone must admit that the line has to be drawn somewhere and here is the most logical place. A druggist is the only tradesman in the city who has been accustomed to sell soda and such things on Sunday. Mr Blackburn thinks the druggist has no right to this monopoly. He does not favor the enforcing of the law on purely religious grounds.

Rev Charles M. Carpenter, pastor of Hope church, was the secretary of the ministers' meeting and one of the members of the committee who waited on the mayor with the petition. Mr Carpenter was seen by a CHRONICLE reporter on Tuesday morning. He said that he did not wish to antagonize the druggists at all. This was the general feeling of the ministers' meeting. Mr Carpenter thought that this matter had been coming on since last December. Matters were precipitated by the meeting of the Congregational club held at the rooms of the Colonial club recently. Mr Carpenter is of the opinion that the children of this city ought not to be taught to desecrate the Sabbath day, as they have been doing in buying candy and other things in the drug stores. He thinks that the Sabbath is a day for rest and not a day for bartering. As for the criticism of himself that he is a pastor of no great account he says he admits that and don't pretend to have any great weight.

Cambridge Chronicle, July 14, 1894, 1.

Who are you?

You are **Aleck Quest**, a social critic who views drug stores as dens of sin. On the back of this handout, you'll find an 1886 exposé on soda fountains and excerpts from your scandalous diatribe "The Fast Set at Harvard University."

How do you feel about these objects?

You interpret the **tobacco pipe**, **soda fountain**, and **patent medicine** as instruments of vice that should not be sold at all. Restricting the inventory of drug stores may sound extreme, but it's the only way to protect our nation's virtues.

The **tobacco pipe** represents a history of rule-breaking, since Harvard's first leaders banned smoking as a fire hazard unbecoming of future clerics. The ban was lifted decades ago, but shouldn't the future leaders of this nation devote their time to more wholesome pursuits?

The **soda fountain** is a gateway to a sinful lifestyle. In 1893, reporters from the *Boston Daily Globe* investigated your scandalous assertions about druggists. They discovered that:

A man could go up to a soda fountain and drink, and before an officer could grab the glass it would be rinsed out beneath the counter, and no one could tell what the glass had contained, except to have a suspicion of it.

In another case, an undercover *Globe* reporter asked a druggist for liquor on a Sunday:

The apothecary looked a moment... and then took off the lid of his soda fountain. Inside, calmly slumbering on ice, were at least a dozen bottles of "Ruppert's" [beer].

The **patent medicine** bottle may be the most incriminating object. Cambridge went dry and stopped granting liquor licenses in 1887. However, druggists are allowed to apply for a special liquor license, since patent medicines contain upwards of 20% alcohol. It is an open secret that students can obtain alcohol from druggists under the guise of medicine. Perhaps that's why Cambridge has three times as many apothecaries as needed!

IN DISGUISE.

How Alcohol Figures in Drug Store Beverages.

The pharmacist is cunning in his methods, or, as he would rather have it expressed, "wise in his own generation." Should a stranger, really in need of a stimulant, enter his place of business and hurriedly say: "Gimme some whisky," or "Gimme some brandy" the proprietor would draw himself up and in a voice, every tone of which would convey to the sufferer an idea of the grievous error he had fallen into, would say to him: "Sir, this is not a gin mill." How different is the reception of the man who, to use a vulgar expression, "knows the ropes." He sails airily into the store, steps in front of the fountain and barely nods his head to the obsequious clerk, who, glass in hand, goes through the formality of repeating the words "The same?" a bottle about half full of some dark looking liquid is produced from its hiding place, about six table-spoonsful of its contents are decanted into a glass, which is then held under the vichy tap, where it receives more or less aerated water, as the patient may signify. He who has been benefited by the dose then lays down fifteen cents, exchanges a solemn look with the clerk and departs. It is a peculiarity of the druggist that he will never sell his alleged whisky or *spiritus frumenti*, by which name he would rather have it known, in its free untrammelled state. One of the unwritten rules of the trade not to be found in the pharmacopœia is that it shall be shorn of its strength by being mixed with some one of the many "natural" mineral waters which flow from a never failing spring in his sub-cellar.

The Brooklyn Daily Eagle, February 16, 1886, 1.

THE FAST SET AT HARVARD UNIVERSITY.

Here is a pen picture of a Harvard card den drawn by a college correspondent: "The poker room with its heated atmosphere impregnated with the sickening smell of stale cigarette smoke, its 'curses both loud and deep' at ill luck, the wild, feverish talk, the hysterical laugh, and the ghastly faces on which are written greed and avarice and despair, is a bad school for any one, and it makes short work of these freshmen, 'on whose lips the milk is scarcely dry.'

"Harvard is a world of itself," says the student of to-day. And, like the great world outside, it has changed amazingly during the last four or five decades. Less than half a century ago sixty men were considered a large class; now the average is two hundred and fifty.

Then an atmosphere of simple village life pervaded Cambridge; now the place is a "prohibition" city where thirsty students may find favor at the druggists' without "winking."

Then, although most, if not all, of the students drank, they did not drink to excess. They were very moderate in their use of wine. One man, who had a keg of beer in his room, was thought a monstrously dissipated fellow to go to such an extent. Intoxication was rare then; now it is all too common. Then a man in his cups was regarded with pity, or scorn, or contempt by the great body of his fellow-students; now he is said to pursue the "manly path," although it is not as straight a path as most men wish to tread. Then about one man in ten was a total abstainer, and looked upon as a "milk-sop"; now, although there is more drunkenness, there is more charity for the fellows who "lack manly spirit."

Aleck Quest, *North American Review* 147, no. 384

(November 1888): 550, 551-552.