In 1909, the *Los Angeles Times* printed a recipe of sorts for “The Suffragette Cocktail,” a drink supposedly created by a Minneapolis bartender that consisted of “sloe gin, French vermouth and Italian vermouth in equal parts,” as well as a few dashes of orange bitters and lemon peel. The recipe noted that “one makes a man willing to listen to the suffragette’s argument. Two convinces him that it has some merit. Three makes him a missionary, willing to spread the gospel abroad, and four will make him go home and wash the dishes.”

While not in the same manner as the recipe describes, women of the twentieth century would connect alcohol to women’s liberation in more ways than one. In the early twentieth century, women used arguments of moral superiority to advocate for temperance and suffrage. At the same time, upon passage of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Amendments, women used alcohol as a means of asserting their liberation and drinking in spaces previously reserved for men. This, combined with the commercialization of leisure time as women entered the workforce, allowed for commercialization and standardization of the modern cocktail.

While much has been written on the subject of gender and Prohibition during this period, little has been written on gender and drinking during Prohibition. Many scholars examine women’s impact on the passage of Prohibition as an assertion of political freedoms. *Liberated Spirits: Two
Women Who Battled Over Prohibition, by Hugh Ambrose and John Schuttler (2018), examines the lives of two women on opposite sides of the debate over Prohibition, but does not discuss women drinking during this time.² Ambrose and Schuttler argue that the relationship between women in politics and the Eighteenth and Twenty-First Amendments are more deeply connected than previous histories have given credit, and that women were deeply divided over these issues. The authors, however, do not discuss the culture of women drinking during Prohibition. Both women discussed in Ambrose’s book were powerful forces in the repeal of Prohibition, but neither woman discussed particularly enjoyed drinking. Alternatively, The Prohibition Hangover, by Garrett Peck (2009), and America Walks into a Bar, by Christine Sismondo (2014), argue that America’s history is closely intertwined with its relationship with alcohol; however, the books do not dive deeply into the culture around female drinkers.³ Peck’s book covers a history of American alcohol, with chapters on beer, wine, and liquor that attempt to examine how America’s drinking preference took its modern form. Sismondo’s book is a broader history of the culture of drinking across American history but only one chapter examines women drinkers during Prohibition.⁴ David Wondrich’s Punch (2010) and Dale DeGroff’s The Craft of the Cocktail (2002) examine cocktails from a food history perspective but leave out the impact and influence of women. Punch provides a close analysis of the historical significance of alcohol as a social facilitator and specifically discusses punches (large batch cocktails served at group gatherings) and their impacts on communities.⁵ DeGroff’s book deals more with how to properly craft classic cocktails, with brief histories preceding the recipes.⁶

Historians of gender and early twentieth-century consumer culture, by contrast, demonstrate the newfound social and economic freedoms of women, which helps provide context for women as new drinkers. As Catherine Murdock argues in her 1998 work, Domesticating Drink: Women, Men, and Alcohol in America, 1870–1940, arguments over alcohol during the period from 1919 to 1933 exemplified a divide along gender lines. While few women drank publicly prior to Prohibition, their moderate and private modes of alcohol consumption stood at odds with the more excessive and public male drinking culture of the time. After winning the right to vote, however, and even in the face of the passage of Prohibition, women asserted their newfound sense of freedom by drinking publicly.⁷ In her 1986 work, Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York, historian Kathy Peiss argues that commercialization led to the transference of women’s leisure into the public sphere, challenging established codes of heterosocial conduct. According to Peiss, women found space in leisure to experiment and express themselves.⁸ These historians create the context for explaining the impact of women on the modern American cocktail. While each of these authors provide an analysis of gender and how it related to alcohol consumption, they fail to recognize how women’s consumption shaped the broader drinking culture.

This essay argues that the political and economic climate of the early twentieth century, characterized for women by liberation and commercialization, allowed women to enter the drinking space. As they did so, the social conventions of public drinking shifted. In particular, they played an important role in popularizing the American cocktail, shaping and solidifying it in ways important for its rise in popularity in the years following Prohibition. Over the course of this essay, I will explore how women’s responses to Prohibition shaped American drinking practices. First, I explain how the location of women drinking moved from private to public due to increased social and economic freedoms for women. Second, I outline how what women were drinking changed in quantity as well as content due to the combined effects of the rise of cocktail culture as well as new social freedoms for women. Third, I discuss how, where, and what women were drinking had a distinct impact on the evolution of the cocktail and American drinking culture overall. This analysis will place women at the center of the narrative to shed light on an area of American Prohibition history previously dominated by men.

Passing the “Dry Amendment”
The story of alcohol in the United States is closely connected to the story of women in the US. Even before the founding of the country, women served drinks to men in taverns who drafted America’s founding documents. Brewing and distilling fell in the domestic realm that women were supposed to occupy.⁹ While few women drank in public taverns and saloons the way men did, many women drank privately with their families, as part of religious rituals, or when alcohol was prescribed as medicine. Since women’s drinking was restricted to the private sphere in the early twentieth century, some women argued they had the moral authority to move into the public sphere and advocate for the reform of men’s drinking.

Prior to Prohibition, women drank almost exclusively in the home. Catholic women and some denominations of Protestant women took wine with communion, and Italian or German immigrant women would enjoy a glass of wine or beer with their family at dinners. However, it was not acceptable for women to be seen drinking or drunk. Saloons, in contrast, were predominantly a male space, and the women who frequented saloons and taverns were typically prostitutes. To drink with men in public or get drunk in public could thus ruin a woman’s reputation and marriage prospects. In this way, societal expectations kept women’s drinking private. The discourse of the temperance movement linked women with abstention from alcohol and linked men with drinking, as popular culture and attitudes surrounding alcohol closely associated consumption and tolerance to virility. This gendered ideology of drink would dominate the rhetoric surrounding temperance and Prohibition.
As saloon culture grew in the latter half of the nineteenth century, women began to advocate for temperance. The temperance movement sought to convince men that alcohol was a threat to their morality, but not to their health. Women relied on rhetoric that centered around the idea of their duty to govern the morality of the home and family to advocate for the passage of laws that would limit the sale and production of alcohol. Their original goal was to protect their families from a breadwinner who spent all of his money at the bar while his family went without their basic needs. Women took to the streets in a way they never had before in order to spread their message. Groups of women stood outside of local saloons and taverns and prayed for the immortal souls of its patrons. Some even took to violence, entering and smashing saloons to protest drinking. These religious campaigns against saloon culture set the stage for the temperance movement to become the largest conservative reform movement of the twentieth century.

It was in this saloon-smashing culture, hosting large scale demonstrations and destroying barrooms, that the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) was born. In the summer of 1873, the mass gatherings of women protesting had come to be called the “Women’s Crusade.” This “crusade” aimed to address the problem of binge drinking in American society, and particularly its effects on family life. The following year, many of those women formed the WCTU. The women of the WCTU campaigned vigorously outside of saloons, often utilizing the same tactics as female temperance activists before them, which consisted of praying on the ground outside the establishments in hope of convincing the owners to come outside and renounce their spirit-selling ways. The WCTU also lobbied for the passage of federal legislation that controlled the distribution of alcohol. The WCTU linked their campaign against alcohol to a broader campaign for the protection and advancement of women’s rights, including women’s suffrage and protecting working girls from the exploitation of men. The WCTU advocated heavily for women’s right to vote, arguing that a woman should be able to vote for her family in case her husband was too heavily influenced by alcohol. Through these efforts, the WCTU grew to be the largest movement of the nineteenth century, with 766,000 members at its peak. The work of these members greatly influenced the ratification of both the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Amendments.

In 1919 Congress passed National Prohibition, making the production, transportation, and distribution of alcohol illegal. Rather than eliminating drinking, however, the amendment drove drinking underground into speakeasies. These illegal establishments served liquor smuggled into America from Canada or Mexico, or liquor produced illegally from industrial alcohols that were intended to be used to make fuel. In contrast to the men-only drinking establishments that existed prior to Prohibition, men and women alike flocked to the speakeasies of New York and Chicago to order cocktails made of bootlegged liquor. These cocktails differed from their predecessors because they aimed to cover up the taste of unpalatable liquors made with industrial alcohol. This marked the emergence of women as public drinkers. Following men into the speakeasies, women finally made their way into a space formerly reserved exclusively for men.

“Where Can a Girl Get a Drink Around Here?”: Women in Speakeasies

As women entered the workforce in the first decades of the twentieth century, the concept of leisure time began to evolve and solidify. Women began to distinguish between work time and leisure time. According to Kathy Peiss, leisure provided women the opportunity to articulate a different set of values. In this way, modern women were able to use leisure to experiment with their independence by challenging traditional codes of conduct regarding heterosexual relationships. During this period, for example, working-class women accompanied men out on the town who would “treat” them to leisure activities such as movies, dinner, and drinks. Commercialization of leisure and the rise of dance halls, amusement parks, and nickelodeons pushed women’s leisure into the public sphere, creating tension with traditional ideas about womanhood.

The bar was central to this phenomenon. Through the course of Prohibition, women moved into drinking spaces they were formerly barred from entering. While it is easy to believe that this was a triumphant storming of previously male-dominated spaces by rampant feminists, the reason for this is complex and many years in the making. First, it was the result of a slow emergence of women out of the private sphere into the public professional spaces, and into public social spaces as well. Secondly, it can be credited to the desire to assert newfound political power by entering previously male-only spaces. Both of these can be attributed to significant changes in ideas about gender and identity and the emergence of the “Modern Woman” and “New Womanhood.” These elements contributed to an atmosphere welcoming of change among the working-class in urban spaces, allowing women to occupy spaces previously reserved for men.

When women entered the barroom in 1920, usually accompanied by men, it challenged traditional ideas about bars as male-only spaces. As Prohibition pushed drinking underground into speakeasies, these spaces served as environments for the commercialization of cocktails, allowing bars to come up with signature cocktails which both masked foul liquors and provided speakeasies to differentiate themselves. Going out for drinks with a man operated similarly to going to an amusement park or a movie, while met with more judgment from more conservative friends and family members. Some women, such as film star Texas Guinan, even owned and operated speakeasies. Many newspaper articles warned of the peril young women could encounter in speakeasies. Despite this backlash, women kept coming to bars and ordering liquor, and, much to the chagrin of her
elders, the New Woman continued as a model for women during the period. The emergence of women into the speakeasies of the 1920s was an assertion of their newfound social and political freedoms. While the WCTU had advocated for women’s suffrage, it was largely a conservative reform group consisting primarily of middle-class women. Because the group was working primarily toward the passage of “dry legislation,” after the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, the WCTU’s conservative influence on American womanhood waivered. Having achieved its initial goals, the group struggled to keep its members united through a common cause. Women had a plethora of new social and political opportunities after winning the right to vote in 1920. This coupled with the emergence of “New Womanhood,” an idea that womanhood could include greater independence and emergence into a more active world, allowed women to burst into elected offices after the Nineteenth Amendment was passed. Moreover, women were now found on the factory floor, behind a desk, and at work in government agencies. According to historian Catherine Murdock, the “New Woman” was a public figure and appeared everywhere she was needed, but “the flapper” took this idea further, and asserted this newfound freedom in a way “disconcerting to her elders.” The flapper took this liberation beyond employment and citizenship and stood as an emblem for radical feminism during this period. She drank, and she smoked, and she went out with men in the late hours of the evening. She danced in dance halls and drank in speakeasies, and she wore straight sparkly dresses that conformed her body to a flat androgynous shape, performing her gender in a way which seemed to erase any distinction between herself and the men around her. In many ways, both societally and economically, the flapper was closer to what a man should be than a woman.

The combination of a growing consumer culture, the creation of leisure as a concept, and newfound political and economic freedoms for women contributed to the construction of the modern woman. Having expanded acceptable behavior, women partook in public drinking alongside men. The creation of leisure time and commercialization of the bar and drinking as an activity to enjoy all acted as factors that encouraged women’s public participation. However, women in speakeasies (and later more respectable bars) created a need for drinks that were more approachable to new drinkers. The emergence of women as public drinkers created a demand for sweeter and more aesthetically pleasing drinks that would continue to be popular in hotel bars.

“What’ll Ya Have?”: Women as Cocktail Drinkers Just as where women drank was changing, what women drank was growing and expanding as well. With the WCTU’s influence on working-class women waning, some women began campaigning for the repeal of Prohibition, arguing that the amendment was not being well enforced and instead increasing organized crime and disrespect for the Constitution. Because middle-class women were more likely to support Prohibition, these women were generally from higher socioeconomic classes. Eventually, groups such as the Women’s Organization for National Prohibition Reform aimed to reform or repeal the Eighteenth Amendment. In December of 1933, the New York Times published an article titled “Hard Liquor Leads in Hotel Drinking.” The article explores what customers of hotel bars were drinking after the Twenty-First Amendment repealed Prohibition earlier that week. In one section of the article, the author discusses hotel bartenders’ astonishment when women frequented their bars. One bartender notes, “In the old days you seldom saw a respectable lady enter a barroom unescorted... But look at them now. They not only come in alone but order hard liquor.” The article depicts women entering hotel bars and ordering their scotch and sodas, gin fizzes, and old-fashioneds like seasoned drinkers. Numerous articles such as this noted that a significant change had taken place in the American barroom. Many articles note that this change was not likely to go away and that women had successfully infiltrated these spaces previously reserved for men. This is significant because it demonstrates that women emerging as new drinkers was considered novel and noteworthy, marking it as different from previous behavior. Hard liquor was ordered by men and women alike, and in larger amounts than before. On the first day after Prohibition’s repeal, many hotel bars ran out of liquor entirely. Over thirteen years of Prohibition, American women had made themselves a space in the barroom, and it was clear to men that there was no going back.

Prior to Prohibition, cocktails had fewer ingredients and more simple recipes. In the early nineteenth century and before, the cocktail could be found only in major urban centers in the United States. Taverns and saloons served predominantly straight hard liquor or beer. Where cocktails were served, they contained only two or three simple ingredients. A common drink in the period was “the flip”; the exact recipe varied by tavern, but it usually included some sort of liquor such as brandy, rum, or whiskey, along with eggs and sugar. Bartenders mixed the ingredients in a barrel, stirring with a hot poker. Another drink, the “Stone Fence,” contained only whiskey and cider. Cocktails like the “Flip” or “Stone Fence” lacked a standardized recipe and were rarely sweet. These cocktails were popular amongst men as they provided a vessel for alcohol that was different from just beer or liquor.

Prior to Prohibition, women generally drank beer, cider, and wine, but those preferences changed over time. Though women had access to and drank hard alcohol, primarily when prescribed for medicinal purposes, they were more familiar with and thus more likely to drink beer, wine, and cider. Some women drank punch since it was easy to make for crowds and gatherings in the home. Punch recipes consisted of five basic elements: strong (liquor), weak (water), sour (citrus), sweet, and spice (usually nutmeg, if one could afford it). This basic recipe for punch served as the basis for what became “the golden ratio” of cocktails: “1 part sour,
1 part sweet, and 2 parts strong.” However, Prohibition made these familiar alcohols scarce, forcing the bartenders of Prohibition to get creative with the recipes. Following the template outlined by medicines and punches, bartenders found a way to make liquor palatable for their new feminine clientele in the modern cocktail.

Because the manufacture of alcohol during Prohibition was illegal, the kind of liquor available during the period was most often industrial alcohol cut with water. To make this concoction imitate a spirit, bartenders added flavoring. While whiskey and rum had been America’s preferred spirits before Prohibition, after the passage of the “dry amendment,” gin became the new favorite liquor. Gin was easier to replicate since only juniper oil was added to industrial alcohol; bootleggers did not need to worry about changing the color or establishing an aged flavor. To replicate whiskey, they needed to manipulate the color and flavor, which was no easy task. Some bootleggers went as far as soaking the carcasses of dead rats or squirrels in industrial alcohol to get the desired color. Unsurprisingly, the bootlegged liquor of the Prohibition era was not only unpalatable, but downright dangerous.

To combat this and make liquor appealing to women during Prohibition, bartenders developed their own signature cocktail recipes, and mixed complex drinks in order to dilute questionable liquors. This era gave rise to cocktails like the “Bee’s Knees,” which used lemon juice and simple syrup to cut the bootlegged gin of speakeasies. Another cocktail from this era was the “Last Word,” developed at the Detroit Athletic Club, composed from green chartreuse, gin, maraschino liqueur, and lime juice. Lime juice and green chartreuse added a distinct green hue, while maraschino liqueur added a strong flavor that helped cover the harshness of bootlegged gin. As these drinks rose in popularity, other bars attempted to re-create them, increasing their availability. Both of these cocktails were popular with the women of the bar scene, and because of their popularity, quickly became essential cocktails of the period.

In the years after the repeal of Prohibition, cocktail culture was limited largely to the cities where customers could find bartenders who knew how to mix drinks after the thirteen-year ban on alcohol. This was particularly difficult given the fact that most of the best bartenders fled to Europe during Prohibition. When American bartenders returned to the United States after the repeal of Prohibition, they brought with them knowledge of booming European bars and returned to a country ready to commercialize the products of their newfound skills. With women as a new clientele, bartenders used this opportunity to try new drinks. Many of these drinks are now regarded as classics, such as the Sazerac, the French 75, and the Negroni, and are notable for their use of European ingredients. The Sazerac, now the official cocktail of New Orleans, uses absinthe, which originated in Switzerland. The French 75 uses champagne and the Negroni uses Italian sweet vermouth and Campari. Growing American consumerism coupled with women discovering what drinks they enjoyed led to the standardization of many drinks.

**Conclusion**

Ultimately, the development of the modern cocktail was driven predominantly by women as a new clientele for bars. The emergence of leisure and consumer culture in America coupled with the Prohibition-era emergence of women as a new market for cocktails reshaped American drinking culture. As women moved away from private drinking and accompanied men to nightclubs and the speakeasies of Prohibition, they were met with an increasing industry that was anxious to make a space for a new market of drinkers. They did so by serving increasingly standardized cocktail recipes. After earning the right to vote, and using that power to repeal Prohibition, women felt that entering the barroom was a way to assert their newfound political freedom. Similarly, bars were interested in commercializing leisure time and focusing working women’s free time around the bar rather than quiet homosocial knitting circles of the previous decades. The combination of commercialization of leisure and newfound female freedoms created an environment in which the American cocktail thrived.

When women entered the barroom after repeal, they provided a new client base willing to try new drinks. This, in addition to the necessity to use mixers to cut unpalatable bootlegged liquor helped create a market for cocktails in the Prohibition era. After Prohibition, bartenders emigrating from Europe experimented with European ingredients on an audience with little prior experience with cocktails. With the possibilities of bars making a name for themselves with signature drinks, bars rushed to create their own spins on classics, forcing many drinks to be codified and served across many different establishments.

By understanding the contribution of women to the development of the cocktail in America, women are placed back into a story that has long been dominated by men. Popular representations of the American cocktail have focused predominantly on the men who drank them. One of the most visible drinks in the media is the martini. We are familiar with James Bond’s martini order, but far less referenced is the inherent femininity of this drink that has long been associated with male cocktail culture. Even the signature glass of the martini is reminiscent of the female body. However, with an understanding of the female influence on the American cocktail, the martini seems far more feminine. Similarly, for the past few decades, the old-fashioned has been seen as a man’s drink, but after Prohibition, the old-fashioned was one of the most popular drinks ordered by women. Understanding this connection between women and cocktail culture places women back into a story that popular culture has removed them from.

Today, cocktail culture is on the rise as hipsters clamor to find speakeasies hidden behind ice cream parlors and laundromats. Cocktail culture is shifting once again as many bartenders turn toward the craft cocktail movement.
Bars are making their own bitters and growing their own herbs for complicated botanical syrups, all in an attempt to stand out, just like the bartenders of Prohibition attempted to stand out with new and exciting cocktails. This focus on quality craftsmanship and ingredients comes after years of teaching Americans to drink again. Little do contemporary American bartenders know how much they owe to the new female drinkers of the 1920s and 1930s, who transformed the nature of public drinking in lasting ways.

Notes
4 Sismondo, America Walks into a Bar, 213.
5 David Wondrich, Punch: The Delights (and Dangers) of the Flowing Bowl (New York: Tarcher Perigee, 2010).
6 Dale DeGroff, The Craft of the Cocktail: Everything You Need to Know to Be a Master Bartender, with 500 Recipes (New York: Clarkson Potter, 2002).
7 Catherine Gilbert Murdock, Domesticating Drink: Women, Men, and Alcohol in America, 1870–1940 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).
9 Murdock, Domesticating Drink, 3–9.
15 Peiss, Cheap Amusements, 8.
16 Peiss, Cheap Amusements, 8, 185–89.
17 Murdock, Domesticating Drink, 70–88.
18 Murdock, Domesticating Drink, 70–88.
19 Sismondo, America Walks into a Bar.
22 Murdock, Domesticating Drink, 162.
27 Wondrich, Punch, 121.
29 The Mob Museum, “Bootleggers and Bathtub Gin.”

Competing Interests
The author has no competing interests to declare.

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About the Author
Elizabeth Sholtis is a History and Professional and Technical Writing Major at Virginia Tech, graduating in the spring of 2021. Her areas of interests are women’s history and the history of alcohol, which both combine in her paper Shaking Things Up: The Influence of Women on the American Cocktail. She gained inspiration for this paper after visiting Special Collections at Virginia Tech and looking into their Cocktail Ephemera Collection.