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Dispensing the Progressive State: Benjamin Tillman’s South Carolina State Dispensary

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Abstract. This paper highlights a pivotal yet understudied moment in the history of South Carolina and the American South: the South Carolina State Dispensary enacted under Governor Benjamin Tillman in 1892 and operated until 1907. The story of the State Dispensary offers an opportunity to study an embryonic Progressivism in South Carolina. The State Dispensary explicitly manifested measures of reform as understood in the Progressive Era – efficient government regulation to root out corruption and uphold morality – while adapting these measures to local cultural and political demands. Southern cultural ideals of manly honor and evangelical morality figured most prominently in these demands and fundamentally shaped the Dispensary’s development. Benjamin Tillman sought reforms that at once challenged these ideals while adapting to them. His Dispensary system symbolized the persistence of tradition and call for change that typified the slow transition to Progressivism in South Carolina.

South Carolina State Dispensary Commissioner W.O. Tatum proclaimed in his 1905 evaluation of the State Dispensary, “South Carolina is nothing if not original. Her solution of the vexatious liquor problem – the gravest and most all-pervading of the age – was such an innovation as to startle the world.” He continued “but its unquestionable success and the satisfaction with it of the great majority of the people who live under it is leading to [the] study of it in other states which have tried either prohibition or license regulation or both and are not satisfied with the results obtained.” However, a tranquil atmosphere of the kind so confidently described by Tatum in 1905 never developed around the state dispensary system he headed. That system granted a complete monopoly to the state of South Carolina for the sale and distribution of alcohol within its borders. It began operations in 1892 and continued until abolished by the state legislature in 1907.

The story of the State Dispensary offers an opportunity to study an embryonic Progressivism in South Carolina. The State Dispensary explicitly manifested measures of reform as understood in the Progressive Era – efficient government regulation to root out corruption and uphold morality.
– while adapting these measures to local cultural and political demands. Southern cultural ideals of manly honor and evangelical morality figured most prominently in these demands and fundamentally shaped the Dispensary’s development. A contentious atmosphere plagued the Dispensary throughout its existence, as it was a frequent battleground issue between South Carolina’s dominant political factions, the “Conservative” establishment and the “Reform/Tillmanite” insurgency. Intrastate tensions between rural and urban, Low-country and Upstate, prosperous and poor, all found voice in this factional divide. Benjamin Tillman’s “Reform Movement” sought reforms that at once challenged these divisions while adapting to them. His Dispensary system symbolized the persistence of tradition and call for change that typified “Tillmanism” as well as a slow transition to Progressivism in South Carolina.

Benjamin Ryan Tillman’s political career began in the service of former Confederate General Wade Hampton during his “Redemption” campaign for Governor in 1876-77. Tillman built his early political success upon conspicuous service with Hampton’s “Red Shirts,” infamous for their violent persecution of black Republicans during this campaign. After Hampton’s election, however, Tillman divorced himself from what he saw as an increasingly corrupt state government that paraded Wade Hampton as its figurehead. Tillman cast himself as the vocal leader of the voiceless white farmer, held politically ignorant by Hampton and his elite Conservatives. According to Tillman, Hampton and his political legions sought only to advance the interests of their faction, invoking images of past Confederate glory and the specter of race war to render moot social class dissension among whites. All the while they pandered to the black vote at the expense of the white farmer.

During his ascendancy to the South Carolina governorship (two consecutive two-year terms from 1890 to 1894) and later the U.S. Senate (four consecutive six-year terms from 1894 to 1918), Tillman espoused a vehement racist vernacular, even defending lynching if it involved “a negro who had committed an assault upon a white woman.” He aimed to ensure white supremacy by disfranchising and segregating blacks. At the same time, he would politically empower white farmers through reforms that promoted their interests by regulating railroad rates, reining in corporations, and offering affordable education in agriculture and mechanical sciences. In doing so, Tillman employed an invective against the Conservatives that at once endeared him to the rural white masses while making him a pariah in Conservative circles, fomenting a political factionalism that colored nearly every aspect of South Carolina politics between 1890 and 1920.

Most historians tend to discuss Tillman in this context of Southern Popu-
lism and racial demagoguery. Historians who have analyzed the Populist and Progressive Eras in the South specifically present an opportunity to reevaluate Tillman’s Reform Movement – including the State Dispensary – as “Progressive” impulses, in the same sense that they grudgingly bestowed that label to segregation and disfranchisement laws of the period. According to these historians, racial segregation purported a stable social and political environment by diminishing the racial tensions that bred corruption and conflict. Therefore, these laws represented Progressive measures within the context of the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century South. From this perspective, Tillman’s reforms – especially the State Dispensary system – seem similar to other Progressive measures that constituted the period’s overarching search for order.

Few historians have examined the Dispensary “experiment” in state regulation, and those who have done so have generally pursued one of three courses. For biographers of Tillman, the State Dispensary constitutes one issue in many he confronted in his personal and political career, and the system itself is neither analyzed nor placed in its own context. For historians of prohibition, the Dispensary generally receives cursory notice as a failed compromise option. And with one exception, the few theses that examine the Dispensary have couched it in a legal and economic context, but not a cultural and political one.

Just months before the state legislature enacted Tillman’s Dispensary law, Baptist Reverend John G. Williams of Allendale, South Carolina wrote several editorials decrying South Carolinians’ unhealthy relationship with alcohol. “The awful plight that South Carolina is in today,” he noted, “politically, financially, and morally, is due in great measure to the corrupting and destroying plague of whiskey.” He proceeded to place the debate over liquor in the context of longstanding conflicts between good and evil, using Biblical references to the “prophet Elijah” and the “wicked King Ahab” to represent the contemporary forces for and against prohibition. Williams echoed the concerns of many South Carolinians when he asserted, “Whiskey troubles the country with drunk[en] rows, with murders, with crimes of all sorts; It is the foe to all domestic peace and happiness, it corrupts and blights the young manhood of the country.” He went on to lament whiskey’s role in perpetuating poverty, corrupting politics and public life, and generally degrading community welfare. He closed by asserting: “Not one of these charges can be denied, or ever is denied.”

The Progressives were not the first to find Demon Rum the root of all evil. Regulation of alcohol in South Carolina dated to the colonial period and persisted in various forms – chiefly liquor taxes and licensing – through the Civil War. During the antebellum period, social reform movements gained momentum, and alcohol increasingly drew their ire. However, all of these early attempts at alcohol control reflected the era’s preference for
“moral suasion” of the individual rather than systemic solutions to social shortcomings. As such, they largely failed to engender widespread adherence, typically stimulating only infrequent and short-lived reform initiatives. South Carolina generally followed national trends in these respects.\textsuperscript{15}

Following the Civil War, resurgent temperance sentiment in South Carolina eventually resulted in local option laws, which granted individual county governments the discretion to prohibit the production, sale, and consumption of alcoholic beverages. The state legislature passed this local option law in 1882, and several counties across the state exercised this discretion and voted out trade in liquor over the remainder of the decade. These initiatives differed from their antebellum counterparts in that they held society itself responsible for perceived moral deficiencies and sought to reform the social structure systematically by law. Despite these efforts, alcoholic excesses persisted. In 1891, continued concern regarding these excesses resulted in a general referendum at the state Democratic primary, where prohibition votes outnumbered the opposition. Though the vote carried no authoritative weight, it demonstrated widespread agreement with Rev. Williams’ consternation over alcohol and its effects in South Carolina. South Carolina again followed emerging regional, national and even international trends. Tillman’s gubernatorial administration occurred during this general high point of emphasis on temperance and prohibition, necessitating some form of state action, a role his dispensary law sought to fulfill.\textsuperscript{16}

At its core, the dispensary law addressed the “liquor problem” in South Carolina by granting the state a complete monopoly over the sale and distribution of alcohol within its borders, in an effort to eliminate the corrupting influence of bars and saloons. It did so by establishing a central state dispensary through which all liquor sold legally had to travel. Local county dispensaries operated beneath this central state entity, and the law mandated they be located in municipalities and incorporated towns. The county dispensaries provided weekly reports to county boards of control, which convened at least once a month and reported on dispensary activity in the county to the State Board of Control.\textsuperscript{17}

Under the law, revenue from the state dispensary system would be divided among the state, county, and municipal governments. The state’s profits derived from selling to the various county dispensaries. Each county contained one dispensary, and since the law directed it be located in a municipal center, the retail trade of these municipal dispensaries was divided evenly between the city and county governments. The law also established a constabulary to enforce the system. Initially, much of the enforcement and supervisory power within the dispensary system lay in the hands of the Governor and the State Dispensary Commissioner, who oversaw the activities of the constabulary and commercial operations, respectively. This
state-sponsored form of political patronage and fundraising drew the ire
of Tillman’s political opponents, who abhorred its seemingly limitless po-
tential for the aggrandizement of gubernatorial power and influence. This
resistance contributed mightily to the factional political atmosphere sur-
rounding the State Dispensary.\textsuperscript{18}

The dispensary law itself evolved significantly between its inception
in 1892 and its demise in 1907. However, these changes never detracted
from the initial spirit of the law and its intended social and cultural effects.
Most of the alterations affected the organization and day-to-day operation
of the system, designed to increase the efficiency and enforcement of the
law while responding to legal and cultural resistance. The first dispensary
law, the Evans Prohibition Bill, was hurried through the state legislature
at the close of the session in December of 1892. Passed largely due to the
factional influence of Tillman and his followers in the legislature, the law
replaced a full-on prohibition bill that had passed the House and been held
up in the Senate. Presumably, many voting on the Evan’s Prohibition Bill
only vaguely understood either the letter of the law or its intent. Given
this rather precarious legislative foundation, questions and contestations
indubitably followed, in the form of court cases attacking various aspects
of the law as well as direct physical assaults on the system in operation.\textsuperscript{19}

Legal disputes over the dispensary arose intermittently throughout the
life of the system, beginning in 1894 with \textit{McCullough v. Brown}, wherein
a partisan State Supreme Court ruled the 1892 Dispensary Act unconstitu-
tional. The court, which consisted of two “anti-Tillmanite” or “conserva-
tive” judges and one Tillmanite, ruled that the Act involved the state in
commercial pursuits and overextended the state police power regarding the
sale of liquor, both of which the court deemed unconstitutional. Anticipat-
ing this decision by a partisan court and knowing that the tenure of one of
the “conservative” judges expired in August of 1894, Tillman complied
with the decision in the short-term but quickly secured the passage of a
revised Dispensary Act in 1893, which fell beyond the purview of the \textit{Mc-
Cullough v. Brown} decision. The 1892 law was dead, but the revised law
went into effect on 1 August 1894 and promised to receive a favorable
ruling from a reconstituted State Supreme Court now consisting of two
Tillmanites and only one conservative.\textsuperscript{20}

This revised law greatly increased the power of the constabulary by
enacting heavier fines for violations and increasing the internal policing
of negligence by dispensary employees. Future changes to the dispensary
system in 1895, 1897, and 1900 primarily affected the internal organization
and external enforcement of the law, with each revision taking the 1893
version as a template. In spirit and purpose, the law remained true to its
original form, with experience in operation necessitating “improvements”
along the way.\textsuperscript{21}
This continual process of evolution did not prevent opponents from resisting the law, as demonstrated by the U.S. Supreme Court case *Donald v. Scott* in 1897 and the nearly continuous litigation faced by the system from that date forward. Conflict between federal and state law, especially the issue of interstate commerce involving liquor, provided the major point of contention. Ultimately, the court decided in *Donald v. Scott* that it was unlawful for a state to prevent private individuals from carrying “original package” liquor across state lines. This decision essentially stripped the constabulary of the right to search and seize liquor at the state line, and opened an avenue for “blind tiger” establishments where individuals could sell liquor thus brought into the state. Other court cases further limited the search and seizure ability of the constabulary by invoking similar arguments involving both interstate commerce and individual rights.\(^\text{22}\)

The result of this copious litigation was a general weakening of the system’s enforcement capabilities, undermining the state’s monopoly by limiting the extent to which the state could exert its police power to enforce it. This structural weakening only exacerbated increasingly conspicuous leadership limitations, which combined to invite deep-seated corruption and graft that ultimately debilitated the dispensary system.\(^\text{23}\)

While these legal attacks on the system fostered lively debate on the dispensary law itself, the physical assault known as the “Darlington Riot” or “South Carolina Whiskey Rebellion,” most vividly highlighted the socio-political situation into which the State Dispensary was born. The factionalism that permeated every aspect of South Carolina politics in the 1890s certainly shone through amidst the violent confrontation over the Darlington dispensary facility. Tillman’s Reform Movement threatened to turn the traditional social order on its head by allocating political power to formerly powerless lower class whites. The conservative political faction, which wielded most of the economic power within this traditional order due to its members’ status as propertied heads of household, constituted the primary opposition to Tillmanism, which based its support amongst the rural farmers over whom the conservatives exerted their political mastery. As governor, Tillman plainly grasped this dynamic when he declared, “I led a fight inside the Democratic party, the white man’s party, to free the State from the rule of these old Bourbons, who wanted the reins of government to rest entirely in the hands of themselves and those who would be subservient to their will.”\(^\text{24}\) He continued to emphasize the class conflict and factional politics driving resistance to his reforms – especially the State Dispensary – by proclaiming, “I was elected by an overwhelming majority, the greater part of my support coming from the agricultural classes, which had until then been practically deprived of a voice in the selection of the officers of the State government.”\(^\text{25}\)

The newspapers, according to Tillman, had exacerbated this factional
divide and promoted class conflict among whites with their attacks on his Reform Movement and its State Dispensary. He said that they sought to “stir up against them the anger of the people in the towns and cities, the inhabitants of which constitute the opposition to the reform movement which resulted in my election.” Cleary, Tillman understood this factional divide as both a blessing and a curse for his reforms, as it enabled him to foment solidarity and political will among the white rural classes but also put the urban-backed upper crust more thoroughly on the defensive. In its design, the dispensary system acknowledged this fact by providing that county dispensary be located exclusively in incorporated towns and cities and that half the proceeds from liquor retail remain in these locales. The system also anticipated resistance among the conservative urban class in its enforcement clauses, which empowered the state to withhold these funds from cities and towns that failed to enforce compliance with the dispensary law.

Darlington, county seat for Darlington County in the state’s northeastern corner, epitomized this conservative resistance, but the momentous “Darlington Riot” or “Whiskey Rebellion” began inauspiciously enough. In the spring of 1894, dispensary constables arrived in Darlington to search several places alleged to be selling illicit liquor. Any liquor not purchased through the dispensary was considered contraband, and upon finding several establishments and private homes engaged in the traffic of such contraband, the constables seized the illegal liquor and arrested the perpetrators. An assembly of increasingly hostile Darlington citizens numbering in the hundreds greeted these actions with rising resentment and ignited a bloody confrontation at the Darlington train station. One constable in particular, J.D. McLendon, endured significant insult from Frank Norment, a Darlington citizen. In his rhetoric and behavior, McLendon acted on longstanding notions of southern manly honor. He declared Norment’s abuses an obstruction of justice as well as a personal affront, and began firing his pistol in answer to these perceived insults. According to the traditional southern honor code, a man was duty-bound to defend his reputation – violently if necessary – when confronted with public insults. McLendon’s response clearly demonstrated his adherence to this code of honor. From this personal honor dispute a general shootout ensued, resulting in several casualties among both constabulary and citizenry. The surviving constables escaped to the woods and remained hidden in the local swamps while a posse composed of Darlington citizens as well as citizens from the neighboring towns of Florence and Sumter scoured the surrounding countryside in pursuit. Four other constables, who had left Darlington by way of another train station, had their car riddled with bullets when passing this mob.

Benjamin Tillman was almost perfectly reared to understand the sense of honor involved in both the enforcement of and resistance to his State Dispensary. He had been born in Edgefield County, South Carolina, a district
in the southern part of the state long-renowned for its honor-bound violence. Edgefield had produced some of the state’s most prominent – and belligerent – political leaders. George McDuffie represented the county in the U.S. Senate during the 1820s, and fought several duels with fellow politicians during his tenure in Washington. Andrew Pickens Butler, another U.S. Senator from Edgefield, had likewise displayed his prowess on the field of honor during the 1840s and 1850s. Preston Smith Brooks, the notorious Congressional Representative who battered Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner with the gutta percha cane in 1856, also hailed from Old Edgefield. And Tillman’s own had family figured just as prominently in this Edgefield tradition for honor and violence. His eldest brother, George D. Tillman, had been forced to flee the country in 1856 after an honor-bound dispute in which he shot and killed a local mechanic over a game of cards. Another older brother, John Tillman, had been shot and killed by members of a local rival family in 1850.

This community tradition for honor and violence had molded Governor Tillman’s own sense of honor. His Edgefield home and his family history both provided vivid examples of honor’s violent defense. As such, Tillman was not unlike many South Carolina men who came of age after the Civil War. Having missed the opportunity to assert their honor in the war, they actively sought other avenues to establish their honor and manhood in its wake. Benjamin Tillman’s active support of Wade Hampton’s Redshirts provided one such opportunity; the attacks on his Gubernatorial Administration and its State Dispensary provided another, and Tillman clearly understood them as such.

Governor Tillman’s reaction to the 1894 Darlington Riot exemplified this sense of honor, both personal and public. Believing the disturbance represented a statewide conspiracy to frustrate the constabulary, destroy the dispensary, and promote general insurrection against his state government, he acted immediately to answer the affront. When he summoned the state militia forces of Columbia, Manning, Sumter, and Charleston, however, the commander of these forces, Brigadier General T.A. Huguenin of Charleston, responded tersely: “The brigade will uphold and defend the honor of the state, but it will not lend itself to foment civil war among our brethren.”

The invocation of traditional manly honor codes thus permeated reactions to the dispensary’s operation.

In response, Tillman issued a general call to militia companies statewide, as well as a call for volunteers among his most ardent supporters – the rural farmers across the state. In doing so, Tillman also invoked the honor code by appealing to these farmers’ manhood and the duty to defend the honor of the governor, the state, and in the broadest terms, their own households. Five hundred fully armed men quickly gathered in Columbia, with several hundred and perhaps thousands more ready to deploy, when Tillman sent
word that his forces were sufficient and the crisis averted. This show of armed support proved enough, and resistance subsided after the “fugitive constables” returned to Columbia unharmed and Tillman received assurance that dispensary operations in Darlington would resume without incident. The Darlington Riot essentially ended outright opposition to the State Dispensary, but coercive and clandestine resistance continued to afflict the system. As Tillman’s political focus and influence expanded from South Carolina into the national arena, these opposing factions forced dispensary leaders to loosen their control, inviting the graft and corruption that eventually spelled the dispensary’s doom.

All of these legal and physical attacks on his State Dispensary between 1891 and 1894 provoked Tillman’s most concerted attempts to defend that system and its intended purpose. His public defense of the dispensary during and after these attacks to a regional and increasingly national audience did not mark any monumental shifts in his perspective or in the design of the dispensary system itself. Tillman’s strong public backing of the State Dispensary as the most promising and practical solution to the liquor problem reiterated his belief in the system from its inception.

Early in his term as Governor, Tillman’s utterances regarding liquor traffic and consumption revealed his burgeoning concern over the moral and political corruption of the saloons and his desire for state intervention to address these ill effects. In his message to the general assembly’s regular session in 1891, Tillman professed:

I desire to direct your attention to a question of great importance, with which the welfare of society and the economical administration of the government are closely connected… Now, while I do not believe it is practicable, or even desirable, to attempt the absolute prohibition of the sale of liquor in the State, no sensible man will deny that one-half or three-fourths of the crimes committed in the State, are traceable directly to the drinking of whiskey.

He closed by stressing: “The people in the country not only pay tribute to those who sell liquor – by means of which the towns are beautified and adorned – but they pay tax for the suppression of crime produced by the maintenance of these bar-rooms. It is unjust and unequal and ought to be stopped.”

Tillman, at this early stage in his administration’s approach to the liquor problem, had advocated placing the control of licensing in the hands of state and county governments. The licenses required for every liquor dealer in the state would provide the proceeds to fund these government entities. The resulting increase in revenue and decrease in crime would consequently minimize court expenses and reduce taxes.

The governor’s annual message to the General Assembly the following year retained this concern for regulation, efficiency, and morality but did so by specifically promoting a statewide dispensary system to achieve these
ends. This message dismissed the referendum vote for prohibition cast at the 1892 primary election, deeming it an abstract recommendation that lacked legislative backing. However, the obvious desire of a substantial portion of the population for some form of government action prompted Tillman to propose his State Dispensary system, modeled on an arrangement in successful operation in Athens, Georgia. This Athens municipal dispensary system had adapted features from a similar control system in Gothenburg, Sweden, in 1865, and Tillman referenced both in designing and implementing his own state-controlled dispensary. From this point forward as governor and then as U.S. senator, Tillman remained an unyielding advocate of the State Dispensary system in South Carolina as an ideal solution to a national problem: liquor and the saloons.

Early in this process, Tillman visibly weighed the applicability of the State Dispensary in his private journal, where he revealed his conception of the system as a regulatory measure in line with state canal and railroad ownership and regulation: “Dispensary: State in business era built a R.R. and ran it for years. S.C. started a canal. N.Y. built a canal and owns it now… Disp[ensary] generates its benefits from the monopoly.” In an article in the North American Review in early 1894, Tillman outlined the origins and initial process of enacting the dispensary law, highlighting its intended purpose and salient features. “I will not pretend to say that it is as good as prohibition would be,” he confessed, “but I do say that prohibition, here or anywhere else, is impossible, and the only question is how best to regulate the traffic so as to minimize the inevitable injury to society inseparable from the sale of liquor under any circumstances” [emphasis added].

Tillman pursued this line of reasoning in a more thoroughly researched and developed defense published in the July 1894 edition of the North American Review. This defense, on the heels of the Darlington Riot and the South Carolina Supreme Court decision declaring the 1892 Dispensary Act unconstitutional, argued “It cannot well be claimed then that the sale of liquor by the State is a ‘business’ in the ordinary acceptance of the term. She assumed control for a specific purpose; that of policing and regulating the traffic.”

Tillman did not end by asserting simply that the dispensary represented the lawful use of state police power to regulate commerce. He thoroughly established the legal and historical precedents that legitimized his dispensary, in form and function:

The United State Government is in the business of transporting the mails, has made it a monopoly, and protects that monopoly by stringent laws… It is in the business of manufacturing arms and building ships. It is in the business of printing and engraving. The United States also went into the business of building railroads, very extensively, about twenty-five years ago (and giving
And he observed that individual states had followed suit: “The State of New York long ago went into the business of building canals, greatly to the benefit of her people,” while “the State of Georgia went into the business of building railroads direct, and still owns a line from Atlanta to Chattanooga, worth nine million dollars.” He then concluded that “none of these things has been considered unconstitutional. But whenever society has attempted, through legislation, to stifle the evils of the liquor traffic the courts have always been prone to throw obstacles in the way and place the constitution, State or national, in the pathway of reform.”

Tillman enumerated the key virtues of the South Carolina State Dispensary by highlighting its elimination of personal profit motive, its assurance of pure liquor, and its abolition of the saloon. This last looms particularly large, as the saloon encouraged corruption, especially through “local whiskey rings” that exerted undue influence on the local economy and political scene. Tillman’s pro-dispensary arguments clearly drew upon a long tradition of limited state commercial regulation, as well as contemporary Progressive measures of reform; measures that utilized efficient state regulation to promote economic and political stability and to address perceived social problems and moral decay. This sense of “reformed tradition” permeated these and all subsequent defenses of the State Dispensary by Tillman.

This reformed tradition ran headlong into broader cultural traditions in South Carolina during the 1894 “Whiskey Rebellion.” Tillman saw the Darlington situation as an opportunity to force reform, symbolized by the State Dispensary, against the grain of prevailing cultural norms that divided the urban and rural elements in the state along class lines. Governor Tillman’s response to the attack on the Darlington dispensary facility and constabulary underscored his comprehension of these political and cultural forces, especially manly honor and individualism, in South Carolina. His reliance on the “wool-hat boys” to respond to his call and his willingness to resort to force of arms to make his stand reinforced this point. As he declared after the fact, “had I deemed it necessary, I could in forty-eight hours after issuance of the call have had an armed force of ten thousand farmers at my command.”

These poor farmers, whom Tillman claimed to have given a political voice, took him up on the offer, and reiterated their support of Tillmanism and its reforms in their letters to the governor. The support of these farmers seems especially poignant in that many of them presumably resented the class bias inherent in many other Progressive reforms of the era. These letters to the governor, from Tillmanites across the state, paid significant attention to the dispensary. Innumerable letters voiced a decidedly Pro-
gressive expectation of government intervention to address social ills by highlighting the aspects of the dispensary with promise toward these ends and instances in which the system currently failed to fulfill this promise.\textsuperscript{49} One of the earliest letters in this vein analyzed the various provisions of the law as observed in the public press. The author of this letter warned that several facets of the law required careful deployment of honest leadership and strict enforcement to ensure effectiveness. In emphasizing this general point, the author called the governor’s attention to one particular applicant for county dispenser, whose former occupation of bar keep disqualified him. The writer explained, “I refer to Mr. John Hill. I have no ill feeling to Hill, but cannot stand by to see this done without a protest when the majority of my people ask to wipe out this influence.”\textsuperscript{50} Other correspondents exhibited a similar concern for the proper enforcement and execution of the law while also heralding its potential success in combating the influence of liquor.

A Mr. H.B. Buist of Blackville, S.C. wrote in early 1893, “I wish to say that the new Liquor law if wisely and firmly put in operation will meet the approval of a majority of both factions of the Democratic Party.”\textsuperscript{51} He went on to warn the Governor that he should be “very careful in selecting a commissioner… a mistake in the appointment of this officer will give the new law the black eye and I trust you may be guided with wisdom in this matter.”\textsuperscript{52} Mr. Buist also suggested that Tillman take “great care in selecting all county boards of control,” and “that at least one anti-Tillman man be appointed on each board, one strongly in favor of prohibition. This will command respect from all sides and do much good to bring about unity of action.”\textsuperscript{53}

The dispensary issue, while placing the forces opposing Tillmanism in sharp relief, also made for interesting bedfellows. The cooperation of staunch prohibitionists and whiskey dealers against the dispensary persistently attracted the public’s attention. However, just as frequent and much less discussed was the combination of “Wets” and “Drys” in favor of the system. Many a professed prohibitionist, like the previously cited Mr. Buist, wrote Tillman to praise the dispensary and the governor’s foresight in establishing and defending it. A Protestant evangelical moral concern over alcoholic corruption pervaded these prohibitionists’ letters of support for the State Dispensary. Despite its limited promise to merely “moderate” the sale and consumption of alcohol, many prohibitionists throughout the state expressed hope that the dispensary could curb alcoholic excess and its most corruptive social effects.

Several of these prohibitionists also recognized South Carolina’s class divisions and political factionalism and placed the dispensary in that context. Waddy C. Johnson of Lancaster, S.C. wrote in 1893, “I am glad to see you take the firm stand you do, on this law, and hope you will be able
to make Charleston and Columbia ‘stand to the rack’… I wanted ‘out and out Prohibition’ and am sorry did not get it. As it is, I want to see this new law rigidly enforced, as I regard it, a big improvement over the present bar-room.’”\textsuperscript{54} Another supporter of the law, from Greenwood, S.C. seconded this position on the dispensary law by writing, “I want to say to you as a Prohibitionist I feel proud of it, believing as I do the law will be enforced. It is high time for S.C. to throw off the rule of Charleston and Columbia – again allow me to congratulate you on your stand for the right.” He concluded “it is sure to win for yourself friends and strengthen the reform movement.”\textsuperscript{55}

“Wets” also took solace in the dispensary as a reform measure, as the system in their view limited the most adverse effects of liquor consumption without the derivative corruption that typically attended full prohibition. Unlike their prohibitionist counterparts, these authors condoned alcoholic consumption, and conceivably supported the role alcohol traditionally played in Southern society and culture. Several letters to Tillman from these “Wets” corroborate this point. One letter proved particularly representative of this general perspective: “I have just read full text of the law regulating [the] sale of liquor. It occurs to me, from a hasty appreciation of the subject, most admirable and that only two classes could object to it, drunkards and minors.”\textsuperscript{56} The author proceeded to laud the assurance of pure liquor the law provided, and cited the impurity of intoxicants illegally begotten under full prohibition as a main cause of the delinquency that often accompanied liquor consumption. In closing, the writer added, “I am delighted your State is making this trial, and remember when I say that, I am a decided anti-prohibitionist.”\textsuperscript{57}

The common theme of these letters was an expectation of government action to address the liquor issue, with an appraisal of the dispensary as a fitting attempt to do so. They also displayed general recognition of the cultural context into which the dispensary entered, and in many respects, echoed Tillman’s own defenses of the system and its proposed reform. The call for rigid enforcement that permeated nearly all of these letters from both “Drys” and “Wets” helped to explain how Tillman could have acted with confidence during the Darlington Riot and again reiterated one of Tillman’s major emphases in defending the dispensary: the backbone of the law was the constabulary.\textsuperscript{58}

South Carolinians held no monopoly of interest in the dispensary or conception of it as a Progressive reform. Tillman and the dispensary received notable exposure in New York Times throughout the life of the system. That the dispensary apparently garnered enough national interest to appear in this wide-reaching publication suggests that many beyond South Carolina also comprehended the Progressive nature of the dispensary. Issues covering the entire lifespan of the system seemed to find a niche in the pages of
The early legal and physical resistance to and resulting debates over the Dispensary Act – that is, its enactment and enforcement – appeared in the *Times* throughout 1893 and 1894. One article in July of 1893 referred to the Act as “the most revolutionary business law of recent years.” Highlighting both the potential for reform as well as resistance, the article commented upon the Act’s decree that dispensaries close at six o’clock: “consequently there has been little of the usual Saturday night drunkenness among laborers who have been paid their wages.” The remainder of the article hinted at the possibility of blind tigers that so often accompanied prohibition measures, but conceded that these establishments had not appeared as of yet except in the cities of Charleston and Columbia, which were acknowledged to be the areas most fervently opposed to the dispensary system. Many of the other articles in the *Times* during this period focused more intently on the negative response to the dispensary and vaguely connected anti-Tillman sentiment with opposition to the system.

Finally, Tillman’s frequent promotion and defense of the South Carolina dispensary system to a national audience appeared often in the *Times*, increasingly so when Tillman entered the U.S. Senate in 1894. Two such articles, one in June of 1894 and the other in August of 1895 described Tillman speaking and debating on prohibition and the dispensary. In these accounts, Tillman’s arguments differed very little from those he had offered since the inception of the dispensary: prohibition was a practical failure and the dispensary limited the corruptive effects of liquor by removing profit motive and fraternization in saloons. All the while Tillman buttressed his arguments with comparisons that pitted South Carolina and her dispensary against prohibition states.

As late as 1902, Tillman still adamantly defended the dispensary system from his U.S. senate seat, citing familiar comparative statistics in an article published by *Frank Leslie’s Popular Monthly*. Comparing the three states with laws to prohibit or regulate the liquor traffic – Kansas, Maine, and South Carolina – Tillman used permit sales by the Internal Revenue Department as evidence that the dispensary not only tempered alcohol consumption by destroying the saloons, but limited illicit liquor activity by enforcing regulation through legal state liquor distribution. Again, Tillman made an explicit connection to Progressive reforms and placed the dispensary and its operation in that context. And he was not alone in doing so. He tapped into a vigorous and on-going discussion concerning the practicalities of controlling alcohol sales and consumption that extended beyond regional and even national borders.

This debate did not end with the legislative dissolution of the South Carolina State Dispensary in 1907, nor with nationwide prohibition through the Eighteenth Amendment in 1919, nor even with the repeal of national
prohibition through the Twenty-First Amendment in 1933. The idea of a state monopoly to regulate the sale and consumption of alcohol, and many features of the South Carolina dispensary in particular, persisted after 1933 in the various forms of licensing, local option, and state monopoly systems enacted to control trade in alcohol. The most visible remnants of the South Carolina dispensary remain in the eighteen states that currently enforce a state monopoly to regulate alcoholic commerce and consumption.65

The South Carolina State Dispensary, studied in the context of traditional Southern cultural ideals of manly honor and evangelical morality, symbolized a culture in transition, capturing at once the persistence of these traditional values while introducing a “modern” conception of social organization and state intervention. “Bourbon” versus “Reform,” urban versus rural, richer versus poorer: debates over the dispensary provided the initial stage on which these debates over the cultural and political transition to Progressivism in South Carolina played out. Evincing recognizably Progressive reform measures, the South Carolina dispensary embodied the deliberate application of such measures within a South Carolina where traditional cultural ideals persisted. Although the South Carolina State Dispensary system was short-lived, many of the lessons learned in South Carolina during its operation reverberated across the nation in the twentieth century. Adapting methods pioneered in international centralized control systems, most notably the Scandinavian model of disinterested management as enacted in Gothenburg, Sweden, South Carolina’s dispensary served a similar role as a template for future state control systems in the United States.66 Numerous government entities – municipal, county, state, and national – adopted and adapted various facets of a state monopoly in an on-going effort to govern the commerce, consumption, and morality of alcohol in the United States throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first.67

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ENDNOTES


2. The Dispensary Law, To Regulate the Manufacture and Sale of Liquors in the State of South Carolina (Sumter, S.C.: Herald Job Presses, 1893); Dispensary law pamphlets, 1892-1907; Box 1, Folders 12-17, SCDR/SCDAH (this is the first in a series of revised Dispensary laws, with subsequent editions enacted in 1895, 1896, 1897, 1900, and 1902); Ellen Alexander, “The South Carolina Dispensary System” (M.A. Thesis, Duke University, 1940), 145-58.

3. For the cultural traditions associated with honor and manhood, see especially Edward...


5. Francis Butler Simkins, Pitchfork Ben Tillman: South Carolinian (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 2002 ed.), 103-184; Stephen Kantrowitz, Ben Tillman and the Reconstruction of White Supremacy (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 110-97. This article extends Kantrowitz’s view of Tillmanism as an expansion of the state apparatus through greater gubernatorial control. He asserts that racism shaped most of Tillman’s perspectives. The ideals of masculine honor and evangelical morality emphasized here largely assumed and reinforced this racism. This essay shows how these cultural traditions could and did incorporate “modern,” “progressive” means of social reform, broadly defined and limitedly applied in a “Progressivism for whites only.”

6. Tillman as quoted in Kantrowitz, Ben Tillman, 169.


14. Ibid.


18. Ibid.


20. Teal and Wallace, South Carolina Dispensary, 15-26; Rowntree and Sherwell, Temperance Problem and Social Reform, 99-104.

21. Teal and Wallace, South Carolina Dispensary, 24; Rowntree and Sherwell, Temperance Problem, 99-104.

22. Teal and Wallace, South Carolina Dispensary, 29.

23. Ibid., 28-30.


25. Ibid.

26. Ibid., 515.

27. Ibid., 517.


31. “Duel in Prospect – Messrs. Butler and Benton,” 9 August 1848; “Difficulty between Judge A.P. Butler and Hon. Thomas Benton,” 22 August 1848; “In our last number,” 30 Au-


35. For more on the sense of honor pervading the Edgefield community and the Tillman family, as well as its effects on Benjamin Ryan Tillman in particular, see Burton, In My Father’s House, 76, 98-99, 100-3, 106; Chapman, History of Edgefield County, 203-6; Kantrowitz, Ben Tillman, 22-24, 37-78; Simkins, Pitchfork Ben Tillman, 29-46, 57-69; 71-88.

36. Teal and Wallace, South Carolina Dispensary, 23.

37. Ibid., 22-24.

38. Message of Benjamin R. Tillman, Governor, to the General Assembly of the State of South Carolina, Regular Session 1891, Series 3, “Personal Unprocessed,” Box 1, Folder 10, Benjamin Ryan Tillman Papers MSS#80, Special Collections, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, South Carolina (hereafter Tillman Papers/CU).

39. Ibid.

40. Ibid.


42. Undated note by Benjamin Ryan Tillman, Series 8, “Diaries and Notebooks,” Box 1, Envelope 8, “Notebook of Ben Tillman, 1894,” Tillman Papers/CU.


45. Benjamin R. Tillman, “A Last Word on the South Carolina Liquor Law,” North Ameri-
Welborn: Benjamin Tillman’s South Carolina State Dispensary

46. Ibid., 50.

49. Letters received by Governor Tillman regarding the Dispensary from farmers across the state, as well as from interested parties beyond, reiterate this general point. These letters reside in Series 2, Box 1, Folder 3 and Series 3, Boxes 1-18, Tillman Papers/CU; and in Boxes 15-16 of the South Carolina Governor’s Records, Benjamin Ryan Tillman, RG 526000 (hereafter Tillman Records/SCDAH).
50. H.B. Berish to Tillman, 22 May 1893, Series 2, “Personal Correspondence, Incoming Series,” Box 1, Folder 3, Tillman Papers/CU.
51. H.B. Buist to Tillman, 9 January 1893, “Letter’s received, 1890-1894,” Box 16, Folder 7, Tillman Records/SCDAH.
52. Ibid.
53. Ibid.
54. Waddy C. Johnson to Tillman, 12 January 1893, “Letters received, 1890-1894,” Box 16, Folder 14, Tillman Records/SCDAH.
55. P.L. Sturkey to Tillman, 16 January 1893, “Letters received, 1890-1894,” Box 16, Folder 18, Tillman Records/SCDAH.
56. T.P. Branch to Tillman, 25 December 1892, “Letters received, 1890-1894,” Box 15, Folder 24, Tillman Records/SCDAH.
57. Ibid.
60. Ibid.
61. Ibid.
66. Gutzke, “Gothenburg.”