



# Prohibition Enforcement in Lawrence Township



The police department photo, 1929, taken in front of the Recorder's Court at Harney's Corner. Edwin Carpenter is in the middle.

In 1916 a resident complained to the township that the Sunday laws against alcohol were being violated by people holding parties in Eggerts Crossing. Within a few years alcohol consumption across the nation would be outlawed. For those who wonder how the “noble experiment” ever happened, it is important to remember that nearly half of the states were dry by 1915. Even wet states like New Jersey had blue laws restricting activities on Sundays and dry sections. Temperance reformers in Cape May, Cumberland, Hunterdon, and Warren counties used local option laws to prohibit alcohol prior to Prohibition. Congress approved the 18th Amendment banning the manufacture, sale, and transportation of alcoholic beverages in 1917. Ratified in 1919 by the required three-fourths of the states, Prohibition became the law of the land a year later on January 16, 1920.

Recorder's Court dockets provide a way to go beyond local lore about speakeasies and bootleggers. A recorder was a municipal officeholder empowered to hear traffic, local ordinance, and criminal cases made by the local or state police. The court's responsibility was to adjudicate township ordinances and some state laws, collect fines, issue warrants, set bail and determine if probable cause existed to send a case to a higher court for trial. More serious crimes, including Prohibition offenses, were tried in county court. Edwin Carpenter served as recorder from 1914 until his death in 1945. Carpenter emigrated from England in the 1880s and worked for 35 years as a foreman at the American Bridge Co. in Trenton overseeing projects for the Panama Canal, the New York Subway, and the Trenton-Morrisville Bridge. Carpenter held numerous public offices including a seat on the school board and was a leader of Lawrence Township's Republican Party. He was elected to the New Jersey Assembly in 1932; his single term coincided with the end of Prohibition in 1933. The court was held nightly at



## LAWRENCE TOWNSHIP HISTORICAL HIGHLIGHTS

Harneys Corner (intersection of Route 206 & Princeton Pike) until moving to the new town hall on Main St. in 1931.

The dockets covering 1920 to 1933 contain fifty-nine Prohibition violations. Of the thirty-six people arrested, twenty-one were arraigned on multiple charges—most commonly Sale & Possession—and three were repeat offenders. While the majority of Lawrence liquor lawbreakers including all transporters and manufacturers were men, almost two times as many women as men were arrested for selling liquor in the township. Lawrence court records support common arguments made by historians that the majority of defendants in Prohibition cases were immigrants and that most were charged with petty violations involving small amounts of alcohol. Every local resident taken into custody lived in the township's southern section where the immigrant population was concentrated.

The 18th Amendment gave federal and state governments concurrent power to enforce Prohibition. Expecting compliance from citizens and cooperation from states, the federal government initially provided limited resources (money and manpower) for enforcement. New Jersey's first state enforcement act was enacted in the spring of 1921 and named after its champion, Jennie Van Ness, an Essex County Republican who was one of the first two women to serve in the state assembly. Lobbying by the Anti-Saloon League and a Republican majority ensured the passage of a state enforcement act over Governor Edward I. Edwards' veto. Edwards had famously pledged to keep New Jersey "as wet as the Atlantic Ocean" during the 1919 gubernatorial campaign and continued to fight for modification and repeal at the state and national level. The governor called the Van Ness Act "defective" because it denied trial by jury and met with widespread public opposition. By October, more than three hundred appeals packed the state Supreme Court's calendar. Justices crushed wet hopes by upholding the law after hearing several test cases in November. The Van Ness Act finally went down in defeat on February 2, 1922 when New Jersey's Court of Errors and Appeals (the state's highest court from 1844 to 1947) reversed the Supreme Court's decision and declared it unconstitutional.

Louis D'Ambra became the first Lawrence resident charged by local authorities with violating Prohibition and the only one under the Van Ness Act. D'Ambra was convicted for selling a pint of liquor to William White, his 65-year old lodger, on July 22, 1921. Police discovered less than two pints of liquor during a search of the house. D'Ambra was an Italian immigrant in his early fifties who came to America in 1906 and worked as a laborer. After serving eight days of a one month sentence in the workhouse, a judge reduced D'Ambra's punishment to a \$5 fine because of poor health.

Local action increased following New Jersey's ratification of the 18th Amendment (three years after it went into effect) and passage of a new enforcement law in March of 1922. *The Trenton Evening Times* reported Recorder Edwin Carpenter's competition with judges in Trenton and Newark over the claim to the state's first prosecution under the new act. This was the case of Frances Krolikowski who sold a half-pint of liquor to 14-year-old Michael Dringus on May 5. The next day township Constable John Mould searched her home with assistance from two New Jersey State Police troopers discovering several gallon and half-gallon jugs of alcohol. Krolikowski was arrested on sale and possession charges and brought to the Recorder's Court where Carpenter set bail at \$250. Carpenter's case notes reveal that police organized a sting using Dringus. The township kept the heat on during the fall of 1922 with raids "to check bootlegging in Eldridge Park." The newspaper reported more than a dozen barrels of wine and large quantities of mash seized and destroyed in a single night. Police arrested Dominic Yuncza, Raymond Scurte, and Anthony Chesnor for manufacturing, selling, and possessing intoxicating liquor. Yuncza, a Russian immigrant and pottery worker, bailed out his neighbors Scurte and Chesnor suggesting a possible

bootlegging partnership. According to the *Trenton Evening Times*, Yuncza was convicted of possession and fined \$100 in November of 1922. Yuncza's defense that "his wife brewed the drink for home consumption" failed to sway the judge. Scurte, an Italian immigrant employed at one of the rubber mills on the Trenton border, was arrested three separate times and the only resident caught rum-running in Lawrence. Patrolling the township on their Harley-Davidson motorcycles, officers stopped Scurte for driving his truck without lights in 1923; a suspicious action that prompted the cops to search his vehicle where they discovered the hooch.

Local enforcement decreased after 1922-1923 except for a burst of activity in 1930. This may be attributed to a boost given the dry movement by President Hoover's election in 1928. Worried about widespread evasion and the rise of organized crime, Hoover established the Wickersham Commission to investigate and make recommendations for improving law and order. At the state level, New Jersey Governor Morgan Foster Larsen received petitions from churchgoers and reformers demanding a statewide conference on Prohibition enforcement. This attention may have inspired greater vigilance by Lawrence officials. However, a shocking hijacking and murder at the Denow farm (near Rider's softball field today) on May 20, 1930 may better explain the crackdown. According to newspaper reports, Mrs. Katherine Denow unknowingly rented her barn to bootleggers. Hijacking, a term coined during Prohibition, referred to robbing bootleggers. In the early morning hours three hijackers entered the barn and in the struggle one of them was shot and killed by the bootleggers. The family heard the attack but did not dare venture out until morning when the body was discovered and the police summoned. The incident unnerved the community because gangland violence was associated with urban areas like Chicago and New York, Newark or Trenton but not Lawrence and appears to have triggered a suppression of vice.

Police made a dozen arrests for sale and possession between June 17 and July 21, 1930 though these perps were nothing like the thugs at the Denow farm. The majority were married immigrant women. Alcohol played an important role in religious and social culture for immigrants. Selling beer, wine and whiskey allowed wives, who tended not to work outside the home, to contribute to the family income. The onset of the Great Depression made such earnings even more important to working-class families. Victoria Laborwicz/Labonity/Labvicz (the spelling of her last name challenged census-takers and the court clerk) was arrested in June and July of 1930 on charges of sale and possession. Victoria and her husband Edward emigrated from Poland in 1910 and 1907 respectively; neither spoke English. When the census-taker knocked at their door on Albemarle Ave. in April of 1930, Edward, an unskilled laborer, was unemployed. Home brewing provided Victoria with a means to support her out-of-work husband and two teenage daughters. Victoria's neighbor, Martin Ferguson was also jobless with a large family to care for in 1930. Ferguson and Theresa Slappy, also apprehended that summer, were among the few blacks arrested by local authorities during Prohibition.

Some of the women were more notorious like Anna Murro who was arraigned for vice and prostitution as well as selling and possessing illegal liquor in late June 1930. The newspaper listed Murro's address at the old Whitehead farm house on Cherry Tree Lane. Recorder Carpenter set her bail at \$1000, much higher than the \$300 charged others for sale & possession, suggesting she had a history with police. The large, bold, shocking headline on the front page of the *Trenton Evening Times* in 1929—"Raid 'Speakeasy' Linked with Death", focused on Mary Marczak, a Polish immigrant living in the township's Eldridge Park section. On April 18th Julius Popkin, a 22 year-old shoe salesman from Trenton, died after a night of boozing at Marczak's 75 Lawn Park Avenue home with a friend and two girls they picked up on the corner of Princeton Ave. and Spruce St. Popkin's drinking buddy led the police on a raid the next day where the newspaper reported "in nearly every room

of the house authorities discovered liquor, wine and beer” including barrels on tap in the cellar. Mary’s husband may have produced some of it at his farm near Lambertville where cops seized a still a year later. Marczak escaped murder charges when the medical examiner determined the cause of death as “too much drink” rather than poisonous liquor as initially speculated. Liquor quality during Prohibition was poor; cocktails were invented to mask the bad taste. But the supply was also dangerous. In order to keep people from drinking alcohol intended for industrial uses, the federal government added poison. Even if bootleggers redistilled denatured alcohol to remove the poisons, enough trace amounts remained to be deadly. The newspaper reported in October that Marczak pled guilty in Mercer County court and received a \$125 fine. The judge could have imposed a fine up to \$1000 or a prison sentence up to six months, but plea bargains like Marczak’s defined Prohibition prosecution as courts and jails struggled to handle the backlog of law-breakers. The outcome of Marczak’s 1930 case is unknown since court records have not survived. As a repeat offender she faced stiffer penalties, but probably got another modest fine if convicted.

Immigrants around the nation found themselves the targets of Prohibition enforcement as reformers sought to Americanize foreigners by imposing middle-class values including temperance. In Lawrence the working-class neighborhood of Eldridge Park was the place of interest. Two-thirds of the locals apprehended on Prohibition charges lived in the community. Established in 1906, the development marked the first phase of suburbanization in the township. Conveniently located between Lawrence Road and the Johnson Trolley line, Eldridge Park attracted workers from Trenton’s rubber, wire and pottery mills including many recent immigrants from southern and eastern Europe. According to the 1920 census nearly 500 people resided in Eldridge Park (13% of the total township population). Two-thirds of Eldridge Park’s head-of-households were immigrants; Italians were the largest group followed by Austrians, Hungarians, and Russians. By 1930 first and second generation immigrants headed over one-half of the neighborhood’s households. Italians continued to be the most numerous group, but Austria, Hungary and Russia were replaced by Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Lithuania. This ethnic shift reflected post-WWI changes in the political landscape of eastern Europe rather than a population turnover. The break-up of the Austro-Hungarian, German, and Russian empires created numerous new nations including Lithuania, Poland, and Czechoslovakia. For example, the census taker listed Dominick Yuncza’s birthplace in 1920 as Russia and as Lithuania in 1930 or Steve Saggat’s birthplace as Austria in 1920 and Czechoslovakia in 1930. Most of Eldridge Park’s ethnic population arrived as part of the great wave of immigration to the United States before WWI. To many immigrants the 18th Amendment was not simply a ban on alcohol but an attack on their culture. They resisted by ignoring the law.

Eldridge Park residents felt harassed and complained about corrupt law enforcement. In 1924 over one hundred people signed a petition to dismiss policeman and neighbor John Mould on charges of “trying to secure ‘hush’ money, disorderly conduct and drunkenness.” The Township Committee conducted a hearing on the afternoon of March 8 at the Lawrence Fire House where Dominick Carcio charged Officer Mould with extortion, Mrs. Chester Pulinski accused him of attempted rape, and George Blizzard and Pasquale Norato claimed he violated the 18th Amendment. Norato’s description of an inebriated Mould entering his yard barking like a dog created a sensational

headline for the *Trenton Evening Times* news coverage of the story: “Mould Denies He Said: ‘Woof, Woof’”. Officer Mould denounced the charges as a “frame-up” by “a bunch of bootleggers, thieves and adulterers.” He admitted that he “liked to drink, and took one or two on occasion, but denied that he was ever drunk.” In the words of his lawyer: “John Mould has simply done his duty too well for Eldridge Park and that accounts for them wanting him out. They want somebody who will shut his eyes to the bootlegging joints and other dives.” The Township Committee stood by Officer Mould, but 1925 marked the end of his seven-year career with the Lawrence Police when he moved away.

Police corruption was widespread during Prohibition and Mould was not the only local cop suspected. Joseph Rich accused Police Chief Joseph Hopkins and his deputy Joseph Stonicker of demanding a bribe during a raid on his property in December 1928 when cops seized a large still and arrested Rich on manufacturing charges. Rich had purchased a 3,000-acre tract on Drift Ave. from Sarah Eldridge that summer. The Township Committee ordered Rich to present his case at a public hearing in May of 1929. According to the clerk’s minutes since “Mr. Rich had refused to avail himself of the opportunity of proving the charges,” the Township Committee “entirely exonerated [the officers] of any

charges” and expressed “full confidence in their honesty and integrity.” That faith was soon shaken when Chief Hopkins faced dismissal in the fall of 1930. Three of the five charges against Hopkins related to Prohibition including: 1) frequenting liquor joints both on and off duty, 2) being a mere “spectator” at raids in Eldridge Park and Eggerts Crossing, 3) tipping off persons to be raided. The catalyst for investigation was a motorcycle crash back in June that put Hopkins in the hospital for several weeks. The other driver and his passenger said they smelled liquor on Hopkins’ breath and a former police officer testified that he saw the chief at a speakeasy earlier that night. Other residents swore to seeing Hopkins at various gin joints around town. About 250 people attended the hearing on September 11th, which featured defiant testimony from Chief Hopkins and “cat-calls and hisses” from the crowd. Though he was cleared of visiting speakeasies and not participating in raids, the Township Committee found Hopkins guilty of conduct unbecoming an officer and suspended him without pay for the duration of the year.

By the early 1930s support for Prohibition was waning across the nation as people lamented the increase in crime and alcohol abuse. Others criticized the untaxed fortunes amassed by violent gangsters and government dollars spent on preventing drinking when the Great Depression left millions out of work, homeless and without bread. After numerous failed attempts to repeal the state enforcement act in the New Jersey legislature because of dry senators, a referendum finally succeeded in November of 1932. In Mercer County, 130 of 134 districts voted in favor of repeal. The last arrests made by township police were of two men for transportation and possession on February 18, 1931, more than one year before the state repeal. Lawrence police continued to aid federal agents and the New Jersey State Police when called to duty. For example, officers participated in the 1931 raid at 1 Vermont Ave. where a still exploded during demolition killing one civilian and injuring five law enforcement officers including Chief Hopkins.

Since a Constitutional amendment had never been repealed most Americans thought it was impossible. Drys certainly planned it that way. But Prohibition did end and faster than expected. The victory of Democratic presidential candidate Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1932 on a wet platform signaled a popular mandate for repeal. President Roosevelt and wet

## Lawrence Township Alcohol Violations, 1920-1933

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|-----------------------|-----|
| Possession .....      | 25  |
| Sale .....            | 18  |
| Transportation.....   | 11  |
| Manufacturing .....   | 5   |
| Drunk Driving .....   | 108 |
| Drunk & Disorderly .. | 81  |

**The larger number of arrests for intoxication (drunk driving and drunk & disorderly) provides further proof of Prohibition’s failure to cut off American drinkers.**

# PROHIBITION ENFORCEMENT IN LAWRENCE TOWNSHIP

Congressmen followed through on their campaign promises by legalizing beer and wine (3.2 percent alcohol) in an act passed on March 22, 1933. As a representative from Mercer County, Recorder Carpenter voted for New Jersey's own "Beer Act" adopted on April 7. The state law allowed municipalities to fix their own rules and so the Township Committee held a special meeting on April 12 to do just that. The ordinance set a liquor license at \$25 and required a petition signed by fifteen township voters attesting to the applicant's good character. Alcohol must be consumed on the premises and kept out in the open. Violators would be fined up to \$200 for each offense. At the regular meeting on April 19 the committee granted ten liquor licenses. The clerk noted that township hall was too small to accommodate the rush of applicants. Fourteen more licenses were soon approved. The court docket listed ten people arrested for selling beer without a license. Recorder Carpenter found three not guilty, while he convicted the rest on evidence provided by John Silvers working undercover for the police. For example, Italian immigrant Elizabeth Rostook pled guilty to selling Silvers beer at her husband's grocery store. Rostook and the other offenders received minimal \$25 fines, or the cost of a license.

Prohibition officially came to end on December 5, 1933 with the ratification of the 21st Amendment. It is the only amendment ratified by state conventions rather than state legislatures. While New Jersey was one of the last states to ratify the 18th Amendment, it was one of the first to strike it down. With the Depression at its peak local, state and federal governments desperately needed the revenue promised by legalizing liquor. Lawrence set the annual license fee at \$400 and a temporary license (special events like a dance or carnival) at \$325. The committee repealed the ordinance allowing Sunday liquor sales passed in July of 1933 much to the approbation of the township's churches and school leaders. The minutes indicate that the committeemen opposed the measure even at the time, but adopted it as noted by the clerk because "there were so few people at the meeting to speak against the matter [that] there was only one thing...to do and that was to grant the permit." The committee met on December 10 to review applications for beverage licenses. They approved four out of ten applications granting Harry G. Brown (Brunswick/Spruce Aves.), Longacres Country Club (Lawrence Rd.), Charles Kicinski (28 Lawn Park Ave.), and George Wesley

Smith and George Bailey (1904 Brunswick Ave.) the first rights to sell liquor in Lawrence after the fall of Prohibition. Before year's end Paul Altman (Brunswick Pike-Geneva Inn), Gus Randhahn and Curt Hempel (Brunswick Pike-Marroe Inn), Bernard Czaplicki (1148 Brunswick Ave.), and Harold R. Williams (1201 Brunswick Ave.) joined them. Many of these businesses remained Lawrence hot spots for years including Kicinski's and Czaplicki's neighborhood bars and the restaurants Marroe Inn and Geneva Inn.

Prohibition was just one of many radical changes to transform Lawrence in the 1920s. The population growth rate was the highest in township history rising from 3,686 (1920) to 6,293 (1930). At the same time, immigrants generated unprecedented demographic changes. Suburbanization spread northward from the Trenton border one subdivision at a time. To meet the new demands of suburbia the Township Committee oversaw major public improvement projects including paving roads and constructing sidewalks, connecting sewer lines and instituting garbage collection, installing street lights and traffic signals, posting street signs and speed limits. When alcohol flowed legally again in 1933, Lawrence was a very different place.

Note on Sources: Recorder's Court records examined include Courts, Box 1: Small Cause Court, 1914-24; Criminal Docket, 1915-1928; Courts, Box 2: Fines, 1922-1926; Docket, 1926-1930; Courts, Box 3: Docket, 1931-1934; Complaint Docket, 1928-1941. I also used the Lawrence Township Minutes for 1916-1933. These materials are held in the Lawrence Township Archives, Lawrence Branch of the Mercer County Library. In addition, the essay draws largely on the *Trenton Evening Times* and the U.S. Census, 1920 and 1930: Lawrence Township, Mercer County, New Jersey Schedules. David E. Kyvig, *Repealing National Prohibition*, 2nd ed. (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2000) and Michael A. Lerner, *Dry Manhattan: Prohibition in New York City* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007) provided historical context.

— Brooke Hunter

*Brooke Hunter is an Associate Professor of History at Rider University and a member of the Lawrence Historical Society Board of Trustees. She would like to thank History majors Rob Williamson (class of '13) and Erich Huhn (class of '14) for their valuable research contributions to this essay.*

## *Chronological List of Prohibition Arrests in Lawrence Township, Name; Residence; Violation; Date;*

D'Ambra, Louis; Eldridge Park; Sale; 7/22/1921  
Kruczkowski, Mrs. Vincent; Eldridge Park; Sale & Possession; 5/5-6/1922  
Baldini, Eduardo; Trenton, NJ; Possession; 5/30/1922  
Foretti, Tito; Trenton, NJ; Transportation; 5/30/1922  
Philips, Joseph; Trenton, NJ; Transportation; 7/14/1922  
Corless, Michael; Princeton, NJ; Possession; 9/9/1922  
Yuncza, Dominic; Eldridge Park; Manufacturing & Sale; 9/9/1922  
Chesnor, Anthony; Eldridge Park; Manufacturing & Possession; 9/10/1922  
Scurte, Raymond; Eldridge Park; Manufacturing & Possession; 9/10/1922  
Gordon, Clarence; bartender, Hamilton Hotel; Sale; 3/31/1923  
Cole, L.; Princeton, NJ; Transportation; 4/1/1923  
Siegle, John; proprietor, Hamilton Hotel; Possession; 4/1/1923  
Scurte, Raymond; Eldridge Park; Transportation; 5/5/1923  
Bergie, Nickolas; Philadelphia, PA; Transportation & Possession; 10/2/1923  
Bernatonith, Simon; Eggerts Crossing; Manufacturing & Possession; 9/7/1924  
Pawlinski, John; Eldridge Park; Possession; 12/28/1924  
Notargiacomo, Gueseppe; ?; Transportation; 5/30/1926  
McChesnor, Mrs.; Eldridge Park; Sale & Possession; 5/31/1926  
Scurte, Raymond; Eldridge Park; Transportation; 4/?/1928

Rich, Joseph; Drift Ave; Manufacturing; 12/21/1928  
Soleino, Lawrence; Brunswick, NJ; Transportation; 9/7/1929  
Bernatonith, Mrs. Rose; Eggerts Crossing; Sale; 10/5/1929  
Bernatonith, Simon; Eggerts Crossing; Possession; 10/5/1929  
Sassbinder, Mrs. Stephen; Brunswick Pike; Sale & Possession; 6/17/1930  
Murro, Anna; Cherry Tree Ln; Sale & Possession; 6/18/1930  
Ferguson, Martin; Eggerts Crossing; Sale & Possession; 6/21/1930  
Laborwicz, Mrs. Victoria; Eggerts Crossing; Sale & Possession; 6/21/1930  
Kicinski, Mrs. Carrie; Eldridge Park; Sale & Possession; 6/28/1930  
Nemitz, Louis; Lawrence Rd; Sale; 6/28/1930  
Norato, Pasquale; Eldridge Park; Sale & Possession; 7/2/1930  
McMors, Thomas; Eldridge Park; Sale & Possession; 7/4/1930  
Slappy, Mrs. Berton; Eldridge Park; Sale & Possession; 7/11/1930  
Marcak, Mrs. Stanley; Eldridge Park; Sale & Possession; 7/11/1930  
Murda, Mrs. Michael; Eldridge Park; Sale & Possession; 7/14/1930  
Labority, Mrs. Edward; Eggerts Crossing; Sale & Possession; 7/21/1930  
Martino, James; Cranbury, NJ; Transportation & Possession; 9/29/1930  
Aronke, Vincenzo; Trenton, NJ; Transportation & Possession; 2/18/1931  
Starna, Francisco; Trenton, NJ; Transportation & Possession; 2/18/1931

