

# Wine, Whiskey and Women: History museum's cocktail exhibit sheds light on drinking and gender



A 'speakeasy' is set up in the basement of Onondaga Historical Association for the Culture of the Cocktail Hour exhibit. David Lassman | [dlassman@syracuse.com](mailto:dlassman@syracuse.com) (David Lassman | [dlassman@syracuse.com](mailto:dlassman@syracuse.com))

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Syracuse, NY -- You might not think a museum display on drinking, bars and saloons and the cocktail would also serve as a [social history](#) of the place of women in society.

Yet that is a theme running through the exhibit "Culture of the Cocktail Hour," at the **Onondaga Historical Association** through June 15.



Items used by police to enforce Prohibition

laws, part of the Onondaga Historical Association's Culture of the Cocktail Hour exhibit. *David Lassman |*

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"Through much of the 19th century, drinking at bars, saloons and gentleman's clubs was a predominantly, almost exclusively, a male activity," said OHA history curator Dennis Connors. "It was Prohibition, in the 1920s, that really changed things."

Connors created the exhibit - featuring old photos, historic records and artifacts -- to complement the adjacent exhibit, "Fashion After Five," a look at vintage and modern takes on the [cocktail dress](#). The cocktail exhibit traces drinks in Central New York from the early 1800s to World War II and just beyond.

"Because Prohibition forced drinking underground, it was easier [for women](#) to participate," Connors said. "They could do something hidden away that they hadn't been able to do out in the open."

And then, when Prohibition ended, women weren't going to be denied their right to drink in public places. The real eye-opening aspect of the exhibit charts the growth of fancy hotel bars and other glitzy establishments that catered to drinkers of both genders.

Check out photos of the Rainbow Room Lounge at the [Hotel Syracuse](#), for instance, or the Travel Room at the Hotel Onondaga (a long-gone landmark at the corner of Jefferson and Warren streets).

While the OHA has long had exhibits and artifacts related to the hugely successful beer industry in Syracuse, this display allowed Connors to dig into the trove of records relating the distilling industry, as well as a focus on drinking places through the years.

You'll see vintage photos of bars at such places as the Yates Hotel, and a stunning art deco bar built on Water Street in the 1920s (meant to anticipate the end of Prohibition).

Also fascinating are the displays related to Prohibition itself - such as the information of Charles Kress, Syracuse's own version of liquor gang-buster Eliot Ness.

Connors is especially fond of the story about one of Syracuse's most notorious speakeasies - located inside the relatively non-descript Wood Building on Jefferson Street adjacent to the Mizpah Tower/First Baptist Church at the corner of Montgomery Street.

It seems this speakeasy catered to a well-heeled and no doubt powerful clientele, and was therefore difficult for the authorities to shut down. But there was an unexpected raid one night, and the operator did his best to hide the liquor by throwing it out a rear window - onto a back roof of the Baptist church.

"The pastor (Rev. Dr. Clausen) was furious," Connors said. "He was a Prohibition supporter, and these people had the nerve to operate next to his church, and dump their liquor on his property."

Eventually, that speakeasy had to move on. But the legacy of Prohibition persisted.

"It really was the glory days of the cocktail because the liquor was so bad, made in bathtubs and so forth, that they learned to mix in ingredients that really masked those flavors," Connor said. "So you had women, mixed drinks and a lot of creativity at that time."

After Prohibition, Hollywood helped glamorize the culture of the nightclub and its allure for women - and Connors' exhibit uses photos of 1930s stars like Myrna Loy, Katherine Hepburn and Claudette Colbert to underscore that effect.

The OHA exhibit clearly demonstrates Syracuse's long love affair with alcohol, but Connors doesn't believe the area was more drink-happy than other similar cities.

"In the 1800s, the saloons thrived because the factory workers - the guys who did dangerous grunt work -- had them as the places where they could go to relax - sort of like the modern man-caves," Connor said. "Then, as we move to Prohibition and beyond, times change and the culture of drinking changed with it."

## **DETAILS**

**What:** Culture of of the Cocktail Hour

**Where:** Onondaga Historical Association, 321 Montgomery St., Syracuse

**When:** Through June 15. Museum open 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Wednesday to Friday and 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday and Sunday.

**Description:** The story of cocktail fashions has several associations with [local history](#). This exhibit will discover some of those people, places and events, including Syracuse's most famous cocktail lounges of days gone by. Cocktails also conjure up the exciting era of the Roaring Twenties, when speakeasies flourished during the decade of Prohibition. Displays will include the story of one of the most famous local speakeasies, located just a few hundred feet from the OH Museum, including a menu of its libations, and the tale of the police raid that shut it down in 1931. Also on exhibit, with other

documents and artifacts of the era, will be original cocktail, beverage and [wine glasses](#) that once graced the famous lounges and bars of the classic Hotel Syracuse, local brewery memorabilia, and historic "restraint devices" of the era, loaned by the County Sheriff's Department. Exhibit sponsored by Hueber-Breuer Construction Company and Pascale's Liquor Square.