

Whiskey ^[1]

Whiskey

by Chester Paul Middlesworth, 2006

See also: [Moonshine](#) ^[2].



Whiskey bottles at the West End Opera House in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, July 11, 2005. Image from Flickr user charliereece.

^[3]Whiskey-making and distribution has been part of North Carolina's commerce and culture from the beginning of European settlement. Whiskies in North America are made from a mash of rye, corn, barley, wheat, or other grains, which is fermented and aged in wooden barrels of various styles and conditions. Distilled spirits and the art of making them were important in European heritage, and, after the [American Indians](#) ^[4] introduced the settlers to corn, the crop became an instant staple of local whiskey makers. In western North Carolina counties, settlers raised fine [apple](#) ^[5] crops in addition to corn, and with apple cider came apple brandy. Whiskey-making stills, mostly single-family operations, could be found throughout the region.

In the 1600s and 1700s, [taverns](#) ^[6] were places of social gathering in the Carolinas, and some towns grew up around crossroads establishments. There were laws against drunkenness but not against selling or making whiskey; some [attempts at prohibition](#) ^[7] of alcoholic beverages came as early as 1852, but the movement garnered little attention by the state's [General Assembly](#) ^[8]. By the middle of the 1800s, whiskey was a major commodity for producers in western North Carolina. Farmers in the mountains and foothills realized that, without adequate roads or train service, bringing a load of corn to market was not worth the wagon space. Distilling the corn into whiskey (usually bourbon) was much more economical and brought greater returns.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, producers in the western counties took their distilled spirits to Statesville for further distribution. Statesville was "the end of the line" for [train service](#) ^[9] to the west for some time, so it became the logical shipping point for whiskey distribution across the Carolinas. It is estimated that during the 1880s, as many as 450 distilleries were shipping their products through Statesville. A freight agent of the Atlantic, Tennessee, and Ohio Railroad reported that between September 1879 and March 1880, nearly 57,000 gallons of whiskey had been shipped from Statesville on his railroad. A large amount of whiskey was also shipped on the [Western Railroad](#) ^[10] in that period.

Major wholesale liquor houses were established in Statesville and prospered from the 1880s until the early 1900s, when statewide [Prohibition](#) ^[11] came in 1909. In 1883 P. B. Key & Co. established a distributorship for whiskey. (Key was the grand nephew of Francis Scott Key, author of the "Star Spangled Banner.") The [Julius Lowenstein](#) ^[12] family was a leader in whiskey distribution throughout the Carolinas. Some of the better whiskey of the period was bottled under the Lowenstein name. When whiskey making was declared illegal, the Lowensteins moved to Atlanta and founded the Norris Candy Company.

In 1905 the Watts law, named for [Iredell County](#) ^[13]'s state representative Alston D. Watts, was passed in Raleigh, prohibiting the manufacture and sale of liquor outside incorporated towns. It also established local-option elections, which generally went against the liquor interests, "drying up" many towns. After Prohibition was established by the Eighteenth Amendment in 1919, whiskey production continued through the illegal efforts of bootleggers, whose "[moonshine](#)" ^[2] became a way of life in various parts of the state, particularly the western counties. Legal whiskey returned after Prohibition was ended by the Twenty-first Amendment in 1933, although most areas were dry until 1935. No significant commercial distilleries were established in the state.

In 1937 the General Assembly approved local-option elections to sell whiskey and other spirits solely through [Alcoholic Beverage Control Commission](#) ^[14] (ABC) stores, which were given control of all aspects of whiskey production, possession, and sale in the state. Later, "liquor-by-the-drink" at bars and restaurants was approved, subject to a local-option election and certain limitations.

Reference:

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Additional Resources:

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Stewart, Bruce E. "Attacking "Red-Legged Grasshoppers": Moonshiners, Violence, and the Politics of Federal Liquor Taxation in Western North Carolina, 1865-1876" *Appalachian Journal* 32. No. 1. Fall 2004. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40934372> ^[15] (accessed August 22, 2012).

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Subjects:

[Food and drink](#) ^[16]

[Industry](#) ^[17]

Authors:

[Middlesworth, Chester Paul](#) ^[18]

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1 January 2006 | Middlesworth, Chester Paul

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