Many Lexingtonians enjoyed alcoholic drinks before Prohibition and, though they might reduce their consumption, they were not going to go completely dry. This gave rise to the bootleggers, who would bring liquor, beer, or less often wine to town. Early on, bootleggers would buy (or steal) liquor from persons who had stocked liquor prior to Prohibition. Some liquor was stolen from Blue Grass area distilleries that had been shut down, such as the James Pepper Distillery warehouse on Manchester Street. As these supplies ran low, more widespread and sophisticated bootlegging networks developed bringing in whiskey from Canada and rum from Cuba and the Bahamas.

The primary source of liquor in Lexington was moonshine. Much of it was distilled in the hollows of Eastern Kentucky where illegal stills were a long-standing tradition. With Prohibition, moonshine production was ratcheted up tenfold. Stills also spring up on farms or county homes in the Blue Grass, including several in Fayette County. Sometimes it was manufactured on a small scale in washtubs or bathtubs in city homes or businesses. Poorly made moonshine could caused serious illness and even death.

In the early 1920s, Lexington’s major bootlegger was Issac “Ike” Miller, owner of a stock farm on Versailles Road where the Cardinal Valley subdivision is today. The farm served as a distribution point where Miller sold whiskey to local suppliers and speakeasies. Rival bootleggers sprang up, most notably the Lawrence Piercy gang. On the night of June 28, 1921, a gun battle between Miller and an associate and four attackers, most likely from Piercy’s outfit, broke out on Jersey Street (just northwest of the University of Kentucky campus). Miller was wounded and hospitalized for several days. The newspapers dubbed this “the battle of Jersey Street” and Miller became a local folk lore hero. Dry agents raided his farm several times to confiscate liquor. Charges were sometimes dismissed for technical reasons, such as a defective search warrant and hung juries sometimes refused to convict. Eventually, however, Miller was convicted for a third time and in 1924 began serving two years in the federal penitentiary in Atlanta.

Piercy - known as “Patrolman Peircy” because he had served eight years with some distinction with the Lexington Police - did not buy his liquor. He acquired it through armed robbery. He robbed homes and distilleries. He hijacked cars and trucks that carrying booze. Piercy was eventually convicted of kidnaping and sentenced to 15 years in the state prison.

As a rail center, Lexington was also a transfer point for the state-distribution of liquor to towns in central, eastern and southern Kentucky and moonshine from those areas to cities such as Cincinnati and Chicago. The great majority of liquor went in and out of town by truck or automobile.