Congress established the National Prohibition Bureau to enforce the 18th Amendment. Its headquarters for Eastern Kentucky was in the Federal Courthouse, then the northwest corner of East Main and Walnut (now North Martin Luther King Boulevard) streets. Early in 1910, the local bureau hired more than 60 agents, adding more as enforcement increased. Some agents were armed with Springfield rifles, .45 caliber automatic pistols, and Browning Automatic Rifles, which could fire over 600 rounds a minute. Acting on tips or undercover reports, agents conducted raid on “speakeasies”, “blind pigs”, moonshine stills, and bootleggers’ cars or truck hauling liquor to or from town. Small time violators such as barbers, gas station attendants, college students, and homeowners made up the majority of arrests. In any given month, there were 75 to 100 liquor-related cases on the District Court docket. The first violation of the Prohibition laws carried a light penalty, but the third violation was considered a felony with a penalty of one year in prison and a fine of $5,000 or more. Vehicles, homes, stores, warehouses, and other property used to violate the law were subject to forfeiture.

Kentucky voters added Prohibition to the state Constitution in the 1919 election, taking effect July 1, 1920. This empowered sheriffs and police officers to conduct raids. Lexington police, however, were not too enthusiastic about Prohibition (many officers were wet-leaning Catholics and Billy Klair, the city’s political boss, was a wet) and seldom led the way unless the activity was too notorious to ignore. But sometimes the force provided “back up” for federal arrests of bootleggers in the city, and enforced state prohibition directly when the department needed an excuse to arrest or harass criminals whose activities went beyond alcoholic beverages.