Serous agitation for prohibition began in Kentucky about 1890. By 1914, all but 14 counties had voted themselves dry. Locally, many Protestant churches and the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) led the way, calling for prohibition in Fayette County and demanding strict enforcement in closing saloons on Sunday. In 1914, dry forces petitioned for a referendum, but the wets carried the county handily: 6,695 to 3,431. Thus Lexington became an oasis, a wide open town during the 1910-19 decade. There were about 150 saloons in town, in 1914. Government restrictions on the availability of grain during World War I and a local army effort to close the saloons to “protect” soldiers training at Camp Stanley at the University of Kentucky brought the number down to 97 by 1919. About 70 were in the downtown area between Limestone and Broadway.

Federal Prohibition became effective at the stroke of midnight on January 17, 1920. On the previous day, the WCTU hosted an all-day victory celebration at Broadway Christian Church. That evening, Lexington residents downed their last legal drinks in the taprooms of the Phoenix, Lafayette, and other city hotels.