



## **Drowning in Health: Mineral Spring Water and Alcohol in Eighteenth-Century England**

Vaughn Scribner, University of Central Arkansas (USA)

[vscribner@uca.edu](mailto:vscribner@uca.edu)

### **Abstract:**

A mercurial ideology based upon changing notions of science, nature, and society, “health” became a core focus of eighteenth-century Britons’ ongoing quest to “civilize” their bodies, and the world around them. Perhaps nowhere was this confluence of health and civilization more apparent than in Englishmen’s complicated—often contradictory—notions of the medicinal qualities of mineral spring water and alcohol.

With dozens of mineral spring spas and hundreds of taverns dotting England (not to mention North America and the West Indies) by the eighteenth century, Englishmen found themselves “drowning” in an a seemingly-endless variety of water and alcohol. Such broad access led Englishmen to reflect upon these beverages and their coinciding spaces through wide a variety of sources, including scientific tracts, newspaper articles, advertisements, travel diaries, and popular literature. Ultimately, this paper contends, the debate that raged over mineral spring water and alcohol during the eighteenth century reveals that the two mysterious beverages and their coinciding public spaces must be understood as complimentary rather than oppositional forces, even if contemporaries did not always understand them as such.

Although it would be easy to assume that Englishmen considered mineral spring water as the healthier alternative to alcohol, this was hardly always the case. In fact, the two beverages shared an inverse, reciprocal, *and* competitive relationship by the eighteenth century, often all at the same time. Just as mineral water might at once heal the sick and indigent, so too might its overconsumption or mishandling lead to death. Alcohol, similarly, was often touted as a medicine and social lubricant at the same time as others damned it as a poison to human and societal health. Many of the same arguments raged over mineral spring spas and taverns—how could such spaces be healthy for certain people, and dangerous for others, and how were Englishmen to govern these popular public spaces according to the most current notions of society, civilization, and science?

There is (and was) no easy answer—many those same English physicians and businessmen who endlessly touted mineral spring water’s therapeutic nature, in fact, were also striving to convince people of the healthiness of alcohol and taverns, while others damned both, and some picked sides (which they might change because of monetary and social pressures). It is this overlap between alcohol and water, health and poison, with which this paper is concerned. Just as modern science constantly vacillates among ideas of health (just look at debates raging over coffee and wine), so too did eighteenth-century thinkers expend considerable time and effort coming to terms with how alcohol and water—and the growing network of spaces associated with these consumables—might shape the future of English society.

## **Biography:**

[www.vaughnscribner.com](http://www.vaughnscribner.com)

I am an Assistant Professor of Early American History at the University of Central Arkansas. I earned my Ph.D. in American History at the University of Kansas, with secondary fields in British and Global History. I believe that my current and future scholarly interests fit perfectly with the Vichy Conference’s goals.

Recently, my research has especially focused on the intersection of sociability, science, health, and the environment in the eighteenth-century British Empire. For instance, I published what I like to consider “sibling” pieces on colonial American mineral spring spas (*Early American Studies*, 2016) and urban pleasure gardens (*Urban History*, 2018). In these pieces, I use British American colonists’ ideas of the urban-rural confluence to investigate their emerging notions of health and civilization. Most recently, I have written a chapter for the Bloomsbury volume, *A Cultural History of Leisure in the Enlightenment* (edited by Peter Borsay, forthcoming 2021) which employs a transatlantic comparison of Britons’ attempts at “greening” their urban environments to make them healthier—and more civilized—places to live.

Beyond mineral spring spas and pleasure gardens, much of my research has also been directed at understanding how colonists understood taverns as spaces through which they might direct a more “civil” society. My book (forthcoming with NYU Press), *Inn Civility: Urban Taverns and the Negotiation of Early American Civil Society* uses the urban tavern—the most numerous, popular, and accessible of all public spaces—to investigate North Americans’ struggles to cultivate a civil society from the early-eighteenth century to the end of the American Revolution. Ultimately, *Inn Civility* demonstrates the messy, often contradictory, nature of British American society building, and how colonists’ efforts to emulate their British homeland ultimately impelled the creation of an American republic. I have also published articles with *Atlantic Studies; Global Currents* (2013) and the *Journal of Early American History* (2015) which analyze early American tavern goers’ attempts at society building.

Thus, my paper for the Vichy Conference will combine my diverse scholarship into an original investigation of how Englishmen debated the health of mineral spring water and alcohol, as well as the public spaces associated with these controversial beverages.