

## **HISTORY OF THE COFFEE HOUSE**

### **IMPACTS ON POLITICS AND THE ARTS**

**The history of the coffee house, much like the history of coffee, is rife with fable, saturated with myth, and couched in legend. The debate on the origins of coffee continues among coffee historians.**

**Coffee was cultivated in Africa as early as the 9<sup>th</sup> century, but it did not reach Europe until the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Originally grown in Ethiopia, it arrived in Yemen sometime in the fifteenth century and was initially used by Sufi Muslims for staying awake for prayers at all hours of the night. This usage was not without its critics. Alcohol, was of course forbidden by Islamic law, and some feared that coffee was merely another intoxicant that should be banned as well. Coffee was a cause of concern not only because of its mind altering properties, but because it had become a stimulus for sociability and conversation, which often led to the discussion of subversive or inappropriate subjects. In 1511, the young governor of Mecca decreed that coffee, like alcohol, should be outlawed by the Koran and that all coffee houses should be closed, although it was rumored that this harsh reaction was the result of the satirical verses about the governor that were generated during coffee house meetings. Ralph S. Hattox cites a sixteenth century Middle Eastern manuscript of uncertain authorship that argues:**

**“If you draw an analogy between coffee and intoxicants you are drawing a false one, since it has been made clear to you how it is quite the opposite in nature and effect. One drinks coffee with the name of the Lord on his lips, and stays awake, while the person who seeks wanton delight in intoxicants disregards the Lord and gets drunk”**

**The Ottoman Turks brought coffee from Yemen to Constantinople in 1453, and in 1472, the first coffee house was established – the name – Kiva Han. In Kiva Han, men met to discuss issues of the day, drink coffee “hot and black as the devil”, discuss business and even listen to a poet or two. Kiva Han still exists today as a small shop on a non-descript cobblestone street in today’s Istanbul, formerly known as Constantinople. Kiva Han was a natural outgrowth of the rising**

**popularity of coffee during the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century when thousands of acres of coffee trees were planted throughout the Arabian Peninsula as trade flourished.**

**Coffee, like tea, was first used for medicinal purposes. It was used to cure all kinds of maladies including female troubles. It was also touted as an aphrodisiac. So serious was this belief, that Turkish men could be sued for divorce if they did not provide their wives with enough coffee, thus giving new meaning to “grounds for divorce!”**

**Coffee began its journey into European culture as an exotic commodity from the Middle East. In 1650, a Turk known as “Jacob the Jew” opened the first coffee house in Oxford, England and spurred the growing coffee house trend. By 1698 London had more than 2,000 similar establishments. An observer at the time posited the theory that coffee houses covered more real estate than any other industry. The coffee houses in London became a magnet for writers like Jonathan Swift, John Dryden, Alexander Pope and others. In the warmth of a glowing fireplace, conversations lasted until well into the night.**

**Historians classify English coffee houses as public social houses during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Patrons would assemble for conversation and social interaction, while taking part in the newly emerging coffee consumption habits of the time.**

**Coffee houses in Europe evolved into forums for social and economic development. Unlike taverns, coffee houses were noted for rational thinking and lucidity versus the irreverence and intoxication so often found in alehouses. The coffee house was an ideal environment for business transactions. Contracts agreed upon within the environs of the coffee houses had the appearance of legitimacy, level-headedness and solidarity. Habitues of the coffee houses exuded an air of self-control and gentlemanliness.**

**There were, in fact, specific rules of conduct when one was in the establishment. A respect for each patron was at the top of the list. Whether a lowly brick mason or a learned professor, their opinions were heard and discussed and respected. Occasionally heated debate transpired, but those were quickly diffused by the management and each of the offenders were fined a pence or two following a required**

**gentlemanly apology to one another! A traveler in London in 1668 remarked, “coffee houses, which are numerous in London, are extremely convenient. You have all manner of news there; you have a good fire, which you may sit by as long as you please; you have a dish of coffee; you meet your friends for the transaction of business; and all for a penny, if you don’t care to spend more.” Thus the phrase was coined “penny universities”. Some men spent so much time there that their mail was delivered directly to the coffee house!**

**Most coffee houses were exclusively male with women relegated to the home or elsewhere for their coffee indulgence. Not allowing women into these establishments did cause a few problems, which were outlined in the “Women’s Petition Against Coffee” published in 1674. The document linked the popularity of the coffee houses with men losing their sex drive, becoming effeminate and even threatening the end of the species.**

**Women were not alone in their displeasure with the coffee house culture. The establishments were pilloried by churchmen who suspected they were occasions for sin, by tavern keeps who resented the competition, and by the establishment who saw them as a source of murmuring and sedition.**

**The most substantial contribution the coffee house made to the political development of Europe during the period was in promoting the idea of public discourse, particularly through the distribution of news and information to all its patrons. Modern English language publishing was a part of the coffee house culture. Pamphlets, newsletters and early periodicals (such as the Guardian and the Spectator) were distributed largely to and through these establishments and writers and editors treated the goings on at the coffee houses as part of their subject matter. The modern short story has its roots in the unsigned, semi-disguised nonfiction accounts run in these publications.**

**Different coffee houses attracted different kinds of crowds. The scientists of the Royal Society met at the Graecian. Other coffee houses were patronized by politicians; there were Whig coffee houses and Tory coffee houses. Still other coffee houses attracted businessmen – Lloyd’s of London (the renowned insurance company) had its birth at Lloyd’s Coffee House.**

**Arty types had their own hangouts. Early on, Will's Coffee House in Covent Garden was THE literary coffee house, with John Dryden as its presiding spirit. Later on, Button's hosted many noted writers of the day such as Jonathan Swift.**

**For obvious reasons, there were various groups who expressed strong opposition to the popularity and influence of coffee houses. The best-documented resistance came from King Charles II of England, although there was robust opposition from social groups as well. The coffee houses were criticized politically for inciting revolution and promoting false, libelous criticisms of those in power. In 1675 King Charles II issued the "Proclamation for The Suppression of Coffee Houses" which was to outlaw all coffee houses as of January 6, 1676. His decree justified closing all coffeehouses, which he identified as the "great resort of idle and disaffected persons," because it was within their walls that "false, malicious and scandalous reports contributed to the defamation of his majesty's government, and to the disturbance of the peace and quiet of the realm". However, as news of the king's proclamation spread, riots erupted throughout Britain and within a week the uproar over coffee houses had reached a level that seriously threatened the**

**monarchy, causing Charles to repeal the proclamation before it could ever take effect.**

**For a little over a hundred years, from the mid 1600s to the late 1700s, coffee houses were the center of British culture. In time, though, the business slowed down. Tea became popular. Some coffee houses decided that the time had come to keep the riffraff out by creating membership lists – subsequently called gentlemen's clubs (not to be confused with today's gentlemen's club!)**

**Parisian coffee houses also developed with a unique character, both in terms of their atmosphere and their function within the French political scene. The French were slow to embrace the coffee house concept until the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, perhaps because the Frenchman was loathe to compromise his love of the grape and the fellowship that existed in the cafes.**

**During the years preceding the French Revolution, Parisian coffee houses increasingly became the prime locations for heated political discussion and debate. One observer noted, “France was a society not well equipped with public institutions for the discussion of politics.” In light of the rising discontent among the common people – the social stratum from which most Parisian coffee house patrons hailed – coffee house conversation was frequently filled with complaints, both economic and political.**

**French authorities were undoubtedly concerned with the radical political conversations taking place at the coffee houses and police undertook efforts to conduct surveillance and infiltrate the inner circles of the political groups that met there. In the end, however, French authorities saw the coffee house as a harmless safety valve for allowing the disgruntled populus to voice its political dissent.**

**Moving to the coffee houses of Germany – the concept met with strong resistance because it was feared that the introduction of a beverage that would displace beer, would do the same to taverns and pubs. Coffee drinking became well established in major metropolitan centers throughout Germany, but for the most part was dismissed by all but the upper classes as an indulgence of the French and English. Johann Sebastian Bach composed the famous Coffee Cantata in the 1730s, which depicts a father trying desperately to break his daughter of her coffee addiction. She laments that “if I can’t drink my bowl of coffee three times daily, then in my torment, I will shrivel up like a piece of roast goat,” and her father replies by threatening her with dismal marriage prospects if she cannot free herself from this habit.**

**Vivaldi’s Christmas Oratorio was performed in Leipzig’s coffee houses. Compositions by Handel, Telemann, and others often were performed in similar venues.**

**Despite the reputation as a beverage of distinctly Muslim origins, coffee received little criticism from the Catholic Church. According to one account, Pope Clement VIII tasted coffee before coffee or coffee houses had taken hold in Europe. His bishops brought him a cup of coffee, warning that this Muslim drink must be banned because of its foreign origins. Tasting it, he supposedly replied, “This Satan’s drink is so**

**delicious that it would be a pity to let the infidels have exclusive use of it. We shall fool Satan by baptizing it and making it a truly Christian beverage.” Whether or not this narrative is true, there is little evidence that coffee provoked the kind of religious disapproval in Europe that it did in the Middle East.**

**European coffee houses inspired the origin of countless noteworthy institutions and ideas. In the late 1700s, the auction houses Sotheby’s and Christie’s began in rooms attached to coffee houses where sales of art took place. Coffee houses aided in the business of buying and selling art and were essential to the success of an artist who could promote their work at little or no cost. It makes perfect sense that today’s coffee houses continue to sell art from their walls. When I Googled coffee house art, I found almost forty-three million sites to visit.**

**Before moving to the coffee houses on this side of the Atlantic I wanted to mention this bit of trivia – when being served in a restaurant, coffee shop or bar – do you know from whence the word “tips” comes? When an Englishman entered a coffee house, he could put a half--penny or pence in a jar at the entrance to the establishment. A sign above the jar read as follows – To Insure Prompt Service – tips! If the server saw the patron make a deposit in the jar, he indeed did receive more prompt service than those who did not!**

**When America was colonized, the coffee house was quick to follow. The role of the American coffee house was the same as those in England - hotspots for the business community. The Tontine Coffee house in 1793 in New York was the original location for the New York Insurance Company, which eventually became the New York Stock Exchange.**

**Philadelphia’s most fashionable establishment was the London Coffee House, located at the busy corner of Front and High Streets near the city’s docks. Established in 1754 by William Bradford, the heir to a newspaper publishing family, the coffee house was funded in part by subscriptions to Bradford’s Pennsylvania Journal and quickly became the most popular and animated arena for business transactions.**

**Despite its name, the London Coffee House thrived on a mixed fare of caffeinated and alcoholic beverages and simple meals. Unlike the coffee**

houses of urban London where a variety of enterprises conducted their business, the Philadelphia establishment tended to attract a more specialized crowd. Here the owners of recently arrived schooners advertised their inventory of goods, investors bought and sold real estate and other properties, and public auctions sold off a wide variety of merchandise. Twice a week at high noon farmers from the area brought their grains and livestock to sell in the sheds across the street. By the early 1770s, the London Coffee House could no longer cater to the increasing business demands of a growing city. Realizing the need for larger quarters, Philadelphia's merchant aristocracy built the Merchants Coffee House, later known Philadelphia Merchant's Exchange.

Virginians modeled their coffee houses after the popular London establishments. Throughout the eighteenth century, Virginians were proud to be English, and English fashions began in London; consequently, coffee houses would be fashionable in Virginia. Naturally differences were apparent between the establishments of London and Williamsburg. The earliest reference to a coffeehouse in Williamsburg dates to 1709 when William Byrd II mentioned one located at the east end of Duke of Gloucester Street near the capitol. He went to the coffee house for drinks, meals, meetings, the latest newspapers and card games.

By the 1740s another coffee house was in operation in Williamsburg, again noted in the diary of William Byrd II. In 1751 the tenant at what we know as Shield's Tavern called his business the English Coffee House. By June 1767, the establishment evolved into a tavern.

During the late 1760s, the coffee houses of colonial North America also became political centers. Even before the Stamp Act protests, some English conservatives derided the American coffee houses as "seminaries of sedition". In 1765, an effigy of Massachusetts Gov. Thomas Hutchinson was hanged and burned near the London Coffee House.

Another significant transition in the history of US coffee house culture occurred in the 1950's and the 60's. At the time most of the newly established coffee houses arose from the espresso and pastry centered Italian coffeehouses of the Italian immigrant communities in the major

**U.S. cities, notably New York City's Little Italy and Greenwich Village, Boston's north end and San Francisco's North Beach. From the late 1950s onward, coffee houses also served as a venue for entertainment, most commonly folk performers during the American folk music revival. This was likely due to the ease at accommodating in a small space a lone performer accompanying him or herself only with a guitar. Both Greenwich Village and North Beach became major haunts of the "Beats", a group highly identified with these coffee houses. From this era came literary works from the generation of professed bohemian writers, leading a lifestyle that raged against the economic conformity of the postwar 1950's. In reaction to "a false and conformist America", they formed alternative ways of thinking and a new way of life. This group of beat writers, formed in New York City, was at first few in number, but grew to have an impact on American society, especially in literature and politics. Those writers, Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, and others, not only started a new style of American literature but ignited the rebellion against social conformity in the 1950's through their writings of social and political criticism. Later in the 1950s, the term "beatnik" referred, often despairingly, to the people who held the ideas and attitudes of the beat writers. Benzedrine and marijuana seem to have played a significant role in the coffee shops of this time. Scholars during this decade described the lifestyle associated with the Beats as deviant. Soon a stereotype merged in the media showing beatniks to be spaced-out, always dressed in black and pounding on bongo drums muttering gibberish as poetry. The coffee house of that era established an atmosphere where a group of writers came forward to declare their alienation and disgust from what they saw as the epitome of deplorable suburban conformity through their poetry and lifestyles.**

**As the youth culture of the 1960s evolved, non-Italians consciously copied these coffeehouses. The political nature of 1960 folk music was a natural tie-in with coffeehouses with their association with political action. A number of well-known performers like Pete Seeger, Joan Baez and Bob Dylan began their careers performing in coffee houses. In his 1969 song "Coffee House Blues, singer Lightnin' Hopkins bemoaned his woman's inattentiveness to her domestic responsibilities due to her overindulgence in coffee house socializing. In 1967, Seattle became known for its thriving counter cultural coffee house scene; the**



**Starbucks' chain later standardized and mainstreamed this espresso bar model.**

**Along with the folk music, art continued to play a vital part in the ambiance of the coffee houses. An artist, who was seeking a venue for his creations to be viewed, and perhaps purchased, often displayed his work at coffee houses. Women artists often were discounted in earlier times. Having their art displayed in the coffee houses brought them more credibility and acceptance within the artistic community as well as the general public. The display of original artwork is still a part of the modern coffee house culture.**

**In general, prior to the 1990s, true coffee houses were little known in most American cities, apart from those located on or near college campuses, or in districts associated with writers, artists, or counterculture.**

**From the 1960s through the mid-1980s, many churches and individuals in the United States used the coffee house concept for outreach. They were often storefronts and had names like The Gathering Place in Riverside, CA, The Catacomb Chapel in New York City, and Jesus for You in Buffalo, New York. Christian music was performed, coffee and food were provided. Bible studies were offered to people of varying backgrounds in this "unchurchy" setting. These coffee houses had a rather short life, about 3 to 5 years on average. Last month, in the November 17, 2011 issue of the Fort Wayne Journal Gazette, an article on coffee house ministries appeared. Some local contemporary churches have coffee shops inside them. Some are using actual coffee houses to meet people who might not venture inside church doors. Lifetree, affiliated with Aldersgate United Methodist Church meets at The Mocha Lounge on Covington Road. The Fire House Tea and Coffee Café on East State Street offers gatherings featuring worship, music, sacred dance and prayer. The New Grounds Coffee Company on Clinton Street offers coffee drinks, soup and homemade pastries, but at 10:30 on Sunday morning, it becomes the New Ground Community Church, a non-denominational entity. The Come 2 Go Ministries offer a coffee house atmosphere in many of their gatherings.**

**Other local establishments, in the traditional sense of gathering places for discussion, camaraderie, music, poetry and such are the Firefly**

**Coffee House on North Anthony Blvd., The Bean on Wells Street, The Espresso Gallery on Illinois Road and others. There are open mike nights, for poetry reading, troubadours with their own style of music and all kinds of creative art on the walls, for viewing and for purchase.**

**Upon visiting a few of these local establishments, I initiated conversations with some of the patrons, most of whom were college students. One of the principal draws for them seems to be the Internet access. Quoting a young woman who visits the coffee house about three times a week “I can’t afford internet because of the expense of school and my apartment, so here is where I can come to do research and do my homework”. Several other students like the fact that they can purchase their beverage, chat with friends, and not have the atmosphere of the “bar scene”.**

**One evening I listened to a very talented singer, accompanying himself on his guitar. At another establishment I heard some original poetry read. I found the atmosphere to be very pleasant, with friendly people and great coffee and sandwiches.**

**In my research I found a delightful piece of writing about the different coffee house archetypes (written by a barrista) – I won’t ask you which archetype you are!**

**The Wanderer – Walks in the door. Walks to the bar. Orders nothing. Walks to the bathroom. Walks to the newsstand. Walks out!**

**The Pretentious One – orders a “macchiato”. Has no clue what it actually is!**

**The Ultra-Pretentious One – Orders a “macchiato”. Knows what it is.**

**The Epicurean – Wants a skinny-double-half-cup-latte with extra foam. Cinnamon on top. Cardamom, not plain.**

**The Legally Blind– “Where’s your menu?” You point to the huge menu directly behind you. “Do you have espresso?” You point to the huge \$14,000 espresso machine next to you.**

**The Wasting Her Time – seems to think coffee’s the diet drink of tomorrow-“ I want a decaf latte with skim milk, a shot of sugar-free vanilla, nondairy whipped cream on top and could you point me to the powdered creamer.”**

**And lastly, the Wasting My Time –“ Gimme a double-espresso. No, make that a vanilla capp. No, I actually want a hazelnut mocha. No, I meant to say almond. Ah, screw it, just gimme coffee!”**

**Inside the history of the coffee house may reside one of the secrets of America’s success as a new nation. Coffee houses were an experiment in learning how society could regulate itself with something other than a royal court. In the best sense, coffee houses were little parliaments, little universities, little news centers, and, despite their occasional inhumanity, little chapels.**

**The coffee house was the springboard for modern culture. The vigor of literature, art and politics, the explosion of its industry and finance – all took their initial shape and impetus in the coffee houses.**

**Perhaps the web is the new coffee house. It may become the new center of culture. For me, having access to the world through the Internet is overwhelming – I am fortunate if I can get my emails and utilize Google! But to those of you who are excited by the endless possibilities of the technology of today – I not only envy you, but wish you well!**