

“Writers blasted tobacco’s soil depleting aspects, which did not allow planters to achieve a sustainable, profitable future. The amount of labor required was said to be out of proportion to any gain it provided, which led to poorly maintained farms and little food crop production, starving the grower and his livestock. Furthermore, authors detailed the weed’s social hazards. Ruined carpets and clothes, dirty church floors, smoke-filled public spaces, and poor manners, as well as offenses to women, followed in its wake. Tobacco was an expensive luxury with no practical purpose. The laziness it generated ultimately stunted the social mobility of its users, leading many to risk poverty. Activists also identified numerous health hazards associated with tobacco use. These included the dangers of second hand smoke, cancer, and tuberculosis, in addition to its addictiveness. No part of the body appeared immune to tobacco’s poisonous qualities and it received blame for numerous annual deaths. Finally, reformers highlighted the moral risks the weed posed. Tobacco was a forbidden fruit that led users to risk their very souls.

“Given these concerns, activists called on the intelligent and righteous elements of the population to realize the troubles that tobacco posed and join them in a movement to rid the country of a loathsome and dangerous element. These often unnamed, or pseudonymously titled, authors tried to promote this crusade in the era’s popular literature. They sought to advance their cause via moral persuasion, not with laws like later activists.

“Despite anti-tobacconists’ labors, ‘smoking remained a minor cause in an era filled with great ones, and by the beginning of the Civil War, antismoking “agitations” . . . had all but died out.’ The anti-tobacco campaign specifically lost momentum in the 1850s when the growing conflict over slavery overshadowed other social issues. The outbreak of war saw the crusade fade from view as tobacco eventually became a ration item for both parties to the conflict.

“Cigarettes gave tobacco its booming life after the Civil War. Soon reformers referred to this item as the Coffin Nail, the Little White Slaver, or the Little White Hearse Plume. Cigarettes were taxed for the first time in 1864. While these taxes stunted use, the cigarette was not to be stopped: By 1880, over 500 million were produced, up from 20 million in 1865. Overshadowed early by chewing and pipe tobacco, cigarettes eventually took the lead in popularity. It was in this environment that the anti-tobacconists attempted to rebuild their efforts. The movement had attempted to sputter back to life after the war, but experienced little, if any, success for the remainder of the 1860s. The cigarette eventually emerged as their main target, particularly as the next major anti-tobacco crusade emerged in the 1880s. However, Progressive-Era reformers did not have to start their campaign from scratch. They built on a foundation established by their earlier nineteenth century forebears.”