

The Paranoid Party:

Freemasonry and Paranoid Politics in the United States

Kameron McNair

Mystic Chords of Memory: Myth, Tradition, and American Nationalism

Eileen Cheng

December 2015

Throughout American history, there are countless instances of battles beyond those fought in wars. Intellectual battles, political battles, and spiritual battles have often shaped history. One notorious battle--a mix of intellectual, political, and spiritual--was that of the Freemasons and the anti-Masons during the 19th century. However, with this particular battle, it appears the aggressor is slightly ambiguous.

Over time there have been many allegations of foul play when it comes to Freemasons. Many of those allegations, however, seem to stem from a place of insecurity. As Ronald Formisano put it, "Secrecy invites fear and hostility."¹ The battle between the Masons and the anti-Masons proves that fear and paranoia can have the power to change the course of history. While that idea pushes the blame onto the anti-Masons, they possessed some valid arguments to support their position. When it comes to fear, the question persists: can a party or individual be wrong about a fear they feel is true?

Freemasonry is not only an American tradition, but is the world's oldest and largest fraternity.² Contrary to anti-Masonic and popular belief, they are not a secret society. Any man can apply for membership. While the fraternity does keep their meetings private and rituals secret, ultimately they would claim they have nothing to hide, and surely nothing to be afraid of. Freemasonry began in medieval Europe as a guild for stonemasons, but lived on as a social

¹ Formisano, Ronald P., and Kathleen Smith Kutolowski. 1977. "Antimasonry and Masonry: The Genesis of Protest, 1826-1827". *American Quarterly* 29 (2). The Johns Hopkins University Press: 139-65. doi:10.2307/2712356.

² Rocca, Mo. "Inside the Secret World of the Freemasons." CBSNews. Accessed December 6, 2015.

organization. The first grand lodge was created in London in 1717. As Europe colonized the New World, masonry made its way across the pond.

“Masons were overwhelmingly men of middle- and upper-class status—doctors, lawyers, and businessmen—who had the time and leisure to join what amounted to a social club for the well-to-do. Many of the founding fathers had been Masons, including George Washington and Benjamin Franklin—indeed, 13 of the 39 signers of the Constitution claimed membership in the fraternity. In the years between America’s founding and 1826, Masonry had only grown more powerful, especially in New York. Gov. DeWitt Clinton was not only a Mason but had also been the grand master of the Grand Lodge of New York and the highest-ranking Mason in the country. By one estimate, more than half of all publicly held offices in New York were occupied by Masons.”³

The rapid growth of Masonry, especially in New York, set the stage for the rise of the anti-Masonic party. To some, it appeared that Freemasonry was almost too good to be true. With anything of that nature, a scandal had to be born.

For the Freemasons, that scandal came in the form of William Morgan. Most sources conclude that William Morgan was an obscure man, to say the least. However, this obscure man

³ Burt, Andrew. "The 1826 Kidnapping, Allegedly by a Cabal of Freemasons, That Changed American Politics Forever." Slate.com. May 15, 2015. Accessed December 6, 2015.

and his obscure demise indirectly created the first third political party in the United States. Before that happened, though, he was a simple man.

Morgan lived a fairly quiet life. He worked as a bricklayer, stonecutter, and store owner. He claimed to have served as a Captain during the War of 1812, but no records can have supported such claim. He married a young woman and had two children before moving to Canada and opening a brewery. When the brewery was demolished in a fire, Morgan had virtually nothing, and returned to the US, settling in New York.⁴

“In upstate New York, then on the outer edges of America’s frontier, two men were occupied with a different question: how to secure personal fame and fortune. The first was David C. Miller, the publisher of Batavia’s Republican Advocate. Miller’s was an opposition paper, pitted against the policies of New York’s governor, DeWitt Clinton...The second was William Morgan, who had moved his family restlessly throughout the countryside, working first as a brewer, now as a stoneworker, hauling his wife, Lucinda, and two young children from one failed venture to the next. Only two years earlier, Morgan had written of his desperation: “The darkness of my prospects robs my mind, and extreme misery my body.” The two men made an odd pair, but what they lacked in common background they shared in common circumstance—and now in common goals. Over that summer

⁴ "William Morgan (anti-Mason)." Wikipedia. September 15, 2015. Accessed December 6, 2015.

the two hatched a plan to expose to the world the inner workings of the secret society of Freemasons.”⁵

The rest of the story goes that Morgan was arrested on petty charges, and kidnapped by Masons, never to be seen again. Miller’s office was set on fire, destroying his business. The trouble was that all the authorities involved were Masons, all the investigations or lackthereof were done by Masons, and the group with the most at stake was the Masons.

“But the Morgan affair wasn’t just about the disappearance of one man. The crime had exposed the existence of a powerful group, shrouded in secrecy, manipulating the law for its own purposes.”⁶

Eventually four Masons were found guilty on charges of kidnapping. “The Freemasons (then and now) admitted that a misguided group of their members did kidnap William Morgan but did not kill him. They claimed he was given \$500 and set free in Canada.”⁷ Even the Masons were able to admit that some of their members became acted radically. However, that admission alone may suggest that the group as a whole is still not heinous. Though the investigation left the question of murder inconclusive, the anti-Masons had the ammunition they needed to ignite their war on Freemasons.

⁵ Burt, Andrew.

⁶ ^^^

⁷ Wilhelm, Robert. "William Morgan - Revenge of the Freemasons." *Murder by Gaslight*. January 10, 2010. Accessed December 6, 2015.

The anti-Masons wanted to eliminate the Masons altogether, so it appears there must have been some reason beyond William Morgan. Could the Masons have been up to something all along? The overarching problem with Masonry lies in its tradition of secrecy. Masons take an oath that prohibits them from disclosing the secrets of their rituals. The principle tenets of Freemasons are Brotherly Love, Relief, and Truth.⁸ The secrecy behind these tenets, however, creates a sort of Catch-22. Anti-Masons believed that because the Masons were keeping these secrets, they had to be malevolent, yet Masons would argue that they are completely benevolent, but they cannot prove it.

“In 1826, however, Masonry's public standing was ambiguous. The Craft possessed standard features of ‘esoteric fraternalism’ and, depending on where it was, could be convivial, benevolent, mystical, patriotic, charitable, pietist, or even reformist. Its most potentially controversial features, however, were its secrecy, secularism, cosmopolitanism, elitism, and implicitly anti-egalitarian urge to provide a model of social order and ‘sponsored mobility.’ Entrance into the fraternity was, as Richard D. Brown put it, ‘ostentatiously exclusive.’ Its hierarchic organization, titles, pageantry, costumes, and icons suggested to outsiders an unrepugnant longing for ‘aristocracy.’”⁹

⁸ "Principle Tenets of Freemasonry - Black Hawk Lodge #65 - Cedar Falls, Iowa Masonic Lodge AF & AM." Principle Tenets of Freemasonry - Black Hawk Lodge #65 - Cedar Falls, Iowa Masonic Lodge AF & AM. Accessed December 1, 2015.

⁹ Formisano, Ronald P.

All evidence leads to the conclusions that Freemasons are harmless. Though, the evidence is mostly circumstantial. Masonry was not religious, but it seems like any group of people gathering and performing strange rituals might be a little religious, by definition.

Additionally, Masons all believe in some God, as Atheism and Agnosticism are not welcome. Overall, any Mason would agree, The Freemasons are *just* a fraternity. Where does that leave the anti-Masons? Were they just jealous? If the Masons really were just a social organization, why would this party go as far as running for president in order to stop them?

Charles Finney was a minister, and lead in the Second Great Awakening in the United States. Before he became a Christian, however, he was a Mason. He explains that his uncle persuaded him to join a lodge when he was a young man, but when he converted to Christianity, he could no longer associate with the fraternity.

In 1869, Finney published *The Character, Claims, and Practical Workings of Freemasonry* in an effort to deter young men from joining the Masons. In his introduction, Finney lists his reasons for publishing his work, and ensures that any reader knows he is not trying to stir the pot. It is clear that Finney feared he may end up like Morgan by publishing his exposé. His first three reasons for writing are disclaimers saying he is not writing to start controversy, or to offend any individual Masons, or because he likes the drama. He then goes on to list why he is in fact writing this book.

“I wish, if possible, to arrest the spread of this great evil, by giving the public, at least, so much information upon this subject as to induce them to examine and understand the true character and tendency of the institution.... I wish, if possible, to arouse the young men who are Freemasons, to consider the inevitable consequences of such a horrible trifling with the most solemn oaths...I wish to induce the young men who are not Freemasons ‘to look before they leap...’”¹⁰

Finney’s main problem with the Masons comes from a religious standpoint, but he brings in some political issues as well.

“Can any of you face the public and assert that men who have intelligently taken and who adhere to the horrid oaths, with their horrid penalties, as revealed in these books, can safely be trusted with any office in Church or State? Can a man who has taken, and still adheres to the Master's oath to conceal any secret crime of a brother of that degree, murder and treason excepted, be a safe man with whom to entrust an office? Can he be trusted as a witness, a juror, or with any office connected with the administration of justice? Can a man who has taken and still adheres to the oath of the Royal Arch degree be trusted in office?”¹¹

While Finney begins his book in near hysterics, this passage brings up some reasonable claims. After he spends the book explaining how serious some of the oaths of Masons are, he questions how these men can be integral government officials while abiding by these oaths. While most

¹⁰Finney, Charles G. *The Character, Claims, and Practical Workings of Freemasonry*. Cincinnati: Western Tract Book Society, 1869.

¹¹ Finney, Charles.

opinion shows that Masons are generally loyal to the fraternity and their oaths, beyond the Morgan incident, it seems there has been no other incident where the fraternity and civic duties are a conflict of interest. Further, all of these claims, and yet Finney published without any turmoil. It seems questionable that a group would kidnap and possibly murder a man for planning to write an exposé of their secrets, yet a man like Finney can speak of their rituals and condemn them and get off scot-free.

Ronald Formisano refers to the Masons as “America’s social fraternity,” but some arguments question whether or not that is all that they were. Some anti-Masons questioned the spirit of the fraternity, claiming it went against American ideals like equality. Many anti-Masons saw the Masons as the upper-class of society who would surely dismantle the democracy. Kathleen Smith Kutolowski points to socioeconomic factors as a huge factor for the rise of anti-Masonry.

“Historians have differed sharply as to Antimasonry's left-wing or right-wing credentials, but a virtual consensus—one owing much to Cross—exists in regard to its social bases. According to the conventional wisdom, Antimasonry ‘tended to differentiate rural and lower middle class folk from their would-be social superiors’ and represented an impassioned, leveling attack by members of the ‘lower classes’ against the village and urban aristocracy.”¹²

¹² Kutolowski, Kathleen Smith. "Antimasonry Reexamined: Social Bases of the Grass-Roots Party." *The Journal of American History* 71, no. 2 (1984): 269. Accessed December 10, 2015.

Kutolowski argues that the anti-Mason's radicalism was not unlike what we see in politics today. They had a "grassroots appeal," and a desire to change the way American politics function. Formisano joins by arguing that anti-Masons might not have been all that crazy.

"In its early stages Antimasonic protest arose from men and women reacting to real events, forming beliefs supported by experience, and joining in conflict with tangible adversaries over legitimate issues. Initially most protesters were neither fanatics nor opportunists, nor were they propelled by anti-conspiratorial impulse. Their hyperbolic rhetoric must be seen in relation to contemporary public rhetoric and, moreover, to Masonic excesses. Admittedly, there were some reckless early attacks on Masonry, but private Masonic vigilantism had initially stirred up fear and anger against the secret society. Whether Masons murdered Morgan or not, whether they and friendly local and state authorities perpetrated a cover-up, grounds existed permitting reasonable persons to believe that Masons were systematically violating the republican norm of equality before the law and due process of justice."¹³

Essentially, the argument posed here states that the anti-Masons had some valid complaints. Be that it may, the complaints seem to be more coincidental than conspiratorial. While most Masons were wealthier men, any man could petition for membership. And while a lot of politician were Masons, anyone could theoretically run for their offices. Nonetheless, the anti-Masons felt they needed their own political party to be able to take down the Masons.

¹³ Formisano, Ronald.

While the Masons never had their own political party, it appeared they did not need one in order to combat the anti-Masons. The central election in question was the 1828 presidential election. The anti-Masons had gleaned enough support for their cause to run their own campaign against Andrew Jackson and Henry Clay, both Masons. Before the election, the Morgan incident called into question the number of authoritative government leaders who were Masons. anti-Masons saw the way the investigation was “handled,” and blamed the Masons for protecting their own. To combat this miscarriage of justice, the anti-Masonic party was born.

“What began as a regional controversy provoked a mass movement that radically altered the course of American politics before the Civil War. Growing out of neighborhood protest rallies, burgeoning in a climate of hostility toward established politicians, Antimasonry itself soon became an organized political force. It fostered a raw democracy, attacked every hint of special privilege, and so drove even its foes to emulation...Antimasonry was, then, not just a movement to determine whether William Morgan was indeed weighted to the bottom of Lake Erie, not only an attempt to punish the numerous men of influence who were implicated in the affair and obstructed its investigation. It was nothing less than an angry people's realization that the ideology of their pristine republic had become inoperative in a more complex society, that their cherished republican equality

was daily flouted by the workings of what contemporary collegians call a power structure."¹⁴

The anti-Mason platform mainly focused on keeping the sacred ideal of democracy in tact, fearing that Jackson's politics were completely opposing. "True Antimasonry had become subverted to anti-Jacksonism."¹⁵ Of course, the anti-Masons were unsuccessful, and Jackson won the election. Ironically, he went on to become a symbol for the American identity, contrary to how anti-Masons viewed him. After the election the anti-Masons essentially fizzled out of the political arena. While the total length of the anti-Masonic movement was rather short, a lot of literature and ideas came out of it, begging the question: what was all the fuss about? Is it possible the anti-Masons saw something the rest of the world was missing?

UCLA history professor, and expert on Freemasonry, Margaret Jacobs says,

"All these men with different neighborhoods, different professions meeting in the cafe, breaking bread together, doing rituals -- what could this be? So the response on the part of the authorities was, Oh my God, this is a conspiracy!"¹⁶

¹⁴ Gribbin, William. 1974. "Antimasonry, Religious Radicalism, and the Paranoid Style of the 1820's". *The History Teacher* 7 (2). Society for History Education: 239-54. doi:10.2307/491797.

¹⁵ McCarthy, Charles. *The Antimasonic Party: A Study of Political Antimasonry in the United States, 1827-1840*. Washington: [Govt. Print. Off.], 1903.

¹⁶ Rocca, Mo.

Jacobs, here, debunks the anti-Masons in one swift punch. She asserts that anyone who believed the Masons are some kind of evil secret club was hysterical. Yet there are seemingly endless articles and books written supporting the anti-Masons and condemning the elusivity of Masons.

It appears rational to believe that a group that has secrets has something to hide. However, if that mindset is applied to every situation, the United States would be in shambles. So much of society functions around the keeping of secrets. Doctors and lawyers are paid to keep secrets; contracts are negotiated at confidential meetings, the government conducts all kinds of business in a cloud of classified operations. If all of those are assumed to be wicked, who is left to trust? The Masons, while not as a group doctors or lawyers, should have had the same right to secrecy without the presumption of devious activity. The admission made to the kidnapping says two things. First, that the Masons are willing to admit their sin. And second, that while they point out the group that committed this sin were “misguided,” there is something to be said about them as a group accepting the guilt of their members. Maybe it was too little too late, but regardless, they came clean.

“During the second quarter of the nineteenth century, when danger of foreign invasion appeared increasingly remote, Americans were told by various respected leaders that Freemasons had infiltrated the government and had seized control of the courts, that Mormons were undermining political and economic freedom in the West, and that Roman Catholic priests, receiving instructions from Rome,

had made frightening progress in a plot to subject the nation to popish
despotism.”¹⁷

As American nationalism grew, the fear of international threat fell. As if bored by the lack of drama, Americans turned against each other, and formed these theories of counter-subversion. If a group grew in numbers, people assumed they would then grow in power and destroy the beautiful democracy Americans worked so hard to build. No evidence suggests the Masons as a whole were a radical group. The Morgan incident may prove the group had some radical members, but it is difficult to name any group without at least one. As for the anti-Masons, on the assumption that Masons were not radical, it seems the anti-Masons must be radical by default.

In their defense, the anti-Masons meant well. They were afraid of losing the liberty and democracy that set America apart from her contemporaries. While George Washington cautioned against the formation of political parties, it is hard to imagine American history without its political divides. The anti-Masons simply had differing views than both the Republicans and the Democrats. Not only did it make sense ideologically for them to form their own party, to some extent, it made sense for people to join this third party.

“It was Antimasonry that played the greatest part in crippling the elite...In

Rochester, however, Antimasonry made sense. It was a skillfully directed assault

¹⁷ Davis, David Brion. "Some Themes of Counter-Subversion: An Analysis of Anti-Masonic, Anti-Catholic, and Anti-Mormon Literature." *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review*: 205.

upon wealthy and powerful men who had been the focus of resentment since the beginnings of settlement.”¹⁸

It is no secret that money and politics go hand in hand. At the time, though, money, politics, and Masonry all fell together as an attack on democracy. However, the three’s correlation does not necessarily have causation. Not all rich men were Masons, and not all Masons were politicians. Essentially, the argument that Masons were trying or succeeding in controlling the government is arbitrary. Masons do not even speak of politics in their meetings. Whether or not a government official was a Mason seemed to only affect one group of people and they were the anti-Masons. While fear is a strong emotion, it should not be one by which people dictate their lives. The anti-Masons were afraid, and arguably without reason.

It is difficult to conclude whether or not either group was “right” or “wrong.” The radical Masons that carried out the Morgan kidnapping were morally wrong, and the Masons that may have covered it up were morally wrong. However, the Masons as a whole swear they are benevolent, and prove this even today with an estimated \$2 million charitable donations every day.¹⁹ The anti-Masons might have been morally right for trying to defend the principles of life and liberty. Nevertheless, the way they carried out their defense may be morally wrong depending on how one views making accusations on unsubstantiated evidence.

Though it is apparent that fear and paranoia can have the mind-altering power to drive people to societal change, the outcome will likely be short lived. Unfortunately, the Freemason

¹⁸ Johnson, Paul Edward. *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837*. Hill and Wang, 1978.

¹⁹ Rocca, Mo.

conspiracy would not be the only conspiracy that shapes American history. Before the Freemasons there were Salem witches, and a century after the Freemasons there was the Red Scare. What is to be learned from the Masons is that fear should be based in facts and should not drive politics.

Works Cited

- Burt, Andrew. "The 1826 Kidnapping, Allegedly by a Cabal of Freemasons, That Changed American Politics Forever." *Slate.com*. May 15, 2015. Accessed December 6, 2015.
- Davis, David Brion. "Some Themes of Counter-Subversion: An Analysis of Anti-Masonic, Anti-Catholic, and Anti-Mormon Literature." *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review*: 205.
- Finney, Charles G. *The Character, Claims, and Practical Workings of Freemasonry*. Cincinnati: Western Tract Book Society, 1869.
- Formisano, Ronald P., and Kathleen Smith Kutolowski. 1977. "Antimasonry and Masonry: The Genesis of Protest, 1826-1827." *American Quarterly* 29 (2). The Johns Hopkins University Press: 139–65. doi:10.2307/2712356.
- Gribbin, William. 1974. "Antimasonry, Religious Radicalism, and the Paranoid Style of the 1820's". *The History Teacher* 7 (2). Society for History Education: 239–54. doi:10.2307/491797.
- Johnson, Paul Edward. *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837*. Hill and Wang, 1978.
- Kutolowski, Kathleen Smith. "Antimasonry Reexamined: Social Bases of the Grass-Roots Party." *The Journal of American History* 71, no. 2 (1984): 269. Accessed December 10, 2015.
- McCarthy, Charles. *The Antimasonic Party: A Study of Political Antimasonry in the United States, 1827-1840*. Washington: [Govt. Print. Off.], 1903.
- "Principle Tenets of Freemasonry - Black Hawk Lodge #65 - Cedar Falls, Iowa Masonic Lodge AF & AM." Principle Tenets of Freemasonry - Black Hawk Lodge #65 - Cedar Falls, Iowa Masonic Lodge AF & AM. Accessed December 1, 2015.
- Rocca, Mo. "Inside the Secret World of the Freemasons." *CBSNews*. Accessed December 6, 2015.
- Wilhelm, Robert. "William Morgan - Revenge of the Freemasons." *Murder by Gaslight*. January 10, 2010. Accessed December 6, 2015.
- "William Morgan (anti-Mason)." *Wikipedia*. September 15, 2015. Accessed December 6, 2015.