

THE MORGAN AFFAIR / ANTI-MASONIC EXCITEMENT

By R.E. William R. Zufall

Illustrations added by rhm

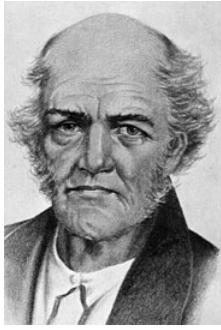
In March of 1798, a New England minister named Jedediah Morse preached a sermon against Masonry, based on a Scottish book entitled, “Proof of a Conspiracy against all the Religions and Governments of Europe, carried on in the Secret Meetings of Freemasons, Illuminati and others”. Although written by a well-known educator, the book confuses several dissimilar societies, and makes statements not based on fact. Nonetheless, the Rev. Morse repeated these charges in his sermon, and then printed it in a pamphlet which was widely circulated in New England. Other ministers followed Morse's lead and organized an anti-Masonic crusade. As early as 1809, the Quakers warned their members not to join Freemasonry. In January 1821, the Pittsburgh Synod of the Presbyterian Church condemned Freemasonry as “unfit for professing Christians”, and two years later the General Methodist Conference prohibited its clergy from becoming Masons.

We must realize that many good and honest men believed they had valid reason to fear and oppose Freemasonry. When a body of men are known to meet behind closed doors, are said to have secret ‘oaths’, and have members holding important posts in the state and nation, a nation less than 50 years old, the uninformed understandably fear the possible control of government by such secret societies and its menace to democracy. Perhaps more significantly, many clergymen resented the universal character of Masonry with its acceptance on an equal basis, of not only all Christian denominations, but non-Christian religions as well. To them, this was definitely un-Christian and therefore anti-Christian.

Please remember that I have been talking about the first quarter of the 19th century – the 25 years leading up to the appearance in our midst of one Captain William Morgan. You can therefore see that the anti-Masonic excitement of the following 20 years was not caused by the disappearance of Morgan any more than World War I was caused by an assassination in Sarajevo, or World War II caused by the attack on Pearl Harbor. These events may have been , triggers which set off a chain of following events, but there was a definite climate existing which made it possible for these triggers to be so explosive.

And thus we come to the person known as William Morgan. Morgan was a stonecutter from Virginia who lived for a time in Toronto, and moved to the village of Rochester in 1822. Two years later he moved to Batavia, where he claimed to be a Freemason, and attended lodge, although there is now considerable doubt that he had ever received the Masonic degrees in any regular Lodge. The records do show, however, that in May of 1825, Morgan received the Royal Arch degree in Western Star Chapter #3 3 in LeRoy.

Subsequently, a number of the brethren decided to form a Royal Arch Chapter in Batavia, and Morgan signed the petition for a charter. The other petitioners were apparently beginning to suspect Morgan's Masonic regularity, and they scratched his name off the petition. This naturally disappointed Morgan, and disappointment turned to resentment and anger. Thirsting for revenge and motivated by the greedy hope of large financial gain, he determined to publish an expose entitled 'Illustrations of Masonry'. He entered into a contract with Batavia publisher David Miller whereby Morgan was to receive one quarter of the profits of the book.



*Illustration 1:
William Morgan*

Announcement of the forthcoming exposure created intense excitement among the brethren in Batavia, LeRoy, Rochester and, indeed, throughout Western New York. Moreover, Morgan boasted in bars and on the street of his progress in writing this book. The more he bragged, the higher the feeling against him ran, and the greater the determination that the book should never appear. Anger against him grew hot. A fire of suspicious origin damaged David Miller's printing shop in Batavia, and apparently at that time a portion of Morgan's manuscript was stolen. It was carried as quickly as possible to New York City, where former Governor DeWitt Clinton was presiding over the meeting of the General Grand Chapter of Royal Arch Masons. Clinton ordered that the manuscript be immediately returned, and that no further effort be made to interfere. Unfortunately, his good advice was too late.

On September 11, 1826, William Morgan was arrested for the theft of a shirt and tie and taken to the county seat, which at that time was Canandaigua. The charges were dismissed and he was released, but then he was immediately rearrested for a bad debt – of \$2.68 – and jailed on this charge. The next day, someone paid the debt, Morgan was released, and he left Canandaigua in a coach with several other men, apparently not of his own free will. The carriage was later traced from Canandaigua through Victor, Pittsford and Rochester to Lockport, and to an abandoned powder magazine at Ft. Niagara. What may have happened then is forever unknown. Much investigation and a lengthy trial 160 years ago could not resolve this question, and we cannot do any better today. There are, however, two basic theories we should at least consider. One of the men who was subsequently convicted of conspiracy to seize Morgan claimed that on the advice of Governor Clinton, he successfully bribed Morgan with a promise of \$500 and faked the 'kidnapping' to make it easier to get Morgan away from Miller and his associates. He claimed that he and others turned Morgan over to two Canadian Masons at Ft. Niagara, who traveled with him to Hamilton, where they paid him the \$500, receiving his signed receipt and agreement never to return. There were subsequent reports of Morgan being sighted at various places around the world, including Boston, Northern Canada, and even Turkey! Others, however, contended that the five conspirators carried Morgan in a boat to the center of the Niagara River at midnight, bound him with chains, and dumped him overboard. These five, which included the Sheriff of Ontario County, were in fact convicted of conspiracy to seize and hide Morgan, and they all served jail terms of various lengths. No charge of murder was made, however, as there was no body.

Now, “did William Morgan choose the easier way, disappear with \$500 from a dangerous situation, eliminating from his responsibilities a wife and family and, in a new freedom, ship on a vessel from Montreal and out into the world, there to come to an unknown end?

“or was he basely murdered by Masons who thought the crime less than the evil results to follow on the publication of Morgan's book?”^[1]

No one will ever know the true answer to these questions. But we do know the effect which Morgan's disappearance had on Masonry in the state and the nation, although it is indeed difficult for us to fully comprehend the storm of persecution and mass hysteria which resulted. It turned neighbor against neighbor and brother against brother. Not only were teachers and pastors driven from their stations, and members from their churches, but the children of Masons were excluded from their schools, the Sacrament was refused to Masons by formal vote of the church, their names were thrown out of jury boxes, their businesses boycotted and their families ostracized. Small wonder that the majority of lodges and other Masonic bodies turned in – or in some cases threw away – their charters and became dormant, closing their lodges and discontinuing their identification with Masonry. All lodges and concordant bodies in Monroe County became dormant, as did most of the lodges in upstate New York west of Albany, including Monroe Commandery #12, KT, which was granted a dispensation to work by the Grand Encampment of New York on Sept. 18, 1826, just 6 days after Morgan's disappearance. The Grand Lodge of Vermont suspended all work until 1845, and in New Jersey, all but eight lodges surrendered their charters. In New York, the membership dropped by 90%, from about 480 lodges with 20,000 members in 1825 to 48 lodges and only 1500 members in 1834. The few lodges in Western New York that continued to meet had to do it secretly, and in peril of bodily harm. Their courage and fortitude earn them the right to have their names recorded and remembered: Ark Lodge #33 at Geneva, which continued to meet throughout the dark years; Olive Branch #39 at LeRoy, which met every four weeks to open and close lodge if nothing else; Evening Star #44 at Hornell; Union Lodge #45 at Lima which continued to meet despite attacks by fanatics, and Fidelity Lodge #51 at Trumansburg, whose 12 members were attacked by mobs, and yet continued to meet.

In the first elections to be held after the anti-Masonic excitement began, a large number of candidates who were Masons were defeated. Rochester publisher and editor Thurlow Weed noted this fact and perceived a golden opportunity to make his political fortunes. Accordingly, he organized a political base to elect anti-Masonic candidates, and wrote numerous editorials in his newspaper continually and consistently branding the entire fraternity as murderers. In the midst of the first campaign, a body washed up on shore near Oak Orchard, some 40 miles from Ft. Niagara. An inquest was held, the body could not be identified, and it was then buried. At this point, Thurlow Weed's political committee went into action. The body was exhumed for a second inquest, and declared to be that of Morgan. It didn't seem to matter that the clothes worn by this body were very different from the clothes Morgan was wearing when he disappeared, nor that the body had a beard whereas Morgan was clean-shaven. Furthermore, the body had a full head of hair, and Morgan was practically bald! Perhaps there's something to be said for Lake Ontario water - maybe Dick Eades and I should give it a try! You can imagine the chagrin of Thurlow Weed and his group when a women named Sara Munro of Clark, Canada, appeared and

1 The book was nevertheless published in November 1926 (rhm)

insisted on having the body exhumed again because her husband had disappeared shortly before the body was discovered. The third inquest had no difficulty in clearly identifying the body as her husband, Timothy Munro, and it was returned to Ontario for burial. When asked what he would do for a Morgan if the body turned out to be somebody else, the crafty politician Thurlow Weed is said to have replied that “it is a good enough Morgan until after election”. Apparently he was right, because the anti-Masons were successful in a number of western New York counties, sending 15 members to the New York Assembly, including the delegate from Monroe.

Another ambitious political king-maker who made his name by denouncing Masonry was Thaddeus Stevens of Pennsylvania. Described by some as a ruthless dictator and a merciless despot, Stevens dominated the legislature of Pennsylvania and later the US Congress with his deadly sarcasm, vitriolic tongue, and cruel, heartless revenge against those who dared to oppose him. When the anti-Masonic movement spread from New York into Pennsylvania, he immediately became its spokesman. So successful was his leadership that in 1835, the anti-Masonic party elected the Governor and a large majority of the lower House in Pennsylvania. So intense and violent were Stevens’ attacks on Freemasons that he became known as the “Arch-Priest of anti-Masonry”. There is even some speculation that Stevens engineered the impeachment proceedings against President Andrew Johnson some 30 years later, at least in part because Johnson was a Mason.

The Anti-Masonic Party made a distinct contribution to the American political scene. For better or worse, it was the first political party to nominate a presidential candidate by the convention method, holding the first national convention in Baltimore in September of 1831.

In their efforts to destroy Masonry, the anti-Masons sought out prominent Masons who could be induced, not only to defect, but also to denounce the Fraternity. The ‘Seceding Masons’ must have given the loyal and faithful brethren great anguish. One of the cruelest blows was the public renunciation of Masonry by Cadwallader D. Colden, several times Mayor of New York City. In a public letter which was widely circulated, Colden stated he had become a Mason at the age of 21, but “after the buoyancy of youth” had passed, he began to realize “the vanity and folly, and the evil tendency of Masonry”. I can only observe that it took him long enough to reach this realization, for he had already served the Grand Lodge of New York as Senior Grand Warden for 10 years!

Like any other hysteria, anti-Masonry finally withered and died. Passions wore themselves away. A few sturdy and brave men stood staunchly by, a few Grand Lodges never ceased to proclaim their allegiance to the principles of the Fraternity. In 1834, Thurlow Weed and his fellow politicians in control of the Anti-Masonic Party in New York, delivered it bodily to the National Republican or Whig Party. In other words, a political party consisting of many thousands of citizens who had repeatedly and most solemnly declared that they would never vote for a Mason for any office, ceased to utter a word against Masons and aligned themselves with National Republicans, composed of Masons as well as non-Masons. Other states followed pretty much the same course, and within a few years, the Anti-Masonic Party had gone out of existence. Little by little, Freemasonry raised its head; one by one, lodges took heart and craftsmen returned to their altars. From a low of 48 lodges on the official roster in New York, the number increased to 79 by 1840, and passed the 100 mark in 1846, including Valley Lodge 109 in Monroe County.

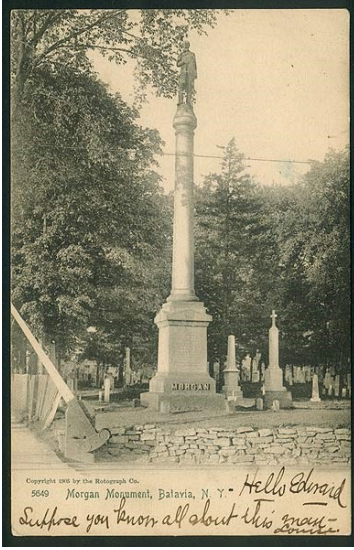


Illustration 2: Morgan Monument in the Batavia Cemetery

Anti-Masonry's last gasp came in 1875, almost 50 years after Morgan's disappearance, when a Chicago-based organization raised a sum of money from subscriptions throughout the country, and erected an imposing monument in the Batavia cemetery, nearly 50 feet high, upon which is engraved, "Sacred to the memory of William Morgan...Abducted...by Freemasons and murdered for revealing the secrets of the order". No attempt has ever been made by Masons to interfere with this monument, and it stands to this day, perhaps as a worthy reminder of the evils of passion and prejudice^[2].

There are those who say that Masonry today has outlived its usefulness, but 160 years ago the death of Masonry was declared as an accomplished fact, yet Masonry survived.

There are those who say that Masonry today doesn't have the appeal it used to have, but 160 years ago Masonry had no appeal at all; in fact it was hazardous to life and limb just to

be a Mason, yet Masonry survived. There are those who say that Masonry must change to meet the needs of a changing society, but 160 years ago society rejected Masonry completely, yet Masonry survived. I can only say that if we hold fast and true to the landmarks, the principles and the essential character of Freemasonry, and if we have the courage and conviction of our loyal brethren 160 years ago, then I am sure of one thing: Masonry will survive.

End of 'The Morgan Affair' – by William R. Zufall

2 Allegedly, the Brethren of Batavia Lodge say the reason no one has 'interfered' with the monument is because the main railroad tracks go right past it, and they noted that every time a train went by, Morgan got a face-full of dirty smoke!