

## Thanatos

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### LIFE, DEATH AND MASONRY – THE BODY OF WILLIAM MORGAN

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#### **Abstrakti: Elämä, kuolema ja vapaamuurarius – William Morganin ruumis**

Syyskuussa 1826 tapahtunut William Morganin salaperäinen katoaminen oli eräs Yhdysvaltain historian kiistellyimmistä ratkaisemattomista kuolemantapauksista. Morgan oli elämässään epäonnistunut muurari ja liikemies, jonka hahmosta tuli kiinnekohta kokonaiselle sukupolvelle amerikkalaisessa politiikassa ja kulttuurissa. Morgan kohtasi kuolemansa jouduttuaan entisten vapaamuurariveljiensä sieppaamaksi ja todennäköisesti myös murhaamaksi New Yorkin osavaltion länsiosissa; tapahtuman taustalla olivat Morganin uhkaukset paljastaa vapaamuurarijärjestön salaisuudet sanomalehdistölle.

Paikalliset vapaamuurarit yrittivät myös myötävaikuttaa Morganin sieppauksesta syytettyjen henkilöiden oikeudenkäynteihin. Lopputuloksena oli sarja lieviä tuomioita, valamiehistön pattitilanteita ja vapauttamisia, joiden lietsoman raivokkaan reaktion seurauksena syntyi järjestäytynyt Amerikan vapaamuurariuden vastainen puolue, *American Anti-Masonic Party*. Seuranneina vuosikymmeninä Morgan

kohotettiin vapaamuurarien vastustajien keskuudessa marttyyriksi, siinä missä vapaamuurarit esittivät hänet roistona. Vaikka vapaamuurariuden vastaisen puolueen syntyä on käsitelty viime aikoina paljon, on Morganin kuolemaan johtaneita olosuhteita ja hänen kuolemansa ympärille rakennettuja kilpailevia kertomuksia arvioitu tutkimuksessa toistaiseksi vain vähän

Yhteisönsä valtaapitävät haastaneena köyhänä miehenä Morgan mitä todennäköisimmin päätti päivänsä vapaamuurarien murhaamana. Kuolemansa myötä hänestä tuli suurempi hahmo kuin mitä hän oli eläissään ollut, sekä vihamiestensä että ihailijoidensa keskuudessa. Morganin kuoleman myötä vapaamuurarijärjestö joutui Yhdysvalloissa pysyvästi puolustusasemiin. Amerikkalaisten vapaamuurarien kertomuksissa Morgan on jäänyt synkäksi hahmoksi, joka muodostaa täydellisen vastakohdan vapaamuurariuden vastustajien luomalle sankarillisen kristillisen marttyyrin perikuvalle.

## **Introduction**

Only in the last few years have American historians begun grappling with the importance of Freemasonry in the foundation of the United States. Before the American Revolution, Masonic membership was *de rigueur* for middle-to-upper class white male Protestants who made up the leadership of the revolutionary cause, helping give them access to the intellectual, cultural, and commercial world of their European contemporaries. During the Revolutionary War, Masonic lodges in the Continental Army helped nationalize the disunited American officer corps. After the war, the expanding membership of Masonic lodges helped include leading artisans and merchants in the elites of post-Revolutionary society, expanding the republican promise of the Revolution socially as well as politically. One of the few American institutions not to openly break with Britain immediately after the Revolution, Masonic lodges provided a connection between British, American, and French elites that allowed Americans to participate in trans-Atlantic society through the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. (Bullock, 4-5, 47-52, 122-133.)

In the 1810s, with their numbers growing rapidly across the United States, including Presidents, Senators, and other leading national figures, Masonic lodges embraced the Romantic movement of the post-Napoleonic period and began crafting new rituals that emphasized their imagined Biblical and medieval past amid fears of the market revolution that would dominate their futures. But in the 1820s American Masonry fell; slipping from its cultural place of pride across the United States as lodges closed, Masons renounced their oaths of loyalty, and the Anti-Masonic Party, the first third party in American history, appeared on the scene. Not until after the Civil War would Masonry again become important in American culture, and it would never again hold the kind of power it had enjoyed before the 1820s. (*The Proceedings of the United States Anti-Masonic Convention*, 1-5.) The reasons for that fall were manifold, but the tipping point for American anti-Masonry, the spark that touched the fertile tender of class resentment, anti-power politics, and nascent sectionalism was a murder – specifically, the murder of New York Mason William Morgan in September 1826.

This article will investigate the murder of Morgan, sorting out both the likely circumstances of his death, and the narratives that came to surround his life after his demise. Using Masonic and anti-Masonic histories composed in the decades after Morgan's death, as well as looking at both contemporary newspapers and 21<sup>st</sup> century historiography on the subject, we will reconstruct the circumstances of Morgan's life, death, and the narratives that arose in the historical record after Morgan himself left it. I agree with the general arguments made by the so-called "revisionists" about Morgan's death. He was most likely killed by upstate New York Masons who then used their lodge connections to evade serious prosecution, and the anti-Masonic reaction that came afterwards was a legitimate reaction to what appeared to be the untrammelled power of the lodges. This is not new – what makes this work relevant in the context of death studies is what there is to say about the stories that came after Morgan's death. The anti-Masonic narrative that came after Morgan's death, with its gloating Masonic killers and piously martyred Morgan, served as a "passion play" for American anti-Masonry, with its lone Christian martyred hero brutally slaughtered by the untrammelled power of Masonry.

Similarly, the Masonic narratives of Morgan's life, and the increasingly fantastic stories of his escape to alternatively Canada, Native American communities, Turkey, Cuba, and the Cayman Islands, show the other side of the coin – a Masonic discourse that was never able to shake the lasting legacy of Morgan's death. Masonic writers ultimately had no answer for anti-Masonic charges save to slander Morgan's character and invent ever-more fantastic stories about his escape. This focus on the discourse that followed Morgan's death is new to the literature, and strengthens it by showing that Morgan's death truly was the foundational narrative of American anti-Masonry. Meanwhile, the failure of Masonic writers to establish a coherent counter-narrative shows the cultural weakness that would lead to the collapse of American Masonry for a generation after the death of William Morgan. Morgan's murderers may have escaped justice, but in death, William Morgan became far more important than he ever could have been in life.

### **Finding the Body**

The body was discovered on October 7, 1827, in so "putrid a state" that it was indescribable in the contemporary press, washed up on the shores of Lake Ontario near the mouth of Oak Orchard Creek. Even today the area is comparatively undeveloped, occupied by a state park and boating sloop, and was even more remote in the 1820s, Orleans County having been largely bypassed by the Erie Canal boom that had swept through points west and south in upstate New York. Farmers Potter and Hoxie, the discoverers of the corpse, quickly reported their discovery to the authorities. The corpse was "the body of a man, some forty-five or fifty years of age; about five feet eight inches in height," dressed in a frock coat, pants, and homespun flannel shirt, with religious tracts and tobacco in the pockets. The coroner's jury concluded the man had died by drowning, and the "John Doe" was buried in a cheap coffin near the town of Carleton. (*Orleans Whig*, October 12, 1827.) Close by the shore of the Great Lakes, not far from the mouth of the Niagara River, it was a routine moment in the life of a rural community in upstate New York in the 1820s. But the corpse's story would soon become nothing like routine as leading editors, political leaders, and ministers converged on Carleton to exhume the corpse, pour over its story, and summon grieving widows from nearby Batavia and across the Canadian border to identify

the dead man. For this was no ordinary time in the life of upstate New York – this was the age of Morgan. (Weed, 313-314; Bentley, 37.)

The alleged murder of William Morgan remains one of the most famous unsolved crimes in American history. (Wilhelm, 1.) The circumstances of Morgan's life, his death, and his interactions with the Masonic lodges of Batavia, Warsaw, and Le Roy, New York in the 1820s were a subject of vigorous national debate within months of his purported kidnapping from the doorstep of the Ontario County Jail in the early morning hours of September 12, 1826. They have remained important to historians of politics, crime, and American culture to this day, as well as to Masonic and anti-Masonic hobbyists still carrying on now nearly-two hundred year old battles about Masonic culpability. (*Batavia Daily News*, September 14, 1882, 6; Armstrong, 7-8.) This national attention has kept alive the historical memory of what would otherwise have been an obscure frontier murder of the 19<sup>th</sup> century; even other "Masonic outrages" of the period like the death and "transfiguration" of Joseph Burnham in Vermont some years later have generally been neglected by historians. (Roth, 35-37.)

For Masons and sympathetic historians, William Morgan was a traitor not just to Masonry, but to the ideals of genteel bourgeois respectability they represented. He was "very intemperate and frequently neglected his family", a man of "dissolute habits" who was "extremely violent when drunk", an abuser of his wife and children, one whose disappearance was "beyond controversy...of his own free will". (Huntington, 30-40; Morris, 60-70.) For Anti-Masons and the few historians sympathetic to their agenda, Morgan was every inch a respectable American patriot: a veteran of the Battle of New Orleans and militia captain, a man of "industry" with a trade, a Christian and hero of his country "cruelly betrayed" by his "supposed friends". (Holley, 15; Weed, 2-12.)

Like his fate, Morgan's body was never conclusively identified. The October corpse was identified first as Morgan by his widow Lucinda, and reburied in Batavia with the "pomp and circumstance" as befit a martyred hero. (Tillotson, 85-86; *New York Spectator*, November 9, 1827.)

Shortly afterwards, the body was identified yet again, by another grieving widow, as Timothy Monroe, a Canadian lost on the lake some months previously, and this time reburied in Canada. (Bentley, 38-40; Weed, 319-320.) The contested story of the Morgan/Monroe body became yet another bone of contention in the story of Morgan's murder, with both sides producing competing forensics, hydrological, and "unimpeachable" eyewitness testimony to prove that the corpse was one man or the other. With competing stories of equal weight, historians cannot know for sure the true identity of the October 1827 body. But they can, however, identify the fate of William Morgan, locating his corpse in historical memory if not in physical actuality.

### **The Killing, and its Relevance**

William Morgan was murdered by his fellow Masons sometime after they took him from the Ontario County jail, voluntarily or otherwise, in order to prevent the publication of his book *Light on Masonry*. None of the Masonic stories that emerged in subsequent years that Morgan became a pirate in the Ottoman Empire, that he fled to the British-owned Cayman Islands and eventually brought his family there, that he changed his identity and lived among the Native Americans of upstate New York, have any appreciable factual justification. (Bryant; Conover, 140-141.) Morgan was a lone man, an outsider with no appreciable friends or allies, one who had aroused the anger of some of the most powerful men in his community, many of whom would continue to condemn him years and even decades after his death. (Brown, 16-24; Bentley, 7-8; Kutolowski and Formisano, 139-140.) By threatening to expose the "secrets of Masonry", particularly the "higher degrees" like Royal Arch Masonry, an 18<sup>th</sup> century innovation popularized by a new wave of mysticism in Jacksonian Freemasonry, Morgan had so endangered the pride, cultural, and economic status of his fellow Masons that they saw no alternative but to take his life. The alternative cases have been made either by Masonic historians with an interest in protecting the historical reputation of their order, or by later historians who have lost sight of the cultural roots and social purpose of Masonry in frontier communities like Batavia and Le Roy. (Kutolowski, 543.)

Historians friendly to Masons, or Masons themselves, have generally downplayed the importance of the murder of Morgan in the formation of the anti-Masonic movement, instead calling attention to the “demagogues” who supposedly manipulated New York public opinion in order to promote their own political agenda in the region. (Schlesinger, x.) A number of influential politicians cut out of power by the Regency did indeed take advantage of anti-Masonry to seek office. (Weed, 102-105.) Nevertheless, it is also true that the reaction to Morgan’s murder was meaningful. Morgan almost certainly was kidnapped and murdered by Batavia and Le Roy Masons. Even if not, local citizens of upstate New York had solid reasons to believe that he had met such a fate. Morgan had been violently condemned in the press and by his fellow Masons. Those sympathetic to Masons had directed attacks against his family and supporters. There had been an attempted arson in the heart of downtown Batavia carried out in the hours before Morgan’s final and fatal arrest (at the hands of a Masonic sheriff who had frequently winked at the order’s abuses in the past), and the cover-up used to deflect attention from the trials of his kidnapers and his allies had become famous across the nation by the time it had finished. (Kutolowski and Formisano, 140-142.)

There were at least two dozen trials spun off from Morgan’s disappearance; Masons were generally not excluded from the relevant jury pools, and only three of the trials were actually successful in reaching a verdict. If anti-Masons were hyperbolic in their rapid condemnation of Masonry, it was an age of hyperbolic rhetoric. They accused Masons of dominating the courts and politics of the region, and they were – as will be discussed below – correct. (*Buffalo Patriot*, March 25, 1828; Kutolowski, 543-545.) The murder of William Morgan did not invent American anti-Masonry, but it did provide the impetus for its formation. Morgan’s murder and its aftermath presented New York Masons as a reasonable threat to human life and republican values. Anti-Masons organized against the evidently untrammelled power of Masonry with what appeared to be solid factual justification – that the death of William Morgan was proof of the secret, unchecked power of the lodges in the American life.

### **Who Was Morgan, and Why Did He Break With Masonry?**

However, it was not obvious, back in the fall of 1826, that Morgan would have to die at all, much less that the story of his murder would become so infamous. For all that some Masons thought of Morgan, in the weeks and months before the publication of his book, as “guilty of outrage upon the laws of Masonry”, and thus that it was “just for him to lose his life”, others were baffled by their brothers’ outrage at Morgan’s planned work. Not long before his disappearance, Henry Brown of Batavia, one of Morgan’s erstwhile lodge brothers, published a letter that condemned the “indiscreet and unnecessary” reaction to Morgan’s plans, telling his brothers that “The lion might as well be alarmed because an army of kites or crows had threatened to invade his proud domains”. (Brown, 20-25; Bullock, 279.)

This is one of the real mysteries surrounding the murder of William Morgan. Anti-Masonic exposes had been in print almost since the early 18<sup>th</sup> century formation of the Enlightenment version of Freemasonry. Anti-Masonic exposes like *Jachin and Boaz* were readily available in print before 1826, while anti-Masonry had enjoyed a brief flowering in the United States twenty years earlier during the vigorous anti-French reaction of the late 1790s. None of these, despite occasional lurid accusations made by anti-Masons later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, prompted a murderous response from contemporary Masons. (Morris, 5-12.) What was it about Morgan, his book, and the Masons of upstate New York and beyond that prompted the vigorous and ultimately bloody reprisals that culminated in the formation of the American Anti-Masonic Party?

Between both Masonic demonization and anti-Masonic valorization, some things can be said with reasonable certainty about the life of William Morgan, who until the months before his death left very little of himself in the world. He was a stonemason and bricklayer from Culpeper County, Virginia, an operative Mason among speculative Masons. Born in 1774, Morgan was in his forties when he married the much younger Lucinda Pendleton in Richmond in 1819. (Tillotson, 81-85.) Lucinda Morgan, recently rediscovered by historians of religion, who became the “martyred widow” of anti-Masonry, would later become a Mormon and marry that group’s founder Joseph Smith, and in later life a correspondent of Jonathan Blanchard. (Morris, 277.)



Soon a father, Morgan immigrated to Upper Canada and became a brewer in York, later Toronto. The fire that destroyed Morgan's brewery and forced the family back to the United States in 1821 left few clues behind. Times were hard for the Morgans in upstate New York, and he frequently was dependent on Masonic charity. (Huntington, 24-26.) Morgan's poverty and his drinking made him a poor fit for Le Roy and Batavia's Masons, Western Star No. 33 and Wells Lodge No. 282, respectively. It was an age when Masons were expected to support their brethren and monitor their welfare, and Morgan was by all accounts incorrigible, a "rolling stone that gathered no moss" and a "shiftless itinerant" in an order friendly to neither. (Palmer, 14-16.)

Morgan had become a Royal Arch Mason in May of 1825 in Le Roy, but his peers by all accounts grew tired of him. When a Royal Arch chapter was organized in Batavia in 1825, Morgan was deliberately blackballed by his putative lodge brothers: this was a higher degree than they had had in Batavia before, and men like Morgan were not allowed. Royal Arch Masonry was an elite tier, a long, involved ceremony reserved for particularly devoted members, a symbol of the new sacralism of Masonry in Jacksonian America. (Bullock, 239-241.) In Masonic sources, Morgan's decision to turn on his Masonic brethren at this juncture is often written off as a betrayal, but by excluding him from their ranks they had already done the same. (Kutolowski, 147.)

### **The Conflict Between Morgan and Batavia Masons**

Disgruntled, Morgan entered into a partnership with David C. Miller, publisher of the struggling Batavian newspaper *Republican Advocate*. Miller has traditionally been largely omitted from the histories of Morgan's murder, as his story is inconvenient for both sides. As a living witness to Masonic-directed mob violence against anti-Masons in the city, Miller's story did not serve the needs of Masonic historians. (Weed, 215-217; Bernard, 341-342.) As a failed businessman and alcoholic who saw no more personal success after Morgan's death than before, he was a much less useful hero and martyr than the dead Morgan for anti-Masonic writers and political leaders elsewhere.

Miller had taken the first Masonic degree some years earlier, but had failed to win traction with his fellow Masons. He was excluded from the local lodge, his newspaper was unable to make connections in the community, and his business was falling apart. (*Ontario Messenger*, 8/9/1826; Greene, 41-42.) Miller, too, had ample reason to resent the power of the Masons of Batavia and Le Roy, and perhaps a better claim to having been excluded from power and business thanks to Masons than Morgan. They made an agreement together to publish Masonic secrets, not just the first three degrees then commonly available, but additionally the secrets of Royal Arch Masonry and beyond that would have been so damaging to the reputations of the leading men of Batavia, had the truth been known.

That these stories would come at the hands of their enemy, a former lodge brother who owed them money in a deeply parlous time, was an even greater humiliation. The Erie Canal had bypassed Batavia and the city was sinking into decline; those debts must have weighed heavily on the minds of Morgan's eventual killers as they fumed over his plans. (Kutolowski, 555.) The eventual attack on Morgan came from several directions. On the 9<sup>th</sup> of August, 1826, a local newspaper printed a strongly-worded Masonic "NOTICE AND WARNING" about Morgan. "*Brethren and companions* are particularly requested to *observe, mark, and govern* themselves accordingly," a notice interpreted as an incitement to violence by anti-Masons in subsequent decades. (Stone, 129; Palmer, 16.) Whether or not this was true – certainly it can be read as a fraternal organization trying to keep out a former member who had now become an enemy – the news that Morgan and Miller were collaborating on a book together spread like wildfire through the Masons of New York state and beyond. Even DeWitt Clinton took an interest in the case, writing to Batavia's Masons in a letter that strongly suggests a Masonic reaction should be made to Morgan's threatened publication. (Weed, 225-227.)

Morgan's debts provided the first means of attack against Morgan personally. The law in New York allowed for the arrest of debtors for amounts as small as "six cents", and Morgan's manifold debts were far greater than that nominal amount. As many of Morgan's debts were owed to his fellow Masons, this gave them a powerful weapon to use against Morgan. He was repeatedly

arrested through the summer of 1826, with only Miller's bond keeping Morgan out of debtors' prison, each time he was held refusing to trade silence for an end to his poverty. (Morris, 89-91.) This also helps reinforce the notion that Miller did need Morgan to successfully publish the work, at least at that stage; he could easily have let Morgan be carried away to jail without risking his own parlous financial state on defending the man and published from Masonic expose volumes.

Debtors' prisons were just at the beginning of their decline in the United States in the 1820s, and were still very much in vogue through most of the nation. (Meskell, 847; Lepore, 34.) Reformers of the same generation as those inspired by Morgan's murder would make sure that states no longer imprisoned those like him. But as the weeks went on and Morgan remained obdurate, Masons in the community and abroad grew more and more agitated. Canadian Mason Daniel Johns infiltrated the Morgan and Miller circle and "aided all he could" as their confederate before stealing the manuscript pages dealing with the Royal Arch from under Daniel Miller's nose. Simultaneously, searches of the Morgan residence by the sheriff's deputies on still more debt charges saw the seizure of several more volumes of manuscript on the 19<sup>th</sup> of August. William R. Thompson, Genesee County sheriff and Mason, would like his counterpart Eli Bruce over in Niagara County give tacit cooperation to his lodge brothers in their efforts to bring Morgan down. (Greene, 145-155; Kutolowski, 147.)

This did not end the threat to the Masons of Batavia, however, who had been repeatedly frustrated in their attempts to bring Morgan to heel. As one Mason wrote, "I never saw men so excited in my life...Committees were appointed to do this and that, and everything went forward in a kind of frenzy". (Greene, 35.) On September 8, six miles from Batavia, a group of Masons gathered together at Ganson Tavern to organize an attempt at destroying the press of the *Republican Advocate* and the duplicate copies of the manuscript made by Morgan. But Miller had laid in armed guards, including himself and his erstwhile ally Johns. Two days later, there was an attempt to actually burn down Miller's offices, taking advantage of the turpentine and woodwork readily available in a frontier community in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Only good luck helped Miller

and his men protect the presses from the attack, one that has traditionally been dismissed as a fabricated incident by Masonic historians like Robert Morris. (Greene, 68-72; Morris, 112-115.) Had the fire claimed his shop and his life, Miller would have been by no means the only American journalist murdered in a frontier town in the Jacksonian period. Only a decade later, another evangelical journalist, Elijah Lovejoy, would be famously murdered on his press by an angry mob whipped into a frenzy of retaliation by his attacks on the rich and powerful in their community. (*Alton Observer*, November 7, 1837.)

### **What Was So Threatening About What Morgan Tried To Do**

Ignorant though he may have been, Morgan's threat to reveal the secrets of Masonry was among the sharpest blows he could have aimed at the heart of economic power and bourgeois clannishness in Genesee County. And there was power in Genesee County, the sort of tightly controlled economic power that came to a place bypassed by the prosperity of its neighbors. Batavia would become a relative backwater in upstate New York even as neighboring communities exploded in size and economic strength: the road from Batavia to Buffalo, famously rough and tumble with corduroy and mud, was dubbed "the worst road in the world" by contemporaries. As for the rest of Genesee County, the Canal only brought prosperity to those directly along its banks: those who lived in the southern part of the county were just as poor in the 1830s as they had been a decade earlier. (*Batavia Advocate*, 11/5/25; Whitman, 56; Kutolowski, 549-550.)

Contrary to the typical image of economically elite Masons, in the Morgan era Masonic membership was no certain protection against poverty. While membership costs and other financial necessities meant that the poorest of the poor were generally not Masons, Masons in Le Roy and Batavia came from all walks of life, though their leadership was primarily of the professional classes that allowed, in a largely barter economy, for sufficient time and money to devote to a lodge. The richest man in Le Roy, Thomas Tufts, was a Mason, but only a third of his lodge brothers were nearly as wealthy, while in Batavia William Seaver, the master of the lodge that ensnared Morgan, had been jailed himself for debt only two years earlier. While Masons were prominent among the town's wealthiest middle class, they by no means dominated it, and indeed,

despite exploitative charges made by anti-Masons, the wealthiest economic leaders of the area, particularly the agents of the all-powerful Holland Land Company, consciously avoided the fraternal orders. What the Masonic membership did provide its members in abundance was access to political power: a third of the Masons of Genesee County had commissions in the state militia, while Masons made up half the county's officeholders and a substantial majority of urban political leaders. The lodges allowed for fraternal bonds among bourgeois elites that made it natural for Masons to be selected as candidates by party machinery, giving Masons a nonpartisan domination of local officeholders that was nonetheless intensely political. (Kutolowski, 556.) These networks, economic and political, mattered, and outlasted Masonry. With the decline of Freemasonry in upstate New York after Morgan's death, Christian labor unions and the Odd Fellows moved in to take the place of the previously dominant secret society. (Lause, 15.)

So Morgan threatened not just the economic leaders of his community, but specifically the political ones: particularly the Masons like Eli Bruce and Henry Hopkins who would become so crucial in covering up the aftereffects of his disappearance. "Doubtful" brothers who had "climbed over the wall" were already a problem for Jacksonian-era Masons; the lack of a central governing body or rituals for American Masons in the period, and the easy availability of exposes, made it easy enough to impersonate a lodge brother and gain access to the benefits of Masonic membership. (Bullock, 244-245.) Morgan's threatened book contained the updated rituals of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, rites far more recent in origin than those made public by the infamous 18<sup>th</sup> century anti-Masonic expose *Jachin and Boaz*. It thus seemed to offer false Masons access to the levers of power and influence that the lodges preferred to keep to themselves.

But the threat posed by Morgan's revelations, particularly those of the secrets of the Royal Arch Degree largely invented by American Masons after independence, was not merely an economic and political one. The rituals and practices of Royal Arch Masonry were no longer gateways to an Enlightenment world of elite power and male fraternal bonding; they were gateways to a world of mystic knowledge and hidden understanding that spoke to the very soul-self of the members of the lodge. It was an age of fraternal teaching and "grand lecturing", an age of secrets

which were not for the consumption of outsiders. Ritual had become all, and Masonry had consciously become a “private place.” This was a threat far greater than economically insecure elites in Genesee County, and helps explain some of the national support for Morgan’s alleged killers from their fellow Masons, as well as some of the backlash against it. (Bullock, 257-260.)

Traditional histories of the conflict between Masonry and evangelism have looked at this cultural clash as simply a competition over bodies and ritual, but this was a genuine conflict over sacralizations: most 19<sup>th</sup> century American Masons were not deists and they did employ significant Christian symbolism in much of their theology, with even the most arcane rituals like the Knights Templar “wielding their swords for the Christian religion”. (Bullock, 275-277.) But with its legalisms, its sacred rituals, and its “ardent votaries”, Masonry fulfilled not only the cultural but intellectual needs traditionally associated with Christianity, with the exception that, unlike a Christian church, their rituals were secretive and exclusive. This served the social need of reinforcing self-distinctiveness for members, giving them something to separate themselves from their neighbors. The problem was, it also meant that Masonic ritual could seem baffling to outsiders, particularly the higher levels like Royal Arch Masonry and Webb’s favorite Knights Templar ritual. Anti-Masons noted with alarm Masonic rituals like drinking wine from a skull and being paraded around on a tow-line, deeply embarrassing Masons for whom these had once been sacred arts. No wonder they were so quick to call Morgan both a perjurer and a liar. (Greene, 17-20.)

Morgan’s threatened publication didn’t merely threaten Masons with exposure of their institution or infiltration of their business club: it threatened to embarrass them personally. The Knights Templar degree was enthusiastically practiced in Morgan’s New York and his own Batavia and Le Roy lodges both made use of it: had Morgan’s work been published, he would have exposed men like sheriff Eli Bruce (one of his accused kidnappers) and Dr. Samuel S. Butler (jury foreman of one of the several kidnapping trials) to personal shame and embarrassment. (*The Proceedings of the United States Anti-Masonic Convention*, 64; Greene, 103-105.) The version we have of Morgan's text, eventually published after his death, is heavily truncated thanks to docu-

mentation thefts by Batavia Masons – but even it has enough of the “lambskins”, “hoodwinking”, “cable tow”, and other rituals later derided by anti-Masons to be deeply embarrassing to contemporary Masonic readers. (Morgan, 18, 25.)

The original, with its expose of the Knights Templar rituals and the Royal Arch degree, would have been far more threatening, socially and economically, to some of the leading citizens of up-state New York. Morgan’s partnership with Miller pitted him against some of the most powerful men in the community, threatening their pocketbooks, their lay religion, and their dignity. It would have dire consequences for them all.

### **The End of Morgan and the Beginning of the Story**

On September 10, 1826, there was an attempt to burn down Miller’s printing office. An attempt to force the door two days earlier, organized by local Mason James Ganson, had been repelled by armed resistance from inside. (*Anti-Masonic Review*, February 1827, 56.) On the night of the tenth, “having found an ally in fire, which fears neither powder nor ball”, an attempt was made to destroy office and documents both. (*Anti-Masonic Review*, February 1827, 57; Bernard, 124; Riley, 96-98.) Arson was a serious threat in a town like this, one that could potentially have killed a dozen people had it not been exposed. Masonic historian Robert Morris found this very funny, joking about the “amusing affair” that had supposedly been invented by Miller and his confederates to attract sympathy, even claiming local Masons had sought the attempted arsonist afterwards. (Morris, 113-115.) By March of 1827, Batavia Masons were already under siege, with accusations of murder flying freely in the community and with trials ongoing. They had every reason to present themselves as an innocent party to the community at large. (Bernard, xx-xxi, 368.) There were no more attempted arsons.

On the morning of the fire at Miller’s office, Nicholas G. Chesebro, master of the lodge in Canandaigua, had Morgan arrested on a charge of petty larceny. Though the constable who arrested Morgan was not a Mason, he was accompanied by five of the Masons of Canandaigua for the arrest itself. Morgan was accused of stealing a shirt and cravat from one of the many inn-

keepers he had boarded with over the last several months. The tavern owner, named David Kingsley, would later swear he had had no intention of swearing out a warrant for Morgan until prompted by the lodge. (Anonymous, 29-30; Huntington, 33-35.)

This is one of those frustrating moments for contemporary historians; though the fifty miles stage ride through upstate New York from Batavia to Canandaigua took all day on the 10<sup>th</sup> and was the first step to Morgan's death, neither Masonic nor anti-Masonic historians speak in much detail of the conversations within. (Bernard, 123-124; Crafts, 202-203; Stearns, 129-130.) We know Morgan's partner, David Miller, attempted to "bail him out" from the arrest: having paid the bail on Morgan's civil debts in Genesee County, he faced a serious financial problem if Morgan was jailed elsewhere. Only Robert Morris, the great Masonic writer of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, delves significantly into the infamous carriage ride, telling a story of a cheerful country jaunt as Morgan was "rescued" from his partner Miller. Morris was the arch-apologist for 19<sup>th</sup> century Masonry, a Kentuckian whose information all came from defendants in the Morgan case who told their stories sometimes decades later. With his account coming just a few pages after a gloating physical account of Morgan that describes his "full feminine breasts" and "greying hair about the ears", it is not difficult to tell which side of the story Morris is on. (Morris, 125-130.) Is the story false in its entirety? Did Morgan smile and joke for his legal captors? Historians cannot say for sure.

His imprisonment in Canandaigua was short-lived. He appeared before the magistrate after dark, Kingsley and his fellow Mason Loton Lawson testified on his behalf, and was released. But it was not that easy. Chesebro, standing by, immediately applied to the magistrate for another civil arrest. Morgan owed yet another debt he could not pay; this time two dollars to Aaron Ackley, an innkeeper in Canandaigua. Having separated himself from Miller and his allies, Morgan had no defense and was imprisoned again in the Canandaigua jail in the morning of September 11, 1826. (Anonymous, 31; Crafts, 202.) Lucinda Morgan, more resourceful than most accounts of the day give her credit for, tried to meet him in jail. She had consulted with the Batavia sheriff, gotten his speculation that perhaps the civil prosecution against Morgan might end if she handed over the papers he had written, and traveled to the city to free her husband. (Greene, 85-87.) He was al-



ready gone by the time she arrived, taken away by person or persons unknown. Here the historical accounts of the Morgan affair, already riven by political and personal strife, become even murkier with issues of outright criminality.

### **Who Killed William Morgan?**

The trial judge of the initial four people accused of Morgan's kidnapping certainly thought they had had something to do with the killing. "*You have been convicted of a daring, wicked, and presumptuous crime...you have robbed the state of a citizen; a citizen of his liberty; a wife of her husband; and a family of helpless children of the endearments and protective care of a loving parent*". (Bernard, xvi.) Though Judge Enos Throop would eventually become a bitter political enemy of the Anti-Masonic Party, at the time he enthusiastically backed the anti-Masonic movement of upstate New York.

Kidnapping was not then a felony in New York, or indeed anywhere else in the United States, and in fact – as was noted at the time – it was a greater offense to help a slave escape in parts of the South than kidnap a white man in the North. Loton Lawson, otherwise a minor figure in local Masonry, earned Throop's greatest wrath for having actually paid Morgan's bail and helped hustle him into the carriage outside the county jail. (Quigley, 10/21/2009.) Nicholas Chesebro, master of the Canandaigua lodge and an elected official in Ontario County, earned a year in jail to Lawson's two, while Edward Sawyer and John Sheldon received one month and three months each in the county jail. Eli Bruce, the county sheriff, would eventually join them in jail for his role in preparing Morgan's cell in Fort Niagara and speeding his way out of prison, as well as strong allegations that Bruce later packed the juries of the previous defendants. (*The Proceedings of the United States Anti-Masonic Convention*, 139-141; Bernard, xvi-xviii; Morris, 245; Riley, 100.) Despite multiple trials carried out by some of the leading attorneys of the state, including John Spencer, who had begun as the defender of the first accused, only a handful of people received light sentences for the crime. Given the evidence of jury tampering, the light sentences, and the repeatedly blocked investigations, it was reasonable for contemporary anti-Masons to see something deeply amiss with the Masonic narrative of Morgan's vanishing.

Anti-Masons have an account plausible to them, as recounted in the pages of Thurlow Weed's autobiography. Morgan was taken from the jail by Masons who paid his debt and briefly imprisoned him in Fort Niagara, an abandoned 1812-era military installation in the Genesee County area. The plan was to pay Morgan off and send him out of the country, with his family to follow, the better to both discredit and silence him and keep his damaging material out of the press. But the plan failed; Canadian Masons would not cooperate into letting Morgan onto their turf. A gathering at the lodge in nearby Lewiston in the aftermath saw a group of men with deep personal grudges against Morgan but no mitigating knowledge of the man gather together to hear a priest call for the enemies of Masonry to find "graves six feet deep". (*The Proceedings of the United States Anti-Masonic Convention*, 7-8.) And so instead they murdered Morgan, wrapping a rope around his body and hurling him into the Niagara River. (Weed, 10-13.)

Is this story plausible? Robert Morris certainly did not think so, telling a story about John Whitney, one of the suspected culprits convicted in the conspiracy charge, threatening Thurlow Weed that he would "wring your d----d nose off" if he kept accusing him of involvement in the murder. (Morris, 162.) Weed himself, as a notable newspaperman, played a leading part in the subsequent organization of the Anti-Masonic movement, eventually becoming an influential figure in the Whig Party and the Republican Party. Morris' primary criticism of Weed's text, that he gets the date of Whitney's death wrong, does not actually appear in the pages of Weed's decades-later retrospective. Weed's story has the added benefit of being free of the 19<sup>th</sup> century histrionics of Edward Giddins' account of Morgan's last days. Giddins, the keeper of the fort of Niagara, was an astronomer and writer, publisher of years' worth of "Anti-Masonic Almanacs" in the years after Morgan's death. (Morris, 200-201.)

Giddins' occasional coded reference to his anti-Masonic activities in his scientific texts of the period must have been clear to contemporary readers: "From 1815 to 1827, I resided in the immediate adjacency of Lake Ontario" (Giddins, *Inquiry*, 3.) His account of Morgan's death seems written particularly for the eyes of his evangelical anti-Masonic subscribers: his Morgan is a pa-

thetic captive in the fort, a martyr who dies full of manly resistance, albeit begging for a Bible in the beginning. It does not read like the Batavia Morgan, like the man who likely invented his own military service or who may well have had a serious problem with the bottle, but it must have greatly satisfied Giddins' readers. (Giddins, *Savage Treatment*, 1-24.) Even so, all that Masonic apologists could say of Giddins was that he was an atheist who was a confessed kidnapper, and thus his word was unreliable. (Morris, 200-201.) Giddins was absent from the fort during Morgan's actual murder.

### **Stories About Morgan's Death and His Life**

Giddins' story, taken together with the accounts of others, reinforces my belief that Morgan's murder was almost certainly an improvised act of killing carried out by Batavia Masons after the failure of their attempts to pawn Morgan off on their neighbors across the border. Abandoning Morgan to fix the nearby lighthouse reflects very poorly on Giddins, but if the actual killing was not planned until after Giddins' departure – thanks to the failure of Canadian Masons to support the efforts of their peers – it makes far more sense.

The Morgan of Batavia might well have taken a \$500 bribe and safe passage for himself and his family to leave the area, particularly after his falling-out with Miller over payment for the book. But with safe passage into Canada failed, with bad feelings against Morgan growing among Lewiston and Batavia Masons, it was so much easier to simply end the problem by throwing him into the Niagara River. Swept downstream and into the falls, Morgan's remains were never seen again. Between the falls downriver and the weight allegedly placed on his body, it is not hard to figure out why his remains were never found. People go missing today on the Niagara River, as recently as the 1990s in some cases. (Niell.) Given the relatively lower population along the Niagara River in the 1820s, Morgan's body could easily have disappeared into the river below; the initial identification of the October corpse as the remains of Morgan was, in all likelihood, mistaken. Murdered by his supposed friends, Morgan died the fate of many who challenged the power of local elites in the rough and ready frontier world of 19<sup>th</sup> century America.

But such a story served the agenda of no one. Anti-Masons gained little from a Morgan who was as eager for money as he was for exposure of Masonic secrets, one who may have died over a falling-out with his putative captors rather than being martyred by them for his Christian faith. Morgan became the “martyred patriot, dragged from his home by Masonic ruffians,” the “unyielding Morgan”, a “martyr to the immodest queen: MASONRY”. (*Anti-Masonic Review*, February 1827, 142; Parton, 101.) Morgan’s death made him, to anti-Masons, a far greater hero than he had ever been to anyone in his life. Even today, Morgan’s story remains widely told by the now fringe anti-Masonic movement in the United States, a story of Christian martyrdom as attractive as any tale of Satanism in rock music or appearances of the Virgin Mary in morning toast. (Padfield, 2011.)

As for Masons, the story of Morgan’s death, and the accompanying cover-up by county officials like Eli Bruce, was hardly the tale of “bonds of brotherhood” and “loving hearts and liberal minds” that Masons preferred to tell about themselves in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. (Morris, 361-365.) It is almost certainly true that the Masonic conspiracy in western New York stopped on the frontier; local Masons reacted against an enemy while their more distant lodge brothers reacted against what they perceived as a witch-hunt against their co-fraternalists. Despite rumors floating around DeWitt Clinton and others in the New York state government, it seems very unlikely that the conspiracy went beyond the circle around those who were finally convicted of Morgan’s kidnapping. (Morris, 169; Cornog, 167; *Niles’ Register*, April 25, 1829.)

But having invested in the innocence of their fellow Masons, post-Morgan Masons involved in the debate over his murder could hardly name names. Certainly the story of Masons in Batavia jailing, kidnapping, and then “disappearing” Morgan is a grim one even without the verified discovery of a body, reading like the fate of civil rights workers in the South in the 1960s or that of any other individual facing mortal threat from enemies that had the law on their side. Indeed, Eli Bruce, the sheriff accused of assisting in Morgan’s legal kidnapping and of stacking the various kidnapping juries afterwards, became something of a martyr for 19<sup>th</sup> century Masons. (Morris, *Masonic Martyr*, 15.) As an alternative to this story, 19<sup>th</sup> century Masons concocted a series of

elaborate stories about Morgan's disappearance: that he had fled to Cuba, to Turkey, become a pirate or an Indian, tales that removed moral responsibility from Masons for his fate and highlighted the character flaws that Masonic historians so readily attributed to the man.

### **Masonic Fascination With Fantastic Tales of Morgan's Escape**

Stories about Morgan's international defection were already circulating on a national basis by April of 1828, when the *Niles' National Register* suggested that Morgan might have "turned Turk, and was lately at Smyrna". (*Niles' Register*, April 26, 1828.) The Smyrna story became a favorite of Masonic historians for the remainder of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, who told self-congratulatory stories of Morgan "living under the name Mustapha", becoming "a Mohammedan", and generally abandoning all pretense of the Christian civilization which Americans of the time believed in. (*National Freemason*, September 14, 1867, 173; Huntington, 166; Morris, 66.)

With its association with the "rapes of Georgian and Circassian maids to supply the Turkish harems", and recent cultural memories of the war with the Barbary pirates, few nations were viewed as more barbaric and treacherous by 19<sup>th</sup> century Americans. To say Morgan had "turned Turk" was to say he, and by extension all anti-Masons, had abandoned Western civilization entirely. (Allison, 62.) The Smyrna story appears to be among the favorite charges made by Masons about Morgan's fate. Others associated Morgan with a more domestic fate, suggesting that he had become a hermit in Canada, a "celebrated Indian chief" in Arizona, or even (and perhaps most dramatically) become the pirate "Guiliem Gilmore" and been hung by the Spanish in 1838. (Morris, 65-66.) Hopes for a tropical fate for Morgan continued into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In the 1950s, Morgan Smead, master of the Grand Lodge of Michigan, corresponded with an "I. Dwight Hunter" who claimed to be the husband of Morgan's great-granddaughter, charging that Morgan had "left Batavia and crossed into Canada", only to be shipwrecked in the Cayman islands in the 1820s. Morgan supposedly lived out his days in exile in the Caribbean, eventually summoning his new Cayman family to join him at the place of his eventual death in Honduras. (Bryant; Smith, 21.) All these stories painted Morgan as a failure at civilized life, a man who had

abandoned what it was to be a good American of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and embraced piracy, alcohol, Indians, and other social mores seen as deeply alien to contemporary Americans. By contrast, this made Masonry – Morgan’s opposite – a keystone of contemporary civilization. But not all Masonic historians were so eager to tell themselves exciting stories about Morgan’s fate.

Lucinda Morgan, as far as can be determined, believed her husband’s body had been found along the shores of Lake Ontario for the rest of her life. She certainly lived as though her husband was dead, staying in Batavia as the “Niobe of Anti-Masonry” for several years, living on donations from Anti-Masons, before marrying George Harris, her landlord, in 1830. (Morris, 277.) Her subsequent life was as much a subject for biographers as her husband’s was not; she became a wife of Joseph Smith and a convert to Mormonism, a faith with close regional and cultural ties to the anti-Masonic movement, survived the pogrom at Nauvoo, converted to Catholicism, became a lay nun and nurse during the Civil War, and ended her life in the intellectual circle of the arch-anti-Mason of the 1870s, Jonathan Blanchard. (*The Examiner*, September 22, 2009.) What matters is that Lucinda stayed in Batavia and remarried. She did not go west, she never slipped away to the Cayman Islands – she acted at all times as a woman who genuinely believed her husband to be dead, and in particular that it was his body that had been found along the Ontario.

Robert Morris, of all people, did his best to defuse – or at least be seen to be defusing – the dramatic rumors over Morgan’s fate. It is entirely true, as Morris points out, that Morgan was in his late fifties, in poor health, probably an alcoholic, and otherwise unsuited for extended travel. (Morris, 68.) We can accept these characterizations of Morgan without assuming as Morris did that he was “a drunken habit, a filthy tongue, a pimply face, [with] an insatiable greed for money”. Given Morgan’s age, his health, his lack of connections elsewhere in the world, it is impossible to imagine the melodramatic life and death in exile that so many Masonic historians enjoyed debating in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Morris’ use of Morgan’s story is careful, he uses the tales of Morgan’s elaborate exile as a way of further associating Morgan with lies. He tells the stories quoted above, and many others, alongside accounts of Morgan’s “rottenwood of history”, a liar and traitor whose name was rightfully “besmeared” from the record of the Batavia lodge.

With his laments about gathering material for his book for forty years and his complaints about having to “*enter into arguments with those who ridicule Masonry*,” [emphasis in the original], not to mention his complaints about the attacks on Masonry by Jonathan Blanchard and others, it is not difficult to read Morris’ understanding of history. Dramatic stories about Morgan’s escape and a barbaric fate abroad had not silenced critics of Masonry; all they had done was keep the evocative story of treason and disappearance alive for another generation. (Morris, 4-5.)

### **Conclusion**

As much as accusations about conspiracy and trial helped fan the flames of the anti-Masonic movement in the Jacksonian period and afterwards, the story of William Morgan’s disappearance was ultimately about the life and death of the man himself. Though Chesebro, Bruce, and others became alternatively martyrs or villains in the tales told by those particularly invested in the controversy, the “story” was always far more about Morgan’s fate than who it was precisely who took his life. Some of this can be dismissed as an effect of libel suits, as when Edward Giddens carefully screened out the names of those he accused in the first edition of his *Anti-Masonic Almanac*, the one published while the trial was still ongoing.

Masons frequently castigated Anti-Masons for seizing on one particular murder when there were so many on the American frontier, and it is true that equally grim murders took place across the nation in the 1820s. (Morris, 121; Roth, 36.) Masons called attention to false reports of Masonic murders spread by anti-Masons, and it is certainly true that, as with any mass movement driven by popular sentiment, lies soon competed with the truth in the story of Masonry and murder in 19<sup>th</sup> century America. (*Boston Masonic Mirror*, October 16, 1830.) But Morgan’s murder, particularly the story of his murder and the subsequent cover-up, remained paramount in the minds of Anti-Masons, just as by defensive reflex it did in the minds of Masons. For Anti-Masons, Morgan was a paragon of Christian virtue: a “martyred patriot”, an ally of President Andrew Jackson, a man of “industry” whose desire to expose the secrets of Masonry had ended with his “bones bleaching beneath the cataract [of Niagara]”. (Cummings, 30-31; *Niles’ Register*, April 25, 1829, 134-135.)

The Anti-Masons, as a party of patriotic American Christians, many of whom believed that Jacksonian America was, or was in the process of becoming a “Christian Republic”, made their martyred hero into a paragon of anti-Masonic virtues. These were potent attacks in an era of mixed patriotism and Christianity in America, the confluence of America’s 50<sup>th</sup> Jubilee in 1826 and the ongoing Great Awakening having created a population that was often both self-consciously American and self-consciously Christian. (Burstein, 83; Goodman, 185.) By contrast, Masons could never go off the defensive when it came to Morgan and his book. For Masons after his death – presumably, despite the reputation of the lodge at Batavia, he was not such an ogre among his fellows before his expulsion – he was the perverse mirror-image of 19<sup>th</sup> century bourgeois respectability: a drunk and abuser of his partner whose marriage had begun with “ [the abduction of] this motherless girl at the age of fifteen”, perhaps a pirate or criminal, “intemperate to a very immoderate degree”, and “possessed of but few moral principles or attributes perhaps of honor and integrity”. (Bentley, 7-8; *Niles’ Daily Register*, April 25, 1829.) Masons and Anti-Masons could not even agree on what the subject of their fascination looked like. In that age before daguerreotypes, Masons turned to rough and ready images like the Noel Holmes penned cover art for the 1883 Morris book *William Morgan, or Political Antimasonry* which show the rough-hewn, working-class Morgan that Masons were so eager to see. Meanwhile, Anti-Masons like Jonathan Blanchard could look at professorial, intellectual images of Morgan like the Franklin-esque depiction of the man done by Cooley for Bernard that showed him as just the sort of enlightened intellectual he almost certainly was not in life. This was used as the mold for the Morgan statue in Batavia in 1882.

Painted as a heroic Christian martyr by anti-Masons and as a drunken coward by Masons, Morgan’s story became one of the deep cultural narratives of 19<sup>th</sup> century America. The nameless Masonic elite that killed him was far more useful to anti-Masonic narratives than the small-town businessmen who panicked against threats of personal embarrassment. The story itself, analyzed by a historian, certainly is a grim one: in an era of powerful local elites far away from a neutral state power, Morgan offended some of the most powerful people in his community and ulti-



mately paid a steep price for it. Anti-Masons did have much to fear about the power of Masonry in their local communities. By looking at the stories told by Morgan's friends, historians can get a better understanding of the ideal of Christian manhood for evangelicals like the Anti-Masons in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. By looking at those told by his enemies, we can see the worst enemies of 19<sup>th</sup> century American civilization when Morgan is painted with their very brush.

Morgan's martyrdom, or villainy, became an exciting story told both by Masons and Anti-Masons in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Only the older generation was still concerned by its implications. By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, only older Masons like Robert Morris and older Anti-Masons like Jonathan Blanchard were still actively grappling with Morgan's murder as a problem to be either shared with the world or solved through rhetoric. Important as Morgan's murder had been to the political history of the 1820s, within a few decades, it was just another footnote to history, relevant beyond its potential as a story only to those old enough to remember it. Anti-Masonry was never "as dead as Morgan", as some anti-Masons charged: Morgan's story had never died at all.

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