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“Paradoxical Continuity: Antimasonry as a Progression of Masonic Ideals”

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Resumen

La masonería en las primeras décadas de la existencia de los Estados Unidos tenía un lugar jactancioso en la sociedad. Representaba lo mejor de los valores -la libertad, la moral, el aprendizaje-, de la sociedad ideal republicana, con los más respetados personajes de mérito llenando sus filas. Sin embargo, para la década de 1840 casi la masonería había sido llevada a su extinción. A pesar de que con el tiempo se recuperó en número de miembros, aunque sea como una de las muchas organizaciones fraternas ordinarias, las preguntas de por qué y cómo el movimiento antimasónico tuvo tanto éxito en la reducción de una hermandad que incluyó personalidades de la talla de Benjamin Franklin y George Washington siguen siendo aún pertinentes. En un intento de responder a ellas se he consultado fuentes primarias como periódicos contemporáneos, así como fuentes secundarias escritas por expertos en el campo. Mis investigaciones me llevaron a la conclusión de que poderosos cambios económicos, sociales, políticos y religiosos en las primeras décadas de la república conspiraron para cambiar las bases de la masonería. La misma definición de mérito había democratizado y la vieja élite de lo que algunos pensaron como una aristocracia republicana, representada por la masonería, se convirtió cada vez más en un blanco de desprecio. Irónicamente, parece que fue la exaltación de la virtud republicana en la masonería lo que contribuyó a facilitar el éxito del movimiento antimasónico. La masónica-ilustrada idealización de la libertad, la virtud y la sociedad civil se adaptó bien a la joven república que muchos de sus miembros estaban ayudando a crear. El movimiento antimasónico, entonces, representa una continuación de los ideales masónicos en un clima de mayor democracia para el hombre común.

Abstract

Freemasonry in the first few decades of the United States' existence held a vaunted place in society. It represented the best of an ideal republican society's values -liberty, morality, learning- with the most respected characters of merit filling its ranks. Yet by the 1840s Freemasonry had almost been driven to extinction. Though it eventually recouped its numbers, albeit as one of many ordinary fraternal organizations, the question of why and how the Antimasonic movement was so successful in bringing down the brotherhood that the likes of Benjamin Franklin and George Washington belonged to remained a pertinent one. In an attempt to answer this question I have consulted primary sources such as contemporary periodicals as well as secondary sources written by experts in the field. My investigations led me to conclude that powerful economic, social, political and religious changes in the early decades of the republic conspired to change the foundations of Freemasonry. The very definition of merit had been democratized and the old elite of what some thought of as a republican aristocracy, represented by Masonry, increasingly became targets of scorn. Ironically, it appears that Freemasonry's extolling republican virtues helped the success of the Anti-masonic movement. Masonry's Enlightenment-inspired idealization of liberty, virtue and civil society fitted well with the young republic and many of its members were helping to create it. The Anti-masonic movement, therefore, represented the continuation of Masonic ideals in a climate of increased democracy for the common man.

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“Paradoxical Continuity: Antimasonry as a Progression of Masonic Ideals”

Max A. Loder

The long development and subsequent downfall of Freemasonry in the United States is a curious phenomenon that deserves attention and detailed analysis. From its American beginnings in the 1730s to its rapid collapse a century later, Masonry had a storied role in the formation of the early United States. Many of the Founding Fathers were Brothers, and the fraternity’s ideals of liberty, a free press and a vibrant civil society meshed well with the new nation they were trying to form. After the Revolutionary War, Masonry endeared itself to the American people and seemed to play a centripetal role in holding new nation together with its extolling of virtue, learning, religion and merit. The questions remain as to why such a seemingly essential institution underwent such a speedy and at times violent downfall, and possibly of more importance, what this downfall tells us of the Antimasonic movement, the brotherhood itself, and the American society they were both a part of in the early nineteenth century.

To answer these questions it is necessary to turn to the historical record. Primary sources such as newspapers, magazines and other writings extant in the period covered in this paper provide relatively unadulterated accounts of singular events and gradual sociopolitical processes alike. Seeing how other scholars have interpreted the concurrent rise of Antimasonry and fall of Freemasonry in the United States is another necessary component. Secondary sources such as books and articles offer learned opinions in the authors’ fields of expertise, which is immensely helpful in highlighting unfamiliar areas of the story of American Masonry and Antimasonry.

Antimasonic sentiment had already existed decades before 1717, the year modern Freemasonry formed in London. In its earliest years, non-Masons regarded the secrecy and exclusivity of Masonic meetings as sure sign of malicious or even demonic intent. Picking up on these threads, and probably influencing them as well, the Roman Catholic Church in 1738 denounced masonry in the papal bull *In Eminenti Apostolatus Specula* as forming a separate religion. In addition, the bull charged Masonry with supporting republicanism and the overthrow of states¹. This was a threat for a religion that was not only entwined with the monarchies of Europe but was itself headed by an absolutist figure in the person of the Pope. Antimasonry followed Freemasonry to the British American colonies and into the new republic they formed in 1776. Though it never gained much traction, it appeared in interesting ways. In an undated post-Revolutionary sermon, pastor and famous geographer Jedidiah Morse accused Masonry of being a tool of European atheists, revolutionaries, and the Illuminati. He conceded that at its start Masonry was “instituted for convivial and friendly purposes only,” but that “its profound secrecy, its solemn and mystic rites and symbols, its

¹ Charles H. Lyttle, “Historical Bases of Rome’s Conflict with Freemasonry”, *Church History* 9 (1940): 4.

mutual correspondence...” made it the ideal tool for infiltration into the highest levels of European and ultimately American society².

The Antimasonry of the late 1820s and 30s was different from these prior incarnations. More than anything else, it reflected major political, social, economic and religious changes that had taken place in American society since after the Revolution. Consequently, the definition of who could and should run the affairs of the country changed dramatically. The merit that Masonry extolled was an elitist merit, and by the Jacksonian era the contradiction of rule by republican aristocracy was apparent.

Though Masonry had impressed its enlightened values onto the new nation, this new Jacksonian definition of merit meant the right of the common man to rule. Paradoxically, Antimasonry’s attacks ultimately helped its target. This paper will demonstrate how through its less subtle but more profound links to Freemasonry, Antimasonry simultaneously manifested Masonic ideas of liberty and civil society while continuing, in a changing society, the fraternity’s idea of merit as the true measure of a man. This continuation forced Masonry to adapt to its new environment and paved the way for a rebirth in the 1840s.

To explore how and why Masonry developed as it did and why it came to place so much emphasis on merit, one must trace its development from its birth in the late medieval period. As its name suggests, Freemasonry began as guilds of stonemasons in England and Scotland³. Only the most skilled stonemasons could call themselves Brothers, and only the best among the craft could ascend the guild’s hierarchy. The fraternity’s penchant for secrecy developed early, as any type of guild’s practices and signs had to remain unknown to potential competition⁴. This demonstrates that the recognition of merit as the true measure of a man was an early one. Only the best could be guild members, and one had to be trustworthy to keep the corporation’s secrets.

This early, or operative, masonry underwent a shift in the late 1600s. The early development of a modern market economy in England and Scotland threw the protectionist consensus of the guild economy into turmoil. Desperate for dues, the stonemasons’ guilds began accepting non-masons into their lodges⁵. These men were usually of means and well regarded in their societies. They were more interested in the philosophical and esoteric aspects of the guild’s mythology than in perfecting stonecutting techniques. By 1717, these non-operative or speculative Masons had consolidated several area lodges into a Grand Lodge of London with the authority to grant charters for the creation of other lodges⁶. In the following years, speculative Masons would come to dominate the lodges and eventually displace the operative masons.

² Jedidiah Morse, “Dangers and Duties of Citizens of the United States”, in *Antimasonry: The Crusade and the Party*, ed. Lorman Ratner (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1969), 19-23.

³ Margaret C. Jacob, *The Origins of Freemasonry: Fact and Fictions* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 11.

⁴ Karel Davids, “Craft Secrecy in Europe in the Early Modern Period: A Comparative View”, *Early Science and Medicine* 10 (2005): 342.

⁵ Jacob, *Origins of Freemasonry*, 11-12.

⁶ Steven C. Bullock, *Revolutionary Brotherhood: Freemasonry and the Transformation of the American Social Order, 1730-1840* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 15.

While claims of possession of ancient knowledge dating back to the days of Solomon and the Great Temple in Jerusalem attracted many, it was more than this supposed wisdom that drew these men of the Enlightenment into the brotherhood. The secrecy and conviviality of lodge meetings provided a safe space for the exchange of ideas in a time that was only beginning to witness the development of the concept of a civil society. This factor was especially important, as by the 1740s the importance of Masonic mythology had waned in favor of rationalism and the development of social science⁷. Voting for lodge officers, majority rule and other democratic aspects of Freemasonry meshed well with the new emphasis on rationalistic thought.

One of the most influential Brothers to be attracted to this new conception of reason as merit was a young Benjamin Franklin. Shortly after learning of the fraternity, Franklin brought it to the American colonies in the early 1730s⁸. Starting in his native Philadelphia, Masonry quickly developed a following among the elites of the thirteen colonies. Merit, as in Great Britain, played an important role in American masonry. This merit, however, was of an almost aristocratic sort as Masonic membership was in practice restricted only to the elites⁹. The public ceremonies Masons held only strengthened the contrast between themselves and the common non-Mason. Wearing their symbolic aprons and gloves they frequently headed magnificent municipal parades, while at the theater they acted as patrons of the arts and delivered orations extolling the virtues of love and honor that their fraternity strove to uphold. Though colonial Masons claimed to act in the interest of social harmony in their cities, more doctors, attorneys, ministers and traders than common laborers and artisans called themselves Brothers. From 1750 to 1770, one Philadelphia lodge counted thirty-two merchants, four doctors, two lawyers, a minister and a governor as members while having only four artisans on the roll. Similarly, from 1768 to 1770, a Boston lodge had seventy-eight merchants and professionals listed as Brothers, but only eight artisans and two retailers¹⁰. As the composition of membership suggests, Masonry can act as a social network where the conviviality of meetings leads to discussions of business and professional matters¹¹. In the eighteenth century, these factors inevitably bred resentment among the very artisans and common men the fraternity largely rejected.

As it would in the decades after the War of Independence, what counted as merit was evolving along with the economy and the society. The colonies were becoming more interconnected and less reliant on the mother country for trade and resources, and this had the effect of lessening the centrality of the urban elites who largely populated the Masonic lodges of cities like New York, Baltimore and Charleston. As a consequence, the rural elites of the interior gained in influence and began to crave the cosmopolitanism and high status of their coastal city counterparts. Concurrently, within these metropolises the very men who before

⁷ Bullock, *Revolutionary Brotherhood*, 10-11.

⁸ Nicholas Hans, "UNESCO of the Eighteenth Century: La Loge Des Neuf Soeurs and its Venerable Master, Benjamin Franklin", *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 97 (1953): 513.

⁹ Bullock, *Revolutionary Brotherhood*, 66

¹⁰ Bullock, *Revolutionary Brotherhood*, 60.

¹¹ Roger Burt, "Freemasonry and Business Networking During the Victorian Period", *The Economic History Review* 56 (2003): 659-660.

were rejected from Masonry due to their social standing were becoming more prosperous and influential with the increasing economic activity of the growing colonies. Like the elites of the countryside, this newly forming middle class sought to emulate the upper tiers of closed colonial society¹². Many of these rural elites, non-professionals and artisans flocked to the lodges of the new Ancient Masonry, which accepted many more men as Brothers than the older, more established lodges did.

This flavor of Freemasonry had started in Britain and had made its way to the colonies via the military lodges of army regulars. The split that developed between the upstart Ancients and the older lodges was ostensibly over differences in ritual. The new lodges claimed they were practicing the rituals as established in King Solomon's time, and called themselves "Ancient" to emphasize their adherence to the deeper roots while derisively naming their older and initially more respectable counterparts "Moderns"¹³. In reality, this schism was a reflection of the new power of the urban middle class and rural elite. This new, more common-oriented merit now meant that artisans, retailers and those who held power in the small cities of the interior had the right to consider themselves fit to lead society. Their professions and locations no longer rendered them unworthy.

However strong the oaths that bound them together as Brothers were, the Revolutionary War posed an existential crisis to some colonial lodges while creating troubles for many others¹⁴. Moderns, as the more established and connected men of society, tended to support the Crown, while Ancients, as upstart traders and craftsmen, supported the Congress. Despite this general tendency, internal divisions between patriot and loyalist split Ancient and Modern lodges alike. This intrafraternal conflict, combined with the rigors of war and the drain on manpower as many Brothers joined the Continental Army or fled to Canada, forced many lodges to reduce or halt meetings altogether.

In spite of these threats to its existence, Masonry thrived within General Washington's army. The challenges of making a collection of officers abandon their separate regional, colonial or immigrant identities and identify as part of one American nation were formidable¹⁵. Masonry helped the officer corps unite and create the bonds necessary to keep the army from disbanding in spite of mutiny and frequent lack of supplies. This fundamental military and political role, along with the fact that the conflict had virtually eliminated Modern Masonry, allowed the brotherhood to portray itself as the central piece of the new republic after the war had ended.

In the post-Revolutionary period, Masonry assumed the hallowed position it would maintain in American society for over thirty years. Powerful Brothers such as George Washington and New York governor DeWitt Clinton claimed that the nation's values of liberty, morality and virtue were also Freemasonry's values, and the Masonic press echoed

¹² Gary B. Nash, "The Transformation of Urban Politics 1700-1765", *The Journal of American History* 60 (1973): 623.

¹³ Bullock, *Revolutionary Brotherhood*, 87-89.

¹⁴ William Preston Vaughn, *The Antimasonic Party in the United States, 1826-1843* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1983), 11.

¹⁵ Anne H. Arsenault, "E Pluribus Unum: Pluralism in the Continental Army", *The Historical Society of Pennsylvania* 2 (2002): 19.

these claims. A typical example was an article in the *Masonic Mirror* magazine. Upon reporting the consecration of the Lafayette Lodge in Bedford, New Hampshire, and how the lodge's namesake had served under Washington, the magazine declared, "Wherever a republican form of government is established, the fervour of enthusiastic superstition subsides and *Masonry* exhibits its charms to the world"¹⁶. Yet the civil society created after Independence was not an open one. Though a factional system had developed by 1800, the battles between the Federalists and the Democratic-Republicans were not waged in the arena of public opinion. Freemasons officially decried this factionalism and promoted the existence of an impartial ruling class, while political elites governed in the framework of a republican, rather than truly democratic, consensus¹⁷.

The paradox of a republican aristocracy was not immediately apparent to many in this time. While the brotherhood celebrated merit as making a man fit to have a say in the governance of society, this type of merit was not innate and certainly not to be found in the average citizen. A "Poem Address" composed in 1810 by Brother Andrew Mitchell makes this select vision clear when it claims, "And in the highest rank exalted see / Immortal stands our time-crowned masonry"¹⁸. To Mitchell, Masonry was not a collection of oligarchs but rather an enlightened society intent on keeping its lesser brethren on the path of republicanism. Claims such as this would later be pilloried in the yet to be developed Antimasonic press, as a magazine piece from 1830 demonstrates. While a fictitious Mason claims that, "So pure and charitable a body cannot be any longer the object of republican jealousy [from the Antimasonic movement]..." the author responds, "But the people are not hoodwinked. They have learned to receive Masonic assertions, like Masonic antiquity, with some thousand percent off"¹⁹.

Masonry's religious and scientific claims offer another aspect of its definition of merit. In addition to their elitist conception of political legitimacy, Brothers saw their organization as the archetypal society of learning and Christian morality. "A Christian without charity, a Mason without love," claims the *Mirror*, "is a solecism! There is no such being!"²⁰ Freemasons saw their mysterious lodge rituals and degree system as enhancing their status as Christians within a context of worldly learning, republicanism, and fraternal love. Interestingly, Antimasons would shortly take the opposite view, associating lodge secrecy and symbolism with subversion and devilish behavior²¹. The explanation for this and other, nonreligious manifestations of Antimasonic thought are grounded in the deep economic, religious and political changes that occurred in the post-Revolutionary period. Though the fraternity's ideological commitment to liberty was one of the reasons a free press and civil

¹⁶ No Title, *Masonic Mirror: and Mechanics' Intelligencer* (Boston, November 27, 1824): 1. American Periodicals Series Online.

¹⁷ L. Steven Demaree, "The Political Culture of the First Party System", *OAH Magazine of History* 2 (1986): 10.

¹⁸ Andrew C. Mitchell, "Poetical Address", *The Freemasons Magazine and General Miscellany* (Philadelphia, August 1, 1811): 1. American Periodicals Series Online.

¹⁹ "Dying Away! Dead!! Extinct!!!" *The Anti - Masonic Review, and Magazine* (New York, May 1, 1830): 2. American Periodicals Series Online.

²⁰ "An Address", *Masonic Mirror: and Mechanics' Intelligencer* (Boston, September 17, 1825): 1. American Periodicals Series Online.

²¹ Vaughn, *The Antimasonic Party*, 14-15.

society could develop in the United States, the concentration of the nation's elite within its lodges would come to make it a target of ferocious attack in the new Jacksonian order.

The American economy in the few years immediately after the Revolution changed little from colonial times. In the South, most citizens were poor white farmers who tended to their hardscrabble farms. Meanwhile, plantation grandees with hundreds of slaves cashed in on crops like cotton, tobacco, sugar, and rice²². The hereditary plutocratic system that was in place in this part of the country would seem to make it a prime target for Antimasonry. Yet it was in the northern states where the movement had its triumphs. In this region of the country, urban craftsmen and traders joined with the yeoman farmers of the countryside to set the economy's parameters. Things were largely static in this older order as most people stayed in or near their place of birth and a person's station in life was often determined by tradition and master-apprentice relationships²³.

By 1790, however, over half of the celebrated Minutemen of Concord, Massachusetts had moved west for lack of land in town²⁴. This was a striking sign of things to come as the earliest stages of an industrial economy began to form. Much more than the South, the North with its more dynamic economy would be affected by these changes. A prominent example of this is Lowell, Massachusetts. The textile mills of the company town were the first to integrate all stages of production under one roof. Young women comprised most of the workforce there and lived near the mills under a strict set of rules which aimed to govern their behavior²⁵. This presaged the rise of factories later in the 19th century, along with the rise of the urban industrial class. The rising population of the North was also a striking feature of this emerging era. This was a result not only of natural growth from the present population, but also via later waves of immigrants from Europe, mostly from the German states, Ulster, and Ireland. This had a profound affect on American culture, as the 1831 article in the *Irish Shield* covering a St. Patrick's Day speech at Philadelphia's Masonic Hall attests to²⁶.

The 1825 construction of the Erie Canal connected the Great Lakes with the docks of New York City and ushered in a boom of canal construction across the north²⁷. This helped contribute to the growth of the economy as well as the rise of powerful financiers and speculators, who were needed to fund the massively expensive projects. Banks proliferated in this era, as did paper money. Many workers, however, did not trust this relatively new form of currency as its value was constantly depreciating²⁸. Furthermore, many canals once constructed were rarely or never used and proved to be incapable of providing a return on

²² James M. Clifton, "Hopeton, Model Plantation of the Antebellum South", *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 66 (1982): 439-440.

²³ Paul Goodman, *Towards a Christian Republic: Antimasonry and the Great Transition in New England, 1826-1836* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 36.

²⁴ Goodman, *Towards a Christian Republic*, 40.

²⁵ *Regulations of the Appleton Company*, 1833, in *Major Problems in the Early Republic, 1787-1848*, ed. Sean Wilentz, 198.

²⁶ "Celebration of St. Patrick's Day in Philadelphia," *The Irish Shield: A Historical and Literary Weekly Paper* (Philadelphia, March 25, 1831): 3. American Periodicals Series Online.

²⁷ Edward Pessen, *Jacksonian America: Society, Personality and Politics* (Homewood, IL: The Dorsey Press, 1978), 126.

²⁸ Pessen, *Jacksonian America*, 141.

investment, bankrupting many investors and ordinary farmers who sold their land to the builders.

This rising population and profound reshaping of the economy did not come without problems. As the Minutemen knew all too well, the lack of affordable land led to higher internal migration and disruption of the relatively predictable patterns of town and farm life. The increase in rootless workers and westward-traveling farmers in turn aggravated the problem in other locations that had been already settled. Native-born Americans often discriminated against the immigrants who made up a large portion of this mobile population and blamed them for rising crime and unemployment. This discrimination prompted one relatively rare anti-nativist newspaper article in 1835 to sarcastically remark, “An Irishman is an Irishman and you cannot make more nor less of his. But we Yankees are immaculate. We never do anything wrong, and we never did. We never hung a witch, nor burnt a convent.”²⁹ In industry, the frequent recessions of the 1820s and 30s led the women of Lowell and other early factory workers to demand better wages and treatment from their parsimonious employers, presaging the labor movements of the later 19th century. Furthermore, the increasing power of banks and speculators, as well as the increasingly unstable nature of money, led many to reject the country’s financial system³⁰. Along with the economy itself, the economic meaning of merit was changing to one more favorable to the common man.

The religious fabric of the Republic also transformed, and with it the religious definition of merit did as well. In the pre-Jacksonian period some of the most dominant Christian denominations were ones with roots stretching into the seventeenth century colonies, such as Episcopalianism, Presbyterianism and Congregationalism. Though many living in the countryside were members of one or another of these churches, the greatest form of legitimacy for these denominations came with the adherence of powerful members who resided in urban areas. Their high positions in trade and politics ensured the centrality of these established modes of Christianity. Indeed, most of the Founding Fathers had been at least official, if not practicing, members of these denominations³¹. Yet by the 1820s, a powerful new trend in religion had begun to shape society, one that deemphasized the role of ritual, hierarchy and centralization in religion.

The Second Great Awakening brought the redemptive, evangelical spirit of Arminian theology to the hinterlands of the northern states. Itinerant preachers such as Charles G. Finney spread this fiery version of the gospel to many rural residents who did not before count themselves as members of a church. The so-called Burned-Over District of western New York was the starting point for much of this new movement, and revivalists there and in other rural regions held lively outdoor sermons that drew hundreds of people. A letter by Finney to a colleague reveals the power of these religious revivals, “On my first arrival at Evans’ Mill, the word seemed to be attended with immortal energy. Some were immediately

²⁹ “General Intelligence”, *Cincinnati Mirror, and Western Gazette of Literature, Science, and the Arts* (Cincinnati, May 2, 1835): 4. American Periodicals Series Online.

³⁰ Pessen, *Jacksonian America*, 141.

³¹ David L. Holmes, *The Faiths of the Founding Fathers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

smitten with conviction, and soon hopefully converted”³². This burst of religious fervor left a permanent mark on the American cultural landscape. More and more people embraced the evangelical wave sweeping over them and began to resent the power of the more established religions and their cosmopolitan elites. A fearful crusade mentality took hold, as campaigns against social ills and conspiracies, perceived or real, became more commonplace³³. New denominations such as the Church of Christ and the Mormons formed, while schisms within older denominations exposed the rifts between their more esoteric, rationalist moderate factions and fundamentalist, evangelical factions³⁴. The people’s favored expressions of Christianity were changing, even if those of the elites were not.

The changes in the political realm placed the people in a new position of importance; by the Jacksonian era, public opinion and not aristocratic consensus was the greatest legitimizing factor. The Era of Good Feelings that preceded it saw the near unanimous reelection of James Monroe in 1820, and is commonly associated with his presidency³⁵. As the name suggests, the demise of the Federalist faction cleared the way for the dominance of one political party: the Democratic-Republicans. The time that the party of Jefferson was in power saw a reemphasis of the early belief that partisan division was toxic and therefore one party rule was the ideal³⁶. Though party warfare by no means ceased to exist, as in the decades immediately after the Revolution, consensus rule by the elite was the standard by which political merit was measured.

By 1824, the relative harmony that had held together the Era of Good Feelings was beginning to crumble. The presidential election of that year saw four ostensibly Republican candidates seek the presidency, though the reality was that the rancor of the four-way contest split the party. Thomas Jefferson himself thought that John Quincy Adams was a better choice for President than Andrew Jackson, even though Jackson would be the one to claim the legacy of the former president and party’s founder³⁷. The House of Representatives eventually chose Adams the winner of the contested election. Meanwhile, Jackson and his followers accused Speaker Henry Clay of handing Adams the victory in a crooked deal³⁸. The atmosphere of bitter mistrust cemented the downfall of the old political order.

In this new sphere of unabashed partisanship appeared the Democratic and Whig parties in the early 1830s. Democrats rallied around Jackson, while the Whigs formed in support of Adams and Clay. The parties aggressively marketed themselves to the average voter, each one framing itself as the citizenry’s champion and denouncing the other as the party of privilege and oligarchy. A Democratic cartoon from 1833 depicts as such when it portrays a New England capitalist, representing the Whigs, plotting against the people in the

³² Charles G. Finney, “Revivals,” *Western Recorder* (Utica, July 6, 1824): 1. American Periodicals Series Online.

³³ William Gribbin, “Antimasonry, Religious Radicalism and the Paranoid Style of the 1820’s”, *The History Teacher* 7 (1974): 246-247.

³⁴ Goodman, *Towards a Christian Republic*, 61-62.

³⁵ Harry Ammon, “James Monroe and the Era of Good Feelings”, *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 66 (1958): 387.

³⁶ Pessen, *Jacksonian America*, 197.

³⁷ “Politics of the Day,” *Niles’ Weekly Register* (Baltimore, December 29, 1827): 33. American Periodicals Series Online.

³⁸ Harry L. Watson, “Old Hickory’s Democracy”, *The Wilson Quarterly* 9 (1976), 118.

“Temple of Mammon”³⁹. In their quest for votes, the parties also turned to extensive use of the spoils system to reward their most loyal followers. The age of the common man was also the age of the common man’s participation in the political system. Just how potent his participation was seemed to matter little as politics took on an almost festive atmosphere at the ground level. New York Whig Philip Hone describes himself during an 1834 Democratic political rally as being “kept awake during the greater part of the night by the... ruffian crew from Tammany Hall... This continued until past three o’clock, and for what?” Expressing his belief that the Democrats were no more than demagogues, he claimed that, “This battle had been fought upon the ground of the poor against the rich, and this unworthy prejudice, this dangerous delusion, had been encouraged by [the Democratic Party and its newspapers]”⁴⁰.

The exaltation of merit had always been a great cornerstone of Masonry, even as the concept of merit had evolved repeatedly over the many years since the brotherhood’s storied founding years in the later medieval period. American Freemasonry had already changed as a result of merit’s changes, and by the post-Revolutionary years it had turned itself into the very keystone of the nation. The many changes the country underwent in the subsequent years would chip away at this favored status, however. The nascent stirrings of an industrial revolution along with the resulting destabilization of a rapidly growing and diversifying society paralleled the fiercely pious, populist strains of Christianity newly appearing in the countryside. The consensus elite began struggling to stay relevant in this new order, as with these deep changes arose a politics to match them. The messy, fervently partisan Jacksonian era had begun. The meaning of merit had evolved yet again and this time Masonry would be largely unable to cope while a transformed society seemed to turn against the brotherhood.

The ultimate cause of the Antimasonic movement and its success was this profound evolution of the many definitions of merit from the end of the Revolution to the late 1820s. The economic, religious, social and political change of those years all pointed to the rise of the common man as the arbiter of national affairs. Merit was now of the common strain in all of these areas, and the Antimasonic party’s targeting of Freemasonry reflected the brotherhood’s immersion in the rapidly fading ways of thinking. The proximate cause, however, was the disappearance of a Mason in Batavia, a town in western New York.

The circumstances surrounding the Morgan Affair, as the 1826 disappearance of William Morgan came to be known, were the sparks that ignited the Antimasonic blaze.⁴¹ Morgan was a Brother who had been threatening to publish high Masonic secrets. As former Mason Samuel Green recalled decades later, powerful local Freemasons who were seeking to prevent this profaning of their rituals had Morgan jailed on trumped up charges, whereupon some of his Brothers forcibly transported him to Fort Niagara. His disappearance after he left the jail, compounded by powerful Masons’ efforts to stymie subsequent investigations,

³⁹ *A Confederacy Against the Constitution and the Rights of the People* (1833, lithograph, in Major Problems, ed. Wilentz): 391.

⁴⁰ “Philip Hone on the Democratic Party, 1834” in *A Confederacy Against the Constitution*, 390.

⁴¹ Ronald P. Formisano and Kathleen Smith Kutolowski, “Antimasonry and Masonry: The Genesis of Protest, 1826-1827”, *American Quarterly* 29 (1977): 159.

resulted in a wave of suspicion that targeted the whole fraternity⁴². The grassroots Antimasonic movement subsequently spread its influence and gained members through meetings and newspapers, spreading like wildfire over the next few years.

A key component of Antimasonry was its powerful religious tone. This pious flavor was a direct result of the changes of the Second Great Awakening. The proliferation of new, more personally expressive denominations helped form a crusade mentality in the rural areas where they predominated. Christianity was now more democratic, guided less by the esoteric theologians of Harvard and more by fiery country preachers such as the charismatic Finney⁴³. This combination of attributes made Antimasonry and its claims of representing Christianity especially ripe for attack.

Religious attacks on Masonry stressed its rituals and the initiation oaths Brothers took to each other and to their fraternity. "It will be observed that with every degree there is an increase of atrocity and blasphemy," an Antimasonic exposé of the higher degrees alleged, "And what must we think of the man who goes deliberately from step to step, accumulating upon his soul the awful guilt of these horrid obligations!"⁴⁴ Antimasons claimed that the fraternity's secrecy and demands of loyalty to fellow Brothers formed a sort of mental bondage. Therefore, this logic went, a Freemason could neither be loyal to the country nor a committed Christian as they would always place the needs of the brotherhood over spiritual and public concerns, as well as their own consciences. Additionally, Masons were accused of profaning the sacred with their cryptic, allegedly bloody rituals. Reflecting this belief, an 1829 interdenominational gathering of New York Christians declared Masonry to be a satanic tool while pleading for the clergy's support⁴⁵. Freemasonry with its devilish agenda, Antimasons argued, was incompatible with a free Christian nation.

Meanwhile, the deep commercial and industrial changes of the era made the movement all the more attractive to those who had not reaped the benefits of a more dynamic economy.

The same democratic impulse that inspired the religious sources of Antimasonry also inspired the economic ones. The landless, unemployed and lower classes resented the nascent capitalist class which seemed to be disproportionately benefiting from the new order. This upper class, which counted the likes of mill operators and canal financiers in its ranks, also wielded much political power as officials both provided them with and received from them pecuniary support⁴⁶. Though not revolutionary in their sentiment, those who had been left out or pushed aside were a willing audience for Antimasonry's claims that a secretive, powerful Masonic oligarchy needed to be stopped by a movement of ordinary citizens.

⁴² Samuel D. Green, *The Broken Seal; or, Personal Reminiscences of the Morgan Abduction and Murder* (Chicago: Ezra A. Cook & Co., 1873), 94-97.

⁴³ Smith Kutolowski, "Antimasonry Reexamined: Social Bases of the Grass-Roots Party", *The Journal of American History* 71 (1984): 289-290.

⁴⁴ "Le Roy Convention," *Religious Monitor and Evangelical Repository* (Philadelphia, April 1828): 4. American Periodicals Series Online.

⁴⁵ "An Appeal to Christian Ministers in Connection with Speculative Free Masonry, 1829" in *Antimasonry*, ed. Ratner, 44-45.

⁴⁶ Pessen, *Jacksonian America*, 223.

Antimasons attacked the brotherhood for its supposed grip on the levers of economic power in the country. Before, the high number of bankers, investors, merchants and other men of reputation who called themselves Brothers would have been a point of pride. Similar to the Ancient Masons of the previous century, Antimasons now made clear that this large proportion of wealthy men would be an object of scorn. Unlike in the eighteenth century Ancient-Modern reexamination of the social order, however, established wealth itself was beginning to be a liability in the public's eye. Jacksonian era office seekers of both parties went to great lengths to associate themselves with the rugged image of the common man, whether or not they had ever plowed a field or dug a ditch in their lives⁴⁷. As an institution with such a high concentration of riches and influence, Masonry was an appealing target for a newly engaged public.

That the fraternity George Washington once belonged to could come under such attack attests to how much the tide had turned in the political and economic arenas. Though Washington was the paramount national hero, his aura did not shine brightly enough to protect the brotherhood. Simply put, merit had shifted to the ordinary citizen by the virtue of his being an ordinary citizen. Antimasons would not tolerate an aristocracy in any form, be it religious, economic or political, and Freemasonry was the ideal outlet for this zeitgeist. Though Masonry's rules prevented discussion of religious and political matters in its meetings, its role as a secretive gathering place for the nation's elected leaders inevitably damaged it. The sociopolitical attacks lodged against it painted Freemasonry as an oligarchic threat that needed to be completely eliminated in order to ensure the integrity of the nation. Questioning whether the fraternity could "survive the sharp lightings of a democratic election," an Antimasonic magazine declared that, "Freemasonry is, by nature, hostile to truth, and to good government"⁴⁸.

Masons did not accept these attacks. Many, like the author of an 1830 column ridiculing Antimasonry for claiming Governor Clinton's recent death was due to suicide brought on by guilt over performing Masonic rituals, offered spirited defenses⁴⁹. However effective the Brothers believed these arguments to be, they failed to take into account the changed definition of merit. Rather, they relied on the old assumptions upon which Masonry had fixed itself into the center of American society⁵⁰. In a similar vein, other Masons attacked Antimasonry for being too close to the common people. To many of them, the word "democracy" still held its immediate post-Revolutionary connotation of rule by the irrational mob⁵¹. Consequently, a defense that attacked the grassroots movement essentially for being grassroots by following the public conscience only legitimized its attacks. Furthermore, the central presence in the movement of ex-Masons willing to testify against the fraternity was

⁴⁷ Reinhard H. Luthin, "Some Demagogues In American History," *The American Historical Review* 57 (1951): 25.

⁴⁸ No Title, *The Anti - Masonic Review, and Magazine* (New York, March 1, 1830): 2. American Periodicals Series Online.

⁴⁹ "DeWitt Clinton," *Boston Masonic Mirror* (Boston, November 27, 1830): 2. American Periodicals Series Online.

⁵⁰ Bullock, *Revolutionary Brotherhood*, 293-294.

⁵¹ Bullock, *Revolutionary Brotherhood*, 296-297.

difficult to dismiss without attacking them as “hardened and hired libelers,” thereby contributing further to the rapid deterioration of Masonry’s image⁵².

In a sign of the movement’s popularity and Masonic weakness in defending itself and stanching the large flow of Brothers renouncing the fraternity, Antimasonic adherents in many states began meeting in the first years after Morgan’s disappearance to denounce the brotherhood and to call for its destruction. One New York gathering in 1828 called for “...measures for the destruction of the Masonic Institution... and asserting the supremacy of the laws...”⁵³. The jump to politics began in the same place the movement began: western New York. In that state as well as in Pennsylvania and Vermont, Antimasons ran for and won statewide office. By 1831 the new Antimasonic party had held the country’s first national nominating convention, drafting lukewarm supporter William Wirt as their presidential candidate⁵⁴. While it was off to a promising start, the political arm of Antimasonry -like the grassroots movement that spawned it- would ultimately fail in its quest to drive Masons out of office and Masonry itself out of the country.

While fervent Antimasons saw the party as a tool for national influence, others saw its vibrancy and grassroots power as an effective way to attack the Democratic Party and, since 1829, President Andrew Jackson. Whigs in New York State used the party to attack Jackson ally William Van Buren and his Democratic political machine, the Regency, accusing it of corruption and elitism⁵⁵. In Massachusetts, John Quincy Adams paid lip service to the cause by denouncing Masonry, though his motivations were born more of anti-Jacksonian impulses to promote the “harmony of the Union,” and “purity of the Constitution” than true Antimasonic ones⁵⁶. While the Whigs were allies of expediency, many Antimasons genuinely were against Jackson and the Democrats⁵⁷. They believed that the Jacksonians, the vanguards of the eponymous era, were in fact ruling on behalf of the elite. Furthermore, through their attacks on Jacksonian politicians they were claiming that any democratic changes were not comprehensive or inclusive enough.

The Antimasonic party’s limited political success and primary focus on Masonry accelerated its absorption into the Whigs in the context of the developing Second Party System. By 1838, the first “third party” had ceased to exist⁵⁸. Ironically, it was Freemasonry’s long held ideals of civil society and liberty that set the stage for Antimasonry’s rise. Its call for citizens to exercise their rights and defend their country was both a product of and influence on the civil society American Masons championed. By attacking the fraternity, Antimasonry continued Masonry’s idealization of merit as the key to legitimacy. The difference was that through many processes the very definition of merit had changed. Gone was the supposed grandeur of the rarified American political, religious and commercial *aristoi*

⁵² “Modern Persecution,” *Boston Masonic Mirror* (Boston, February 12, 1831): 2. American Periodicals Series Online.

⁵³ “Proceedings of a Convention of Delegates Opposed to Freemasonry, 1828” in *Antimasonry*, ed. Ratner, 48-49.

⁵⁴ Vaughn, *The Antimasonic Party*, 61.

⁵⁵ Pessen, *Jacksonian America*, 225.

⁵⁶ “John Quincy Adams”, *Boston Masonic Mirror* (Boston, September 28, 1833): 5. American Periodicals Series Online.

⁵⁷ Kutolowski, “Antimasonry Reexamined,” 290.

⁵⁸ Vaughn, *The Antimasonic Party*, 180.

along with its democracy of governing for the people instead of with them. What had developed over the decades was a definition of merit that had run away from the pretensions of the postcolonial trustees into the open embrace of the idealized, virtuous commoner. This transformation would paradoxically allow Freemasonry to adopt this new definition of merit and reinvent itself as an ordinary fraternal organization several decades later. Though it survived and eventually surpassed the number of members it had before the Morgan Affair, it could never again claim to be guiding light of the Republic.

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