

The Strange Populism of the Anti-Masonic Party

By Bill Kauffman

"'Twas a night as dark and drear, as e'er o'er-spread the Earth"--or at least that's how partisans imagined the evenings in September 1826 when William Morgan was drowned in the Niagra River and up bobbed the oddest political party in our history.

Morgan, a 52-year-old itinerant toper, had fought under Andy Jackson at the Battle of New Orleans and he kept battling for the rest of his tumultuous life. He settled in Western New York, where he joined the Masons, the centuries-old secretive fraternal order. The voluble boozier was bounced from chapter to chapter, until, resentful, he exacted revenge by revealing Masonic oaths and pledges and other arcane in his book *Illustrations of Freemasonry*. For his perfidy Morgan was "plunged into the dark and angry torrent of the Niagara...at the black hour of midnight." (His body never washed ashore, and to this day a few loyal Masons insists that Morgan was spirited north to Canada, where he swore--and kept--another oath, this one of silence.)

Rumor and speculation ran rampant. A cover-up was alleged: Morgan's disappearance was desultorily investigated by a legal-political structure rife with Masons, from Governor DeWitt Clinton on down. The region was already on the cusp of a great and fiery religious revival: Morgan's murder lit the match, and the tinderbox blew.

Anti-Masons held raucous caucuses that resembled revival meetings. Claiming to be animated by "the blessed spirit," they sang not of William Morgan, drunkard, but of Captain Morgan, the people's hero:

A Martyr has yielded his life to the cause
Of freedom and truth, and respect for the laws;
'Tis *Morgan* whose blood still proclaims from the ground
That life is in peril, where masonry's found

How absolutely baffling it must've been for a typical Mason--a well-to-do merchant, prosperous and respected--to wake one morning to find himself vituperated as a homicidal cabalist!

In 1873, two generations after the backlash, one elderly New York Mason recalled the sting: "Masons were excluded from a participation in the Holy Communion; their names were thrown out of the jury box; and at the social gatherings of the grave matrons of the neighborhood resolutions were...passed forbidding their daughters from keeping company with a Mason."

The fury concretized into the Anti-Masonic Party, which in its newborn purity rested on a single plank: to bar Masons form political office, juries, indeed all of public life.

In 1827 Anti-Masons won 15 seats in the New York Assembly; over the next quadrennium the party became preeminent in much of New York and Vermont and part of Pennsylvania, electing congressmen, legislative blocs, and capturing Vermont's governorship. In 1830 the Anti-Masons barely lost the gubernatorial race

in New York, 128,000-120,000. Damning secret societies became the rage: John Quincy Adams, trawling for Anti-Masonic votes in 1828, offered to expose the treacheries of Phi Beta Kappa.

Then came the locusts. A host of cunning men who would later found the Republican and Whig parties--William Seward, Thurlow Weed, Millard Fillmore, Horace Greeley--cut their eyeteeth on Anti-Masonry. They'd found a regular lode of votes, but still, they winced at a rabble given to such overheated utterances as "Let the friends of good order and civil law rise in their strength, and drive back to the dark regions from which it sprang this beast with Seven Heads and Ten Horns." ("Anti-Masons tended not to believe in venial sins," historian Lee Benson noted with understatement.)

The coup was bloodless. Master strategist Weed ousted the leader of the red-hot, publisher Solomon Southwick (poor Solomon's habit of basing major decision son a coin flip proved lethal to his reputation), and the party fell to a cadre of well-groomed young lawyers on the make. The new Anti-Masons committed the party to Henry Clay's program of high tariffs, a national bank, internal improvements, and other matters unrelated to the Beast with Seven Heads.

The deposed Southwick saw "the cloven foot of Clay...in the movements of some folks who pretend to be Anti-Masons," but the hijacking was successful. Lost in the shuffle was the party's reason for being: the Anti-Masons were now indifferent on the subject of Masonry! In 1832 Weed engineered the nomination of an unrepentant ex-Mason, William Wirt, for the presidency; Wirt carried only Vermont. The party was finished; the smooth alchemists Weed and Seward admixed its tailings with Henry Clay's National Republicans to create the Whigs, while the firebrands were left in the lurch, betrayed and sputtering.

And what of Masonry? The order was decimated in the Northeast. In 1825 the Masons counted 480 lodges and 20,000 members in New York; a decade later they numbered fewer than 50 lodges with 3,000 adherents. Today the Masons are no more clandestine than the Rotary Club; lodges are likelier to sponsor Little League teams than governors.

Oh, and by the way, 14 presidents have been Masons. Which raises the question: what if the conspiracy theories were right?



Published in [Law and Order May/June 1995 Issue](#)

This information was found online at:
http://www.taemag.com/issues/articleID.16878/article_detail.asp