

THE ANTIMASONIC MOVEMENT IN WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA¹

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IN HIS last annual report directed to the board of overseers and to Harvard alumni, President James Bryant Conant of Harvard University included a recommendation that gave utterance to a tacit conviction that has been growing for some time in the minds of scholars everywhere. He stressed the need for a number of teachers on the university faculty, who would be, so to speak, ministers without portfolio, whose duty it should be to attempt to link together the steadily diverging fields of specialized investigation. Most historians will sympathize with that recommendation. It is becoming increasingly difficult to keep in touch with our respected colleagues, the European historians, to say nothing of the economists, the sociologists, the anthropologists, and the biologists, who are all skirmishing away along some distant sector of the battle line. Yet the historian vitally needs the assistance that these fellow workers in the field of learning can give; he would, for example, willingly join hands with the psychologist, who at a moment's notice can interpret complexes and inhibitions, hopes and fears, reactions to complex stimuli, and refusals to react. It would be interesting and profitable to hear a psychologist's report on the Antimasonic movement. Certainly he would be better qualified than a mere historian to explain why, more than a hundred years ago, Antimasonic agitation swept like wildfire over the rural districts of New York and Pennsylvania, fed by rumors that had no radio orators or chain newspapers to spread them far and wide.

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The Antimasonic agitation is not, however, a unique phenomenon in American history. The witchcraft delusion of the seventeenth century in Salem, Massachusetts, is an early instance of a similar phobia seizing upon the minds of a generation and causing it to behave in a manner that excites only ridicule in the present day. In more recent times, large numbers of respectable persons have been stampeded into joining movements to track down and persecute foreigners, negroes, Roman Catholics, and other minorities in sections where popular prejudice exists.

There were evidences in early America of a popular suspicion of secret societies that was grounded in the equalitarian beliefs common at the time. George Washington and his fellow officers of the American Revolutionary army were dourly regarded by some for their membership in the exclusive Society of the Cincinnati. Rank, titles, and secret affiliations came in for their share of denunciation even on the part of the conservative membership of the Constitutional Convention. Doubtless too there was an American audience for a libelous volume published in England during the year 1798 for the purpose of exposing the secret ceremonies and oaths of the order of Freemasons.² Nevertheless the Masonic order achieved a foothold in western Pennsylvania at an early date. The rites were practiced in the region as early as 1759, and at the very close of the year 1785 the first regular lodge west of the mountains, No. 45, began to function at Pittsburgh.

Not until the new century was well under way did the local Masonic order experience pressure from the levelers of that day. Just before the end of the year 1820 the first of the Antimasonic volleys in the region was delivered. Interestingly enough, the occasion was that of the meeting of the Presbyterian Synod at Pittsburgh, and the attack took the form of a report by a committee of the synod. The report proclaimed it a duty of the synod to warn and admonish the professors of religion with whom its members were especially connected against becoming members of Freemason lodges or, if already members, against continuing to attend their meetings. It went on to state:

At how vast a risk does any one, and especially an unguarded youth, enter an association "embracing with equal affection the Pagan, the Turk, and the

² See Thomas F. Woodley, *Thaddeus Stevens*, 49 (Harrisburg, 1934).

Christian?" How humiliating and disgusting must it be to persons of intelligence and taste to mingle in the close intimacy of brotherhood with those whose society they would spurn on all ordinary occasions? . . .

We also consider masonry, in excluding from its rites, its confidence, and privileges, all females, as insulting to the dignity and hostile to the comfort of the most amiable of our species: woman was destined by our benevolent Creator to be the affectionate friend, the counsellor, and most intimate confidant of man. It is believed then, that a man of a generous and affectionate heart will hesitate before entering an institution which would forbid him to intrust to the wife of his bosom, secret communications imparted to the most worthless of his own sex; and which would alienate from her and her children their common property, without the privilege of their being permitted to know for what purpose or what object.³

The synod failed to adopt the report and the accompanying resolutions, but their content was noised abroad. Letters pro and con appeared in the local newspapers, and one of the New York journals gave vent to an editorial criticizing the report. Moreover, the three lodges in Pittsburgh published in the *Pittsburgh Gazette* of January 29, 1821, a long protest, asserting the respect of all good Masons for the gospel and denying that their oaths enjoined anything at variance with the duties of Christian and citizen. The excitement was short lived. Further controversy ceased, and there seemed little reason to believe that the mooted report would be snatched up and reprinted a decade thence as one of the principal documents of an Antimasonic fury.

From the foregoing it will be easily understood that there was abundant latent hostility to the Masonic order in the land when the Morgan incident occurred in western New York in September, 1826. William Morgan, whose fate excited nearly as much curiosity as did the circumstances of a famous kidnaping of recent date, was a citizen of Batavia, New York. In the course of the summer of 1826 he announced his intention of publishing the secrets of the first three degrees of Freemasonry. Not long afterwards he suddenly disappeared. The story was spread about that he had been spirited away by several members of the Batavia lodge, taken to Niagara Falls, and there cast into the foaming torrents with weights attached to his body. The Masons laughed at the

³ Alfred Creigh, *Masonry and Anti-Masonry*, 294 (Philadelphia, 1854). The report is also reprinted in the *Pennsylvania Democrat* (Uniontown), December 6, 1830.

story. They suggested that Morgan had absconded with funds placed in his hands by his financial backers. Nevertheless the accused parties were held for trial in the New York state courts, and some minor sentences were allotted to them. The murder charge went unproven except in the minds of a number of that potent jury, the general public. It was easy to believe that the unhappy Morgan had become the victim of the Masons whom he was about to expose. It was said that a body had been found in an advanced state of decomposition and had been partially identified as that of Morgan. Thurlow Weed, a rising young New York state politician, who saw the possibilities of employing the agitation as a political vehicle, is said to have remarked grimly to one of his skeptical-minded friends, "Well, it's a good enough Morgan for our purposes."⁴

The way had been paved for Antimasonic agitation around Pittsburgh by a criminal case that had been on the docket for several years past. In 1818 a certain Joseph Pluymart had collaborated with a Daniel Emmons in carrying out the first bank robbery in Pittsburgh, that of the Farmers and Mechanics Bank. Four times he was arrested for the crime, and four times he broke jail. While at large he was pardoned by action of Governor Andrew Shulze, who had received a large number of petitions in behalf of Pluymart from prominent citizens of New York City, Philadelphia, Cleveland, and Columbus. The word was passed around that both Shulze and Pluymart were Masons and that Masonic influence had been at work to liberate Pluymart. It was even said that criminals in the dock had been seen to give the signal of distress to Masons in the jury box and on the bench.⁵

Naturally the rank and file of the Masons viewed the rising cloud of suspicion with alarm. To offset the bad impressions that were being circulated, they sought somewhat belatedly to justify themselves. Lodge

⁴ Charles McCarthy, *The Antimasonic Party: A Study of Political Antimasonry in the United States, 1827-1840*, 371 (American Historical Association, *Report*, 1902, vol. 1—Washington, 1903); Woodley, *Stevens*, 50; George P. Donehoo, ed., *Pennsylvania: A History*, 3: 1363 (New York, 1926).

⁵ John N. Boucher, ed., *A Century and a Half of Pittsburgh and Her People*, 1: 392 (New York, 1908); Erasmus Wilson, ed., *Standard History of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania*, 767 (Chicago, 1898).

No. 164 at Washington, Pennsylvania, prepared an "appeal to the public," dated March 25, 1830, which read in part:

In the present state of political excitement, when great and unexampled efforts are making to destroy the character and circumscribe the rights of free-masons, there needs, we trust, no apology for an obtrusion of ourselves upon the attention of the public. . . .

We have no intention of entering the arena of newspaper discussion. We shall not attempt a refutation of the "thousand and one" falsehoods and absurdities alleged against us. We shall not enter the lists against assertions and arguments which denounce Franklin and La Fayette, Warren, Green, ay, and Washington, the Father of his Country, with a host of other revolutionary worthies, as the leaders, associates, and abettors of a band of murderers and enemies of civil liberty. We have no hope of convincing or converting any who, on finding, as masons, that the institution could not be prostituted to political schemes and personal interests, have, in the hope of thirty pieces of silver, renounced masonry; nor of those who have taken counsel of their fears for the abandonment of their honor. We appeal not to those who are engaged in a crusade against us, as a mere political venture; nor to those whose interest it is for any other reason to assail us. But we address honest seekers after truth, and we address them in the words of soberness and truth.⁶

This appeal was duly signed and distributed throughout Washington and the adjoining counties but with negligible effect. The Masons had to bear up under repeated snubs and threats. When in the summer of 1832 the Pittsburgh lodges wished to celebrate the anniversary of the dedication of the order to John the Baptist, they were refused permission to hold their ceremonies in the Methodist Church, the Methodist Reformed Church, the Union Church, the Reformed Baptist Church, and the First Presbyterian Church.⁷

From such slights and worse the Masons of western Pennsylvania suffered in common with their brethren elsewhere. They were forced to become exceedingly circumspect with regard to every word and action, for they were under constant surveillance. From printing press and pulpit denunciations poured forth. Even the stage took part with burlesque performances of the ritual. Petitions for initiation became fewer, and many withdrew from membership altogether. About 1830 the lodges began to disband, and by 1838 over seventy warrants for lodges in Penn-

⁶ Creigh, *Masonry and Anti-Masonry*, 80.

⁷ *Statesman* (Pittsburgh), June 27, 1832.

sylvania had been vacated, leaving only forty-six functioning in the entire state. Lodge No. 45 was the only one of the Masonic bodies in Pittsburgh to withstand the storm. Both Milnor Lodge No. 165 and Hamilton Lodge No. 173 at Lawrenceville gave way and apparently terminated their own existence about 1835. Needless to say their sister lodge was subjected to great strain. Nonpayment of dues became an acute problem, and in 1834 the height of the crisis was reached. A special meeting of Lodge No. 45 was held on June 17 of that year to consider a memorial from a number of Pittsburgh Masons advising the lodges of the city and county to resign their charters for the good of Masonry. After some debate, the members of the lodge voted down the proposal and elected to continue the struggle.⁸

From one standpoint, the Antimasonic movement was something of a crusade. As such, it had a broad appeal in western Pennsylvania, where there were numerous German sects committed firmly to tenets forbidding oaths and where dwelt the Scotch-Irish, who have sometimes been called the Puritans of Pennsylvania. Details of the Morgan trials found their way into the newspapers of western Pennsylvania, and during the year 1828 Thurlow Weed's *Anti-Masonic Enquirer* from New York state began to pick up considerable circulation in Allegheny County and elsewhere in the region.⁹

Andrew Jackson's political following and local politicians opposed to him alike wondered if they might not make capital out of the agitation. Jackson's triumph was largely explained by his appeals to the democratic prejudices of the frontier. Might not his own weapons be used against him? The first Antimasonic newspaper in the state, the *Antimasonic Herald*, was established at New Holland in Lancaster County in June, 1828, although there had been an attempt to establish a similar newspaper in the western half of the state a year before.¹⁰ Not until 1829 did

⁸ Woodley, *Stevens*, 63; Frederick C. Rommel, *History of Lodge No. 45, F. & A. M., 1785-1910*, 130-141 (Pittsburgh, 1912). Most of the criticisms were not so good-humored as that of the newspaper editor who said, "Matrimony is like Masonry—no one knows the secret until he is initiated. It is like an eel trap, very easy to get into but plaguety hard to get out of." *Western Press* (Mercer, Pa.), April 14, 1838.

⁹ Thurlow Weed, *Autobiography*, 1:310 (New York, 1883).

¹⁰ Woodley, *Stevens*, 51; McCarthy, *Antimasonic Party*, 429.

the Antimasons of the West begin to line up their party presses. The *Anti-Masonic Examiner* appeared in Pittsburgh that year to join hands with the neighboring *Greensburg Gazette* and the *Pennsylvania Democrat* at Uniontown. In the course of time the *Butler Sentinel*, the *Indiana Register*, the *Mercer County Luminary*, the *Crawford [County] Messenger*, and the *Erie Gazette* became redoubtable allies. Within Pittsburgh, the largest city of the district, the *Times* and the *Gazette* became the mouthpieces of the Antimasonic party in active conflict with the *Statesman*, an anti-Jackson paper, whose editor, John B. Butler, was an active Mason.

The local Antimasons took no significant part in the election of 1828, but the next year they precipitated themselves with a will into partisan conflict. Delegates from Somerset, Erie, Westmoreland, and Indiana counties attended the state convention that assembled at Harrisburg on June 27, and Dr. Robert Mitchell of Indiana County was named president of the convention. Joseph Ritner of Washington County was chosen as candidate for governor, plans were made to send delegates to the national convention that was being roundly discussed, and an address was prepared for popular consumption. The fall election involved a keen contest. Ritner was defeated by his Democratic opponent, George Wolf, but discerning political observers noted that he had carried Bedford, Cambria, Crawford, Erie, Huntingdon, Indiana, Mercer, Somerset, and Washington counties in western Pennsylvania alone and had polled a heavy vote in Fayette, Greene, and Westmoreland counties.¹¹

In the Pittsburgh district the contest for Congress was peculiarly interesting. After the regular election was over, the resignation of William Wilkins, the congressman for the district, necessitated a special election. The Antimasons of Allegheny County met in convention at Pittsburgh on November 21, 1829, to choose a nominee for the vacancy. This group was the core of the new party at Pittsburgh. The nomination was first offered to the distinguished Henry Baldwin, but he refused on the score that the party's course was a rigid proscription of an organization that for ages had survived the enmity of inquisitions and tyrants. The

¹¹ Anti-Masonic State Convention of Pennsylvania, Harrisburg, 1829, *Proceedings*, 9-29 (Lancaster, 1829); McCarthy, *Antimasonic Party*, 432.

Antimasons then turned to Harmar Denny, son of the first mayor of Pittsburgh, and were successful in inducing him to be their candidate. After the custom of the times, the new party made use of considerable campaign literature. One broadside declared fiercely that the murder of Morgan was clearly demonstrated to be the work of a society that claimed its origin from Solomon and John. Furthermore, it was stated that of the six thousand taxable citizens of Allegheny County, there were no more than five hundred Freemasons, yet the Masons held nineteen of the twenty-six local offices. This last charge stung the Masons into angry denials, and the *Statesman* went so far as to publish a list of public officers elected and appointed in Allegheny County since 1810 showing that 92 of them were Masons and 303 non-Masons.¹² Even more exciting was another document that came out during the campaign, containing what was alleged to be the complete oath of Royal Arch Masonry and italicizing the part pledging secrecy in behalf of a fellow member under all charges, even of murder and of treason. From this the conclusion was drawn:

Murder accordingly, has been kept secret under the obligations of this impious oath, *and the murderers unpunished*. Treason too might have been kept secret, had Paulding, Williams, and Van Wirt been Royal Arch Masons—ANDRE would have escaped, ARNOLD succeeded, and our liberties betrayed. Toleration could stand it no longer; then, and not till then, were the people roused. The excitement which followed, was as honourable to *freemen*, as the contrary spirit of apathy and submission would have been worthy of slaves. They sneer at this “angry storm” of Antimasonry—be it a storm! it will purify the air—and if it *do* shake to its foundations the ancient temple of Masonry, let our fellow citizens come out from its mouldering vaults, its tottering Royal Arches!¹³

Denny was successful in the election that followed. He carried the county by 621 votes and the district made up of Allegheny, Beaver, Butler, and Armstrong counties by 1,198 votes.¹⁴ Thus began the distinguished congressional career of one who was probably the ablest political figure in the ranks of the Antimasonic party in western Pennsylvania.

In the elections of 1830 and 1831 the Antimasons lost ground. Yet

¹² Anti-Masonic Convention, Allegheny County, 1829, *Proceedings*, in the Denny-O'Hara Papers (Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania); Wilson, *History of Pittsburgh*, 769; *Statesman*, July 21, 1830.

¹³ Handbill, in Denny-O'Hara Papers.

¹⁴ *Pittsburgh Gazette*, December 22, 25, 1829.

they were hopeful of taking advantage of the division of their enemies to elect a president in 1832. Delegates from six western Pennsylvania counties, Harmar Denny among them, were present at the national convention of the party (the first national nominating party convention in American history, it is said) at Baltimore in September, 1831. Most of the prominent men of the day were Masons, and the Antimasons had difficulty in finding candidates. In the end they made the supreme blunder of nominating for the presidency William Wirt, who was himself a Mason. Amos Ellmaker, a lawyer from Lancaster, was the party's candidate for vice president. In the October election of 1832 the Antimasons mustered enough strength in western Pennsylvania to carry nine counties, Allegheny County among them. But their hopes of carrying the state for Wirt were rudely disappointed. In vain did Neville B. Craig, the editor of the *Pittsburgh Gazette*, urge the voters to reject Jackson, the enemy of the tariff, the foe of internal improvements, and the would-be assassin of the United States Bank. Erie and Beaver were the only counties west of the mountains carried by the coalition of Antimasons and National Republicans, and the state entered the Jackson column by a majority of 24,267 votes. Temporarily, the cause of the Antimasonic party in western Pennsylvania was eclipsed, and when in the spring of 1834 a new anti-administration party, the Whig party, entered the field, the position of the Antimasonic party became more critical. By its enemies it was styled derisively the "Anti-Goat party."¹⁵

In 1835 it seemed that at last the opportunity of the Antimasons had come. Internal dissensions crept into the party organization of the Democrats that year and brought about the nomination of two candidates, George Wolf representing the Jackson men and Henry Muhlenberg the Van Burenites. With enthusiasm the Antimasons united behind their candidate, Ritner, the more so as the Whigs were induced to coöperate with them. Thaddeus Stevens, the party whip in the state legislature, was prevailed upon to go to Pittsburgh to address a large mass meeting of the Antimasons called together for a Fourth of July celebration. The

¹⁵ *Niles' Weekly Register*, 41:173 (October 29, 1831); *Pittsburgh Gazette*, October 12, 1832; McCarthy, *Antimasonic Party*, 452; Samuel R. Gammon, *The Presidential Campaign of 1832*, 170 (*Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science*, vol. 40, no. 1—Baltimore, 1922); Wilson, *History of Pittsburgh*, 774.

Gazette enthusiastically hailed him the "Lion of the Day."¹⁶ But election day was more truly his for Ritner won the three-cornered contest handily, and Stevens entered into the position of prime minister. Ritner majorities were secured in fourteen counties of western Pennsylvania, constituting practically an unbroken tier from Erie to Bedford. Together with the Whigs, the Antimasons were in control of the lower house of the state legislature, and although they had only a minority in the senate, they could control both houses on a joint vote.¹⁷

Ever since his entrance into the lower house of the legislature, Stevens had spared no effort to smoke the Masons out. He was indefatigable in his efforts to introduce legislation to prevent Masons from taking part in court proceedings and even to outlaw the institution of Freemasonry itself. So it was that as soon as the legislature convened on December 1, 1835, he moved with lightning speed to introduce a bill calling for the suppression of societies bound together by secret and unlawful oaths. Straightway he was made chairman of a committee to report the bill. Now at last he had the requisite power to take up the petitions for an investigation of the evils of Freemasonry that had been pouring in upon the legislature for many months. One dated for the year 1834 and bearing the signatures of twenty-seven citizens of Pittsburgh recited the anxiety of the signers on account of the multiplication of secret societies in the community and expressed the opinion that the evil was of such magnitude as to call for the interposition of the legislature.¹⁸ Most of the petitions from the western half of the state came from Allegheny County although a considerable number were issued from Somerset and Indiana counties as well.

On January 11, 1836, the investigating committee began to take testimony. The Masonic papers sent up a chant about the Star Chamber proceedings and branded Thaddeus Stevens with the titles of Inquisitor General and the archpriest of Antimasonry. Craig of the *Pittsburgh Gazette* replied in that paper on January 19, "We trust that he will persevere in the investigation, until its charity and excellence are universally known, or till its rottenness stinks in the nostrils of the whole people." On January 26 Craig pointed out:

¹⁶ *Pittsburgh Gazette*, July 24, 1835.

¹⁷ McCarthy, *Antimasonic Party*, 470.

¹⁸ Woodley, *Stevens*, 76; Rommel, *History of Lodge No. 45*, 141.

It is now more than nine years since William Morgan, a citizen of these United States, was taken from his house by an infamous Masonic stratagem, imprisoned in a common jail, taken again from thence, and conveyed more than one hundred miles through a populous country, lodged in a gloomy dungeon for several days, denied intercourse with any person but the cut-throat Masons who held the keys of his prison, denied the use of a bible, and after five days of terror and despair, in fulfillment of Masonic obligations, and according to Masonic rule, *cooly, deliberately, masonically murdered*.

At first the investigation proceeded smoothly. The first witnesses examined were voluntary witnesses, and they answered readily questions put to them concerning their membership in the order and the authenticity of the various *exposés* of Masonry, and more specifically as to whether or not wine was administered out of a human skull to the candidate for the Knight Templar's degree. Among these first witnesses were Andrew W. Foster, Jr., and Joseph McClelland of Pittsburgh, both of whom were held up to public scorn for their faithlessness and treachery by the Pittsburgh *Statesman*. McClelland, when called upon to testify, readily admitted that the forthcoming publication of Morgan's book had in his hearing been discussed at a meeting of Lodge No. 45 of Pittsburgh during the summer of 1826. Foster told what he knew about the Independent Order of Odd Fellows.¹⁹

When it came time however for the Masonic witnesses to be subpoenaed, there was another story. From former Governor Wolf down, a score all told, the witnesses refused to be sworn to give testimony. Two of the number were from western Pennsylvania, Ephraim Pentland and Robert Christy, both of Pittsburgh. After their return they published a long explanation of their conduct, which was printed by John B. Butler at the *Statesman* office and generally circulated. In their apology the two witnesses explained that the powers claimed by the committee were judicial powers, which under the constitution of Pennsylvania could only be exercised by the judicial department of the government. They were willing, they said, to go instead before a court of competent jurisdiction and testify. Try as he might, Stevens could not whip the legislature into compelling the refractory witnesses to answer the questions. One legislator was even in favor of apologizing to the prisoners at.

¹⁹ Pennsylvania House of Representatives, *Testimony Taken by the Committee . . . to Investigate the Evils of Free Masonry*, 1-4, 25 (Harrisburg, 1836); *Statesman*, January 20, 1836.

the bar. At length the prisoners were discharged by a vote of fifty to thirteen, and the investigation was at an end.²⁰

On that day the life passed out of the Antimasonic movement in western Pennsylvania. The Pennsylvania Antimasons were unable to agree upon a candidate for the presidency in 1836 and the paradoxical situation of the two Antimasonic journals in Pittsburgh supporting opposite candidates was rendered possible. The *Gazette* endorsed William Henry Harrison, the Whig contestant, and the *Times* endorsed Martin Van Buren, the Democratic choice. Either Daniel Webster or John Quincy Adams would have been preferred, but there was not general enough backing for them. The next year the Antimasons in Allegheny County were induced by the Whigs to join a fusion ticket. It was a sign of the times. Four years later there was strong sentiment within the county organization to abandon the Antimasonic label altogether and steal silently over into the ranks of the Whigs. That the step was not taken at that time was largely because of the opposition of Craig, the fiery editor of the *Gazette*.

In the rural districts of western Pennsylvania the Antimasonic spirit lingered on for an amazingly long time. In Allegheny County eighty-three votes were cast for an Antimasonic ticket as late as 1876.²¹ With the transfer of the *Pittsburgh Gazette* to Whig ownership, however, the Antimasonic movement may be said to have departed for other worlds. Its influence was not entirely ephemeral. It must be granted that its crusade against the Masonic order had only short-lived effects: in the period after the Civil War secret societies prospered in western Pennsylvania as never before. As a political phenomenon the movement was more significant: it is perhaps not too much to say that the Antimasonic party broke the solidity of the Democratic phalanx in western Pennsylvania and opened a rift through which the columns of the Whig and Republican parties marched toward the promised land of all politicians.

²⁰ Ephraim Pentland, *An Address to the Citizens of Allegheny County . . . in reference to Free-Masonry*, 5-22; Woodley, *Stevens*, 77-80. A copy of the Pentland pamphlet recently came into the possession of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania.

²¹ Henry R. Mueller, *The Whig Party in Pennsylvania*, 94 (New York, 1922).