



MORGAN AFFAIR

An oration given by Dr. Bing Johnson, 32° KCCH,
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I became interested in the Morgan Affair because of its profound and devastating effect on American Masonry in the 1820s, 30s and 40s. But became side tracked. More about that later.

The story is long and complex and is clouded with imagination and fabrication. In a nutshell William Morgan, presumed to be a Mason, became angry with the Masons in Batavia, NY. He and David C. Miller, publisher of the *Republic Advocate* in Batavia entered into a conspiracy to print and sell the Masonic ritual in 1826. This caused an uproar in Batavia. Morgan was a man of questionable character and his involvement with the local Masonic community quickly disintegrated. At one point he was arrested and jailed for indebtedness, but was soon released. He was next seen entering a closed carriage with several men and was sent to Niagara. He remained there until Sept 19, 1826 and then disappeared forever. It was presumed by the general public that Morgan had been kidnapped and murdered by Masons because of his printing of Masonic secrets.

This resulted in immediate and intense anti—Masonic feelings that quickly spread to the rest of the country. It is difficult to understand the exact genesis of this movement but it was profound and deep. Families were torn apart, ministers were driven from their pulpits, parishioners were refused admission to their churches, businesses failed and workers were fired.

The anger and hatred were similar to the feelings that existed during the civil war and against Japanese, Nazi and communist sympathizers during World War II and the cold war era.

Masonry suffered for many years. In New York in 1827 there were 480 lodges with 20,000 members, by 1830 there were 82 lodges with 3,000 members. The Grand Lodges of New York, Vermont, Michigan, Rhode Island and Maine basically ceased to function for many years. The Morgan Affair was partly responsible for the formation of the Anti-Masonic Party which had a presidential candidate in 1831

I became sidetracked because of the testimony of a single Mason given during hearings conducted by the General Assembly of Rhode Island in 1831. His testimony was a masterpiece of eloquence and his statement about the purpose and value of Masonry is as relevant today as it was then. In today's parlance it was awesome and powerful.

To their great shame the General Assembly decided that the Masonic institution should discontinue and repealed the civil charters of several lodges and of the Grand Lodge of Rhode Island. These charters were not restored until 1861.

Our experience in watching the treatment of witnesses during governmental hearings as seen on the nightly news and C-span suggest that witnesses are frequently subjected to harsh and discourteous questioning and may become targets for tirades by the questioning authorities. It was probably no different then.

Imagine now that you are in the hearing chamber of the Rhode Island Assembly in 1831 and are listening to the exact words of testimony during those angry and stormy times.

"I, CHRISTIAN M. NESTELL, ornamental painter and gilder, a resident of Providence, and a Mason and still adhere to Masonry. I have taken the following degrees, viz. Entered Apprentice, Follow Craft, Master

Mason, Mark Mason, Past Master, Most Excellent Master, Royal Arch, Royal Master, Select Master, Super Excellent Master, Knight of the Red Cross, Knight of Malta, and Knights Templars of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem.

In attaching myself to the Masonic institution, as in the taking of the foregoing degrees, I was previously impressed with a favorable opinion of the institution; which impression led me, of my own free will and accord, to solicit the recommendation of my friends to enable me to obtain them I never knew it to be the duty or practice of Masons to use any exertions towards soliciting the accession of members. As a man and a Mason I consider my duties to my Creator paramount to all other duties; and I feel willing to testify and declare in truth and sincerity, under a solemn oath, that I have never taken an oath or obligation that I consider can in any way interfere or conflict with the duty I owe to my country. Neither has any of my obligations or promises made In Masonry, ever given my brethren any right, or power, to execute, or inflict any penalty upon me beyond expulsion.

The invocation attached to each degree I have always understood to be between my Creator and myself, should I ever willingly, or knowingly disclose unlawfully the vital secrets of Freemasonry. The internal secret forms and ceremonies attached to each degree, I view as a species of private property, which I have justly and lawfully purchased, and which I never will consent to yield up to any man, or body of men, who are not as justly and lawfully entitled to the same as I am myself, even were my life and property to be the forfeiture.

I consider the prominent object of Freemasonry is to promote the best interest of mankind Every Mason is bound to alleviate the distress of all

worthy brethren no matter whether they originate in the immediate vicinity in which he resides, or sprung from the remotest corners of the earth. I have been a Mason eleven years; have held an office in all the Masonic bodies of this place, and have served two years in the first office in the gift of the lodge in this town, during which period I never knew a call for relief refused a worthy brother, his widow or orphan.

In taking the several degrees attached to each body, I was distinctly informed previously to taking my obligations, that they were not to interfere with my religion, politics, or my allegiance to my God or my country. I never was led, or influenced by them, to confer a favor on a Mason, to the injury of one who was not a Mason.

The moral precepts, which Masonry inculcates, have been a great stimulus in teaching me to render every Mason his just due without distinction. The secret forms and ceremonies of each degree, with their true explanations, are calculated to fix and impress the mind with correct principles of morality; they are also designed to unite and conciliate true friendship among men, which friendship would never have otherwise existed.

We have secrets which our obligations bind us sacredly to conceal; by them we are enabled to distinguish true brethren from imposters, and if we were not under these obligations to keep them from bad men, they would soon become common and of no intrinsic value by their subversion. I have never regretted the taking of the degrees in Masonry and if there were any more to be conferred, I should ask to obtain them. They have been the means of introducing me to many valuable friends and the study of each degree has had a tendency to strengthen and improve my memory, with many other advantages, which has proved more than a remuneration of the

whole amount I ever paid to obtain them.

As regards my Masonic ties to these brethren who compose the Masonic family, I am bound to them as far as truth, honor and justice will warrant, and no further I am not to screen them from the arm of the law, cloak their inequities, render them assistance to the detriment of myself or family; nor am I to enter into plots or conspiracies against the government of the country in which I live, but feel myself bound by the precepts of Masonry, to be a peaceable, quiet citizen of the place in which I reside, and to patiently submit to the legal authority thereof.

I am ready to confess we have some immoral and disorderly members among us, but I do know it be the duty of each member of the body where such belong to complain of them, and have them admonished and exhorted to reformation, and should gentle means fail, we then have recourse to expulsion, and thus forever withdrawing from them our fellowship as Masons.

I consider it my duty as a Mason, to so live and conduct myself as to avoid becoming a subject of reproach, and use my endeavors to preserve unsullied the reputation of the institution. I hold myself not accountable for the depredations said to be committed on the body of William Morgan, by those who have passed through our solemn ceremonies; if it be true that this outrage was committed by such, and they had become so wretchedly depraved as to trample on the laws of God and Mason, they, and they alone, on proof of guilt, are culpable; and agreeable to the laws of our country, have forfeited their existence.”

I doubt that I would have had the either the courage or the eloquence to have given that testimony.

SOURCES.

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