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The Anti-Masonic party, the first third party in United States history, was born of the factionalism and disorder engendered by the breakup of the Federalists in the early 1820s. Fervently hostile to President Andrew Jackson, the party's core members later furnished the leaders and partisans of the Whig party. As a movement, anti-Masonry began when western New Yorkers refused to vote for candidates who were Freemasons in local contests in the spring of 1827. In the fall, Anti-Masons ran for statewide offices, astounding Democratic-Republicans with their electoral success. By 1828, one can speak of a genuine regional political party that drew its electoral support from New England, New York, and Pennsylvania. Its high tide occurred in the elections of 1830. By 1834, most of its leaders and voters were subsumed in the newly formed Whig party, and by the presidential election of 1836, the party had disappeared. The study of this party's history poses a unique challenge as there are two distinct elements to anti-Masonry: the movement and the political party.

AN ABDUCTION SPAWNS A PARTY

Anti-Masonry was born of public frustration over the mystery surrounding the September 1826 disappearance of William Morgan, an upstate New York stonemason described by historians as "pretentious" and "impecunious." Together with David Miller, struggling publisher of the Batavia Republican Advocate, Morgan, a former Mason, had planned to publish an expose of the rituals and activities of Freemasonry. Freemasons were secret organizations of privileged men that typically worked to advance the economic and political interests of their members. To many, the closeness of the disappearance and the planned publication was no coincidence, and foul play was suspected and sometimes substantiated. Ultimately, the mystery was never solved and no body was found that could be conclusively identified as Morgan's.

How an abduction and possible murder of an ex-Mason could fuel a virulent political movement and spawn a political party has long puzzled students of the Jacksonian era. Certainly, anti-Masonic sentiment was not new. As early as 1797, newspapers in Philadelphia and New York intimated that behind Masonic secrecy lay immoral and lewd practices, even the occasional murder. This viewpoint flavored many early-nineteenth-century commentaries on the Masons, particularly among working-class and early populist-type political writers. In addition, Masons were known to have abused their positions in law enforcement and the judicial system in a number of instances. Indeed, sheriffs in all the western counties of New York were Masons, and under state law grand jurors were selected and summoned by county sheriffs. To anxious citizens struggling to come to terms with the Morgan disappearance, it seemed the conspiracy to protect Masons extended even into state government. In that a majority of state officeholders were Masons, this was not an entirely ridiculous conjecture. Among rural farmers and owners of small
businesses, the Masons were believed to dominate and manipulate government. This sentiment crystallized with the formation of the anti-Masonic movement.

Modern historians see a more prosaic cause for the rise of anti-Masonry. The party, they say, simply filled the political gap left by the passing of the first party system, which eliminated the Federalists and produced intense factionalism among the Democratic-Republicans who totally dominated political life in America in the early 1820s. Indeed, in states where the major party's factions were nonexistent or uncompetitive, the Anti-Masonic party achieved its most stunning successes.

Yet, to simply say that anti-Masonry filled a gap caused by the collapse of the Federalists fails to explain why this party took on such strange ideological coloring. In his classic work on the paranoid tradition in American politics, historian Richard Hofstadter places the anti-Masons firmly in that tradition since they believed in the existence of an insidious and effective conspiratorial network designed to perpetrate foreboding and undemocratic acts, such as silencing critics. Still, as the old saying goes, sometimes paranoid really are being followed. Some modern historians say that focusing on anti-Masonic extremism is unfair to that movement since the Masons did often engage in political reprisals, vigilantism, and cover-ups of their activities.

Thurlow Weed, a newspaper editor and politician credited with channelling anti-Masonic sentiment into a political party, later noted in his memoirs that Masons could have averted anti-Masonry in those early days if they would have cooperated more with the investigative committees established at public meetings in towns across western New York. "It would," he said, "have calmed the troubled waters ... for up to this period, there had been no general or indiscriminate denunciations." Frustration over the Morgan case, however—including cover-ups, attempts at blocking an investigation, and efforts at protecting alleged perpetrators of the crime—turned many neutral people into frenzied enemies of Freemasonry. Later, when anti-Masonry spread to other areas, Masons crowded into meetings and shouted down anti-Masonic speakers.

EGALITARIANISM OF ANTI-MASONRY

At the same time, there were more positive and egalitarian aspects to anti-Masonry, which becomes evident in broadsides, speeches, and newspaper articles produced by party members. At the Anti-Masonic Convention in Oswego County in October 1832, delegates issued
this period—a name given to it because of the evangelical fervor of its inhabitants—were a host of religious and social reform movements, including temperance, abolitionism, and women's rights. Indeed, religious revivalism (Sabbatarianism, charismatic religion, temperance, Bible societies) and ultras movements (Millenism, Mormonism, spiritualism) swept this Yankee path of emigration from western Vermont to the western reserve of Ohio in the early nineteenth century.

By the late 1840s the women's movement, antislavery, and abolitionism became the social manifestations of religious upheavals in the Burned-over District. A number of interlocking socioeconomic changes intersected to produce these movements. First, the Burned-over District was largely settled by emigrant Yankees who were predisposed to evangelicalism. Second, within the space of a generation the inhabitants experienced the transition from subsistence frontier farming to commercial agriculture (with the opening of the Erie Canal and subsequent debilitating price competition from Wheat producers in the Midwest) to industrialization.

Pioneers who had cut their difficult way into a wilderness lived to see a great transformation. It is arguable that no other region of the country had ever before experienced such a dramatic socioeconomic and cultural transformation in such a short span of time. By 1830, the household economy in the Burned-over District—that is, an economy in which households produced most of the goods they consumed—had ended: Women now bought their textiles from stores, leaving evenings freed up for prayer meetings, religious revivals, masonic work, and temperance activities.

At the same time, as men increasingly worked outside of the home, female authority gained increasing importance in the home, as well as in the many religious and reform movements sweeping the region. Indeed, some historians even argue that women heavily influenced the anti-Masonic movement, seeing in the all-male organization a threat to their newly rising power. Freemasonry, then, was vulnerable to charges that it allowed men to secretly in-
dulge in their un-Christian behavior, while betraying the domestic ideal by abandoning the family, if only for the many meetings and events the Freemasons held for their members. As in other spheres, such as religion and politics, Masonry became a lightning rod that attracted and concentrated the free-floating anxieties of the age.

There was also an element of communalism in the Anti-Masonic agenda—that is, much Anti-Masonic literature dealt with concerns that community needs and values were being replaced by individualistic ones. William Wirt, the Anti-Masonic presidential nominee of 1832, who had served as attorney general under both James Madison and John Quincy Adams, was seen as the embodiment of republican and civic virtue. His wife was a devout Presbyterian who was responsible for her husband's conversion. Wirt supported women's rights and encouraged women to participate in the public sphere. His political experience left him disillusioned with the moral authority of male leadership. Finally, he bemoaned the absence of civic virtue he believed endemic among a new breed of politicians and businessmen, whom he identified as Masons.

While National Republicans, one of the major parties of the day, argued that Anti-Masonic electors should vote for Clay instead of Wirt, as there was no difference in principle between the two, Anti-Masons replied that if that had been the case, the electoral votes should go to Wirt, "whose moral character," one anti-Masonic newspaper article of the time read, "was fair, rather than to Mr. Clay, whose days and nights had been spent in a brothel." In preaching virtues of cosmopolitanism over localism, Masonry was a place for men (transplanted from their homes in search of work) to enjoy society outside of the constraints of church. At the same time, it legitimizes a society designed exclusively for males and pursued outside the feminine confines of the home.

As politician Thurlow Weed noted at the time, the anti-Masonic sentiment was strong among farmers and weak in villages, "especially among the wealthy and influential classes," but one must be cautious in assuming that this always translated into poor versus rich. Anti-Masons were not necessarily poor or angry farmers. In Genesee County, for instance, the party's electoral power lay in the most economically prosperous townships. Similarly, Massachusetts Anti-Masons were often quite successful and ambitious.

In fact, Anti-Masonry was grounded in value shifts that cut across economic lines in a commercializing republic. It was this explosive combination of Puritan religious fundamentalism and dramatic change in the way one organized one's or one's work life and leisure—forces that were absent in the South and the frontier—that produced the Anti-Masonry phenomenon. Additionally, a populist component surfaced in western New York in which tenants joined the anti-Masons in order to fight against absentee landlords, as the Democratic party in New York was controlled by these landlords and ignored the concerns of renters.

According to many historians, then, the Morgan incident was merely the spark that started the anti-Masonry fire, which burned under the controlled direction of clever political leaders such as Weed, William Seward, Thaddeus Stevens, and Millard Fillmore. They faced a difficult job placating the extremists of the movement who wanted to destroy Masonry completely while channeling the reformist impulse within the membership toward the creation of a genuine political alternative to the Democrats.

GEOGRAPHICAL EXTENT OF ANTI-MASONRY

The center of anti-Masonry remained western New York and western and southern Pennsylvania, and it was from these regions that its great politicians and organizers emerged. Anti-Masonry was understood to be, as the Pennsylvania Patriot wrote in 1830, "a Yankee concern from the beginning." With some exceptions such as the German sectarian in Pennsylvania and New York, the Scotch-Irish Presbyterians of
Pennsylvania, and the Quakers, anti-Masonic drew its strength along the path of New England emigration. Most of its leaders were of New England extraction. Most of the anti-Masonic newspapers were under New England editors. In addition to Pennsylvania and New York, political anti-Masonry achieved varying degrees of success in the Western Reserve of Ohio, Rhode Island, Vermont, and all but northeastern Massachusetts. Anti-Masonry was almost completely absent from New Hampshire and Maine and was but a small presence in New Jersey.

ANTI-MASON'S AND CATHOLICISM

As for issues beyond mere opposition to Freemasonry, the Anti-Masonic party was barely distinguishable from the National Republicans on most issues, in both state and national contests. Like the National Republicans, they supported the American system (internal improvements, protective tariffs), favored recharter of the Bank of the United States, supported Indian rights, and were outraged by Jackson's support of Georgia's Cherokee removal policy, which ignored the Supreme Court ruling in favor of the Indians. Anti-Masonry leaders often championed women's rights as well.

The main difference with the National Republicans lay in the fact that the Anti-Masons remained more evangelically and morally oriented; they were, to put it simply, antislavery teetotalers. According to many Anti-Masons, Henry Clay, the National Republican candidate for president in 1832, was morally corrupt. He was a slaveowner, a Mason, a duelist, and a drunker; his politics could hardly make up for these personal defects.

Because these sentiments were associated almost exclusively with evangelical Protestantism, some anti-Masons drifted into anti-Catholicism as well. Fillmore was one among a number of prominent anti-Masons who filled the ranks of the nativist Know-Nothing party in reaction to the "rum and Romanism" increasingly associated with the Democratic party. The Irish Catholics and the New York Dutch resented both Anti-Masonic and Whig (Protestantism and Yankee) proscriptions, which drove them into the Democratic party. Still, there were divisions in the anti-Masonic ranks on the question of Catholicism. While Weed and Seward had hoped to recruit immigrants into the Whig party, Fillmore held out little hope for that strategy, believing that immigrants would never join.

In state politics, Anti-Masons specialized in opposing everything the Democrats proposed, except in Massachusetts and Rhode Island, where they allied with the Democrats against the National Republicans. In New York politics, Anti-Masons allied with the National Republicans against the Albany Regency, a group that ran New York State government, to attack the militia system (rich men could afford the twelve-dollar fine for absenteeism), to support internal improvements (popular in the western counties), and to fight efforts to raise tolls on the Erie Canal. They favored rechartering of the national bank, arguing that state banks were more susceptible to corruption and political manipulation. Unfortunately for the Anti-Masons, the national bank was mistrusted by the great mass of voters; most supported Jackson's veto of the recharter.

In his autobiography, Seward claims that Anti-Masons supported the 1831 bill that abolished imprisonment for debt, while the Jacksonians divided on it and yielded only to "the rising tide of popular feeling." Indeed, while Weed's paper applauded the legislation banning imprisonment, the Albany Argus, the paper of the Democrats, belittled the importance of the ban. But imprisonment for debt was of great concern to western New Yorkers, where, for instance in Monroe County, there was one imprisoned debtor for each of ten families in the year prior to the passage of this bill. Nor was it forgotten that Morgan met his fate while imprisoned in a debtor's cell.

Anti-Masonic electoral success was a function of the lack of a competitive two-party system and the absence of strong party attach-
ments. In the fall of 1827, fifteen Anti-Masons were elected to the New York assembly, which was said to astonish even the Masons themselves and wake up other politicians to the new movement's growing political power. The next year, five Anti-Masons were elected to the state senate and seventeen to the assembly. For the first time, one could speak of a significant Anti-Masonic presence in the legislature. But in many elections in New York, the Anti-Masons would come to play the role of spoiler. In the 1828 gubernatorial election, Martin Van Buren beat out the National Republican candidate because of the presence of a significant Anti-Masonic candidate who siphoned votes away from the latter.

The Anti-Masons made significant gains elsewhere as well. In the 1832 Pennsylvania elections, eight Anti-Masons were elected to Congress, and thirty-two (out of a body of 100) were elected to the state house. In Vermont, William Palmer was elected for three successive years as an Anti-Masonic governor, while the party held a majority in both the house and council. In Massachusetts, three state senators and somewhere between twenty and twenty-five assemblymen were elected on the Anti-Masonic ticket; by 1831, Anti-Masons held 150 seats in the lower house, out of a total of 490.

In 1833, John Quincy Adams ran for governor of Massachusetts on the Anti-Masonic ticket. But when the four-way contest went to the legislature, Adams withdrew his name in order to unite the National Republicans and Anti-Masons. Indeed, Adams was unacceptable to those Masons who were National Republicans, as his views about Masonry were well known. In his diary, Adams wrote, "It is a matter of curious speculation why such degrading forms, such execrable oaths, and such cannibal penalties should have [been] submitted to by wise, spirited, and virtuous men. It is humiliating to the human character." As for the presidency, the Anti-Masons, confined as they were to a small section of the country, never had a chance. Wirt carried only Vermont in the 1832 contest.

LEGACY OF ANTI-MASONRY

Has anti-Masonry left an imprint on American political culture? How successful was Anti-Masonry in achieving its goals? The anti-Masonic movement, which remained centered in western New York, achieved its principal goal: by 1835, there were only 49 Masonic lodges with 3,000 members, down from 480 lodges in 1825 with 20,000 members. It was a short-lived success, however. On the eve of the Civil War, there were nearly 5,000 lodges in the United States. The revivalist Charles G. Finney tried unsuccessfully in the 1820s and 1830s to warn a new generation about the evils of Masonry. In the Gilded Age, however, his warnings were ignored; the changeover from an agrarian to an industrial society had proceeded too far, making the ideological and social basis for a popular anti-Masonic movement obsolete.

Political anti-Masonry left a bigger mark, having pioneered the popular party-nominating convention for local, state, and federal offices, an innovation soon imitated by the National Republicans and Democrats. It was also the first party to take advantage of technological advances in communication and transportation. There were 141 anti-Masonic newspapers in 1832, published in fifteen states. Anti-Masonic leaders traveled widely to campaign and lecture. Yet anti-Masonry's chief importance in American political history is its role in providing the first solid base for the Whig movement. In addition, Horace Greeley, Weed, and Seward (the antislavery anti-Masons) became the "Conscience Whigs," who, in turn, would later become the progressive core of the antislavery Republican party.

Finally, both the National Republicans and Democrats were surprised and concerned about the sudden electoral strength of the Anti-Masons, and for good reason. The anti-Masonic experience taught a new generation of party leaders about voter mobilization. By the end of 1827, Anti-Masons had elected candidates in town, county, and state races. Anti-Masonry demonstrated the rapidity with which nonvoters could
be mobilized when enthused about a cause—just the phenomenon that writers of state constitutions had feared when they had imposed property qualifications for suffrage and limited the number of directly elected offices.

The anti-Masonic experience illustrates that political culture became a factor in party competition early in the history of American political parties. The Anti-Masonic party was the first Christian-moral political party. Fundamental socioeconomic transformation carries with it uncertainty and trepidation for some people. Activist religions provide an anchor for those people feeling adrift. It is natural that this group would attach itself to a party of civic virtue and republicanism—such as the Anti-Masons—rather than the party of civil liberties and individualism such as the Democrats or the National Republicans.

Laurie Buonanno Lanze

See also: Federalist Party; Millard Fillmore; Know-Nothing Party; National Republican Party; William Henry Seward; Thaddeus Stevens; Whig Party

Bibliography


