

The Morgan Affair offered local intrigue and conspiracy

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Bethinking of Olde Orleans

Arch Merrill in his book *Pioneer Profiles* writes this: "William Morgan was hardly the stuff of which martyrs are made. He was an obscure stonemason — bricklayer, glib, shifty, something of a tippler, a blowhard in his cups, eternally in debt, literate, with a gift for turning a phrase, but no scholar.

"Yet the mysterious disappearance of this nonentity after his abduction from Canandaigua jail on a September night in 1826 plunged the East into turmoil, set brother against brother, drove Masonic Lodges into hiding and spawned a national political party that polled a quarter of a million votes in one election.

"The man who threatened to publish the secrets of Free Masonry was the first Western New Yorker ever "taken for a ride". Did he ride down the Ridge Road in a curtained carriage to his death in the Niagara River? Did murder still his tongue and pen?

Many thought so in 1826. Many believe so today. But no man can say for sure just how or when or where William Morgan died

"In 1825 he was admitted to membership in a chapter of the Royal Arch Masons in LeRoy where he moved that year. Previously he had been admitted to Wells Lodge in Rochester as a visitor, vouched for by an employer. Search by Masonic historians of the records of American and Canadian lodges fail to show any previous Masonic affiliation.

"Morgan's break with the order is said to have originated when he failed to obtain expected work on allege building in LeRoy. Then in 1826 he signed a petition for membership

in a Royal Arch Masons chapter being formed in Batavia. He had moved to that village from Rochester with his wife and two young children.

"Masonic officials seeing Morgan's name on the paper and knowing his reputation as a loose talker in taverns and a "dead beat" were disturbed and ordered his name on the petition smudged out with ink. When Morgan appeared at a meeting of the chapter and was turned away, he was incensed and determined to get even with the fraternity.

He conceived the idea of getting his revenge, and at the same time make some money, by publishing the secrets of the order.

The threat aroused many fanatical members of the fraternity in Western New York. At first they sought to dissuade Morgan and Miller from the threatened publication. When that tack failed they took other steps. On August 9, 1826, this item appeared in the *Canandaigua Messenger*:

"If a man calling himself William Morgan should introduce himself on the community they should be on their guard, particularly the Masonic fraternity. Morgan was in the village on May last and his conduct here and elsewhere calls forth this note ... Morgan is considered a swindler and a dangerous man."

Upon his release from the Canandaigua jail for debt, Morgan was taken for a ride by the Masons. By stage coach he was

brought up Ridge Road and according to legend kept over-night in the Gaines Chapter No. 82 Royal Arch Masonic Lodge. From here Morgan was taken to Lewiston and was never seen again.

Horace Greeley publisher of the *New York Herald Tribune*, became a leading anti-Masonic politician.

At Batavia on Harvester Avenue in the cemetery, there is a large monument erected in Morgan's memory. This was placed there by volunteer contributions from people believing Morgan's First amendment rights of free speech and press had been taken from him by the Masonic Order.

Indeed Morgan had written: "The bane of our civil institutions is to be found in Masonry, already powerful and daily becoming more so. I owe to my country an exposure of its dangers."

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