

## **Lodge Education Program**

Chandler Lodge #138

Date: 10 March 09

The story of William Morgan is an important part of the history of freemasonry. The tale starts in with a small family relocating to Batavia New York, in 1823. William Morgan was an actual operative stonemason, among many other jobs that he had. He was somewhat of a wanderer and most accounts of him indicate he had trouble holding a regular job, and this amounted to money problems. He was also a novice writer, and avid reader. No records can be found to prove that William ever became a freemason, and it is believed he gained access through knowledge contained in various Masonic exposes of the time. Eventually he gained trust and traveled to visit lodges around the Batavia and Rochester NY area. Upon this false blue lodge membership he did in fact become a royal arch mason, and this is what started the problem. William Morgan and a few other fellow royal arch masons petitioned to start a new royal arch chapter in Batavia. Somewhere in this process for reasons unknown Williams signature was deleted, and he was no longer welcome at the lodge, or chapter meetings. The reasons for this dispute are not known, it is not even known if this was the reasoning for his book deal, or if it was just for financial gain.

However what came out of this disagreement lead William Morgan and a local publisher David Miller of the Batavia Advocate to announce and publicly boast about the release of an exposé of the Masonic and Royal Arch secrets. William bragged that he could publish all the secrets, and signs and thus everyone would know what was going on behind closed doors, and aid others in gaining false admission. The masons of Batavia were highly incensed at this boasting, and rejected his plan to denounce them and make money at their expense. On Sept 11 1826 William Morgan was jailed for a debt of 2.68 to Nicholas Cheseboro who at that time was the master of a local lodge. The next day Cheseboro showed up and paid the debt to the jailer; another mason, to have William Morgan released. Upon his exit from the jail he was met by two other masons and abducted him into a waiting carriage. The carriage traveled for many days, and it is known that he arrived at Ft. Niagara NY. Witness' say he was kept there for 5 days, and the last time he was ever seen was on Sept 19, 1826. Rumors of his abduction spread quickly. One scenario is that William made a financial deal to increase publicity of his new book and voluntarily disappeared. Others say the abductors turned him over to Canadian Masons who then insured his demise. Other still say he was taken out in a ferry, weighted and thrown into the Niagara River. Regardless of motive or cause William Morgan was never seen alive again. His partners publishing business was burned to the ground, Morgan's work was not found and published until 1932, as one of over 100 anti-Masonic papers it sold for fifty cents and had virtually no effect on masonry.

Because of the publicity surrounding Morgan's book previous to the kidnapping the tale's of his disappearance spread like wildfire. Although no evidence ever indicted the masons, they were drug into many of the conspiracy theories because of the involvement of local masons and the assistance of other masons, like the jailer or the sheriff of Niagara NY. Even when the captors were sentenced for kidnapping, because they couldn't prove murder with out a body, the judge was a mason and he issued very lenient sentences, all adding fuel to the public outcry. The public was weary of secret organizations and this became their lightning rod, and an avenue to attack the fraternity. Anti-masonry campaigns sprung up everywhere. Lodges shut down, and

members went into hiding. Publicly masons were shunned, banned from churches, and children denied admission to schools. Before the campaign the Grand Lodge of New York had 480 lodges with 20,000 members. At its lowest point it dropped to 75 lodges with about 3000 members. The lodges of Vermont gave up their charters, and even the grand lodge of Vermont stopped meeting. Maryland got as low as thirteen active lodges due to the anti-masonry campaign. The campaign became so large that it nominated a candidate for the presidency of 1828, coincidentally against Andrew Jackson, who was the Grand Master of Tennessee. The governors of Vermont and Pennsylvania and many state senators were elected by the anti-masonry supporters. Much to their dismay Andrew Jackson went on to win the Presidency and by 1835 the public fervor had begun to die, but it took over 20 years for Masonry to regain the numbers and status prior to the Morgan Affair.

For all the trouble Morgan caused for freemasonry at the time, his disruption and its alleged response actually benefited the fraternity. As freemasonry returned it grew in a slow fashioned manner, better structured and managed. The Grand Lodge of New York required members to associate with one primary lodge, and instituted dues. Dues cards were issued to insure 'false masons' could not gain access to lodges. Test oaths and modes of recognition were taught and enforced. The loud drunken gatherings were replaced with formal business like meetings and solemn degree work. Other things outside of masonry were also influenced by the Morgan affair. For instance shortly thereafter the governor of NY upgraded the kidnapping law to a felony offense to insure misdemeanor penalties could not be imposed. Within politics the anti-masonry party first used a nominating convention for selecting their candidate, and every party nomination since 1831 has used this process. The anti-masonry party merged into the Whig party around 1835 and came to power with the election of William Henry Harrison, who only served one month and died in office with never setting the anti Masonic agenda. The last Whig to come to power was Millard Fillmore, and he officially ended the anti-Masonic battle when he invited the Grand Lodge of the District of Columbia to set the cornerstone for the US Capital building extension. The Whig party later went on based in strong principles to abolish slavery and maintain the union by becoming the Republican Party to support and win the election of Abraham Lincoln.

Source:

Lexicon of Freemasonry

Idiots Guide to Freemasonry

Wikipedia