

William Morgan disappeared in 1826 in western New York as he was set to publish the secret rituals of Freemasonry. A firestorm of public protest led to the emergence of the Antimasonry Party, the first third party to nominate a Presidential candidate.

THE BRIGHT MASON / An American Mystery

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THE BRIGHT MASON
An American Mystery

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THE BRIGHT MASON
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Robert Berry

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Chapter One

The Stonemason

"Not all that tempts your wand'ring eyes
And heedless hearts, is lawful prize;
Nor all, that glisters, gold."

-- Thomas Gray

William Morgan had a habit of covering his baldhead by pulling hair over from the side with his fingers, especially when he was excited about something. About 5'6", in his mid-40s, and muscular, Morgan had a barrel chest thickly matted with hair and tufts of curly gray hair sprouting from his ears. Tattoos on his arms led some to believe he had traveled with pirates in the Caribbean. Much of the time his eyes were swollen; a condition for which he often received treatment while living in Rochester.

Morgan was born in Virginia in 1774, served in the Army in New Orleans during the War of 1812, and later was trained as a stonemason. He married Lucinda Pendleton, the 16-year old daughter of a Methodist minister in Culpepper County, Virginia, in 1819.

Morgan worked in Virginia as a stonemason for two years and when he had accumulated sufficient funds, he and wife immigrated to York, Canada, now Ontario, where Morgan built and operated a brewery. After operating the brewery for a year, he lost everything in a fire. Penniless, he and his wife moved to Rochester, N.Y. in 1822. Morgan returned to his craft, finding work as a stonemason on construction of the Erie Canal aqueduct over the Genesee River.

He was an operative mason skilled in bricklaying and construction with stone. He presented himself as a speculative Mason knowledgeable in the rites and history of Freemasonry. Nothing is known of how he came by his craft or his education. What little is attributed to his past became available after he disappeared and therefore is colored by the person giving the description. Depending

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on how one felt about the disappearance, he was either a hero or martyr who was denied basic civil rights, or he was disloyal, disorderly, and dissipated.

How Morgan came by the title "Captain" has not been determined. His champions said he earned it fighting with Andrew Jackson at New Orleans in the celebrated defeat of the British; however, independent researchers of the time said there was no War Department record of a William Morgan being an officer, although there were several soldiers with that name. Defenders of Morgan's virtue verified that he married Lucinda in Virginia. In describing Morgan, Samuel Greene, a neighbor and Lodge brother in Batavia, said, without qualification, that Morgan earned his title of Captain while serving with General Jackson at New Orleans.¹ According to investigating journalist William Stone, Morgan told one acquaintance he fought in many battles south of the Potomac River and was a private.²

A contemporary of Morgan, Robert Morris, said he and other Masons suspected Morgan was British by birth, served with the British in the War of 1812, and was made a Mason in Canada. As recently as 1958, a report to the Canadian Masonic Research Association stated there is a record of the initiation of a William Morgan in 1815, describing him as a branch pilot in the ports of New Brunswick.³ Were this true, it might account for the title. More importantly, it is certain Morgan would not admit to fighting for the enemy of those for whom the war was still a fresh memory.

Samuel Greene provided many first-hand details of the events surrounding Morgan's disappearance in his autobiography, *The Broken Seal*. The book was written some forty years after Morgan's disappearance. In the years after Morgan disappeared, Greene toured the New England Antimasonry lecture circuit giving his first-person account of the events. If talk-radio were available in the 1830's, Greene would have been a regular.

Greene grew up in Leicester, Massachusetts the son of a Baptist minister. He was a bright student and taught at the district school at the age of seventeen. After two years at Brown University he continued teaching, married and had two children. In 1816, at age

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28, he followed many other New Englanders seeking a new life on the western frontier. His first enterprise was the Brick Tavern in Pembroke, on the road to Buffalo about eleven miles west of Batavia, the Genesee County seat. He moved to Batavia in 1822 and opened the County Inn, a boarding house that included a private Presbyterian female school.

The one thing on which all the writers agree about William Morgan is that he drank liquor, a lot, and often. His degree of imbibing varies with the author describing him. On the one hand we have Samuel Greene, a fellow Lodge member who received instruction in Masonic ritual from Morgan. Greene's autobiography describes Morgan this way:

In later years the Masons charged him with being a drunkard, but in my judgment, without reason. He was doubtless a convivial man, and at times would drink freely, according to the fashions of the day. I myself have seen him when he had been drinking more than was good for him; but he was not what, in the general acceptance of the word at that time, or at any time, would be called a drunkard. It was the period of hard and general drinking, and certainly it ill becomes Freemasons to charge men on this score, for no body of men among us have done more, from generation to generation, to promote drinking habits than they.⁴

A New York City journalist of the period, William Stone, later published the numerous letters he exchanged with John Quincy Adams on Masonry, Antimasonry, and the "Morgan Excitement." Stone was a Mason who was critical of excesses of both Masons and Antimasons. Stone said Morgan did not fit the legal definition of a drunkard, which held that a person had to be intoxicated half the time. That said, Stone reports:

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He [Morgan] was continually mingling 'hot rebellious liquors with his blood' – his nights and sometimes his days also, were spent at tippling houses; while, occasionally, to the still greater neglect of his family, he joined in the drunken carousals of the vilest and most worthless of men. His disposition was envious, malicious, and vindictive.⁵

Taken together, Stone and Greene give a picture of the period and place in which Morgan lived, if not agreeing on the limits of Morgan's drinking habits. "The temperance question was nonexistent in 1825. Three years later it was a middle-class obsession."⁶ Liquor in the workplace was common. Newspapers editorialized against intemperance; however, it was not generally a political issue and those who made it one were not elected. Because of their size, taverns were multi-purpose buildings; in addition to providing room and board to travelers, they offered space for community meetings, worship services, trials, and elections.

Nonetheless, attitudes about strong drink were changing in and around Rochester. Where dram breaks, a workman's perk, were common at one time, in the 1820s businessmen were beginning to be concerned about the effects of strong drink on production. As a consequence, the world of the wage earner was becoming a world apart from the merchants and shop masters. Drinking became "an angry badge of working-class status."

Paul Johnson describes the change in his book *A Shopkeepers Millennium*. "It was not only the need for clearheaded calculation at work but the new ethos of bourgeois family life that drove businessmen away from the bottle. Sullen and disrespectful employees, runaway husbands, paupers, Sabbath breakers, brawlers, theatergoers: middle-class minds joined them [wage earners] in the image of a drink-crazed proletariat."⁷

After work, master and wage earner retreated further into worlds of their own. William Morgan fell into a low class despite his pretentious dressing a little above his station. As part of the Erie

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Canal, the Rochester aqueduct was an enormous construction project involving a stone structure that passed sixty-five feet above the Genesee River below the falls. Many of the workers were Irish immigrants who had worked on construction of the Erie Canal and settled in Rochester, establishing a community east of the river. Morgan's background and experience set him apart from the others at work.

In the course of his work in Rochester, Morgan became acquainted with a construction supervisor who was a Freemason and member of the Rochester Lodge. Col. Nathaniel Rochester, his sons, and sons-in-law, formed the Lodge with close business associates. While there is no evidence Morgan attended the Rochester Lodge, it appears Morgan convinced the supervisor he belonged to the craft and was eligible to receive a bit of Masonic charity. When winter set in that year, construction was suspended and Morgan spent more time in taverns. In the spring of 1823 he returned to the construction project. When the aqueduct was completed later that year, Morgan became an itinerant stonemason, following the work around the region in a 50-mile radius. His Masonic acquaintance from the canal aqueduct project gave him a contact in Batavia, thirty miles south and west of Rochester, where he found work as superintendent of construction for a brick house.

In August 1824 Morgan wrote a mournful letter to his wife, Lucinda. "I have suffered much since I left you both in body and mind. I have by no means recd. any relief--The darkness of my prospects robs my mind, and extreme misery my body of all earthly comfort." Morgan's despair was two-fold. Lucinda, still in Rochester, had recently given birth to a daughter with difficulty and the baby's health was of great concern. Morgan was not able to return from Batavia as he was recovering from an injury. "I cannot say with certainty when I shall be able to return if ever. I have made no arrangement to get by which I can raise any money, nor can I do it without making a great sacrifice--It is not all gold that glitters."⁸

In a letter to Lucinda from Batavia dated September 4, 1824, Morgan lamented at length on the death of their daughter and said his doctor advised him he was too feeble to travel to Rochester. Toward

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the end of the letter, he gave instructions for getting some tools to Brockport where he expected to work when his health improved. Morgan was then convalescing at the home of Batavia builder Nathum Loring for whom he had been working.

Later in 1824, Morgan's prospects improved. In a November 28, 1824 letter from Batavia to a friend he said: "I am certain this is a better place for Mechanicks than Rochester . . . and there are not men enough to do the business of the place."⁹ Morgan and his wife moved to a boarding house in Batavia.

A smaller village than Rochester, Batavia was nevertheless very busy as it lay on the stagecoach route between Albany and Buffalo. In 1812, it was the end of the stage line from Albany. It was the home of the Holland Land Company, the Dutch owners/developers of the land from the Genesee River to Buffalo between Lake Ontario and the Pennsylvania boarder. Batavia grew to become the governmental seat of Genesee County, an expansive tract that later was subdivided into other counties as the population grew. The first stone building erected in Batavia was the office of the Holland Land Company. It was believed that stone construction was safer from destruction by fire.

A resident of this period said Batavia was a major military post in the War of 1812 and in the 1820s retained some of that character despite the three church steeples.¹⁰ By 1825, there were three newspapers, each representing local political factions aligned with state factions. Among the local stores was C.C. Church's Military Goods, Jewelry & Company providing side arms, muskets, swords, uniforms [with "a great variety of epaulettes"] and "feathers of all kinds." In addition, they sold "elegant watches from \$2 to \$50" and busts of Gen. Lafayette. It had a court, dry goods stores, blacksmiths, and small factories that included a wagon making shop and a chair factory advertising "Fancy and Windsor Chairs." The Postmaster would publish a list of the names of people with letters waiting to be picked up. The post office also sold lottery tickets offering a prize of \$500.¹¹

Before shipping from the East shifted to the Erie Canal, most goods were transported by large wagons pulled by teams of four

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horses with Batavia as a stopover. It was about fifty miles west of Canandaigua, a major stop on the route. Transients were common. Batavia residents accepted that teamsters would be unwinding after days on the rutted turnpike. One of the social problems was the behavior of the teenagers. Letters to the editor decried the raucousness of the youths. Some letters registered alarm at the physical and verbal abuse boys on the street inflicted on passersby. One letter in winter complained about youth-filled sleigh rides that went on until 3 a.m. "They were packed in neck and heels like African slaves . . . girls should not be participating."¹²

A letter to *The People's Press* signed by A VILLAGER called for banning "the dangerous practice of firing Crackers in the streets." The writer concluded: "Would not the Corporation by restraining this dangerous practice, better serve the interest of the citizens, than by expending their funds in posting boards at the corner of the streets to designate their names? Our streets are not so numerous and extensive, that there is much danger of even a stranger getting lost in them without this precaution."¹³

Despite the general economic progress of Batavia, the lack of stone or brick construction at times, particularly in winter, meant Morgan was without income for long periods of time. Harassed by debt, he had been sent to jail for short periods for failure to pay a debt and he turned to fraternity brothers for support.

Morgan did not fit the profile of a typical Mason in Genesee County, had no documentation of previous membership, and yet was accepted to membership, given prominent roles, and received Masonic charities. His reputation as "a good talker" and "a bright Mason" carried him far.

Part of the Post-Revolutionary spread of Masonry was the desire to make Lodge meetings and ritual uniform. The Grand Lodge would appoint "lecturers" to travel from Lodge to Lodge giving instruction. On the frontier, it was rare to have a lecturer attend Lodge meetings and the members had to rely on their own members to maintain the uniformity. William Morgan's ability to recite ritual, demonstrate proper movements, and provide Masonic lore led to his label as a bright Mason. Although not designated a lecturer by the

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Grand Lodge of New York, Morgan was appointed to that role in the Batavia Lodge.

Samuel Greene relates in his biography that Morgan lectured him after he took the first degree. "He went over with me, at the dead of night, the long farrago of nonsense necessary to be gone through with in order to advance in Masonic knowledge. I was committing these forms of words to memory to be used at the Lodge in taking the second and third degrees, and he was acting as my guide and teacher."¹⁴

Although Masons list charity as one the obligations of members, it was charity limited to members and their families. The fraternity's charity went beyond helping in catastrophes such as barn fires or supporting the wife and children of a member who died. Support was offered during periods when work was not available. Historian Dorothy Ann Lipson offers this description:

Minimally, Masonic membership offered the many pleasures of fraternal conviviality. The rituals and ceremonies of the Lodge were sources of exotic experience, and the lectures and libraries seemed to promise a new source of special information and self-education. Masonic charity was an insurance policy for its members and their families that was more freely and routinely available in time of need than civic or Christian charity. Holding membership equipped the Masons with access, by password, to similar groups in distant places throughout much of their relevant world. Freemasonry linked its members in a far-flung network of shared values and stable standards of association on which they could rely in spite of movement and change.¹⁵

British-raised Freemasons among the colonists formed Lodges in America and Canada under the jurisdiction of Grand Lodge

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of England. Later a Grand Lodge was chartered in Massachusetts. Freemasonry, in Post-Revolutionary America changed dramatically. The anti-aristocratic sentiment in America was reflected in Masonic Lodge membership as it was open to craftsmen, professionals, and entrepreneurs. As the Lodges grew in number, their stature rose with increased charitable activities. Lodges also spread with the westward movement providing itinerant businessmen and preachers with a place to go where they would be greeted as “brother.”

Following the Revolution, there had been local outbursts against secret societies in general among several religious denominations. Freemasons, prominent in the new government, received special denunciation. Roman Catholics were forbidden to join Freemason Lodges in a papal bull issued by Pope Clement XIII in 1738. The issues of secret rites and extra-judicial oaths caused some Protestant clergy who were members to drop membership, voluntarily, or at the urging of congregations. For many Protestants, taking an extra-judicial oath was seen as contrary to civil law and, more importantly, flew in the face of the divine command to “Swear not at all.” Among these were the Baptists, Quakers, Lutherans, Mennonites, Methodists and Presbyterians. Today, some of these groups accept members who join Masonic Lodges.

According to New York historian Clarence Lewis, there were 600,000 Masons nationwide in the early nineteenth century. More than half of the political office holders in New York were Freemasons. The western New York Lodges had small cores of loyal, active members. Some recruiting took place. Many of these recruits, drawn perhaps by curiosity or seeking a social outlet, took just one degree and left the Lodge; some moving on west, others disenchanted with the work of the Lodge.

Evangelistic denominations condemned the society from the start. That it was a secret society cast suspicion on Masonry. However, the main objection was that many leaders of the fraternity were Deists, Universalists, or Jeffersonian-Republicans, or a combination of these. In New England, leaders of the Congregational Church saw the anticlerical elements of Masonry as a force in disestablishment of the church wherein the clergy were no longer

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supported by state funding through payments to churches to operate schools with the minister as the headmaster.

Speculative Masonry has its roots in England during the Enlightenment. It emphasized a moralistic system based on reason, not revelation, natural Christianity as opposed to revealed Christianity. For those Christians who believe their church is the one true church, Freemasonry appears blasphemous. According to Bullock, Evangelicals attacked Freemasons for “the promiscuous mixing of the converted and the unconverted.” The religious tolerance expressed by Freemasons is indicated by the fact that the only requirements for membership are a confessed belief in God and moral behavior.

The Antimasonry in western New York followed from the New England crusade in the 1790’s that was led by Dr. Jedidiah Morse, Jr., a Congregational minister in Connecticut, who viewed the Freemasons as “infidels.” He lumped them with liberal denominations that were considered “heretics.” Morse later confessed his anger was more related to the Illuminati in Europe than Masons in America.

Most of the people in the area of Batavia were New England immigrants. It was common for the Masons among them to carry documentation of Masonic membership or to have local members vouch for previous membership in New England. Identification cards were not common and admission to a new Lodge could be gained if one could satisfy an examination committee that he was a ‘bright Mason.’”

The Batavia Masonic Lodge had been chartered in 1817 as Lodge No. 433. The typical member was a non-evangelical businessman who may also have been a veteran of the War of 1812. A study of history of Genesee County Lodges by Kathleen Smith Kutolowski reports that the Batavia and LeRoy Lodges had distinctive types among their members. At least half the members were Episcopalians. Some members were pastors or communicants of Evangelistic Baptist or Presbyterian churches; however, their numbers were small. This representation was the converse of the general population in Genesee County as the Baptists were predominant, followed by the Presbyterians.

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There is a sharp contrast also in the occupations of Masons compared with the area in general. “Over four-fifths of Batavia, LeRoy, and Warsaw Masons were engaged in the professions and business at the a time when some ninety-three percent of Genesee County’s work force made its living on farms. Occupation, not location, would seem to have been the key variable.”¹⁶ At the same time, Kutolowski reports that Lodge members did not include the wealthiest of the region, such as the leaders of the Holland Land Company. Kutolowski goes on to offer that not only did businessmen and professionals seek to benefit from the contacts but also were the most likely to have the time and capital to be Masons. Fees were charged for initiation, annual dues, and admission to higher degrees. In addition, there was the cost of “conviviality” after meetings and at festivals.

Historian Paul Goodman describes early Nineteenth Century Masonry as “very much a young man’s institution” where young men made contacts as they started out in a career or business. “Becoming a Freemason was akin to a rite of passage by which young males affirmed their independence from women and the domestic universe. Because many women disapproved of Masonry, going against common feminine opinion defied the claims of domesticity. When a son joined his father’s Lodge, therefore, he was siding with his own sex in the battle of the sexes.”¹⁷

Regarding politics, Kutolowski reports that Masons were also involved in politics for the same reasons, time and money: “Fully half of the county’s pre-1822 office holders (including fourteen of seventeen assemblymen and senators) belonged to Lodges.” Contrary to later Antimasonry criticisms, Masons were not of one party and had about equal representation in both the Bucktail and Clintonian factions. According to Kutolowski, Masons were rarely in leadership positions. Another dimension to Masonic membership and politics is the participation of militia officers: “one-third of the 320 Masons studied held militia commissions, frequently serving together in units located in strong Lodge areas. It mattered little whether officers received commissions through political appointments (prior to 1822) or whether units elected their own officers under the new state

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constitution of 1821.”¹⁸

William Morgan had none of these typical characteristics: he had no outward signs of a moral compass, no military commission that squared with records, no political interests, and no reliable source of income to offer as support to Lodge or to buy drinks after meetings. And yet, he was accepted. What is more, Morgan received Masonic charity. “Passing the hat” was common after a Morgan lecture.

On trips to LeRoy, twenty-six miles east of Batavia, Morgan became acquainted with Major James Ganson. Ganson was prominent in the region having founded the village of LeRoy. He had been a state legislator, and sheriff of Genesee County. Ganson was also active in the higher degrees of Masonry and had ties with the Rochester Lodge. Ganson was responsible for Morgan becoming a Royal Arch Mason by avouching for Morgan’s knowledge of previous degrees. On March 31, 1825, the Masons at LeRoy accepted Morgan into higher degrees. He declared on oath that he received the previous six degrees in regular manner and thereafter was made a Royal Arch Mason in Western Star Chapter No. 33.¹⁹

William Stone describes how Morgan was successful on such a path:

Too indolent to dig, he nevertheless was not ashamed to beg – at least from his Masonic brethren, and what his scanty earning lacked in affording him an indifferent and precarious support, was made up by Masonic charities, - in devising means to procure which, he was remarkably ingenious. It is one of the faults of the institution, that it not unfrequently [sic] produces just such oracles of its wisdom -- cunning and artful men, having an air of the shabby-genteel; -- with colloquial powers rather above the ordinary range of uneducated persons; -- while at the same time, it furnishes enough of weaker brethren, to form a listening circle,

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sufficient in numbers to add to the imaginary importance of the oracles, and happy in the privilege of contributing to the temporal wants of such traveling luminaries.²⁰

The Lodge in LeRoy was the most active in the area with meetings nearly every evening. Plans were underway for construction of the new building to accommodate the Knights Templar. Batavia attorney, Henry Brown described the construction in an 1829 report on the excitement to U.S. Secretary of State Martin Van Buren, leader of New York's Bucktail Party. Brown said:

In the settlement of a new country, the Spaniard, we are told, erects first a church -- the Frenchman a ballroom, and the Yankee a tavern. The Masons, however, in LeRoy, a place of no ordinary celebrity, supposing it would be good economy to unite the three in one, it is said, first erected a Lodge: of this however, we speak only from report.²¹

The Round House was never completed as the Lodge was forced to return its charter and sell the building under pressure from Antimasonry excitement after Morgan's disappearance. Brown reports that up that time the Lodge was very successful, "the members ambitious to extend Masonry far and wide."²²

Major Ganson, and other Masons, had some concerns that Morgan could not produce documentation of his prior membership. There was also the matter of Morgan's dissolute habits, of which the fraternity members were becoming more keenly aware. Morgan had believed he would be working on the new Masonic building at LeRoy but Ganson declined to hire him and his relationship with Major Ganson began to sour.

Early in 1826, charter petitions were issued for a Royal Arch chapter and a Knights Templar Commandery in Rochester followed by petitioning a Royal Arch chapter in LeRoy. Subsequently, Royal

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Arch Masons of Batavia applied to the Grand Chapter of the state for a charter. Many of the applicants did not want Morgan on the application; however, someone apparently did not know about not wanting Morgan and presented it to him. Morgan gladly signed, as he would then become a member upon approval of the charter. The leaders of the project tore up the petition, prepared a new one and submitted it to the Grand Chapter. After the charter was approved, Morgan learned his name was not on it. Now he could become a member only by unanimous consent of the members and he knew that would not happen. Masons also ceased providing charitable family funds on the grounds of his drunkenness. He raged against the fraternity in the taverns to anyone who would listen saying he would bring them down by exposing their secrets.

Masons turned their backs on Morgan and gave little credence to his exhortations about exposing Masonic secrets. It was not out of the ordinary for Masons to expel members for excessive drinking or for not paying dues. Morgan's excessive drinking by itself was sufficient to have him expelled. However, the fact that he could not document his initiation into Freemasonry was a larger concern. Major Ganson, who avouched for Morgan's entry into the Royal Arch Lodge, had the additional resentment of personal embarrassment.

Journalist William Stone contends that Morgan intended to publish his Masonic writings earlier in Rochester, prior to the time of his rebuff by Masons in Batavia. At one point in the spring of 1825, nearly a year previous, Morgan stayed at a Masonic hotel in Rochester. He was writing about Freemasonry and "was often closeted with a man of considerable talents, and some scholarship, who had been expelled from the fraternity the preceding year, for a breach of his Masonic faith, in writing and exhibiting certain Masonic matters that were then supposed to be unwritten."²³ Stone never identifies the man saying the information about the man came from a conversation with a friend of Stone who was a Mason.

And this was not the only contact Morgan had with someone who had written about Freemasonry. The editor and publisher of the *Batavia Republican Advocate* had habits much like Morgan's and it is no stretch to believe they became acquainted while in Danold's

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Tavern. Certainly the *Batavia Republican Advocate's* editor, David C. Miller would have been keenly interested in Morgan's threats against the fraternity; he had a few resentments of his own.

Col. David C. Miller had lived in Batavia for several years and was moderately successful publishing the *Batavia Republican Advocate*. His use of the title Colonel appears to have been a little overblown. Miller was a volunteer in the New York militia serving for two months on the staff of Major General Peter Porter in 1814 as a Quartermaster Sergeant.²⁴ He moved to Batavia in November 1814, a month after leaving the militia. Miller, not liked in Batavia, was described as "a man of respectable talents, but of irreligious character, great laxity of moral principle, and of intemperate habits."²⁵

The *Batavia Republican Advocate* was a four-page, five column weekly newspaper, edited and published by Miller. He operated from the second-floor offices of two buildings about fifteen feet apart. Up to mid-1825, the paper had numerous advertisements for local and area businesses, sheriff's notices, the Post Office list of letters being held, political announcements, pleas for bills to be paid, and notices of runaway boys. Early in 1825, Miller announced that the publication would improve the quality of paper and expand from five to six columns. Much of the copy was a reprinting of articles from other newspapers; the front page devoted to serialization of a story published in New York City newspapers. Another common practice was publishing notices of Masons expelled from Lodges for "unmasonic" actions, which could be anything from not paying dues to imprisonment for crimes committed.

The split among Governor Clinton supporters trickled down to the smaller towns and Batavia was among them. The Batavia newspaper readership was already divided between the *Advocate* and the *Spirit of the Times*. The latter had been printing since 1817, was supported by the Bucktail Party and promoted Van Buren followers for county offices. The two papers engaged in political attacks on each other's candidates and had many of the same advertisers.

In 1825, Miller had a falling out with political friends over the People's Party. A rival newspaper, *The People's Press*, was established causing Miller to lose patronage, such as sheriff's notices

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for property sales to satisfy debts. The estrangement of these former political partners grew acrimonious as time passed. They traded barbs on political issues that were illustrative of the split among Clinton supporters. One such issue was Miller's support of "self-nominations" for county offices and an end to the nomination caucus wherein one faction tended to dominate. A year later *The People's Press* would take up the issue of Miller's involvement with publishing Morgan's book, belittling the publication more than defending Masonry. However, the editor's main focus was Miller's drinking habits. Miller, on the other hand, would question the competency of office holders such as Sheriff Thompson, a member of the People's Party.

Miller's first association with Freemasonry occurred some twenty years earlier when he lived in Saratoga. Masons in Albany heard that Miller was preparing to reprint a new edition of *Jachin and Boaz*-- a British publication of Masonic rituals. The Albany Masons invited Miller to join the Lodge, hoping his inclusion would forestall the publication. In taking the first degree he learned that it was the same as the material he proposed to publish. According to Samuel Greene, Miller did not take the next degree, being "disgusted, rather than pleased."²⁶ As Miller shared those sentiments with Greene in 1826, Miller apparently neglected to mention also that the Freemasons in Batavia, several years earlier, had refused his attempt at further advancement in the craft.

Taken together, Miller's dwindling financial fortunes and contentious history with the Masons made him a ready partner for Morgan. According to Greene, "Captain Morgan, therefore, when he wished to publish abroad the secrets of Masonry, found Colonel Miller a man ready to cooperate with him."²⁷

Chapter Two Thurlow Weed

“Newspapers and newsmen have been troublemakers in American history almost from the first creaking of a press in New England nearly three centuries ago.”

--Robert Rutland, *The Newsmongers*

Thurlow Weed also resettled in Rochester in 1822. As with William Morgan, Weed was nearly penniless, with a wife and child, full of hope for a new start. Weed had worked in printing shops since he was fourteen. Now twenty-five, Weed was not only tall, at six feet one inch, but also had broad shoulders and was muscular from the physically demanding work of the printing. It is work that required two vigorous pulls on the press for every sheet printed. However, hard work did not guarantee success. Weed had been forced to look for work because of politics. He had convinced himself that in the fast growing mill town of Rochester with a population of 3,000 he would achieve the success that had eluded him. A friend suggested he apply for work with Everard Peck, a printer/publisher in Rochester.

In fact, Weed was so optimistic he never expected to be rejected so curtly by publisher Everard Peck. Peck, in a busy off-handed way, told Weed he had no openings for a journeyman printer. Peck's rejection cut Weed to the bone. He was making his way slowly to the staircase of the second floor print shop when suddenly Peck called him back just as abruptly as he had dismissed him.

They spoke for a while then Peck offered Weed \$400 a year to become a printer and junior editor. The change in Peck's attitude seemed to be motivated more by charity than for business considerations. Peck, at age thirty-one, was not far removed from Weed's circumstance. In the previous two years, Weed operated two small country printing offices and both failed. It was not the first time

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his politics had been tested. Prior to that he was fired from the *Albany Argus* for supporting DeWitt Clinton. Weed remained an ardent supporter of Governor Clinton and Peck was one of the pro-Clinton leaders in Rochester.

It was October 1822. The Erie Canal section between Syracuse and Rochester had recently been completed. Plans were underway to water the canal from nearby streams. After years of editorializing in support of the canal construction, being among the first to enter Rochester on a packet boat, no doubt, held a certain symbolic value for Weed.

He had closed the *Manlius Republican* when he lost the patronage of the sheriff, who bought handbill printing for debtor sales. Van Buren's Bucktails had won the recent legislative election in the district, appointed a new sheriff, and the sheriff's patronage was given to another printer. Also lost was Weed's appointment by Governor Clinton as Commissioner of Deeds for Onondaga County and its \$2-\$3 a week income. The voters in Onondaga County voted against the Governor's candidate for sheriff to express resentment over construction of the canal in the north, and subsequent loss of trade.

Weed's loss was a common occurrence as newspapers at this time were usually party organs that received a subsistence income from government printing. Political parties relied on favorite newspapers to send their message out or, more often, to attack an opponent. In return, the parties sent business to the printers. The *Albany Argus*, an instrument of Martin Van Buren and the Bucktails, held the state printing contract and was the primary form of communicating with the party regulars.

As a Clinton supporter, Peck was in competition with area newspapers that supported Martin Van Buren's Bucktail faction. Weed's support of Clinton played a role in his getting hired. Weed's experience of having operated two rural newspapers, in addition to having worked for newspapers in Albany, and for one year in New York City, was sufficient to make him a reliable contributor despite his lack of formal education. A Weed biographer describes Peck as being not much interested in the "hurley-burley of political

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journalism.”¹ Perhaps Weed’s passion for politics was seen to be a valuable addition to the editorial staff. It would also give Peck more time to devote to his bookstore. Many immigrants to Rochester were literate, schooled in New England, and had a voracious appetite for literature and religious tracts.

Among his accomplishments as a successful printer, Everard Peck did more than print a newspaper and broadsides, a popular one-sheet exposition on a special topic. Peck established the first bookstore in Rochester with the printing office on the second floor of the building. He printed the first locally published book in Rochester. In 1819, Peck reprinted William Kenrick’s *Whole Duty of Woman*, a favorite from the 1790s that “counseled women to be modest, pious, chaste, industrious, frugal, and submissive.”²

Early settlers helping those who followed was a common practice on the frontier. However, Peck went beyond giving Weed employment. The house Peck arranged for Weed to rent was not quite finished by November. Peck and his family welcomed Thurlow, his wife Catherine, and baby Harriet into their home for a few days. Peck then stocked the new house with wood and pork. This was great improvement over the move to Manlius a year earlier when the Weed family lived on bread and butter for eight days until Thurlow could complete his first contract of handbills.³

The new home was on a street that had logs lying in it to keep the coaches and wagons from sinking in the mud. In his memoirs, Weed said Fitzhugh Street ran northward from Buffalo Street. It was “a rough, swampy thoroughfare, skirted by narrow footpaths on either side, with huge logs lying in the middle to keep wagons or stage coaches, from sinking in the mud.”⁴

Charity was more than act of occasional friendliness for the Pecks. The Pecks were known for their charitable acts. The women of the Presbyterian and Episcopal churches in Rochester had been raised in communities where charitable actions were a common activity for women. In the decade to follow, many women’s reform movements would have their beginning in Western New York and, often as not, the seeds of those reform movements were being sowed in Rochester in the 1820’s. For instance, in 1848 the Seneca Falls Convention took

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place in the eastern end of what later came to be called the “Infected District” and in 1852 Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton would initiate the women’s suffrage movement in Rochester

The wives and daughters of the early Rochester entrepreneurs worked closely; the men did not. The Female Charitable Society membership came from both Presbyterian and Episcopal churches. In February of 1822, a few months after the Weeds arrived, Everard Peck’s wife hosted a meeting of fourteen women, Presbyterian and Episcopal, who formed the Female Charitable Society to aid the sick and poor.⁵ Women's studies researcher Nancy Hewitt describes the society:

The Female Charitable Society was the only formal vehicle for relief. The benevolent women who established the society in 1822 went from house to house, seeking out the needy and providing them with medical care, food, clothing, and bedding. During the 1820s most Rochesterians applauded these efforts and believed them sufficient to alleviate the wants of those left behind by the town’s success.⁶

Everard Peck was among the first entrepreneurs in Rochester aligned with Francis Brown, the first village president, and others in the Clinton faction. Pillars of the Presbyterian church, with roots in New England, the Brown family moved to the Genesee River west bank from Rome, N.Y. Founder of the village, Col. Nathaniel Rochester, was often one step ahead of the Browns. He and two other investors had bought a hundred-acre tract on the east bank of the Genesee River in 1803. They had their own plan of development registered with the Holland Land Company. It did not include the hundred-acre tract owned by the Browns to north. The Brown family members also purchased land on the West Side of the river and, in addition to a gristmill, constructed a sawmill.

Col. Rochester had been a member of the Maryland revolutionary assembly. In 1810, Rochester moved his large family

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and slaves from Maryland to a 400 hundred-acre farm south of what was to become the village of Rochester. Once settled in, the slaves were freed. He moved his family closer in 1815 and in 1818 moved onto his tract, building a house a short way downstream from his gristmills.

The two groups of entrepreneurs carried their politics with them, the Brown family supporting DeWitt Clinton and the Rochester family supporting Martin Van Buren. It was a time in national politics when there were no parties and Jeffersonian Republicanism was supplanting Federalism. The economic, cultural and political competition in early Rochester was grounded in kinship. Competition over political differences and jealousies sharpened as the village grew:

This was faction politics, centering on jealousy and competition for honor between a few wealthy gentlemen and their families and friends. Underneath that competition lay an additional and temporarily inoffensive fact: the Rochesters belonged to the Masonic Lodge; their opponents did not.⁷

While Weed was preparing to move to Rochester, Peck gave his view of the Rochester political scene in letter to him: "As to Politics all is hodge podge. No character to it. The Bucks are spitting & fighting like cats while the good & true Republicans look on & laugh. To meddle with politics now except with a long stick & at a good distance would be to dirty one's fingers."⁸

In addition to being dirty, American politics in the first quarter of the 19th century were becoming intensely local. Presidential candidates were still nominated by Congressional Caucus and half the states still had state legislature appointment of electors to the Electoral College rather than by popular election. Distinct national parties would not appear until Andrew Jackson's election in 1828. The Federalists were a disorganized minority. In New York, the closest political factions came to parties was the division of

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Jeffersonian Democrat-Republicans into Clintonians and anti-Clintonians, with the anti-Clintonians led by Martin Van Buren and William L. Marcy.

DeWitt Clinton was a former Mayor of New York City and nephew of George Clinton, who had been Governor and later Vice President during Thomas Jefferson's second term. Opponents referred to Clinton as "Magnus Apollo" because of his physical size and his ego. Van Buren became New York's U.S. Senator in 1820 and later Andrew Jackson's Vice President before becoming the Eighth U.S. President. Van Buren had many nicknames because he was viewed as opportunistic and often non-committal. The kindest titles were "The Little Magician" and "The Red Fox of the Kinderhook."

At the Democrat-Republican state convention in 1820, the Van Buren faction often stuck deer tails in their hats to keep track of one another; hence the name "Bucktails." The Bucktail leadership in Albany formed what became the forerunner of the political machine, countering Clinton's patronage with their application of the spoils system to maintain party discipline. It was one of Van Buren's close cohorts, William Marcy of Tammany Hall, who coined the phrase, "To the victors go the spoils." In an editorial, Weed acknowledged the smooth operation of Van Buren's followers and, because of their arrogance, labeled them the "Albany Regency." The Van Buren followers accepted the title as a badge of honor.

According to historian Alvin Kass, because the elections were highly personalized, centering on certain candidates "factions constantly formed and reformed in seemingly endless succession. The rapid and often unpredictable passage of the electors from one party to another was made easier by the fact that the elections rarely turned on matters of principle, and a large percentage of New York's population consisted of recent migrants who had no deeply rooted habits of party loyalty." Kass says the machines had several techniques for winning elections. "Among the most important of these was the party press, which involved the control of one or more newspapers whose leadership tailored and interpreted the news in accordance with the organization's dictates."⁹

Kass concludes his discussion of early Nineteenth Century

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New York with the following. "Politics occupied a major segment in the life of New Yorkers. It was somewhat like a highly popular sport that was played earnestly and seriously. The violent rhetoric of election campaigns shows the extent to which people got aroused over the competition. The absence of substantial issues in the elections makes the crusading atmosphere that pervaded the battle for votes all the more remarkable. The heated proceedings produced defamation of character, bloody duels, and enduring personal animosities that outlasted the political conflicts."¹⁰ The mix of politics in Rochester suited Weed's style. He was knowledgeable in state politics from having worked for newspapers in Albany and having opportunities to watch the legislature in session. He saw the leaders of the day, Martin Van Buren, Erastus Root, and DeWitt Clinton at work. Beyond being a witness, he had some direct experience with patronage. In Albany, Weed became acquainted with Clinton and enjoyed Clinton's support when he started a newspaper in Norwich. In between Norwich and Manlius, Weed was hired by the *Albany Argus* -- the state printer under a Bucktail dominated legislature. Weed was fired from the *Argus* when it was learned he was a staunch Clinton supporter, not entitled to a patronage position.

Weed was excited about his new position in Rochester. His youthful exuberance came through in a letter to a friend a few months earlier. "I hope a change is at hand. I will whenever the iron is hot stand ready to strike; or if any assistance is wanted in heating be the first hand at the bellows."¹¹ Now, at the *Rochester Telegraph*, his hand was on the bellows. However, his most effective use of the "hot iron" came later with the "Morgan Excitement."

Newspapers in this period were exercising their recently won freedom of speech with a vengeance. More than raising up their candidate, they more often leveled vile criticism and printed exposés of opponents. This was a continuation of the earlier pamphleteering. Holmes Alexander describes the period in his biography of Van Buren, *The American Tallyrand*:

The country was being drenched in the pamphleteering craze that was the beginning of

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her political self-consciousness. These journals were not as yet newspapers, for they dealt more with issues than events, and were, for the most part, venomous and one-sided diatribes aimed at personalities who represented the current problems of the day. Hardly ever did they praise any one directly, for the common mode of defending a man, or an idea, was simply to vilify their opponents. The result of these vigorous and exciting methods was a wide popularizing of political knowledge. Even people interested only in hearing the latest slander, accidentally imbibed much information concerning matters of state, and in taking sides with their favorites, found themselves heatedly defending their favorites' doctrines.

Freedom of speech being among the most luxurious of the new liberties, it was considered a high privilege, for instance, to address the exalted George Washington in person and to call him (as often happened) "a crocodile," "a hyena," "a traitor."¹²

Politics and pamphleteering were common in the Colonial period. However, newspapers and factional politics had its beginning in Philadelphia in 1791. The *National Gazette*, founded by Philip Freneau, gave voice to the democratic ideals of Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson and gave much space to attacking Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton individually and Federalists in general. Jefferson appointed Freneau to a minor post as translator for the State Department. It is said that Hamilton was the instigator of later attacks on Jefferson by a Philadelphia newspaper edited by James Callender. According to historian Robert Rutland, no matter how well known a printer might become by bashing political opponents, this was not a royal road to riches or political glory. "Unless a newspaper editor-printer also had outside business interests (such as book publishing or

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a public printing contract), his life was indeed often a race with his creditors. As long as debtor's prisons existed in America, there were printers among the inmates. Making money did not seem as important to zealous printers as raising the party banner."¹³

Weed eagerly followed in this fine tradition. Despite his young career, Weed had experience in partisan editorializing. Two years before settling in Rochester he edited the *Republican Agriculturalist*, a four page weekly in rural Norwich. His articles praised Clinton and his program as well as reiterated Clinton's defense of patronage as a healthy "rotation in office" and an "equalized distribution of public favors." There were also denunciations of the Bucktails' alleging interference with the advancement of democracy and the Erie Canal project.

Weed's biographer, Van Deusen, describes two incidents provoked by Weed's editorials in the *Agriculturalist*. On one occasion Weed had accused an attorney of cattle theft. The attorney, Lot Clark, came after Weed in the street with a buggy whip, dueling being illegal in New York. Weed took a few blows from the whip, then friends of both combatants joined the fray. The two separated after the whip changed hands and Weed struck a few blows on Clark.¹⁴

When Weed purchased the Clinton-partisan newspaper in Norwich with the help of friends in Albany, it was agreed that the seller would not open a newspaper in competition. The agreement was violated and Weed was denounced as "a young quat [pimple], fool, knave, and liar." Van Deusen describes Weed's editorial prowess. "He had written an article defending Judas Iscariot. He butchered the English language. Weed's powers of invective were not yet fully developed and he could not equal his assailant at mudslinging. However, he did very well. Hubbard was described as one who 'shook off the cumbersome restraints of moral duty, and raised a monument of disgrace upon the remaining fragment of his character.' Weed won \$400 in a judgment against Hubbard for forfeiting 'good will' in the sale of the paper. Weed sold the *Agriculturalist* and returned to Albany."¹⁵

In his autobiography, Weed often compliments his wife, Catherine, for her industry and frugality while bemoaning his own

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lack of fiscal discipline. Weed was often self-deprecating and more often in debt. Growing up poor near the Hudson River, more than once he saw his father hauled off to jail for failure to pay debts. His father's horse and wagon was not a reliable source of income for supporting a family with six children. The family moved often, sometimes being separated. Weed started working at an early age; among his experiences were boiling sap to make maple sugar, doing farm chores, and serving as a cabin boy on a Hudson River boat sailing from Albany to New York City. His first dollar came by selling a salmon he clubbed in shallow water; something he learned from Onondaga Indians. He acknowledges having six to eight months total of schooling but was a voracious reader.

At fourteen, he had his first apprenticeship in a printing office doing chores for room and board. He moved from town to town as work was available. By sixteen, he was allowed to do some writing and editing. At eighteen, he spent a year in New York and became a member of the Typographical Society and a journeyman printer. During this period he set a goal of visiting every church in New York City. He visited several; however, he returned to the Universalist Church several times. That is all we know about his religious experience. If he still had an interest in Universalism when in Rochester, he did not discuss it. Inasmuch as the Protestant denominations were contentious with each other, they also looked down on the Catholics. However, their greatest denunciations were reserved for the Universalists and Unitarians--denouncing them as heretics for their theology of understanding God through reason rather than revelation, among other things.

When Weed returned to Albany, an editor who was a strong Clinton supporter hired Weed as the *Albany Register* foreman. Weed's first lobbying effort was in securing a charter for the New York Typographical Society: he won the charter, however, it was stripped of any power for the typographers to control wages. He was married a year later and moved to Norwich to become an editor for the first time. He named his paper the *Agriculturalist*, although he had little or no knowledge of farming. Weed was harassed by debt all along the way. The debts did not start to melt away until 1824 when

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he first became directly involved in politics on a mission to secure a bank charter for the village of Rochester.

In 1821, voting registration was revised opening voting for some offices to non-landowners. In the same year, Monroe County received a charter with Rochester as the county seat; all achieved on the lobbying efforts of Colonel Rochester, who also donated land for the county buildings across the street from the Episcopal church. The churches were prominent symbols of a difference between the New Englanders and the Southerners; however, the competition among the early leaders was not over religion-- building adornments maybe, but not theology.

When Weed went to work on the *Rochester Telegraph*, he established a reputation as a pugnacious editor and publisher. A month after arriving, he took over the editorial column. His style appealed to the readers of Rochester and circulation improved. Weed continued to support internal improvements and wrote in support of John Quincy Adams for President. His denunciations of the Bucktails provoked retaliations. The editor of the *Monroe Republican* called Weed "a Federalist and a liar, a whiskey guzzler." In return, Weed called his critics "Van Buren pimps."¹⁶

Weed's writing was typical of the period. While politics was his primary focus, he would also assert opinions on foreign affairs such as invasion of Spain by France. Most Americans avidly followed events in Europe. Local issues included articles against drunkenness, gambling, debauchery, and Negro slavery.¹⁷

Temperance was not an issue in the early 1820s and did not become one until after the great revival led by Rev. Charles Gradison Finney in 1830. Strong drink was common to all classes. Drunkenness was common. Although assailed in editorials and in local elections, public drunkenness was not regulated beyond licensing the sale of alcohol and occasionally issuing fines. Those who took hard stands on the issue were not elected.¹⁸

In his 1883 autobiography, Weed confesses to drinking wine but never in his life malt liquors. "It is proper to say that until I was twenty-two years old I drank nothing stronger than cider, but for nearly half a century I have been an habitual wine drinker. I have also

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been an occasional drinker of whiskey, though always fastidious about the quality.”¹⁹ Weed smoked cigars continuously and was no stay-at-home. He was often seen in the billiard rooms and theaters. Weed’s appreciation for the theater started in Albany when he was a seventeen-year-old printer’s apprentice. He confessed to attending the theater every night; a practice limited only by how much money he had left after paying for room and board.

Rochester was becoming a very busy center with the Erie Canal opening to eastern traffic in 1822 and construction of a viaduct over the Genesee River below the falls. When Weed arrived, more than six hundred houses had been built; most were three-room frame buildings. The streets were often clogged with farm wagons bringing wheat to the mills where farmers were paid in cash. Farm families shopped for imported items, or more often, manufactured goods made by local craftsmen specializing in shoes, clothes, farm implements, and household items. The population growth was especially vigorous among workmen. Taverns, pool halls, and itinerant performers provided entertainment.

Temperance had not become an issue in Rochester in 1825, Evangelist Charles Grandison Finney having not yet arrived. However, by 1828 the temperance movement had grown to obsessive proportions between the middle class and all Protestant denominations. By the early 1830s, western New York had come to be described as “the burned-over district,” seared by the fires of revivalism.

The temperance movement and evangelical revivals did not influence the early scene when there was one distillery for every thousand people. In addition to taverns, liquor was sold in groceries. *The Rochester Album*, April 25, 1826 editorialized, not for temperance, rather that liquor and gaming be taxed:

The number of Groceries and Huckster houses within the year past has been increasing to almost double what they have been at any one time heretofore. Groceries are peculiarly calculated to increase pauperism; it is but

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equitable that the proprietors of such establishments, should contribute liberally to the support of our civil institutions by paying a tax, commensurate to the mischief created by an unnecessary use of ardent spirits among the labouring class of the community, many of whom, with their helpless families, are reduced to penury through the preposterous use of distilled liquors. Consequently disease and infirmity ensue; publick [sic] charity is demanded.²⁰

The newspapers also carried articles on the evils of intemperance. Political leaders decried what it was doing to the village; however, once in office the leaders did not vote to change the status quo. That change did not occur until 1830 after which Rochester became a hotbed of reform movements. Hewitt describes the period:

With the opening of the Erie Canal in 1822, Rochester became a depot of goods, for people, and for social and political movements as they traveled between eastern urban centers and frontier communities. At the heart of the Burned-over District, the town was illuminated (or ravaged, depending on one's perspective) by the fires of religious and reform enthusiasms in each of the decades from 1830 to 1870.²¹

The dynamics of life in and around Rochester are illustrated by the census of 1825. It is presented here as an extract from the January 17, 1826 issue of the *Rochester Album*, a non-political weekly newspaper:

Census and Statistics of Monroe County –
Number of towns, 16; inhabitants, 39,108;

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persons subject to military duty, 5,156; voters for state and county officers, 7,606; aliens, 1,060; paupers, 40; persons of color not taxed, 243; persons of color taxed, 20; marriages past year, 283; births 1,666; deaths, 611; acres of improved land 136,712; neat cattle, 33,972; horses, 6866; sheep, 86,257; hogs, 39,737; yards linen, cotton, and other thin cloths, 110,899; grist mills, 32; saw mills, 76; oil mills, 3; carding machines, 33; woolen factories, 4; cotton factories, 1; iron works, 5; triphammers, 6; distilleries 34; asheries, 47; deaf and dumb, 24; idiots, 58; lunaticks, 22.²²

For entertainment in 1825, there was a bowling alley, a theater for itinerant actors, and a lottery office. "Baseball was played every afternoon by men ages 18-40,"²³ although there is no description of the rules. An advertisement in the *Rochester Album* of November 17, 1825 promoted the New State Lottery with a top prize of \$100,000.00. Tickets were fifty dollars; however, they could be purchased in halves, quarters, eighths and sixteenths. Smaller lotteries, sponsored on the local level, were prevalent and the lotteries of other states drew space in newspapers for prize offerings and winning numbers. After 1830, these advertisements all but disappeared from the Rochester newspapers, being replaced by ads for elixirs to cure intemperance and for revival meeting notices.

Vital issues of economic and social development came in swift succession, all related to rapid growth. Rochester was the first inland city created after 1815 and became the fastest growing community in the United States.²⁴ A wilderness in 1812, Rochester became a manufacturing and marketing center with a population of 10,000 by 1830.

William Morgan disappeared in 1826 in western New York as he was set to publish the secret rituals of Freemasonry. A firestorm of public protest led to the emergence of the Antimasonry Party, the first third party to nominate a Presidential candidate.

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