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America's First Third Party:
The Antimasonic Party, 1826-1836

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The Anti-masonic Party was an active political party in the early nineteenth century and was influential in beginning the shift of the political spectrum away from the two main parties at the time, the Federalists and Anti-Federalists. This paper will examine the history of the political party and attempt to explain how and why it was necessary in the American political landscape, focusing on the epicenter of the party, in New York, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts. Further, this paper will work towards explaining the various successes and failures in the American electoral system by the Anti-masonic party, especially in the area of focus. This is vital to understand, because the party did have some success in certain areas, and this can mean that the political ideas the party expressed did mean something to the public and they did become a viable party, at least for some period of time. The goal of this paper will be to show the founding, growth, and eventual downfall of the political Anti-Masonic Party. The paper will have a fairly limited scope, primarily focusing on the years of 1830-1836, while touching on events in 1828 that set the stage for the formation of the party, as these were the prime years of the party's influence in national politics.

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Introduction

In the summer of 1826, William Morgan, a member of the Masonic Order, a fraternal organization whose primary goals are to instill within its members “a moral and ethical approach to life,” announced a plan to release an exposé on the fraternal group, outlining what he believed was its influence over the American political landscape.¹ After his plans became public, Morgan was jailed under suspicious circumstances before being released into Masonic custody. Morgan was not seen from again after being released, and rumors still persist to this day about the so-called “Morgan Affair,” and if the Masonic Order was to blame for his apparent death.

The Masonic Order can trace its origins to medieval Europe and has been a powerful force since its inception. The members tended to be the aristocrats, the wealthy, and the powerful. Simply put, the members had the money and the control to influence politics in many ways. This resulted in a lot of nonmembers considering the Masonic Order too powerful, but the debate has to be whether it was the Order itself with the power. Far too often, people have associated the Order with its members, but they must remember that the very nature of a social club like the Masons means that many members have diverse backgrounds and the structure of the organization is very decentralized. Therefore, the activities of a Lodge in Upstate New York are very different than the activities of a Lodge in Pennsylvania, and that there is not much of a centralized authority controlling what certain Lodges might do under the name of the Freemasons.

¹ <http://www.ugle.org.uk/what-is-masonry/>

When the Americas were colonized, the Masons made the trip across the Atlantic too. Many of the founding fathers of the United States were themselves Masons, and as the country aged, many elected officials decided that membership in the Masons could be a stepping stone to higher office. The idea that all politicians were members became a sort of self fulfilling prophesy. Due to the fact there were several members of the Masons in publicly elected offices and, more importantly, the rumors that being a member would ensure favors by your fellow members, a growth occurred in not only the number of government workers joining the Order, but the total numbers of members to the Order.²

The growing number of members in the Order resulted in growing anger and discontent towards the Masons. The idea that the Masonic Order itself had taken over the government was not unique to America in the early nineteenth century, but the degree and fervor that the antimasonic protesters exploded in the nineteenth century. The citizenry was angered to the point of starting a competing political party whose sole platform, at least at its inception, was not being masons. Over time, this movement turned into substantial political organization, and helped shape the elections in the 1830s. While their influence over politics was rather short lived, lasting only about ten years, their legacy has changed the political landscape of the United States. The Antimasonic Party created a political culture that encouraged the country to move away from the traditional parties of the early United States, and helped the changes that shaped what political parties formed after them, eventually leading to a complete overhaul of the political party system.

² Formisano, Robert P. & Kutolowski, Kathleen Smith. "Antimasonry and Masonry: The Genesis of Protest 1826-1827." *American Quarterly* 29 no. 2 (1977): pg. 144

The Morgan Affair

In 1800, there were approximately 16,000 members of the Freemasons in the United States. By 1825, that number had grown to over 21,000 members. However, just five years later, the number of Masonic lodges fell from 500 to only 82, and the total number of members plummeted.³ Why the decline?

In the summer of 1826, Morgan announced his plans to publish through David Miller, the owner and publisher of the *Republican Advocate*, a Batavian newspaper. The planned book was generally believed to be motivated by profit, but also may have been motivated by revenge. Morgan wanted to get some sort of revenge on the Masonic Lodges of the time, because he had been allegedly slighted by the Masons, in his eyes. Details are hard to find regarding how and why Morgan was removed from the Masons, but he certainly was angry enough with the Lodge to work against them to try and publicly humiliate them. Morgan had been a Mason, and Miller's rivals were all members.⁴ This all came to a head when Morgan was arrested by corrupt Masons. On September 11, 1826, Morgan was freed from jail and immediately kidnapped and disappeared forever. Rumors swirled at the time that this was a publicity stunt to help promote the publication of his book (mostly coming from Masons and their allies). This rumor persisted because Miller was also supposedly the victim of a potential kidnapping, when a posse grabbed him and held him for hours until Miller's allies helped free him without much trouble. While

³ Formisano, Robert P. & Kutolowski, Kathleen Smith. "Antimasonry and Masonry: The Genesis of Protest 1826-1827." *American Quarterly* 29 no. 2 (1977): pg. 144

⁴ Formisano, Robert P. & Kutolowski, Kathleen Smith. "Antimasonry and Masonry: The Genesis of Protest 1826-1827." *American Quarterly* 29 no. 2 (1977): pg. 147

rumors of a publicity stunt persist, most people believe that this was the work of the Masons, as revenge for Morgan's attempted exposé. These crimes formed the basis of the Antimasonic protest, which led to the formation of the political party, and showed people that any group that could orchestrate such acts with such ease and such a lack of repercussions was a group with far too much power. Almost immediately after the Morgan Affair, people began to work to use this event to undermine the Masons' supposed political power and ensure what they saw as the fair governance of their country.

The Masonic lodges were blamed for the Morgan Affair, the case of the kidnapping, disappearance, and suspected murder of a former Mason, William Morgan. The Masonic lodges of the Batavia area of New York were accused of being responsible for the kidnapping. This was due to the fact that William Morgan was planning to write an exposé about the Masons and supposedly reveal their secrets to the world. Morgan had a publisher set up to release the book and the Masons tried to stop him several ways, before allegedly resorting to kidnapping and murdering him.⁵

Morgan's alleged murder struck a nerve with the people of Batavia, and people throughout the east coast of early America. People began to realize the influence of the Masonic Order. Frustration over the power of certain groups wasn't new by this time in American history, the degree of this anger was unprecedented. While citizens had simply thought of the judges, politicians, and men of influence as their peers and comrades before the Morgan Affair, they now saw them as "Masons," a name that had become boogymen of sorts. To be a Mason meant that you took a secret oath to swear your allegiance to the Order, first and foremost, and to

⁵ Morgans Printing offices were destroyed and arson was attempted on his offices. Formisano, Robert P. & Kutolowski, Kathleen Smith. "Antimasonry and Masonry: The Genesis of Protest 1826-1827." *American Quarterly* 29 no. 2 (1977): pg. 147

the country second, at least according to the Antimasons. They became worried that the Masons in power would not work towards the betterment of the country, but instead worry about their own Order's interests. This caused the average citizen to question how fit they were for office. If a Mason had two opposing directives from the Order and the citizenry, who would the Mason comply with, in the end? This question was the motivation for the political party going forward, and the question of "Who are the leaders of this country" was one that persisted in almost all of American history.

Birth of the Party

Following the events of the Morgan Affair, there was an outcry of anger and outrage towards the Masons. What had started as a fairly small protest of the Masons by a few men, blossomed into a national movement against them, resulting in the formation of a political party that actively worked towards undermining and destroying the Order. This was very different than many of the previous antimasonic protests, which had focused primarily on religious groups and their issues with the Masonic Order.⁶ Rather, this was a secular protest over the influence of the Order on the workings of the government. There were only four arrests over the Morgan Affair, and only three were ever convicted, with two years being the maximum sentence. This, after what was a lengthy and rather expensive murder and kidnapping investigation.

⁶ Religious antimasonry was primarily over what many people thought of as the contradictions between the Order and the Christian Bible. Many people thought that a Mason could not follow both the Order's rules and the bible.

When people discovered the lack of results from the Morgan Affair investigation, they were outraged and wanted to see the Masons disbanded over their crimes. Meetings began to be held to trying to understand the Morgan affair, almost immediately following the incident.⁷ The protesters believed that a secret organization had infiltrated their government and made powerless because it could no longer be impartial to all citizens. Rather, this new government, run by the Masons, was hurting people by ignoring the needs of the many and focusing on the wants of the few. This new idea of what government was spread around the country and pushed people into action.

What began as a regional controversy provoked a mass movement that radically altered the course of American politics before the Civil War. Growing out of a neighborhood protest rallies, burgeoning in a climate of hostility toward established politicians, Antimasonry itself soon became an organized political force. It fostered a raw democracy, attacked every hint of special privilege, and so drove even its foes to emulation. It reinvigorated party politics even before the Jacksonian excitement and proclaimed anew the revolution's republican faith in moral probity as the basis of all civil liberty?⁸

The dissatisfaction in the government can be thought of as the spark that caused the political powder keg to burst. One relatively small controversy, the Morgan Affair, resulted in a serious and fundamental change in how politics as usual happened in this country. This revolution of political ideals helped shape what would become the Antimasonic party. The people wanted to free themselves of the political stranglehold of the early nineteenth century Masons and the Antimasonic party responded by taking the people's ideals and trying to make the party into what the citizens would want to support on election day.

⁷ Palmer, John C.. *Morgan affair and Anti-Masonry*. Montana: Kessinger Publishing, 1992. Pg. 31

⁸ Gribbin, William. "Antimasonry, Religious Redicalism, and the Paranoid style of the 1820's." *The History Teacher* 7 no. 2 (1974): 240

The Party was able to form as a statewide and national party thanks to its conventions and the ability to share information quickly and accurately around the country. The Antimasonic party was, arguably, the first political party to use national conventions to organize and spread its messages throughout the country. The party was lead by founders Thurlow Weed and William Henry Seward. Both became interested in the party because of the events surrounding the Morgan Affair, helping shed light on the issue while raising money to help fight those they felt were responsible for it.⁹ Both knew that fundraising was a primary concern, because in their eyes, money meant power in the political arena.

In 1827, the Antimasonic party set up political conventions to pick candidates to run for office, especially in places where it was likely considered that an outsider could displace the incumbent. This is generally considered the first real political movements of the Antimasons, who were still in the infancy of the party. Whereas before they had simply protested against those currently in power, now they were actively trying to oust it from power using elections, and participating in the democratic process. They were an actual political party, not just a loose group of protesters. This was an important change in the structure of the Antimasonic party, because it tended to be easy to simply work against something. Often, a new political party stumbles once it finds itself in power. That is due to the fact that simply protesting against something is a whole lot easier than actual governance.

As the elections of 1827 loomed closer, the presidential ticket of John Quincy Adams and Henry Clay appeared to be allying themselves with the Antimasons (in the eyes of the Antimasons, at least), supporting their parties ideals, but did not receive any endorsement from

⁹ Vaughn, William Preston. *The Anti-Masonic Party in the United States, 1826-1843*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983. Pg. 26

the ticket. In turn, the party promoted a “Republican Anti-Masonic” ticket,¹⁰ but did not end with sympathetic ears in the White House, with the Adams/Clay ticket losing the presidential race. The loss did, however, help the party win a number of seats in the New York state assembly, and gave them high hopes for their political future and that of the party.

While in the New York assembly, the Antimasons tried to merge with the supporters of Adams to gain more political capital, but the Adams men refused, citing the Antimasons lack of a true political platform as a reason. The Adams supporters did not want to be seen as allies with a single issue party, and therefore be boxed in by the Antimasons beliefs. Additionally, they had Masons as supporters and voters that they still wanted help from. In response, the New York Antimasons held their conference and established a set of guidelines describing the difference between the two parties, and ensured a divide that would inevitably hurt both groups in the long run. This divide between the two groups made the lack of success in the polls unsurprising. When a pair of political parties are fighting over the same group of voters, the fight turns ugly and the voters will chose to stay at home rather than vote for one of two flawed parties. The Antimasons tried to steal away voters from the National Republicans, and that ugliness made nineteenth century voters stay at home on election day, rather than simply choosing the lesser of two evils.¹¹ Due to their fighting between the parties, the Democratic candidate, Andrew Jackson won by more than 200,000 votes in the 1832 Presidential elections.

¹⁰ Vaughn, William Preston. *The Anti-Masonic Party in the United States, 1826-1843*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983. Pg. 28

¹¹ Leip, Dave. "1832 Presidential General Elections Results." [Dave Leip's Atlas of U.S. Presidential Election Results](http://uselectionatlas.org/RESULTS/). Available from <http://uselectionatlas.org/RESULTS/>. Internet; accessed 10 April 2011.

Peak of the Political Party

The Antimasonic Party was active, politically viable and most successful from 1828 to 1836. From 1828 to 1832 no candidates ran for office, but the party was active and growing. The party ran candidates mostly in the four years from 1832 to 1836. These were the years of the “peak” of the party’s political influence. While the 1832 Antimasonic presidential ticket seemed to fail fairly miserably, the party put out a concise, organized message of the parties platform and its goals.

The exact peak of the party was and is debatable, but one could argue that the party’s highest point was the Presidential Election cycle of 1832, despite the terrible showing at the polls. This would be the most competitive Presidential election for the party. There was an increased amount of attention and scrutiny, both from the media and the public at large. They had a candidate that most, if not all the voters knew about and did receive a large amount of votes. While the electoral results may not have been what they wanted in the end of the cycle, they were able to get their message of the Masonic influence in government out.

The Party’s nominating convention was held in September of 1831, and its primary purpose was the presidential ticket. The group spent days deliberating over the potential nominees, with New York, Pennsylvania and Massachusetts controlling the debate by possessing 70 percent of the delegates. Henry Clay, a well respected Senator and National Republican, the party that the Antimasons lined up with very closely on many issues, was the early favorite to win the nomination. Unfortunately, he was so respected that he was the presumed nominee for the National Republicans. Additionally, he was a former Grand Master of the Masons of

Kentucky. Although he claimed to no longer be a member of the lodge, he eventually seemed an unlikely ally, thanks to his reluctance to actively condemn the Masonic Order, as he hoped for their support in the election of 1832. The Antimasons hoped he would publically denounce the Masons, for if he did, the issue of Masonry in the government would become a nationwide political issue. However, he never actively condemned the Masons, he was afraid that by doing so, he would lose as many masonic Republican votes as Antimason votes.¹²

Obviously, the Antimasonic Party had some problems that it had yet to figure out, and the party fought over who would become the party's standard bearer for the future. Some names discussed were Richard Rush, the former Pennsylvania Attorney General with the most experience in government work of all the potential candidates.¹³ John Quincy Adams seems to have wanted the nomination, but never expressly sought it out, and the Massachusetts delegation seemed to have fought for Adams, but New York opposed it on account of Adams previous loss in 1828. Vice President John C. Calhoun was brought up, as he made it clear through statements that he held Antimasonic sentiments, but his other political beliefs were deemed too far from what the Antimasons felt to be a viable candidate in the states needed to win. The associate justice of the Supreme Court John McLean was a lot of delegates favorite candidate for the nomination. He seemed to not want the nomination from the Antimasons, because he thought the party had little chance to truly win, and did not want his name attached to a losing presidential bid. McLean officially turned down the offer on September 7, 1831, over fears

¹² Vaughn, William Preston. *The Anti-Masonic Party in the United States, 1826-1843*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983. Pg. 56

¹³ Rush was controller of the treasury and attorney general for James Madison, minister to Great Britain under James Monroe, and secretary of the treasury under John Quincy Adams and his vice presidential running mate in Adams unsuccessful campaign of 1828.

violent Antimasons and their publications, and his hopes to advance in a more mainstream party.¹⁴

William Wirt, the former Attorney General of the United States, had been rumored to be a possible running mate of McLean, but never seriously spoken of as a real possibility for the presidential nomination, because many party members thought he was too flawed to be a serious candidate. However, McLean's decline of the nomination complicated the convention and the party's plans had to change quickly. Weed, often referred to as the father and head of the Antimasonic Party, was not an official delegate in the convention, but worked the delegates to support Wirt. Wirt was generally seen as the best of a terribly difficult situation by his party, nobody's first choice, but certainly the party's best option available. New York and New England threw support behind Wirt, and once Seward had convinced Pennsylvania to put their support behind Wirt, he had the nomination for president as a candidate for the Antimasonic Party.

¹⁴ Vaughn, William Preston. *The Anti-Masonic Party in the United States, 1826-1843*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983. Pg. 56-60

Hope and Letdown in the 1832 Presidential Election Cycle

Almost as soon as Wirt had secured the nomination, his candidacy started to unravel, and the Antimasons started to lose faith in him. Before he had officially received his party's support, news came out that Wirt had been a Mason and had never publicly denounced his membership in the group even going so far as to defend the Order in a speech.¹⁵ Further, he was seen by his peers as a National Republican first, and an Antimason second, someone who would simply get out of the race, so the Republican nominee could walk into the White House.

Wirt's running mate did allay some fears, however. Amos Ellmaker, the Attorney General of Pennsylvania was a strong supporter of all things Antimasonic. This helped counteract Wirt's tepid Antimasonry.

After receiving the necessary votes to secure the Antimasonic nomination, Wirt was approached by the leaders of the Party about whether or not he would accept that nomination. When he seemed hesitant to accept the nomination, they told him McLean had declined the nomination so that they were left with two possibilities. The first was to simply let the Republicans take office without a fight, and the other was to wage a war to rid the government of the "obnoxious administration." The group promised him that nothing in the campaign, should he run it well, would sully his reputation and ruin his future in politics.¹⁶

Wirt accepted, and wrote a letter to the delegates. In the letter, he claimed to not even want the presidency or its workload and vast responsibilities. Further, he did not even claim to

¹⁵ Antimasons. (1911). *Encyclopedia britannica*. New York: The Encyclopedia Britannica Company.

¹⁶ Gammon, Samuel Rhea. *The Presidential Campaign of 1832*. General books, 2010. Pg. 50

understand the Antimason's reasons for nominating him, and even asserted that they had only nominated him after all other viable candidates either backed out or became unappealing. Wirt also argued that his affiliation with the Masonic lodge in Richmond was a youthful mistake, and he had never been all that interested in the Order. He did not suspect them of having sinister motivations or desires, but rather that it had grown to be a very powerful political group because of the nature of its makeup, as an organization of men who had a lot of free time.

Wirt's letter of acceptance arrived that evening at o'clock. It was at once read before the convention entered on the minutes and the meeting voted that he recommended to the country for cordial support as Antimasonic candidate. For all this Wirt's letter must be hard to stomach. He accepted the nomination as a personal honor from a distinguished body tendered him personal considerations purely and not upon principles involving a crusade against Masonry. He that he had once been a Mason but had never advanced in the order and had gradually lost interest and out though from no conviction against it that he did not believe the Masonic complicity in the Morgan case to be a characteristic or generally authorized proceeding of the order and ended by saying that if knowing these sentiments convention desired to change its nomination he should retire with even more pleasure than he accepted. From all which it appears that so far from being eager for the nomination Wirt was entirely indifferent to it save as an accorded his personal character and attainments and that elected he proposed to enter upon no proscription against Masonry as an institution.¹⁷

He argued that there was nothing in Masonry that stopped someone from being a true patriot or a good man; that the group was first a social club and the political motivations of its members were nothing inappropriate, simply men wanting to serve their country. Wirt concluded his acceptance letter by stating that if the Antimasons had a problem with his beliefs, they should simply nominate someone else.

During his time as the Antimasons nominee, Wirt made it seem as if he did not even want to be in the race for the presidency, at least in the eyes of the Antimasons. He constantly made

¹⁷ Gammon, Samuel Rhea. *The Presidential Campaign of 1832*. General books, 2010. Pg. 51

remarks on how he was surprised that he was nominated. He wrote a letter to the National Republican central committee, stating that he had to withdraw as a delegate for the party's meeting and that he felt shocked to have received the Antimasonic nomination. He wrote in a different letter that he had only accepted the nomination in the hopes that he might defy the odds and also receive the National Republican's nomination and could thus unify the parties under a single banner. When this did not happen, Wirt seemed to be unwilling to put any amount of real work into winning the office as the Antimasonic candidate.

Wirt's nomination was met with skepticism from the other political parties, as they believed that the Antimasons would not have chosen Wirt if they were serious about winning the presidential election. Many believed that this was a set up to not only give the election, but the entire Antimasonic party voting block to Henry Clay and the National Republicans. Others simply did not understand how he was qualified as an Antimasonic candidate, as he was not particularly adamant against the Masons. He was a former Mason himself and had never said enough against the masons to be satisfactory for the party members. Several key leaders thought that his lack of ferocity when it came to denouncing the Masons would be his downfall. Many thought that without firing up the base of the party and getting them out to vote by speaking to their issues, that Wirt would lose the election, and badly.

The more prominent members of the Antimasonic party all initially expressed pleasure over the nominee. William Seward, one of the bigger names in the party, said that he had turned out to be the best of all possible nominees. While this was almost certainly hyperbole, it would not be unreasonable to think that these leaders had convinced themselves that Wirt was their best option, and that praising him would only convince the party to fully back his candidacy. However, he seemed to be the most unwilling nominee in the history of this country to his

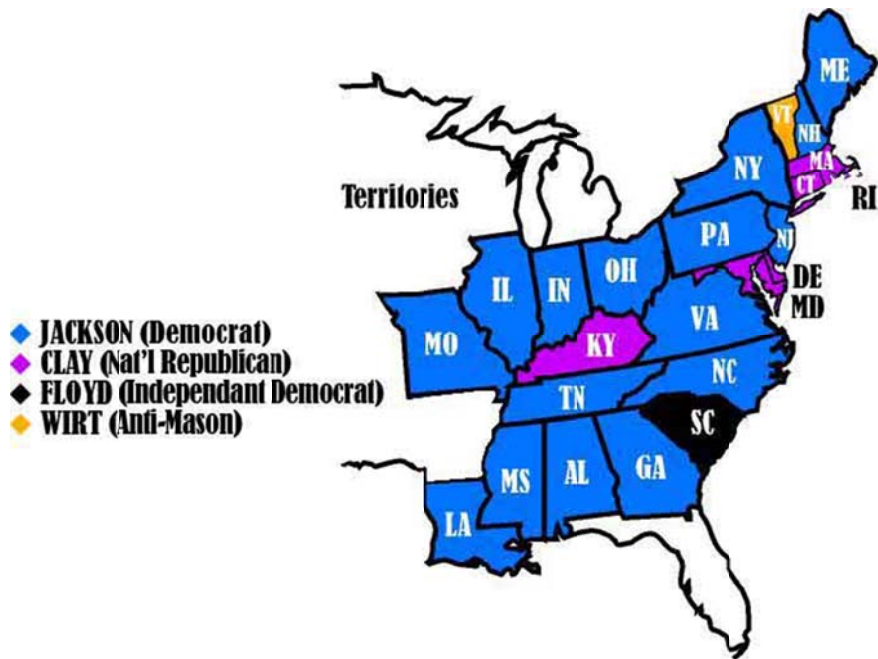
constituents. Wirt did not want to be the presidential nominee and tried to withdraw from the election several times between 1831 and 1832, knowing that he would not win the election without the National Republican's support. Wirt also knew that that support would be nonexistent because of a strong Republican nominee, Henry Clay. Wirt tried to engender more support by turning to more extreme positions of antimasonic sentiment, most likely hoping to get a strong showing in the base of the party.¹⁸ Many party members saw this as disingenuous, however, because of his previous positions about the Masons, when he argued that the Masons did not have sinister intent when it came to the perceived notion that the Masonic Order was ruling the country. It was most likely the party leadership leaning on him to try and get the message out and make the other candidates respond to his positions.¹⁹

Wirt lost the election quite badly, and both the National Republican and the Antimasonic party lost quite badly. The Democratic party candidate won very easily, and many scholars have put a small portion of the blame the splitting of votes between the National Republicans and the Antimasons. Because they shared a lot of beliefs, many Antimasonic voters would have likely voted for Henry Clay and the Republicans if Wirt had not been on the ticket. It is, however, unfair to put the National Republican's loss in 1832 on Wirt or the Antimasons hands, because Henry Clay lost by an incredibly large margin, and the votes that Wirt took from him would have likely made very little difference. Even if all of Wirt's 99,000 votes had gone to Henry Clay, Clay still would have lost by more than 200,000 total votes.²⁰

¹⁸ Vaughn, William Preston. *The Anti-Masonic Party in the United States, 1826-1843*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983. Pg. 66-67

¹⁹ Oberg, Michael L. "William Wirt and the Trials of Republicanism." *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 99, no. 3 (1991): Pg. 323

²⁰ Leip, Dave. "1832 Presidential General Elections Results." [Dave Leip's Atlas of U.S. Presidential Election Results](http://uselectionatlas.org/RESULTS/). Available from <http://uselectionatlas.org/RESULTS/>.



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Conventions

The Antimasonic Party was only able to be the powerful, if short lived, political party it was because of their party convention system. They were able to organize the party into a powerful group that could work towards common goals. Before the era of nationwide political conventions, political parties did not have the organized, focused messages that they are in today. Political parties in early American government did not have a centralized, controlled message

²¹ "Presidential election of 1832 States Carried." United States Presidential elections. Available from <http://www.historycentral.com/elections/1832State.html>. Internet; accessed 8 May 2011.

throughout the country. Many state level organizations had problems even keeping their members in line. By having a number of conventions and meetings, the Antimasons were able to shape the message of the party and essentially teach its members what to say and what not to say.²²

The first national convention of the Antimasonic Party was held in 1830, and this only served as a way increase the message focus of the party. Now, the Antimasons had a national message and focus for campaigns and focusing on the press. This meant that the likelihood of someone distorting and misunderstanding their political ideals dropped significantly, and that their supporters could be counted on to spread the party's true message and meaning. Suddenly, it became a truly nationwide party, rather than the old model of a loose collection of statewide parties.

Thurlow Weed, one of the founding members of the Antimasonic Party, was a strong supporter of the convention system. He believed that it was one of the easiest ways to make the party into a true political powerhouse. Without that organization and structure, the party could easily be ignored by the press, and they could simply assume that it was a small movement with no staying power. Weed wanted the media, and the citizenry of the United States, to recognize the Antimasons on the same level as the established parties of the time.²³

The convention of 1832 was specifically held to nominate the presidential ticket for the 1832 elections. This was a hard fought battle, but in the end, William Wirt received the nomination and would be the face of the party in the coming elections. While this did not end

²² Holley, Myron. *The Proceedings of the United States Anti-Masonic Convention: Held at Philadelphia, September 11, 1830*. Nabu Press, 2010. Pg. 73

²³ Weed, Thurlow. *Life Of Thurlow Weed: Including His Autobiography And A Memoir (1883)*. Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2008. Pg. 257

the way the Antimasons had hoped, and Wirt was generally considered a poor candidate in retrospect, having a national campaign helped the Antimasons in the local and statewide races. The Antimasons held onto power for their short lifespan, until their party effectively died out. Wirt was barely covered by the media in the days leading up to the elections. “By January Wirt’s name had begun to disappear from the pages of the opposition press.”²⁴ It was clear that the Antimasonic party’s influence was dwindling and the end was near.

For a more detailed explanation of the convention, see the section labeled “Peak of the Party.”

Death of the Party

The Antimasonic Party began a slow decline starting in 1832, after the debacle that was the Wirt candidacy. While they retained power at the state level, in New York and Pennsylvania specifically, they never fully recovered at the national level. They resorted to putting their support behind other party’s candidates, rather than nominating and running their own. This began in 1836, when the candidates for the Whig party worked with the Antimasons to receive the support of their followers.²⁵

²⁴ Oberg, Michael L. "William Wirt and the Trials of Republicanism." *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 99, no. 3 (1991): 324

²⁵ Mueller, Henry Richard. *The Whig Party in Pennsylvania: -1922*. Ithaca: Cornell University Library, 2009. Pg. 353

Daniel Webster was the first Whig to campaign outright for the support of the Antimasons.²⁶ He was outspoken against Masonic influence, but the party leadership of the Antimasons seemed reluctant to support him. The party seemed to think that he seemed to be a bit too focused on Federalism for their taste, and the leaders needed more than Antimasonic feelings to support someone.

William Henry Harrison ended up being the Whig nominee and Seward and Weed, both founding members of the Antimasons and now leaders in the Whig party, supported him and stated that he had the best chance of winning the office of the President. He was a war hero and an ardent enough sympathizer of the Antimasons that the party could not justify giving their support to anyone else. While Webster still desired his party's nomination, it appeared to all involved that Harrison was the right choice. Webster fought hard, but the majority of the Antimasons supported Harrison.²⁷

The election of 1836 marked the beginning of the end for the Antimason's power in presidential elections. They were an important group to get support from, but not so important that they would sway the results. They had quickly turned into an interest group, rather than a political party. They could not stay relevant in the time, because they so focused on a single issue and their supporters' anger over the Morgan Affair eventually subsided and people chose to vote for other issues. The Masonic influence had waned to the point where it was no longer necessary for the party to exist.

²⁶ Vaughn, William Preston. *The Anti-Masonic Party in the United States, 1826-1843*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983. Pg. 174

²⁷ McCarthy, Charles. *The Antimasonic Party*. BiblioBazaar, 2009. Pg. 514

Innovations and the Legacy of the Antimasonic Party

The Antimasonic party was able to fundamentally change the course of our political landscape in this country. Through its various changes to the status quo, the Antimasons were able to change how a person runs for office and how they get their name out. There were two major innovations that changes elections in our country.

The largest innovation that the Antimasons had was the idea of national nominating conventions. The party was the first political party to have a nationwide nominating convention, and helped changed how a candidate runs for office. Their idea was to have all the states come together, get a consensus on their ticket for president and vice president, and present a uniform message to the public. This kind of innovation ensured that the public got to see the candidate and party's message to the country. This helped clear up a lot of inconsistencies that existed prior to the nominating conventions, such as mixed messages due to lack of communication between state parties.. All too often, the press would have deal with different messages from different state conventions. While not huge in the total number of differences, they were enough to cause some problems. By unifying the conventions, the press was able to see the national message and present it to the citizens of the country.²⁸

The second innovation that the Antimasons helped develop was the concept of the single issue campaign. When they first formed, the Antimasons were focused on one particular issue, what they believed to be the over representation of the Masons in the government. They

²⁸ Weed, Thurlow. *Life Of Thurlow Weed: Including His Autobiography And A Memoir (1883)*. Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2008. Pg. 256

campaigns hard on trying to eliminate the masons from a large portion of their jobs, and even though they did not have the spectacular success that they might have hoped, they did help spread their message and began to transform the political landscape away from what had been seen as the old system, to a more representative model. People heard their message helped make public offices more accessible to the citizens of our country.

Conclusion

The Masonic Order was one of influence and power in the early nineteenth century. They were able to have at least partial influence in many portions of the United States government. While this might be considered suspect, it is more likely that many of the individuals were already on their way to power, and the Masonic Order was considered a social club for mostly elites, rather than a way to force your way into power. This order has been around much longer than the country itself, and had long been considered an old boys club, where those in power could gather together like gentleman and enjoy each other's company no matter their political or social stances. The Antimasonic Party formed because they believed that the Masons power had gotten out of control and had to be stopped. To do so, they believed that they had to take the control of the government back from what they perceived of as an outside group. Rather than a revolution, they worked within the political system to attempt to take back power, with the help of elections and the formation of the Antimasonic Party.

The Antimasonic Party was able to show how a political party could rise to power in the early nineteenth century, and how a group of individuals could make a single issue into a nationwide topic of concern. They were tried to inform the country of what they saw as Masonic power in the government, and while not necessarily purging the governments of their influence entirely, they were able to make their representation more proportional to their membership numbers. More importantly, they were able to make changes to the political system as a whole. They moved the spectrum away from the rich and elite of early America. While wealth and political certainly continued to be a good barometer of someone's political power, the Antimasons began the transformation to a system where the layperson could have their voice heard in the government, and where a person's opinion matter the same amount no matter their wealth or power.²⁹

²⁹ Oberg, Michael L. "William Wirt and the Trials of Republicanism." *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 99, no. 3 (1991): 306

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