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THE KNIGHTS TEMPLAR AND THE FREEMASONS:
AN AMERICAN MYTH

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I. Introduction

In modern America, being interested in the country's beginning and early history have developed into somewhat of a pastime. In many countries around the world, nationalism plays a huge role in the national psyche and social climate – events of the past remain points of contention, and upholding the reputation and beliefs of one's country is viewed as a personal responsibility. In the United States, much of the nationalism and patriotism expressed by the population stems from the country's foundations – as evidenced by the country's extravagant Independence Day celebrations and ever present fascination with the nation's early history and the men who helped create it.

Any examination into America's early history will return references to the Knights Templar and the Freemasons. Though neither organization was started in America, they have each played a part in shaping the history of the nation. Furthermore, understanding their impact and influence on the United States has become a hobby for thousands, an obsession for many, and for some – even their life's work. Unfortunately, both organizations are considered secret societies, and the Knights Templar in its original form no longer exists. Such a situation limits the amount of information available to the public, due to the fact that much of the activity of such societies are known only to initiated members. Moreover, many of the records kept by the Knights Templar at the height of its power have been lost or destroyed. For these reasons, many claims about the involvement or influence of either group in the United States (or anywhere else, for that matter) are unsubstantiated speculation – especially in modern times.

All of this unsubstantiated speculation – made by both academics and MacBook wielding cyber-sleuths – has created an even larger air of mystery surrounding the origins of America. A quick Google search referencing the role of Freemasons in America will return buckets of

information, much of which is far-fetched, impossible to prove, or false in its entirety.

Oversimplification and sweeping generalizations about the known nature of masonic involvement in the early United States has led to misconceptions about the nation's early history, which have become more well-known and widely accepted than the truth. These misconceptions have infiltrated the media and popular culture as a whole, snowballing into bizarre conspiracy theories and a means of entertainment through novels such as Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, its accompanying movie adaptation, and standalone movies such as Disney's *National Treasure* series. Media claiming to reveal the truth about these organizations, reveal new information about them, or anything of the sort continue to gain popularity – a trend that does not show signs of stopping anytime soon.

As illustrated above, someone wishing to learn about the role of the Knights Templar and Freemasons in the United States without concern for the validity of the information has millions of resources available to them. Someone wishing to know only what can be proven has a far more difficult task. In a world where anything can be put on the internet, it is hard to make determinations between reality and conspiratorial fodder – especially when the subject relates to secret societies. Though many things cannot be proven or disproven beyond a shadow of doubt, it is possible to make likely, educated inferences about the role of both organizations in the United States based on what has been proven. To begin with, we do know that these organizations impacted the early United States, and that the truth and legends concerning their involvement continue to play a role in our society's culture today – especially in popular culture, where *The Da Vinci Code* and the *National Treasure* series are often regarded as gospel.

II. Origins of the Knights Templar

Before one can understand how the Knights Templar and Freemasons have influenced the United States, it is imperative to understand the background and history of each. At the end of the First Crusade, most of the men who came and fought as crusaders left Jerusalem and returned to their homes. This was an unfortunate situation for the pilgrims who followed after them, due to the fact that the pilgrims were left without sufficient protection once the crusaders left. The crusader states were ruled by Europeans, mainly French, and came to be known collectively as Outremer. Due to a lack of European immigration to Outremer a constant shortage of soldiers and fighting men existed. Michael Haag makes reference to this in his book *The Templars: The History and the Myth* writing, “The King of Jerusalem, the prince of Antioch, and the counts of Edessa and Tripoli could between them raise no more than two thousand knights.”¹ With such a small defensive force available, it was only possible for the towns within Outremer to be secured against attacks – leaving pilgrims and other travelers on the roads in and around the crusader states, in effect, defenseless.

Facing the threat of rape, murder, robbery, and enslavement was the reality dealt with by pilgrims travelling to the Holy Land until 1118, when the Knights Templar formed. A group of nine men – including most notably Hugh of Payns, a knight from Champagne, and Godfrey of Saint-Omer in Picardy – who had served as knights during the First Crusade appealed to the Patriarch of Jerusalem Warmund of Picquigny and King Baldwin II to provide them with a task that would lead to the salvation of their souls following the acts they committed serving in the crusade. King Baldwin, understanding the dangers presented to those traveling within his

¹ Michael Haag, *The Templars: The History and the Myth* (Broadway, New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 94.

kingdom, proposed that the men earn the salvation of their souls through protecting pilgrims making their way to Jerusalem. Furthermore, the men were required to take vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Baldwin eventually persuaded Hugh and his men to commit their lives to the task, and they took their vows in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in 1119, calling themselves the Poor Fellow-Soldiers of Christ.²

The order was formally accepted by the people in January 1120 at Nablus. There, the nine members of the Poor Fellow-Soldiers of Christ were introduced to the spiritual leaders of Outremer. Later that year, the count of Anjou, Fulk V, would come in contact with the order. Impressed, he bestowed upon them an annual revenue upon his return home. Even combined with the money the order was already receiving from the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the knights earned a very modest income. In fact, individual members were genuinely poor. Once the new palace of the King of Jerusalem was completed, he passed the al-Aqsa mosque – which had been serving as his palace – on to the order. It then became their base of operations, with knights residing within and using it as storage for their clothing, food, and arms. The vaults within the mosque were widely believed to have been Solomon's stables and the mosque was believed to have been built on the site of Solomon's Temple, leading to the mosque being known as the Templum Solomonis. Due to their use of the mosque as their headquarters, the Poor Fellow-Soldiers of Christ adapted their name to be the Poor Fellow-Soldiers of Christ and of the Temple of Solomon – thus establishing themselves as the Knights Templar.³

In 1127, Baldwin sent Hugh of Payns, then Grand Master of the Templars, west on a mission to secure donations and recruits for the order. Prior to sending Hugh, Baldwin wrote to

² Ibid., 95-6.

³ Ibid., 98.

Bernard of Clairvaux, explaining that the Knights Templar were attempting to gain the pope's approval of the order. Bernard was familiar with both the issues plaguing the Holy Land and the Templars, and Hugh received a warm welcome. Upon landing in France, the Templars received grants of land, horses, silver, and armor – the first of many gifts to be bestowed upon the order during Hugh's voyage. As he went, Hugh established Templar homes and outposts across the land. By 1129, the rules governing the Templars lives were amended – marking the emergence of their monk-like existence.⁴

When Hugh of Payns died in 1136, he was succeeded by Robert of Craon, who went on to consolidate the gains made by the Templars. A series of Papal bulls then established the Knights Templar as an independent organization within the Latin Church purposed with being the attackers of the enemies of Christ. Furthermore, the Templars were afforded their own priesthood, exempted from tithes, and given permission to keep all spoils of war. The knights were then given permission to wear the uniform they have become famous for: a white tunic adorned with a red cross, symbolic of their martyrdom in defense of the Holy Land.⁵ These changes in the lives of the Templars were monumental – not only did they confer wealth and power to the order, they also established it as an important body within both society and the Latin Church. The Templars were then appointed to accompany the French during the Second Crusade. In response, the Pope appointed the treasurer of the Templars to receive the tax that was imposed on church goods as a way of funding the crusade. Not only did this transfer even greater importance and power to the order, it also effectively made the Paris Temple the treasury of France – in stark contrast with the humble beginnings of the order.

⁴ Ibid., 101-2.

⁵ Ibid., 104.

The role of the Knights Templar continued to progress in this fashion. As the crusades and struggles over territory dragged on, the states began to rely much more heavily on military orders for protection, food, and order, among other things. Fortunately for the Templars, their importance to the people was directly related to their power. Answering only to the Pope placed the knights above both local and national quarrels, preserving their position in society. Moreover, the lure of knighthood was strong in noble families. This meant that the Templars had a relatively inexhaustible source of manpower ready and willing to join their ranks at any time – protecting their numbers from disease, death, famine, or any other potential disaster. The growing reverence for the order, its importance in terms of finance and protection, and its seeming immortality all equated to one thing: power. Haag writes, “...the Templars and the Hospitallers received donations of property in Europe which soon made them wealthy. Each order levied its own taxes, had its own diplomatic service and possessed its own fleet of ships. In effect the Hospitallers and the Templars were states within the state.”⁶ Virtually untouchable, the Templars continued to gain power. By 1166, there were only three castles in Jerusalem that were not under the control of the military orders – a testament to their dramatic increase in wealth and power in under 50 years.

Unfortunately for the Templars, their power and prestige would be relatively short lived. Following the fall of Acre, the Templars took a substantial amount of the blame and responsibility for the loss. Defending the Holy Land and protecting pilgrims on their voyages to it was the Templars’ sole reason for existence, and failing in this respect left them in a sort of limbo – especially when considering their exile from the Holy Land. Though beaten, the knights were persistent, and believed they would one day be able to recover the Holy Land. This dream

⁶ Ibid., 130.

was especially alive in the Templars' Grand Master, James of Molay. Though active in numerous attacks and plans for crusades to retrieve Outremer, the Templars would never be successful in their mission to do so. In 1307, the Knights Templar were arrested on charges of heresy and blasphemy sent down by King Philip IV.

In the early morning hours of October 13, 1307, roughly 2000 Templars were simultaneously arrested throughout France. The group did not exclusively include knights; all those with Templar ties were arrested, right down to the knights' agricultural workers and household servants. Philip's men met no opposition from the knights; most were unarmed and many were quite old. All arrests were made in the name of the Inquisition, and upon being brought to Paris, the Templars were held in their own headquarters.⁷ As previously noted, the main charge leveled against the Knights Templar was heresy. According to Haag, "When being inducted into the order, initiates were required to deny Christ, spit on the cross, and place obscene kisses about the body of their receptor. They were also obliged to indulge in sexual relations with other members of the order if requested, and they wore a small belt which had been consecrated by touching a strange idol which looked like a human head with a long beard called Baphomet."⁸ At a time when the Latin Church held most of the power in Europe, these actions were regarded with utmost disgust. However, these ceremonies had been occurring for hundreds of years without issue, even though the order answered and was loyal to the Papacy. An oddity of the charges leveled was that though authorized by the Papal Inquisitor, they were carried out by the king – not the church. This was made possible due to a loophole in the law,

⁷ Ibid., 217.

⁸ Ibid., 218.

which allowed the inquisitor to pursue charges of heresy against anyone – even the exempt orders answering directly to the Pope.

Since heresy was the one charge that could be leveled against the Templars, the king had to have evidence to back up the claims. Ceremony and ritual acts practiced by the order were then taken out of context and presented as crimes against religion in order to portray the Knights Templar as a group maintaining a heretic creed. For Philip, proving the Templars heretics meant the transfer of their wealth and power over to him, which he needed to finance and pay off wars. The Templars were then subject to brutal torture practices in order to secure their confessions. Many then recanted their confessions, which served only to make the situation worse. On May 12, 1310, fifty-four Templars were burnt at the stake after being found guilty of revoking their confessions.⁹ This led many others for return to their original confessions for fear of death. Then, the Latin Church ruled that the order was to be suppressed due to being too defamed to carry on as usual. The balance of the Templar wealth was then transferred over to the Hospitallers. The official end of the once great Templars came on March 18, 1314 when the order's last Grand Master, James of Molay, was burned at the stake after being once again condemned by the king as a heretic.

Origins of the Freemasons

Like any other secret society, Freemasonry is surrounded by questions and mysteries. What is surprising about the institution of Freemasonry, however, is that one of the largest mysteries surrounding it is that of its origin. What is, perhaps, even more shocking, is that this question has even masonic historians divided over its true answer – sparking debate to this day.

⁹ Ibid., 234.

There are two main theories concerning how Freemasonry came to exist. The first is that it developed out of the ancient guilds of stonemasons. The second is that Freemasonry is descended from the original order of the Knights Templar. Since neither theory can be proved true or false, it is important to understand both in their entirety.

The theory that Freemasonry developed out of ancient stonemasons' guilds is the theory that is most widely known and accepted by the general public. In the Middle Ages, stonemasons were set apart from the general public due to the nature of their job.¹⁰ Unlike the serfs or craftsmen who made up most of the population, stonemasons possessed a very specialized skill: the ability to work in stone. At the time, most buildings were not made of stone. Only the most important structures – such as castles and cathedrals – required the work of the highly skilled stonemasons. Since the majority of buildings did not necessitate the utilization of stonemasons, their numbers were not very large. Because of this, stonemasons had to travel great distances more often than not when they were commissioned to work on a new project. Due to the grandeur of such projects, they often took many years to complete. Once in a new location, the stonemasons would erect a hut, known as a “lodge,” where they would take their afternoon breaks, eat dinner, and store their tools.¹¹

Midway through the 1300s, acts were passed by the English Parliament establishing maximum wages for skilled workers. This came in response to the shortage of available labor caused by the Black Death. Stonemasons began developing illegal trade unions to circumvent the maximum wage laws. Since the availability of skilled workers – especially highly skilled

¹⁰ Jasper Ridley, *The Freemasons: A History of the World's Most Powerful Secret Society* (New York, New York: Arcade, 2011), 1.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

stonemasons and master masons – was so low, those hiring them were willing to take the risks associated with breaking the law by paying above the maximum wage limit in order to ensure they were getting the best workers possible. Since they were operating illegally, these trade unions met in secrecy so as not to be overheard by outsiders. In order to prevent low-ranking entered apprentice masons (or anyone else, for that matter) from portraying themselves as a qualified master mason and taking the work and wages of the master masons, the masons established a code word which was only given to qualified master masons.¹² This code word allowed master masons to recognize each other, and prevented apprentices from posing as the more skilled master masons.

Sometime between 1550 and 1700, the Freemasons as a group changed from the medieval stone guilds of centuries past into the fraternal organization recognized today. It is unknown exactly how or why this shift took place. What is known, however, is that the days when membership required one to be a practicing stonemason were over. Masonic lodges began accepting membership from those in no way linked with stonemasonry. These men came to be known as “speculative masons,” while those who were honest stonemasons were called “operative masons.” One theory explaining the motive of the masons when deciding to allow non-masons to join the order comes from Michael Haag, who states “To enhance the standing of their associations, freemasons invited influential people to serve as patrons. This gave the freemasons a social appeal which together with their study of the Bible began to attract an inquiring elite comprising gentlemen and scholars, professionals and merchants...”¹³ As a direct result of the masons permitting outside membership, speculative masons outnumbered operative

¹² Ibid., 7

¹³ Michael Haag, *The Templars: The History and the Myth* (Broadway, New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 259.

masons by the year 1700. In 1717, four masonic lodges in London joined to form a Grand Lodge. Rather than electing an operative mason to head the Grand Lodge, the Freemasons chose a gentleman – a speculative mason – to be Grand Master. Following this appointment, an operative mason would never again serve as Grand Master.

The second theory surrounding the foundation of Freemasonry is that the order is descended directly from the original order of the Knights Templar. Following the execution of James of Molay, no one knows what happened to the remaining knights who were not captured. According to legend, the remaining knights boarded the ships of the Templar fleet and made their way to Scotland, where they joined Robert Bruce in fighting against the English. According to H. Paul Jeffers, “The favored view is that remaining Templars made their way to Scotland to protect its warrior king, Robert Bruce. Fighting the English and having no significant force of his own, he declared that all Templars would be welcome to join him.”¹⁴ Fleeing Scotland made sense for the fugitive Templars, due to the fact that they were facing persecution and Bruce welcomed them into the country. Welcoming the fugitive Templars into the country made sense for Bruce, due to the fact that he was up against a much larger and well prepared army. Utilizing the highly trained and skilled Templars meant that Bruce’s fighting power increased exponentially, making the defeat of the English much more likely. When fighting broke out between the Scots and the English on July 24, 1314 at Bannockburn, the Scottish army was made up of unskilled foot soldiers and bowmen. Throughout the day, the Scots appeared to be nearing defeat. Late in the day, a force of Templars appeared, and the English fled. After the battle, the fugitive knights found refuge on islands off the west coast of Scotland for close to eighty years.

¹⁴ H. Paul Jeffers, *Freemasons: Inside the World’s Oldest Secret Society* (New York, New York: Citadel Press, 2005), 17.

Then, at the end of the 14th century, they moved to the east coast, settled in Aberdeen, and called themselves the Freemasons.¹⁵

Considering the circumstances of the Templars' persecution adds an element of validity to this story. Prior to being denounced by both the King and the Church, the Knights Templar was arguably the most powerful organization in all of Europe – maybe even the world. It answered only to the Pope, who had no qualms with it; it was exempt from all taxes, but had the power to levy them; it became rich through the spoils of war, helping the order to gain immeasurable power and become, for all intents and purposes, the first modern bank – providing loans even to the royal family. The size of the order would have also been quite impressive, especially when considering each person who worked for the order. When the Inquisition came down against the Templars and arrests were ordered, only ten men were verifiably arrested. As deduced by Michael Baigent and Richard Leigh, “An exhaustive consideration of both English and Inquisition documents, and a detailed study of the work of other historians, leads us to conclude that in 1307, Templar strength in England numbered some 265 men.”¹⁶ Though 265 men is a small number by modern standards, it was not at the time of the Templar arrests. Of those 265 men, about twenty-nine would have been full-fledged knights along with twenty-seven sergeants and thirty-one chaplains. Leaving out the supporting staff of the Templars puts the range of fighting knights between thirty-two and 106. If only ten men were arrested, that would have left over ninety men at large.¹⁷

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Michael Baigent & Richard Leigh, *The Temple and the Lodge* (New York, New York: Arcade, 2011), 61.

¹⁷ Ibid., 61-2

Based on evidence, it is reasonable to assume that these fugitive men were never found. If they had been discovered, there certainly would have been a record made of such a monumental occurrence. Furthermore, there is no explanation for the disappearance of the Templar fleet. If the ships had been secured in the King's hands, given to the Hospitallers, or even caught leaving, a record of that would certainly exist. Even if these records were somehow hidden, it is reasonable to believe that the general public would have had knowledge of such events, making them impossible to be kept secret. Furthermore, if the fugitive knights had boarded their ships and sailed to Scotland, they would have been able to do so without alerting the French, and under the protection of Bruce.

The factor that perhaps lends the most credibility to this second theory is the fact that it is the origin story championed by the Freemasons themselves. The brotherhood fully believes that Freemasonry has descended directly from the order of the Knights Templar, and that it was the last remaining Templars themselves who created the institution. Regardless of the brothers' stance on the issue, it cannot be proven either way. Thus, it has not been guarded from criticism. Some historians, such as Jasper Ridley, believe that the Freemasons invented the theory of Templar descent in order to have a more romantic, mysterious past. According to Jeffers, "Historian Jasper Ridley surmises that some Freemasons simply chose to believe that it was more romantic for Freemasonry to be descended from a persecuted religious order of chivalry than from trade unions of English stone cutters."¹⁸

Though these are both very interesting stories, it is important to view this perspective of the history of the Knights Templar and the origin of Freemasonry with some skepticism. Though

¹⁸ H. Paul Jeffers, *Freemasons: Inside the World's Oldest Secret Society* (New York, New York: Citadel Press, 2005), 17.

the king really did level charges against the Templars which ultimately resulted in their demise, these charges are not generally accepted as being true. King Philip IV had been feuding with the popes for a long time and desperately needed to raise funds. By confiscating the assets of the Templars, he stood to gain an impressive amount of wealth and power. However, he needed grounds in order to do so – resulting in the fake charges against the Templars. Furthermore, most historians generally do not accept the theory that the Templars fled to Scotland and aided Robert the Bruce at Bannockburn. The battle at Bannockburn occurred in 1314, seven years after the arrest of the Templars by King Philip IV. Furthermore, Pope Clement later ordered all European monarchs to follow suit in their own countries – making the Knights Templar unwelcome across Europe. There are also no records showing that any French knights appeared in Scotland at the time, which would not have gone unnoticed. This in and of itself lends a lack of credibility to the idea that the Templars aided Robert the Bruce. As an ally of the French king, it is unlikely that the Templars would come to his aid after facing persecution at the hands of Philip IV. The history presented is one that is intriguing, but it is also the one responsible for spawning much of the speculation and conspiracy theories that will be discussed later. Ultimately, while interesting, it is important to view this information with an air of caution due solely to the fact that it cannot all be proven beyond reasonable doubt.

III. Freemasonry Takes Root in America

As Europeans immigrated to North America, they brought their culture and beliefs with them, which extended to include things such as Freemasonry. The first documented mason in America was John Skene, who traveled to the New World with his family aboard the *Golden Lion*, settling in New Jersey in the year 1682. The first Freemason to be born in America was Andrew Belcher. He was the son of John Belcher, a mason, and was initiated into the craft in

1733.¹⁹ Though immigrants to North America brought Freemasonry along with them, it was many years before the institution became an integral part of society.

The French and Indian War broke out in 1754. The war precipitated the need for more soldiers, which was fulfilled by the American colonists. Working alongside General Jeffery Amherst and the other members of the British military meant exposure to their customs – including Freemasonry. Beginning in the 1730s, Freemasonry began to spread through the British army. It took the form of regimental field lodges, which were quite different than those of traditional Freemasonry. Unlike traditional lodges, field lodges were mobile with troops carrying the masonic paraphernalia of their lodge from place to place and battlefield to battlefield. Often, the commanding colonel would serve as a regiment lodge’s original master, who would then be succeeded by other officers.²⁰ Like traditional masonic lodges, military lodges brought together men from many different backgrounds. It provided soldiers with a place where they could speak freely, without concern about title, rank, or status and provided a channel for the remedy of grievances.

The British army’s exposure of Freemasonry to the Americans had a profound impact on Freemasonry in America. As one can imagine, the Freemasonry that was so widely known to the British troops quickly expanded to the Americans serving alongside them. Freemasonry allowed soldiers to become more than men fighting alongside one another; it made them brothers – ultimately strengthening morale and bonds between the men. In the words of Baigent and Leigh, “American commanders and personnel pounced on whatever opportunities arose to become not

¹⁹ Ibid., 35

²⁰ Michael Baigent & Richard Leigh, *The Temple and the Lodge* (New York, New York: Arcade, 2011), 203.

just comrades-in-arms, but also fellow Freemasons. Fraternal bonds were thus forged between regular British troops and their colonial colleagues...and even those who did not themselves become Freemasons were still constantly exposed to the influence of Freemasonry...”²¹

As Freemasonry spread through the army, it began making its way into normal society and the lives of the general public. At a time when the military was held in high esteem, the acceptance of such an order by the troops meant that it would gain the approval of the masses as well. What is more, men returning to their homes after service were not likely to sever their masonic ties or leave Freemasonry behind, which spurred its growth throughout the nation. As men returned home, they shared their masonic beliefs and teachings with other men, growing the population of Freemasons and necessitating the formation of more lodges. The growth of masonry became cyclical; the more exposure the craft had, the more quickly it grew as people became aware of it and embraced its guidance and ideals.²²

The version of Freemasonry that was to become prevalent throughout the American colonies was quite different from that of the military as well as the Freemasonry established in Europe. Unlike traditional masonry, which bridged the divide between social class, title, rank, and status to include men from a variety of backgrounds and walks of life, American Freemasonry was more restricted. In *Revolutionary Brotherhood: Freemasonry and the Transformation of the American Social Order, 1730-1840*, Professor of history Steven C. Bullock writes, “Colonial Masonry was not a middle-class order that embraced a wide range of

²¹ Ibid., 211

²² Ibid.

members. Instead, membership was restricted almost exclusively to men of rank.²³ Within Freemasonry, these men sought to advance their own interests, enhance their status, and climb up the ladder of social hierarchy. The mingling of all men traditionally embraced by masons would have made this impossible, due to the fact that the order would not have been associated with gentlemen and those of wealth and societal importance. Rather than transcending the restraints of society proper, this new American masonry worked to reinforce them and establish the men of its ranks as well-respected elites. Bullock reiterates this idea gain, stating “Colonial leaders saw the fraternity as a means both to build elite solidarity and to emphasize their elevation above common people. Masonry’s public processions and orations portrayed colonial elites as they wished to be seen, secure in their dignity and open in their sympathies.”²⁴ Not only did this new brotherhood serve to consolidate elite members of society into one group, it also served as a way to illustrate this to the general public – all while maintaining an image of a group of men bound together by nothing more than fraternal bonds.

IV. Antimasonry

Masonry and its brethren were generally well-respected during the formative years of the United States. Comprised mainly of elite gentlemen such as politicians and scholars, Freemasonry was held in high esteem due to its very nature. Criticism of the craft related mainly to its secretive nature, with those on the outside insisting that the secrecy emerged due to the need to hide something, and that the institution as a whole must have been untrustworthy. Unfortunately for these critics, their arguments lacked supporting evidence – there had not yet

²³ Steven C. Bullock, *Revolutionary Brotherhood: Freemasonry and the Transformation of the American Social Order, 1730-1840* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 51.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

been an occurrence to truly tarnish the reputation of Freemasonry in the United States. This, however, would soon change – resulting in a social movement, the first third party in American history, and the near dissolution of Freemasonry throughout the country.

The cataclysm that would become responsible for antimasonry in the United States was the death of William Morgan in 1826. Records show that Morgan attained the Royal Arch degree on May 31, 1825 at Western Star Chapter No. 33 in Le Roy, New York.²⁵ Historical accounts of Morgan also suggest that he lived as an uneducated vagrant. Unconcerned with financial obligations, he was frequently arrested for his lack of debt repayment and was often the recipient of masonic charity. According to masonic legend, Morgan was never a true brother – that is, his acceptance into the craft by other members never actually occurred. Instead, modern masonic brethren speculate that Morgan gained entrance into the brotherhood through the manipulation of a masonic acquaintance in Rochester who then vouched for his false authenticity.²⁶

Once suspicions of Morgan's membership were raised, he was dismissed from the institution based on his lack of credibility. In retaliation, Morgan announced that he had written a book that would reveal the secrets and rituals of Freemasonry, and that he had a penal bond with three other men for its publication – a bond that would net him \$500,000. Morgan continued to boast about his book throughout the city, much to the chagrin of the masons. Freemasons feared the ramifications of such a book; initiation into the brotherhood required a vow of secrecy. The exposé touted by Morgan threatened the very foundations of Freemasonry, and members feared that Morgan's success would dismantle the institution as a whole.

²⁵ H. Paul Jeffers, *The Freemasons in America: Inside the Secret Society* (New York, New York: Citadel Press, 2006), 45.

²⁶ Ibid.

In September 1826, Morgan was arrested on charges of theft for stealing a shirt and tie. Once acquitted, he was immediately rearrested and placed in jail for failing to pay a debt of \$2.86. He spent one day in jail, after which an unidentified person posted his bail. Upon Morgan's release, he left in a coach with several other men, apparently not of his own free will. With Morgan shouting, "Murder!" from the back of the carriage, it drove out of sight.²⁷

The carriage then traveled from Canandaigua to Fort Niagara. Formerly the home of the U.S. government's department of defense. The fort lay empty, and Morgan was held there for multiple days by his captors. It is rumored that at one point, Morgan's captors took him by boat across the river to the Canadian border where discussions concerning transfer of the prisoner to the Canadians as a means of his disposal took place. No such transfer was ever made, and Morgan was taken back to Fort Niagara. Following his return to the fort, Morgan was never publicly seen again.²⁸ The body of William Morgan was never recovered. Initially a body wearing what appeared to be Morgan's clothing was found and identified by his wife, but further investigation proved that the body was not his.

William Morgan's initial arrests were incited by a group of Freemasons. The man who paid Morgan's debts, securing his release, was Lotan Lawson – a mason who claimed to be Morgan's friend. Lawson then supposedly insisted that Morgan join him in his carriage, with two other masons – Chesebro and Saywer – forcing a reluctant Morgan into the coach. The fort at Niagara should have been inaccessible to the men, but investigators later determined that the

²⁷ Barg Karg & John K. Young, *101 Secrets of the Freemasons: The Truth Behind the World's Most Mysterious Society* (Avon, Massachusetts: Adam's Media, 2009), 105.

²⁸ Ibid.

caretaker of the fort, another Freemason, had provided them access.²⁹ The ferryman who took the men across the river later asserted that the meeting that took place was between several American and Canadian Freemasons, and that they spoke of eliminating William Morgan. Unfortunately for the American masons, their Canadian brothers refused to become involved in the affair.

Though the evidence against the group of masons involved in the Morgan affair was substantial, it was not entirely conclusive. While it is true that he was never seen alive again, his body was never found, nor was any evidence of his murder. Because of this, there was no way to charge anyone with his murder or prove that he was, in fact, murdered. There were, however, numerous witnesses to Morgan's abduction that corroborated the crime. Morgan's captors were convicted of his abduction and given sentences and imprisonment ranging from one month to barely more than two years.³⁰

Acquaintances of William Morgan began informing the press and public about his disappearance and the circumstances surrounding it. Miller also used the event as a means of bringing publicity to the tell-all book he had written prior to his disappearance, which immediately became a best-seller. The Freemasons contended, both at the time and now, that the story of Morgan's disappearance was orchestrated by Morgan and Miller as a publicity stunt to sell more copies of the book and ensure a higher payout.³¹

²⁹ Jasper Ridley, *The Freemasons: A History of the World's Most Powerful Secret Society* (New York, New York: Arcade, 2011), 178-9.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 180-1.

³¹ H. Paul Jeffers, *The Freemasons in America: Inside the Secret Society* (New York, New York: Citadel Press, 2006), 46.

Once the tale of Morgan's disappearance became public knowledge, Freemasonry began to lose the respect and admiration it once commanded. The incident added fuel to the fire for those who had already been critics of the craft, adding a new element of fervor to their argument and increased dedication to their beliefs. Many who had formerly been supporters of Freemasonry – including some Freemasons themselves – turned their back on it due to their displeasure with the situation. Speculation about Freemasonry's true secrets and what its members were hiding multiplied exponentially. According to historian H. Paul Jeffers, "Popular feeling that Masons considered themselves above the law produced a public campaign against Freemasonry. It was claimed that their secrecy hid illegal and immoral activities, that Masonic oaths were unlawful and 'bloody,' and that Masons sought to subvert American political and religious institutions."³²

When considering the sentences handed down to the convicted masons, many believed that they were far too lenient for the crimes committed. The tendency of masons to be society's elite also meant that they often held important positions in society. Much of the public believed that having friends – or in this case, brothers – in high places is what secured the men such light sentences. In the eyes of the public, Freemasons had now gained such great power through their elitism and connections that the law no longer applied to them. To quote historic biographer Jasper Ridley, "Freemasonry was denounced as a conspiracy against the nation; an affront to the American ideal; as a sinister elite placing their members in positions of authority and privilege, violating the American principles of equality and fair play applied impartially to every citizen; as

³² Ibid., 47.

a secret society negating the open, honest government which was the pride of the American Constitution.”³³

The newly invigorated, nationwide antimasonic sentiment culminated in the antimasonic movement and the Antimasonic Party – the first official third party in American political history. As a whole, antimasonry attracted those who were already involved in or supported other reform movements and religious crusades. This attraction, however, was not limited to one area of the country or members of any specific social distinction. No relation can be proven between antimasonry’s adherents and geographic, economic, or social conditions of those parties. The only valid generalization that can be made about subscribers of antimasonry is that they were all very concerned with morality. That is not to say that every person concerned with morality in the United States was an antimason; rather, each antimason was a moralist.³⁴

Through morality-based attacks, the antimasons were able to both discredit American Freemasonry, thus gaining support for their movement, and force brothers who were also involved in the church to choose between it and masonry. The foundation of Freemasonry as a fraternal brotherhood devoted to helping others and benefitting society did not mesh with the disappearance of William Morgan. Furthermore, most of the elite gentlemen who would have made up the majority of Freemasonic brethren at the time were also Christians. The acts of kidnapping and potential murder committed by Morgan’s assailants did not align with the beliefs of Freemasonry or Christianity. This left those who were brothers but also claimed to be Christians in an unfavorable position, especially those holding roles in the church. Through

³³ Jasper Ridley, *The Freemasons: A History of the World’s Most Powerful Secret Society* (New York, New York: Arcade, 2011), 184.

³⁴ Lorman Ratner, *Antimasonry: The Crusade and the Party* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1969), 10-11.

appeals to their moral conscience, antimasons were able to force these brothers to choose between Freemasonry and religion, which was illustrated by the letter penned by prominent laymen representing the major religious denominations in the United States to clergy with masonic connections. These prominent men believed that if the clergy had truly believed in the goodness of the fraternity, they would have upheld the actions of its brothers in the Morgan affair and defended the institution rather than abandoning it. Since the clergy chose to walk away from the brotherhood instead, the laymen felt that they had known all along that Freemasonry did not align with Christian ideals. The men cited their frustrations with the clergy for failing to denounce Freemasonry prior to the Morgan incident for these reasons, writing:

And admitting that you knew it to be incorporated with the kingdom of Christ, it is reasonable to suppose that your conduct and decision in relation to the subject would have been prompt and unhesitating; that you would not have forsaken the lodges and chapters of masonry on account of a little opposition and disgrace that fell upon it for having executed its righteous laws on an offending brother; and that you like men set for the defence of the truth, would have rallied round the standard of masonry, grasped your masonic weapons, and worthily executed every forfeited penalty, and thus have secured the secret mysteries and treasures of masonry.³⁵

According to these men, the claim that masonry had any ties to morality had always been false. Since many abandoned their masonic ties following the publicity of the Morgan affair, it appeared that they did not truly believe Freemasonry was an ethical organization. If they had, they would have never walked away from it; instead, they would have defended it and its actions, proving to the world that the antimasons were wrong in asserting that it was a rotten institution.

³⁵ *An Appeal to Christian Ministers in Connection with Speculative Free Masonry 1829*, From *Antimasonry: The Crusade and the Party* by Lorman Ratner (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1969), 43.

Antimasons also contended that Freemasons themselves were attempting to dismantle religion, specifically Christianity. Viewing the organization as a cult rather than a brotherhood, the movement emphasized the false idea that membership required denouncing not only religion, but also Jesus Christ and its other tenets entirely. The Freemasons became likened to pagans, with their rituals and vows being compared to Satanism and referred to as “blood oaths.” Illustrating Freemasons as enemies of religion helped to brand them as dishonest as well as enemies of the country, based on the idea that its historical beginnings were rooted in the struggle for religious freedom.

The aspect of morality in the antimasonic movement extended farther than just religion. The goal of the movement and the Antimasonic Party was to portray Freemasonry in a negative light in all respects. In order to gain support, it was critical that the movement illustrated all Freemasons – not just those involved in Morgan’s disappearance – as self-righteous, arrogant individuals without concern for the democratic principles the nation was founded on. Professor and historian Lorman Ratner contends, “In attacking the Fraternity through politics the Antimasons, hoping to preserve the character of a crusade, based their attack on the principle of defense and furtherance of democracy. Masons were now labelled as aristocrats, monopolists, and self-interested individuals who lacked either interest in or respect for democratic principles.”³⁶

Positioning their crusade in this way, the antimasons were able to make it personal for everyone in America. Recollection of the revolution and the reasons behind the democratic principles of the United States were still very fresh in the minds of the electorate. A group posing

³⁶ Lorman Ratner, *Antimasonry: The Crusade and the Party* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1969), 14.

a threat to that democracy posed a threat to them personally – and could not be tolerated. Furthermore, portraying themselves as the defenders of democracy hid the motives of the antimasons and allowed the group to appear as valiant white knights swooping in to save the heroine – the United States – from the evil villain that was Freemasonry. As illustrated by the words of prominent minister Jedidiah Morse, the movement molded Freemasonry into an organization that threatened everything of meaning to the population as a whole: “Nor were the labours of this Academy confined to religion. They attacked also morality and government, unhinged gradually the minds of men, and destroyed their reverence for every thing heretofore esteemed sacred.”³⁷

The antimasonic political party focused its energy on proving that Freemasons were a hindrance to democracy. The involvement of various officials who were masons in the Morgan case provided the party with fairly lethal ammunition for doing so. As soon as Morgan’s kidnappers were convicted, protests over their light sentences began. Though the law at that time did not provide for much harsher sentencing, the public viewed it as an injustice to the missing man. All of this gave rise to the idea that the men were getting off due to masonic help on the inside. When the Committee on the Abduction of William Morgan presented a report to the U.S. Senate, it capitalized on these fears, stating, “It is believed that grand juries, a majority of whom were masons, have omitted to find bills of indictment when there was proof before them of outrages, not surpassed in grossness and indecency by any committed in the country since its

³⁷ Jedidiah Morse, *Dangers and Duties of Citizens of the United States from Antimasonry: The Crusade and the Party* by Lorman Ratner (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1969), 20.

first settlement.”³⁸ Not only did this report reinforce the idea that the masons had become too powerful, it suggested that their sparse consequences were the result of an internal governmental conspiracy. If indeed, an internal masonic conspiracy existed within the government, it would be of paramount importance to remove the threat before it could do any further damage.

The only surefire way to remove the threat of masonic conspiracies within the government was to remove masons from their positions and prevent new masons from being elected. This became the number one goal of the Antimasonic Party. Their argument hinged on the idea that allowing affairs to continue as they were would ultimately result in a downward slope of declining democracy. If masons were allowed to continue holding governmental positions, they argued, democracy would break down to the point that even the freedom of speech would cease to exist. The plan to prevent masonic candidates from holding office was simple: withhold support from them. If they had no support, they would not be elected, eliminating the problem in a way that upheld democratic ideals. The antimasons argued that being made up of elite members of society, viewing themselves above the law, and having masonic brethren in beneficial governmental places, Freemasons were being treated differently than the rest of the population. Again portraying themselves as innocent of ulterior motives, the party passionately presented its stance as about protecting citizens’ rights, writing “It is not a question whether this or that man shall be President or Governor – it is not a question whether this or that line of measures shall be pursued – but it is a question of immeasurably greater

³⁸ The Committee on the Abduction of William Morgan in a report made to the Senate on February 14, 1829, from *Antimasonry: The Crusade and the Party* by Lorman Ratner (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1969), 28.

importance – a question whether the rights of the citizen shall be held sacred – whether the laws shall be impartially administered – whether religion shall be duly revered.”³⁹

Though the election of 1832 marked the end of the Antimasonic Party, it was not the end of antimasonic sentiment in the United States. By 1832, Freemasonry was on a downward slide that would last around two decades. Countless brothers denounced their membership and cut ties with the fraternity, wishing to distance themselves from the negative publicity surrounding its name. Others who remained active did so quietly, abandoning the parades, orations, and grandeur that characterized the craft’s early years in America. The antimasonic movement gained all of its momentum from the case of William Morgan – a man who Freemasons contend, to this day, was never murdered; just paid off to leave the country and never be heard from again. Regardless of the fact that the claims of the Antimasonic Party were often exaggerated, their actions caused the reputation of the institution to be effectively ruined in the United States for many years afterwards.

V. Indisputable Influence

There are many theories surrounding the impact of the Freemasons and Knights Templar on early American history that cannot be proven. Unfortunately for historians, it is difficult to determine with complete accuracy what is real and what is not real due to the secretive nature of both organizations. Though all of the above is true, it would also be false to claim that the organizations did not exert any sort of influence. Historians and the historical record may not be

³⁹ Proceedings of a Convention of Delegates Opposed to Freemasonry, which met at LeRoy, Genesee Co., New York, March 6, 1828, from *Antimasonry: The Crusade and the Party* by Lorman Ratner (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1969), 56.

able to prove or debunk the conspiracies surrounding these organizations in the early years of the United States, but they can easily show that they did make some sort of impact.

When the American Revolution broke out, it was Britain's war to lose. With a larger army, more resources, and greater support, a loss for the British was very unlikely. This, however, is exactly what happened. In many ways, Freemasonry had a hand in winning the war for the United States. The British army was responsible for the spread of Freemasonry in America during the French and Indian War. As discussed in a previous section of this paper, regiment field lodges expanded and multiplied greatly throughout the war. All soldiers, even those who did not practice the craft, were constantly exposed to its beliefs and values due to its saturation of the army as a whole. Upon returning home, many of these men took their masonic values with them. Constructing new lodges and attracting new brothers, the fraternity continued to grow. As a result, when the American Revolution broke out, many men in both the British and American armies were Freemasons. Even those who were not practicing masons were once again steeped in its attitudes and values.⁴⁰ The fact that the war pitted brothers against each other made it extremely difficult for them to behave as expected.

Upon initiation, Freemasons are required to take an oath that they will defend and protect their brothers for the rest of their lives. The brotherhood takes this oath very seriously, giving aid to brothers who need it whenever possible. As such, fighting other masonic brethren – even if they were serving in a different army – did not mesh with Freemasonic beliefs and values. Furthermore, much of what the Americans were fighting for paralleled masonic ideals. Authors

⁴⁰ Michael Baigent & Richard Leigh, *The Temple and the Lodge* (New York, New York: Arcade, 2011), 211.

and speculative theorists Michael Baigent and Richard Leigh write, "...for the British high command, as well as for the 'rank-and-file,' they were engaged in a war not just with fellow Englishmen, but also with Freemasonic brethren. In such circumstances, it was often difficult to be ruthless."⁴¹ In the minds of the British army (and even some colonists loyal to the King) the colonists were ultimately still British, due to the fact that the American states were colonies of Britain and a large portion of the colonists immigrated to the country from Britain. When combined with the fact that many were masons, it was difficult for the British army to act as it typically would in times of war. This, of course, does not mean that the British did not do their job. As professional soldiers, they were prepared to do their duty to their country. However, they were not necessarily prepared to do whatever it would take to win. Most only did what was absolutely necessary of them, and nothing more – choosing their Freemasonic beliefs over English colonial interests.

Masonic influence can be seen yet again in the formation of the United States government throughout and following the Revolutionary War. Freemasons constituted a decent amount of the colonies' elite gentlemen, the group that was called upon to draft the blueprints for the new federal government. When the Declaration of Independence was signed in 1776, nine of its 56 signers were Freemasons, and 10 others may have been Freemasons.⁴² Though these numbers do not constitute the majority of the men involved, they do show proof of masonic brethren having a hand in the passage of the declaration. When the Constitutional Convention opened on May 25, 1787, Freemasonry was the only surviving pre-revolution fraternal

⁴¹ Michael Baigent & Richard Leigh, *The Temple and the Lodge* (New York, New York: Arcade, 2011), 216.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 219.

organization, and the sole organization operating nationally.⁴³ The presiding officer of the convention was none other than George Washington – a mason – working with the help of other masonic delegates such as Benjamin Franklin. Forty men went on to sign the Constitution of the United States of America. Of those forty men, twenty-eight have been proven to either be Freemasons or possibly members of the brotherhood.⁴⁴

George Washington went on to become the first President of the United States. When choosing members for his cabinet, Washington extended positions to men who either were masons, or who were sympathetic to the fraternity's values. These men included Thomas Jefferson, who became secretary of state; Alexander Hamilton, who became secretary of the treasury; General Henry Knox, who became secretary of war; and Edmund Randolph, who became attorney general. While these men were chosen due to their skills and suitability for holding governmental offices, being Freemasons or sympathetic to them resulted in an increase in this suitability. As elite, educated gentlemen of society, it made sense for Washington to choose these men. In accordance with this idea, Washington wrote that "... 'being persuaded that a just application of the principles on which the Masonic fraternity is founded must be promotive of private virtue and public prosperity, I shall always be happy to advance the interest of the society and be considered by them a deserving Brother.'"⁴⁵

⁴³ H. Paul Jeffers, *The Freemasons in America: Inside the Secret Society* (New York, New York: Citadel Press, 2006), 26.

⁴⁴ H. Paul Jeffers, *Freemasons: Inside the World's Oldest Secret Society* (New York, New York: Citadel Press, 2005), 50.

⁴⁵ H. Paul Jeffers, *The Freemasons in America: Inside the Secret Society* (New York, New York: Citadel Press, 2006), 29-30.

Although not every member of the government or military was a Freemason, the presence of Freemasons in both institutions had a very large impact on them as a whole. Multiple masons signed the Declaration of Independence, and Freemasonry played a relatively large role in securing an American victory during the Revolutionary War – the two events responsible for establishing the United States as an independent country. The United States Constitution was signed by multiple Freemasons as well, and the institution as a whole has often cited Freemasonic influence in its writings. Once Washington was elected president, he filled his cabinet of advisory members with like-minded men, made up mainly of masons and those sympathetic to masonic values. Washington's election also set the precedent for masonic leadership of the nation's federal government, with thirteen more Freemasons serving as President since his election.

VI. Popular Culture: Myths, Legends, and Conspiracies

The world of secret societies is characterized by speculation and obsession by those on the outside. This is especially true for the Freemasons, who have been surrounded by hushed whispers of outsider conspiracies for hundreds of years. In recent years, these musings have gotten mainstream attention through best-selling novels and box office busting movies as well as through the help of the internet, which has made this wealth of information accessible to anyone. As a result of this media saturation, the general public has begun to accept unchecked theories and speculation as the gospel truth.

The most basic legend surrounding the Freemasons is the theory that they are directly descended from the Knights Templar. According to the legend, a treasure was found by the Knights Templar that had the potential to change the world forever. As far as what this treasure really is, no one can say. Theories range from treasure in the literal sense, made up of gold and

jewels, to the Holy Grail. Some even believe that the treasure found by the Templars was the truth about the life of Jesus as well as the body of Mary Magdalene – who they contend was Jesus’s wife. The Templars appointed themselves guardians of this treasure, with the sole purpose of protecting it from falling into that hands of someone who would misuse it. They believed that it was too grand and monumental for any single person to claim, so the purpose of the order became the concealment and protection of this supposed treasure. The treasure was then handed down from one Grand Master to another. It is said that the night before his execution, James of Molay ordered a group of Templars still at large to enter the crypt of the Paris temple, remove the treasure, and flee to safety. Haag writes, “the treasure, which consisted of the seven-branched candelabra stolen from the Temple by the Roman Emperor Titus, the crown of the Kingdom of Jerusalem and a shroud. These were taken to the Atlantic port of La Rochelle from where eighteen Templar galleys made their escape to the Isle of Mull where they called themselves Freemasons.”⁴⁶

Some aspects of Freemasonry, when viewing it as a fraternal organization born from ancient stonemasons’ guilds, do not make sense. When being initiated as a Master Mason, a brother is told that the new degree will make him “a brother to pirates and corsairs,” which has no explanation if the brotherhood stems from medieval guilds. If, however, Freemasonry is a derivative of the Knights Templar, this phrase would have an explanation. The Templar fleet disappeared after James of Molay’s execution, and no record of its whereabouts exist. If the remaining Templars who were not subjected to the Inquisition loaded the treasure onto the ships, boarded them, and left, this statement would make sense in that any remaining Templar fugitives

⁴⁶ Michael Haag, *The Templars: The History and the Myth* (Broadway, New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 264-5.

found on land would be a brother to any Templars who fled by sea, and thus, the Freemasons. There also exists a Freemasonic oath that no brother may tell the secret of any other mason that would cause him to lose his property and life. When considering the stonemason guild origin story, the only situation which would cause a brother to lose his property – and thus his life in a figurative sense – would be if another mason revealed the higher wages they were earning through breaking the law. If this did, in fact, happen, it is plausible to believe that the mason whose illegal wages were revealed would be prosecuted for his crime. However, whether or not he would truly lose his life through death is unable to be determined. On the other hand, such an oath would be critical to the survival of the fraternity at a time when many of its members were actually fugitive Templars who would still be murdered if publicly revealed.⁴⁷

These connections would make it appear as if Freemasonry originated from the last remaining Templars, in stark contrast with the widely held belief that it originated in medieval stonemason guilds. The fact that the Freemasons themselves support and propagate this theory also lends to its credibility. Some, however, believe that this story is just that: a tale conceived by the Freemasons to romanticize their antiquity and provide them with an air of martyred mystery. Following William Morgan's disappearance, his book – *Freemasonry Exposed* – was published as an exposé of the fraternity considered responsible for his apparent death. In it, he writes “Masonry is of itself naked and worthless. It consists of gleanings from the Holy Scriptures, and from the arts and sciences, which have shone in the world. Linking itself with philosophy and science and religion, on this it rests all its claims to veneration and respect. Take away this borrowed aid, and it falls into ruins.”⁴⁸ Though Morgan does not directly reference ties to the

⁴⁷ John J. Robinson, *Born in Blood: The Lost Secrets of Freemasonry* (Plymouth, United Kingdom: M. Evans, 1989) 165-7.

⁴⁸ William Morgan, *Freemasonry Exposed* (Chicago, Illinois: Ezra A. Cook & Co., 1872) 6.

Knights Templar as an example of “borrowed aid,” he does make the claim that all of the aspects of the institution that make it respected are false – which would include a Templar lineage. From this perspective, it is even possible that the Freemasons added the aforementioned oaths to their rituals after the fact in order to provide a greater linkage to the Knights Templar – regardless of their true historical accuracy. Nevertheless, this theory cannot be proven or disproven, and thus earns its distinction as the stuff of legend.

Another myth that has gained wild popularity concerning Freemasonry is that the Freemasons were responsible for the American Revolution. Proponents of this theory point to the positions of power and authority held by many colonial masons, but the theory largely ignores the underlying reason for this phenomena. The brotherhood was mainly made up of elite gentlemen, the same class of men who held high positions in society. This was not the result of an inside job completed by the Freemasons as a facet of their plan to overthrow British rule. Rather, it was a direct result of the type of organization colonial Freemasonry was.

Supporters of this theory claim that the Boston Freemasons were responsible for the Boston Tea Party. When examining the facts about the case, this appears plausible. At the time of the Boston Tea Party, the meetings of the St. Andrew’s Lodge were taking place in the Long Room of Freemason’s Hall, which was formerly known as the Green Dragon Tavern. Lodge records also appear to indicate the brotherhood’s involvement in the affair. Jeffers writes, “...lodge minutes reveal a close connection with the event. St. Andrew’s convened for its annual election the night before the first public meeting discussing the tea’s arrival, but adjourned because of low attendance. ‘Consignees of TEA,’ the secretary noted, ‘took the Brethren’s

time.”⁴⁹ These minutes seem to show that the masons had advance knowledge of the tea’s arrival, and were plotting something connected with it. On the night of the Boston Tea Party, the lodge met again; however, only five members were in attendance: the master, the two wardens, and the two deacons. Jeffers goes on to suggest that this may have been an effort to establish an alibi for the brothers so that they could not be connected to the events taking place in Boston Harbor.

When looking at this situation from a presentist viewpoint, it would seem as though the Boston Tea Party was organized and carried out by the Freemasons. However, the historical record clearly shows that it was the work of a more radical, militant revolutionary organization – The Sons of Liberty. That is not to say, however, that no Freemasons were involved in the Tea Party; twelve members of St. Andrew’s Lodge took part in the tea dumping in the harbor. However, these men were members of both St. Andrew’s and the Sons of Liberty, not the masonic lodge alone. It is also true that a dozen members of the Sons of Liberty became members of St. Andrew’s Lodge following the raid on the British ships, but this occurred after the fact.⁵⁰ Thus, it is true to say that Freemasons took part in the Boston Tea Party, but it is a historical inaccuracy to claim that they were the driving force behind it.

Those who truly believe Freemasons orchestrated the entire American Revolution also point to the Freemasons’ involvement in government. When the Declaration of Independence was signed in 1776, it owed much of its success to the radical Thomas Paine. After moving to America from England, Paine wrote his famous book *Common Sense*, in which he urged the

⁴⁹ H. Paul Jeffers, *Freemasons: Inside the World’s Oldest Secret Society* (New York, New York: Citadel Press, 2005), 113.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 41.

Americans to overthrow the rule of King George III and establish themselves as an independent republic. Contrary to popular belief, Thomas Paine was not a Freemason.⁵¹ As such, Paine's words and influence cannot be honestly attributed to the brotherhood. The origin of the Declaration of Independence also refutes these claims. Though it is true that the document was signed by multiple masons, it was drafted by Thomas Jefferson – who was not a mason, even though he has been wrongly labeled as such many times. Perhaps the most damning evidence to the theory that the Freemasons were responsible for the revolution is the fact that many of them were loyalists. In fact, of the seven Provincial Grand Masters in the American colonies, five fully supported King George III, and even publicly condemned the revolutionary attacks against established authority.⁵²

Many conspiracy theorists also argue that Freemasonry runs the United States government. The argument draws on their involvement in colonial America and the early years of the United States discussed above, but it also insists that this trend has continued into modern times. These theorists make claims that most presidents of the United States have been masons, and that most influential men during the Revolutionary Era were Freemasons. The argument that Freemasonry exists as an evil entity working to control the government has also been around for more than a century. In his book, Morgan propagates the idea that the Freemasons' goal was to use the power they gained as a group to further their agenda, writing "Masonry gives rogues and evil-minded characters an opportunity of visiting upon their devoted victim, all the ills attending combined power, when exerted to accomplish destruction."⁵³ Morgan goes on to further tarnish

⁵¹ Jasper Ridley, *The Freemasons: A History of the World's Most Powerful Secret Society* (New York, New York: Arcade, 2011), 9.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 100.

⁵³ William Morgan, *Freemasonry Exposed* (Chicago, Illinois: Ezra A. Cook & Co., 1872) 8.

the image of the masons, likening its brethren to the grim reaper – and thus evil itself. He states, “It works unseen, at all silent hours, and secret times and places; and like death when summoning his diseases, pounces upon its devoted subject, and lays him prostrate in the dust. Like the great enemy of man, it has shown its cloven foot...”⁵⁴

Though this argument has persisted, its claims are exaggerated. While it is true that about one third of the nation’s presidents have been Freemasons, this number is not enough to constitute a majority. Furthermore, masonic connections have often been contributed to men such as Patrick Henry and Thomas Jefferson, who were never members of the brotherhood. It has also been argued that George Washington’s roles throughout the revolution, both in the military and government, and the fact that he was elected first President of the United States proves that the masons have controlled the nation’s government since the beginning. This could be a convincing argument, had Washington been an active member of Freemasonry. As stated by Jeffers, “Masonic historians note that while Washington admired the principles and goals of Freemasonry, he was not especially familiar with them and did not attempt to learn more about the craft. Although he wrote letters indicating that he was happy to be a Freemason, and never sought to resign or repudiate his Masonic membership, there is little to no evidence that he attended many Masonic lodge meetings after his initiation in 1753.”⁵⁵ Though Washington was proud of his masonic identity and believed in its values, he was never especially involved with the institution – perhaps even less so during his presidency more than two decades after his initiation into the brotherhood. Records indicate that he may have attended at most three meetings following his initiation, but it is possible that he attended fewer. Even when serving as

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ H. Paul Jeffers, *Freemasons: Inside the World’s Oldest Secret Society* (New York, New York: Citadel Press, 2005), 47.

Grand Master of the Alexandria-Washington Lodge No. 22, he did not partake in the activities of the lodge.⁵⁶

Further arguments by this group call attention to the official seals of the federal government and the layout of Washington D.C. as having masonic, and even sinister, connections. This theory also draws on the idea that the Freemasons are the Illuminati – which is in fact another misunderstood organization – and that their modern goal is total world domination and to create a “New World Order.” In 1791, Major Pierre Charles L’Enfant was commissioned to design the layout of Washington, D.C. He was a friend of George Washington, but was not known to be a Freemason. He was later dismissed for requesting total control of the operation, but his plan for the city was retained.⁵⁷ Modern conspiracy theorists view L’Enfant’s layout of Washington as part of a masonic conspiracy to position the United States at the center of their “New World Order.” They cite that the city’s plan is made up of the masonic shapes of the square, the rule, the compass, and the pentagram. Drawing lines between D.C. landmarks, the group contends that the Capitol Building is the top of the compass with the left leg being Pennsylvania Avenue and the right leg Maryland Avenue. The left leg sits atop the Jefferson Memorial, with the right leg on the White House. They have also claimed to view a satanic goat’s head from these connections.

The pentagram is formed at the intersections of streets within the city, ultimately sitting on top of the White House. According to an internet source referenced by Jeffers, “The center of the pentagram is 16th Street, where thirteen blocks due north of the very center of the White

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ H. Paul Jeffers, *The Freemasons in America: Inside the Secret Society* (New York, New York: Citadel Press, 2006), 97.

House, the Masonic House of the Temple sits at the top of this occult iceberg.”⁵⁸ Believers also note that the Washington Monument is perfectly lined up with the intersecting point of the masonic square. Cornerstones of many of these buildings have been laid in masonic ceremonies, with conspiracy theorists contending that they are rituals “dedicated to the demonic god of masonry, JaoBulOn,” which is apparently a secret name or the “lost word” learned during the ritual of the Royal Arch degree.⁵⁹

Those supporting the conspiracy also find masonic connections in the Great Seal of the United States. According to them, the most prominent and important men concerned with designing the Great Seal were masons. This, however, is not true. In 1776, four men – Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and Pierre Du Simitiere – were charged with designing the seal. Of these four men, only Benjamin Franklin was a Freemason. Du Simitiere, the artist who contributed most of the designs, had no masonic connections. Years passed and no design had been accepted for the seal when a member of the second committee – Francis Hopkinson – submitted a design utilizing the unfinished pyramid. The entire second committee, including Hopkinson, had no connections to Freemasonry.

Nevertheless, conspiracy theorists insist that the Great Seal has masonic underpinnings. They claim that the sixty-five feathers in the eagle’s wings represent the phrase “together in unity,” which appears in masonic ritual. The glory above the eagle’s head is divided into twenty-four parts, which is supposed to represent the masonic gauge that is also divided as such. The five pointed star represents the Freemasonic Blazing Star, as well as the five points of masonic fellowship. The arrangement of the stars in the constellation form Stars of David, which is a

⁵⁸ Ibid., 99

⁵⁹ Ibid.

reference to finding the “Lost World.” The eagle’s shield is representative of masonic values of valor, purity, and justice due to its use of the colors red, white, and blue. The scroll clutched in the eagle’s beak, reading “E Pluribus Unum,” translates to “out of many, one” – referencing Freemasonic brethren. The all-seeing eye represents the eternity of the soul. The unfinished pyramid is supposedly a signal to the brotherhood of the unfinished temple and untimely death of the fraternity’s master architect, Hiram Abiff.

According to speculation, all of these supposed connections illustrate the masonic control of the government. Furthermore, when the reverse side of the seal was placed on the dollar bill by Vice President Henry A. Wallace, who was a mason, this signaled that the masons’ plans for the New World Order were being put into motion. Apparently, the number thirteen is symbolic to Freemasons due to the arrest of the Knights Templar on Friday, October 13, 1307. Because of this, theorists claim that the thirteen stars in the crest, stripes and bars in the shield, olives, arrows in the right claw, feathers in the arrows, letters in “Annuet Coeptis,” letters in “E. Pluribus Unum,” courses of stone in the pyramid, and twenty-seven dots in around the crest within the seal prove such. Furthermore, there are thirty-two feathers in the right wing (the same number of degrees as Scottish Rite masonry), thirty-three feathers on the left wing (the same number of degrees as York Rite masonry), and thirteen levels in the pyramid.

The pyramid also supposedly depicts the organization of the New World Order, and the eye represents the House of Rothschild – a family of bankers who supposedly controls the group and perpetuates the idea of the New World Order, or one world government.⁶⁰ The idea of a Freemasonic link to the Illuminati and a plot to control the government of the world has persisted

⁶⁰ Ibid., 113

for well over 100 years. Henry Dana Ward, a master mason, wrote in 1828, “What was their object...surely it was not for the light or the love of Free Masonry...One who works against the government will find Free Masonry...a good tool.”⁶¹ Others suggest that the pyramid represents the few Freemasons who are aware of the full plan of Freemasonry and the New World Order who have come to be known as the Illuminati, or illuminated ones. According to the conspiracy, this group is all-powerful, and they “occupy all top level members of police and military forces around the world. They are found in every area of society at all levels, but at the top, in the highest social and monetary bracket, the Brotherhood prevails.”⁶² Those with masonic suspicions also note the motto beneath the pyramid, “Novus Ordo Seclorum,” translates to “New Order of the Ages,” which they insist is synonymous with the “New World Order.” Conspiracy theorists believe that the ultimate goal of the Illuminati and Freemasons beyond establishing a single, worldwide government is the breakdown of modern society. According to historian Brian A. Marcus, theorists believe that these groups work to veil their sinister plot as one that will usher in an era of peace and prosperity.

According to the men behind this plan, the resulting new world order will be the first steps in a millennium of peace and prosperity for the world. However, the reality of this plot is to extend the dominion of Satan across the world and overthrow Christianity, capitalism, and the American way. All of these things will pave the way for the rise of the Antichrist and the end of the world as we know it.⁶³

⁶¹ Henry Dana Ward, *Free Masonry: Its Pretensions Exposed in Faithful Extracts of its Standard Authors; with a Review of Town's Speculative Masonry: Its Liability to Pervert the Doctrines of Revealed Religion, Discovered in the Spirit of its Doctrines, and in the Application of its Emblems: Its Dangerous Tendency Exhibited in Extracts from the Abbe Barruel and Professor Robison: and further Illustrated in its Base Service to the Illuminati* (New York: 1828), 157.

⁶² H. Paul Jeffers, *Freemasons: Inside the World's Oldest Secret Society* (New York, New York: Citadel Press, 2005), 174.

⁶³ Brian A. Marcus, *Freemasonry and the Illuminati as Archetypes of Fear in America, From Fear Itself: Enemies Real & Imagined in American Culture* by Nancy Lusignan Schultz (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1999), 392.

These theories have infiltrated the mainstream media, becoming more well-known and synonymous with these groups than the historical truth. One such example is the Dan Brown novel *The Da Vinci Code*, which is a New York Times best-seller that was adapted for film. The premise of both the film and the book is that the Priory of Sion discovered the truth about the life of Jesus. Rather than being the son of God who died on the cross, he was actually a man who had a child with Mary Magdalene. The Priory of Sion discovered this truth and sought to prevent it from becoming world knowledge, and thus the Knights Templar were born as their military arm to protect both the treasure and the Priory. If this was true, and a connection between the Knights Templar and the Freemasons did exist, that would mean that the modern Freemasons are the keepers of this divine knowledge. In the novel, when the main characters are discussing the origin of the Knights Templar, Brown writes “A common misconception. The idea of protection of pilgrims was the *guise* under which the Templars ran their mission. Their true goal in the Holy Land was to retrieve the documents from beneath the ruins of the temple.”⁶⁴ Haag writes:

A story much put about these days in books like *The Da Vinci Code* and *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* is that the Templars were founded not to protect pilgrims or to defend the Holy Land but to undertake secret excavations beneath the surface of Temple Mount. This argument takes advantage of gaps and uncertainties in the historical record, and it turns unknowns into mysteries – or into conspiracies. Why were there only nine Templars? Because they had a secret to keep, and so the fewer the better. Why do we know so little about the military activities of the Templars in their early years? Because really they were digging holes in the Temple Mount. Why did the Templars become so powerful? Because they found a huge treasure or discovered an explosive secret beneath the Temple Mount which they used to blackmail the Church. Why were the Templars destroyed? Because they knew too much.⁶⁵

The Da Vinci Code sparked mass conspiracy, discussion, and even controversy in the United States (and worldwide). If the information relayed by Brown in the novel was in fact true, that

⁶⁴ Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Anchor Books, 2009), 207-8.

⁶⁵ Michael Haag, *The Templars: The History and the Myth* (Broadway, New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 98.

would mean that the history of the world as we know it was inaccurate – especially from the Christian perspective. Through his manipulation of historical fact, Brown was able to plant the idea that the reality accepted by most people is was an elaborate disguise for the truth – allowing popular culture to preserve *The Da Vinci Code* and the ideas it presents within the realm of conspiracy indefinitely.⁶⁶

Another mainstream example of such conspiracies in popular culture is Disney's *National Treasure* series. Both the original movie, *National Treasure*, and its sequel, *National Treasure 2: Book of Secrets*, rely on masonic conspiracy theories for their plot. The opening scene of *National Treasure* relays the theory of the Freemasons being in control of the United States government in its formative years. It then goes on to speak of the Freemason's treasure, relaying the idea that the Freemasons descended directly from the Knights Templar who found the treasure, and took it to Europe, and called themselves Freemasons after smuggling the treasure.⁶⁷ The general plot of the movie is that this treasure was hidden in the United States by the colonial Freemasons in an attempt to keep it from falling into the hands of the British, and the main character, Ben Gates, sets out to find it. He eventually does find the treasure, through the use of masonic clues and codes along the way. The film makes use of other conspiracies, such as the masonic symbolism on U.S. currency, which all add up to a map to the mason's treasure rather than an attempt to rule the world or create a New World Order. The plot of *National Treasure 2* is very similar, and ends with the characters using colonial masonic clues to

⁶⁶ Samuel Chase Coale, *Paradigms of Paranoia: The Culture of Conspiracy in Contemporary American Fiction* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 2005), 34.

⁶⁷ *National Treasure*, directed by Jon Turteltaub (2004; Burbank, California: Walt Disney Pictures, 2004), DVD.

find another, different treasure – the lost City of Gold.⁶⁸ The City of Gold was hidden in the Black Hills and camouflaged by Mount Rushmore, which was commissioned by the United States government – harkening back to the idea that the Freemasons *are* the federal government.

All of these myths, theories, legends, and conspiracies are of course, just that. They cannot be proven or disproven by anyone with the information available. However, examining them from an unbiased viewpoint often leads to the conclusion that they are quite far-fetched, if possible at all. Though it is quite difficult to image that these intricate webs and connections have sustained hundreds of years without exposure, and that these organizations truly desire to rule the world, no one can definitively prove otherwise. Therefore, these stories are sure to continue being told and remain in society as such.

VII. Conclusion

Since the first appearance of secret societies, they have been shrouded in mystery and myth. This is especially true for the Knights Templar and the Freemasons, who continue to be the subject of popular culture and new conspiracies. Though the historical record cannot accurately determine many questions surrounding each, such as the origin of Freemasonry and whether or not a Templar/masonic treasure exists, the record does show that each has always been an important organization. Whether or not the Knights Templar were formed to protect traveling pilgrims, they did. Whether or not Freemasonry stems from medieval stone masons' guilds or from the Knights Templar, they do large amounts of charity work – helping both their brethren and communities. While it is true that they had an impact on early American history,

⁶⁸ *National Treasure 2: Book of Secrets*, directed by Jon Turteltaub (2007; Burbank, California: Walt Disney Pictures, 2007), DVD.

through both governmental, social, and military involvement – as well as the antimasonic movement and party that formed out of backlash against them – theories about the extent of this involvement often leave out important historical knowledge and are exaggerated. These theories have also invaded popular culture, where they have become more well-known than the historical facts relating to them. Though the false information cannot be eradicated, it is important to continue to strive for the truth and diligently research uncorroborated theories. Unfortunately, however, new information revealing the true extent of the impact of the Knights Templar and Freemasons on early American history may never surface – leaving it to remain a true American mystery.

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