

Fighting Words: The Pamphlets of a Democratic Revolution



Nestled in a manuscript box and secured in a basement vault, three obscure volumes of bound pamphlets in the Special Collections of the Concord Free Public Library bear witness to the political upheaval of the decade from 1826 to 1835 known as Anti-Masonry. Its origins lay in New York State, where a renegade Freemason named William Morgan was abducted and murdered to prevent him from divulging the secrets of the fraternal order, and where local law enforcement officials clearly engaged in a cover-up of the crime to protect their guilty brethren. The ensuing protests mushroomed into a populist revolt against elite authority throughout the new republic and marked a turning point in the democratization of American life. Anti-Masonry came late to Concord, not until the winter of 1833, six years after the scandal erupted in upstate New York, and it burned itself out in three short but intense years. In its brief existence Anti-Masonry remade politics in the small town of two thousand inhabitants, ousted key figures in the local establishment, and transformed the conduct of public debate. It also forced the local Masonic lodge to hunker down and avoid public notice for a decade. The crusade set neighbor against neighbor in a bitter war of words that left its traces in the little collection of

pamphlets at the Concord library. Herein are the polemics that polarized a New England town, soon to become famous as a center of Transcendentalism and the home of Emerson and Thoreau, and turned it upside down.

These several volumes, containing thirty-one distinct items, the great majority from the peak years of the conflict, would not attract the notice of most book collectors today. Half-bound in sheep covered with blue paper, they are crammed with a miscellany of materials—addresses to Masonic lodges, speeches by opponents of the fraternity, proceedings of Anti-Masonic conventions, reports of legislative investigations—barely held together after 181 years of peaceful coexistence on library shelves. One volume is labeled “Freemasonry,” another “Masonry & Anti-Masonry,” and the last “Anti-Masonry”; in the library, as in life, the anti’s overwhelmed their foe.



Figure 1: Bound pamphlets on Masonry and Antimasonry, 1797-1834, Topical Pamphlet Collection, 1741-1996. Courtesy of Concord Free Public Library.

The most remarkable aspect of these volumes is their very existence. The assemblage does not grow out of the efforts of librarians, bibliographers, or book collectors retrospectively documenting the printed record of an important episode in the American past. Rather, it is a contemporary collection put together by local witnesses to the populist outrage sweeping through Concord and so many other towns. In 1835 the three-man executive committee of the

Concord Social Library, an association of shareholders who maintained a substantial collection of books and periodicals for their own and their neighbors' use, took note of the "anti-masonic excitement which entered so deeply into the peoples' interests and [had] biased their social and political judgment for six or eight years." One member was the son of a Freemason; his colleagues had no connection to the fraternity. None aligned themselves with the populist crusade. Yet, in the heat of the controversy, Dr. Edward Jarvis, Rev. Hersey Goodwin, and businessman Nehemiah Ball took a long view of the conflict and decided that its printed record should be preserved for posterity. If they did not act now, the true significance of the episode might be lost forever, to be remembered by later historians merely "as one of the passing clouds that overshadowed a few people and its story told in a paragraph of tradition or history." With a sense of urgency they called on the townspeople to scour their houses for pamphlets not just about Anti-Masonry but about "all the great questions that have agitated our country for the last 50 years" and to donate what they found to the "town library." The call drew an astonishing response; out of the barrels and attics of Concord poured some two thousand pamphlets, which the committee had bound into one hundred and fifty volumes. "They are now an invaluable collection of the fleeting literature & history of the days of their appearance," Jarvis observed with pardonable pride, "& will transmit to succeeding time a better memorial of their day than will be found in more digested & formal history."

A good many of these titles have been lost or discarded over the years. But the pamphlets on Masonry and Anti-Masonry, which instigated the collecting project, have passed from the social library into the public library and thence into the William Munroe Special Collections, and they have survived pretty much in their original form. Within the three volumes, Jarvis recollected, "is the history of the agitation." A partial history is more precise. It is tempting to view these pamphlets, all handily gathered together, as constituting the field of discourse on which the combatants disputed the issues of secrecy and exclusiveness, openness and democracy, during those heated years of the Anti-Masonic crusade. But like any collection, it is selective, representing not only what items were held by townspeople in 1835 but also which titles they were willing to contribute. A few leading participants in the fight were donors themselves, including the most powerful politician and pre-eminent Freemason in town, the richest property-holder, and the "turncoat" printer who deserted his Masonic brethren and his principal patrons to enlist his newspaper in the Anti-Masonic campaign; their names are inscribed on the items they once owned. A couple pamphlets reproduce speeches to the local lodge; another contains the testimony of the Anti-Masonic editor before a committee of the Massachusetts House.

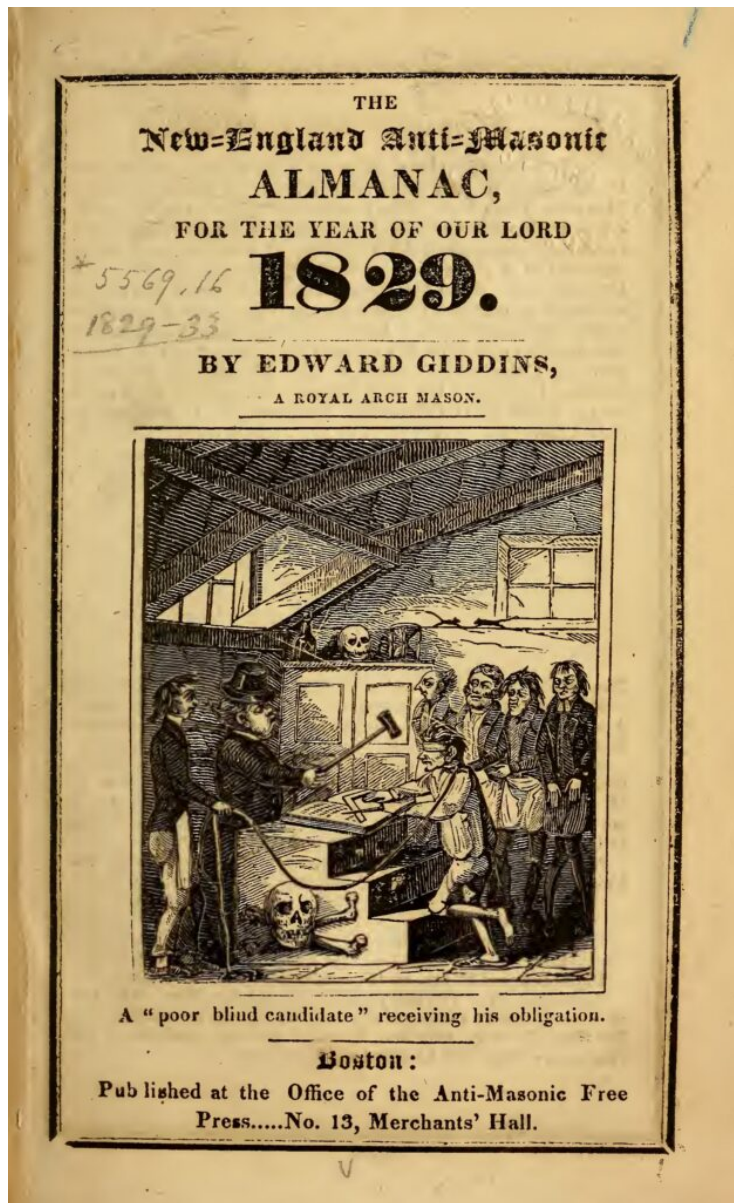


Figure 2: Edward Giddins, *The New England Anti-Masonic Almanac, For the Year of Our Lord 1829* (Boston: Office of the Anti-Masonic Free Press, 1830). Courtesy of the [Internet Archive](#).

Seldom do these voices directly engage one another. Nor do they present a debate between dueling parties intent on defeating opponents with well-chosen words. Far from it. The discussion is asymmetrical. The disputants make their cases to different audiences through forms of print as distinctive as the positions they took. Preaching to their respective choirs, the partisans who penned these polemics were well-aware of their adversaries, yet they made little effort to address or win them over. Unlike the pamphlet debates in the era of the American Revolution or the famous exchange between Burke and Paine, these rhetorical forays over Masonry were one-way conversations, calculated to shore up partisan loyalties and turn out supporters at the polls. To judge from the Concord collection, the public forum of antebellum America was no model of democratic deliberation.

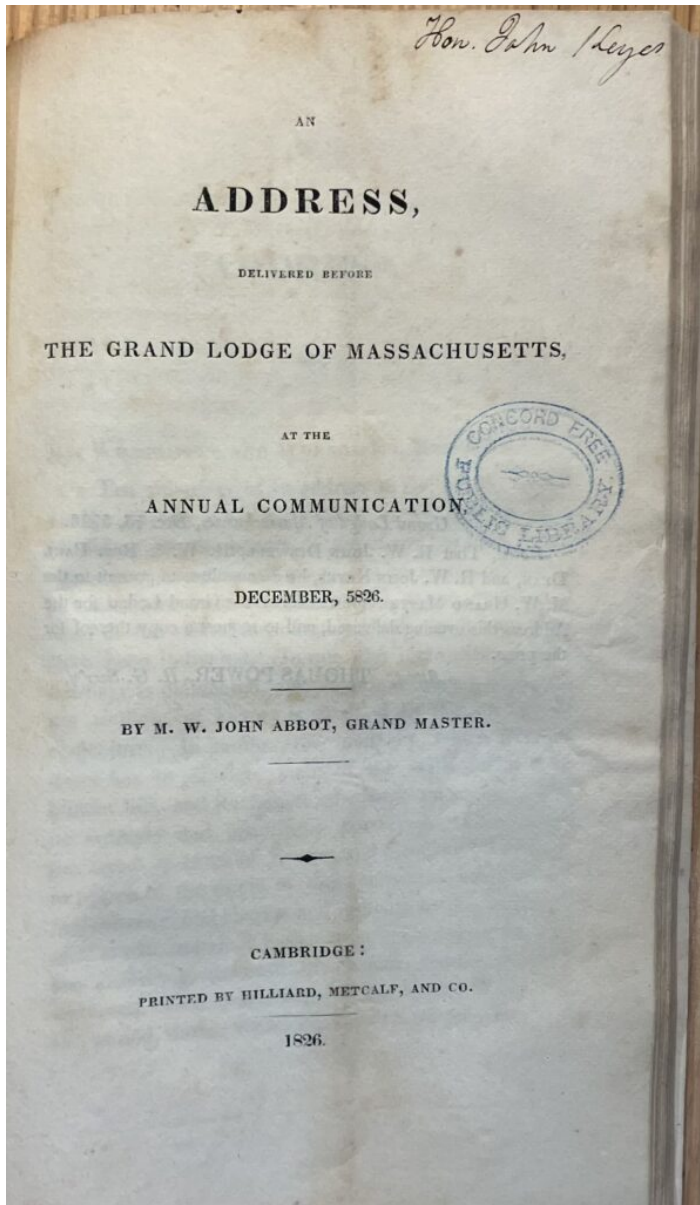


Figure 3: John Abbot, Grand Master, *An Address, Delivered before the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts, at the Annual Communication, December, 5826* (Cambridge: Hilliard, Metcalf, and Co., 1826). Courtesy of Concord Free Public Library.

Consider the opposite approaches to print taken by the two sides. Of the eleven pamphlets in the volume on Masonry, ten were addresses to local lodges by visiting dignitaries in the upper ranks of the fraternity or climbing the ladder to the top; two had been delivered in Concord itself. The publications were keepsakes of those occasions, brought into print at the request and the expense of the listeners. Instead of a copyright notice, each pamphlet records its origin in fraternal exchange. The host lodge appoints a committee to wait on the speaker, express thanks for the discourse, and request a copy for the press; the lecturer acknowledges the courtesy and complies. Often printers in the brotherhood were hired to produce the works, and copies were then distributed within the lodge. These titles were not on offer to the public at large. Rather, they served to enhance personal bonds among members of the order, as was the case with an 1826 address to the grand lodge of Massachusetts

by John Abbot, outgoing grand master. The copy was owned by Concord's power broker, Hon. John Keyes, who had served on the committee to arrange for the publication. The two men were well-acquainted. Keyes had grown up in the town of Westford, ten miles to Concord's northwest, where Abbot was a prominent lawyer; following his graduation from Dartmouth College in 1809, Keyes had studied for the bar under Abbot's supervision. The Squire was also familiar with the men responsible for the imprint, fellow Masons William Hilliard and Eliab W. Metcalf, whose Cambridge firm was the official printer of Harvard College for three decades. Embedded in personal relationships, these printed addresses were as distinctive of the fraternity as its public celebrations of St. John's Day and its secret rituals behind the closed doors of Freemasons' Hall.

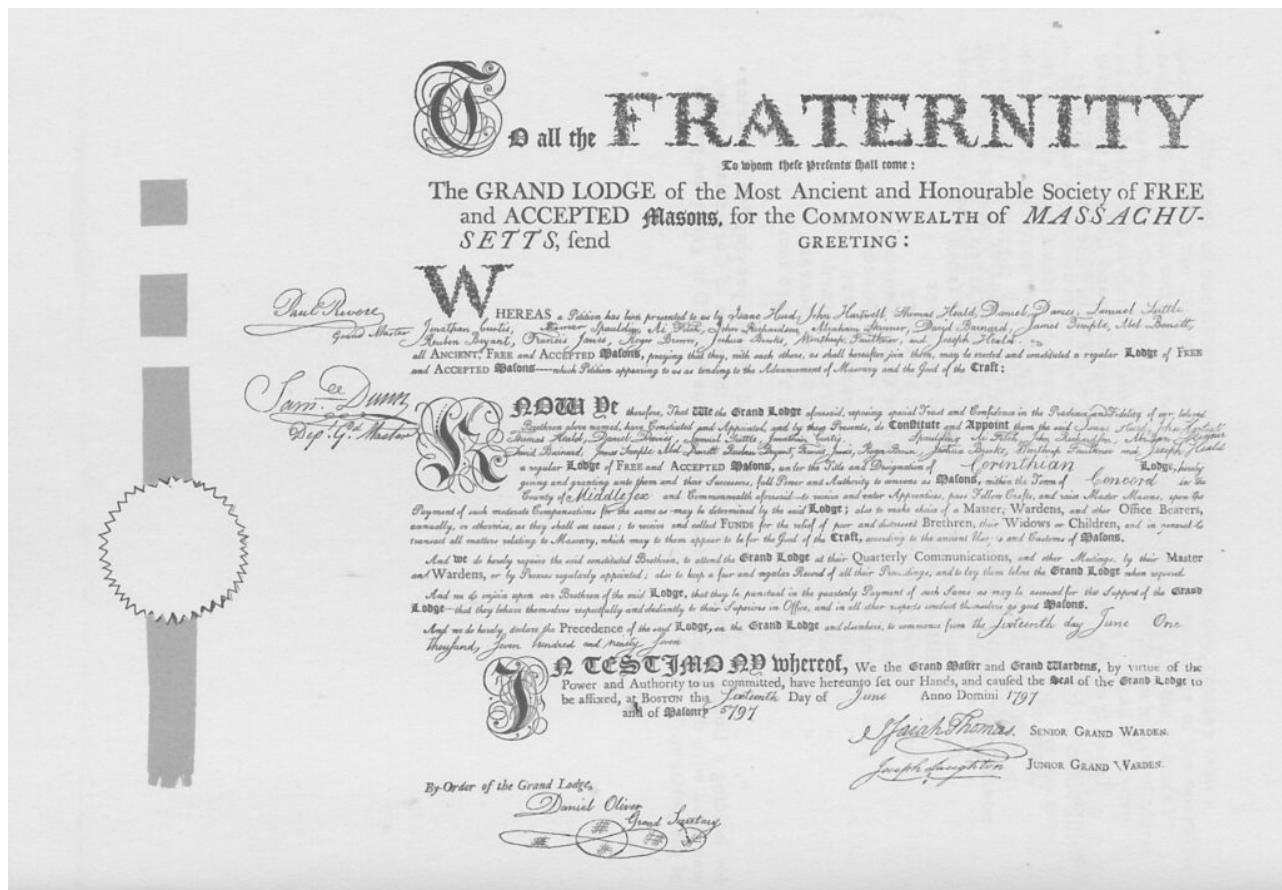


Figure 4: Charter of Corinthian Lodge of Freemasonry, June 16, 1797. Courtesy of Douglas Ellis, past master of the Corinthian Lodge, Concord, Mass.

By contrast, the publications of the Anti-Masons were sent forth to the citizenry in general under the auspices of legislative bodies and political organizations. Setting themselves apart from the secretive fraternity, Anti-Masons put a premium on transparency. All their proceedings were purportedly open to view in the printed records of county, state, and national conventions: the names of delegates and officials, the nomination and selection of candidates, the resolutions and debates. Should one not have time to pore over the numerous columns of small print, "abstracts" and "brief reports" were also

available. The *Boston Advocate*, the principal organ of Anti-Masonry in the state, took pains to produce and circulate these materials; it also disseminated speeches and public letters by prominent supporters of the movement, such as former Congressman Timothy Fuller (father of the better-known Transcendentalist writer Margaret Fuller) and Suffolk County Sheriff Charles Pinckney Sumner (father of the famous senator). These materials, cheaply made and quickly produced, were probably available at the printing offices that doubled as party headquarters. No advertisements for their sale appear in the local press. Likewise, the reports of legislative investigations must have been distributed to voters by Anti-Masonic representatives to the General Court. Like the printed petitions the Anti-Masons presented for signatures in the towns and like the Bibles and tracts distributed by benevolent societies to "destitute" Christians everywhere, these publications united citizens in a common cause, whose message was unmediated by local elites. Though produced and sold outside a commercial nexus, they gathered up a mass audience for print. Indeed, the polemics of Masonry and Anti-Masonry were, with few exceptions, conducted in the public domain. Only a few works took advantage of copyright law to seek profit. Appropriately for a popular movement, Anti-Masonic publications were the result of collaborative effort and collective authorship.

No. 4.
FOURTH ANTIMASONIC STATE CONVENTION.

**ANTIMASONIC
REPUBLICAN CONVENTION,**

OF

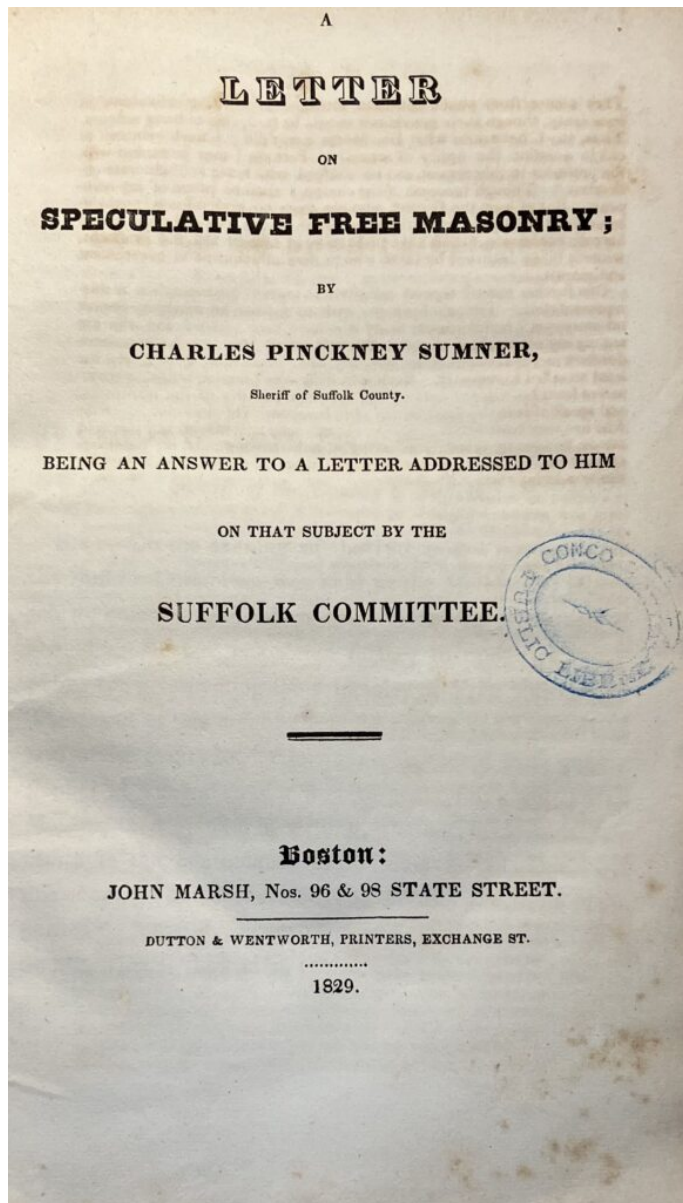
MASSACHUSETTS,

HELD AT BOSTON, SEPT. 11, 12 & 13,

1833,

FOR THE NOMINATION OF CANDIDATES FOR GOVERNOR AND
LT. GOVERNOR OF THE COMMONWEALTH, AND
"FOR THE PURPOSE OF 'CONSULTING UPON THE COMMON GOOD, BY
'SEEKING REDRESS OF WRONGS AND GRIEVANCES SUFFERED'
FROM SECRET SOCIETIES.'"

BOSTON:
PRINTED BY JONATHAN HOWE, FOR THE CONVENTION.
.....
1833.



Figures 5a and 5b: Title of *Fourth Antimasonic State Convention. Antimasonic Republican Convention, of Massachusetts, Held at Boston, Sept. 11, 12, & 13, 1833, for the Nomination of Candidates for Governor and Lt. Governor of the Commonwealth, and "For the Purpose of 'Consulting Upon the Common Good, by Seeking Redress of Wrongs and Grievances Suffered' from Secret Societies"* (Boston: Jonathan Howe, 1833). Courtesy of Concord Free Public Library. Charles Pinckney Sumner, *A Letter on Speculative Free Masonry . . . Being an Answer to a Letter . . . on That Subject by the Suffolk Committee* (Boston: John Marsh; Dutton & Wentworth, 1829). Courtesy of Concord Free Public Library.

Yet the contrast between these bitter rivals can be overdrawn. In the face of a determined campaign to drive Freemasons from public office, deny them fellowship in churches, and criminalize their secret oaths, the fraternity did not unilaterally disarm. It counted on the press to defend its cause. In 1825 twenty-four-year-old printer Charles W. Moore launched the *Boston Masonic Mirror*, the first newspaper devoted to the fraternity anywhere in the world. Founded a year and a half before the Morgan affair, the *Mirror* found itself "in

the battle of masonry against free-masonry" in the public arena. It had few imitators. For a long time, Massachusetts Masons entrusted their fate to independent newspapers, few of which took much notice of the gathering storm. In Concord brother Herman Atwill safeguarded his lodge's interests from the editorial helm of the *Yeoman's Gazette*. In the 1820s the newspaper filled its columns with friendly accounts of Masonic parades, speeches, and installations of officers, at the same time as it ignored reports of the "outrages" in New York State or dismissed their significance. If any crimes were committed, the *Gazette* insisted, they were the fault of a few bad apples and *not* of the Institution itself. When an *Anti-Masonic Free Press* was started in Boston in 1828, Atwill denounced the bid "to introduce the contemptible Morgan fever into New-England." As late as spring 1832 he ran a derisive notice of an "Anti-Secret Society Meeting" (A.S.S!) in town, attended by a "baker's dozen" of Anti-Masons. "Not being one of the initiated," he explained, "we are unable to make public their proceedings."

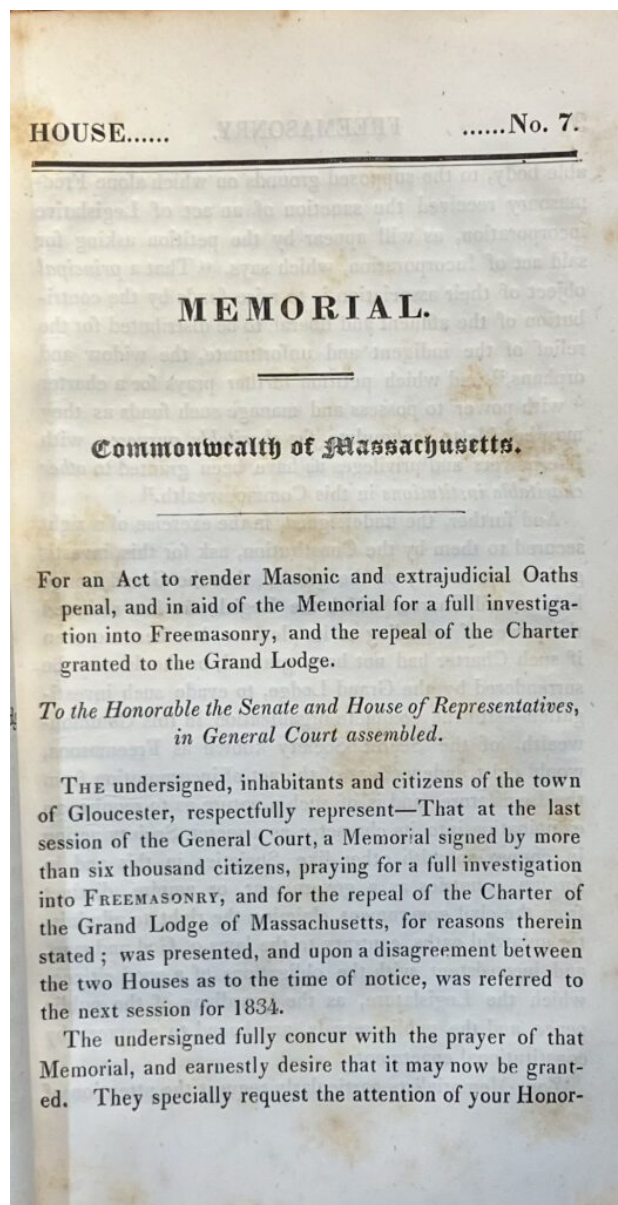


Figure 6: *Memorial [to the Massachusetts House of Representatives] for an Act to render Masonic and extrajudicial oaths penal and in aid of the Memorial for a full investigation into Freemasonry, and the repeal of the Charter granted to the Grand Lodge.* ([Boston: The Commonwealth], 1834). Courtesy of Concord Free Public Library.

Silence and ridicule went only so far. As instruments of self-defense, they could not counteract "the high state of excitement" aroused in "the public mind" by the "partial and inflammatory" accusations made "by a few misguided members." Eventually the fraternity felt compelled to respond. In December 1832, twelve hundred Masons from all over Massachusetts signed a public statement, composed by Charles Moore, portraying the association as law-abiding, virtuous, moral, and patriotic. Widely reprinted in the press, it brought forth a detailed rebuttal, three times as long, from the forces of Anti-Masonry. Sometimes words were not enough. When Herman Atwill, a signer of the 1831 declaration along with twenty-five of his Concord brothers, finally decided to jump ship in the winter of 1832-33 and enlist the *Yeoman's Gazette* in the Anti-Masonic crusade, the local establishment retaliated swiftly. Masons and their friends set out to destroy Atwill economically. Angry readers canceled subscriptions. Indignant creditors demanded immediate payment of his debts. John Keyes called in his mortgage on Atwill's land. County magistrates pulled official advertising from the *Gazette*. Atwill withstood the fury, shrewdly exposing every act of intimidation in his columns.

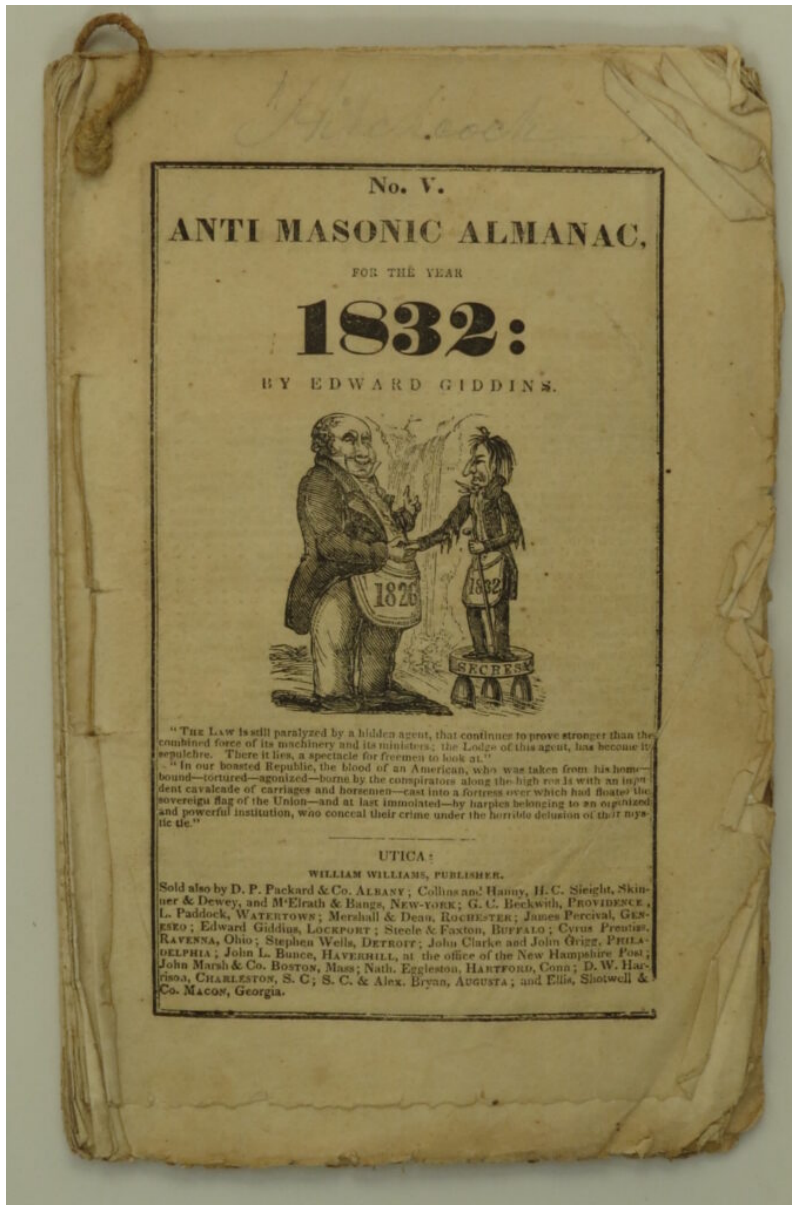


Figure 7: Edward Giddins, *Anti Masonic Almanac, For the Year 1832* (Utica: William Williams, 1831). Gift of John Brenton Copp, [National Museum of American History](#).

Unable to close him down, the friends of Masonry tried another gambit. They recruited the editor of the *Bunker-Hill Aurora* in Charlestown to move his shop to Concord. Though not a Freemason himself, William W. Wheildon was the half-brother of Moore and the son-in-law of the Massachusetts Grand Lodge's official lecturer. For six months he manfully opposed the attempts by "ambitious and unworthy, and designing men"—by the hypocrite Atwill, in particular—to deprive "a very respectable portion of the community" from "the enjoyment of their unalienable and original rights." He also denied the existence of any "combined determination" on the part of Masons and others, "to persecute or oppress" his rival at the *Gazette*, while simultaneously revealing that Atwill had sold his newspaper to a consortium of Anti-Masonic politicians. This was a crucial acquisition, establishing Concord as the headquarters of the populist movement in Middlesex County. Unable to prevail running a general newspaper with pro-

Mason sentiments, Wheildon soon returned to Charlestown, where he would eventually partner with his half-brother Moore and re-establish his newspaper as the *Bunker Hill Aurora and Mirror*. The refashioned newspaper regularly ran a "Masonic department" overseen by Moore, but the fraternity no longer had an authoritative organ on its behalf.

In these embattled circumstances the fraternity eschewed direct engagement with critics and focused on shoring up support in its own ranks. A few speakers to local lodges explicitly addressed "the Claims of Anti-Masonry, and Duty of Masons" with the goal of arming the brethren to resist "the war of extermination" being waged against them. Two pamphlets in this vein ended up in the Concord collection—rare instances of polemical writing by Masonic authors in the decade of dispute. One speaker, the Yale-educated clergyman Simeon Colton, saw no need to answer at length the unreasonable charges against the institution. He dispatched them quickly; then, like a modern literary critic, he set out to expose the extravagant language and the manipulative methods of the foe. One disgraceful tactic was to "ridicule" the fraternity and render it "odious" and "contemptible"; another was to exaggerate its power and liken it "in all the array and terror of the Inquisition." Such violent rhetoric exceeded all bounds; driven by a "persecuting spirit," it "savor[ed] too much of passion, prejudice, and party zeal." By such hyperbolic means Anti-Masonry sowed division and distrust. It invited "political demagogues" to "widen the breach" in society; it shattered the peace of the church. These were "the devastating effects of the wide-spreading pestilence," whose "poisonous effluvia . . . from the caverns of corruption" were "producing a sickly state of public feeling" How to combat it? Colton ingeniously extended the alarm. The assault on Freemasons did not affect the fraternity alone; it was "an attack . . . upon rights and privileges that lie at the foundation of all good society." To "proscribe" individuals from serving on juries or holding public office because of a private affiliation was to infringe liberty and to deny freedom of association. Anti-Masonry was thus a threat not just to members of the fraternity; it posed a danger to all. "The dearest interests of individuals and society are at stake."

AN ADDRESS

DELIVERED BEFORE THE

CENTRAL LODGE OF FREE-MASONS,

IN DUDLEY, MASS.

JUNE 24, A. L. 5830.

BY SIMEON COLTON,
Principal of Monson Academy.

SOUTHBRIDGE:
OFFICE OF THE REGISTER,
J. SNOW, PRINTER.

1830.

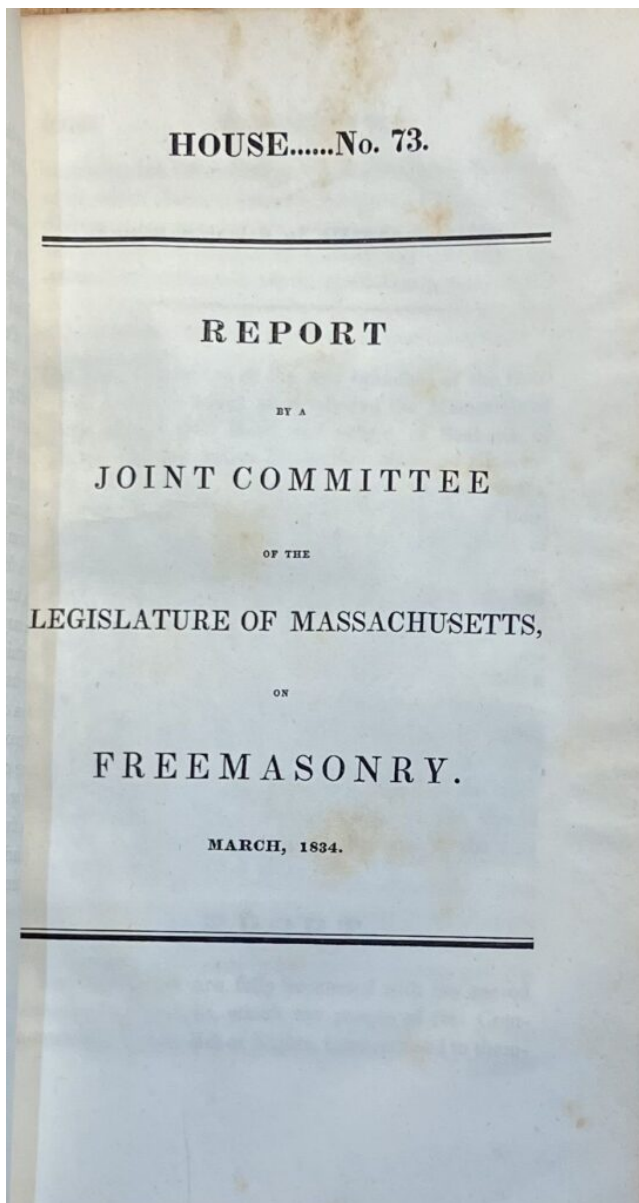


Figure 8: Simeon Colton principal of Monson Academy, *The Claims of Anti-Masonry, and Duty of Masons: An Address Delivered before the Central Lodge of Free-Masons, in Dudley, Mass. June 24, A.D. 5830* (Southbridge, 1830). Courtesy of Concord Free Public Library.

Freemasons were at a disadvantage in this debate. The aim of their exclusive association was to foster virtue and promote peace. Members were forbidden to agitate sectarian or partisan questions within the group. Lodges affirmed these consensual ideals in their names: Harmony, Unity, and, in the case of Concord, Corinthian, in imitation of St. Paul's campaign to end conflict and impose order among early Christians. No one could be admitted to a lodge without a unanimous vote. Ideologically and psychologically, Freemasons were ill-equipped to press disagreements and expose contradictions. Not so the Anti-Masons, many of whom were veterans of a long sectarian struggle within Massachusetts Congregationalism; opposed to the liberal Protestantism inculcated at Harvard College, these evangelicals demanded a return to the purity of New England's founding fathers. From their perspective compromise was intolerable. Anti-

Masons worked to mobilize all the true believers they could, unite them on a militant platform, and march them to the polls under the banner of "the people" versus the "aristocracy."

A key weapon in this campaign was the personal testimony of renegade Masons, among whom Concord's Herman Atwill loomed large. The *Report of the Joint Committee of the Legislature of Massachusetts on Freemasonry*, issued in March 1834 and included in the Concord pamphlets, features the testimony of the turncoat editor, exposing the fearful rituals of initiation and challenging the association's claim to be a "a religious and a moral Institution." His breaking point came when he proposed to publish John Quincy Adams's *Letters on the Entered Apprentice's Oath . . . Demonstrating That the First Step in Masonry is Wrong*, another pamphlet in the Concord set. His financial backers immediately raised objections, and after Atwill went through with the plan, they dropped their patronage. Atwill opted for Anti-Masonry to sustain his freedom to publish what he wished.



LETTERS

ON

THE ENTERED APPRENTICE'S OATH.

BY JOHN QUINCY ADAMS,
EX-PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES;

DEMONSTRATING THAT

THE FIRST STEP IN MASONRY IS WRONG.

Stereotype Edition,

PUBLISHED BY THE YOUNG MEN'S ANTIMASONIC ASSOCIATION FOR THE
DIFFUSION OF TRUTH.

INTRODUCTION.

In June, 1832, Colonel William L. Stone, of New-York, published an octavo volume of 570 pages, containing a series of 49 Letters on Masonry and Antimasonry, addressed, by permission, to John Quincy Adams, late president of the United States; the first being dated November 20, 1831, and the last April 2, 1832. The writer of the letters was unquestionably actuated by a sincere wish to induce a voluntary surrender of Freemasonry by Freemasons themselves. His appeal is strengthened by the fact that it is urged by a member of the institution. In his first letter to Mr. Adams, Colonel Stone describes himself as "a Mason, who, for ample cause, had not attended the sittings of any lodge, since the atrocity of the vest was disclosed, but who had, nevertheless, made no renunciation." To political Antimasonry he has uniformly been opposed.

The first ten letters by Mr. Stone are devoted to the most plausible and ingenious apology for Masonry, which has yet been published; founded, however, not upon Masonry as it really is, but upon what Mr. Stone and some other "intelligent and virtuous men" have construed it ought to be! Those who aim to diffuse truth on this subject, could desire no more factual argument on both sides than the apology attempted in Mr. Stone's letters, tested by the letters of Mr. Adams on the Entered Apprentice's oath; and both arguments tested by the detail of facts which follow Mr. Stone's attempt to construe the oaths and ceremonies of Masonry to harmless and unmeaning follies, or instructive lessons. Great credit is due to Mr. Stone for the candor and honest independence with which he has related the history of the Masonic outrages in

Figures 9a and 9b: *House No. 73. Report by a Committee of the Legislature of Massachusetts, on Freemasonry. March, 1834* ([Boston: The Commonwealth], 1834). *Appendix Containing the Testimony and Documents Received in Evidence by the Committee* follows report. Courtesy of Concord Free Public Library and John Quincy Adams, *Letters on the Entered Apprentice's Oath*. Stereotype Edition (Boston: Young Men's Antimasonic Association for the Diffusion of Truth, 1833). Courtesy of Concord Free Public Library.

Anti-Masonry thus relied on the power of personal example nearly as much as did the fraternity. But where Freemasonry invoked the public honors, civic service, and social standing of its members, opponents stressed the personal sacrifices of men like Atwill in the name of liberty and democracy. The two sides were, in the end, ships passing in the night, unseen by one another. Each relied on a different strategy of persuasion through divergent means of communication. Neither could appreciate the polemics of the other. In these choices they may have anticipated our current media world. Opting for different newspapers and imprints, the competing sides in the fight over Freemasonry were no more

disposed to take in the same information and messages than are Americans today in their separate enclaves constituted by Fox News and MSNBC, not to mention their separate Twitter feeds. Ironically, the bound pamphlets at the Concord Public Library bring them closer together in the archives than they ever were in life.

Further Reading

Bound pamphlets on Masonry and Antimasonry, 1797-1834: Topical Pamphlet Collection, 1741-1996, Box I.7 Vault B20, Unit 1, Special Collections, Concord Free Public Library.

John L. Brooke, *Columbia Rising: Civil Life on the Upper Hudson from the Revolution to the Age of Jackson* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

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

Ronald P. Formisano, *For the People: American Populist Movements from the Revolution to the 1850s* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

Ronald P. Formisano, *The Transformation of Political Culture: Massachusetts Parties, 1790s-1840s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).

Ronald P. Formisano and Kathleen Smith Kutolowski, "Antimasonry and Masonry: The Genesis of Protest, 1826-1827," *American Quarterly* 29 (Summer 1977): 139-65.

Paul Goodman, *Towards a Christian Republic: Antimasonry and the Great Transition in New England 1826-1836* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

Robert A. Gross, *The Transcendentalists and Their World* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021).

Robert A. Gross and Mary Kelley, eds., *An Extensive Republic: Print, Culture, and Society in the New Nation, 1790-1840* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

David G. Hackett, *That Religion in Which All Men Agree: Freemasonry in American Culture* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2014).

Margaret C. Jacob, *The Origins of Freemasonry: Facts and Fictions* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006).

Dorothy Ann Lipson, *Freemasonry in Federalist Connecticut* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977).

This article originally appeared in September 2023.

Robert A. Gross is James L. and Shirley A. Draper Professor of Early American History Emeritus at the University of Connecticut. His first book, *The Minutemen and Their World* (1976), recipient of the Bancroft Prize, was released in a revised and expanded edition by Picador Press in 2022. His latest work, *The Transcendentalists and Their World* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2021), was awarded the Peter J. Gomes Book Award by the Massachusetts Historical Society and named among the top ten books of 2021 by the *Wall Street Journal*.