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Emily McGee

“Meeters in Secret:” The History of Freemasonry and Its Influence on Conspiracy Culture in the  
United States

May 5, 2020

## Introduction

George Washington. Theodore Roosevelt. John Wayne. Henry Ford. Booker T. Washington. Mark Twain. Lewis and Clark. Harry Houdini. Buzz Aldrin. The names, initially, seem to have no correlation. These men come from different centuries and economic backgrounds. They are presidents, authors, entertainers, inventors, and adventurers. They are important symbols of American culture, but their connection reaches deeper even than that. All of the men listed above, and countless others, were part of the Freemason Society. For some, this might be a shocking revelation, but, for others, this may not be surprising. Freemasons have permeated American politics and popular culture since its creation. Essentially, Freemasons have been involved in every aspect of American society, whether the greater public has been aware of it or not. Because of this, the society has come under substantial amounts of scrutiny over the last few centuries. Freemasons have been accused of satanic practices, secrecy, murder, and other conspiracy theories involving political movements and historical events. When asked about Freemasons, most of the American population would more than likely repeat some piece of information or symbol they had seen in popular culture. Popular movie franchises such as *National Treasure* portray early American history as being full of secrets and intrigue, with specific references to Freemasons. This film, and many other forms of media that reference the organization, are not historically accurate. The majority of the American public, however, is not aware of this. On top of the public's widespread ignorance of the organization, the Freemason Society is highly secretive. Even close family members of Freemasons have no knowledge of the society's rituals, traditions, and other basic information. This makes for a dangerous combination. During the course of time, humans have proved to be wary and judgmental of anything that is not familiar and understandable. Especially for Americans in the late eighteenth

and early nineteenth centuries, the fact that many of the men in charge of their country were members of a secret society made individuals intimidated. Individuals and groups began targeting Freemasons with rumor and conspiracy, most of it unfounded. However, because of the society's hold on privacy, they could not refute these claims enough to satisfy the public. This began a long tradition of suspicion surrounding the Freemason Society and other secret organizations that would continue until present day. This established tradition of conspiratorial thinking would influence the way Americans perceive and interact with conspiracy theories and would inspire the current conspiracy culture in the United States.

This paper will be divided into several sections including this introductory section. The first will be Methodology. In this section, I will discuss the methods of research, as well as the various challenges I faced in research and how they were worked around in the composition of this work. The second section is Historiography. In this section, I will break down the historiography of the subject. Essentially, it will be a discussion of how previous historians have analyzed this specific phenomenon, and how this particular treatment of it will shed light on the subject. The main body of the paper will come next, in which I will explore the history of the Freemason Society, the conspiracy theories surrounding the society, and they have influenced the contemporary conspiracy culture that is arising in American society. In this section, I will analyze some of the most popular conspiracy theories/arguments against Freemasonry, as well as how these conspiracies have influenced the formation of other conspiracies and the validity of them in the eyes of the American public, even to present day. After this section, Directions For Future Research will follow. Here, I will consider the possible follow up issues and research topics for either myself or professional historians. I will also discuss the weaknesses of this paper, as well as if I would like to continue pursuing this topic in future endeavors. And lastly,

there will be a conclusion in which I will restate the argument and resolve any lingering questions.

### **Methodology**

Researching this particular topic came with its own fair share of challenges. Finding sources in general was not difficult. There are an abundance of books, articles, movies, and other forms of media discussing Freemasonry. However, the complication was finding reliable sources to help form my argument. For example, the film franchise *National Treasure* discusses the conspiracies surrounding Freemasonry quite a bit, and although this example can be used to highlight the tradition of conspiracy in American culture, I could not use it as a reliable scholarly source. I was fortunate that I was able to access most of my sources and information online, to where I did not have to travel to an archive in order to find them. JSTOR, online library databases, and scholarly newsletters contained a majority of the sources employed in this paper. There were two primary complications that had to be dealt with during the research for this paper. The first was the lack of primary sources, and the second was the abundance of bias among the sources I did utilize.

The want of primary sources was a challenge that came with the particular topic I chose to research. The foundation of conspiracy theories is not fact, but rather fear and hearsay. In effect, it made research and analysis more challenging than if I had chosen an event or person. There are no official documents recording these theories, especially from the organization they are concerning. There are no diaries or letters recording these theories either and, if such documents exist, I have no access to them. Another aspect of this issue comes from the secrecy of the Freemason Society. The organization, for many years, kept little to no documentation at all, and when they did, they were not open to the public. Not until recent decades have some of

the organization's records become public, and it has become evident at how little information these documents actually provide. They provide some of the mundane proceedings of the lodges, but don't address some of the ritualistic practices. Although some lodges are trying to create transparency about Freemasonry, it is extremely difficult to repair centuries' worth of damage to their reputation. Most are just lists of members names, and possibly death dates. The Society does not produce their own theological material. They neither endorse nor refute claims made by individual Masons in books, articles, or interviews, which makes some of their symbols and morals difficult to define and link to conspiracies or popular misconceptions.

The second main struggle was identifying bias in my sources. Once I came to the realization that I would be mainly dealing with secondary sources, it made the research process smoother. There are many treatises on Freemasons by critically acclaimed scholars available for use. However, upon closer examination, it became evident that many of these pieces were written by Freemasons themselves. This reality comes with both benefits and consequences. On the one hand, having literature written from someone in the organization would give a unique perspective that could not be produced from someone who is not in the organization. On the other hand, the member will also bring their own set of biases. The more I read these books and articles written by Freemasons, it became obvious that several of them were writing in order to clear the Freemasons' name in the eyes of the public. They could not possibly be writing objectively, and some of them did not even attempt to. It required me to be wary when compiling my evidence for this paper. I will admit that several of them, especially Morris and de Hoyos, provided a substantial amount of documentation in their books. This information was helpful, but their utilization of it to support their biased claims required me to approach with caution and discernment when using it. As I was also analyzing conspiracy theories, I also encountered many

sources that were biased on the other side of the spectrum. As has been previously established, conspiracy theories are not officially documented. They consist of rumor, which means I had to interact with sources that normally would not be engaged with in a scholarly work. Blogs, social media posts, and other sources from the internet were useful in examining where these theories originate and in what space they exist.

I also feel that the current cultural setting in which I wrote a majority of this work did have a small influence on the final product. Although I wrote the greater part of this work while in quarantine, the sudden changes brought from COVID-19 did not heavily impact my process for this paper or necessarily make the research more difficult since my research occurred almost exclusively online. The setting in which I wrote this paper did, however, reinforce the motivations which caused me to choose this particular topic in the first place. The conspiracy theories and suspicion arising during this pandemic towards the government, China, and various other organizations and groups illustrated the influence of conspiratorial thought in the United States and the need for the issue to be addressed.

### **Historiography**

Freemasonry is a subject surrounded by speculation for centuries, so there are a plethora of sources surrounding that subject, all approaching the topic in a slightly different way. The topic surrounding Freemasonry and its influence on conspiracy theories and conspiracy culture has not been discussed nearly as much. However, many of the books and articles dealing with Freemasonry discuss the conspiracy theories surrounding the organization and how that has influenced their reputation or current events. One such book is titled *Is it True What They Say About Freemasonry?*, and is written by S. Brent Morris and Arturo de Hoyos. Both Morris and de Hoyos are distinguished authors and researchers, and experts on Freemasonry, both having

written several books on the subject. In this book, they seek to debunk many of the conspiracies surrounding the society. They explain much of the history of the organization and explain many of the traditions and their origins. Being Masons themselves, Morris and de Hoyos seek to clear the name of the Masons. They analyze many of the arguments and critics of Freemasonry one at a time, seeking to debunk the assumptions based on non-fact. This book is unique compared to other works on this topic, specifically those written by Masons. Many of the other works written by Masons were not as diligent in educating others on the Masons and the true origins of their traditions. Some of the other works considered for this project written by members of the society expected the reader to take the author's word for it that the society was not involved in a certain event or participates in a certain practice, which of course is not believable or reliable. Another text written by a Freemason is *The Meaning of Masonry* by W.L. Wilmshurst. It is similar in many ways to the work by Morris and de Hoyos, but it does not actively try to disprove accusations toward the society, it only wishes to explore more in depth the history and meaning of the society. Although Wilmshurst was a Mason, he is considered one of the authorities on the subject, and his book is regarded as one of the most reliable treatises on the subject. As discussed in the previous section, sources written by Masons have both advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, those who are a part of the society can explain certain intricacies and traditions like no one else can, and no doubt have knowledge that is specific to members of the society only. However, because they are involved in the institution, their work on the subject is no doubt biased in some way. They may have reliable sources and explanations for their arguments, but their motive for writing this most likely is not objective research. Most of the sources found for this topic who were authored by those in the society were aimed toward clearing the society's

name. So while they are still interesting and reliable sources that have been acclaimed in the scholarly community, it is still important to recognize the possibility of bias.

As would be expected, many historians and other individuals who have chosen to research and discuss this topic are American (one notable exception is Wilmshurst, who is British). As this society has found notoriety in the United States, especially when discussing early American politics, it seems logical that most of those interested in this topic would be American. Such as Neil L. York, who, in his article “Freemasons and the American Revolution,” discusses the influence, and lack thereof, of Masonic thought on the American Revolution and early American politics. He discusses how most of the founding fathers actively tried to separate Masonic ideology from their politics, which is an unpopular conclusion, especially tied to this specific topic. However, although the general public almost exclusively associates the society with the United States, the Freemason Society originated in Europe. Because of this, it would be insightful to find some works and studies conducted by Europeans, but they are few and far between, and difficult to find, at least in the research conducted for this paper. And although an overwhelming majority of the sources written on this topic are by historians, this topic is interdisciplinary in many ways. Conspiracy theories in America are discussed by not only historians, but political scientists, psychologists, sociologists, and many other professionals. As would be expected, the belief in conspiracy theories is heavily discussed in the field of psychology. In the article “Why Do People Believe in Conspiracy Theories?,” psychologist David Ludden discusses individuals’ desire for control and security. Any time they feel threatened in some capacity, they find a reason for this, even if it is not founded in fact.

It appears that, although works have been written and published all throughout the last few centuries, there have been trends. There was a spike in production in the late nineteenth and

early twentieth century, and again in the late twentieth and early twenty-first. Most sources that were deemed useful for this topic seem to fall in one of these two time periods. While all the dynamics that could contribute to this trend cannot be easily explained, it is believed that the reason these works began to be published more often at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first century is because of the amount of information available to people because of the internet. The internet began being used on a wider scale by this time, and this is when the popularity of conspiracy theories began to rise. There was also a wave of conservatism that swept the country in the 1980's and 1990's, which also most likely influenced the rise of conspiracy theories. With this conservative movement, there was also a rise in an interest in history, specifically surrounding the founding fathers and the American Revolution, which is also heavily associated with the Freemasons. Certain books and movies in pop culture in the 1990's and early 2000's, such as *The Da Vinci Code* and the *National Treasure* franchise, also made discussions on Freemasons and conspiracy theories mainstream and sparked fascination among the public. On the other hand, during the late nineteenth century, there was an anti-Masonic movement, especially among evangelical Christians. In Roberts article, he discusses the movement against secret societies, which was led by the National Christian Association in the 1870's and 1880's. This no doubt sparked some of the investigation into the society and an effort by those who were a member of the lodge to clear their reputation.

There are several gaps in the scholarship surrounding this subject. One problem is how secretive the Masonic lodges are, as Neil York points out in his article, lodges kept very basic and incomplete records, and even when they did, they rarely made them public. While there is some, there is not an abundance of raw data for researchers to use. Some of the accounts that are available that are surrounding actual events have been written about by Masons, and some

information has been left out, either purposefully or because the information is not there. For instance, the William Morgan affair of 1826, in which a Mason threatened to publish a book exposing all the secrets of the Freemasons suddenly disappeared and was never seen again. There is little to no primary sources discussing this event, and the sources that are generally available to the public are short, skimpy articles published in Masonic journals attempting to disassociate the society with the event. One of the main holes in the subject is that there is little to no connection from the past to the present. There is little to no causation discussed in these books, articles, and other sources. One of the few sources that attempts to tackle this issue is *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* by renowned historian Richard Hofstadter. In this work, Hofstadter attempts to connect the anti-Catholic and anti-Mason movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to the Communist conspiracies during the Cold War. Hofstadter aims to categorize these movements with some para-historical political ideology rather than finding causation between the movements. Hofstadter began an important discussion around conspiracy theories, but did not make a connection to the historical narrative. Other than Hofstadter, most authors simply discuss the society, the history behind it, it's influences back in the day, or the conspiracy theories associated with it. However, there is no connection between the conspiracy culture surrounding this society and how it has influenced the culture we experience today. That is precisely the reason why I want to research this, because there is connection there.

## **Freemason Society, Conspiracy Theories, and Their Impact**

### **History of the Freemasonry**

The Freemason Society holds great cultural and social significance, but the organization's origins contain economic motivations. The society began as a craftsmen guild in Britain in the

Middle Ages, but would eventually spread all throughout Europe. Although historians have not been able to solidify the exact date of its creation, the earliest Masonic writing, the Regius Manuscript, is dated to the early 15<sup>th</sup> century. The Regius Manuscript, whose author is unknown, is a poem alluding to an “assembly frequented by great lords, the sheriff of the county, the mayor of the city, knights, squires, and aldermen,” who were required to pledge allegiance to the King.<sup>1</sup> Each guild catered to specific skill or trade, and the Masonic lodges were guilds specifically for stonemasons. The reason why the Masonic lodges held significance or lasted longer than others is not completely known, but the longevity and impact of the society can in part be contributed to the organization’s ritualistic practices and lore. The work of a stonemason has mythological and religious significance in several different cultures in the East and West. In China, what Gould refers to as the “Deity” is called the “First Builder,” and building holds significance in regard to creation, new beginnings, and harmony in the universe. In Jewish and Christian tradition, the stonemason is associated with the Tabernacle Moses constructs in the desert and the Temple King Solomon has built in Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup>

Although the guilds began to grow during the Middle Ages and Early Modern Period, along with the other craftsmen guilds, the Freemasons began to decline in the late seventeenth centuries due to the rise of the market economy. Before the market economy, guilds ensured the stabilization of prices and the survival of the craft through apprenticeship. The market economy would bring the rise of supply and demand and mass production, which would put guilds at risk. Faced with this crisis, the Masonic organization began admitting men outside of their craft. This brought in revenue for the organization and social status for the new members from the

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Freke Gould, *Concise History of Freemasonry*, Place of publication not identified: Nabu Press, 2010, 129.

<sup>2</sup> Gould, *Concise History of Freemasonry*, 3-4.

Freemasons' ritualism and "reputed antiquity." By the early eighteenth century, almost all members of the Freemason Society were not Masons at all.<sup>3</sup> As men from different circles began joining the society, this created a perfect environment for the discussion and exchange of varying ideas regarding religion and politics. Over the next few decades, the Freemasons accumulated a reputation of radicalism, participating in "opposition to absolute monarchy, support for social mobility, religious tolerance, and, in some circles, pantheism and republicanism."<sup>4</sup>

### **Anti-Masonry and Emerging Conspiracy**

It would be no surprise, then, that Freemasons would participate in the American and French revolutions. Masonic lodges were established in America and France in the early-mid eighteenth century, creating spaces for political and ideological discourse just as they had in England. The earliest lodges in America were founded in Boston, Massachusetts, Savannah, Georgia, and Charleston, South Carolina, in the 1730s.<sup>5</sup> Some scholars speculate that up to 21 signers of the Declaration of Independence were Freemasons, including George Washington. As Freemasons created a following in America, they brought their reputation of political dissention, radicalism, and secrecy.<sup>6</sup> Although suspicion surrounding the organization existed in revolutionary America, there is no tangible evidence of opposition to the Society until the Anti-Mason movement in the 1820s and 1830s (which would then be revived in the 1860s). The event that brought the Freemasons under speculation was the infamous William Morgan Affair of 1826. In this affair, William Morgan, a Mason, threatened to publish secrets about the Society.

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Barkun, "UFOs and the Search for Scapegoats I: Anti-Catholicism and Anti-Masonry," In *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, 126-40, University of California Press, 2003, Accessed April 1, 2020. [www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1pnjvz.11](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1pnjvz.11), 128.

<sup>4</sup> Barkun, "UFOs and the Search for Scapegoats I: Anti-Catholicism and Anti-Masonry," 129.

<sup>5</sup> Gould, *Concise History of Freemasonry*, 413.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Feuerherd, "The Strange History of Masons in America," JSTOR Daily, August 3, 2017, <https://daily.jstor.org/the-strange-history-of-Masons-in-america/>.

Although this would not be a new occurrence (certain symbolic rituals and “secrets” had been leaked since the 1730s), Morgan planned to reveal details about some of the highest orders of the organization. Shortly after, Morgan was kidnapped and never seen again. In the next year, as police tried and failed to discover Morgan’s fate, increasing suspicion was placed on the Masons. Lodges were damaged, individual Masons were denied appointments to juries, church membership, and were generally scorned by their neighbors. Parades, banquets and other activities were forced to cancel, and “Masonic activities in established strongholds of Massachusetts, New York, and Pennsylvania were dramatically reduced.”<sup>7</sup> The case was never able to be resolved because of pro and anti-Masonic motivations of the witnesses and those involved, and the emotionalism surrounding the act. Masons constituted a majority of the juries and many acted as judges in the area. Critics of the society accused members of taking “blood oaths” that required Masons to be loyal to the organization over the federal government. Many felt that the Masons involved in the trial and investigation would support their fellow Masons and attempt to preserve the Society rather than seeking justice for Morgan.<sup>8</sup> Irreversible damage was committed to the Society’s already unstable reputation among the American public. This crime pushed the pre-existing anti-Masonic movement to develop into “an organized campaign of national scope.”<sup>9</sup>

Anti-Masonry emerged during a time of political shift. During this period, Jacksonian democracy prevailed, focusing on the common man and the authority of local rather than federal

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<sup>7</sup> David G. Hackett, "Anti-Masonry and the Public Sphere, 1826–1850," In *That Religion in Which All Men Agree: Freemasonry in American Culture*, 111-24, Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 2014, Accessed April 1, 2020, [www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt5hjj61.8](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt5hjj61.8), 112.

<sup>8</sup> Hackett, "Anti-Masonry and the Public Sphere, 1826–1850," 112.

<sup>9</sup> Clarence N. Roberts, "The Crusade against Secret Societies and the National Christian Association." *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society (1908-1984)* 64, no. 4 (1971): 382-400, Accessed February 29, 2020. [www.jstor.org/stable/40190703](http://www.jstor.org/stable/40190703), 382.

government. Following the revolutionary period, “respect for the hierarchical authority of a local elite gave way to an embrace of the democratic power of ordinary Americans.”<sup>10</sup> The church began to democratize, as well. Churches, specifically Protestant denominations, migrated away from the hierarchy of the clergy and emphasized the personal relationship between the individual and God rather than an organized and restricted act.<sup>11</sup> Freemasons represented elitist sentiments that, for some Americans, seemed unpatriotic and even treasonous. But, for some, such as young businessmen, the Masons provided connection and social mobility. Generally, the Freemasons of any community were members of the middle to upper class, involved in politics, and pillars of the local church. There was another distinction, however, that set the Freemasons apart from their neighbors. Although a significant number of Masons identified as Protestants, especially in the western portion of New York near the site of the William Morgan Affair, the few citizens of the community who were Anglican were almost always Masons. Some Masons even went to the extent as not having any religious affiliation at all, which, during this period during the Second Great Awakening, almost assuredly guaranteed social alienation.<sup>12</sup> However, these social and economic differences are not enough to explain the sudden and widespread support of the Anti-Mason movement. Criticism of the Society began in the early eighteenth century, attacking its secretive tendencies and “immoral practices.” There had also been previous popular conspiracy theories involving the Freemasons. One in particular accused Freemasons of being “involved with the Bavarian Illuminati in a secret conspiracy to overthrow American churches and government.”<sup>13</sup> Although these accusations were not lacking in their intensity and frequency, because of the social status of Freemasons and the lack of evidence to support these claims, local

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<sup>10</sup> Hackett, "Anti-Masonry and the Public Sphere, 1826–1850," 113.

<sup>11</sup> Hackett, "Anti-Masonry and the Public Sphere, 1826–1850," 113.

<sup>12</sup> Hackett, "Anti-Masonry and the Public Sphere, 1826–1850," 114.

<sup>13</sup> Hackett, "Anti-Masonry and the Public Sphere, 1826–1850," 115.

clergy, politicians, and educators were usually successful in quelling any animosity or outright suspicion. But, unlike these previous charges, the accusations hurled during the trials and investigation of the William Morgan Affair were not always completely unfounded and were in an environment in which they could be tested. Masons were involved in almost every aspect of the affair, with members of the fraternity serving “among the judges and juries in the twenty trials that decided the fates of the alleged abductors.”<sup>14</sup> The Morgan Affair brought “into public view the potential threat of Freemasonry to the democratizing ethos of the early nineteenth century” and critics “accused Masonic politicians of placing their allegiance to the fraternity ahead of their commitment to republican government.”<sup>15</sup> As the Freemasons’ involvement in the case prolonged the justice that the public called for, Americans began questioning the role of secret societies in democratic government all together. At a time in political history in which (limited) equality, transparency, and the common man were being celebrated, “pseudoaristocratic elites flaunting grandiose titles looked badly out of touch.”<sup>16</sup> “Religious fervor” began to mix with political outrage to facilitate the perfect environment for the Anti-Mason movement. Protestant ministers began renouncing the fraternity, including Elder David Bernard, a Baptist minister near Batavia, New York, who became the first Protestant minister to publicly renounce the organization and became one of the fiercest leaders of the Anti-Mason movement in New York.<sup>17</sup>

The William Morgan Affair created the foundation for conspiracy directed toward the Freemasons that continues until present day. Accusing the organization of secrecy and intrigue

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<sup>14</sup> Hackett, "Anti-Masonry and the Public Sphere, 1826–1850," 115.

<sup>15</sup> Hackett, "Anti-Masonry and the Public Sphere, 1826–1850," 115.

<sup>16</sup> Hackett, "Anti-Masonry and the Public Sphere, 1826–1850," 115-116.

<sup>17</sup> Hackett, "Anti-Masonry and the Public Sphere, 1826–1850," 116.

became popularized, and an American tradition. The William Morgan Affair gave conspiracists ammunition and evidence for their suspicion. In the coming centuries, there would be countless allegations hurled at the Society, but some would become more popular than others. One of the most popular conspiracies about Freemasons is that they participate in Satanism, or devil worship. This claim is one of the oldest concerning the organization, and the initial sources are unknown, but the first publication of these claims came from a former Mason named Gabriel Antoine Jogand-Pages, better known as his pen name, Leo Taxil, in the 1880s. In 1881, Taxil received the First Degree of Masonry, however, by 1882, he was no longer welcomed in his lodge. In 1885, he converted to Catholicism, convinced a priest he was a murderer, and asked to pay penance in a monastery. While there, he began sharing stories of the “secrets” of Freemasonry and writing wild accusations about the Society. He began fabricating rituals and symbols regarding the higher orders of the fraternity as demand for his writings increased.<sup>18</sup> Most of his accusations were centered toward General Albert Pike, Grand Master of the Scottish Rite in South Carolina. As Taxil’s popularity grew, so did his stories. His tales began to include imagined characters and outlandish situations. The core of his tale read as follows:

The fictitious and pure heroine, Diane Vaughan, escapee from a Palladian lodge, tried to evade the clutches of the equally imaginary but evil Sophie Walder, Grand Mistress of Palladism. Diana, he said, carried secret instructions from Albert Pike to the “23 Supreme Confederated Councils of the World,” telling them they could now reveal to their high-degree members that the “Masonic religion” is the worship of Lucifer.

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<sup>18</sup> Art De Hoyos and S. Brent. Morris, *Is It True What They Say about Freemasonry?* Lanham, MD: M. Evans, 2010, 34.

Taxil continued this farce for years, until April 19, 1897, where he confessed his deception to a stunned audience at the Geographic Society of Paris, where, afterward, a riot nearly ensued.<sup>19</sup> Although Taxil publicly admitted to his deceit, his claims left a lasting legacy. His tales survive to present day, commonly known as the “Luciferian Conspiracy.” Taxil’s tales created a foundation for the increasingly outlandish conspiracy theories that would develop in the coming decades.<sup>20</sup>

### **The Illuminati, Freemasons, and the New World Order**

One of the most prevailing conspiracies involves Freemasons and the Illuminati. The frenzy surrounding the Illuminati began in the late eighteenth century. The Bavarian Illuminati emerged during the French Revolution and was heavily influenced by Enlightenment philosophy. Illuminism, another ideology founded on rationalism, was proposed in 1776 by Adam Weishaupt, a professor of law at the University of Ingolstadt. It gained some popularity among some prominent German princes, but would eventually dissipate for the most part in Europe amid persistent persecution. In a few years, it would move to the United States, where its “humanitarian rationalism” seemed to have found a welcoming environment in Masonic lodges.<sup>21</sup> Americans first came into contact with Illuminism through the work titled *Proofs of a Conspiracy Against All the Religions and Governments of Europe, carried on in the Secret Meetings of Free Masons, Illuminati, and Reading Societies*, which was published in 1797 by leading Scottish scientist John Robison. Robison cites several German sources and explains the origins and history of the organization and philosophy, however, when he moves to the political

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<sup>19</sup> De Hoyos and Morris, *Is It True What They Say about Freemasonry?*, 36.

<sup>20</sup> De Hoyos and Morris, *Is It True What They Say about Freemasonry?*, 37.

<sup>21</sup> Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics: and Other Essays*, Harvard University Press, 1996, 10.

influence and moral character of the movement, he made a complete leap into fantasy. Robison claimed that the association was formed “for the express purpose of rooting out all the religious establishments, and overturning all the existing governments of Europe.” Robison went on to also argue that the leaders of the French Revolution were involved in the organization and supposed plan to eradicate Christianity and established government. Robison accused the movement of containing moral and sexual debauchery, even charging its followers with creating multiple nefarious inventions and weapons, including a tea that would cause abortions.<sup>22</sup> Almost simultaneous with Robison, Abbe Barruel, a French Jesuit, published a four-volume work in London titled *Memoires pour servir a Phistoire du Jacobinisme*, which essentially repeated many of the sentiments and accusations that Robison had expressed, attributing the conspiracy to anti-Christians, Freemasons, and the Illuminati.<sup>23</sup> In May 1798, the conspiracies would gain traction in the United States after Jedidiah Morse, a prominent minister from Boston, would deliver a sermon in which he warned his congregation against this international conspiracy that was slowly infiltrating America. Although there is no evidence that any members of the Illuminati ever came to the United States, the organization felt like a visceral threat.<sup>24</sup>

This fear of a supposed “New World Order” has persisted into modern times in the American psyche. Recent polls have shown that up to “23% of Americans believe in the Illuminati and New World Order.” Those who believe in this conspiracy assert that there is a single government controlling the world, including the United States, and this organizations consists of prominent members of society, including politicians, actors, musicians, and other

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<sup>22</sup> Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics: and Other Essays*, 11.

<sup>23</sup> Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics: and Other Essays*, 12.

<sup>24</sup> Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics: and Other Essays*, 13.

celebrities.<sup>25</sup> Theorists claim that the organization abducts these individuals, creates clones of them, and then uses that celebrity's content and fanbase in order to push principles of the Illuminati onto the public. Many cite videos of celebrities staring off into space as evidence of "glitching" and the use of clones. These videos include Beyonce, Eminem, and even Al Roker. Supporters of this theory also point to certain symbolism that has been associated with the Illuminati, and, consequently, also with the Freemasons, including the Eye of Horus and pyramid. The most well-known occurrence of these symbols is on U.S. currency; however, proponents of these theories also point them out all throughout popular media.<sup>26</sup> The Illuminati has also been charged with various other accusations, including transforming humans into lizards and murdering celebrities who try to escape the organization. These conspiracy theories surrounding the Illuminati and Freemasonry are also closely tied to anti-Semitism. After the end of the second world war, a set of documents titled the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a "fake transcript of a secret meeting of Jewish leaders plotting world domination," was published, giving new wind to these conspiracies. Amidst the political paranoia of the Cold War, theorists used these ideas as political propaganda in "anti-communist witch hunts." Certain Americans utilized these theories in order to demonize and alienate groups found outside of the rigid social norms of the time, including Freemason, Jewish people, and those presumed to be participating in the Illuminati.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Nisha Krishnan, "The Illuminati Conspiracy Theory," *The Psychology of Extraordinary Beliefs*, Ohio State University, February 11, 2019, <https://u.osu.edu/vanzandt/2019/02/11/the-illuminati-conspiracy-theory-2/>.

<sup>26</sup> Krishnan, "The Illuminati Conspiracy Theory."

<sup>27</sup> Annabel Bligh, "A Short History of Conspiracy Theories – Listen to Part Three of Our Expert Guide," *The Conversation*, April 21, 2020, <https://theconversation.com/a-short-history-of-conspiracy-theories-listen-to-part-three-of-our-expert-guide-134305>.

### Modern Conspiracy Culture in America

Conspiracy theories have permeated American popular culture in the recent decades, appearing in movies, television shows, books, video games, music, and countless other forms of media. One of the most famous is found in the novel *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown, which has sold over 65 million copies. Although Freemasonry is not the main subject of the novel, it does briefly address Freemasonry surrounding the Founding Fathers and early American history. The references are mostly positive, however, and have piqued the public's interest in the society, inspiring documentaries and spinoff novels studying the subject. But, because of this interest, Brown announced the sequel would focus primarily on Freemasonry. The sequel, titled *The Lost Symbol*, was published in 2009, and as of 2013, has sold over 30 million copies. The novel is centralized around the search for the Masonic Pyramid in Washington, D.C., and other "secret symbols" of the Society.<sup>28</sup> The publicity surrounding the Society seems to be a two-edged sword. Membership of the lodges has increased for the first time in decades, and more members of the public are researching the Society and discovering what exactly the organization is, and its actual involvement in American history. Masons have appeared in the media, attempting to promote the organization and downplay the stains in their past. Some modern Masons are pushing to separate the current organization from the past, downplaying ritualistic practices and symbols such as the Ancient Mysteries, which, ironically, is usually the reason for the public's interest.<sup>29</sup>

Americans' interest in conspiracy theories is not limited to Freemasons. Belief in conspiracy theories is steadily on the rise, according to recent data such as a 2017 poll which discovered that over 60 percent of people—regardless of age, race, gender, educational level, or

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<sup>28</sup> Joshua Gunn, "Death by Publicity: U.S. Freemasonry and the Public Drama of Secrecy," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 11, no. 2 (2008): 243-77, Accessed April 1, 2020, [www.jstor.org/stable/41940358](http://www.jstor.org/stable/41940358), 245.

<sup>29</sup> Gunn, "Death by Publicity: U.S. Freemasonry and the Public Drama of Secrecy," 246.

political preference—believe that Lee Harvey Oswald did not act alone in the JFK assassination<sup>30</sup> and a 2019 survey found that “45 percent of American adults have doubts about the safety of vaccinations.”<sup>31</sup> While in previous decades those who adhered to conspiracy theories were labeled as deranged, uneducated fanatics on the fringes of society, it has become undeniable that this group is growing—and coming from all walks of life.

The growing popularity of conspiracy theories has come to the attention of historians, psychologists, and even the Federal Bureau of Investigation, primarily because this movement has begun to have tangible consequences. In the first half of 2019, there were more cases of the measles in the United States than had been since 1994. Many owe this to the growing incredulity of vaccinations among the public.<sup>32</sup> On May 30, 2019, the Phoenix home office of the FBI released a document which states “conspiracy theories ‘very likely’ inspire domestic terrorists to commit criminal and sometimes violent acts and ‘very likely will emerge, spread and evolve’ on internet platforms.” It was the first document of its kind from the FBI to address conspiracy theories and their possible repercussions.<sup>33</sup> The FBI and other organizations have recently felt forced to address this phenomenon, not only because it is rapidly growing in popularity, but because it is producing palpable consequences that are being made evident in American society. Acts of violence, such as synagogue shootings and hostage situations over supposed government-run-sex-trafficking-rings, are increasingly attributed to conspiracy theories and their massive presence in today’s media.<sup>34</sup> The FBI anticipates a spike in conspiracy theories in the

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<sup>30</sup> Harry Enten, “Most People Believe In JFK Conspiracy Theories,” FiveThirtyEight, FiveThirtyEight, October 23, 2017, <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/the-one-thing-in-politics-most-americans-believe-in-jfk-conspiracies/>.

<sup>31</sup> Joshua Pease, “How You’ve Been Conditioned to Love Conspiracy Theories,” Popular Mechanics, December 17, 2019, <https://www.popularmechanics.com/science/a30119985/why-people-believe-conspiracy-theories/>.

<sup>32</sup> Melissa Chan, “Why We Can’t Ignore Conspiracy Theories Anymore, Experts Say,” Time, Time, August 15, 2019, <https://time.com/5541411/conspiracy-theories-domestic-terrorism/>.

<sup>33</sup> Chan, “Why We Can’t Ignore Conspiracy Theories Anymore, Experts Say.”

<sup>34</sup> Chan, “Why We Can’t Ignore Conspiracy Theories Anymore, Experts Say.”

upcoming 2020 election, mostly due to political figures such as President Donald Trump.<sup>35</sup> With over 63 million Twitter followers, the president has one of the biggest social media followings among any contemporary political figures. In recent years, especially after his election, he has used his platform to help spread conspiracy theories and dissenting culture. He has tweeted “more than 100 times to voice doubts about the negative effects of climate change,” has pushed the false narrative that former President Barack Obama was not born in the United States, and, most recently, “following Jeffrey Epstein’s apparent suicide in federal jail, Trump retweeted an uncorroborated theory that suggested the death of the well-connected financier, who was charged with sex trafficking of minors and conspiracy, was suspicious and somehow linked to former President Bill Clinton.”<sup>36</sup> Trump’s motives for promoting these theories is not completely clear, but when recently confronted about whether he thinks these theories are true, he claimed he “had no idea.”<sup>37</sup> Another instance of the power of social media to spread these theories is in the case of Ethan Lindenberger, an Ohio teenager who was vaccinated against his mother’s wishes, and who revealed in a Senate hearing that his mother, who was a strong anti-vaccination advocate, mostly relied on Facebook for her information.<sup>38</sup> Social media has contributed greatly to the spread of conspiracy theories. While the internet has brought in a new age of information, not all of the information is accurate. Social media sites have given theorists and other individuals a platform to spread theories quickly and widely. Some are getting nervous about the unprecedented accessibility of theories and false information to the public that has been seen in recent years, including Mike Wood, a lecturer specializing in the psychology of conspiracy theories at Winchester University. Wood states that conspiracy theories “motivate people to take

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<sup>35</sup> Chan, “Why We Can’t Ignore Conspiracy Theories Anymore, Experts Say.”

<sup>36</sup> Chan, “Why We Can’t Ignore Conspiracy Theories Anymore, Experts Say.”

<sup>37</sup> Chan, “Why We Can’t Ignore Conspiracy Theories Anymore, Experts Say.”

<sup>38</sup> Chan, “Why We Can’t Ignore Conspiracy Theories Anymore, Experts Say.”

actions—to vote or to not vote, to vaccinate their kids or not to vaccinate their kids, to do all of these things that are important.”<sup>39</sup> Because of this, certain social media platforms such as YouTube and Facebook have taken measures to ban high profile conspiracy theorists like Alex Jones, and to ban or mute content that would “ promote or engage in violence or hate.”<sup>40</sup>

Conspiracy theories are not strictly an American phenomenon. There are theories, especially surrounding Freemasons and the Illuminati, that emerge from all over the world. The unique political tradition of the United States, however, has produced a culture feeding off of dissenting thought that continues to grow every day. Many fears and conspiracies surrounding these organizations began around the era of the American Revolution, in which Americans were striving to gain independence from what they considered to be a tyrannical government. This fear of control, especially from an entity that cannot be seen or identified, began to be solidified in American tradition. Paired with the emergence of Masonic conspiracies during this time involving many of the Founding Fathers, set a precedence in American culture not only for the suspicion of Freemasons and the organizations they were affiliated with, but with conspiratorial thinking. The founding of the United States and the events that occurred during the Revolutionary era are elevated to nearly a spiritual level in the minds of many Americans. As with any country, the origins of American history hold patriotic significance. If a vital aspect of American symbolism and identity is surrounding by conspiracy and suspicion, it will set a precedent for political discourse in the future. This specific type of suspicion is currently thriving in American modern culture, where conspiracies have moved from the fringes of political discourse into mainstream media.

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<sup>39</sup> Chan, “Why We Can't Ignore Conspiracy Theories Anymore, Experts Say.”

<sup>40</sup> Chan, “Why We Can't Ignore Conspiracy Theories Anymore, Experts Say.”

### **Directions for Future Research**

As with any piece of scholarship, this paper has gaps and weaknesses. The central argument could be strengthened if there was more scholarship or data on the connection between the legacy of the Freemasons and the conspiracy culture currently forming in the United States. One struggle in this paper was working with sources written by Freemasons. Bias was a tremendous hurdle when composing this research and writing. Having more objective sources on the conspiracy theories themselves would aid in identifying causation. However, there are very few scholarly sources that discuss and dissect these theories, because of the nature of conspiracy theories and their lack of primary sources. Having more scholarship discuss the cultural and political consequences of conspiracy theories would greatly aid this discussion. The claim that there is a strong correlation could be analyzed more extensively in the next few decades as the craze surrounding political conspiracies begins to form, and researchers and historians are able to collect more data from the public. I hope that psychologists will become more involved in this study, and hopefully conduct research that will discover correlation. For example, I believe it would be helpful to find if those who believe in conspiracy theories know people or have family members who are Masons. This topic needs to be discussed more among historians as this influence is having a direct impact on the world. This spike in the number of people subscribing to conspiratorial thought will no doubt attract special study in the years to come and hopefully lead to the production of more scholarship on the subject. It would also be beneficial for political scientists to contribute to the conversation, especially as the events during the election of 2020 unfold. In the coming years, it will no doubt become more evident how the conspiracy culture will change and influence political thought and action. However, with the nature of this study, I

believe it will always be difficult, and possibly impossible, to discuss these theories and their effects in a concrete way.

### **Conclusion**

The Freemasonic Society has had a tumultuous history, has been the subject of conspiracy and curiosity, and is constantly seeking legitimacy and clemency in the minds of the American public. Freemasons, whether intentionally or not, have altered the way in which Americans view secret societies. Their heavy influence and involvement in early American politics and presumed corruption, especially in regard to the William Morgan Affair, left a lasting impression of political deceit and treason. This would create the foundation for the circulation of conspiracy in the United States, especially surrounding the Masons and political dogma. Even as new conspiracies would emerge, derision and suspicion for the Masons resided in the background. As the Anti-Mason movement began to be supported with religious fervor, the skepticism surrounding the organization took on new meaning. The arguments adopted new tones, new motivations, and new accusations. This turn is evident in some of the most popular Masonic conspiracies, involving Satanism, the Illuminati, human sacrifice, and countless other charges. The curiosity with the Society seemed to revive in the 1990s and 2000s with the release of several books and films depicting the society and its supposed hidden secrets. Especially with the invention and popularity of the internet in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the discussion surrounding conspiracy theories began to expand. The internet, websites, and social media platforms gave conspiracists room to discuss openly their speculations, evidence free. Entire websites were dedicated to this practice. Because of this environment, American culture has seen an unprecedented rise in the popularity of conspiracy theories.

The accusations hurled at the Masons in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and even nineteenth centuries laid the foundation for the culture that Americans are witnessing and participating in in the twenty-first. This paper, or, arguably, any paper, cannot possibly explore every avenue, every conspiracy, every source and come to a concise conclusion to the causation or correlation of this phenomenon. However, the points analyzed in this work aim to scratch the surface of this tradition and illustrate the obvious association between the organization's reputation and conspiracy theory culture. The direct impact of this American tradition cannot be discerned currently, but as these conspiracies continue to have tangible consequences in America's political discourse, they will inevitably make themselves known.

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