

1 **The Politics of Conspiracy Theory in 19th-Century America: Antimasonry, Anti-Catholicism, & Nativism**

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- ★ What is Freemasonry?
 - ★ Secretive, all-male fraternity & philanthropic organization that evolved from building trade guilds in 18th-century England & spread with Enlightenment. Members were known as “speculative” or “free” masons (rather than real stoneworkers).
 - ★ Part of a fad for clubs and societies, and an important trend: the rise of “voluntary associations” in which people met outside the traditional contexts of family, church, or state.
 - ★ The Ultimate Boys’ Club:
 - ★ Emphasized fellowship & male bonding in age (18thc.) & culture in which men were not supposed to express inner emotions or admit vulnerability.
 - ★ Involves complex structure of “lodges” & stepped “degrees” of knowledge.
 - ★ Rituals with occult symbolism & mythology borrowed from ancient Jewish & Egyptian culture (key figure was builder of the Temple of Solomon).
 - ★ Special clothing (aprons); rings; secret handshakes; “bloody oaths.”
 - ★ Not supposed to observe religious or social distinctions, and in America this was actually somewhat true. Examples: the upwardly mobile artisans Benjamin Franklin & Paul Revere.
 - ★ Claimed to be quasi-Christian but looked/functioned almost like an alternative religion.
 - ★ In early US, the best way to make political & business contacts, plus a place to meet & party in private, away from women. Masons supported brothers & kept secrets.
 - ★ Prominent role of Freemasons in Early American Republic: Washington & many other Founders as members; cornerstone ceremonies; the Great Seal of the United States.

3 **II. The Rise of Anti-Masonry**

- ★ The Antimasonic Crusade
 - ★ Origin: 1826 kidnapping and murder of William Morgan, an ex-Mason from Batavia, NY (along Erie Canal) who planned to publish Masonry’s secrets.
 - ★ Erie Canal area in New York as a site of most rapid urbanization & social change that nation had yet seen, esp. in terms of the rise of a middle-class, wage-earning society.
 - ★ Investigations discovered that masons in office were helping protect the murderers.
 - ★ Controversy set off a major national campaign to exterminate Masonry. What did the Antimasons dislike about Freemasonry?
 - ★ Anti-Christian; secrecy & power made it undemocratic, unfair, & potentially immoral; created an alternate loyalty (besides God & country) that could lead to subversion. Fear of a Masonic plot to establish a monarchy or dictatorship.
 - ★ A competitor to the new evangelical religion, new female-dominated family, interfered with free competition in the new wage labor economy.
 - ★ Methods & results, based in newly democratized political culture:
 - ★ Made heavy use of new political methods: Antimasonic newspapers, Antimasonic political party that held first national convention in 1830 & ran a presidential candidate in 1832. Major leaders: Thurlow Weed and William Seward, future president Millard Fillmore, all NY.

- ★ Nearly destroyed U.S. Freemasonry & mostly ended fraternity's political role.
- ★ In the North, Antimasons became core of Whig Party that replaced the Federalists.

★ The Continuing Afterlife of Antimasonic CTs

- ★ Jack the Ripper supposedly a Freemason whose crimes were covered up by his Craft brothers, based on resemblance of wounds to Masonic Oaths.
- ★ Hitler, Mussolini, & Ayatollah Khomeini all persecuted Freemasons. Pat Robertson & other conservative Christians, hate groups, conspiracists continue crusade today.
- ★ Evil Masonic deeds: JFK, Manson family, & esp., New World Order.

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III. Anti-Catholicism in America

✚ Heritage of anti-Catholic prejudice among American Protestants

- ✚ Traditional Protestant propaganda: Catholic Church = "Whore of Babylon" from Bible
- ✚ Pope's (or Guy Fawkes) Day celebrations & Quebec Act fears in New England.
- ✚ Anglo-Protestants associated Catholicism with superstition, corruption, mindless obedience to authority, absolute monarchy, disorder, conspiracy.
 - ✚ Belief that Catholics were ignorant & unfit for self-government.

✚ Immigration & the Rise of Anti-Catholicism

- ✚ After War of 1812, immigration from Germany and Ireland picked up, and the immigrants, once mostly Protestants, became increasingly Catholic.
- ✚ By 1830s, increased Catholic population led to an expanded and more assertive Catholic Church, esp. in Midwest, aided by missionary groups (Leopold Assoc.).
- ✚ Bitter resistance to Catholic expansion by evangelical Protestants, with wild CTs:
 - ✚ Samuel F.B. Morse, *Foreign Conspiracy Against the Liberties of the United States* (1834), Lyman Beecher, *A Plea for the West* (1835): Catholic Church seen as conspiring to destroy American republicanism on behalf of European monarchy. Cartoon on this theme.
 - ✚ Anti-Catholicism openly joined with nativism (opposition to immigration.) First nativist parties such as the Native American Democratic Association.
 - ✚ CTs & rumors about convents: girls held against will, turned into sex slaves of priests. Burning of Mt. Benedict convent & school in Charlestown, Mass., Aug. 1834.
 - ✚ *The Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk* (1836): Best-seller that told "true" story of sex & baby-killing in Montreal's Hotel Dieu convent by an alleged escapee.

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IV. Immigration & the Rise of Political Nativism

- ✚ Controversies over new, assimilationist public school systems, beg. late 1830s
 - ✚ In 1840s, Catholic Church fought with state & city governments over Bible reading & school funding and with congregations over church property.
 - ✚ May 1844 "Bible riots" in Philadelphia left 24 dead & two Catholic churches burned.
- ✚ Impact of the Irish Potato Famine of 1846
 - ✚ Failure of potato crop in Ireland and Germany. Starvation and cheaper passages led to huge wave of immigrants, poorer & more Catholic than ever. Germans went to Midwest (cities & farms), while Irish stayed in port cities, especially Boston & NY.
 - ✚ 1845-1854 was proportionally the biggest decade of immigration ever: 2.9 million people, almost all Irish & German Catholic.
 - ✚ Figures: 14% of 1845 pop., more than all previous U.S. history put together.
- ✚ CT into Conspiracy: The Nativist Secret Societies
 - ✚ Great fear was that immigrants would vote en masse & take power, so Protestants conspired to stop it, organizing secret societies like the Order of United Americans. Election violence and corruption blamed on Catholic immigrants.
 - ✚ Nativism became huge factor in national politics in early 1850s, as Whig party was falling apart due to slavery and temperance issues.

- ✚ Old Catholic controversies revived, plus Catholics showed signs of political power, and a papal nuncio, G. Bedini ("Butcher of Bologna"), visited the United States.
- ✚ Order of the Star-Spangled Banner organized, set up like Masons but secret, with members sworn to support no foreigners or Catholics in elections.
- ✚ OSSB became the "Know-Nothing" party & wiped out the Whigs by surprise in 1854 elections, controlling some state governments & sending members to Congress.
- ✚ K-Ns were absorbed themselves by the Republicans (GOP) by 1856. Antimasons + Know-Nothings + Antislavery Whigs & Dems = Lincoln's Republican Party.

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Maria Monk, Anti-Catholic

Bestseller

- ◆ Roots of problem in "superstitious" Catholic beliefs & free access of priests to nuns in a time of growing m-c prudery.
 - Suspicions about confession.
- ◆ Among Maria's stories:
 - Nuns discouraged from bible-reading, encouraged to hate themselves & perform extreme acts of penance.
 - Doctrine preached that priests as special beings incapable of sin.
 - Nuns forced into sex with priests, followed by baptism & murder of resulting babies.
 - Torture and murder of nuns who rebelled.
- ◆ Widely believed despite independent investigation & author's mental illness.
 - Disproved by NY editor W.L. Stone, who was inclined to believe it.
- ◆ Still touted today as early expose of sexual abuse by priests.