

Baptists and Freemasonry: A Conflicted History  
By Jeff Straub, Ph.D.  
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**Introduction:**

My interest in this topic came through two separate events in my recent history. First, I attended a man's funeral in Georgia after his death of colon cancer in his mid-30s. The funeral was held in a prominent Southern Baptist church. As a family member, and a minister, I sat on the platform with the pastor. Shortly before the service, a group of well-dressed men, each wearing a small white apron around their waist and a sprig of acacia in their lapel entered the church and sat near the front. The pastor informed me that the deceased had been a mason and his "brothers" were present to participate in the funeral. This was something completely new to me, observing the masonic ritual at death. Though I knew of masons from afar, I had never been in close proximity (that I knew of) nor had I ever attended the funeral for a mason. At the grave, the masons played a major role, including placing their sprigs of acacia in the grave, as symbols of immortality. This funeral ritual is one of the few *public* rites and must be requested by the deceased family, in this case, the man's father and grandfather, both of whom had encouraged him to join the masons. His wife later told me that her husband was a mason to honor them, but he didn't participate much in the ritual.

A few years later, I was asked to complete a writing project of Baptist historian Terry Wolever, who unexpectedly died, leaving a biography Stephen Gano (1762–1828) unfinished. Gano, son of John Gano (1727–1804), founder of the First Baptist Church of New York City (1780), had pastored the important First Baptist Church of Providence, RI, arguably the first Baptist church in America. Terry had amassed a significant amount of research on Stephen's life and outlined his plan for the biography but died before he could pen the book. Would I be interested in completing the work? Stephen became an important Baptist in his own right at FBC Providence, where he labored from 1792 until his death in 1828. The project was intriguing to me, especially since much of the research had been done.

What I discovered about Stephen was that he was a freemason. Stephen was active in the Mount Vernon Lodge of Providence, admitted July 1801. He received the degrees of Capitular Masonry in 1808 and was elected Grand Chaplain of the Grand Lodge of Rhode Island. He was remembered as "a true and faithful supporter of the Masonic institution."<sup>1</sup> Stephen was married four times. His fourth wife, Joanna Latting of Hillsdale, NY, whom he married in 1801, created a stir in FBC, Providence when she accused Stephen of devilry in 1803 and permanently separated from him. She had been in the church at Hillsdale, NY, where he met her years earlier when he was pastor (1787–1792). The church under his leadership joined the Shaftsbury Association in 1788. After Stephen moved to Providence but before he married Joanna, Shaftsbury examined the "merits and demerits of Speculative Free Masonry." The response, "As a number of our churches are greatly distressed over members joining with *Free Masons*, for the peace of the

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<sup>1</sup> See Henry W. Rugg, *History of Freemasonry in Rhode Island* (Providence, RI: Freeman, 1895), 365. Several years after Gano's death, a toast was offered at a public dinner, on the occasion of the Festival of St. John, held in the Roger Williams Hotel of Providence, by Rev. Br. Taft "to the memory of a man who when living was a friend of God and man. The memory of Stephen Gano," ("Festival of St. John," *American Masonick Record and Albany Literary Journal*, July 10, 1830, 2).

churches, we pray for such to desist,” yet, “as this association claims no jurisdiction over the members of churches, each church must judge for itself, according to fact and circumstance.”<sup>2</sup>

Joanna likely learned her anti-masonic position at Hillsdale and apparently was not aware that her husband to be had become a mason about four months before they were married. Stephen’s freemasonry created no small stir in the Providence church. This event may have been “the most bizarre issue in the entire history of the Providence church.”<sup>3</sup> In the summer of 1803, Joanna “complained that ‘she could not fellowship that allowance of Free masonry in the bosom of the church’” and brought charges against her husband and seven others. The masons were part of the “Mystery of Iniquity” and were in a “Covenant of Death and agreement of Hell.”<sup>4</sup> The matter went before the body in a series of meetings, during one of which Stephen read his wife’s accusations against him as it was improper for a woman to speak in a church meeting. After reading the charges, Stephen demanded that the church decide whether it was proper for him to continue as their elder. The church voted unanimously to stand with their pastor and the others and rejected Joanna’s accusations. With Gano and the rest absolved of disciplinary issues, charges were brought to discipline Joanna, not because of her opinions on masonry but “on account of her hard and unchristian language towards our brethren, who are Masons; toward our Elder, her husband” and towards others in the church.<sup>5</sup> She was subsequently voted out of the church. She remained in Providence and never lived with her husband again.<sup>6</sup> This victory for the masons was memorable among the New England brotherhood.<sup>7</sup>

Another interesting connection between Baptists and freemasonry I discovered was that Gano’s son-in-law, the important Baptist historian David Benedict was also a mason. He was pastor of the church at Pawtucket, RI from its inception for twenty-three years until his freemasonry became a problem and he ceased his pastoral care though he remained a member of the church.<sup>8</sup> Benedict’s devotion to freemasonry can be seen in mason literature and in Benedict’s own writings. Speaking of the struggle Baptist churches and associations experienced over the acceptance of masons as members, Benedict wrote

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<sup>2</sup> *Minutes of the Shaftsbury Baptist Association; Holden (?) at Elder Hull’s Meeting House, June 6 and 7, 1798*, 7. Also Stephen Wright, *History of the Shaftsbury Baptist Association from 1751 to 1853* (Troy, NY: A. G. Johnson, 1853), 57.

<sup>3</sup> J. Stanley Lemons, *First: The First Baptist Church in America* (Providence, RI: Charitable Baptist Society, 2001), 28.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 226. The specific details of her charges have not survived. *Ibid.*, 572, fn 18.

<sup>5</sup> Minutes of FBC, Providence, August 25, 1803, quoted in Lemons, *First*, 120, fn. 57.

<sup>6</sup> Lemon, *First*, 28. This victory for the masons was memorable among the New England brothers. See “An Anti-Masonic Defeat,” Editorial Miscellany, *The New England Free Mason*, V. 2, Ed. Sereno D. Nickerson (Boston: Frank Wood, 1875), 360.

<sup>7</sup> The definitive biographical source on Gano is Terry Woelver, “Stephen Gano (1762–1828)” in *A Noble Company: Biographical Essay on Notable Particular Baptists in America*, ed. Terry Woelver (Springfield, MO: Particular Baptist Press, 2015), 6:164–202. The story of Gano’s troubles over freemasonry may be found on pp. 186–89.

<sup>8</sup> The best source for information on Benedict is Matthew Lee Underwood, “David Benedict, 1779–1874” in *A Noble Company: Biographical Essays on Notable Particular Baptists in America*, ed. Terry Woelver (Springfield, MO: Particular Baptist Press, 2017), 8:1–65. His discussion of Benedict and freemasonry may be found on pp. 25–34. On Benedict as a freemason, see Rugg, *History*, 366–67. On Benedict see also, William Cathcart, *Baptist Encyclopedia*, 1:94–95.

Freemasonry, and southern slavery, soon became the subjects of the greatest interest among the contending parties, and as a natural consequence, respecting these new matters of excitement in their present shape, the most ardent altercations arose among combatants in this new warfare on Baptist ground, which involved questions which, our churches had never legislated, nor adopted any rules of discipline. . . . Up to this date, the members of Baptist churches were not molested in their religious standing on account of their connection with the mystic order; and multitudes of the most staunch defenders of the Baptist faith found themselves all at once in an embarrassing dilemma in consequence of the new church laws, which they had never subscribed, and against which they entered a solemn protest. . . . In the new Baptist reform, many strong men, and not a few who could not properly be placed in this class, were engaged, with a zeal which they had never before manifested against any evil of the land, real or imaginary. The details of the strifes and commotions which followed this modern warfare against a fraternity of very high antiquity, I shall not attempt to repeat.<sup>9</sup>

In these two early American stories of Baptist freemasons, considerable ambivalence can be seen. Though opposed by his wife, Gano was sustained by the church. Had Gano still been at Hillsdale in 1798, he would have been a part of the Shaftsbury discussions on freemasonry and might not have joined in 1801. While David Benedict resigned the pastorate, he did not leave the church. The church seems to have granted a measure of tolerance toward freemasonry. This same measure of tolerance has existed among Baptist churches ever since.

Today, freemasonry, as in the later 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, is not consistently viewed among Baptists as good or bad. The Southern Baptist Convention labored over whether to tolerate or reject the fraternity from 1985, agreeing at one point to make masonic affiliation a matter of personal decision and kept the conversation to the local church level. Years later, the North American Mission Board issued a statement offering eight reasons why freemasonry should be considered anti-Christian. Nevertheless, there is still a masonic presence among Southern Baptists, once estimated at between 500,000 and 1.3 million adherents, although statistics are difficult to verify.<sup>10</sup> Undoubtedly this ambivalence toward freemasonry may be because of the numerous prominent Southern Baptist leaders of the past, including B. H. Carroll, L. R. Scarborough, George W. Truett, Herschel Hobbs and H. Leon McBeth, who were masons. Other Baptist groups have been clearer in their rejection of freemasonry.

The deeper one plunges into the study of freemasonry and Baptists, the more conflicted the topic becomes. It may be worthy of a full monograph for lovers of Baptist history. Nevertheless, an article tracing the larger contours of the relationship between Baptists and

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<sup>9</sup> David Benedict, *Fifty Years Among the Baptists* (New York: Sheldon, 1860), 172–73. Benedict also defends freemasonry in a sermon he delivered before the Grand Lodge of Rhode Island Masons. (David Benedict, *An Address Delivered before the Grand Lodge of Rhode-Island at the Anniversary of St. John the Baptist, Thursday, June 24, 1830* (Pawtucket: Meacham & Fowler, 1830).

<sup>10</sup> “Baptists and Freemasons,” Available online at <http://www.jmm.org.au/articles/786.htm>. Accessed Nov 6, 2021. The numbers of SBC freemason vary widely. 500,000 is a common number given and on the high end, an article in the *Tampa Bay Times* used 1.3 million SBC freemasons. See “Southern Baptist Free to be masons,” *Tampa Bay Times*, Oct 9, 2005. Available online at <https://www.tampabay.com/archive/1993/03/27/southern-baptists-free-to-be-masons-report-says/>. Accessed Nov. 8, 2021. However, this is also the number given for the total number of freemasons in the US today. Part of the explanation for this is that freemasonry has been in decline globally and COVID has taken a toll as well. See also John Hinck, “Understanding the Decline in Fraternal Organizations: A Mixed Method Approach.” (Ph.D. diss, University of San Diego, 2018).

freemasons is in order.<sup>11</sup> This paper will unfold first with a brief history of freemasonry and its introduction into the Americas. An examination of its impact among the elites will demonstrate the attractiveness of freemasonry to Baptists. The next section will sketch the contours of the Baptist attitude toward freemasonry, both positive and negative from the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century through the antimasonic movement, then trace Baptist discussions in churches and associations. The paper will conclude with a summary of the Southern Baptist conflict in the 1990s as well as a short discussion of the rejection of freemasonry by other Baptist groups like Freewill Baptists, the General Association of Regular Baptists, and the Scottish Baptists.<sup>12</sup>

### Freemasonry Comes to North America

“Freemasonry is a system of morality, veiled in allegory, illustrated by symbols. Not a religion, but religious in character, it is a philosophy of ethical conduct which imparts moral and social virtues, and fosters brotherly love. Its tenets have endured since man turned the first pages of civilization. They embody an understanding by which man can transcend ordinary experience and build a life in greater harmony with the Great Architect of the universe.”<sup>13</sup>

There is dispute as to when freemasonry began. “The evidence relating to the emergence of modern freemasonry is complex, confusing, and often fragmentary.”<sup>14</sup> Since this is the case, it is well beyond the scope of this paper to consider this interesting topic. Therefore, the paper begins with freemasonry’s entrance into the United States from England sometime before 1733 when the first American grand lodge was established. English merchant and active mason Henry Price (1697–1780), upon arriving in Boston, discovered the existence of other masons. He returned to England to receive a warrant from the London Grand Lodge that had been formed by four London lodges in 1717 to establish the first Grand Lodge in North America.<sup>15</sup> A lodge is not a building but a group of masons who meet together to carry out the ritual and foster fraternal relationships. A grand lodge is a main lodge in a geographical location that is responsible for authorizing the formation of other lodges within its area.

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<sup>11</sup> There is a good discussion of early Baptists and freemasonry in J. Stanley Lemons, *Retracing Baptists in Rhode Island: Identity, Formation and History* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019), 223–31 which ends its treatment with the early conflict. No comprehensive treatment of Baptists and freemasonry exists that I can find.

<sup>12</sup> There isn’t sufficient space to consider the larger question of freemasonry and Christianity. A starting point for exploring this issue may be found in *Handbook of Freemasonry*, ed. Henrik Bogdan and J. A. M. Snoek (Leiden: Brill, 2014). See Part 2, “Freemasonry and Religion,” (139–87 esp.) which has chapters of freemasonry and Roman Catholicism, freemasonry and Orthodox Churches, freemasonry and Protestantism.

<sup>13</sup> “Freemasons,” Minneapolis Lodge No. 19 website available online at <https://mpls19.org>. Accessed October 29, 2021. Furthermore, freemasonry is not a monolithic ideology. Its diversity makes it difficult to master. On global freemasonry, see John Dickie, *The Craft: How Freemasons Made the Modern World* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2020).

<sup>14</sup> David Stevenson, *The Origins of Freemasonry: Scotland’s Century, 1590–1710* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 1.

<sup>15</sup> “Boston Masons Organize First Grand Lodge in America,” Massmoments. Available online at <https://www.massmoments.org/moment-details/boston-masons-organize-first-grand-lodge-in-america.html>. Accessed Oct 30, 2021. For a history of this beginning, see Thomas Sherrard Roy, *Stalwart Builders: The Grand Lodge of Masons in Massachusetts, 1733 – 1970* (Masonic Education and Charity Trust of the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts, 1971). For a recent history of American freemasonry, see Mark A. Tabbert, *American Freemasonry: Three Centuries of Building Communities* (New York: New York University Press, 2005). On Price, see Melvin M. Johnson, *The Beginnings of Freemasonry in America* (Kingsport, TN: Southern Publishers, 1924), 92–103.

Masonic lodges soon began to appear in the Colonies with other Grand Lodges being formed that authorized smaller lodges. Additionally, other branches of masonry, e.g. Irish freemasonry, authorized additional of grand lodges in the United States. Borrowing imagery from Solomon's Temple and steeped in symbolism from the medieval stonemason guilds, masonry was largely a movement that appealed to the elites of society. "Masonic lodges thus brought together a large section of their city's most important men . . . High fees and the unanimous votes required for initiation membership, and additional degrees (usually requiring separate ballots) kept out those of limited means."<sup>16</sup> Philosophically, "the fraternity embodied European Enlightenment ideals of liberty, autonomy, and God as envisioned by Deist philosophers as a Creator who largely left humanity alone."<sup>17</sup>

Some of the chief architects of the United States were freemasons—George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Paul Revere and Prince Hall. George Washington, America's first president, wearing masonic garb, laid the cornerstone of the US Capitol in 1793. Hall was an African American free black abolitionist who formed the first black freemason group in Boston. Hall and some of his free black brothers petitioned to join the Boston lodge but were rejected. They sought recognition from a lodge in Ireland who were represented by British troops quartered in Boston. They received permission to form African Lodge #1 (later renamed African Lodge 459) as the first black lodge in America.<sup>18</sup>

With Boston as the center of early freemasonry,<sup>19</sup> clergy began to be attracted to the movement. Reverend Arthur Browne (1699–1773), an Anglican in New Hampshire, became the first clergyman in that colony to embrace freemasonry in 1747.<sup>20</sup> Other clergyman would follow, but this raised troubling questions. Masonry was shrouded in secrecy and rumors of a ritual that sounded strangely antithetical to Christianity concerned some Christians. Could a man be a freemason and a Christian?<sup>21</sup> Baptists, who like other Americans, were open to freemasonry, began to ask questions about involvement in freemasonry in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>16</sup> Steven C. Bullock, *Revolutionary Brotherhood: Freemasonry and the Transformation of the American Social Order, 1730–1840* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 62.

<sup>17</sup> Peter Feuerherd, "The Strange History of Masons in America," JStor Daily, Aug 3, 2017. Available online at <https://daily.jstor.org/the-strange-history-of-masons-in-america/>. Accessed October 29, 2021.

<sup>18</sup> For details on these early American masons, see Tabbert, *American Freemasonry*, 33–47. On African American freemasonry, see *All Men Are Free and Brethren: Essays on the History of African American Freemasonry*, ed. Peter P. Kinks and Stephen Kantowitz (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013). Also, Cécile Révanger, *Black Freemasonry: From Prince Hall to the Giants of Jazz!*, trans. Jon E. Graham (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2014).

<sup>19</sup> There is dispute over whether Boston or Philadelphia was the first Grand Lodge in the Colonies. For a discussion of the Grand Lodge in Philadelphia, The Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania dates its original to 1730. See "Freemasonry," *Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia*. Available online at <https://philadelphiaencyclopedia.org/archive/freemasonry/>. Accessed October 31, 2021. See also, *Free Masonry in North America: From the Colonial Period to the Beginning of the Present Century*, comp. Henry Whitemore (New York: Artotype Printing, 1889), 1–3 and Alain de Kéghel, *American Freemasonry* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2015), 3–4.

<sup>20</sup> Arthur F. Hebbeler, III, "Colonial American Freemasonry and It Development to 1770," (M. A. thesis, University of North Dakota, 1988), 58.

<sup>21</sup> Freemasonry was initially a men's movement, but there were early examples of women seeking standing freemasonry. See Janet M. Burke and Margaret C. Jacob, "French Freemasonry, Women, and Feminist Scholarship," *Journal of Modern History* 68 (Mar 1996): 513–49. See also Margaret Jacob, "Women in the

## Early Baptist Engagement with Freemasonry

It is not surprising the Baptists sought respectability in the Colonies and one of the earliest ways to gain that respectability was by joining the masons, given its elite status. In early America, “freemasonry became a social phenomenon to join. Men of good character, men seeking to rise in society . . . the fraternity early on attracted high aristocracy and even members of the royal family, so that just attracted more and more men who might want to join but on a very personal or individual level.”<sup>22</sup> Early Baptists seemed neutral toward the lodge. In 1785, Boston’s Samuel Stillman preached a sermon before the “Most Ancient and Honorable Society of Free and Accepted Masons” wherein he commended “our brethren of the Craft [who] always give preference to a *brother*, especially to the most amiable.” Addressing his masonic auditors, Stillman considered it an honor that these men requested his sermon be published. He was only too happy to comply because charity was “one end of your institution.”

concerning the *secrets* of masonry, I will observe, that charity obliges us to conclude, that these *secrets* are only useful to the *brotherhood*; because it is incompatible with that benevolence, on which all *Lodges* are founded, to keep that a *secret*, which, if revealed, would prove of *public utility*.

With the Constitutions of Masonry I profess myself acquainted; and am pleased to find that by them, every mason is obliged to pay strict attention to his morals—to the Lord’s Day and public worship—to be chaste in his conversation while the Lodge is together—to avoid excess after it has broke up—to keep good hours, and carefully to attend to the government of his family, if he has one—that no immoral person is to be admitted—that all are obliged to encourage brotherly love, and to abound in acts of hospitality . . . Your laws are good. Study to be what they require . . .”

Concluding his sermon, he declared “thus spake our GRAND MASTER. To him we owe obedience, and every ascription of glory, dominion and praise.” He apparently saw no conflict between freemasonry and Christianity.<sup>23</sup>

Stillman was one of many prominent Baptist leaders who spoke at freemason gatherings. A few years later, Stephen Gano preached *Undissembled Love to God and Man, the Duty of Christians and Masons* before the Grand Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons in Providence, RI in 1800.<sup>24</sup> The sermon was printed at their request.

The matter of Baptists and freemasonry was not a new issue among New England Baptists as has been suggested. In the decade before the Gano address, prominent Massachusetts Baptist Isaac Backus (1724–1806) spoke of “a procession of free masons” whom he saw

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Lodges,” in *The Origins of Freemasonry: Facts and Fictions* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 92–129.

<sup>22</sup> Mark Tabbert, “Freemasonry in Colonial America.” Available online at <https://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/freemasonry/freemasonry-in-colonial-america/>. Accessed October 31, 2021.

<sup>23</sup> Samuel Stillman, *Charity Considered in a Sermon Preached at Charles-Town, June 24, 1785 Before the Ancient and Most Honorable Society of Free and Accepted Masons* (Boston: T. and J. Fleet, 1785). Stillman was “not a brother” but clearly appreciated what he knew of freemasonry (Bullock, *Revolutionary Brotherhood*, 168).

<sup>24</sup> Providence: Samuel Williams, 1800.

parading through the streets of Boston that “lookt to me more like worshippers of Diana than of lowly Jesus.”<sup>25</sup>

Baptist associations began to have questions presented to them asking about how churches should handle the issues involving freemasonry. The Kehukee Association, meeting, May 20, 1786, decided in the affirmative that it was “*disorderly* to hold communion with a church member who frequented a *Free Mason Lodge*.” The issue was again raised in 1822. “We, your committee appointed to draft an answer of advice to the churches relative to the above query, would recommend to the churches to admonish such persons thus acting to desist from attending Masonic Lodges, which we think is calculated to injure the feelings of the truly pious; and should they refuse to submit to such admonition, that it would be disorder in them, for which they should be dealt with accordingly.”<sup>26</sup> Again secret societies came before the association in 1827 with a similar response.

In 1798, the Charleston Association was asked by the church at Pipe Creek “Is it consistent with the principles and conduct of a Christian, for a person to join himself to a lodge of free-masons? And if this be answered in the affirmative, is it orderly for him to associate with a lodge of the fraternity, who are evidently persons of immoral lives, and whose assembling together proves a means of increasing immoral conduct?” The response given was guarded. As to the first part of the query, the association responded, “Yet we think the subject so intimately connected with the rights of private judgment, that a person should be left to his own contentious determination respecting it.” As to the second part of the query, the issue “must depend on the judgement which ought to be formed of the business of the masonic lodge; Whether it is a matter of duty or not.”<sup>27</sup>

In 1803, the Shaftsbury again raised the of freemasonry. Without firmly siding against freemasonry as unchristian, they decided that since association with freemasonry troubles the churches, it ought to be avoided.

In 1811 at the Broad River Baptist Association of North Carolina, meeting at Concord Church in Rutherford County, the question was asked “is it right to hold members in fellowship who belong to and frequent Masonic Lodges?” The answer given by the association was no. There was no mention in the minutes as to the nature of the discussion that occurred. At the time this query was made, William Lancaster was the clerk of the association from its inception in 1801 until 1811. He was an “active deacon in the Cedar Springs Church to the day of his death which occurred in 1824. That church would have been ashamed to have thought of excluding the best deacon it had only because he was a Free Mason, and to carry out the advice of the Association.” Nevertheless, Lancaster was replaced as clerk by Elder Berryman Hicks in 1812.<sup>28</sup> Lancaster continued to represent the church at association meetings until 1823.

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<sup>25</sup> Diary of Isaac Backus, Nov. 23, 1768. *The Diary of Isaac Backus*, ed. William G. McLoughlin (Providence: Brown University Press, 1979), 704. NB. The *Diary* was published in three volumes with the pages numbered consecutively through the set.

<sup>26</sup> Cushing Biggs Hassell, *History of the Church of God, from Creation to A. D. 1885 including especially the History of the Kehukee Primitive Baptist Association*, rev. Sylvester Hassell (Middletown, NY: Gilbert Beebe's Sons, 1886), 706, 733–34.

<sup>27</sup> *Minutes of the Charleston Association*, 1798, 3–4.

<sup>28</sup> John R. Logan, *Sketches, Historical and Biographical, of the Broad River and King's Mountain Baptist Associations from 1800–1882* (Shelby, NC: Babington, Roberts, 1887), 27. Logan surmised that the issue of freemasonry was “a *New England* prejudice [that] probably had been introduced by ministers and newspapers from that section of the country against the time-honored institution of Masonry, which prejudice had already been

David Benedict delivered a message before the Grand Lodge 1830.<sup>29</sup> Other sermons by Baptist pastors could be mentioned but their masonic connection is not always clear.<sup>30</sup> Some of those speaking were not masons but many were, and some held office their lodges. William Rogers (1751–1824), pastor of First Baptist of Philadelphia (1772–1775), was active among Philadelphia freemasons, serving as Grand Chaplain, regularly offering prayers at masonic meetings. He was periodically referred to a “Rev. Dr. Bro. William Rogers.”<sup>31</sup> Benjamin Munro Hill (1793–1881), during his pastorate in New Haven, CT, was elected “Rev. Sir Grand Prelate” (1827) and eventually Generalissimo of the Encampment of the Masonic Knights Templar in New Haven (1829).<sup>32</sup>

While there were a substantial number of masons among these early 19<sup>th</sup> century Baptists, some of the brethren came in reconsider their masonic association. Antimasonry erupted in American life, in part over the disappearance of William Morgan (1776–1826?), of Batavia, NY, who planned to publish an exposé on masonry.<sup>33</sup> Many believed he was kidnapped by the masons and murdered to preserve their secrets which he threatened to reveal. Some Americans became concerned over the political influence of the masons and formed an antimasonic party that became the first third party to hold a nominating convention in American

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developing its mischievous consequences on a goodly number of Pedito-Baptist churches, and a few Baptist churches where disturbed thereby.” Ibid., 28.

<sup>29</sup> *An Address delivered before the Grand Lodge of Rhode Island at the Anniversary of St. John the Baptist, Thursday January 24, 1830* (Pawtucket, RI: Meacham and Fowler, 1830).

<sup>30</sup> E.g. John Stanford, *A Discourse on the Urim and Thummin delivered before the Hiram Lodge, No. 72 . . . on St. John's Day, Dec. 27, 1800*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: E. Crandall, 1820) Stanford does not appear to have been a freemason; William Batchelder, *A Discourse delivered at the South Meeting House in Danvers, September 25, 1810 at the Consecration of Jordan Lodge* (Salem: Thomas Cushing, 1810). I have been unable to determine if Batchelder (1768–1818), pastor of First Baptist Church of Haverhill, MA (1803–1818) at the time of this address was a freemason. On Batchelder, see William B. Sprague, *Annals of the American Baptist Pulpit* (New York: Robert Carter, 1860), 319–26. Also, Isaac Bucken (Bucklin), *A Discourse Delivered in Middlebury, VT, Before Union Lodge No. 5 of Free and Accepted Masons on the Festival of St. John the Baptist, June 4, A. L. 5819*. (Middlebury: J. W. Copeland, 1819). NB: A. L. is the masonic dating system – *Anno Lucis* – in the year of light. It is the Gregorian date plus 4000. Bucklin appears to have been a mason. He is called a brother.

<sup>31</sup> Julius F. Sachse, *Old Masonic Lodges of Pennsylvania, “Moderns and Ancients,” 1730–1800* (Lancaster, PA: New Era, 1913), 2:8-9. Rogers, a Revolutionary War Brigade chaplain, became a mason about 1779, rising to the office of Grand Chaplain in 1803 which he held until his death in 1824. Also on Rogers, see Anthony L. Chute, “William Rogers (1751–1824),” *A Noble Company: Biographical Essays on Notable Particular-Regular Baptists in America*, ed Terry Wolever (Springfield, MO: Particular Baptist Press, 2014), 5:98–121.

<sup>32</sup> “Connecticut,” *American Masonic Record, and Albany Saturday Magazine* Sept 22, 1827, 266. Again in 1828, *ibid*, Aug 16, 1828, 226. In 1829, he was elevated to Generalissimo (*The Connecticut Annual Register, and United States' Calendar* (New London: Samuel Green, 1829), 117. In the Masonic Knights Templar, the officers were Eminent Commander, Generalissimo, and Captain General (see *Bylaws of Mary Commandery No. 36* (Philadelphia: Chandler, 1876), 19. On Hill see, Terry Wolever, “Benjamin M. Hill, (1793–1881),” in *A Noble Company: Biographical Essays on Notable Particular-Regular Baptists in America*, ed Terry Wolever (Springfield, MO: Particular Baptist Press, 2017), 9:226–53.

<sup>33</sup> *Illustrations of Masonry by One Devoted to the Fraternity* (Rochester, NY: Printed for the author, 1827). There is a question over whether Morgan's body was correctly identified, and his disappearance is shrouded in mystery.

politics.<sup>34</sup> Baptists were compelled to deal with freemasonry more regularly in church life after the rise of the anti-masonic movement.

Joshua Bradley, pastor of churches in Rhode Island, Connecticut, Vermont and New York, first affirmed and later renounced freemasonry, creating no small stir among his former masonic brethren.<sup>35</sup> As a mason, he published a defense of freemasonry in 1816 while pastoring in Vermont. At that time, Bradley was a member of Newport Royal Arch Chapter and Grand Chaplain of the Washington Encampment of Newport, RI.<sup>36</sup> However, about a decade later, while preparing to defend freemasonry against the rising tide of antimasonry, he altered his views and abruptly did and about face, renouncing freemasonry in the light of the antimasonic movement then causing chaos in the country, citing the murder of William Morgan as one reason. He became a vocal antagonist of freemasonry. Word of Bradley's renunciation made news in masonic publications where he was castigated for his defection but where some of his reasons for departure were published in an effort to refute them.<sup>37</sup> Word of his renunciation was carried in antimasonic publications as well, bolstering support for that movement.<sup>38</sup>

John G. Stearns was, as a young man, a mason, but when he entered the Literary and Theological Institution of Hamilton, NY, in 1819, he declared his masonry when asked but was asked to "dispense with Masonry while a member of that school. I replied that I had made up my mind never to have any more to do with freemasonry." He went on to become an ardent antimason, publishing several works attacking freemasonry.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> On antimasonry, see Andrew Burt, *American Hysteria: The Untold Story of Mass Political Extremism in the United States* (Guilford, CT: LP, 2015), 49–72. William Preston Vaughn, *The Antimasonic Party in the United States, 1826–1843* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1983).

<sup>35</sup> See his address before he renounced masonry, Joshua Bradley, *An Address to Masons on the Importance and Utility of Forming Associations; Spreading Light among uninformed Brethren; Securing Their Funds from Failure and Establishing Academies* (Cooperstown: E. B. Crandall, 1824).

<sup>36</sup> *Some Beauties of Freemasonry; Being Extracts from Publications, Which Have Received the Approbation of the Wise and Virtuous of the Fraternity* (Rutland, VT: Fay & Davidson, 1816).

<sup>37</sup> Bradley renounced his freemasonry on May 9, 1829. The text of his renunciation may be found in "Rev. J. Bradley's Renunciation," *The Craftsman*, June 30, 1829, 167. This issue is filled with reaction to Bradley's renunciation. For example, "To the Rev. Joshua Bradley" from Junius, in *ibid.*, 163. Also "Rev. Joshua Bradley," *Boston Masonic Mirror*, Sept 12, 1829, 86. "To the Rev. Joshua Bradley of Louisville, KY," *The Amranoth or Masonic Garland*, 2, 1829, 145–49. See also a scathing denunciation in 1842 regarding his renunciation in Charles W. Moore, "Masonic Chit Chat," *Freemason's Monthly Magazine*, vol 1, 288. "We regret to see the Maysville, KY Masonic Mirror and the Augusta Masonic Journal, extracting from the Masonic writing of Elder Joshua Bradley, and giving the credit as Brother Bradley. We can hardly suppose that the editors of those publications are ignorant of the character of the person named; for he was formerly a resident of Louisville, KY, where he renounced and denounced the Masonic Institution. He is a seceding and expelled Mason, and we had supposed that he was known to be such by every intelligent Brother in the country. He was for several years one of the most bitter and reckless among the enemies of the Institution. We do not object to our contemporaries drawing their Masonic matter from his writings, if they think it proper to do; but we do most seriously object to their recognizing him as a Brother of the Fraternity."

<sup>38</sup> Henry Dana Ward, "Renunciation of Elder Joshua Bradley," *Anti-Masonic Review and Magazine* (New York: Vanderpool and Cole, 1828), 254. Also in John G. Stearns, "Renunciation of Joshua Bradley," *Letters on Freemasonry* (Utica, NY: T. W. Steward, 1860), 170–74.

<sup>39</sup> In addition to *Letters on Freemasonry* cited above, see also *An Inquiry into the Nature and tendency of Speculative Freemasonry* (Utica, NY: Northway and Porter, 1829). The quote in from *Inquiry*, vii. Also, *A New Chapter on Free Masonry Addressed to the Baptist Church of Clinton, NY* (Utica, NY: Griffith and Warren, 1868).

David Bernard (1798–1876), from Utica, NY, was ordained in Stillwater, NY in 1824, just ahead of the antimason movement. In 1827, he became pastor of the Baptist church at Warsaw, NY, just south of Batavia, where the Morgan affair was raging. Though having completed 15 levels of freemasonry, he renounced the fraternity and published *Light on Masonry*<sup>40</sup> for which he became a “marked man.” John Quincy Adams took notice of him and his stand. “To him, perhaps more than to any other man, the world is indebted for the most execrable mysteries of masonry, nor could he as a minister of the word of God, have performed a service to his country and his fellow Christians more suitable to his sacred functions.”<sup>41</sup> Bernard’s church withdrew in 1827 from the Holland Purchase Conference, and united with the Genesee Baptist Association. Genesee County was where “Baptists were the most thoroughly involved denomination . . . in the antimasonic excitement.”<sup>42</sup>

Historian Henry C. Vedder suggested “many churches were divided by the question, and the growth of the denomination was seriously interfered with.”<sup>43</sup> More churches and Baptist associations began taking up the question of freemasonry sentiments varied across the country. The Mississippi Baptist Association, formed in 1807, raised freemasonry in 1818, answering a question from the Bayou Pierre Church, “should a brother be held in fellowship, who prefers the rights and privileges of the Masonic Lodge to the communion of his church?” The answer given was “No.”<sup>44</sup> In 1825, the Pearl River Baptist Association of Mississippi, meeting in September at the Hebron church, one of thirty churches in attendance, addressed a query from Ebenezer church. “Do the Baptist Church permit their members to join the Masonic Lodge; or if members of that Lodge, to continue with when they join the church?” The answer received was that “this Association does not presume to decide the merit of demerits of Masonry; but recommend strict observance of the Gospel discipline among the churches.”<sup>45</sup> In its Circular Letter, the association further stated

Every association—every congregational church—every minister of the Gospel, and every individual member of the church, should use every means in their power to promote and perpetuate harmony and union throughout the whole church of God; and particularly amongst those with whom they are more closely connected by social obligations. They should industriously avoid anything that might have a tendency to interrupt it. Discord is one of the greatest evils incident to churches or communities: if,

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<sup>40</sup> David Bernard, *Light on masonry: a collection of all the most important documents on the subject of speculative free masonry* . . . (Utica: William Williams, 1829). Also, idem., *Light on Masonry*, rev. ed. (Dayton: OH: J. Shuey, 1871). On Bernard, see Alonzo Alvin DeLarme, *History of the First Baptist Church of Norristown, PA* (Philadelphia: Lehman & Bolton, 1897), 61–62.

<sup>41</sup> John Quincy Adams, *Letters on the Masonic Institution* (Boston: T. R. Marvin, 1847), 229.

<sup>42</sup> William H. Brackney, “Experience vs. Conviction: Baptist Response to the Antimasonic Impulse, 1826–1830,” *Foundations* (1978): 168. See this essay for yet more examples of churches and associations that opposed freemasonry.

<sup>43</sup> *A History of the Baptists in the Middle States* (Philadelphia: ABPS, 1898), 197. Vedder’s discussion on antimasonry begins on p. 194.

<sup>44</sup> Benjamin Griffin, *A History of the Primitive Baptists of Mississippi* (Jackson, MS: Barksdale and Jones, 1853), 109. Notice the issue here may have been merely putting the masonic lodge before the church in order of priority.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

therefore, we should ‘abstain from every appearance of evil,’ is not evident that we should subject all our measures to more than ordinary scrutiny, when there is the least appearance of the love and harmony which now blesses the churches of this association, is a sufficient proof that we are not devoid of brotherly love.<sup>46</sup>

The following year, Ebenezer again pressed freemasonry, asking “will Gospel discipline take under dealings any brother for attending the Masonic Lodge as a member of that Lodge, to the grief of his brother.” The question was answered in the affirmative.<sup>47</sup>

The churches in the Cayuga Association in New York experienced disturbances over freemasonry. In the early 1820s, after a season of revival, a church was “awakened” by the issue of freemasonry, which they subsequently disfellowshipped. They further pushed the Cayuga Association to do similar. “We feel it our duty to inform you that it is a grief to us to meet at Councils and Associations members of other churches who meet with Free Masons or advocate the Masonic institution as being in its present regulations, consistent with the religion of Christ.” In 1828–1829, the churches in Cayuga, “in addition to a general declension of religion,” had “been sorely rent with Freemasonry. Long and arduous have been our labors to gain our brethren from the wiles of the enemy, but alas! they had no ears to hear us, and we have been under the painful necessity of excluding them.”

Yet disfellowship was not the consistent view among the churches. As an illustration, the church at Trumansburg, NY of the Seneca Association, whose founding pastor, Oliver C. Comstock, one-time Congressman and physician before ordination, started the church in 1819 and was a freemason.<sup>48</sup> The church experienced troubles over freemasonry in 1827, passing a resolution “we fellowship all Masonic brethren who will not meet with lodges of speculative Free Masons, or pay any money in consequence of Masonic obligations”<sup>49</sup> but before Comstock was denounced, he left Trumansburg and took the pastorate of the First Baptist Church of Rochester which had also been bothered by antimasonry.<sup>50</sup> Many disaffected former members at Rochester apparently returned under Comstock’s ministry.<sup>51</sup> In 1828, the Seneca association adopted a resolution in opposition to speculative freemasonry, “but as the Association, a few years afterward, elected a well-known member of that fraternity as one of its officers, and continued to require his services for many years, it is not probable that the resolution expressed

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<sup>46</sup> “Circular Letter,” *Minutes of the Pearl River Baptist Association, convened at the Meeting House of Hebron Church* (Jackson, MS: Peter ?, 1825), 15.

<sup>47</sup> Griffin, *Primitive Baptists*, 144.

<sup>48</sup> A. Russell Belden, *History of Cayuga Baptist Association* (Auburn: Derby & Miller, 1851), 122–23.

<sup>49</sup> Lewis Halsey, *History of the Seneca Baptist Association* (Ithaca, NY: Journal Association Book, 1879), 190.

<sup>50</sup> *Proceedings of the Grand Lodge of the State of New York of Free and Accepted Masons . . . May 1904* (New York: J. J. Little, 1904), 118.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 25. On Comstock, see Augustus Hopkins Strong, “Historical Sketch,” *Centennial Celebration First Baptist Church, 1818–1918, Rochester, NY* (N.p.: n.d.), 9–14. A. H. Strong was baptized by Comstock in 1831. Also, Halsey, *Seneca Association*, 207–14; John Stearns, Baptist seceder, quotes from an address Comstock, a mason, made before the Ithaca lodge. Stearns, *Speculative Freemasonry*, 188–190. Grand Master of St. John’s Lodge, 1806? *Our Country and Its People: A Descriptive and Biographical Record of Saratoga, New York* (Boston: Boston History Co., 1899), 156. 1807 St. John’s Lodge No 22, Greenfield, *Proceedings of the Grand Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons of the State of New York* (New York: J. J. Little, 1901), 157.

their enduring sentiments.”<sup>52</sup> The historian of the Association ultimately declared that “many, even of the most bitter opponents of the institution, concluded, on second thought, that a society which had numbered so many good men among its members, could scarcely be the terrible monster which had appeared before them as the picture of their excited imaginations.”<sup>53</sup> The history of Baptists and freemasonry is thus uneven. Some came to oppose freemasonry, even leaving it, while others failed to see serious issue.

In 1826, the Fall Church of the Sandy Creek Association, raised the issue of freemasonry at the annual meeting at the Brush Creek meeting house, Randolph County, NC, but it was laid over until 1827. At the next meeting, the association voted unanimously to declare that “we, as Baptists, profess to know nothing correctly about Masonry, therefore we are not prepared to give a definitive answer to said query.” Fall Creek church raised a question again in 1828, “Is it, or is it not, consistent with the gospel for any member of the Baptist church to join themselves to a people who are called Masons, and frequent the lodges?” The answer given, “Resolved, That we do not fellowship the practice of any member in our connection joining with or frequenting Mason lodges.”<sup>54</sup> Sandy Creek showed the contradictory way that freemasonry was often dealt with.

Other associations could be mentioned with respect to weighing in on freemasonry after the antimasonic movement began in 1826, whether as a consequence of antimasonism or not. In 1829, the Steuben Baptist Association of New York passed a resolution “That this association have no fellowship with brethren who adhere to the institution of speculative Free Masonry.”<sup>55</sup> The Chowan Baptist Association of North Carolina had a query raised in 1822 wondering “If a member of a Baptist church who is also a member of a Masonic society continues to visit his lodge, and still maintains and supports a moral character, shall that be a sufficient cause for his brethren in the church to withdraw their fellowship from him?” The answer given was “It is our opinion that our brethren, and the ministry in particular, would do well to so highly appreciate the importance of maintaining Christian Union and brotherly love as to forbear being initiated into said societies, and, if already initiated, to quit visiting their lodges.”<sup>56</sup> About 1839, the association further declared

Resolved, That it is well calculated to woundings of many of our brethren, and is likely to prove the cause of much strife and confusion in the churches, we do affectionately advise ministers and brethren belonging to this Association, by no means, to connect themselves

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<sup>52</sup> Halsey, *Seneca Baptist Association*, 37.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>54</sup> George W. Purefoy, *History Sandy Creek* (New York: Sheldon, 1859), 135–38. After describing the 1828 censure of freemasonry, Purefoy adds the following remark, “At present time (A. D. 1859), this query would not doubt be answered in such a way as to leave it discretionary with church members to become Masons or not. There are very few intelligent church-members now, who would make Masonry a test of fellowship. The feelings of those that have prejudices against this time-honored benevolent institution should be respected.” (138)

<sup>55</sup> Thomas William Carter, *Centennial History of the Steuben Baptist Association* (Bath, NY: n.p., 1917), 14. After mentioning the 30th anniversary of the association, Carter comments that “for many years the Minutes record the entire disapproval of all secret societies on the part of the Association, and their full belief in all forms of missionary endeavor.” *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>56</sup> James A. Delke, *History of the North Carolina Chowan Baptist Association, 1806–1881* (Raleigh, NC: Edwards, Broughton, 1882), p. 80.

with the Masonic Fraternity. Resolved further, That with unabated regard for those brethren who have heretofore connected themselves with the Masonic Fraternity, we do most earnestly and affectionately advise them to discontinue visiting the Lodge.<sup>57</sup>

Baptist associations labored over freemasonry throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Some associations seemed to raise no objections to freemasonry while others censured it. Thomas Pope, of Muscles Shoals, AL, was excluded in 1822 for being a mason. In 1829 he was renewed to fellowship by ‘recantation,’ but ‘whether he quit the mason or not is not stated.’ Pope became a deacon in his church.<sup>58</sup> Elder John R. Nesmith joined Bethel Baptist Church and felt a call to ministry and a burden to prepare. He joined a lodge at Leighton in 1856, apparently uncontested by the association.<sup>59</sup> Elder William Leigh, originally from Virginia, became active in Muscles Shoals promoting the cause of missions. In 1834, he was grand master of the grand lodge of Alabama, even authoring a booklet on masonry.<sup>60</sup> When he died in his eighty-second year in Florence, AL, he was buried with “masonic honors,” donating the land for a church and a masonic hall. He was said to be an “enthusiastic mason” . . . “an earnest, enthusiastic and good man. He was not a very able preacher, but a sound one.”<sup>61</sup>

The antimasonic movement sometimes had serious consequences for Baptist elders. George Witherell (d. 1839) was elder at the Baptist Church at Hartford and was a mason. After the publication of Morgan’s book, he became a seceder, renouncing masonry as “corrupt and anti-christian.” A season of “violent persecution raged against him” wherein his church split (1828) with 70–80 forming the pro-Mason South Hartford church, but the majority sided with Witherell’s anti-mason sentiments. He remained at the church for six more years, during which time he nearly lost his life for his renunciation although the masons worked to discredit the alleged attack.<sup>62</sup>

Baptists of wide diversity weighed in on masonry. Cadron Regular Predestinarian Baptist Association, of Arkansas, organized in 1872, originally consisted of six churches, five of which left the Point Remove Association because that body permitted its members to belong to and visit Masonic Lodges.<sup>63</sup> Freewill Baptists, in 1859, at its seventeenth general conference, meeting in Lowell, MA, raised the issue of membership in secret societies before the brethren with a motion from R. Dunn. “Resolved, That, notwithstanding we would advise our churches to make membership in secret societies a subject of church discipline, yet we affectionately entreat

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>58</sup> Josephus Shackelford, *History Muscles Shoals Baptist Association* (Trinity, AL: by the author, 1891), 149.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 256.

<sup>60</sup> *The Ladies’ Masonry or, Hieroglyphic monitor: containing all the emblems explaind in the degrees of the Holy Virgin and Heroine of Jericho, duly arranged, to which are added illustrations, addresses* (Louisville: for the author, 1851). On Leigh, see “William Leigh, PGM (Past Grand Master),” Grand Lodge of Alabama. Available online at <https://dev6.glofal.com/bio/william-leigh-pgm/>. Accessed Nov 5, 2021.

<sup>61</sup> Shackelford, *Muscles Shoals Association*, 221–22.

<sup>62</sup> Wright, *Shaftsbury Association*, 352–53. On the alleged attempted murder, see “Judicial Investigation of Elder Witherell’s ‘Humbug,’” *Boston Masonic Mirror*, Nov. 20, 1830, 161–63. Also “Daring Outrage,” *Corydon Courage and Anti-Masonic Democrat*, Nov. 10, 1830. Also, Rob Morris, *William Morgan; Political Antimasonry, Its Rise, Growth and Decadence* (New York: Robert Macoy, Masonic Publisher, 1883), 297.

<sup>63</sup> Hassell, *History of the Church of God*, 889.

all our members, and especially our ministers, to withhold their names and support from such societies.”<sup>64</sup> The issue was raised again in 1862, 1865, 1874, and 1877. The question of affiliation was referred from the eighteenth conference to the nineteenth conference for further consideration.<sup>65</sup> Primitive Baptists (Old Baptists) regularly listed “secret societies” among the list of intolerable, extra biblical institutions that included protracted meetings, tract societies, seminaries, temperance societies, and mission boards. In pronouncing against secret societies, they were following the tradition laid down by the Kehukee brethren in the 1780s and 1820s.

We have many good friends in worldly secret orders, but they are of the world and let the world have them and keep them, but we cannot allow our members to belong to such societies, and still remain in the church of God. . . . You cannot be a loyal Christian and belong to the lodge.<sup>66</sup>

### Southern Baptists and Freemasonry

It has already been demonstrated that there was no single view among Baptists regarding fellowshiping with freemasons or attending their lodges. Clearly from the evidence presented, some associations disfellowshipped freemasons while others were more accommodating. As Baptists spread across the country and the nation grew, so too did Baptist associations and their troubles. As the anti-masonic movement was dying out, Baptists were facing another threat to their cohesion—slavery/abolitionism. The Southern Baptist Convention was formed in 1845 and Baptists North and South wrangled over slavery until emancipation and then over the residual effects of slavery. Northerners generally favored abolition while Southerners were proslavery. The anti-masonic movement was a northern issue largely, which may explain why some Southerners were less willing to separate from their masonic brethren, seeing both abolition and anti-masonry as Northern impositions on Baptist liberty.

Southern brethren were often willing to maintain fellowship with brothers who were masons. The Waco Baptist Association of Texas maintained a neutral attitude toward. Robert Rogers (1799–1871), the first white settler in Leon county, helped organize the Baptist church of Leon in 1846. He was commended as a “zealous member of the Masonic fraternity.”<sup>67</sup> Rev.

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<sup>64</sup> “Minutes of the Seventeenth General Conference held at Lowell, Mass, October 1859,” in *Minutes of the General Conference of the Freewill Baptist Connection*, compiled I. D. Stewart (Boston: F. B. Printing, 1887), 43.

<sup>65</sup> “Minutes of the Eighteenth General Conference” (1862), *Minutes of the General Conference of the Freewill Baptist Connection*, 1:71; *ibid.*, 1:86; “Minutes of the Nineteenth General Conference” (1865), *Minutes of the General Conference of the Freewill Baptist Connection*, 1:123; “Minutes of the Twenty-second General Conference” (1874), *Minutes of the General Conference of the Freewill Baptist Connection*, 1:281; and “Minutes of the Twenty-third General Conference” (1877), in *Minutes of the General Conference of the Freewill Baptist Connection*, 1:336

<sup>66</sup> L. H. “Why Old Baptists Do Fellowship [sic] Secret Societies,” *The Gospel Messenger*, June 1920, 2. The title was printed in error. It should been “Why Old Baptists Do Not Fellowship Secret Societies.” The error was noted in “Corrections for the *Gospel Messenger*, June Issue,” *The Gospel Messenger*, July 1920, 15. See also, John R. Daily, *Secret Societies: The False Religious Principles and Corrupt Practices*. Indianapolis, IN; By the author, ca. 1916. Also see A. V. Simms, “*Let There Be Light*” or *Why Primitive Baptists Do Not Fellowship Secret Orders*. Atlanta: n.p., n.d. On Primitive Baptists, see John G. Crowley, *Primitive Baptists in the Wiregrass* (Gainesville, FL: University of FL, 1998).

<sup>67</sup> J. L. Walker and C. P. Lumpkin, *History of the Waco Baptist Association of Texas* (Waco: Byrne Hill, 1897), 399.

Thomas Paulain Babcock, of the Marlin church, who died in 1876, was buried by the Masonic lodge of Los Angeles in their cemetery.<sup>68</sup> C. L. Dotson, a “Baptist pioneer,” received a masonic burial as well.<sup>69</sup>

Texas Baptist Freemason history could fill an entire book, recounting the long list of prominent clergymen and laymen who joined the fraternity. Robert Emmett Bledsoe Baylor (1793–1873) was an Alabama lawyer, who was converted in 1839 and moved to La Grange in Fayette County Texas, after he was ordained. He helped to organize the Texas Baptist Education Society in 1841. He became a judge in Texas and helped petition for the founding of what is today Baylor University in 1845, giving the first thousand dollars toward its needs. He had become a Mason in 1825 while still in AL and served Texas freemasons as a Grand Chaplain of the Grand Lodge of Texas, 1843, 1845, and 1847. He was also instrumental in the forming of the lodge at Gay Hill in Washington County, the lodge where his membership was at his death.<sup>70</sup> Rufus Columbus Burleson (1823–1901), served as pastor of First Baptist of Houston, until he became president of Baylor from 1851–1861. He became a mason at Waco lodge No. 92 in 1853, the lodge having chartered shortly before in 1852. He served as chaplain among the masons for thirty-six years.<sup>71</sup>

If there was time, one could tell similar stories among the long list of Southern Baptist freemasons. When the Southern Baptist Convention became embroiled in a debate over freemasonry in the 1990s, pro mason supporters, in their defense of masonry, used the strong presence of Texas Baptist leadership who had been Masons. Among those examples cited were B. H. Carroll, George W. Truett, W. A. Criswell, the first two Baptist missionaries in Texas, L. R. Scarborough, H. Leon McBeth, and others. These numerous examples served as support for those who wished to avoid a schism over freemasonry. The opponents of freemasonry in the SBC also marshalled evidence of those leaders of the past who had been connected with the fraternity.<sup>72</sup> George W. Truett, long-time pastor of First Baptist, Dallas, was often cited in support of masonry. He delivered an address in 1940 before the Grand Lodge of Texas declaring,

From my earliest recollection, sitting about my father’s knee, who was a Mason, and hearing him and fellow Masons talk, I imbibed the impression in early childhood that the Masonic Fraternity is one of the most helpfully mediating and conserving organizations

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 226.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 298.

<sup>70</sup> See Travis L. Summerlin, “Baylor, Robert Emmett Bledsoe (1793–1873), *Handbook of Texas*. Available online at <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/baylor-robert-emmett-bledsoe>. Accessed Nov. 7, 2021. Also <https://grandlodgeoftexas.org/reb-baylor-pro-ecclesia-pro-texana/>

<sup>71</sup> *The Life and Writings of Rufus C. Burleson*, comp. by Mrs. Georgia J. Burleson (N.p.: n.p., 1901), 467. See also “Rufus Burleson,” available online at <https://www.wacomasonic.org/rufus-burleson/>. Accessed Nov 7, 2021.

<sup>72</sup> See for example [http://www.jesus-is-savior.com/False%20Religions/Freemasonry/famous\\_baptists.htm](http://www.jesus-is-savior.com/False%20Religions/Freemasonry/famous_baptists.htm) which includes documentation for the SBC leaders as masons. Accessed Nov 7, 2021. Also, [http://www.blessedquietness.com/journal/housechu/sbc\\_cloud.htm](http://www.blessedquietness.com/journal/housechu/sbc_cloud.htm). Accessed Nov 7, 2021. Also, Michael Glenn Maness, *Character Counts: Freemasonry is a National Treasure and a Source of Our Founders’ Constitutional Original Intent*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Bloomington, IN: Author House, 2010), 243–56. The chapter is entitled “The SBC Magnificent Seven—Legends in Their Own Time” and covers Abner McCall, Lansing Burrows, Louis D. Newton, W. T. Conner, B. H. Carroll, George W. Truett, Herschel Hobbs,

among men, and I have never wavered from that childhood impression, but it has stood steadfastly with me through the busy and vast hurrying years.<sup>73</sup>

That sentiment summarized the pro mason side in the SBC.

Freemasonry, despite its long presence among Southern Baptists despite began to be targeted as unChristian in 1985. The first attempt in recent times<sup>74</sup> to remove the influence of masonry in Southern Baptist life occurred when Pastor Charles Burchett of the First Baptist Church of Kirbysville, TX, with the help of James “Larry” Holly, a physician from Beaumont, Texas, introduced a resolution before messengers at the SBC convention meeting in Dallas declaring “Free-masonry Not Compatible with Baptist Faith and Message, Bold Mission Thrust, or the Cooperative Program.” The resolution was referred until the next meeting in 1986.<sup>75</sup> The resolution was studied by the Home Mission Board whose Interfaith Witness Department examined the issue and reported in 1986 that “it is the Board’s conclusion that freemasonry does not fall within the scope of the assigned responsibility.”<sup>76</sup> This did not end the debate over freemasonry and the issue was put to messengers again in 1992. Holly mailed out fifteen thousand copies of *The Southern Baptist Convention and Freemasonry* he had written, intent on putting the question before the messengers again.<sup>77</sup> The Interfaith Witness Department was again tasked with studying the issue and responding at the convention in Houston in 1993. The 1992 convention did pass a vague resolution partially directed at freemasonry, encouraging Southern Baptists “to refrain from participation or membership in organizations with teachings, oaths, or mystical knowledge which are contrary to the Bible and to the public expression of our faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ, which must be above reproach.”<sup>78</sup> In conjunction with this, the Historical Commission of the SBC did a deep dive into the SBC annuals and other materials at

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<sup>73</sup> George W. Truett, “Address by George W. Truett, Freemason, Proceedings of the Grand Lodge of Texas, 1940,” *The Scottish Rite Journal of Freemasonry Southern Jurisdiction* (February 1993): 33-38. Also, “George W. Truett on Freemasonry,” available online at [http://www.preciousheart.net/fm/Truett\\_1940.htm](http://www.preciousheart.net/fm/Truett_1940.htm). Accessed Nov 6, 2021.

<sup>74</sup> Efforts at raising the issue of freemasonry had not been absent in Southern Baptist life before 1985. John R. Rice (1895–1980), a Texas Baptist, graduate of Baylor and associated with J. Frank Norris and Southern Baptists until the 1920s, published *Lodges Examined by the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Sword of the Lord, 1943). Rice’s father, William Henry Rice, had been a mason and John R considered following him into the lodge but changed his mind. John R became an independent Baptist, publishing *The Sword of the Lord* (established in 1934) until his death and often appealed to Southern Baptists in its pages. For a masonic critique of Rice’s pamphlet see, “Freemasonry and Religion: Sensitive Issues to Prospective and Progressing Masons,” available online at <http://www.grandlodge.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/FREEMASONRY-AND-RELIGION-11.pdf>. Accessed Nov. 10, 2021. On Rice, see Keith Bates, *Mainstreaming Fundamentalism: John R. Rice and Fundamentalism’s Public Reemergence* (University of TN, 2021).

<sup>75</sup> *1985 Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention* (Nashville: Executive Committee, Southern Baptist Convention, 1985), 69, 86.

<sup>76</sup> “One Hundred Forty-First Annual Report, Home Mission Board,” *1986 Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention* (Nashville: Executive Committee, Southern Baptist Convention, 1986), 175.

<sup>77</sup> Ed Decker, “Freemasonry and the Southern Baptist Church,” available online at <https://www.ericbarger.com/articles/fmasonry-sbc.htm>. Accessed Nov. 8, 2021.

<sup>78</sup> “Proceedings,” *1992 Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention* (Nashville: Executive Committee, Southern Baptist Convention, 1992), 90.

the archives in Nashville and could not find any mention of freemasonry being an issue going back to the beginning of the convention in 1845.<sup>79</sup>

Coincidentally, Gary H. Leazer, an ordained Baptist minister and currently a 33° freemason, was director of the Interfaith Witness Department of the Home Mission Board (1987–1993). Leazer would lead the charge against the anti-mason sentiments within the SBC, eventually tying freemasonry to fundamentalism, then threatening Southern Baptist cohesion.<sup>80</sup> His department produced the *Study on Freemasonry* that went to the messengers in 1993, in response to Holly’s actions of 1992. The 1993 report offered to Southern Baptists was clear on its conclusion.

The Home Mission Board Interfaith Witness Department staff agree with Charleston Southern Baptists, who in 1798, advised that the matter of Southern Baptist membership in Freemasonry “be left with the judgment of the individual.” They agree with George W. Truett who said, “The right to private judgement is the crown jewel of humanity, and for any person or institution to dare to come between the soul and God is a blasphemous impertinence and a defamation of the crown-rights of the Son of God.”<sup>81</sup>

Leazer was asked to resign in October 1993 by Larry Lewis of the HMB for giving a speech favorable of masonry at a masonic convention in Atlanta. He subsequently joined the masons, eventually attaining 33° status. The catalysts for Leazer becoming a mason included both Lewis and Holly.<sup>82</sup> After his resignation, Leazer became a champion of freemason cause, warning his masonic brothers of the “fundamentalist mindset” of men like John Ankerberg and James L Holly. “If Freemasons do not rise to the occasion, I believe you will end up like the moderates in my denomination. The choice is yours.”<sup>83</sup> Gary went on to become the Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Georgia and currently is the Grand Orator of the same lodge.<sup>84</sup> The SBC had a considerable struggle over freemasonry in the 1990s. Since entering into the internet age, numerous websites have been dedicated to the issue of preserving Baptist liberty to remain

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<sup>79</sup> The Interfaith Witness Department produced a 75-page report on freemasonry and the SBC. *A Study on Freemasonry* (Atlanta: Home Mission Board, [1993]). Available online at <https://www.focusedonhimministries.com/Library/Information%20on%20Freemasonry/A%20Study%20of%20Freemasonry.pdf>. Accessed Nov. 7, 2021. This document includes a long list of prominent SBC leaders who have been active masons, including some of those mentioned above.

<sup>80</sup> *Fundamentalism and Freemasonry: The Southern Baptist Investigation of the Fraternal Order* (M. Evans, 1995).

<sup>81</sup> *A Study on Freemasonry* (1993), 71.

<sup>82</sup> Art Toalston, “Former HMB director says he’s entered Freemasonry,” *Baptist Press*, Nov 14, 1996. Leazer’s personal recollections of his involvement was written up in Gary Leazer, “The Southern Baptist Convention Study of Freemasonry,” *The Voice of Freemasonry*, Spring 1994, 3–4, 8–10.

<sup>83</sup> Gary Leazer, “Fundamentalism, Freemasonry, and the Southern Baptist Convention,” *The Scottish Rite Journal*, July 1994, 32.

<sup>84</sup> See “Grand Lodge Officers,” The Grand Lodge of GA website, <https://glofga.org/grand-lodge-officers/>. Accessed Nov 10, 2021.

freemasons as well as websites that challenge freemasonry as a viable Christian option. Publishing houses have produced literature, pro and con, trying to influence Baptist sentiments.<sup>85</sup>

The follow up from the report is what might be expected. The SBC convention meeting in 1993 resulted in the messengers approving after a “brief but sharp debate” that “membership in a Masonic order [should] be a matter of personal conscience” while admitting that some masonic teachings were incompatible with Christianity.<sup>86</sup> The report upon which the decision was made, released by the HMB on March 17, 1993, while commending the masons for their charitable endeavors, listed eight reasons why Southern Baptists should reconsider their masonic involvement, concluding “that many tenets and teachings of Freemasonry are not compatible with Christianity or Southern Baptist doctrine.”<sup>87</sup> Still, this did not end the struggles over freemasonry. Some Southern Baptists took these statements as conflicting, especially since the convention did not renounce freemasonry.

Conservatives within the convention continued to push for greater separation from the masons. At a meeting of the Home Mission Board directors at their annual 1994 spring meeting, freemasonry was again on the table—should the HMB study whether masons should be prohibited from serving as home missionaries? There was a weariness expressed by those participating in the discussion that the HMB had said about all it could do on freemasonry. HMB president Larry Lewis, speaking for many, declared “The obvious consensus of our board is that they do not want further involvement with the Freemasonry issue, and that we have dealt with this issue as thoroughly and as adequately as we are able.” However, some Southern Baptists had apparently taken away from the 1993 statement that the HMB expressed an ambivalence toward universalism in the process of not censuring freemasonry. Therefore, the HMB reiterated its rejection of universalism while narrowly defeating a motion to bar masons from serving as home missionaries.<sup>88</sup> The HMB directors further made it clear that it was never their intention to open the door for universalism to be held by Southern Baptists.<sup>89</sup>

This activity in the SBC in the 1990s did not lay to rest the issue of freemasonry. In brief, the issue has risen periodically across the denomination. For instance, in 2007, Terry R. Comer of West Columbia, SC, was “offended” to see a picture of Pagdetts Creek Baptist church recognizing masons the week before in the SC Baptist paper *The Courier* and wrote to the editor, “I understand that the Freemasons do a lot of charitable work, but we should not publicly recognize them in our churches.”<sup>90</sup> This letter produced a series of responses during the

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<sup>85</sup> See for example Southern Baptist John Ankerberg’s website and published material. “Is Freemasonry a Cult?” Sep 30, 2001, The John Ankerberg Show website at <https://jashow.org/articles/is-freemasonry-a-cult/>. Accessed Nov 8, 2021. Also, John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *The Secret Teachings of the Masonic Lodge: A Christian Perspective*, Expanded ed. (Chicago: Moody, 1990) and John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *Fast Facts on the Masonic Lodge* (N.p.: ATRI, 2011). Also <https://freemasonrywatch.org/holly.html> which has James Holly’s material. Accessed Nov 8, 2021.

<sup>86</sup> Timothy C. Morgan, “Clinton Draws Ire of SBC,” *Christianity Today*, July 19, 1993, 54.

<sup>87</sup> “A Report on Freemasonry,” Home Mission Board, SBC, Mar 17, 1993, 4. Available online at <https://www.namb.net/apologetics/resource/hmb-report-on-freemasonry-1993/>. Accessed Nov. 8, 2021.

<sup>88</sup> David Winfrey, “HMB Directors Address Universalism, Freemasonry,” *Baptist Press*, Apr 15, 1994. Available online at <http://media.sbhla.org.s3.amazonaws.com/7755.15-Apr-1994.pdf>. Accessed Nov 8, 2021.

<sup>89</sup> “HMB directors clarify statement on universalism,” *Baptist Press*, Apr 15, 1994.

<sup>90</sup> “Offended,” *The Baptist Courier*, May 11, 2007.

following weeks, both pro and con for freemasonry.<sup>91</sup> In 2016, the NAMB reposted its summary of freemasonry and the eight incompatibilities of masonry with Baptist/biblical teaching.<sup>92</sup>

Having covered the gamut of Baptist thought on freemasonry in the United States, there remain two other Baptist groups to mention in passing—the General Association of Regular Baptists Churches and the Baptist Union of Scotland, both of which made strong statements against freemasonry.<sup>93</sup> The GARBC, at its 58<sup>th</sup> annual meeting in Columbus, Ohio, in 1989, passed a resolution expressing their conviction that “Freemasonry is cultish and a dangerous false religion leading many away from true salvation through faith in Jesus Christ under the guise of compatibility with Christianity” and recommended to the churches “of our Fellowship who have taken a clear-cut stand against Freemasonry, and that we encourage churches which have not done so to do so.”<sup>94</sup> It came as no surprise that the GARBC took such a stand. Just over twenty-five years earlier, prominent GARBC founder, Robert T. Ketcham, had produced a pamphlet on lodge membership encouraging Christians to reconsider their membership.

Just why should one insist that the church of which he is a member be separated from modernism and those who deny Christ, and then himself turn right around and join a secret society which sets forth the most blatant of all modernism and denial? Think it over. Pray it over, brother.<sup>95</sup>

The GARBC also recommended and published *I Left the Lodge* by Dale A. Byers.<sup>96</sup>

One final non-American Baptist mention is in order. The Scottish Baptist Union, in January 1987, was pressed by questions regarding freemasonry and did its own investigation. They issued a statement that was subsequently endorsed by the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland, highlighting important teaching of freemasonry and concluding “that there is an

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<sup>91</sup> See Gerald Carver, “Masons Honorable,” *The Baptist Courier*, June 11, 2007; Bill Poore, “Keep Them Separate,” *The Baptist Courier*, June 25, 2007; Dave Engelman, “Well Said,” *the Baptist Courier*, June 25, 2007 (pro mason); Steve Small, “Get to Know Them”, *ibid.* (pro mason); Mark Jones, “Simple Tenets,” *ibid.*, (promason); Johnny Morris, “No Conflict,” *ibid.*, (pro mason); Greely Palmer Jr., “Hand-in-Hand,” *ibid.* (pro mason). At the end of Palmer’s letter, the editor of the *Courier* wrote “Recent editions of the *Courier* have carried letters expressing opinions favorable to, and critical of, Freemasonry. The *Courier* believes that both viewpoints have been given adequate attention and no further letters on this issue will be published. – Editor.” These editorials are available on *The Baptist Courier* website, online at <https://baptistcourier.com>. Search “freemasonry.” Accessed Nov 8, 2021.

<sup>92</sup> “Freemasonry Overview,” North American Mission Board, available online at <https://www.namb.net/apologetics/resource/freemasonry-overview/>. Accessed Nov 8, 2021. Also, “A Closer Look at Freemasonry,” available online at [http://www.preciousheart.net/fm/SBC\\_Closer\\_Look.pdf](http://www.preciousheart.net/fm/SBC_Closer_Look.pdf). Accessed Nov 9, 2021.

<sup>93</sup> One aspect of Baptists and freemasonry not covered in this paper due to space considerations is African American Baptists and freemasonry. Numerous Black pastors have been or are freemasons, e.g. Martin Luther King Sr., Jesse Jackson, and Al Sharpton. There is also the issue of racism and freemasonry that had an impact on southern Baptist masons. See “Masonic Groups in South Struggle with Racial Separation,” Oct 24, 2006. Available online at <https://www.foxnews.com/story/masonic-groups-in-south-struggle-with-racial-separation>. Accessed Nov 12, 2021.

<sup>94</sup> “Freemasonry,” available online at <https://www.garbc.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Freemasonry-1989.pdf>. Accessed Nov 8, 2021.

<sup>95</sup> Robert T. Ketcham, *The Christian and the Lodge* (Chicago: Regular Baptist Press, 1962), 12.

<sup>96</sup> (Schaumburg, IL: RBP, 1998).

inherent incompatibility between Freemasonry and the Christian faith. Also that commitment within the movement is inconsistent with a Christian's commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord.”<sup>97</sup>

### Reasons for a Conflicted History

Having surveyed the landscape of American Baptist history<sup>98</sup> and seen the rather mixed response to freemasonry manifest, some conclusions can be drawn as to why freemasonry has produced such a mixed response among American Baptists. These views are preliminary and would take additional research to be more certain but given a thorough knowledge of Baptist ways, I would like to offer several reasons why I think this is the case.

- 1.) Baptists, like other Americans, saw virtue promoted among the masons. Church attendance, charity, deportment, and the like were important to the masons and masonry seemed to seek a man's moral improvement.
- 2.) It is the nature of Baptist churches to allow individual congregations to make their own determinations on orthopraxy except at great cause. Many saw virtues in the lives of the masons among them and individual churches refused to sanction members who were otherwise faithful despite masonic affiliation.
- 3.) Some Baptists saw the freemason issue arising out of paedo-baptism and naturally gravitated away from paedo-Baptist sentiments. (See fn. 29)
- 4.) Freemasonry took time to grow and spread across the country. With Baptist presence occurring early in New England and with freemasonry commencing on American soil first in New England, it is natural that churches in that part of the country would be the first to raise questions over freemasonry. The antimasonic movement started in New York contributing to the diversity.
- 5.) Freemasonry was seen as a gentlemen's group and prominent men were members. Baptists sought respectability and one avenue to gain such was by joining the masonic brotherhood.
- 6.) Due to the secret nature of freemasonry, Baptist outsiders knew little of the inner workings of the society and would have had a more difficult time making judgement calls on the society, especially in the light of friends among them who lived upstanding lives as masons.
- 7.) While there was no necessary relationship between freemasonry and slavery, both issues had a northern component that raised the ire of the Southern brethren. The anti-masonic

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<sup>97</sup> “Baptists and Freemasonry,” Baptist Union of Scotland, n.d. Available online at [http://www.skirret.com/papers/baptists\\_and\\_freemasonry.html](http://www.skirret.com/papers/baptists_and_freemasonry.html). Accessed Nov. 8, 2021.

<sup>98</sup> This essay hasn't scratched the surface of the larger question of Christianity and freemasonry. For example, in 1738, Pope Clement XII promulgated *In eminenti*, the first papal decree against Catholics being freemasons. Available online at <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/clem12/c12inemengl.htm>. Accessed Nov 9, 2021. Since that date, no less than seven other popes have pronounced against the masons. See William Whalen, *Christianity and American Freemasonry* (Milwaukee, WI: Bruce, 1958), 78–84. Nor have the abundant Protestant rejections of freemasonry been cited. For example, see Eddy D. Field II and Eddy D. Field III, “Freemasonry and the Christian,” *TMSJ* 5/2 (Fall 1994): 141-157. From a survey of Christian opinions regarding freemasonry, Baptists, especially Southern Baptists, have been the most open toward the masons. For a sampling of other positions, see Joe Carter, “The FAQs: Is Freemasonry Compatible with Christianity?” *The Gospel Coalition*, Feb 19, 2020. Available online at <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/the-faqs-is-freemasonry-compatible-with-christianity/>. Accessed Nov 9, 2021.

movement was of New York origin as was abolitionism. Did Southern brethren resist the anti-masonic movement the same way they resisted abolition? The two movements overlapped considerably

These may be some reasons why Baptists have had a very conflicted relationship with freemasonry. That conflict still abides today. While freemasonry has dwindled in recent years, particularly impacted by COVID, there are still many freemasons among the Southern Baptists.<sup>99</sup> Not just pastors but prominent laymen. The legendary Strom Thurmond (1902–2003), long time senator from South Carolina was a Southern Baptist and a freemason.<sup>100</sup> And the list goes on . . .

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<sup>99</sup> In 1959, freemasonry had about 4.1 million members, estimated at 4.5% of American men. They are down by about 75% of the number as of November 2020. Christiana Silva, “Freemasons say they are needed now more than ever. So why are their ranks dwindling?” NPR News. Available online at <https://www.npr.org/2020/11/28/937228086/freemasons-say-theyre-needed-now-more-than-ever-so-why-are-their-ranks-dwindling>. Accessed Nov 8, 2021.

<sup>100</sup> Ivan M. Tribe, “J. Strom Thurmond: The Ultimate Senior Senator,” *Knight Templar*, Dec 1999, 18–22.