

BAPTISTS AND FREEMASONRY: A CONFLICTED HISTORY

by
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My interest in Freemasonry began a few years ago, as I was asked to complete a writing project of Baptist historian Terry Wolever, who unexpectedly died, leaving a biography of 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 amassed a significant amount of research on Stephen's life and outlined a plan for a biography but died before the book was written. Stephen was an important Baptist in his own right at Providence, where he labored from 1792 until his death in 1828.

I discovered Stephen was a Freemason. He 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.”² Stephen had been married four times. His fourth wife, Joanna Latting of Hillsdale, NY, whom he wed in 1801, created a stir in FBC, when she accused Stephen of devilry and permanently separated from him. Stephen was pastor at Hillsdale, where they met years earlier. 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 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.”³

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²See 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*, 10 Jul 1830, 2).

³*Minutes of the Shaftsbury Baptist Association; Holden [sic] at Elder Hull's Meeting House, June 6th et 7th 1798*, 7; also Stephen Wright, *History of the Shaftsbury Baptist*

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 controversy in the church. This event may have been "the most bizarre issue in the entire history of the Providence church."⁴ 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."⁵ 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.⁶ She was subsequently voted out of the church. She remained in Providence and never lived with her husband again.⁷ This victory for the Masons was memorable among the New England brotherhood.⁸

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.⁹ Benedict's devotion to Freemasonry

Association from 1751 to 1853 (Troy, NY: A. G. Johnson, 1853), 57.

⁴J. Stanley Lemons, *First: The First Baptist Church in America* (Providence, RI: Charitable Baptist Society, 2001), 28.

⁵*Ibid.*, 226. The specific details of her charges have not survived (*ibid.*, 572, n. 18).

⁶Minutes of FBC, Providence, 25 August 1803, quoted in Lemons, *First*, 120, n. 57.

⁷Lemon, *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*, vol. 2, ed. Sereno D. Nickerson (Boston: Frank Wood, 1875), 360.

⁸The definitive biographical source on Gano is Terry Wolever, "Stephen Gano (1762–1828)," in *A Noble Company: Biographical Essay on Notable Particular Baptists in America*, ed. Terry Wolever (Springfield, MO: Particular Baptist Press, 2015), 6:164–202. The story of Gano's troubles over Freemasonry may be found on pp. 186–89.

⁹The 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 Wolever (Springfield, MO: Particular Baptist

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,

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.¹⁰

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.¹¹

Today, Freemasonry, as in the later 18th and early 19th 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

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.

¹⁰David 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]).

¹¹There 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 investigation of Baptists and Freemasonry exists that I can find.

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.¹² 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 among the Baptists, the more conflicted the topic becomes. This study begins 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 18th and early 19th century through the anti-Masonic movement, then trace Baptist discussions in churches and associations. The examination will conclude with a summary of the Southern Baptist conflict in the 1990s as well as a brief discussion of the rejection of Freemasonry by other Baptist groups like Freewill Baptists, the General Association of Regular Baptists, and the Scottish Baptists.¹³

Freemasonry Comes to North America

According to one lodge, “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

¹²“Baptists and Freemasons,” available online at <http://www.jmm.org.au/articles/786.htm>, accessed 6 Nov 2021. Estimated numbers of SBC Freemasons vary widely. 500,000 is a common number given, and on the high end, an article in the *Tampa Bay Times* mentioned 1.3 million SBC Freemasons (“Southern Baptist Free to be Masons,” *Tampa Bay Times*, 9 Oct 2005, available online at <https://www.tampabay.com/archive/1993/03/27/southern-baptists-free-to-be-masons-report-says/>, accessed 8 Nov 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 in more recent years 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).

¹³This article does not attempt 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 on Freemasonry and Roman Catholicism, Freemasonry and Orthodox Churches, and Freemasonry and Protestantism.

life in greater harmony with the Great Architect of the universe.”¹⁴

There is dispute as to when Freemasonry began. “The evidence relating to the emergence of modern Freemasonry is complex, confusing, and often fragmentary.”¹⁵ Since this is the case, it is well beyond the scope of this study to consider this interesting topic. Therefore, the investigation 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.¹⁶

Masonic lodges soon began to appear in the Colonies. Additionally, other branches of Masonry, e.g., Irish Freemasonry, came to 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.”¹⁷ 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.”¹⁸

Some of the chief architects of the United States were Freemasons including George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and Paul Revere,

¹⁴“Freemasons,” Minneapolis Lodge No. 19 website, available online at <https://mpls19.org>, accessed 29 Oct 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).

¹⁵David Stevenson, *The Origins of Freemasonry: Scotland’s Century, 1590–1710* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 1.

¹⁶“Boston Masons Organize First Grand Lodge in America,” available at <https://www.massmoments.org/moment-details/boston-masons-organize-first-grand-lodge-in-america.html>, accessed 30 Oct 2021. For a history of this beginning, see Thomas Sherrard Roy, *Stalwart Builders: The Grand Lodge of Masons in Massachusetts, 1733–1970* (Boston: 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.

¹⁷Steven 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.

¹⁸Peter Feuerherd, “The Strange History of Masons in America,” JStor Daily, 3 Aug 2017, available online at <https://daily.jstor.org/the-strange-history-of-masons-in-america/>, accessed 29 Oct 2021.

among others. George Washington, America's first president, wearing Masonic garb, laid the cornerstone of the US Capitol in 1793. Freemasonry soon attracted free African Americans also. Prince 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.¹⁹

With Boston as the center of early Freemasonry,²⁰ 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 1747.²¹ 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?²² Baptists, who like other Americans, were open to Freemasonry, began to ask questions about involvement in Freemasonry in the late 18th century.

Early Baptist Engagement with Freemasonry

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

¹⁹For 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 Kantrowitz (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013); also Cécile Révauger, *Black Freemasonry: From Prince Hall to the Giants of Jazz*, trans. Jon E. Graham (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2014).

²⁰There is dispute over whether Boston or Philadelphia was the first Grand Lodge in the Colonies. The Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania dates its original to 1730. For a discussion of the Grand Lodge in Philadelphia, see “Freemasonry,” *Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia*, available online at <https://philadelphiaencyclopedia.org/archive/freemasonry/>, accessed 31 Oct 2021. See also *Free Masonry in North America: From the Colonial Period to the Beginning of the Present Century*, comp. Henry Whittemore (New York: Artotype Printing, 1889), 1–3, and Alain de Keghel, *American Freemasonry* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2015), 3–4.

²¹Arthur F. Hebbeler, III, “Colonial American Freemasonry and Its Development to 1770” (M.A. thesis, University of North Dakota, 1988), 58.

²²Freemasonry was initially a men's movement, but there were early examples of women seeking standing in Freemasonry. See Janet M. Burke and Margaret C. Jacob, “French Freemasonry, Women, and Feminist Scholarship,” *Journal of Modern History* 68 (Mar 1996): 513–49; also Margaret Jacob, “Women in the Lodges,” in *The Origins of Freemasonry: Facts and Fictions* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 92–129.

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.”²³ 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 [*sic*—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, 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.²⁴ Stillman was one of many prominent Baptists 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 1800.²⁵ 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 parading through the streets of Boston that “lookt to me more like

²³Mark Tabbert, “Freemasonry in Colonial America,” available online at <https://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/freemasonry/freemasonry-in-colonial-america/>, accessed 31 Oct 2021.

²⁴Samuel 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).

²⁵Providence: Samuel Williams, 1800.

worshippers of Diana than of lowly Jesus.”²⁶

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.”²⁷ 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, 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.”²⁸

In 1798, Freemasonry first came before the Shaftsbury Association. Those who joined with the Masons were guilty of “sinning against the weaker brother” by staying affiliated with the Masons when doing such offended their fellow believers—they should desist. In 1803, Shaftsbury again raised the issue. Without firmly siding against Freemasonry as unchristian, they decided that since association with Freemasonry troubles the churches, it ought to be avoided. They went so far as to request that other associations who did not feel similar, not to send delegates to Shaftsbury meetings who were Masons.²⁹ The issue of Freemasonry caused great distress among Vermont Baptists.³⁰

²⁶Diary of Isaac Backus, 23 Nov 1768 (*The Diary of Isaac Backus*, ed. William G. McLoughlin [Providence: Brown University Press, 1979], 704).

²⁷Cushing 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.

²⁸*Minutes of the Charleston Association*, 1798, 3–4.

²⁹*Minutes of the Shaftsbury Association*, 1798, 7; *Minutes of the Shaftsbury Association*, 1803, 8–9.

³⁰Henry Crocker, *History of the Baptists in Vermont* (Bellow Falls, VT: P. H. Goble, 1913), 45–46 and 119–24.

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. 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 1812.³¹ Lancaster continued to represent the church at association meetings until 1823.

The Mississippi Baptist Association, formed in 1807, considered the issue of 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.”³²

David Benedict delivered a message before the Grand Lodge of Rhode Island in 1830.³³ Other sermons by Baptist pastors could be mentioned but their Masonic connection is not always clear.³⁴ Some of those speaking were not Masons, but many were, and some held office

³¹John 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 developing its mischievous consequences on a goodly number of Pedit-Baptist churches, and a few Baptist churches where disturbed thereby” (ibid., 28).

³²Benjamin 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.

³³*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).

³⁴E.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*, 2nd 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) was a Freemason at the time of this address. 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 4,000. Bucklin appears to have been a Mason. He is called a brother.

in 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.”³⁵ 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).³⁶

While there were a substantial number of Masons among these early 19th century Baptists, some of the brethren came to reconsider their Masonic association. Anti-Masonry 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.³⁷ 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 anti-Masonic party that became the first third party to hold a nominating convention in American politics.³⁸ 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 controversy among his former Masonic brethren.³⁹ As a

³⁵Julius 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.

³⁶“Connecticut,” *American Masonic Record, and Albany Saturday Magazine*, 22 Sept 1827, 266. Again in 1828, *ibid.*, 16 Aug 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.

³⁷*Illustrations of Masonry by One Devoted to the Fraternity* (Rochester, NY: Printed for the author, 1827). There is a question whether Morgan’s body was correctly identified, and his disappearance is shrouded in mystery.

³⁸On anti-Masonry, see Andrew Burt, *American Hysteria: The Untold Story of Mass Political Extremism in the United States* (Guilford, CT: LP, 2015), 49–72; also William Preston Vaughn, *The Antimasonic Party in the United States, 1826–1843* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1983).

³⁹See his address before he renounced Masonry: *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).

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.⁴⁰ However, about a decade later, while preparing to defend Freemasonry against the rising tide of anti-Masonry, he altered his views and abruptly did an about face, renouncing Freemasonry in the light of the anti-Masonic 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.⁴¹ Word of his renunciation was carried in anti-Masonic publications as well, bolstering support for that movement.⁴²

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 about it. He 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 anti-Mason, publishing several works attacking Freemasonry.⁴³

David Bernard (1798–1876), from Utica, NY, was ordained in

⁴⁰*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).

⁴¹Bradley renounced his Freemasonry on 9 May 1829. The text of his renunciation may be found in "Rev. J. Bradley's Renunciation," *The Craftsman*, 30 Jun 1829, 167. This issue is filled with reaction to Bradley's renunciation. For example, "To the Rev. Joshua Bradley" from Junius (*ibid.*, 163); also "Rev. Joshua Bradley," *Boston Masonic Mirror*, 12 Sept 1829, 86; "To the Rev. Joshua Bradley of Louisville, KY," *The Amaranth 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* 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."

⁴²Henry 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.

⁴³In 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 is from *Inquiry*, vii; also *A New Chapter on Free Masonry Addressed to the Baptist Church of Clinton, NY* (Utica, NY: Griffith and Warren, 1868).

Stillwater, NY in 1824, just ahead of the anti-Mason 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 fifteen levels of Freemasonry, he renounced the fraternity and published *Light on Masonry*⁴⁴ 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.”⁴⁵ 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.”⁴⁶

Nathaniel Colver (1794–1870), a prominent Baptist clergyman, had become a Mason while serving as pastor of the Baptist church at Fort Covington, NY (1821–1829). An older man in the church, “an advanced mason,” encouraged him to join the fraternity “simply because in doing so he believed it would make him a more useful minister of Jesus Christ.”⁴⁷ “It would open to me a source of knowledge on divine subjects, that I could not have without it.” Consequently, Colver pursued Masonry “as far as the seventh of Royal Arch degree; besides which I believe I took two of what are called honorary degrees.” However, when asked to take an oath that could require even murder in its fulfillment, Colver recoiled—he had believed that he would not be required to take this oath—and pursued Freemasonry no further.⁴⁸ This led him to renounce the fraternity as

a moral evil, a political evil, and an imposition upon the world...a moral evil in that its specious ceremonies are a combination of Christianity, Judaism and Heathenism. Its oaths are licentious and profane; and so far as there is weight in them, they rob its votaries of the

⁴⁴David 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.

⁴⁵John Quincy Adams, *Letters on the Masonic Institution* (Boston: T. R. Marvin, 1847), 229.

⁴⁶William 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.

⁴⁷J. A. Smith, *Memoir of Rev. Nathaniel D. Colver, D. D.* (Boston: Durkee and Foxcroft, 1873), 66.

⁴⁸“Elder Colver’s Renunciation” originally published in the *Franklin Telegraph*, republished in *The Religious Monitor and Evangelical Repository*, vol. 6 (Albany, NY: Webster and Word, 1829–1830), 175. For details of Colver’s refusal to take the oath, see Smith, *Nathaniel Colver*, 73–75.

unalienable rights of man. And in its titles and degrees it is highly profane and blasphemous.⁴⁹

Colver concluded his renunciation with an appeal to Scripture.

Some of you are professed followers of the meek and lowly Redeemer. I hope you will read the second chapter of Paul to the Colossians, and the fourth of Paul to the Galatians, and be led to separate yourselves from Masonic rites and ceremonies which are so incompatible with the whole genius of the simple, plain, open, frank and holy gospel of Christ. Your brethren have looked within the door; their hearts are pained. Will you feed their grief by stubborn adherence to that which you in conscience feel is not right? Or will you listen to the call of Christ, to come out and be separate, and touch not the unclean thing?⁵⁰

Colver, in 1831, joined other likeminded Baptists in forming the Bottskill Baptist Association. The “distinctive article” in their constitution was an anti-Masonic resolution.

Resolved, That the following is our understanding of the *second* article of our Constitution: “*No church* which refuses to apply the laws of Christ, or do not apply them for the *entire removal* of speculative Freemasonry from the church, by holding their members who are Masons, to leave it as a moral evil, and confess their wrong according to the requirement of the gospel for having participated in that evil, shall have a seat in this association.”⁵¹

Three years later, seeking to draw together all the Baptist churches in the area in one association, efforts were undertaken to form the Washington Union Baptist Association whose sixth article called speculative Freemasonry “a moral evil,” and insisted that “churches ought to require an acknowledgement of it from their members, who are or have been Masons.”⁵²

Colver became a dedicated anti-Masonic antagonist⁵³ as well as an influential Baptist abolitionist.⁵⁴ From his prominent pulpit at what

⁴⁹“Colver’s Renunciation,” 176.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 178.

⁵¹Wright, *History of Shafisbury Association*, 252.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 253.

⁵³For details, see Smith, *Nathaniel Colver*, 83–84.

⁵⁴Colver was active in his antislavery/pro-abolition work (see *ibid.*, 153–79). In addition to Colver’s opposition to Masonry, he also challenged the Odd Fellows. In January 1844, he announced to the church in Boston that he would apply the biblical injunction against Christians in an unequal yoke with unbelievers to the Odd-Fellows (*ibid.*, 142–44). From this he published *Three Lectures on Odd Fellowship* (Boston: William S. Damrell, 1844). Colver’s critiques of the Odd-Fellows were similar to critiques on the Masons. Christians should not be unequally yoked. Odd Fellowship has many similarities with Freemasonry, though it has not been as large. Both were considered “secret societies” by many Baptists. See J. S. Backus and H. B. Kenyon, *Backus and Kenyon on Secret Societies* (Albany, NY: Joel Munsell, 1850). For a brief

would become Tremont Temple Baptist, of Boston, where he remained until 1852, his influence among Northern Baptists grew significantly. Later he went to Chicago and taught at the Old University of Chicago and his name continued to be used in the anti-Masonic effort even after his death. At the National Christian Association, held in Boston in 1880, the convention passed Resolution 8 that “this Convention fully concur in the deliberately expressed opinion of the late Rev. Nathaniel Colver, D.D. of Boston, that the vicious character of Masonry, and its guilt concealing and barbarous oaths, are such as not only to release all men from their bonds, but also to lay upon them the solemn obligation tearing off its covering and expose its enormity.”⁵⁵

Two other pastors of the Bottskill Association ought to be mentioned, namely Edward Barber, pastor of the Baptist Church at Union Village and George Witherell, pastor of the Baptist Church at Hartford, NY. With respect to Freemasonry, Barber was “one of the foremost and firmest opponents of the institution.”⁵⁶ Witherell (d. 1839) was an example that the anti-Masonic movement sometimes had serious consequences for Baptist elders. George 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 of Masonry although the Masons worked to discredit allegations of the alleged attack.⁵⁷

Speaking of the seriousness of the agitations over Masonry, Baptist historian Henry C. Vedder suggested “many churches were divided by the question, and the growth of the denomination was seriously interfered with.”⁵⁸ More churches and Baptist associations began taking up

history of Odd Fellowship, see “History,” Independent Order of Odd Fellows, the Sovereign Grand Lodge, available online at <https://odd-fellows.org/history/>, accessed 19 Nov 2021; also Theo. A. Ross, *Odd Fellowship: Its History and Manual* (New York: M. W. Hazen, 1888).

⁵⁵“National Christian Association, Resolutions Passed,” *Evangelical Repository*, May 1880, 373.

⁵⁶Ibid., 300. On Barber, see André A. Gazal, “Edward Barber, (1768–1834),” in *A Noble Company: Biographical Essay on Notable Particular Baptists in America*, ed. Terry Wolever (Springfield, MO: Particular Baptist Press, 2015), 6:441–78. For a detailed discussion on Barber’s anti-Masonic sentiments, see *ibid.*, 462–76.

⁵⁷Wright, *Shaftsbury Association*, 352–53. On the alleged attempted murder, see “Judicial Investigation of Elder Witherell’s ‘Humbug,’” *Boston Masonic Mirror*, 20 Nov 1830, 161–63; also “Daring Outrage,” *Corydon Courage and Anti-Masonic Democrat*, 10 Nov 1830; Rob Morris, *William Morgan; Political Antimasonry, Its Rise, Growth and Decadence* (New York: Robert Macoy, Masonic Publisher, 1883), 297.

⁵⁸*A History of the Baptists in the Middle States* (Philadelphia: ABPS, 1898), 197. Vedder’s discussion on anti-Masonry begins on p. 194.

the question of Freemasonry with sentiments varied across the country. 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 or demerits of Masonry; but recommend strict observance of the Gospel discipline among the churches."⁵⁹ 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, therefore, we should "abstain from every appearance of evil," is it 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.⁶⁰

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.⁶¹

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."⁶²

⁵⁹Ibid., 143.

⁶⁰"Circular Letter," *Minutes of the Pearl River Baptist Association, Convened at the Meeting House of Hebron Church* (Jackson, MS: Peter ?, 1825), 15.

⁶¹Griffin, *Primitive Baptists*, 144.

⁶²A. Russell Belden, *History of Cayuga Baptist Association* (Auburn: Derby & Miller, 1851), 122–23.

Yet disfellowship was not the consistent view among the churches. The church at Trumansburg, NY of the Seneca Association, whose founding pastor, Oliver C. Comstock started the church in 1819 was a Freemason. 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”⁶³ but before Comstock was denounced, he left Trumansburg and took the pastorate of the First Baptist Church of Rochester, NY, which had also been bothered by anti-Masonism.⁶⁴ Many disaffected former members of the Rochester church apparently returned under Comstock’s ministry.⁶⁵ 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 their enduring sentiments.”⁶⁶ 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.”⁶⁷ The history of Baptists and Freemasonry is thus uneven. Some came to oppose Freemasonry, even leaving it, while others failed to see it as a serious issue. This conflicted relationship is apparent elsewhere.

In 1826, the Fall Creek 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 that 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.” The 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

⁶³Lewis Halsey, *History of the Seneca Baptist Association* (Ithaca, NY: Journal Association Book, 1879), 190.

⁶⁴*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.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 25. On Comstock, who baptized A. H. Strong in 1831, see Augustus Hopkins Strong, “Historical Sketch,” *Centennial Celebration First Baptist Church, 1818–1918, Rochester, NY* (N.p.: n.d.), 9–14; also Halsey, *Seneca Association*, 207–14. John Stearns, Baptist seceder, quotes from an address that Comstock, a Mason, made before the Ithaca lodge (Stearns, *Speculative Freemasonry*, 188–190). See also 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; 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.

⁶⁶Halsey, *Seneca Baptist Association*, 37.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, 25.

join themselves to a people who are called Masons, and frequent their lodges?" The answer given, "*Resolved*, That we do not fellowship the practice of any member in our connection joining with or frequenting Mason lodges."⁶⁸ Sandy Creek showed the contradictory way that Freemasonry was often dealt with.

Other associations north and south could be mentioned with respect to weighing in on Freemasonry after the anti-Masonic movement began in 1826, whether as a consequence of anti-Masonism 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."⁶⁹ 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."⁷⁰ 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 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.⁷¹

Baptist associations labored over Freemasonry throughout the 19th century again and again. Some associations seemed to raise no objections

⁶⁸George W. Purefoy, *History of the Sandy Creek Baptist Association* (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).

⁶⁹Thomas 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).

⁷⁰James A. Delke, *History of the North Carolina Chowan Baptist Association, 1806–1881* (Raleigh, NC: Edwards, Broughton, 1882), 80.

⁷¹Ibid., 76.

to Freemasonry while others censured it. Allen Hill (1831–1898), general agent of the Indiana Baptist Convention, and of whom it was said that “no man in the denomination was more favorably known,” was a Mason, who helped organize the lodge at Saulsberry, IL and eventually became its Worshipful Master.⁷² Thomas Pope, of Muscle 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.⁷³ 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.⁷⁴ Elder William Leigh, originally from Virginia, became active in Muscle Shoals promoting the cause of missions. In 1834, he was grand master of the grand lodge of Alabama, even authoring a booklet on Masonry.⁷⁵ 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.”⁷⁶

Baptists of wide diversity weighed in on Masonry. African American Baptists show the same conflicted history toward Freemasonry. Thomas Jewel Smith pastored in Kentucky in the early twentieth century and was an active Mason and an Oddfellow. But the Stone Street Church of Mobile, AL was “stubbornly set against all secret societies so that no secret society people [were] allowed in its membership.” Adam Clayton Powell Sr. (1865–1953), pastor of the influential Abyssinian Baptist Church of New York City was a 32-degree Mason and an Odd Fellow.⁷⁷

Freewill Baptists, in 1859, at their 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

⁷²J. C. Tibbets, *Coffee Creek Baptist Association Southern Indiana* (Seymour, IN: Seymour Tribune, 1930), 162.

⁷³Josephus Shackelford, *History of the Muscle Shoals Baptist Association* (Trinity, AL: by the author, 1891), 149.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, 256.

⁷⁵*The Ladies' Masonry or, Hieroglyphic Monitor: Containing All the Emblems Explained in the Degrees of the Holy Virgin and Heroine of Jericho* (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 5 Nov 2021.

⁷⁶Shackelford, *Muscle Shoals Association*, 221–22.

⁷⁷*The Golden Jubilee of the General Association of Colored Baptists of Kentucky*, ed. C. H. Parrish (Louisville, KY: Mays, 1915), 262; Charles Octavius Boothe, *The Cyclopaedia of Colored Baptists of Alabama, Their Leaders and Their Work* (Birmingham, AL: Alabama Publishing, 1895); and “Powell, Adam Clayton,” *Who's Who of the Colored Race*, ed. Frank Lincoln Mather (Chicago: n.p., 1915), 1:222.

secret societies a subject of church discipline, yet we affectionately entreat all our members, and especially our ministers, to withhold their names and support from such societies.”⁷⁸ 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.⁷⁹ 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.⁸⁰

The 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.⁸¹

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

⁷⁸“Minutes of the Seventeenth General Conference held at Lowell, Mass, October 1859,” in *Minutes of the General Conference of the Freewill Baptist Connection*, comp. I. D. Stewart (Boston: F. B. Printing, 1887), 43.

⁷⁹“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.

⁸⁰L. H. “Why Old Baptists Do Fellowship [*sic*] Secret Societies,” *The Gospel Messenger*, Jun 1920, 2. The title was printed in error. It should have been “Why Old Baptists Do Not Fellowship Secret Societies.” The error was noted in “Corrections for the *Gospel Messenger*, June Issue,” *The Gospel Messenger*, Jul 1920, 15. See also John R. Daily, *Secret Societies: The False Religious Principles and Corrupt Practices* (Indianapolis: By the author, ca. 1916); 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 Florida, 1998).

⁸¹Hassell, *History of the Church of God*, 889.

Baptist associations and their troubles. As the anti-Masonic movement was dying out, Baptists were facing another threat to their cohesion—slavery and 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 Masonry. 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.”⁸² Rev. Thomas Paulain Babcock, of the Marlin church, who died in 1876, was buried by the Masonic lodge of Los Angeles in their cemetery.⁸³ C. L. Dotson, a “Baptist pioneer,” received a Masonic burial as well.⁸⁴

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 Alabama 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.⁸⁵ 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.⁸⁶

⁸²J. L. Walker and C. P. Lumpkin, *History of the Waco Baptist Association of Texas* (Waco, TX: Byrne Hill, 1897), 399.

⁸³*Ibid.*, 226.

⁸⁴*Ibid.*, 298.

⁸⁵See 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 7 Nov 2021; also <https://grandlodgeoftexas.org/reb-baylor-pro-ecclesia-pro-texana/>.

⁸⁶*The Life and Writings of Rufus C. Burleson*, comp. Georgia J. Burleson (n.p., 1901), 467. See also “Rufus Burleson,” available online at <https://www.wacomasonic.org/rufus-burleson/>, accessed 7 Nov 2021.

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, Mason supporters, in their defense of Masonry, used as evidence the strong presence of Texas Baptist leadership who had been Masons. Among 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 leaders of the past who had been connected with the fraternity.⁸⁷ 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 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.⁸⁸

That sentiment summarized the pro Mason side in the SBC.

Freemasonry, despite its long presence among Southern Baptists began to be targeted as unchristian in 1985. The first attempt in recent times⁸⁹ to remove the influence of Masonry in Southern Baptist life

⁸⁷See for example http://www.jesus-is-savior.com/False%20Religions/Freemasonry/famous_baptists.htm, which includes documentation for the SBC leaders as Masons, accessed 7 Nov 2021; also http://www.blessedquietness.com/journal/housechurch/sbc_cloud.htm, accessed 7 Nov 2021; Michael Glenn Maness, *Character Counts: Freemasonry is a National Treasure and a Source of Our Founders' Constitutional Original Intent*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington, IN: Author House, 2010), 243–56. The chapter is titled “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, and Herschel Hobbs.

⁸⁸George 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, accessed 6 Nov 2021.

⁸⁹Efforts 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 associate 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 10 Nov 2021. On Rice, see Keith Bates, *Mainstreaming Fundamentalism: John R. Rice and Fundamentalism's*

occurred when Pastor Charles Burchett of the First Baptist Church of Kirbyville, 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 1986.⁹⁰ 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.”⁹¹ 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.⁹² 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.”⁹³ In conjunction with this investigation, the Historical Commission of the Convention carefully examined the annuals of the Southern Baptist Convention and other materials in the archives in Nashville and could not find any evidence of Freemasonry becoming an issue going back to the beginning of the convention in 1845.⁹⁴

Coincidentally, Gary H. Leazer, an ordained Baptist minister, was director of the Interfaith Witness Department of the Home Mission Board from 1987 to 1993. Leazer led the charge against the anti-Mason sentiments within the Convention, eventually tying anti-Freemasonry to fundamentalism, then threatening Southern Baptist cohesion.⁹⁵ His department produced the Study on Freemasonry that

Public Reemergence (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2021).

⁹⁰1985 *Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention* (Nashville: Executive Committee, Southern Baptist Convention, 1985), 69, 86.

⁹¹“One Hundred Forty-First Annual Report, Home Mission Board,” 1986 *Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention* (Nashville: Executive Committee, Southern Baptist Convention, 1986), 175.

⁹²Ed Decker, “Freemasonry and the Southern Baptist Church,” available online at <https://www.ericbarger.com/articles/fmasonry-sbc.htm>, accessed 8 Nov 2021.

⁹³“Proceedings,” 1992 *Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention* (Nashville: Executive Committee, Southern Baptist Convention, 1992), 90.

⁹⁴The Interfaith Witness Department produced a 75-page report on Freemasonry and the SBC, *A Study on Freemasonry* (Atlanta: Home Mission Board, [1993]). This document includes a lengthy list of prominent SBC leaders who have been active Masons, including some of those mentioned above.

⁹⁵*Fundamentalism and Freemasonry: The Southern Baptist Investigation of the*

went to the messengers in 1993, in response to Holly's actions of 1992. The 1993 report 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."⁹⁶

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.⁹⁷ After his resignation, Leazer became a champion of the 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."⁹⁸ Gary went on to become the Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Georgia and is currently (2022) the Grand Orator of the same lodge.⁹⁹ 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 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.¹⁰⁰

Fraternal Order (New York: M. Evans, 1995).

⁹⁶*A Study on Freemasonry* (1993), 71.

⁹⁷Art Toalston, "Former HMB director says he's entered Freemasonry," *Baptist Press*, 14 Nov 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.

⁹⁸Gary Leazer, "Fundamentalism, Freemasonry, and the Southern Baptist Convention," *The Scottish Rite Journal*, Jul 1994, 32. Leazer would continue to contribute to the debate on Freemasonry in the SBC by publishing *Fundamentalism and Freemasonry: The Southern Baptist Investigation of the Fraternal Order* (New York: M. Evans, 1995).

⁹⁹See "Grand Lodge Officers," The Grand Lodge of GA website, <https://glofga.org/grand-lodge-officers/>, accessed 10 Nov 2021.

¹⁰⁰See for example Southern Baptist John Ankerberg's website and published material: "Is Freemasonry a Cult?" 30 Sept 2001; The John Ankerberg Show website at <https://jashow.org/articles/is-freemasonry-a-cult/>, accessed 8 Nov 2021; also John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *The Secret Teachings of the Masonic Lodge: A Christian Perspective*, exp. ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1990); idem, *Fast Facts on the Masonic Lodge* (N.p.: ATRI, 2011); and <https://freemasonrywatch.org/holly.html>, which has James Holly's material (accessed 8 Nov 2021).

The follow up from the report is what might be expected. The SBC 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.¹⁰¹ 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.”¹⁰² 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. The Home Mission Board directors, at their annual 1994 spring meeting, had Freemasonry 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 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.¹⁰³ 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.¹⁰⁴

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.”¹⁰⁵ This letter produced a series of responses during

¹⁰¹Timothy C. Morgan, “Clinton Draws Ire of SBC,” *Christianity Today*, 19 Jul 1993, 54.

¹⁰²“A Report on Freemasonry,” Home Mission Board, SBC, 17 Mar 1993, 4.

¹⁰³David Winfrey, “HMB Directors Address Universalism, Freemasonry,” *Baptist Press*, 15 Apr 1994.

¹⁰⁴“HMB Directors Clarify Statement on Universalism,” *Baptist Press*, 15 Apr 1994.

¹⁰⁵“Offended,” *The Baptist Courier*, 11 May 2007.

the following weeks, both for and against Freemasonry.¹⁰⁶ In 2016, the NAMB reposted on its website its summary of Freemasonry and the eight incompatibilities of Masonry with Baptist/biblical teaching.¹⁰⁷

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 have made strong statements against Freemasonry.¹⁰⁸ The GARBC, at its 58th 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.”¹⁰⁹ 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.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶See Gerald Carver, “Masons Honorable,” *The Baptist Courier*, 11 Jun 2007; Bill Poore, “Keep Them Separate,” *The Baptist Courier*, 25 Jun 2007; Dave Engelman, “Well Said,” *the Baptist Courier*, 25 Jun 2007 (pro Mason); Steve Small, “Get to Know Them,” *ibid.* (pro Mason); Mark Jones, “Simple Tenets,” *ibid.* (pro Mason); 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 8 Nov 2021.

¹⁰⁷“Freemasonry Overview,” North American Mission Board, available online at <https://www.namb.net/apologetics/resource/freemasonry-overview/>, accessed 8 Nov 2021; also “A Closer Look at Freemasonry,” available online at http://www.preciousheart.net/fm/SBC_Closer_Look.pdf, accessed 9 Nov 2021.

¹⁰⁸One 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,” 24 Oct 2006, available online at <https://www.foxnews.com/story/masonic-groups-in-south-struggle-with-racial-separation>, accessed 12 Nov 2021.

¹⁰⁹“Freemasonry,” available online at <https://www.garbc.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Freemasonry-1989.pdf>, accessed 8 Nov 2021.

¹¹⁰Robert T. Ketcham, *The Christian and the Lodge* (Chicago: Regular Baptist Press, 1962), 12.

The GARBC also recommended and published *I Left the Lodge* by Dale A. Byers.¹¹¹

One final non-American Baptist mention is in order. The Baptist Union of Scotland, 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 teachings of Freemasonry and concluding “that there is an 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.”¹¹²

Reasons for a Conflicted History

Having surveyed the landscape of American Baptist history¹¹³ and seen the 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.

¹¹¹(Schaumburg, IL: RBP, 1998).

¹¹²“Baptists and Freemasonry,” Baptist Union of Scotland, n.d., available online at http://www.skirret.com/papers/baptists_and_freemasonry.html, accessed 8 Nov 2021.

¹¹³This essay has not attempted to address 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 9 Nov 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,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 5 (Fall 1994): 141–57; also John Mazingo, “Freemasonry and Evangelical Christianity: Are They Compatible?” (D.Min. thesis, Liberty University, 2020). 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*, 19 Feb 2020, available online at <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/the-faqs-is-freemasonry-compatible-with-christianity/>, accessed 9 Nov 2021.

- (3) Some Baptists saw the Freemason issue arising out of paedobaptism and naturally gravitated away from paedo-Baptist sentiments (see fn. 31).
- (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 was natural that churches in that part of the country would be the first to raise questions over Freemasonry. The anti-Masonic 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 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 Southern Baptists.¹¹⁴ 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.¹¹⁵ A search of obituaries online yields numerous examples of Baptist laymen who were both members of Baptist churches and of Masonic lodges.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴In 1959, Freemasonry had about 4.1 million members, estimated at 4.5% of American men. They are down by about 75% from that 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 8 Nov 2021.

¹¹⁵Ivan M. Tribe, "Sir Knight J. Strom Thurmond: The Ultimate Senior Senator," *Knight Templar*, Dec 1999, 18–22.

¹¹⁶See for example, the recently deceased Reginald E. Harris, Jr. who passed away 6 Mar 2022 at 83 years of age. He was a member of several Louisiana Baptist churches while at the same time being both a 32nd Scottish Rite Freemason and an El Karubah Shriner, available online at <https://www.shreveporttimes.com/obituaries/spt079652>, accessed 21 Jun 2022.