

**THE FRUITS OF A CRUSADE:
WESLEYAN OPPOSITION TO SECRET SOCIETIES**

by William H. Brackney

There have been numerous attempts to emphasize the strength of antislavery sentiment in Wesleyan historiography with little exploration into other critical areas of social concern. The reason for this is fairly obvious: few social reform movements, if any, have had the profound impact upon American society as the Civil Rights movement, and historians have spent their energies researching the roots of antislavery in every conceivable direction. Other, less conspicuous emphases in the Wesleyan tradition actually elucidate a clearer discernment of the early character and ethos of American Wesleyanism. One such emphasis was the opposition to secret societies and associations which prevailed in the formative discussions and documents of the Wesleyan Methodist Connection in the mid-1800's.

According to the reliable chroniclers of Wesleyan Methodism, the movement had its origins in discontent with the direction of the Methodist Episcopal Church with respect to social reform. Some of the fiercest agitation had occurred in western New York state in the 1830's which culminated in an open secession movement in 1841-43, which was composed largely of local preachers and lay persons from the Genesee Conference. Gradually, by the first General Conference of the Connection, held in 1844, the secession included elements from New England, Pennsylvania, and the Old Northwest, as well as New York. However, the fact that a center of secessionism was located in western New York is extremely significant.

For a variety of reasons, western New York was a seat of ultraistic religious expression and volatile social sentiment from its initial settlement. One of the major events which helped to shape the unique character of the "Burned-Over District,"¹ as Whitney Cross called it, was the abduction and disappearance of Captain William Morgan of Batavia, New York in September, 1826. For his published exposure of Masonic "secrets," Morgan was harried off to confinement at Canandaigua, and finally to Fort Niagara, where it was reported that he was drowned in Lake Ontario. All of these activities, the public came to believe, were planned and executed by Masonic henchmen in

¹The thirteen-county area lying west of Seneca Lake was unique in the history of the American frontier due to its experimentation with traditional Puritan concepts. The terminology had its origin in the 1830's during the many waves of revival fire which spread across the area. See Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-Over District: A Social and Intellectual History of Western New York* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965).

protection of their fraternal order. The exact details of Morgan's disappearance will never be known, nor will it ever be thoroughly determined that a Masonic conspiracy was at work. What was significant about the Morgan affair was its effect upon the general public in New York and, eventually, the nation.

Thanks to a shrewd and capable group of journalists and religious enthusiasts, a major crusade was launched "to totally extirpate Freemasonry from the earth" in early 1827. A host of "free presses" sprung up from Utica to the Genesee Valley decrying Masonic abuses of American republicanism, while local groups banded together to form "conventions" where "responsible" persons renounced their Masonic oaths and vowed to work for the total overthrow of the fraternity. The center of the crusade came to be Rochester, where extensive investigations were being conducted into the Morgan kidnapping, while elsewhere politicians pondered the situation concerning its potential for a new political vehicle in the upcoming elections. Among those who actively campaigned in the crusade against Masonry were Millard Fillmore, William H. Seward, Francis Granger, and Thurlow Weed. Men like these, and others of extraordinary ability, labored to transform the movement from a local expression of social indignation into a viable political following which would form a major component of anti-Jacksonism and the second American party system.

Without considering the vast political development of Antimasonry, the social and religious emphases and implications of the crusade are of paramount importance to succeeding events. Socially analyzed, Antimasonry was a radical movement of the lower classes against the prestige, privilege, and position of the higher strata. Henry Dana Ward, the young, enthusiastic editor of the *Antimasonic Review* in New York City recognized early that the movement was representative of a rising tide of opinion that was opposite to urban wealth and aristocratic privilege.² According to Lee Benson, the principal concern of these classes was equality of opportunity: "Equal opportunity was the hallmark of a republican country. . . . Freemasonry destroyed equal opportunity by secretly using its great powers to favor the interests of its members. . . . Freemasonry, therefore, could not be permitted to exist in the republican United States."³ Another significant factor in Antimasonry was its association with basically rural areas of New York State. Because the urban centers of the state such as New York City, Albany, Syracuse, and Utica were centers of banking and commerce, the Masonic involvement

²Ward became one of the leading religious editors of his day; see *New York Whig*, August 7, 1832.

³Lee Benson, *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy: New York As A Test Case* (Princeton: University Press, 1961), p. 19.

was deep and enduring. Consequently, the Antimasonic crusade had little impact in these areas. Where the masses did throng to the diatribes of renounced Masons was on the agrarian frontier between Lakes Ontario and Erie in unprecedented numbers between 1827 and 1830. It was in the local villages such as Livonia, LeRoy, and Geneseo where the populace sneered and scowled at the haughtiness of Masonic businessmen and leaders. By the gubernatorial election of 1828, a thirteen-county area in New York had elected senators and assemblymen in an impressive showing to represent their concerns in Albany, which earned the region the sobriquet, "The Infected District."

Antimasonry possessed certain religious distinctions as well. A recent study has shown that the crusade was initially and fundamentally a religious movement, and that its most immediately pronounced effects may well have been upon the church at local levels. The content of antimasonic ideology was characterized by several points common to all spokesmen in the crusade. Fundamental to the thinking in the movement was the presupposition that Masonry had committed sin. This strikingly evangelical idiom was evident in three specific aspects. First, in several ways, Antimasons felt that the fraternity was a poor counterfeit for the Christian religion. By simulating biblical ceremonies, names, and personalities, Freemasons blasphemed Christianity. Secondly, evangelicals indicated great consternation at Masonic oaths. Here the problem was twofold: the oaths themselves were illegal and they compelled lodgemen to commit crimes against the laws of Christian and human morality. The final dimension of Antimasonic ideology encompassed a host of specific snags centering on the secrecy of the lodges. Because evangelical religion had imbibed democratic, public methodologies for the conduct of its affairs, the secret societies of the fraternity's lodges became synonymous with darkness, sin, immorality, intemperance, treason, oligarchy, and other manifestations of the demonic, including Satan himself.⁴

As indicated, the evangelical churches responded more decidedly than did other groups, and among those churches most affected were the Presbyterians and Baptists, both Regular and Free Will. While no other action was ever taken at the level of the General Assembly, several of the Western New York presbyteries passed resolutions which denounced the fraternal relationship. Similarly, in the Baptist structure antimasonic sentiment rose to a feverish pitch and threatened to fragmentize the New York Baptist Convention. A major split occurred

⁴William H. Brackney, *Religious Antimasonry: The Genesis of a Political Party 1826-1830* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1976), pp. 266-296; it may be noted that the principal response of religious Antimasons was disfellowshipping members from church relations who continued to maintain fraternal ties.

among the Baptists in the Chautauqua Association, where a majority of the churches formed a secessionist body with antimasonic by-laws. At least three of the leading spokesmen of the crusade were evangelical churchmen: John G. Stearns and David Bernard, Baptists, and Lebbeus Armstrong, a Presbyterian.⁵

There are no indications that Methodists at any level officially responded to the crusade in its early progress in western New York. In the first place, the hierarchy of the Methodist Episcopal Church was sympathetic to the Masonic fraternity. Secondly, there was a tight control maintained over the itinerants on the frontier, which prevented any heterodox behavior under threat of loss of credentials. Finally, in most cases, the Methodist preachers had little time for involvement in local disputes as they constantly moved from station to station. On the other hand, however, there can be little doubt that lay persons who were involved in Methodist work were also sympathetic to Antimasonry because of its basically evangelical appeal.⁶

An extremely significant change occurred in the character of the Antimasonic Crusade about 1829, which was to profoundly alter its course in the 1830's. Less religious politicians had carefully observed the appeal of antimasonry to the populace in the face of the traditional political party system of the mid-1820's. Sensing that Antimasonry might form a new political vehicle for an anti-Jacksonian persuasion (particularly since Jackson was a Mason), men like Thurlow Weed, William H. Seward, and Millard Fillmore worked to completely politicize the movement by the Utica Antimasonic Convention of 1830. From that time forward the major thrust was directed at a conservative, anti-Jackson force in national politics, which eventually became the Whig Party.⁷

One might well wonder what became of the original focus of the Antimasonic Crusade — namely the extirpation of the fraternity. On a local basis, in the "Infected District" the evangelical church made war upon Freemasonry, with rather impressive results. While the goal of the leaders was never accomplished — the legal abolition of secret societies — the vitality of the institution in New York was definitely jeopardized. As Lee Benson has shown, "in its heyday the Order

⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 182-255.

⁶Antimasonry formed a much more consistently reinforced ideal on the frontier than did the spasmodic circuit meetings of the early Methodist preachers. In many communities similar groups of persons were involved in a variety of evangelical activity across denominational, and often theological, lines.

⁷Antimasons were fused together into the Whig coalition with Clay Republicans, Adamites, Clintonians, and Websterites to oppose the hegemony of Andrew Jackson. In New York the Jacksonians were considered conservative behind the leadership of Martin Van Buren and the Antimasons a more radical position, while on the national level, just the opposite was true.

counted about 480 lodges and 20,000 members in the state . . . by 1835 the Order had shrunk to 49 lodges with less than 3,000 members."⁸ It may be safely concluded that a prejudice against secret societies, particularly Freemasonry, was strongly evident in western New York after 1830.

Religious Antimasonry did not die, however, when political Antimasonry moved into the national perspective. Among the major exponents of the bias was Charles G. Finney, a popular evangelist on the frontier in the 1830's. As a young student-teacher in Connecticut, Finney had joined the local Masonic lodge in 1813, and taken the initial three degrees. Later, in 1818, when he journeyed to study law at Adams, New York, he continued to be active in the local lodge activities, and regarded himself as a "bright mason," or one who was able to commit Masonic information to memory.⁹ In 1821, when Finney was converted, he expressed grave doubts about the validity and purpose of Freemasonry and withdrew from active participation in his lodge. When the Morgan affair occurred in 1826 and Stearns, Bernard and others wrote their denunciations of the Fraternity, Finney energetically joined the Crusade and became thoroughly indoctrinated in the Antimasonic evangelists' position.

Although he was basically known as an outstanding revivalist and abolitionist, Finney had no meager reputation in New York and Ohio as a vehement Antimason. He considered himself to be one of the leading evangelists who destroyed the order in the 1830's, when he composed his book, *The Character, Claims, and Practical Workings of Freemasonry*, in 1869 during a revival of Masonic activity. Of his original realization that Freemasonry was evil, Finney would later write

it has become more and more irresistably plain to my convictions that the institution is highly dangerous to the state and in every way injurious to the church of Christ. . . . Ought a Freemason of this stamp to be fellowshipped by a Christian church? Ought not such a one be regarded as an unscrupulous and dangerous man?¹⁰

Lest there be any doubt as to Finney's success in convincing his audiences of the validity of Antimasonry, he was considered a leading figure by most evangelicals in western New York by 1840. His revival meetings had achieved phenomenal success in Rochester, Utica, Buffalo and Auburn from 1827 to 1842.¹¹

⁸Benson, *Jacksonian Democracy*, p. 36.

⁹Charles G. Finney, *The Character, Claims, and Practical Workings of Freemasonry* (Cincinnati: Western Tract and Book Society, 1869) p. 4.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 272.

¹¹An important account of his appeal and success on the New York frontier may be found in his own account, *The Memoirs of Reverend Charles G. Finney, Written by Himself* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1896), pp. 158-193; 284-319.

With the abiding influence of Charles Finney and the inherent regional tendency to be antimasonic, it is not surprising that the early organizer of the Wesleyan Methodist Connection from New York pressed for anti-secret society standards in their first conferences. While Wesleyan historians agree that the Connection was founded upon three basic issues — slavery, church government, and temperance¹² — few of the initial accounts emphasize the fact that the most controversial issue among the Wesleyans before 1860 was the position of the Church on membership in secret societies. There was widespread controversy as late as the 1864 General Conference on the issue which particularly pointed to the dichotomy within regional leadership of the annual conferences.

The debate on secret societies commenced at the organizational conference of the Connection held at Utica, New York on May 31, 1843. Utica had been the scene of numerous Antimasonic conventions which catapulted the crusade to national attention in the previous two decades.¹³ It was significant that of a total 154 delegates present, 107 were from New York state. Many of these delegates desired that a clear and uncompromising statement concerning membership in secret societies be included in the first disciplinary rules. Still others, including such influential spokesmen as Orange Scott, Luther Lee, Leroy Sunderland, Jothan Horton, and Lucius C. Matlack were opposed to any such general statement which might be considered binding upon the entire Connection. Luther Lee observed of that first conference at Utica that

the matter was easily disposed of for the time being, on account of the fact that some of the leading members of the Convention took no part in the discussion, more than to exert themselves to bring the two extremes together on some common ground.¹⁴

The compromise which was reached involved no official position by the Connection at large: "We leave that matter to the several Annual Conferences and the individual churches."¹⁵ Among others, the New York Annual Conference, which included all of New York except those churches in the Champlain area, took advantage of the compromise statement by categorically denying membership to any who were members of a secret society, and they presented their position to the General Conference of the church the following year. The particular center of the anti-secret society agitation in 1843-44 appeared to be on the

¹²The historiography begins with Luther Lee, *Wesleyan Manual: A Defense of the Organization of the Wesleyan Methodist Connection* (Syracuse: Samuel Lee, 1862), chapters I-III and p. 70 ff. The same synthesis may be found in the works of Joel Martin, Arthur Jennings, and Ira McLeister, as noted below.

¹³For the significance of the Utica Antimasonic Convention, see Brackney, pp. 327-331. Utica was an important town with urban-frontier connections.

¹⁴Lee, *Wesleyan Manual*, p. 170. It appeared in 1862 that Lee was trying to demonstrate that he had maintained a responsible non-partisan stance in 1844.

¹⁵*The Discipline of the Wesleyan Methodist Connection of America for 1843* (Canton, Ohio: J. B. Miller, 1844), p. 91.

Orleans Circuit in western New York, which had long been a center of Antimasonic fervor.

The New York position on secret oath-bound societies was significantly accepted by the 1844 General Conference which met at Cleveland, Ohio, October 3-10. From the beginning, Edward Smith of Pittsburgh and president of the Allegheny Conference, expressed the "obligation which he was under, from conscientious views and special instructions, to press a rule of discipline."¹⁶ While the major memorials on the subject were presented by the New York and Champlain Conferences, a coalition of New Yorkers and Alleghenyites from western Pennsylvania actually led the struggle to prohibit involvement in secret societies.

There can be no doubt that the Wesleyan debates reflected a dependence upon the Antimasonic Crusade and ideology of fifteen years before. The records of the Conference show that a review of the Morgan affair and other evidence was presented to the body of delegates in an attempt to demonstrate that Masons "swear their life away at every step they take," and that Masonic associations were "contradictory and inconsistent with Christian character."¹⁷ For the antimasonic delegates, the alternative was singular: "We only ask you to prohibit men from becoming Masons, and provide further, that those who do belong, refrain from attendance upon the meetings and processions of lodges."¹⁸

Many of the outstanding delegates such as Orange Scott of Massachusetts and William H. Brewster of New England reflected a dissenting spirit for a variety of reasons. In full defense of the Masonic relationship, Orange Scott argued that the oath of Freemasonry "involved nothing which would violate the duty we owe to God and man . . . if anything should be required contrary to these duties, masons are absolved from their obligation."¹⁹ Most of the delegates rejected Scott's reasoning, while others accepted the statement because of Scott's reputation. Brewster went a step further to point out that if the radical resolution was adopted it would cast aspersion upon the "undoubted Christian character" of "good men . . . who are united with these societies."²⁰ Lucius Matlack, following an earlier rationale presented by Robert McMurdy, believed that the resolution forbidding membership in a secret society was an unjustifiable test of membership which did not reflect the

¹⁶*Proceedings of the First General Conference of the Wesleyan Methodist Connection of America* (New York: Orange Scott, 1845) p. 483; this work was published along with Luther Lee's edition of *The Debates of the General Conference of the M. E. Church, May 1844*.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 480.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 481.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 482.

²⁰*Ibid.*

original requirements set down by the organizing convention at Utica, and as such, it would necessitate being presented to the annual conferences for ratification. On this questionable issue, Matlack, a prestigious leader since the early days of the Connection, seemed to be attempting to dilute the authority of the General Conference by referral to the annual conferences. He apparently believed that there was insufficient antimasonic sentiment across the Connection at large to support such a radical position. Finally, James Walker of Allegheny closed the initial debate by stating that aside from all of the preceding discussion, "Jesus Christ has given us the plan of the only lawful beneficial society, with every direction for the management of its affairs."²¹ On this note, the delegates adjourned for lunch.

The resolution on secret societies, excluding Orange Scott's amendment substituting "advise" for "prohibit," was presented to the General Conference on October 8, 1844 in the following form by Cyrus Prindle:

Question: Have we any directions to give respecting secret oath-bound societies?

Answer: We will on no account tolerate our ministers and members in joining secret oath-bound societies, or holding fellowship with them, as in the judgement of the Wesleyan Methodist Connection, it is inconsistent with our duties to God and Christianity to hold such connections.

The vote on the matter reflected a serious difference of opinion: twenty-two affirmative, fourteen negative. Almost fifty percent of the voting delegates were opposed to the radical position taken by the Antimasonic majority. Robert McMurdy, secretary to the Conference, noted that a movement began among those in dissent to regard the resolution as "advisory," following Orange Scott's position, while antimasonic elements regarded it as mandatory." So great was the dissent led by Orange Scott, that the Prindle Resolution, as it came to be called, was reopened for further consideration and "warm discussion,"²³ which eventuated in an amendment which directed the final ratification to the annual conferences. In this way, Matlack's suggestion became a form of compromise between the extremes.

As Orange Scott continued to fight for a less definitive position, Edward Smith, the foremost antimason, again reiterated his obligation to his constituency in Pennsylvania and his insistence that the Matlack-Scott amendment be rejected, "as nothing less will be received by us . . ." ²⁴ Smith's oratorical powers having won him the immediate sentiments

²¹*Ibid.*

²²*Ibid.*, p. 483.

²³The resolution and the reactionary debates to it are contained in *Ibid.*, p. 483.

²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 484.

of the delegates present (which did not include many New Englanders), several attempts were made to expand the Wesleyan prohibition to include Odd Fellows, Sons of Temperance, Rechabites, and engravers working for calico printers, all of whom were required to maintain secrecy in their respective relationships. Smith, perhaps sensing a need for a more tactful course, pleaded unfamiliarity with any group beyond Freemasons and Oddfellows ("I did not know there were any such beings in the world"),²⁵ and chose to remain with the general terminology of "secret societies." Over the continuing efforts of Orange Scott to place the question before annual conferences, and the next general conference in 1848 if necessary, the original resolution was adopted a second time, without amendment. One observer noted that the pro-Masonic elements from the Northeast were absent when the vote was taken.

While Edward Smith progressed to other issues of sabbatarianism and peace,²⁶ Orange Scott and the Masonic dissenters contemplated a further presentation of their position. On the final day of the Conference, Lucius Matlack made one last attempt to question the constitutionality of the Prindle Resolution by presenting a counter-resolution prohibiting the adoption of any rule establishing a new test of membership without being ratified by the annual conferences. In so doing, Matlack hoped to indirectly place the Prindle Resolution before the Connection at large and thus invalidate its intent. Apparently the delegates at least agreed that the entire debate upon secret societies had demonstrated that the issue presented ambivalent constitutional ramifications which could touch upon other general conference proceedings in the future. With a fresh recollection of the authoritative position of the Methodist Episcopal General Conference proceedings on slavery, the delegates voted unanimously to adopt Matlack's resolution, which in essence placed every question of membership restriction in the future before the various annual conferences for ratification. Unfortunately for the pro-Masonic delegates, the adoption of the Prindle Resolution, which prohibited Freemasons from Connectional membership, predated the Matlack Resolution by twenty-four hours.

No doubt recognizing that the dissenting Matlack Resolution had come too late for their purposes, a group of eleven dissenters led by Orange Scott and Robert McMurdy composed a document which they called "A Protest of the Minority," and presented it to the Conference for inclusion in the published minutes. The "Protest" summarized their

²⁵*Ibid.*

²⁶The peace issue was significantly antislave in complexion as Southern expansionists rallied behind James Polk of Tennessee in 1844, favoring action against Mexico, if necessary. Whigs and northern abolitionists opposed Texas annexation and the belligerent attitudes of the era which might ultimately lead to war. The Wesleyans thus followed a typically northern antislave position in advocating "peace."

discontent with the provisions of the Prindle Resolution by stating that "the act was not strictly constitutional because it did not carry the approval of the annual conferences," and that the antimasonic delegates established "a new test of membership . . . such as the Holy Scriptures do not authorize." The pro-Masonic bias of Scott and his followers was evident in their pointed assertion: "To say the least, the principle upon which the act proceeds, is of doubtful character, namely that all secret, pledged or oath-bound associations are morally wrong and therefore sinful."²⁷ This pro-Masonic stance simply refused to concede that all Freemasons were bound to commit evil or that their mutual association competed with the cause of Christ. In being decidedly protectionistic of their fraternal ties, they attempted to further alarm the general Connection by stating that the antimasonic resolution violated a basic principle of the Connection, namely the constitutional rights of the annual conferences and individual societies. "Pregnant with the most disastrous consequences to the Connection, if its charter may be violated at one time, it may at another."²⁸

As an observer noted, one of the dissenters conspicuous by the absence of his signature from the "Protest" was Lucius Matlack. He apparently chose not to include his name among the eleven dissenting signatures because the Conference had honored by their adoption his proposition concerning new tests of membership. Curiously, Matlack, whose opinions on the issue were published with the proceedings, pointed out that the spirit of the Prindle Resolution was directed at future membership candidates who evidenced Masonic affiliation, rather than being a statement of disqualification of any person who was already a Wesleyan Methodist and maintained ties with the Fraternity. His views were probably included in the proceedings to mollify any sentiment that the pro-Masonic delegates be disqualified from membership, representing as they did much of the Connection's leadership. On the other side, however, Matlack's position fell far short of traditional antimasonic ideology, which called for an immediate renunciation of Freemasonry when confronted with the "truth." It is also obvious that Matlack had not taken into account the strong influence of delegates like Edward Smith and John Young, who faithfully believed that "it was a sin to be associated with societies of that kind, as most contradictory and inconsistent with Christian character."²⁹

In the eight-year period between the General Conferences of 1844 and 1852, the secret society question was a subject of great controversy

²⁷ *Wesleyan Methodist Proceedings*, p. 489.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 480; while Matlack was more compromise-oriented than Orange Scott and his following, Matlack's position fell far short of acceptability to vehement antimasonic Wesleyans.

within the Connection. Following the first Conference in Cleveland, William Sullivan, an antimasonic delegate from Michigan, had written to his wife of his concern over the "malignity of Masonry" and its grip upon leaders within the Connection:

The Masonic question seemed to involve us in the most trouble of anything that came before us. . . . My confidence was shaken when I heard Scott, Sunderland, Horton, and Lee avow themselves Masons. I have a natural shuddering when I am brought into contact with this foul system. It is too like a pestilence. . . . Oh I could write a book upon it if I should give vent to my feelings. If there is anything that will destroy us it is Masonry. We must put our trust in God.³⁰

In many ways, Sullivan's feelings in 1844 were prophetic of the future stance of Wesleyan Methodists. Since pro-Masonic elements refused to regard the Prindle Resolution as binding, in order to protect fraternal affiliations, the General Conference of 1852 added the footnote, "This section the General Conference ordains as law."³¹

The addition of a footnote, however, served merely to promote further controversy. Dissenting delegates argued that "if the original law was not constitutional, no number of footnotes could make it so." So widespread was the problem within the local churches that Arthur T. Jennings observed that

one pastor would enter upon the duties of his pastorate, and finding members of some of the minor societies would encourage them and perhaps himself become a member of some of the societies. The next pastor would take the opposite course, and the result was endless discord.³²

The General Conference of 1860 authorized a new statement with a blanket prohibition and no footnotes, which read as follows:

We will on no account tolerate our ministers or members in joining or holding fellowship with secret societies, such as Free Masonry or Odd Fellowship, as in the judgement of the Wesleyan Methodist Connection, it is inconsistent with our duties to God to hold such connections.³³

This statement was finally submitted to the various annual conferences between 1860 and 1864 and adopted by a large majority. The Matlack Resolution of 1844 was thus finally observed, and the antimasonic position was validated within the Connection at large, ironically an opposite stance than Matlack had predicted as he proposed referral to the annual conferences. As Jennings later commented, if the delegates had

³⁰Joel Martin, *The Wesleyan Manual or History of Wesleyan Methodism* (Syracuse: Wesleyan Methodist Publishing House, 1889), pp. 22-23; the letter had survived for forty-five years after its writing before Martin procured it for his work.

³¹*The Discipline of the Wesleyan Methodist Connection of America for 1852* (Syracuse: L. C. Matlack, 1852), p. 76n.

³²Arthur T. Jennings, *History of American Wesleyan Methodism* (Syracuse: Wesleyan Methodist Pub. Assn., 1902), p. 64.

³³*The Discipline of the Wesleyan Methodist Connection of America for 1867* (Syracuse: A. Crooks, 1867), p. 125.

settled the question of constitutionality at the first in Cleveland, "the Connection would have saved much of strength and good will and unity."³⁴

Following the Civil War, minor debates still occurred at General Conference meetings on the breadth of application of the Secret Societies Legislation of 1860-74 to numerous fraternal organizations, but the issue was ultimately settled by a circulated resolution of the Champlain New York Conference which called for universal application to all secret associations. When a report was made to the General Conference of 1879, it was noted that the Champlain Conference proposition had been recognized as valid in the annual conferences at a ratio of ten to one in the affirmative. In the 1879 proceedings the delegates voted 50 to 4 in favor of the Champlain proposition.³⁵ A later historian would note that, after the issue was finally settled in 1879, and it was evident that Wesleyan Methodists were uniformly opposed to secret societies, "the rule is probably as well enforced as any other rule of the Church."

It is definitely worth noting that the period of Wesleyan acceptance of the antimasonic position also witnessed the withdrawal of certain premier leaders of the original Connection who were pro-Masonic. Since 1859, and concomitant with the continuing debate on the question of secretism, the Connection was deeply involved in a plan of union with the Methodist Protestants which caused serious reflection upon Wesleyan distinctives. Perhaps the thorniest issue separating the two denominations was the Wesleyan opposition to secret societies. Luther Lee, a perceptive advocate of union, reduced the difficulty to a single issue:

It cannot be denied that the principal opposition to the proposed union grows out of the Secret Society question; those who oppose the Union, are in favor of maintaining our present rule against Secret Societies, without any abatement . . . it is clear then that nothing will satisfy, but an arbitrary, absolute general rule, such as we now have.³⁶

Lee probably hoped that the issue would be finally resolved by submergence into a larger group with the Methodist Protestants, who wanted to allow local churches to decide upon the issue.

As Luther Lee and others determined that the Wesleyans were too reform-oriented in their church law to merge with a body as congregational as the Methodist Protestants, they made plans to move elsewhere themselves. Within the Wesleyan tradition, Ira F. McLeister

³⁴Jennings, *American Wesleyan Methodism*, p. 64 ff.

³⁵*Minutes of the Tenth Quadrennial Session of the General Conference of the Wesleyan Methodist Connection of America 1879* (Syracuse: Wesleyan Methodist Pub., 1879), p. 13. Interestingly, of the votes reported from the various annual conferences on the Champlain proposition, the closest was recorded in Syracuse Conference where the vote was 16 to 10 in the affirmative; cf. p. 9.

³⁶*The American Wesleyan*, April 25, 1866.

observed that "Luther Lee by his writings, debates, and lectures did more than any other man in the Church . . . to set up the ideal of the independence of the local church."³⁷ When, however, the most irritating issue to Lee was not to be silenced and the "arbitrary, absolute general rule" was strongly adhered to, he lost interest in the Connection.

In May 1866 Luther Lee, Lucius C. Matlack, Cyrus Prindle and several others returned to the Methodist Episcopal Church where they had originated. Ostensibly, Prindle had calculated that about 120 former Wesleyans were back in the M. E. Church primarily because that Church was now in sympathy with antislave ideology, and was inviting former abolitionists to renew their former relationships. Lucius C. Matlack was, in fact, "commended for his long devotion to the cause of freedom" by the Philadelphia Conference.³⁸ While it was not true in the case of Cyrus Prindle, there can be little doubt that Lee and Matlack had tired of the controversy over secretism and returned to their former church, where there was no opposition to fraternal relationships. Joel Martin, among others, severely criticized Lee for his defection and disruption of the Connection in the 1860's, while Martin forged ahead with his renewed efforts to support the Wesleyan position that "there is in those various societies an unequal yoking together of believers and unbelievers which the Scriptures forbid."³⁹ With the departure of Lee and Matlack, the principle voices of a pro-Masonic defense were silenced in the Connection.

Several conclusions may be drawn concerning the controversy over secret societies within the Wesleyan Methodist Connection. First of all, Wesleyan Methodists, for theological reasons similar to those of earlier Antimasons, followed a strongly egalitarian-reform tradition which originated in western New York. Wesleyan antimasonry was the next locus along a historical continuum which originated in the Antimasonic Crusade of the 1820's, and was given additional impetus by the energies of Charles G. Finney in the 1830's. Opposition to secret societies of any kind was a stance which reflected anti-elitist, anti-privilege, anti-discriminatory predilections in church and society. The early Wesleyans were committed to the all-inclusive ideals of the Christian gospel and their institutionalization in the Connection, rather than being sympathetic to a fraternal organization which based its membership qualifications upon status, personal connections, and

³⁷Ira F. McLeister, *History of the Wesleyan Methodist Church of America* (Syracuse: Wesley Press, 1951), p. 88.

³⁸*Minutes of the Delaware Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church for 1869* (Wilmington: 1869); also excerpted in Martin, *Wesleyan Manual*, p. 157.

³⁹Martin, *Wesleyan Manual*, p. 137; Martin's work represents a triumph for antimasonic Wesleyanism which continued to thrive after Lee's departure from the Connection.

secret proceedings. Upon a biblical foundation, Wesleyans opposed secret societies because they competed with the cause of Christ.

Secondly, the geographical context of western New York, in which much of the early opposition to secret societies was located, strongly suggests some clues as to the economic and social bases of early Wesleyan Methodism in that region. As Benson has found in his studies, opposition to a privileged order or exclusive social relationship was a peculiar stance among rural New Yorkers who represented agrarian-debtor interests as over against the landlord-bankers associated with urban development. By the 1840's much of the financial base of the Methodist Episcopal Church was located in the cities of the east coast, and this was certainly evident in the administration of the episcopacy. Those who seceded from the ranks of Methodism to become Wesleyans in western New York and Pennsylvania were agrarian frontiersmen who stood in an individualistic, egalitarian tradition which opposed economic, social, and political discrimination. Significantly, those who opposed any statement forbidding membership in a secret society, like L. C. Matlack and Luther Lee, were natives of New England where a more urbanized population and social strata existed. The great struggle of the Jacksonian period was, therefore, evident within the Connection--the forces of privilege versus the forces of reform and egalitarianism.

Finally, it is ironic that reformers of the caliber of Luther Lee and Lucius Matlack who favored the outstanding ecclesiastical reforms leading to the establishment of a new church that was dedicated to anti-slave idealism, would concurrently oppose the democratic and social idealism of antimasonry. The sole reason why Lee supported a primacy of the local church in the organization of the Connection was to protect the right to hold fraternal memberships from a broad scale prohibition at the level of the highest laws of authority in the new Connection--the General Conference. Lee and his supporters joined a particular sector of the reform tradition of the 1840's who may rightly be considered conservative when compared to others such as Charles Finney or William Lloyd Garrison who were thoroughly committed to religious reform in all dimensions. Fortunately, there was a majority of opinion from the beginning which ultimately won acceptance in the Wesleyan ideology that pressed for thoroughgoing religious and social transformation. It is to the credit of those leaders that the Wesleyan Methodist Connection became a nationally recognized force in the American reform tradition.