The greatest setback for United States and Illinois Freemasonry came from within the Masonic organization when in 1826, Willam Morgan was abducted on multiple occasions, and when he eventually disappeared.

William Morgan was a stone mason by trade and who also attempted to operate a distillery in Canada. He was living in Batavia, New York with his young wife and two infant children while that region was first being settled in the newly constituted United States. The United States Constitution had granted all the citizens of the new country the right to free speech, and the freedom of the press, among other inalienable rights.

William Morgan had joined the Masonic fraternity and had witnessed the three degrees, whether all three degrees were regularly received by Morgan, or not.

Due in part to his tendency toward drunkenness, William Morgan was shunned from further participation in Masonic activities, and as a result of his anger at being rejected, he entered into an agreement with a local printer to print the entire Masonic floor work and ritual, despite his Masonic obligation to not do so.

The booklet, which was ultimately printed and distributed to the public was titled, Illustration of Masonry. This booklet was a true accounting of the Masonic ritual and floorwork of that period, complete with the pass and token of the pass for the three degrees. Illustration of Masonry was not different in content from the modern monitors and floorwork manuals available to Masons today. The accuracy of Morgan’s account of the three degrees demonstrates that Morgan was truly educated and practiced as a Master Mason, contrary to some of the rumors which claimed Morgan to be a fraud.

There is substantial evidence to conclude that the Masonic members from upstate New York and Canada conspired to execute the penalties of the Masonic degrees on William Morgan for violating his Masonic oaths. Whether or not the penalties were actually carried out remains to be publicly revealed, but such revelation is moot. William Morgan was known to be abducted by Freemasons from jail, and then Bro. Morgan was not seen again. The Masonic obligations, and penalties of the obligations, provided the evidence needed to convince citizens of the guilt of Freemasons in murdering a man for exercising his right to free speech and freedom of the press.

The United States had just marked its 50th anniversary since the American Revolution, which endowed all Americans with the Bill of Rights. Despite the membership of the Masonic Fraternity being composed of men of the highest moral character and social standing, nearly all Masonic activity was forced to go dark, or was driven to extinction.

This excerpt from the 100th anniversary of Social Lodge #38, Wilmington, Vermont dated June 1, 1915, reveals the effect of this event:

“These men, previous to the Morgan episode which created bitter hatred and rancor against the institution of Freemasonry, were counted among the best, most respectable and law-abiding citizens of this and surrounding towns, and yet, for the reason that they were members of the Institution of Masonry, within whose consecrated walls its votaries were taught that the Holy Bible was to be accepted as the rule and guide to their faith, to be loyal to their country, obedient to its laws, respect for those in civil authority, to exercise brotherly love, relieve the distressed, to practice temperance, fortitude, prudence, and justice, and to be charitable to all mankind; for more than ten years succeeding the year 1826 endured social, religious and political persecution. Families became divided, brothers were estranged, and churches, in many instances, demanded that their members who were of the Order should renounce all further allegiance to Freemasonry or suffer excommunication; they were denied civil rights, in that, they were held to be unfit men for jury duty and untrustworthy for political office.”

In some ways it is ironic that members of the Masonic fraternity were among those who started the American Revolution. It was Freemsons who contributed ideas of freedom to the founding principles of the United States; and then just fifty years later jeopardized their own institution by continuing to give membership oaths that required Freemasons to commit acts against the very foundations of the free society they fought for.

The year 2026 marks the 200th anniversary of the Morgan Affair. Some Masonic jurisdictions have enacted changes to their ritual that specifically informs the candidate that the penalties of their obligation were an ancient practice, and today the penalties are only symbolic. However, some Grand Lodge jurisdictions, such as the Grand Lodge of Illinois, continue to obligate new members to the ancient penalties without regard for the candidate’s rights to free speech and freedom of the press.

It was true that Freemasonry was at one time a secret organization and that the penalties for revealing its secrets were serious and real; however, the American Revolution transformed Freemasonry, inadvertently or by design, from a secret society into a private society. We may be setting ourselves up for a future repeat of the Morgan Affair by not bringing our supposedly solemn obligations in line with modern laws of individual freedoms; which again, were inspired and fought for by Freemasons.