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TRAGEDY IN MALONE



TWENTY-TWO-YEAR-OLD Almon Wheeler came to the frontier town of Malone, New York, in 1812 with his teenage bride, Eliza, and a head full of dreams. He wanted to buy some land, build a home, start a family, and become a lawyer.¹

Almon had been born in Fairfield, Vermont, a town named for his father's birthplace in Connecticut, on October 1, 1789, four months and a day after George Washington had been inaugurated president.² When he was eighteen, he had enrolled in the University of Vermont but had dropped out before graduating to head west with other Vermonters who were looking for new opportunities.³ Before he left the Green Mountain state for Malone, he married seventeen-year-old Eliza Woodward of Castleton, Vermont.⁴ She was a strong woman with keen black eyes and a commanding figure. People who knew her were impressed by her firm character and strong convictions. They said she "never swerved a hair when her mind was fully made up."⁵

When Almon and Eliza first arrived, Malone was barely ten years old. It was the county seat for Franklin County, which had been created in 1808.⁶ Bordering Canada on the north, Franklin County lies between Clinton County and Lake Champlain on the east and St. Lawrence County on the west. The landscape of the central and southern sections of Franklin County is dominated by the Adirondack Mountains. Malone is in the northern part of the county, forty miles north of Saranac Lake, and about fifty miles east of Plattsburgh.

Within a year after the Wheelers settled in Malone, Almon put his dreams into action. He borrowed money and purchased a half-acre lot on Elm Street and built a home.⁷ He also convinced the Franklin County court to suspend its rules for the admission of attorneys and swear him in as a lawyer without requiring him to study law with an attorney for the requisite number of years.⁸

Almon had not practiced law very long before life in the North Country was disrupted by war. Congress declared war on Great Britain on June 18, 1812. As hostilities broke out all along the Canadian border in the opening rounds of the War of 1812, Eliza gave birth to the couple's first child, Jane, in 1813.⁹

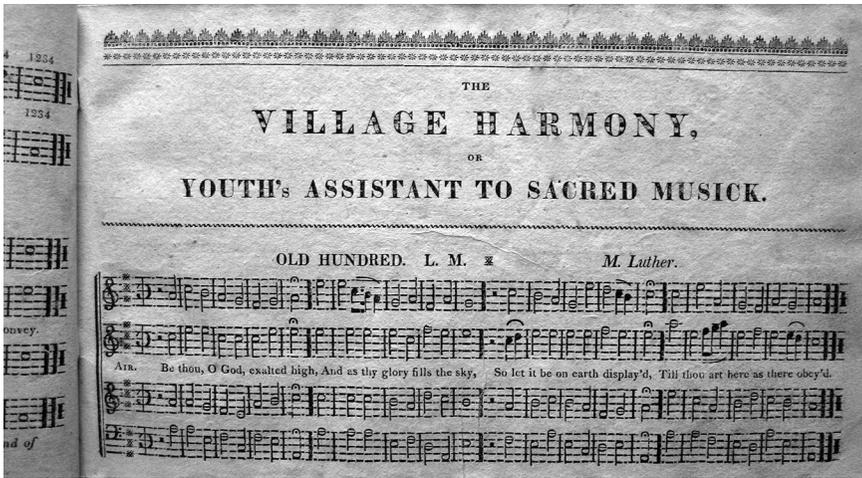
A year later, in September 1814, Almon answered a call for military help that had been sent to Malone from Plattsburgh. Volunteers were urgently needed to help the U.S. Army stop a powerful force of British veterans from advancing down Lake Champlain from Canada and cutting off the New England states from the rest of the Union. Almon took up arms and fought as a volunteer at the battle of Plattsburgh.¹⁰ The battle was a turning point in the war, which officially came to an end a few months later with the signing of the Treaty of Ghent on December 24, 1814.¹¹

The end of the war brought joy to the Wheeler household in Malone and a second child, Sarah Fidelia, born on November 27, 1815.¹² The conclusion of the war also brought Almon a legal rival. He was Asa Hascall, a twenty-nine-year-old Vermont native who had been studying law in Essex County before he came to Malone.¹³

Hascall was politically well connected with the faction of the Democratic-Republican Party, which was led by Governor DeWitt Clinton. In 1818, Governor Clinton appointed Hascall to be Franklin County district attorney, a post he would hold, except for two years, until 1846.¹⁴ Hascall was popular with Malone voters who elected him town supervisor in seventeen consecutive elections beginning in 1818.¹⁵ He was a political powerhouse in Franklin County and was destined to play an important role in the fate of the Wheeler family, particularly in the life of Eliza and Almon's third child, William Almon Wheeler, who was born on June 30, 1819, one month after Walt Whitman was born on Long Island, and one month before Herman Melville was born in New York City.¹⁶

Bill Wheeler's father now had a wife and three children to support and a large mortgage on his house to pay. He began to dabble in local Democratic-Republican politics in order to find a way to earn additional revenue and generate legal business. His political activities soon paid off. In 1820, Almon was appointed Malone postmaster.¹⁷

Eliza and Almon's family grew up in a religious household. They regularly attended Congregational Church services, which were conducted by the Reverend



The Village Harmony songbook. Courtesy of the Franklin County Historical and Museum Society.

Ashbel Parmelee who had come from Vermont to Malone in 1809. He served as pastor of the church for the next thirty-six years.¹⁸ Almon was also an officer in the Franklin County Bible Society and a Mason in the same lodge as the Reverend Parmelee.¹⁹ When Bill was four years old, a Congregational Church Sunday School was organized and his parents saw to it that Bill rarely missed a class.²⁰

Religion also permeated the Wheeler home in the form of music. Bill's father owned a songbook, *The Village Harmony: or Youth's Assistant to Sacred Music*. It contained sheet music, words to psalms, and sacred music that was popular in the early nineteenth century. An introduction to the book included instructions about how to read music and also had lessons for tuning the voice.²¹ Because of the musical instruction Bill received from his parents and older sisters at home, he developed into a fine singer.

When Bill Wheeler's family was not praying or singing, they were concerned about paying their bills and putting food on the table. In the 1820s, nothing sounded better to promote economic growth and development in Malone and the North Country than a canal. The opening of the Champlain Canal in 1823 created an all-water route from Lake Champlain to New York City that cut the dependence of the North Country's agricultural and lumbering interests on Quebec as a market. Goods that previously had to go north to Canada could now be sent south to New York City. As an added benefit, the door to more and cheaper imports was flung wide open.²²

Across the North Country, there was vigorous agitation for an east–west canal to be built from Lake Champlain to the St. Lawrence River.²³ In 1824, the legislature subsidized the design of a proposed 133-mile route that went from Ogdensburg in St. Lawrence County on the St. Lawrence River, east through Malone in Franklin County, on to the Chazy River in Champlain, and from there to Lake Champlain.²⁴

Boston financial interests joined North Country canal advocates in promoting a canal from Ogdensburg to Lake Champlain. Their vision was to win commerce for Boston from the Great Lakes. Some saw the port of Ogdensburg on the St. Lawrence River as the destination point from Boston because at that time, Ogdensburg was the foot of sloop and steam transportation from Lake Ontario. With the help of canals from Boston to Lake Champlain and another around Niagara Falls (the Welland Canal was in the planning stages), Boston would be able to access the commerce of all of the Great Lakes.²⁵

Because of the high costs and the difficult geographic obstacles canal builders had to face, none of the plans for canals from Lake Champlain to Ogdensburg moved beyond the drawing boards. The dream of a Boston–North Country–Great Lakes transportation system would have to await the coming of the railroad and the maturation of young Bill Wheeler.

Bill was six years old when his father became a major legal figure in one of the most notorious criminal trials that had ever been held to date in the North Country. Almon agreed to defend Stephen Videtoe, the first murderer brought to trial in Franklin County.²⁶ Following an investigation by District Attorney Hascall, Videtoe had been arrested and charged with murdering his fiancée, Fanny Mosley. A tailor by trade and pregnant at the time of her murder, she had been living with Videtoe and his family in their two-room house in Fort Covington where she was found shot to death on her bed, two days before her wedding. Videtoe denied shooting Fanny and proclaimed his innocence.²⁷

The trial became the center of attention in the North Country. For five long days, Hascall and Almon fought it out in the courtroom. When they rested their cases, a jury took fifteen minutes to find Videtoe guilty. He was sentenced to be hanged in a field a half-mile away from the Wheeler home on Elm Street. One eyewitness said that six- to eight thousand people witnessed the hanging.²⁸ As a result of his vigorous defense of Videtoe, Almon won the respect and admiration of the North Country bar in general, and District Attorney Hascall in particular. Two years later, he would show his high regard for Almon's character by helping Almon's son Bill, and his family, when they really needed it. However, before that happened, another crime took place almost three hundred miles west of Malone that set in motion political events that would also greatly influence Bill Wheeler's future.



Luther Bradish. Brady-Handy Collection, Library of Congress.

In 1826, a Mason named William Morgan of Batavia, New York, published an expose of the secrets and rituals of Freemasonry. Suddenly, Morgan disappeared. Wild rumors had it that he had been taken out on a boat on the Niagara River and murdered by Masons to protect their order. People began to say that Morgan's killers would never be brought to justice because the prosecutors and judges were Masons. Morgan's disappearance and the resultant public outcry led to what some historians have called "the first mass movement in American history." Soon, what had begun as a campaign to protest the undue influence of Masons on governmental affairs, turned into a political crusade and the Anti-Masonic Party was born. Its main goal was to make sure that no Mason would be elected to public office. Masons by the score renounced their affiliations. Churches were torn asunder in the excitement and preachers thundered from the pulpit against the Masons. Before the year was out, the existence of the Masonic lodges in Malone and nearby Chateaugay was being threatened.²⁹

Astute politicians such as Thurlow Weed, Millard Fillmore, Francis Granger, William Seward, and Franklin County's own Luther Bradish, correctly saw the political potential of the anti-Masonic fervor that was sweeping east across New York State and began to make plans to use it to win political power. In 1826, Luther Bradish, one of the absentee owners of land in the Town of Moira, which lay directly west of Malone, relocated his home to a farm there. He became a leader of the anti-Masonic movement in the North Country and began to make plans to run for the assembly from Franklin County.³⁰ He would become one of the most popular and influential political leaders in New York State. Bradish's success prepared political leaders across the state to accept leadership from a Franklin County man who lived miles away from the urban centers of power and influence.

The Wheeler household was shaken by the power and fury of the anti-Masonic movement. Almon had been an early member of the Masonic lodge in Malone. Many of his fellow lawyers, friends, and clients were Masons. However shaken the Wheelers were by the social and political ramifications of the anti-Masonic movement, nothing prepared them for the family disaster that happened next. On January 5, 1827, thirty-seven-year-old Almon Wheeler suddenly became ill and died.³¹

His wife Eliza was thirty-three. Almon left her no money to support their three children: Jane, age fourteen; Sarah Fidelia, age eleven; and William Almon, age seven. The home on Elm Street was mortgaged heavily and Eliza did not know how she was going to pay the bills and raise her children.³² She worried about what would happen to her children without a father and without money, especially her youngest child, seven-year-old Bill.