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Sir Alfred Constantine Barry (1815–1888): Minister, Educator, Mason

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Abstract

This work represents a biography of A. Constantine Barry (1815–1888), an American minister and prominent public figure, who at the height of his career served as the 4th Superintendent of Public Instruction of the state of Wisconsin.

The study's source base incorporated the following three groups: 1) collections of published documents; 2) museum items; 3) sources of private origin.

The findings revealed that, a dedicated missionary minister all his life, A.C. Barry preached in eight different localities within the state of New York and four localities within the state of Wisconsin. His life can be divided into two distinct time periods – (1) before 1857 and (2) after 1857.

During the first period, beginning in 1836, he engaged in missionary work and served as a Mason, and, following his relocation to Racine, WI, in 1846, he engaged in promoting the temperance cause and championed the idea of enacting prohibition in the state of Wisconsin, supervised public education in Racine, was active as a Mason, engaged in research work, was a member of several scientific societies, and served as the 4th Superintendent of Public Instruction of Wisconsin in 1856–1857.

In 1857, A.C. Barry was a guest at the inauguration of President James Buchanan. During his visit to Washington, DC, he was one of several dozen guests stricken by the "National Hotel disease" – which some suspected was an attempted poisoning – and would suffer from its after-effects for the rest of his life. The disease is likely to have been behind his not running for another term as Superintendent of Public Instruction of Wisconsin. There was also a sharp drop in his activity as a Mason. He opted to focus on missionary work. However, the Civil War would change his plans, with him going off to serve as a chaplain – which he did for about 2 years. During that

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period, he also engaged in volunteer recruitment work and served one term in the Wisconsin State Assembly. After the war, A.C. Barry continued his missionary service; he established a church in Elkhorn, WI. That was the height of his activity in the postwar period.

Keywords: Alfred Constantine Barry (1815–1888), 4th Wisconsin Infantry Regiment, chaplain, Reverend, Civil War, Union Army, Mason, Racine Lodge No. 18, Superintendent of Public Instruction of Wisconsin, National Hotel disease.

1. Introduction

Alfred Constantine Barry (July 15, 1815 – March 5, 1888) was an American educator, politician, Universalist minister, and Wisconsin pioneer. Born at Walton, Delaware County, NY, he moved with his parents to Victor, Ontario County, NY, when he was a child. He was raised there and acquired a good education under private tutors, with his preceptor being the Rev. Jacob Chase, of Geneva, Ontario County, NY ([Butterfield, 1880: 989](#)). He was ordained a Universalist minister in 1836 and pastored for 10 years at various locations around New York (Gaines, Orleans County; Homer, Cortland County; Fort Plain, Montgomery County). During that period, he became a member of a Masonic lodge under the jurisdiction of the Grand Lodge of New York. In 1846, he moved to Racine, WI, where he would reside for 18 years. He remained a resident of the state of Wisconsin up until his passing.

2. Materials and methods

The study's source base incorporated the following three groups: 1) collections of published documents; 2) museum items; 3) sources of private origin.

In considering the first group, primary mention has to be given to the two-volume work 'Roster of Wisconsin Volunteers, War of the Rebellion, 1861–1865' ([Roster of Wisconsin..., 1886; Roster of Wisconsin..., 1886a](#)), which contains material on A.C. Barry's service as chaplain with the 4th Wisconsin Infantry Regiment and the 19th Wisconsin Infantry Regiment. In addition, use was made of the annual *Proceedings of the Grand Annual Communication of the Grand Lodge of Wisconsin* (1848–1855) to gain information on his service with Racine Lodge No. 18 ([Proceedings..., 1848; Proceedings..., 1850; Proceedings..., 1851; Proceedings..., 1852; Proceedings..., 1854](#)).

In terms of the second group, central is A.C. Barry's rare Masonic sword, now part of the collection of the Museum of the History of the American Knights Templar at Cherkas Global University (Houston, USA) ([Figures 1–4](#)) ([MHAKT CGU. Collection 1st. Catalog no. 083/KT072](#)).



Fig. 1. Rare Masonic sword which used to belong to A.C. Barry ([MHAKT CGU. Collection 1st. Catalog no. 083/KT072](#))

The sword appears to date back to when there were no Knights Templar parades yet – the scabbard has no rings to attach it to the belt, which may place it in the 1860s. It is adorned with multiple Masonic ornaments that used to be utilized only by members of the Masonic order of Knights Templar. In fact, the collection of the Museum of the History of the American Knights Templar at Cherkas Global University contains several swords with similar ornaments and inscribed with the names of their owners, and those individuals were doubtless connected with the Masonic order of Knights Templar – e.g., Eugene F. Falconnet (1830–1887) ([MHAKT CGU. Collection 1st. Catalog no. 034/KT030](#)), James E. Allonson (1846–1913) ([MHAKT CGU. Collection 1st. Catalog no. 046/KT042](#)), and others.



Fig. 2. Sword's hilt and guard



Fig. 3. Sword's scabbard



Fig. 4. Inscription on the sword's hilt – 'A.C. Barry, Wis.'

The sword is marked with two names – W. Clauberg and Virgil Price, NY, which may suggest that it was manufactured between 1859 and 1870 ([Hamilton et al., 2008: 208, 210](#)).

The third group of sources is a set of writings published by A.C. Barry in his magazine, *The Old Oaken Bucket* (Barry, 1849).

In terms of methodology, use was primarily made of the retrospective and biographical methods.

3. Discussion

The historiography on A.C. Barry is relatively thin. There is a short biography of him in C.W. Butterfield's 'The History of Columbia County, Wisconsin' (Butterfield, 1880). As a side note, the last place of residence of A.C. Barry's family was the city of Lodi, located in Columbia County. In general, the work is relatively scant biographically, with no information whatsoever on anyone's membership with Masonic organizations. At the same time, it provides a pretty detailed biographical account of the life of A.C. Barry. For instance, it even lists the exact date he was mustered out after the Civil War. Essentially, it may be regarded as a personal autobiography of A.C. Barry (Butterfield, 1880: 989), which doubtless adds to the value of that publication.

The other work that provides an insight into the legacy of A.C. Barry is J. Schafer's 'Prohibition in Early Wisconsin' (Schafer, 1925), which touches upon his active work with the Sons of Temperance society.

4. Results

A. Constantine Barry and the fight for temperance

In 1848, Wisconsin became a state, and that same year there started in the region the fight for temperance, with the Sons of Temperance establishing a Grand Division in Milwaukee. (The Sons of Temperance was a society founded on the east coast with a mission promoting a lifestyle abstinent from alcohol.) The minister A.C. Barry, too, joined the temperance movement. What is more, he would become active as a member of that organization. In addition, in Racine he would found and edit (1849–1852) a temperance magazine known as *The Old Oaken Bucket* (Figure 5). The magazine was made the official organ of the Wisconsin Grand Division Sons of Temperance (Schafer, 1925: 284).

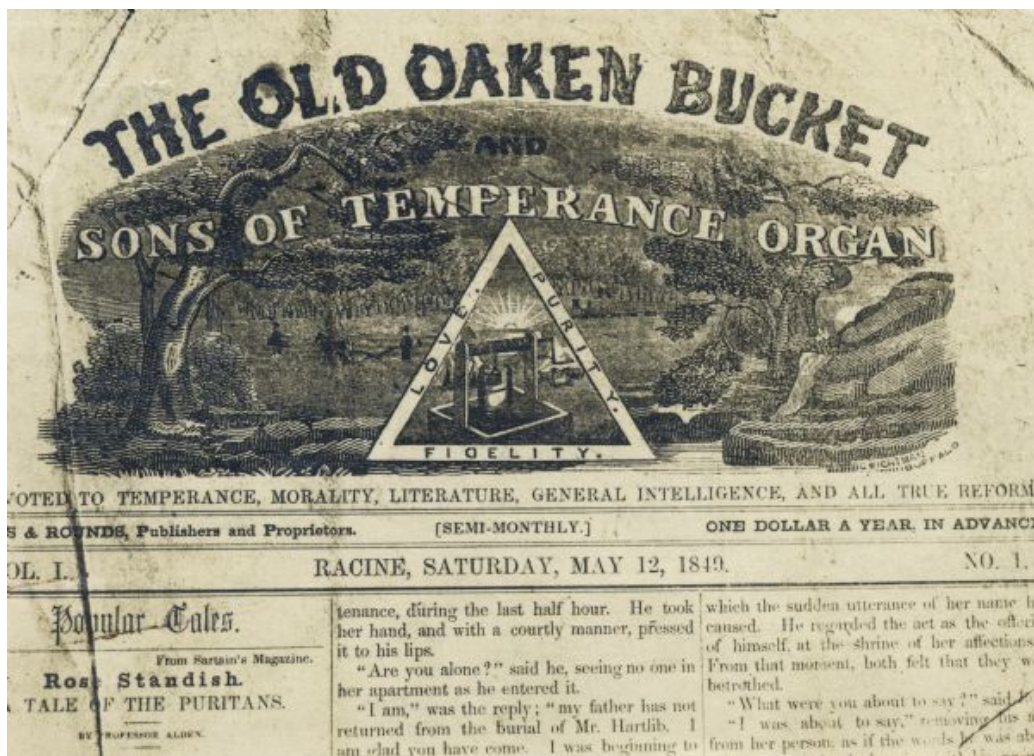


Fig. 5. Front page of *The Old Oaken Bucket* magazine

The Sons of Temperance succeeded in causing a law to be enacted in 1849 requiring vendors to pay a \$1,000 bond on which they could be sued for damages caused by customers consuming their liquor. It was viewed as a tentative achievement, with Sons of Temperance member A.C. Barry

having this to say about it in *The Old Oaken Bucket*: “Generally speaking, it will remain a dead letter on the statute books. There is a greater law opposed to it and which renders it a nullity. Unless enlightened public opinion and sentiment go along with a law and sustain it, it is good for nothing” (Barry, 1849: 169).

The law did not suit anyone, with the Sons of Temperance and A.C. Barry insisting on complete prohibition of liquor vis-à-vis those opposed to anti-liquor legislation demanding that liquor be allowed to be sold freely and with no bonds imposed (Schafer, 1925: 288).

As a side note, much opposition to liquor prohibition came from Wisconsin’s growing German population, as for those people beer was socially and culturally important and the brewing process was central to communal life. Consequently, in 1851 a new law was adopted requiring a bond of only \$500, half of the original required bond. The law’s passage was lamented by the Sons, including A.C. Barry, who in *The Old Oaken Bucket* characterized the defeat as an abandonment of Wisconsin’s historical temperance pedigree.

The 1851 defeat coincided with a continued rise in the beer-positive German population, with the Sons of Temperance effectively losing their political power by 1855.

A. Constantine Barry as an educator

In 1848, the government of Wisconsin undertook to reform its school system – by replacing a territorial system with centralized governance with a system of independent school districts. Virtually concurrently with his arrival in Racine and engagement in the fight for temperance, A.C. Barry became involved in local education matters.

He was an advocate of the educational theories of Horace Mann, and supported the creation of district normal schools and teacher’s institutes, and the consolidation of school districts.

In 1849, Wisconsin introduced a system of free public schools, funded with taxpayer money. A.C. Barry served as the first supervisor of the public schools in Racine from 1849 to 1853. The introduction of the system of free public schools would lead to a sharp drop in the number of private primary schools in Wisconsin.

However, the 1848 school statute was such a jumble that the legislature, recognizing serious deficiencies, established a revision commission to codify and rationalize school law. Eventually, in 1862 a new law forced all school districts in Wisconsin to relinquish their authority to county superintendents.

In 1855, A.C. Barry became the 4th Superintendent of Public Instruction of Wisconsin. He would hold that office until 1857. (Butterfield, 1880: 989).

A member of the Democratic Party, A.C. Barry was a guest at the inauguration of James Buchanan (15th US president) in 1857. He and his wife were among several dozen guests at the National Hotel in Washington, DC, stricken by the so-called “National Hotel disease” (Butterfield, 1880: 989). The serious consequences the poisoning had for A.C. Barry are mentioned in several biographical accounts. As a side note, some regard the National Hotel disease as one of the United States’ biggest crime mysteries of the 19th century. President James Buchanan, too, was afflicted, but managed to recover. The disease was peculiar in that the majority of the hotel’s guests stricken by it would not be able to recover from and continue to be sick with it for the rest of their lives. For instance, Representative John Montgomery of Pennsylvania died at the age of 51 a month after contracting the disease, with Representative John Quitman of Mississippi passing at the age of 60 a year and 4 months after contracting it and Representative David Robinson of Pennsylvania passing at the age of 43 2 years after doing so.

Due to the after-effects of contracting the disease, A.C. Barry had to substantially limit his public and pedagogical activity. He did not run for re-election as Superintendent in 1857.

A.C. Barry was well-versed in the natural sciences and had been for many years a corresponding member of the Academy of Sciences of Philadelphia, the Boston Natural History Association, and the Buffalo Scientific Association (Butterfield, 1880: 989).

A. Constantine Barry during the Civil War

At the outbreak of the American Civil War, A.C. Barry volunteered for service in the Union Army and was enrolled as chaplain of the 4th Wisconsin Infantry Regiment, serving in that role from June 15, 1861 to June 8, 1862. As a side note, in 1863 the 4th Wisconsin Infantry Regiment was converted to the 4th Wisconsin Cavalry Regiment (Roster of Wisconsin..., 1886: 156-157).

On his return to Wisconsin, he served on the local recruiting board and was engaged in volunteer recruitment work.

In the 1863 general election, he was elected to the Wisconsin State Assembly, representing Kenosha County in the 17th Wisconsin Legislature.

On April 4, 1864, after the end of the legislative session, he returned to active duty as chaplain for the 19th Wisconsin Infantry Regiment, and served 10 months with that regiment ([Roster of Wisconsin..., 1886a: 112](#)). On February 9, 1865, A.C. Barry received an appointment from President Abraham Lincoln to serve as chaplain of the United States Hospitals.

He mustered out on August 15, 1865 ([Butterfield, 1880: 989](#)).

A.C. Beckwith's 'History of Walworth County, Wisconsin', published in 1912, draws upon the recollections of some of the region's longtime residents. In 1868–1878, A.C. Barry resided in Elkhorn, Walworth County, where he established a church. Of interest is the fact that he and his service as chaplain during the Civil War would be remembered by residents nearly 50 years later, and on top of that they would even quote one of his sayings – “While in military service he said or wrote that he had been preaching universal salvation for many years, but was at last convinced that hell was just then a military necessity” ([Beckwith, 1912: 303](#)).

After the war, he was an active member of the Wisconsin Commandery of the Military Order of the Loyal Legion, and served as chaplain of the organization for many years.



Fig. 6. A. Constantine Barry (photographed between the 1870s and 1880s)

In the spring of 1864, A.C. Barry moved his family to Fond du Lac, WI, where he resided for 4 years. In 1868, he moved to Elkhorn, WI, where he established a church. He finally moved to Lodi, WI, in April 1878, where he resided for the rest of his life ([Butterfield, 1880: 989](#)).

A. Constantine Barry as a Mason

In 1846, A.C. Barry moved to Racine, WI. As a side note, on May 29, 1848, an eastern portion of the Territory of Wisconsin, which at the time was an organized and incorporated territory of the United States, was admitted to the Union as the State of Wisconsin, the US's 30th. Interestingly, just shortly before that, in January 1848, Racine became home to Racine Lodge No. 18. The lodge was founded by 10 Master Masons (most of whom were not locals), with A.C. Barry being one of them ([Proceedings..., 1848: 75](#)). Back then, a new lodge could be formed by a group of not less than seven Master Masons ([Webb, 1816: 84](#)). In 1848, Racine Lodge No. 18 numbered just 14 members – 10 Master Masons (two of them officers), one Fellow Craft, and three Entered Apprentices ([Proceedings..., 1848: 75](#)). The following year, 1849, the lodge now had 24 members – nine officers, 14 Master Masons, and one Entered Apprentice ([Proceedings..., 1850: 115-116](#)). In 1850, A.C. Barry was installed as Chaplain of Racine Lodge No. 18 ([Proceedings..., 1851: 101](#)). While no information of this kind is available for 1851, it is known that in 1852 A.C. Barry was still the lodge's Chaplain ([Proceedings..., 1852: 111](#)).

No information on Racine Lodge No. 18 is available for 1853. A.C. Barry is listed among the lodge's Master Masons in the 1854 report ([Proceedings..., 1854: 67](#)). There is no mention of him being with Racine Lodge No. 18 in the 1855 report ([Proceedings..., 1855: 101-102](#)).

On February 7, 1855, Racine became home to Orient Charter No. 12 of the Grand Chapter of Royal Arch Masons of the State of Wisconsin. No reports are available on the activity of that organization for 1855–1863. However, there is reason to believe that it is in that timeframe that A.C. Barry became a member thereof. This conclusion is based on the fact that A.C. Barry was among the Companions of that Masonic organization in 1864 ([Proceedings of the Grand Chapter..., 1864: 62](#)).

In 1865, despite A.C. Barry and his family having left Racine, he continued to be one of the Companions of that Masonic organization ([Proceedings of the Grand Chapter..., 1865: 63](#)).

There was a similar situation in 1866–1870 ([Proceedings of the Grand Chapter..., 1866: 55](#); [Proceedings of the Grand Chapter..., 1867: 76](#); [Proceedings of the Grand Chapter..., 1868: 92](#); [Proceedings of the Grand Chapter..., 1869: 79](#); [Proceedings of the Grand Chapter..., 1870: 65](#)). It is difficult to say for how long A.C. Barry remained a member of Orient Charter No. 12 of the Grand Chapter of Royal Arch Masons of the State of Wisconsin, but from 1877 the records no longer listed him as a member of that organization.

On January 6, 1866, Racine became home to Racine Commandery No. 7. However, there is no mention of A.C. Barry in the records of the Grand Commandery of Knights Templar for the State of Wisconsin for 1867 and 1873–1878 either as a member of Racine Commandery No. 7 or one of any other commandery. He might have been a member of the Masonic order of Knights Templar for a short period of time, and, while records are yet to be found on his service with the Knights Templar, the only historical reminder of that experience is his Masonic sword.

5. Conclusion

A dedicated missionary minister all his life, A.C. Barry preached in eight different localities within the state of New York and four localities within the state of Wisconsin. His life can be divided into two distinct time periods – (1) before 1857 and (2) after 1857.

During the first period, beginning in 1836, he engaged in missionary work and served as a Mason, and, following his relocation to Racine, WI, in 1846, he engaged in promoting the temperance cause and championed the idea of enacting prohibition in the state of Wisconsin, supervised public education in Racine, was active as a Mason, engaged in research work, was a member of several scientific societies, and served as the 4th Superintendent of Public Instruction of Wisconsin in 1856–1857.

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After the war, A.C. Barry continued his missionary service; he established a church in Elkhorn, WI. That was the height of his activity in the postwar period.

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