

# NICHOLAS G. CHESEBRO

**Born:** March 19, 1788, Stonington, CT

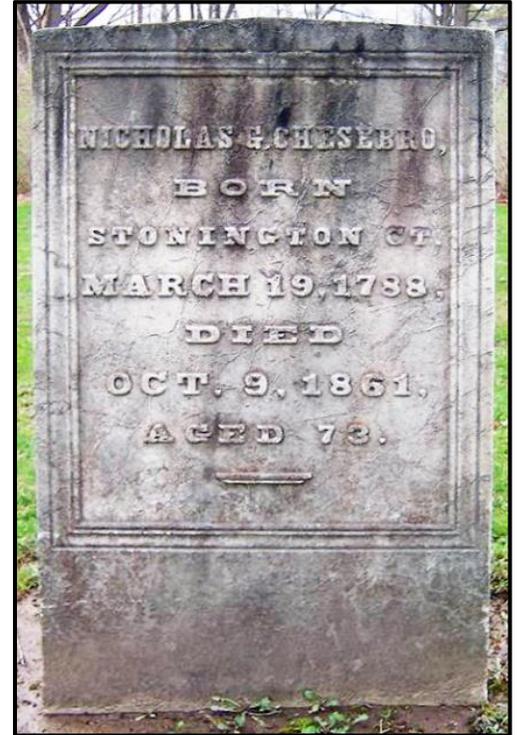
**Died:** October 9, 1861, Canandaigua, NY

**Cemetery Location:** Section 18 Lot 1

Little is known of Nicholas Chesebro prior to coming to New York, but he left his mark in the history of Canandaigua and beyond. Nicholas served as a local coroner and postmaster in Canandaigua and was a member of the local Freemasons where he served as a Master Mason. His wife, Betsey, was a hatter. They had several children, one of which, Caroline, became a well-known author and started *The Packard Quarterly*.

As a member of the Freemasons, he and his fellow members are sworn to maintain the secrets to this fraternity. He, and a couple of his friends, learned of a man that has made a lucrative deal to write a book about the inner workings of the Freemasons. This man is William Morgan. Morgan was born in Virginia, served as a captain in the War of 1812 and later married Lucinda Pendleton, also of Virginia. After his marriage, they moved to York (Toronto), Canada where he operated a brewery.

After his business was destroyed by fire, Morgan was reduced to poverty. He then returned with his family to the United States, settling first in Rochester, NY, and later in Batavia, where he worked as a bricklayer and stonecutter. Nineteenth-century local histories described Morgan as a heavy drinker and a gambler, characterizations disputed by Morgan's friends and supporters.



William Morgan

Morgan claimed to have been made a Master Mason while he was living in Canada, and he appears to have briefly attended a lodge in Rochester. In 1825, Morgan received the Royal Arch degree at LeRoy's Western Star Chapter Number 33, having declared under oath that he had previously received the six degrees that preceded it. It has never been established if he actually received these degrees and if so from which lodge. Morgan then attempted unsuccessfully to help establish or visit lodges and chapters in Batavia, but he was denied participation by members who disapproved of his character and even questioned his claims to Masonic membership. Morgan finally announced that he was going to publish an exposé titled *Illustrations of Masonry*, critical of the Freemasons and revealing their secret degree ceremonies in detail.

Morgan declared that a local newspaper publisher, David Cade Miller, had given him a sizable advance for the work. Miller is said to have received the entered apprentice degree (the first degree of Freemasonry), but had been stopped from advancement by the objection of Batavia lodge members. Morgan was promised one-fourth of the profits, and the financial backers of the venture—Miller, John David (Morgan's landlord), and Russel Dyer - entered into a \$500,000 penal bond with Morgan to guarantee its publication.

Since Masons place their hands on a Bible and promise not to reveal the passwords and grips of the degrees, several members of the Batavia lodge published an advertisement denouncing Morgan for breaking his word by authoring the book. An attempt was also made to set fire to Miller's newspaper office and print shop.

On August 9, 1826 an advertisement taken out by Nicholas Chesebro, serving as the Master of the Canandaigua Lodge at the time, first in a local paper, and reprinted in many others throughout the region read:

**NOTICE AND CAUTION:**

***If a man calling himself William Morgan should intrude himself on the Community they should be on their guard, particularly the Masonic Fraternity. Morgan was in this village in May last, and his conduct while here and elsewhere calls forth this notice. Any information in relation to Morgan can be obtained by calling at the Masonic Hall in this village. Brethren and Companions are particularly requested to observe, mark and govern themselves accordingly. Morgan is considered a swindler and a dangerous man. There are people in this village who would be happy to see this Captain Morgan.***

On September 11, 1826, Morgan was arrested for supposed nonpayment of a loan and allegedly stealing a shirt and a tie; according to the laws of the time he could be held in debtors' prison until restitution was made, which would have made it more difficult to publish his book. Morgan was jailed in Canandaigua, and when Miller learned of this, he went to the jail to pay the debt and secure Morgan's release. Morgan was released, but then re-arrested and charged with supposedly failing to pay a two dollar tavern bill. While the jailer was away, a group of men convinced the jailer's wife to release Morgan; they walked to a waiting carriage with a resistant Morgan screaming "Murder, Murder!". The carriage arrived two days later at Fort Niagara. Shortly afterwards, Morgan disappeared.

There are conflicting accounts of what happened next. The generally accepted version of events is that Morgan was taken in a boat to the middle of the Niagara River and thrown overboard, where he presumably drowned, since he was never seen again in the community. In 1848, Henry L. Valance allegedly confessed on his deathbed to taking part in Morgan's murder. One group of Freemasons denied that Morgan was killed, alleging that they had paid him \$500 to leave the country. Morgan was reportedly seen later, including in other countries, but none of the reports were confirmed.

***Not sure why Morgan would accept \$500 when he was promised \$500,000 for writing the book, but it sounds good!***

Eventually, Eli Bruce, the sheriff of Niagara County and a Mason, was removed from office and tried for his involvement in Morgan's disappearance; he served 28 months in prison after being convicted of conspiracy for his role in kidnapping Morgan and holding him against his will before his disappearance. Three other Masons, Loton Lawson, Nicholas Chesebro, and Edward Sawyer, were convicted of taking part in the kidnapping and served sentences. In several trials that spread from 1828 to 1831, six masons were convicted of kidnapping (not then a felony in New York), conspiracy to kidnap, false imprisonment, assault and battery. Nicholas Chesebro served a sentence of one year.

After all the turmoil that Chesebro was involved in from the mid-1820's to the early 1830's, he still managed in the following years from 1840 to 1860, to live in Canandaigua; and still holding offices, including that of president of the village (1836-1840, 1841-1844), postmaster (1853-1858), and director of what would become the Northern Central Railroad.

All versions of the kidnapping of William Morgan seem to be similar, however there are many different theories to his final disappearance. This may be one of the biggest unsolved, and forgotten, local mysteries!

I guess we may never know, but it sure is interesting.

Nicholas Chesebro and his family were originally interred in West Avenue Cemetery in Canandaigua, NY. Like many, the family was disinterred and moved to the beautiful grounds of Woodlawn after its opening in 1884.

