

“A SKELETON IN OHIO'S BACKWOODS CLOSET”

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This afternoon I'd like to reminisce with you for a few moments about a little bit of Ohio history that has almost been lost and forgotten in the 170 years since it occurred - but which for almost a century was the subject of a raging debate between politicians and historians and the people of the great Ohio Valley - and which even today, nearly two centuries later, is still clouded with mystery. It is a story with all the ingredients of a great, historical novel - intrigue in high places, famous actors, treason, mob scenes, court room drama, stark tragedy - and all of this portrayed against the backdrop of a little island in the middle of the Ohio River at a time when Ohio was still a dense forest land. It was almost totally unpopulated except for a few hardy souls at Marietta and Cincinnati who were beginning to carve out a new land from the forest which had, until a few years before, been the sole possession of the great Shawnee, the Mingo, the Miami, the Tuscaroras and the other tribes of the Ohio Indian nation.

I call this story "A Skeleton in Ohio's Backwoods Closet" because, among other reasons, it exposes to full view the greed of men in high places and the great political struggle that divided the country and threatened to pull our new government down; and more than anything else, it shows the intense tragedy which this incident inflicted on the lives of all the people it touched.

The story begins in France in 1796 when a young Irish nobleman, Harman Blennerhassett by name, married the vivacious and beautiful young daughter of one of England's most distinguished families. Harman was the third son of a wealthy Irish aristocrat and a direct descendant of King Edward III of England. He was reared in luxury in Conway Castle, his father's estate. His family had served in the English Parliament for 500 years. His new wife, Margaret Askew, was the daughter of the Lt. Governor of the Isle of Man, also a very wealthy person.

Since Harman was the third son and hence third in line to inherit his father's fortune under the laws of primogeniture, it had been necessary that he prepare himself for an honorable profession. Prior to his marriage, he had studied law in Dublin and became a barrister. He had little occasion to practice, however, because in a very short span of time, his father and his two older brothers died, leaving Harman as the sole owner of Conway Castle and all of his father's estate. Strangely enough, Harman did not elect to live the life of an Irish aristocrat like his father. Immediately after his marriage, he sold all of his inheritance to a cousin and took his bride of less than six months to make his fortune in America. After a 73-day passage, the Blennerhassetts arrived in New York in August, 1796. They visited in New York and later in Philadelphia for almost a year. They then decided to make a tour through Kentucky and Tennessee to find a likely place to build a new home and establish a plantation

that would support a way of life such as they had known across the ocean. On their way west, they heard of a new, young settlement called Marietta which a group of Revolutionary Officers had formed just 10 years before at the confluence of the Muskingum and the Ohio Rivers. They decided to stop briefly in Marietta on their way west and were pleasantly surprised to find that Marietta, little more than a clearing in the forest, had been founded by a group of cultured people -people who were interested in music, literature, science and the arts and who loved balls, fine wines and hard spirits as much as the Blennerhassetts. In short order, they decided to make their new home there and began searching for a likely place to build their plantation. Since they planned to live their new life on a scale like that of the aristocratic families in the South, they would need slaves to work their land and staff their mansion; and since slavery was prohibited in the Ohio lands by the Northwest Ordinance, but permitted across the Ohio in Virginia (now West Virginia), they decided to build their home on an island in the middle of the Ohio River, which was then a part of Virginia. The island was 14 miles down river from Marietta and 2 miles from Newport, Virginia, a little settlement consisting of 12 log houses, which is known today as Parkersburg, West Virginia. They bought 170 acres on the upper end of the island -then called Backus Island -for \$4,500.00. The island was about 3 1/5 miles long and contained about 500 acres. Blennerhassett called his new farm Isle de Beau Pre.

The Blennerhassetts immediately moved into an old block house which had been built on the island during the Indian wars and began to build the largest, most magnificent mansion in the west -a home that would permit them to live in the luxury to which they had always been accustomed. They employed all of the carpenters and artisans who were available at Marietta and began construction. Their mansion was to be of wood since Harman was deathly afraid of earthquakes, and it was designed to be a showplace in keeping with their station in life. The main house had two stories and long fan-shaped, one-story wings stretched out on either side of the main building. These wings curved toward the front, forming a handsome lawn which stretched down to the tip of the island. The main house had 10 rooms, including a ballroom for the levies and parties that Margaret planned. The left wing contained the kitchen, pantries and servants' rooms. The right wing housed Harman's office, a large library and the laboratories where Harman planned to conduct experiments in electricity, to study the heavens through his telescope, and to play his bass viol and cello.

Harman was very proud of the fact that his new mansion had 36 glass windows - an unheard of indicia of wealth and luxury in the land across the Alleghenies. In fact, when Ohio built its first capitol building some three years later at Chillicothe, it had less than half as many windows as the Blennerhassett Mansion - and people came from far and wide to marvel at the sight of so much glass in Chillicothe.

Harman and Margaret bought ten slaves in Virginia and brought an English gardener to their Island. They filled their home with magnificent

furniture, gold cornices, fine silver and china and expensive drapes and wall hangings -all brought from England and packed across the mountains on horseback. Their gardener established a 2-acre English flower garden with both native and imported plants. Their plantation also included an orchard and a kitchen garden full of vegetables and herbs. They employed a local farmer to manage a farm and dairy on the balance of their land.

Early in the year 1800, just 12 years after the first permanent settlement in the Northwest Territory was founded - just 5 years after Anthony Wayne had ended the Ohio Indian Wars at Fallen Timbers and at Greenville, just three months after George Washington's death, and 3 years before Ohio became a state - Harman and Margaret moved into their new home.

Margaret presided over her household with all of the grace, charm and efficiency to which she had been born. The appearance of notable visitors at Marietta almost always occasioned a ball or a party at the Isle de Beau Pre and often Margaret persuaded her guests to take part in impromptu readings and performances of Shakespeare's plays. The Blennerhassett mansion soon became the center of social activity in that entire part of the Trans-Allegheny backwoods. Margaret was indeed an unusual woman for her day. She was well schooled in history, literature, music and art; she spoke Italian and French fluently; and she wrote poetry and rode her horse like the wind. She often rode the 14 miles to Marietta in her scarlet riding habit and a white beaver hat with an ostrich plume - all this with her negro man galloping along behind her, trying his best to keep up.

Her husband, Harman, was almost an exact opposite. He was tall, stooped and had very bad eyesight. In fact, the writers say that when he hunted, a man servant had to point the rifle for him. He still wore knee breeches, silk stockings and shoes with silver buckles, even though that type of dress had for the most part gone out of style some years before. He was deathly afraid of lightning and it is said he would hide in a closet during thunderstorms. On one occasion it is reported that he was convinced he could change fat into oil useable for lamps by immersing meat in water for a long period. He kept a side of beef tied under the surface of the Ohio River for several days only to find when he pulled it up that most of the meat had been eaten by the catfish. Every venture he tried seemed to fail. His farm did not begin to pay the expenses of his household. He imported thousands of dollars worth of Irish linen, pewter, velvet, slippers and hose, only to find he had few customers for these goods in the back country. He went into the shipbuilding business and failed. Suddenly, through pure chance, he became involved in a web of intrigue that ruined him financially and cast a pall on his family for the rest of their lives.

Harman's tragic venture began in Marietta on a fine May day in 1805 when Harman was introduced to a very famous statesman who had stopped there briefly on a fiat-boat trip to New Orleans. This visitor was indeed possessed of a notable, and some thought notorious, background. His father had been president of Princeton and his grandfather had been Jonathan Edwards, the famous New England theologian. He graduated from Princeton at

16 and studied law. In 1775 he joined the Continental Army and became one of the youngest command officers serving in Washington's forces. After 4 years of military action, he retired from the army because of ill health and began to practice law in New York City where he quickly became one of the most successful and brilliant members of the Bar. He also married the widow of a British officer and became the stepfather of five children, 2 of whom were officers in the British army. This visitor and his wife had one daughter, a lovely girl who later married a man who became the Governor of South Carolina and the wealthiest rice planter in America.

In 1791, five years before Harman and Margaret had set sail for the new land, this visitor to Marietta had been elected to the United States Senate on the Republican ticket, and in securing this victory, soundly defeated the arch Federalist, General Phillip Schuyler, the father-in-law of Alexander Hamilton. Hamilton was furious, not only because his father-in-law had been defeated, but also because this defeat signaled the beginning of troubles for the Federalist party which had held the political power firmly in its grasp in the country since the adoption of the Constitution in 1787. This man served two terms in the Senate and during this period, the tide continued to turn toward the Republicans. In 1800, the same year Harman and Margaret moved into their new mansion far to the west, this man was nominated for the Vice Presidency of the United States as the running mate of that gentleman planter from Charlottesville, Thomas Jefferson. At that time the Constitution provided that the candidate receiving the largest vote in the electoral college would serve as President and the candidate receiving the second largest would be Vice President. In this bizarre case, the electoral college ended in a tie vote for the two offices and so the decision was sent to the House of Representatives where Jefferson was not overly popular. Nevertheless, the vote was to be taken by states, not by individual members, and after 36 ballots covering 6 days of voting, Jefferson was declared the winner by one vote. From that moment on, Jefferson and his new Vice President, who had lost the Presidency by one vote, were bitter enemies.

This visitor to Marietta had served as Vice President under Jefferson for four years and won many compliments from the Congress for his excellence as a presiding officer. In February, 1804, in the last year of his term as Vice President, he ran for Governor of New York. Alexander Hamilton campaigned bitterly against him and the Vice President was defeated. Six weeks after the election he became enraged over a newspaper story in which Hamilton was quoted as insulting him rather liberally. This seemed to be one of the political customs of the day. This man, still the Vice President of the United States, challenged Hamilton to a duel. This also appears to have been quite common among politicians of that day. These two men, one a well-known general in the Revolution and the Secretary of the Treasury under George Washington, and the other the Vice President of the United States, met a few minutes after 7:00 in the morning on July 11, 1804 at Weehawken, New Jersey, just across the Hudson from New York City. The Vice President fired and Hamilton dropped, mortally wounded. He would die 31 hours later.

Although duels were illegal, the parties were not usually prosecuted in those days. However, because of the public shock over the death of such an important figure, indictments for murder were issued against the Vice President in both New York and New Jersey. He very wisely decided a long trip to Georgia and South Carolina might be in order. However, in January 1805 when Congress reconvened, he was back in Washington ready to preside over the Senate, which he did until his successor took over as Vice President on March 3, 1805. He was never tried for Hamilton's death.

Who was this man -this brilliant lawyer, popular leader of the New York Republicans and former Senator -this man who came within a breath of being President of the United States? His name, of course, was Aaron Burr, a name which, probably unjustly, has come through the years to be almost a synonym for treason, treachery, mystery and intrigue.

Many volumes have been written about the next adventure in Burr's varied career and I shall not dwell on these events in detail since the principal actors in this little vignette are the Blennerhassetts. However, the activities in which Burr engaged during the next eighteen months, and the resulting events, are fascinating and have intrigued historians for generations.

From the moment Burr pulled the trigger on his little one-shot dueling pistol, he knew his future as a political candidate was gone forever. And when the door of the U.S. Senate slammed behind him at the end of his term as Vice President, he was a very disappointed man. Always ambitious, however, he looked for an opportunity to redeem his reputation and fortune. Looking toward the opportunities that might lie in the Spanish territories of the Southwest and Mexico, he embarked in April 1805, one month after his Vice Presidential term ended, on a flat-boat trip down the Ohio River from Pittsburgh. On May 5, 1805, as mentioned earlier, Burr stopped in Marietta and touched the life of Harman Blennerhassett.

Blennerhassett, of course, invited Burr to his island and entertained him lavishly there. After a brief visit, Burr proceeded on down the river to New Orleans, putting together plans during the rest of that year for a grand scheme to invade Mexico and other Spanish-held territories and establish a new empire, undoubtedly with himself as the head of state. In December, Burr wrote to Harman offering him a part in the expedition and Harman enthusiastically agreed. A number of other people in high places were involved with Burr in varying degrees of complicity; they include General James Wilkinson, the Commander-in-Chief of the United States Army, who, by the way, was also a paid secret agent of Spain. In fact, his pay from the Spanish government was more than his pay as head of our own country's armed forces. Consider the duplicity here: General Wilkinson held the highest military position the United States could offer; he was an agent of an unfriendly foreign nation; he was involved with Burr in a plot against Spain which encouraged the secession of the Western states to join Burr's new empire; and in the end, he betrayed Burr by disclosing Burr's plans both to President Jefferson and to his Spanish contacts by coded letters. If we have ever had a double agent, or rather

a quadruple agent, in this country, here was one. In addition, Andy Jackson of Nashville, later to become President, seems to have been involved in some manner never fully proved.

At any rate, Burr decided to start his expedition at Blennerhassett's Island and in August 1806 Burr arrived there and began assembling boats, supplies and recruits, mostly with Blennerhassett's money and guarantees. During the next few weeks, Burr made side trips to Cincinnati, Lexington, and Chillicothe to recruit men and money for his expedition. While in Cincinnati he stayed in Terrace Park at the home of Senator John Smith, one of Ohio's two original U.S. Senators. Smith was later to be forced to resign from the Senate because of his complicity with Burr. In October, Governor Alston of South Carolina and his wife, Theodosia Burr, Aaron's daughter, arrived at the island. In October, President Jefferson received Wilkinson's coded letter and sent a secret agent of his own to Marietta to investigate Burr's activities. This agent sent back full reports to Jefferson who issued a proclamation in late November warning the nation about the venture and ordering all civil and military authorities to arrest the participants. Spurred on by Jefferson's proclamation and the urging of Jefferson's special agent, Governor Tiffin, our first Governor, requested the Ohio Legislature to pass a special law (which it did on December 6) empowering the Governor to arrest Burr and his comrades. Quickly the Governor alerted the militia at Marietta and they were successful in impounding a number of Burr's boats and many supplies. Nevertheless, the small expedition left the island in December and floated on down the River to Natchez, Mississippi where Burr and Blennerhassett were ultimately arrested and charged with treason. Since the alleged treasonable acts occurred on Blennerhassett's Island in Virginia, the trial was held in Richmond and was presided over by Jefferson's violent enemy, John Marshall, Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court. After a long and fascinating trial, on September 1, 1807 Burr and Blennerhassett were acquitted of treason and they parted company - Burr, a totally ruined man, and Blennerhassett, a very discouraged man because most of his remaining fortune had evaporated along with Burr's grand plans for conquest.

After the trial, Harman returned to his island only to find his home had been almost totally ruined by mobs of militia, by vandals, and by a flood that had occurred in the meantime. Most of the household furnishings had been attached and sold by his creditors and his slaves had escaped. Harman and Margaret packed up the remainder of their possessions and what little was left of their fortune, and went down the river to try to start a new home in Mississippi, never again to return to his little island in the forest.

The aftermath of the story is more tragic still. Within three years, the beautiful mansion was set afire by vandals and burned to the ground. Burr's vivacious and accomplished daughter, Theodosia, was lost at sea, and Burr's only grand-child died, Burr eventually went to England and later came back to New York where he lived in almost total oblivion for many years, still dreaming dreams of what might have been. In 1820 Harman failed again and

was forced to sell his Mississippi farm. The Blennerhassetts moved to Montreal for a time before Harman went back to England to attempt to regain his fortune. He died there, a broken man, in 1831. Margaret later came back to America and petitioned Congress for damages done by the militia to their mansion so many years before. Just days before Congress was ready to act on the measure, Margaret died quietly and unknown in New York.

This, then is the end of the tale. And yet perhaps I have left out one part - perhaps the most tragic part of all. That part involves the reason why Harman and Margaret, both born in high station in Great Britain, had decided to leave their friends, their families and their opportunities and come to the hard, unsettled backwoods of the American west when it was still frontier. Historians, of course, always must find reasons for the actions of participants in historical events, and for a hundred years after Harman and Margaret built their mansion on their little Island in the Ohio, the historians opined that their reason for coming to America was simply so that they could live in a free country. In fact, in a lengthy paper on the Burr Conspiracy published by the Ohio State Archeological and Historical Society in 1886, the author said:

"Harman's heart glowed with the principles of revolt and republicanism. Though closely allied by marriage, relationship and social rank to the nobility of Ireland and England, he had become a Republican and looked with longing eyes toward America, which had shaken off the distasteful chaperonage of the mother country, and was leading the nations in the onward march of independence and popular liberty."

This flowery declaration, as it turned out, was pure speculation.

In July 1901, more than 100 years after Harman and his pretty wife came to Ohio, the real reason for their flight from Ireland was told in a magazine article written by a direct descendant of Harman's family. The true fact, as it turns out, is that Harman, in marrying Margaret, had married his sister's daughter and was guilty of incest. This scandalized their families and the English society of that day. Margaret was disinherited by her family and the newlyweds were ostracized from society. It was for this reason and none other that they came to America, and after arriving here, this was the reason they found a remote, inaccessible island in the middle of the Ohio River on which to build their home. It was for this reason that they had become convinced, even before they had met Aaron Bun, that they should move on down river and find a new home since Marietta was attracting more and more visitors, even in that early day, and the chance that their secret might be discovered was increasing every day they remained there. And so with this final tragic note in a tale filled with sad episodes, the story comes finally to a close. - A story which I like to call for reasons which I'm sure are now quite obvious, "A Skeleton in Ohio's Backwoods Closet."

1973 Spring Court
Society of Colonial Wars in the State of Ohio
Miamiville, Ohio
June 2, 1973