

ON THIS DAY IN WEST VIRGINIA HISTORY JANUARY 4



On January 4, 1808, Harman Blennerhassett was released from prison after being found "not guilty" of treason for his role in the Aaron Burr conspiracy.

CSO: SS.8.21

Investigate the Document: (*West Virginia Historical Society Quarterly*, Vol. XIII, No. 1, January 1999)

1. What action(s) compelled Harman Blennerhassett to flee Ireland to America?
2. After residing in New York and Pittsburgh, Harman Blennerhassett decided upon a strip of property that was nestled in the midst of the Ohio River near _____, the present-day county seat of Wood County.
3. What plan did Aaron Burr have in which he needed the influence and investment of Harman Blennerhassett to make it work? Why did Burr's dream die?
4. What charge did Aaron Burr stand trial for as a result of his plan?
5. Where did Harman Blennerhassett move to in the aftermath of the Burr Conspiracy?

Think Critically: Summarize the Burr Conspiracy in your own words. What is the significance of the Burr Conspiracy in American history? What was Aaron Burr's plan?

IRISH RESEARCHERS

The West Virginia Historical Society recently received notice that a new book on the Irish famine and survivors has been published. David Leahy, who earlier published County Longford and its People - an index to the 190s Census of County Longford, has a new volume on County Longford. It is titled County Longford, Survivors of the Great Famine - A complete index to Griffith's Primary Valuation (GPV) of County Longford (1854). For information and purchase contact David Leahy, Glack, Park Road, Longford, Ireland or e-mail davidleahy@tinet.ie.

**NEW RIVER SYMPOSIUM
APRIL 15-17, 1999**

The West Virginia Division of Culture and History will join the New River Gorge National River in sponsoring the New River Symposium at Boone, NC on April 15, 16 and 17. The Symposium features papers and presentations on the New River region's cultural, physical and natural history.

**A CHRONICLE OF THE LIFE OF
HARMAN BLENNERHASSETT**

by Micheal Burke

The tragic tale of Harman Blennerhasset is one of a man who appeared never to avoid the periods of seemingly self-induced ill fortune. He was, at the same time, well respected Aristocrat and a man of cosmopolitan society. However, his inability to overcome an adolescent naivety ultimately sealed his fate and marred the Blennerhasset name forever. His extravagant mansion stands firmly amid the Ohio River as a reminder of his unforgettable existence in western Virginia.

Harman Blennerhasset was born October 8, 1764 to Conway Blennerhasset, a wealthy Irish land owner, and his wife Elizabeth Lacy. At the time of his birth, the family was not residing at "Castle Conway," as the Blennerhasset estate was known, but rather at the English village, Hambledon, in County Hampshire. The Blennerhasset's were away from Ireland to avoid the violent raids on prominent Irish landlords by a group of peasant outlaws known as the "Whiteboys." (Swick, 1) Although the third son of his father, Harman inherited "Castle Conway," when his older brothers preceded their father in death. Already a practicing attorney, the future of this 27 year old seemed as bright as the morning sun. In only a few years, however,

Harman ceased to practice law and began the task of squandering his unearned fortunes. To share his riches, Blennerhassett went against the laws of the churches of both England and Ireland and wed his niece, Margaret Agnew. (Swick, 2) This religiously unlawful union, along with Harman's revolutionary political views, made it no longer worthwhile for the Blennerhassetts to remain in Ireland and prompted their journey to America.

As a young man in Ireland, Harman Blennerhassett showed signs of resentment toward the established government of the land, and subsequently aligned with unscrupulous characters who held similar views.

Whether or not he formed political opinions on his own, or simply fell prey to the rhetoric of more intelligent people, remains to be seen, although even his loving wife accused him of being extremely naive at times. It seems that he must have been a somewhat capable politician, for he was quickly promoted to Secretary of a revolutionary faction known as the Society of United Irishmen.

To escape persecution for his unusual choice of bride and companions, Blennerhassett sold his father's estate far below face value and used this money to establish himself in the New World. He and his Young wife took up residence in New York and Pittsburgh, before deciding upon a splendid strip of property nestled in the midst of the Ohio River. It was here that Harman Blennerhassett

constructed a mansion that was one of the most beautiful and extravagant of its time. For a few years, Blennerhassett was content to toll as an amateur chemist and musician, while also hunting to pass the time. The couple blossomed as the premier social attraction of the Ohio Valley as they used their island paradise to draw guests by the thousands. Due to the extravagant nature of the Blennerhassetts, accounts of their riches were greatly exaggerated. They had little income other than the interest earned by their capital, which did not come close to meeting their overwhelming, and unnecessary expenses.

It is probable that tales of the supposed Blennerhassett fortune reached the ears of Aaron Burr, who was recovering from political devastation and was in need of an investor of the influence of Hannan Blennerhassett to carry out plans of either annexing Texas or forming a new government out of the western states (Pigden, 157) And thus Blennerhassett's revolutionary idealism reared its ugly head once again. And so from this river hideaway on Blennerhassett Island he and Aaron Burr allegedly hatched a plan to separate the western states from the union and set up a new government. News of the plot spread quickly throughout the Ohio Valley and many neighbors became immediately suspicious of Burr's continued presence at Blennerhassett Island. On November 27, 1806 President Thomas Jefferson issued a proclamation calling for the arrest of Burr and his followers. (Swick, 42) This only increased the excitement in

the Ohio Valley, as it roused the Virginia militia to form to make the arrest. Hannan Blennerhassett fled his island paradise only hours before the militia laid siege to it. Blennerhassett then met up with Burr and his associates in Kentucky, but Burr's dream of a separate western nation was not to be. Interest quickly declined when consorts began to realize the consequences of this act of treason. Burr and Blennerhassett were arrested and imprisoned in the Virginia State Penitentiary. Burr stood trial for high treason, but was acquitted when a five month trial failed to produce any concrete physical evidence as proof of his plots. Blennerhassett's release soon followed, and both men were granted freedom, although their reputations, as well as their fortunes had been destroyed by the ordeal. Aaron Buff sought refuge abroad, in Europe, and Harman Blennerhassett purchased a small cotton plantation and moved his family to the Mississippi Territory. Their stay at the plantation was short-lived, however, when declining cotton prices and crop failures forced this once proud family to return to Ireland and survive only by the grace and pity of an older sister of Blennerhassett. Harman Blennerhassett died a devastated man on February 2, 1831 from a series of apoplectic strokes. Margaret Blennerhassett survived her husband by eleven painful years, only to give way to poverty and disease in the summer of 1842. (Swick 46)

The Blennerhassetts, once the inhabitants of an impeccable island paradise and the toast of the Ohio Valley, had witnessed the destruction of their nearly Utopian existence, and had resorted to living off of the incomes of various family members, including their two eldest sons. In all, the Blennerhassetts conceived five children, although they adopted another. Two sons and a daughter were born on Blennerhassett Island, but only the sons survived infancy. Once settled onto their Mississippi plantation, Margaret Blennerhassett bore two more children, a son and a daughter. Once again, however, the daughter died in infancy. Of the Blennerhassett sons only the youngest bore children, none of which reached adulthood, and when he himself passed in 1862, the Blennerhassett name died with him.

The extreme highs and lows of Harman Blennerhassett's life seem tragic at first glance, but when examining this it becomes more pleasant to focus on the wonderful, although brief period, in which the Blennerhassett family flourished on their isolated island home. Few ever have it so good, and so it seems almost fair that they fell from grace and tasted the poverty and hardships endured by so many of that era. For this fall, the blame must rest firmly on the shoulders of

Harman Blennerhassett, for it was he alone who allowed himself to become entranced by revolutionary propaganda more than once in his 66 years.

Recent history has been kind to the Blennerhassetts, however pitiful their existence may have been, for they are now remembered primarily for their architectural masterpiece, which has been restored to its original splendor and is now a profitable tourist attraction.

SOURCES

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