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BLANNERHASSETT PAPERS
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OCTOBER, 1973

Manuscript Collections (Ms 7)
[Accession 73]

Special Collections Department
James E. Morrow Library
Marshall University
Huntington, West Virginia

1973

Scope and Content: Journals, correspondence, and financial and legal papers of Harman Blennerhasset and his role in the Aaron Burr conspiracy of 1806.

[NEWS RELEASE — COPY]

Copies Of Harman Blennerhassett Diaries and Papers

Back In Parkersburg, West Virginia Area After Absence Of 167 Years

For the first time since Wednesday, December 10, 1806, copies of the complete diaries and other papers of Harman Blennerhassett are back in the Parkersburg area, thanks to the generosity of a prominent Parkersburg business executive.

It was near midnight on that date, 167 years ago, when Harman Blennerhassett and Comfort Tyler, one of Aaron Burr's lieutenants of Herkimer, New York, along with a small party of men, pushed off from a bitter cold, snow-covered Blennerhassett Island, out into the southerly currents of the Ohio River. They were on their way to meet Aaron Burr, ex Vice President of The United States, who had a scheme about a new settlement in the Southwest and perhaps a plan for the conquest of Mexico.

Dark rumors of the Burr scheme and Blennerhassett's involvement had circulated throughout Wood County (Virginia) and Washington County (Ohio) for some little time. President Thomas Jefferson sent his agent, John Graham, to investigate. Upon receiving Graham's initial report, Jefferson issued a presidential warning to citizens of the Ohio and Mississippi valleys.

From the Ohio state capitol at Chillicothe, Governor Edward Tiffin issued a warrant for Blennerhassett's arrest and had dispatched it to Marietta for action by Judge Return Johnathan Meigs and Major General Joseph Buell.

Earlier that evening of December 10th, in an upper room of his island mansion, Blennerhassett wound up his mercantile and counting house business partnership with Dudley Woodbridge, Jr., of Marietta. This afforded him about six thousand dollars in cash. With this money and a few of his most precious possessions, Blennerhassett headed down the River.

Harman Blennerhassett was a highly literate and well educated gentleman, a lawyer, something of a scientist, and a fine musician. There is little doubt that his personal diaries and other papers were among those few most precious possessions he took aboard the boat that cold midnight.

Blennerhassett and Comfort Tyler left the Island in great haste and secrecy. He feared he might be detained or killed by the Wood County Militia, the Marietta Militia, or by irate citizens from either side of the Ohio River.

However, Blennerhassett did not hesitate to leave his wife, Margaret, and his two small sons, Harman, Jr., and Dominick, behind on the Island. Blennerhassett had been on friendly, if formal, terms with Colonel Hugh Phelps of Parkersburg - the husky commander of the Wood County Militia. He was certain that with Colonel Phelps in command no harm would come to his family.

As we know from history, no physical harm did come to his family. But, when Colonel Phelps was absent from the Island, pursuing Blennerhassett and Tyler down the River, the Wood County Militia went on a drunken spree and severely damaged the beautiful mansion and grounds. The Blennerhassett mansion would stand another five years, until the Christmas season of 1811 when it accidentally burned to the ground.

Margaret Blennerhassett and their sons followed down river a week later, on December 17, with a party of 14 men under the command of Morgan Neville of Pittsburg, the son of the Chief Justice of Pennsylvania. She was made comfortable aboard a boat manned by one Thomas Butler. Interestingly, this boat was lashed to a similar craft which carried provisions and which was owned by A. W. Putnam of Belpre.

On December 8, the Monday before Blennerhassett's midnight departure, Comfort Tyler along with John and Charles Dana of Belpre, and others, had gone from the Island to Colonel Joseph Barker's shipyard, eight miles up the Muskingum River above Marietta.

This was the same Colonel Barker who had built Blennerhassett's magnificent Island mansion, once described by its owner as "highly and completely finished, containing, with the wings connected to it by circular corridors, thirty-six windows, glazed with lights twelve by eighteen inches."

This was also the same Colonel Joseph Barker who, a few years earlier, had built from oak trees on his own river farm, an ocean-going sailing ship, christened "Dominick", after Blennerhassett's son. Barker built it for the mercantile firm of Woodbridge and Blennerhassett of Marietta.

When Comfort Tyler and the Danas arrived at the Barker Muskingum shipyard, they discovered that the Marietta Militia had already seized ten of the fifteen Schenectady-style boats which Burr and Blennerhassett had ordered Barker to build and Dudley Woodbridge to provision

with the corn, pork and whiskey. The Tyler party tried to seize the remaining five boats, but they got into a fist fight with some of the Marietta Militiamen. They managed to return to Blennerhassett Island with only one of the boats.

Today, Harman Blennerhassett's own manuscript account of his life in Ireland, England, and in this nation before that eventful night, and the high excitement and tragedy which followed in the next weeks and months, is back in Parkersburg.

Microfilm copies of the Blennerhassett papers are being deposited in Parkersburg's Carnegie Library, with the Parkersburg Blennerhassett Drama Association, and at other libraries to be named, thanks to the interest and generosity of C. O. Erickson, a Parkersburg business executive.

The events leading up to the obtaining of the microfilms actually cover a span of six years.

On May 2, 1967, Dick Abels, a Parkersburg advertising man, happened to have a several-hour layover between planes in Washington, while on a business trip from New York City to Parkersburg. Since he had been interested in the Blennerhassett story for many years, and since he knew the Blennerhassett personal diaries and other papers were in the Archives of the Library of Congress, he decided to spend those few hours attempting to have a first-hand look at the historical documents.

Abels was amazed to find out how "first-hand" his look at the Blennerhassett papers turned out to be. Rather than giving him microfilm copies of the papers, as he expected, the Archives librarians gave him the actual Blennerhassett papers. Most were in Blennerhassett's own handwriting. All were remarkably well preserved and legible after more than 165 years of little more than casual care. Some were in hard back binders, some in ordinary file folders, and one letter collection was in a small box. The only precaution was an unarmed guard who sat on a small balcony, overlooking the twenty or so study tables in the Archives reading room.

Abels spent those few hours eagerly and carefully reading and examining the precious documents. Later that afternoon, flying over the Alleghanies on his way home, it began to bother him to think that he, an unknown, could walk in off the street and handle these historically important papers.

On May 14, 1967, Dick Abels wrote to the Chief Librarian of the Manuscript Division,

Library of Congress, and inquired whether or not microfilms of the Blennerhassett papers could be obtained. The answer came back from David C. Mearns (since retired) that yes, they could be microfilmed.

Some time later, after the Parkersburg Blennerhassett Drama Association was formed, Abels relayed this information to A. Beauchamp Smith III, who heads the Association. Smith began to include the story of the microfilms in talks he gave before various local civic, service and fraternal groups.

It was through these talks that C. O. Erickson heard about the possibility of obtaining the microfilms. Erickson is very much interested in the historical background of Parkersburg and surrounding areas. He expressed himself as willing to help in obtaining the microfilm copies of the papers.

In this way, Erickson and Abels got together and now what was just a dream of several people has become a reality for the Parkersburg community, and the State of West Virginia.

The three reels of 35 mm microfilms have been described as “a gold mine of information for those interested in the Harman Blennerhassett story and an eye-witness description of our infant nation at the close of the 18th and turn of the 19th centuries.”

It is impossible to describe all of the information included in the three reels. There are about 1,700 pieces of information.

Briefly, in **reel No. 1** there are Blennerhassett's journals of his surrender to United States marshals at Lexington, Kentucky, and his incarceration there on July 14, 1807. There follows an account of his defense by Henry Clay who was his lawyer and who, incidentally, upon at least one occasion, had been a visitor to Blennerhassett Island.

The first reel also includes a day-by-day journal of Blennerhassett's trip as a prisoner from Lexington to Richmond, Virginia, where he was formally charged as an accomplice of Aaron Burr, and lodged in Richmond Penitentiary. Included are a day-by-day journal of events in that prison, an account of famous visitors who came to see him, and the progress of Burr's treason trial before Chief Justice John Marshall in the Richmond capitol building. Also in this reel are correspondence and diary entries, starting in 1795, before Blennerhassett left Ireland for the United States.

The **second reel** includes correspondence, legal and financial papers, and miscellaneous items - such as Blennerhassett's law diploma, granted by King's Court Inn, Dublin, Ireland, in 1790. Some of Margaret Blennerhassett's correspondence is included in the second reel, and there is at least one letter from Henry Clay.

Professor William H. Safford of Chillicothe, Ohio, had only part of these papers when he wrote what is probably the most authentic account of Blennerhassett's life. During the winter of 1859-60, Professor Safford wrote "The Blennerhassett Papers".

Joseph Lewis Blennerhassett, Harman and Margaret's only living son at that time, a lawyer in Missouri, permitted Safford to have the papers for only one year. Safford was badly pressed for time since he was teaching, to earn a living, as well as writing the book.

Since then, additional items have been furnished by family descendants, especially by Mrs. Therese Blennerhassett-Adams. Mrs. Adams turned the papers over to the Library of Congress in the year 1900. She also compiled a detailed 16-page list which is part of the collection and which serves as an excellent guide. Incidentally, Mrs. Adams was the first to reveal the consanguinity of the Blennerhassett's uncle-niece marriage.

The Blennerhassett papers are now not only preserved on microfilms in the Library of Congress, but also are available to interested people throughout West Virginia.