



AARON BURR

wicked intrigue. He tried to inveigle money from England and Spain on the pretext that he intended to lead a secession of the western states from the Union. To the English, who were still unreconciled to their defeat in the Revolution, the disintegration of the United States into several weak nations would have been welcome news. Spain also looked with disfavor upon the growing power adjoining her Mexican possessions. Burr discovered, however, that Spain would not finance an expedition against her own territory, and England refused to become involved.

At this crisis in his plans Burr turned to Blennerhassett and other individuals for help. At first he was successful in securing men and money. Eventually he relied upon five hundred followers and believed that four or five thousand more would rush to his leadership as soon as he set foot upon Spanish soil. He hinted that the government countenanced his plans, and even flourished a letter of approval from the Secretary of War which Jefferson later declared a forgery. Burr expected the co-operation of General James Wilkinson, who was at the same time commander-in-chief of the armies of the United States—and secret agent Number Thirteen of Spain. But Wilkinson betrayed Burr by writing to Jefferson the contents of a letter in cipher.

Ultimately Burr met disaster because of his alleged intention to attack New Orleans and separate the western states by war. The thought of voluntary separation was common in that day. George Washington had said in a letter to Benjamin Harrison in 1784 that "the western States stand as it were upon a pivot," and that "the touch of a feather would turn them" to Spain in the South or England in the North. In speaking of the East and West in 1803 Jefferson had said: "God bless them both, and keep them in the Union if it be for their good, but separate them if it be better." Although voluntary separation was favored for a time, the cause for dissatisfaction was removed by the opening of the Mississippi, and Westerners became loyal adherents of the Union. They resented the intimation that they would eagerly join Burr in the formation of a separate state. Perhaps Burr was not responsible

for the talk of separation by violence, but that talk led to his trial on the charge of levying war against the United States.

Because of Blennerhassett's eagerness to join the enterprise, and because of the favorable location of his home, Burr decided to organize the expedition at Blennerhassett's Island. Accordingly on August 4, 1806, Burr and his daughter Theodosia, wife of Governor Joseph Alston of South Carolina, started westward. Arriving at Marietta on the day of annual militia muster, he rode to the drill ground with Jonathan Meigs and impressed the people favorably with the efficient manner in which he drilled the troops. Many recruits signed up for his vague but glorious expedition. At a ball in the evening Burr won more followers by his social charm and personal magnetism. With this encouraging reception of his plan Burr began assembling supplies for the trip down the Mississippi.

Blennerhassett took Burr to his business partner, Dudley Woodbridge, who contracted to furnish boats and provisions after Blennerhassett guaranteed the New York draft presented in payment. Colonel Joseph Barker, contractor for the Blennerhassett mansion, was employed by Woodbridge to make fifteen boats at his farm six miles up the Muskingum. Ten boats were forty feet long, ten feet wide, and two and a half feet deep, while the other five were fifty feet long. All were pointed at each end for poling or rowing up stream. One of the longer boats was fitted with partitions, fireplace, and glass windows for the Blennerhassett family. Barker's bill for the boats was \$1319.00. Fifty barrels of pork were purchased from Woodbridge. Two thousand dollars worth of flour, whiskey, and bacon was paid for with a bill drawn on Mr. Ogden of New York. On the island workmen prepared several hundred barrels of corn meal from corn dried in hastily erected kilns. This meal was intended to serve as emergency military rations.

For three weeks Burr made his headquarters on the island, assembling equipment and enlisting recruits. Each member of the expedition agreed to furnish his own rifle and expected to receive rations on the trip and one hundred acres of land on the Washita.

hassett-Adams said: "Blennerhassett's reason for joining Burr was not love of adventure, but to remove himself farther from those who knew him. . . . the dread was with him always that the truth would become known to his children."

Burr's purpose was clear; he wanted to acquire riches and redeem his reputation. His plan was intentionally vague, so that it would attract the most and offend the fewest people. But he made no secret of the fact that Spain was his antagonist, and Mexico was his goal. Spain had angered the people of the West in 1802 by closing the lower Mississippi River, which was the only outlet for western products. At once the settlers west of the Alleghenies threatened to secede from the Union if Congress permitted this strangulation of their commerce. Throughout the West Burr was welcomed as the hero who would lead eager battalions into Mexico, where he would break the shackles of Spanish oppression and find wealth for himself and his followers. As long as war between Spain and the United States was imminent, Burr was on safe ground. But when late in 1806 the danger of war passed, he was a private citizen without legal right to make war on a neighboring government. In his old age Burr admitted his ambition "to establish an empire in Mexico and become its emperor," but denied that he ever "got within ten thousand leagues of a wish to break up the United States." Perhaps he did not specifically advocate the separation of the western states, but he listened sympathetically to complaints against Congress and expressed ironical opinions which led people to think that they read in his thoughts what he had not uttered aloud. Some authorities claim that Burr did not meditate a separation of the Union by force; but if the western states had appeared willing to join his empire, he probably would not have rejected this opportunity for political triumph.

To finance an expedition that would take advantage of prevailing discontent with Spain and the United States government, Burr used a method that was a marvel of brilliant conception and

an engagement against, or subjugation of, any of the Spanish Territories, I am disposed in the confidential spirit of this letter to offer you my friends, and my services to co-operate in any contemplated measures in which you may embark." Burr did not receive this letter until two months after it was written. On April 15, 1806, he replied to Blennerhassett's offer of his services that "I learn with the utmost pleasure that you are to be restored to the social and active world. Your talents and acquirements seem to have destined you for something more than vegetable life, and since the first hour of our acquaintance, I have considered your seclusion as a fraud on society . . . it is due to the frankness of your letter, to acknowledge that I had projected, and still meditate, a speculation, precisely of the character you have described."

At the trial in Richmond Mr. William Wirt, one of the lawyers for the prosecution, described Burr as a "destroyer" who came to the island to "change this paradise into a hell." The truth is that Blennerhassett seriously thought of moving to the South before Burr finally revealed his plans. Writing to General Devereux on December 15, 1805, Blennerhassett explained his neglect of his friend on account of "unavoidable attention to some embarrassments my circumstances have lately undergone; the effect of which more and more disposes me to endeavor to change my situation, by selling or letting this place to effect a removal to another, where I could embark in mercantile pursuits, or the resumption of my old profession." For this reason he explained that "through want of skill and capital, I am unable to make the best advantage of" the farm. Again Blennerhassett informed Burr on December 21, 1805, that "the interests of a growing family, I feel, will summon me again to active life, to the resumption of my former profession of the bar, mercantile or other enterprise." These statements prove that Blennerhassett's extravagance had forced him to consider moving away from his island before Burr proposed the Mexican expedition. But there was another reason for his eagerness to move. Travelers from England were arriving in increasing numbers. The secret of the incestuous marriage was no longer safe. Mrs. Blenner-

Mrs. Blennerhassett fell under the spell of Burr and devoted all her energy to the preparation of supplies. Blennerhassett wrote a series of articles for the *Ohio Gazette* at Marietta in which he signed himself "Querist," and suggested the advantage to be derived if the Western states should separate themselves from the Union. This suggestion was vigorously attacked in the same paper by "Regulus," who was identified in Williams' *History of Washington County* as Jared Mansfield, Jefferson's surveyor-general in Marietta, although other authorities claim that Jacob Burnet wrote the replies to "Querist."

When the Blennerhassetts gave a ball in his honor, Burr charmed the ladies with his gallantry and commanded the admiration of the men with his confidential intimations of conquest in Mexico. But whisperings about his motives were already circulating. Burr asked for the honor of dancing the minuet with Miss Chambers of Pennsylvania, who attended the ball with her sister Mrs. William Skinner of Marietta. "Some knowledge of Burr's designs on Mexico had reached Miss Chambers' ears, and with proud dignity she drew herself to her full height and gazing into the eyes of the man who had missed by only one vote being president of the United States said: 'I do not dance with traitors.'"

Burr continued recruiting at Chillicothe, Cincinnati, and Lexington. As a base of operations, or as a farming settlement to give an innocent aspect to his expedition, Burr in October, 1806, purchased from Col. Charles Lynch 400,000 acres of land on the Washita River in Louisiana called the Bastrop Grant after the former owner, Baron Bastrop. He optimistically talked about the empire he intended to establish in Mexico. He would have money. The jealous statesmen in Washington would tremble at his power. He would be Emperor Aaron I. And Blennerhassett would triumph over his detractors by appearing as Ambassador to England. Alston arrived at the island in October and with his wife and Blennerhassett went to join Burr at Lexington.

While Mrs. Blennerhassett remained in charge of preparations at the island, flashes of suspicion and rumbles of anger at the

military activity of Burr finally swelled into a raging storm of indignation. The citizens of Wood County, Virginia, held a mass meeting on October 6 to organize volunteers "for the purpose of defending themselves and their property from any threatened attack." These resolutions were printed in the newspapers and forwarded to the president of the United States. On hearing of this action Mrs. Blennerhassett sent Peter Taylor to Kentucky to notify her husband of the danger. He returned and received the assurance from Col. Hugh Phelps that, although the Hendersons were agitating the people of Wood County against Burr, Blennerhassett had nothing to fear. General Wilkinson, already a traitor to the United States, now betrayed Burr by sending the contents of his cipher letter to Jefferson.

After remaining inactive in regard to the conduct of Burr for fifteen months, Jefferson sent John Graham to Marietta to investigate Burr's alleged military activities against Spain. By representing himself as Burr's agent, Graham encouraged Blennerhassett to discuss the matter freely. But Blennerhassett said nothing that would serve as evidence of treason, and refused to be convinced that the expedition was illegal. Graham then carried to Governor Tiffin at Chillicothe the information that boats were under construction above Marietta for the Burr enterprise, but Tiffin saw no reason to act. On November 27, on the basis of Graham's reports and Wilkinson's disclosure, Jefferson issued a proclamation in which he warned the country of "unlawful enterprise" in the West and ordered all civil and military authorities to arrest the participants.

Spurred on by Jefferson's proclamation, Governor Tiffin notified the Legislature that "some hostile expedition is afoot, inimical to the peace and interest of the United States," with intention to proceed from Marietta with a flotilla of boats, capture New Orleans with its banks and artillery, and establish an independent government. In response to this warning the General Assembly on December 6 passed an act which provided for the arrest and imprisonment of any one found hostile to the United States,

smouldering with jealousy, he looked for an opportunity to redeem his reputation and fortune. Thinking this opportunity lay in the West, he started on horseback from Philadelphia on April 10, 1805. At Pittsburgh he embarked on a specially constructed flatboat and arrived at Marietta on May 5. Here Burr viewed with interest the elaborate earthworks erected by a prehistoric race which had built a city on the same site. And David Wallace introduced him to Harman Blennerhassett, who was on a business trip from his island down the Ohio.

Later when Burr resumed his voyage down the river, he went ashore to view the famous and magnificent estate of the cultured Irishman. His presence was soon discovered and he was invited to supper by the Blennerhassetts. If the conversation concerned anything except landscape and literature, the fact has not been preserved. Burr then floated on to New Orleans, hinting that fortune and glory awaited those who joined an enterprise he would shortly inaugurate in the West. Returning overland he revisited Marietta late in October after finding the Blennerhassetts absent from their island home. On this stop in Marietta he called on Return Jonathan Meigs, the son of a comrade on the Quebec expedition, who had been appointed Territorial Judge of Upper Louisiana. At the home of this friend he met General Edward Tupper, who was said by a witness at Burr's trial to have provoked an act of war on Blennerhassett Island.

As Burr traveled eastward, he must have reflected that Blennerhassett's support would give money and prestige to his undertaking. He immediately wrote to inquire about Blennerhassett's willingness to join the enterprise. The reply was most favorable. Blennerhassett wrote on December 21, 1805, to assure Burr that he was sorry to have been absent on his second visit and expressed the hope that "you will not regard it indelicate in me to observe to you how highly I should be honored in being associated with you, in any enterprise you would permit me to participate in." He came closer to the point by "viewing the probability of a rupture with Spain," and assured Burr that "in the event of such

college. The Constitution then provided that the candidate having the largest number of electoral votes was to be president, and the person having the next largest number was to be vice president. As the result of the tie in the electoral college the election had to be made by a majority of states represented in the House of Representatives. Burr could easily have been elected by a majority of members, because he was the choice of the Federalists. But after six days of deadlock Jefferson was elected president on the thirty-sixth ballot. Burr was accused, perhaps unjustly, of seeking to defeat Jefferson, who was the regular candidate of the party. For this alleged breach of party loyalty he was ostracized by the Republicans. Jefferson never forgave Burr for this close race.

Senator Mitchell of New York said: "Burr is one of the best presiding officers that ever presided over a deliberative assembly." In the Senate his genius had found a stage and a role that called forth his best effort. But in an election remarkable for its recrimination Burr was defeated for the governorship of New York in 1804. He could endure all the vituperation of the campaign except a published letter by Doctor Cooper containing the statement: "I could detail to you a still more despicable opinion which General Hamilton has expressed of Mr. Burr." Burr challenged Hamilton to a duel. The two men met at dawn at Weehawken on the New Jersey side of the Hudson with pistols at ten paces. Burr inflicted a mortal wound and Hamilton died thirty-one hours later. Although duels were somewhat common, and although Burr was no more guilty than other duelists, political animosity operated to bring against him indictments for murder in New York and New Jersey. He sought safety in the South until time for the closing session of the Senate in Washington. In spite of the bitter feeling against him, he performed his duty so brilliantly that the Senate was in tears at the end of his farewell address.

When Burr slammed the door of the Senate chamber behind him, he was a defeated and disappointed man. He was ostracized from political life. In killing Hamilton he had disposed of one enemy and created thousands of others. Thwarted in ambition and

and gave the governor power to use the militia of Ohio to capture suspects.

Under the authority of this act Governor Tiffin ordered the Washington County militia under Major General Joseph Buell to stop any warlike activity of the boats above Marietta. Sentries were posted at Marietta day and night, and a six pound cannon was mounted on the river bank. General E. W. Tupper was inspired by the pranks of the citizens at this time to write a pioneer ballad called "The Battle of the Muskingum, or the Defeat of the Burrrites." The poem relates that when Blennerhassett's men were expected to take possession of the boats, the commander said:

"Old Blanny's boats, most careless float,  
Brim full of death and treason!"

After the soldiers loaded their cannon with broken spikes,

"This band so bold, the night being cold,  
And blacksmith's shop being handy;  
Around the forge they drink and gorge  
On whiskey and peach-brandy."

At midnight several jokers on the opposite side of the river set off half a keg of powder that had been wrapped in a canvas sack and buried in the ground. The drunken militia thought they were attacked by Burr's men. Their excitement is humorously described in the poem. R. J. Meigs is made to say: "Great men are scarce; I'd better keep from battle." After the fright subsided,

"Sol raised his head; cold spectres fled;  
Each man resumed his courage;  
Captain O'Flan dismissed each man  
To breakfast on cold porridge."

On another occasion the soldiers were alarmed by what appeared to be a boat passing down the river at night. After scrambling into boats and rowing into midstream, they found a burning tar barrel on a raft of logs put afloat by practical jokers.

While these farcial scenes were enacted at Marietta, more

tragic events occurred at Isle de Beau. Blennerhassett returned in disappointment from Marietta on December 6 when he found that the boats were not completed. But the firm resolution of his wife renewed his wavering courage. In the evening of the same day he was cheered by the arrival of Comfort Tyler from Pennsylvania with approximately thirty men in four boats for the expedition. On December 9 news reached him that the Wood County militia under Col. Hugh Phelps intended to attack the island. After dark that evening a party of young men from Belpre went to Marietta to secure boats by stealth, but after a violent fist fight with the militia they escaped with only one boat. Seeing the storm approaching, Blennerhassett decided to escape with the flotilla of Comfort Tyler.

About an hour before midnight on December 10, Edward W. Tupper arrived to collect some money Blennerhassett owed him. In his deposition for the trial scheduled at Chillicothe, Tupper said he met Blennerhassett going to the boats and urged him to remain and stand trial at Marietta. But Blennerhassett was alarmed at the threat of the Wood County militia to burn his mansion and kill him the next day. At midnight Blennerhassett said farewell to his family and friends and started on his journey to join Burr. Tupper saw no arms or weapons. Next morning when Col. Phelps found that his quarry had escaped, he led his force on horseback across the great bend of the Ohio to Point Pleasant, arriving several hours before the little flotilla. But the sentinels who were posted to watch for the boats drank so much whiskey to keep warm that they went to sleep and Blennerhassett floated quietly along toward the rendezvous at the mouth of the Cumberland.

Perhaps it was considered safer for Mrs. Blennerhassett and her two sons to descend the river later when she would be safe from the threat of violence against her husband. On the morning after her husband escaped she went to Marietta to secure the boat fitted up for her family. When she learned that the entire flotilla had been seized, she returned to the island on December 13.

knew of the relationship of the parents were arriving more frequently, and the children were old enough to realize the irregularity of the marriage. These financial and domestic troubles worried Blennerhassett so much that he thought the only solution was to leave the island. For this reason he accepted eagerly Aaron Burr's invitation to join an expedition to Mexico.

Aaron Burr was born February 6, 1756, the son of Rev. Aaron Burr, president of Princeton University, and grandson on his mother's side of the foremost New England theologian, Jonathan Edwards. After being graduated from Princeton at the age of sixteen, Burr soon started the study of law. Already he had made rapid progress in the art of flirtation. One romance was headed toward elopement, but the girl's father and brother caught the elopers while waiting for a ferry and threw Burr in the river before they took the girl home. Law and love were both flung aside in 1775 when he answered the call of his country. Although he thought Washington a conceited man and a poor general, Burr was rapidly promoted until he was the youngest lieutenant-colonel in the army. In 1779 he resigned from the army on account of poor health after four years of service. Soon after being admitted to the bar he married Mrs. Theodosia Bartow Provost, a woman ten years his senior, the widow of a British officer, and mother of five children, two of whom were British officers. Burr became deeply attached to their precocious daughter Theodosia, and the family enjoyed ten years of companionship before Mrs. Burr died in 1794.

Burr soon became one of the leading lawyers in New York, where one of his friendly law rivals was Alexander Hamilton. His meteoric rise in politics carried him to the United States Senate in 1791 at the age of thirty-four years. For this office he led the Republican ticket to victory over the Federalist candidate, General Philip Schuyler, father-in-law of Hamilton. Burr was still friendly, but Hamilton was furious. The Federalists had been in power since the Constitution went into effect. In 1800 the tide was turning to the Republicans, who nominated Jefferson and Burr for the presidency. Each received seventy-three votes in the electoral

the Blennerhassetts were prominent in the social life of the vicinity. They became intimate with the Neals, Stephensons, Averys, Hannamans, Phelps, and Kincheloes on the Virginia side. In Belpre they visited the Putnam and Dana families. The Woodbridges, Emersons, Tappers, Spencers, and Putnams were invited from Marietta for days at a time. These friends assembled for parties and balls which compared favorably in fashion with the cities of the East. Sometimes Blennerhassett presented his guests with Indian pottery and ornaments found in the extensive aboriginal village site and burial ground on the island. Again he entertained his visitors with his original compositions on the cello. A favorite pastime was the presentation of impromptu performances of Shakespeare's plays. The hospitality of the Blennerhassett mansion was famous from East to West.

Blennerhassett did not devote all his time to social and cultural pursuits; he attempted to increase his fortune by investment. In the Library of the Ohio Historical Society is an invoice of merchandise shipped in September, 1798, from London to Harman Blennerhassett of Marietta on the Ohio River. This shipment of Irish linen, pewter plates, slippers, hose, tools, velvet, fans, and other articles then had a value of 2,800 pounds or \$14,000. In the same collection of documents is an agreement of February 9, 1799, between Harman Blennerhassett of Harrison County, Virginia, and Dudley Woodbridge of Marietta in which both parties agreed to pay for and sell jointly the goods ordered by Blennerhassett from England. They also invested in the construction of ships, one of which was named Dominick after Blennerhassett's son. But on account of Blennerhassett's inexperience his business and farming ventures failed to balance his extravagant spending. He was looking for other opportunities.

In addition to financial difficulties they had other worries. Mrs. Blennerhassett wrote to Dudley Woodbridge: "Dominick is as impudent a blackguard as you ever saw. I am almost tired of turning him out of a room and must endeavor at some reformation before his Papy returns." Travelers from England who perhaps

her home wantonly damaged by the militia. During her absence Morgan Neville and fourteen other Bastrop colonists from Pittsburgh had been captured on the island and taken to the mansion for trial. While this procedure of doubtful legality was in progress, the militia found the wine cellar and in the drunken debauch which followed broke mirrors and furniture, tore down draperies, used ornamental fences for firewood, and fired musket balls in the walls. Col. Phelps apologized, but after this demonstration of community feeling Mrs. Blennerhassett was glad to accept Neville's offer of a place on his boat. Starting from the island on December 17 with Dominick and Harman, she endured many delays before she joined her husband near Natchez in January.

Blennerhassett and Burr were arrested in Mississippi Territory, but Blennerhassett was discharged and permitted to start for his island. In the meantime Burr was summoned to appear before the grand jury in Natchez and was acquitted. But when the judge refused to release him from bail, Burr knew that his enemies intended to use the alleged treason as an instrument of persecution. Secretly he said farewell to his hundred followers, who supplied the territory with clerks, dancing masters, and tavern keepers. Then he lingered to importune Madeline Price to marry him, and finally escaped in disguise. But he was soon recaptured and taken on March 26 to Richmond, Virginia, to be tried for treason. In July while Blennerhassett was on his way to the island, he heard that an indictment for treason had been found against him. He immediately hastened to Lexington and submitted to arrest. Henry Clay served as his counsel.

In telling the story of Blennerhassett, it is not possible to give more than a very brief summary of the famous trial of Burr. Since the treason charged against Burr was committed in Virginia, the trial was presided over by the judge of the Virginia Court at Richmond. Ironically for Jefferson, but fortunately for justice, this judge was the Federalist Chief Justice John Marshall of the United States Supreme Court, who hated and was hated by Jefferson. Both defense and prosecution claimed some of the most brilliant

legal strategists in the country. Burr himself was a formidable lawyer. At once he threw the ranks of the prosecution into disorder by contending that he should be judged not by testimony as to treasonable intentions, but on treason defined by the Constitution as an overt act of war testified by two witnesses. The prosecution made much of the testimony of Jacob Allbright, a laborer on the island. Allbright said on the witness stand that when Blennerhassett was escaping from the island at midnight, Edward W. Tupper placed his hands on Blennerhassett and said: "Your body is in my hands in the name of the Commonwealth," and that seven or eight muskets were instantly aimed at Tupper. Burr's accusers hoped this statement would vindicate Jefferson's alarm and convict Burr of treason. Burr quickly protested that he was in Kentucky at the time the alleged act of war was committed. Another weakness of the case of the prosecution was that Allbright was the only man who would say he saw the muskets aimed at Tupper. According to the Constitution a second witness was necessary. The prosecution would not call on Tupper to testify, because he would have told exactly what he said in his deposition for the trial set for Chillicothe on January 4, 1808, and never called. He would have said that he had neither civil nor military authority to arrest any one, that he did not attempt to arrest Blennerhassett, that no guns were levelled at him, and that he saw no guns on the island. This statement would have proved Allbright a perjurer. Anyway Blennerhassett recalled that Allbright had taken stolen melons and sweet potatoes from the island and sold them at Marietta.

While Blennerhassett mixed oxygenized muriatic acid gas to purify the air of his cell in the penitentiary, and was being shaved by a Negro prisoner who had cut his wife's throat, he raged against the "inveterate animosity" of the Wood County witnesses. He explained their motive by saying: "The Wood County rabble only want some pretext to vindicate their plunder." Dudley Woodbridge came to apologize for saying on the witness stand that Blennerhassett had every sense but common sense. Already embittered by the infidelity of his friends in his crisis, Blenner-



HARMAN BLENNERHASSETT



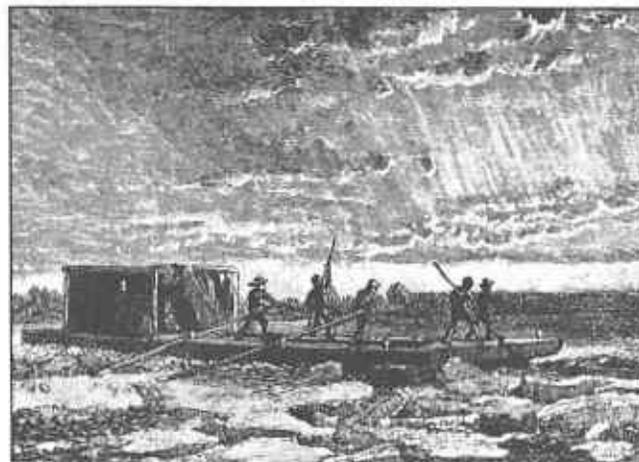
MARGARET BLENNERHASSETT

extravagant spending. Realizing too late that he had wasted his fortune, he seized the opportunity offered by Burr to find riches, as well as escape from reproach, in Mexico.

Margaret Blennerhassett was the opposite of her husband in many ways. He was impractical; she was practical. He was subject to fits of despondency; she was vivacious, self-confident, energetic, resolute. Like him she was tall, but unlike him she was graceful and charming. She had dark blue eyes, brown hair, and a fair complexion. A young man from Belpre rented a field of corn on the island so that he could see the queen of the mansion as he worked. Although reared in an atmosphere of culture and luxury, she quickly learned to supervise the cooking, sewing, weaving, and other domestic activities of her frontier household.

When she wanted to visit the stores in Marietta, Mrs. Blennerhassett scorned the slow trip up the river by pirogue. Mounting her favorite horse Robin, she rode fourteen miles through the forest in two hours. On these rides she wore a dress of scarlet broadcloth ornamented with gold buttons, and a white beaver hat graced with an ostrich plume. Ransom, the Negro servant who accompanied her, had to use whip and spur to keep in sight of his mistress. In good weather she often walked to Marietta. On the farm she sometimes placed one hand on the top of a five-rail fence and gracefully vaulted over. When her two sons were vaccinated in New York, she brought home some of the virus and successfully vaccinated many neighbor children. She loved dancing and social life, but she was not lacking in intellectual accomplishments. She spoke Italian and French fluently and was well read in history and English literature. Frequently she entertained her guests with her interpretations of passages from Shakespeare. Later in life she wrote a volume of poetry called *The Widow of the Rock*.

Safe from the accusations of their relatives, the Blennerhassetts enjoyed their island retreat. The curse of their incestuous marriage had not yet appeared. Their eldest son Dominick was born in 1799 while they were living in the blockhouse, and Harman, Jr., was born in the mansion in 1801. Because of their culture and wealth



FLIGHT OF MRS. BLENNERHASSETT



MRS. BLENNERHASSETT'S RIDE TO MARIETTA

hassett became violently angry when he heard that the jury was "grossly packed" by political enemies of Burr. In the diary kept for his wife he wrote: "Say Thos. Jefferson! thou philanthropic messenger of peace and liberty to this favored country! under thy administration, are these things unknown to thy tender heart, or are they the unhallowed doings of thy worthy and illustrious partisans." Even after Blennerhassett wrote in his diary that he had been aware for nine months that Burr had duped him, he wrote a prescription when Burr preferred Blennerhassett to the Richmond doctors. Burr had to be kept alive; he owed Blennerhassett \$50,000.

After fifty-three days of imprisonment Blennerhassett was discharged for treason but detained for misdemeanor. He gave bail to appear at Chillicothe, January 4, 1808, but was never called. On September 1 the jury returned the verdict that Burr was "not guilty . . . by any evidence submitted to us." Burr objected to this equivocal statement, and Marshall decreed that the usual verdict of "not guilty" should be recorded.

At the conclusion of the trial Burr and Blennerhassett parted company. Their last conversation concerned the money lost by Blennerhassett in the enterprise. He told Burr "with firmness, that I should expect indemnity from him for every loss." He quarreled with Alston over reimbursement. Estimating that he lost \$21,000 by endorsing Burr's notes and bills for supplies, Blennerhassett held Burr responsible for a loss of \$15,000 suffered by the forced sale of his household goods in Wood County, and eventually by blaming Burr for the loss and destruction of his mansion through creditors demanded a total of \$50,000.

But Burr could not rebuild his own fortunes, much less repay Blennerhassett. Soon after the death of Burr's grandson in 1812, his daughter Theodosia embarked on the privateer *Patriot* which started from South Carolina to New York and was lost at sea. Burr eventually went to England and continued his grandiose discussion of an invasion of Mexico. He had a plan for the manufacture of sugar from sap, and he talked of regaining his fortune

tained a pharmacy for dispensing drugs to his family and neighbors. Perhaps his superficial knowledge of medicine was the cause of the imaginary diseases and fits of hypochondria which he suffered. By means of a fine telescope he studied astronomy. Electricity, the latest scientific toy of the day, fascinated him. He amused himself and his friends with galvanism, the production of electricity by chemical action. In one of his chemical experiments he attempted to change meat into fat for use in place of whale oil for illumination by submerging large pieces of beef in the Ohio River. But catfish, perch, and decay prevented the success of his experiment. This versatile Irishman was an accomplished player on the bass viol and cello, and composed original pieces for both instruments. Although he was well trained in classical languages, it is probably an exaggerated claim that he could repeat the whole of Homer's *Iliad* from memory. There is perhaps more truth in the statement that his reading of the books of Voltaire and Rousseau undermined his religious beliefs.

Blennerhassett's intellectual tastes and aristocratic training were not the qualities needed for success in a pioneer community. Dudley Woodbridge testified in Burr's trial at Richmond that "It was common opinion throughout the country that Blennerhassett had every sense but common sense." He suffered from his own generosity in social and business relations. A Virginian who owed him a large sum of money lost his house and furniture by fire. Upon hearing of his misfortune, Blennerhassett invited the man to dine and cancelled the debt. His unsuspecting nature made him an easy victim of swindlers. He once bought a quantity of clam shells, which in pioneer times were burned in log heaps to secure lime for plastering. The man who collected the shells claimed that he had to dive for them in water six to eight feet deep. Instead of taking the trouble to see that the shells could be secured in almost unlimited quantity by walking along the shore, Blennerhassett paid him fifty cents per bushel—five times their worth. He was too impractical to manage his one hundred acre farm at a profit, and his fortune dwindled rapidly through unwise investment and

ceiling. Above the dining room was the living room of equal size. The four bedrooms on the second floor corresponded in size and location with the smaller rooms below. The drawing room was half arched around the cornices, and the ceiling was finished in stucco. The hangings above the chair rail were green with gilt border, and a reddish gray below. In the decoration of this room Blennerhassett spent money lavishly for fine carpets, draperies, mirrors with golden frames, massive silver plate, and elegant furniture.

In front of the mansion extended a spacious fan-shaped lawn of several acres traversed by gravelled walks and a carriage road from the river. The road led from the landing on the Ohio side through a high gateway of massive stone pillars. On the right of the mansion the carriage road was separated by a hawthorne hedge from the two-acre flower garden. Native and imported flowers were cared for by Peter Taylor, a gardener from Lancashire, England. Through masses of colorful blossoms ran a labyrinth of walks leading to arbors and grottoes covered with honeysuckle and eglantine. High fences entwined with gooseberries, peaches, and other fruits enclosed the garden on the lower side. Below the mansion on the left a large kitchen garden led to orchards stocked with the best varieties of trees from Belpre nurseries and from abroad. Farther down the island a farm of one hundred acres was under the management of Thomas Neal, who also superintended a large dairy.

The monarch of this miniature empire was a tall, stooping man, with eyes so weak that he had to hold the pages of a book close to his nose as he read. When he hunted quail, a servant pointed his gun and told him when to pull the trigger. Although he was near-sighted and somewhat awkward, his six-foot figure made an impressive appearance in the old English style of dress which he wore in society. This costume consisted of a coat of blue broadcloth, knee breeches of scarlet or buff, silk stockings, and shoes with silver buckles.

Blennerhassett spent much of his time in the office which contained his library and laboratory. His chief interests were science, literature, and music. He also owned a good law library and main-

by making artificial teeth. Finally he secured a small law practice in New York and married Madam Jumel. When at the age of eighty he made provision in his will for two daughters, one six and the other two years old, Burr replied to the protest of a friend: "When a lady does me the favor to name me as the father of her child, I trust I shall always be too gallant to show myself ungrateful for the favor." In 1836, as news reached New York that the Texans had defeated the Mexicans, Burr exclaimed: "There, you see. I was right! I was only thirty years too soon! What was treason thirty years ago, is patriotism now."

After the trial the Blennerhassetts lived in a constant struggle against financial difficulty. It has suited the writers of romance to represent the Blennerhassett drama as beginning with incestuous romance, rising to a climax in the Burr conspiracy, and ending in the tragic poverty of the parents and imbecility of the children. Mrs. Blennerhassett-Adams asserted that "The abject-poverty tales of the Blennerhassetts . . . are not true." The existing letters show that they always had enough money to live comfortably, and at the same time that Mrs. Blennerhassett expressed the hope that "we can end our days without starvation" she had six bank shares and kept a maid servant. On the other hand they lost heavily through their own extravagance and Blennerhassett's endorsement of Burr's bills, and they could not reconcile themselves to living without the luxury to which they were accustomed. After his release from the trial Blennerhassett hurried to salvage his property on the island, which had been rented to Col. Cushing of Belpre. He found that the grounds had been flooded, the window frames had been torn out to get the lead weights, and the stone roller broken to get the iron axle. His Negroes had escaped, and his creditors had forced the sale of his library and laboratory in Wood County. Robert Miller, a creditor of Kentucky, took over the farm for the raising of flax and the manufacture of cordage.

With the remains of his fortune Blennerhassett purchased a thousand acres of land on the Mississippi River near Port Gibson for the raising of cotton. The new home, named La Cache, or

The Hiding Place, was described by Ira Boswell in 1903 as being "in shape, design, and size an exact reproduction of the center building of the island home." At first cotton brought a high price, and while Blennerhassett devoted his time to music, science, and literature, his wife superintended both her own household affairs and the business of the estate. A second daughter named Margaret died in infancy here. Their fifth and last child was named Joseph Lewis after the Philadelphia friend of the family. Dominick attended an academy at Germantown, Pennsylvania, and Harman, Jr., was sent to Ohio University at Athens under the care of Waldo Putnam of Belpre. When Harman was "forced out of his work" at Athens, his father requested Mr. Putnam in 1818 to send the boy home.

In an attempt to provide for the future of his wife and children, Blennerhassett on March 2, 1811, reminded Alston that only \$12,500 of the total debt of \$50,000 owed by Alston and Burr had been paid. He then threatened that unless an additional \$15,000 were paid he would publish a book which he had written to expose the "private treason and public perjury" of Burr and Alston. A similar threat was addressed to Burr two years later. Soon after his futile ultimatum to Alston, Blennerhassett received news of the destruction of the mansion. *The Western Spectator* for March 6, 1811, reported that two Negroes came to the mansion chilled from their attempt to save a companion from drowning in the river. In going to the cellar for brandy, they accidentally touched the flame of their candle against the hemp crop of the previous season which was stored in the north wing, and the mansion burned to the ground. Still more disaster to the fortunes of Blennerhassett resulted from the embargoes imposed during the War of 1812.

After twelve years at La Cache Blennerhassett was compelled by the collapse of the cotton market and the insistence of his creditors to sell his plantation and twenty-two slaves for \$27,000. With the money left after his debts were paid, he bought stock in the banks of New York City.

From Mississippi Blennerhassett took his family for a short stay

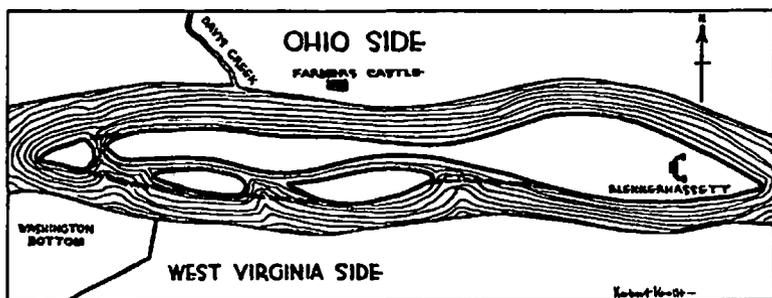
The Richards passed  
March 6 - 1811 the burning home in  
the newspaper recd. their way to Lexington, Adams Co.  
Ohio

Immediately workmen under the direction of Colonel Joseph Barker started the construction of the mansion. First they cut down the primeval forest trees which grew to great size on the fertile soil of the island, and removed the stumps. Boat landings were constructed on both sides of the island to facilitate passenger travel and the unloading of building supplies. Blennerhassett secured numerous boats for passengers and freight, and purchased eight or ten Negroes to serve as boatmen, grooms, and waiters. Stone was quarried from the Virginia hills for foundations and landings. Instead of building his home of stone, Blennerhassett preferred wood because he believed it was less likely to be damaged by earthquakes.

The mansion was completed in 1800 at a cost of more than \$40,000. Facing the upper end of the island, it consisted of a main building of two stories flanked by one-story wings which curved forward in the shape of an ellipse. Trees were removed at the head of the island to permit an unobstructed view of the estate. To the traveller descending the Ohio by boat this gleaming white mansion in the wilderness was a surprising and memorable sight. The main building measured fifty-two feet in length by thirty feet in width. It contained ten rooms, five upstairs and five downstairs. Porticoes forty feet in length curved forward on both sides of the house to join offices twenty-six feet long by twenty feet wide. The total inside dimension of the front was therefore 184 feet. The wing on the left served as a servants' hall and kitchen, while the right office contained Blennerhassett's library and laboratory. Blennerhassett boasted that his mansion contained "with the wings connected to it by circular corridors, thirty-six windows, glazed with lights 12 by 18 inches."

On the first floor, doors led from the large dining room in the middle of the house to two small parlors on the sides. Behind each of the parlors was another small room. The dining room was furnished with massive furniture imported from Philadelphia and England. The walls were finished in a dark color, and a cornice of plaster bordered with a golden moulding extended around the high

to John Harvie, who on April 19, 1780, made an entry for five hundred acres on the first two islands of the cluster. The title was then held successively by Samuel MacDowell, John Harvie, Henry Banks, Heron, Nelson & Co., and James Heron. Elijah Backus, an editor and lawyer of Marietta, purchased the two upper islands from Heron in 1792 for 250 pounds, or \$833.33½. Blennerhassett met Backus in Marietta and contracted to buy 170 acres on the upper end of the first island, but Backus failed to issue a warranty deed. After a suit entered by Blennerhassett in the Superior Court of Chancery at Staunton, Backus and his wife executed a deed to Blennerhassett and Joseph S. Lewis of Philadelphia as joint owners.



Map showing formation of Blennerhassett Island by filling of channels between the smaller islands seen by George Washington in 1770.

At the time Blennerhassett made his purchase, the island was called Backus Island after the first local owner. On the survey books of the Ohio Company at Marietta it was called Long Island, and the name Belpre Island was also used. Blennerhassett named his property Isle de Beau Pre. Two miles above the island on the Virginia side at the mouth of the Little Kanawha stood a settlement of a dozen cabins called Newport, now Parkersburg, West Virginia. Opposite the island on the Ohio side the farming community of Belpre extended for six miles. Early in 1798 Blennerhassett moved into a blockhouse which Captain John James had constructed during the Indian War half a mile below the head of the island.

in New York and then moved to Montreal in 1819 in the hope of receiving an appointment to the bench from the Duke of Richmond, an old schoolmate, who was governor of the province. But the Duke was removed from office and Blennerhassett's hopes were shattered. For two years he practiced law in partnership with a Mr. Rossiter without success. In 1822, after twenty-five years in America, he went to England to apply for an inheritance from the estate of Dean Harman through Wentworth Harman, his great-grandfather. Disappointed in this expectation, he talked of keeping school, devised an original system of education, applied for the position of secretary to General Devereux, begged the Marquis of Wellesley for a civil position in Ireland, offered to take a position as rector in the church, tried to sell musical compositions to the poet Thomas Campbell, editor of the *New Monthly*, and attempted to exchange ideas for the improvement of cannon for an appointment in the office of ordnance. In desperation he stooped to blackmail in suggesting to members of the nobility that he had influence to prevent the publication in America of a volume of scandalous revelations which would have been embarrassing to the King.

While her husband suffered heartbreaking failure in England, Mrs. Blennerhassett talked of starting a boarding house in Montreal. She sold one of her precious shares of bank stock to establish Dominick, who had been educated in medicine, as a surgeon's assistant in the army. But within a week he was discharged, and Mrs. Blennerhassett wrote to her husband: "I firmly believe he has no longer the power to refrain from drink." Later Dominick enlisted in the army. Harman, Jr., studied law, but his relative said in the *Century Magazine* that he "was little better than his eldest brother." At this period of her life, remembering in her misery the joy of the past, Mrs. Blennerhassett wrote a volume of verse called *The Widow of the Rock, and Other Poems. By a Lady*, published in Montreal in 1824. The best known poem is "The Deserted Isle," which contains this stanza:

"To thee, fair isle, reverts the pleasing dream;  
 Again thou risest in thy green attire:  
 Fresh, as at first, thy blooming graces seem:  
 Thy groves, thy fields, their wonted sweets respire;  
 Again thou art all my heart could e'er desire.  
 O why, dear isle, art thou not still my own?  
 Thy charms could then for all my griefs atone."

In this low state of the family fortunes Blennerhassett's sister Avice offered him a home. He returned to Canada in 1825 and took his wife and youngest son to live with Avice at Bath, Somersetshire, England. But the climate was not favorable for Mrs. Blennerhassett's heart disease, and upon the recommendation of her physician they moved to St. Aubin on the Island of Jersey in the British Channel. Three years later they went to the Island of Guernsey, where some property of Avice was located. There on May 28, 1828, Blennerhassett's left side was paralyzed, and after two more attacks he died February 2, 1831, in his sixty-sixth year.

His will was recorded at St. Peter Port, Island of Guernsey. It raises more questions than it answers. Why did he say, "Bury me at night and limit funeral expenses to no more than for an ordinary working man"? Why did he ask his "dear wife Margaret" to "take in" Mrs. Mary Nelbern, a milliner, "soon to become a destitute widow, and also her orphan child, Avice"? How did Mrs. Nelbern save the lives of Blennerhassett and his sister as the will states? And how could a woman, soon to become a destitute widow, have provided Blennerhassett with both subsistence and property as the will further asserted? Time has drawn a veil of secrecy and mystery over the answers to these questions.

If Mrs. Blennerhassett carried out the provisions of her husband's will, she probably spent the next decade on Guernsey. Avice died in 1838, leaving to her brother's wife a house in England which yielded a small rent. In 1840 Mrs. Blennerhassett joined her son Harman, Jr., in New York to petition Congress to indemnify her for the losses inflicted when the drunken

that place on August 2, 1797, Edw. D. Turner wrote Blennerhassett a letter of introduction to Judge Dudley Woodbridge of Marietta, Ohio, and soon thereafter the exiled couple went down the Ohio River by keelboat to search for a home in the West.

Founded in 1788 by officers of the Revolutionary Army, Marietta was the first settlement in the Northwest Territory under the Ordinance of 1787. Only two years before the arrival of the Blennerhassetts an Indian War of five years duration had ended with the defeat of the tribes by Anthony Wayne at Fallen Timbers. Marietta was the residence of Rufus Putnam, Return Jonathan Meigs, Jr., future governor of Ohio and postmaster-general, and many other prominent people. The Blennerhassetts enjoyed the society of the Marietta residents so much during the winter that they abandoned their plan of visiting Kentucky, Tennessee, and the Miami country and returning through Virginia in search of a home. For a while they considered Mount Dudley, between the village of Newport and Newell's Run, as a location for their mansion; but that site was difficult to reach, and it is said that Blennerhassett preferred to settle in a state which permitted slave holding. Therefore in March, 1798, he purchased for \$4,500 a tract of 170 acres on the upper end of Backus Island in the Ohio River two miles below Parkersburg.

George Croghan recorded this island for the first time on May 19, 1765, when he noticed below the mouth of the Little Kanawha "five very fine islands." On October 27, 1770, George Washington described in his diary "a cluster of islands" while searching for lands to be claimed by officers for their services to England in the French and Indian War. Through gradual filling by successive floods the four or five smaller islands have been connected to form a single island three and a half miles long containing five hundred acres.

Although it is frequently said that George Washington once owned the island, Roy Bird Cook in *Washington's Western Lands* finds no evidence to support this statement. Samuel MacDowell, the first legal claimant, assigned his title based on a land warrant

the age of twenty-five. But the death of his older brothers John and Thomas made him heir to the family estate, and it was unnecessary for him to practice law. After the death of his father he inherited the family fortune and lived the life of a cultured aristocrat.

In the spring of 1796 Harman Blennerhassett's sister Catherine asked him a favor. She was the wife of Captain Robert Agnew of Howlish, County of Durham, lieutenant-governor of the Isle of Man. Her husband's father, General James Agnew, died for the English cause at the battle of Germantown in the American Revolution. The favor asked by the sister was not large. Would he escort her daughter home from school for a vacation? He did. When the thirty-one year old uncle and eighteen year old niece arrived, they were man and wife. The girl's husband was her mother's brother. Relatives of the couple were scandalized. The girl was disinherited, and social ostracism drove Blennerhassett and his wife to America.

Until Therese Blennerhassett-Adams revealed the consanguineous marriage in the *Century Magazine* for July, 1901, all writers on the subject had said that Blennerhassett's motive in coming to America was his desire to live under a republican form of government. But he was more interested in science and music than politics, and he could have found both republican government and cultured society in one of the cities of the East without taking his wife to the hardships of the frontier. It was not political oppression but social ostracism which drove him to America. He selected an isolated island for his home because of the ever-present fear that his children might learn of the relationship of their parents.

To escape the reproach of his family, Blennerhassett sold his estate to his cousin Thomas Mullin, afterward Lord Ventry, for \$160,000 and started with his wife for America. In London he purchased a library and scientific apparatus for chemical and physical experiments. After a journey of seventy-three days from Gravesend they landed at New York on August 1, 1796. After visiting New York and Philadelphia they went to Pittsburgh. At

militiamen destroyed her property during the trial of Morgan Neville and his companions. Leaving his wife in Swansea, South Wales, Joseph Lewis came in June, 1841, to assist his mother in pressing her claim. Her appeal to Congress was accompanied by a statement from R. Emmet that "her condition is one of absolute want," and that her son Harman was reduced to "utter imbecility, both of mind and body." Henry Clay presented a bill in the Senate to grant her claim for \$10,000.

With relief from her distress in sight, Mrs. Blennerhassett died at 75 Greenwich Street, New York City, June 16, 1842, in the presence of Harman and Joseph Lewis. Most writers have said that these two sons and the family of Mr. T. A. Emmet attended her burial in St. Paul's Churchyard on Broadway, but the authorities of that Church found no record of the interment of Mrs. Blennerhassett on their books. After Dominick's enlistment a friend of the family found him wandering through the streets of New Orleans in rags and destitution. A position as apothecary's assistant in a hospital was secured for him, but he soon wandered to St. Louis. Nothing is known of his fate, except that "he probably died in a gutter." Harman, an artist, died of cholera on August 10, 1854, in the almshouse on Blackwell's Island, New York City, under the care of the ladies of the Old Bowery Mission. Joseph Lewis located 160 acres of government land at Troy, Lincoln County, Missouri, and practiced law there. His sons, Robert Emmet and Harman, died in childhood. Joseph Lewis Blennerhassett, last direct descendant of Harman Blennerhassett, died at Troy about 1863.

Today the only remains that fire and flood have left of the Blennerhassett mansion are some foundation stones and the original well. A collection of Indian relics from the island is exhibited in the High School at Parkersburg, West Virginia. Another collection is owned by the United States National Museum at Washington, D. C. At Campus Martius State Memorial in Marietta may be seen the best collection of Blennerhassett furniture, china, and other objects from the mansion. Formerly steamboats made frequent excursions to the island, but now it is not easily accessible and there are few

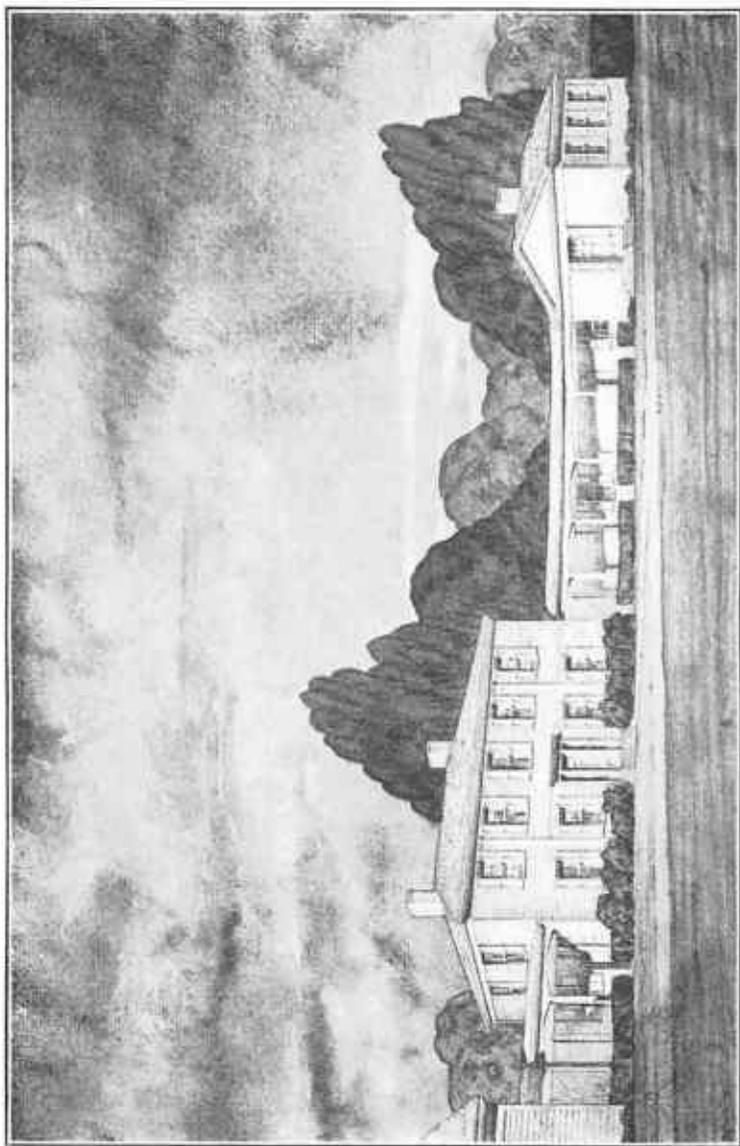
visitors. Blennerhassett Island is a part of West Virginia. A few farmers reside in well anchored houses on its fertile fields in summer, and usually move to the Ohio or West Virginia shore during the winter. In 1965 the Du Pont Company acquired an option to purchase the island if test drillings reveal an adequate water supply for industrial use by factories on the West Virginia side. Time has almost fulfilled the imprecation of Mrs. Blennerhassett in her poem :

“The black’ning fires have swept throughout her halls,  
The winds fly whistling o’er them, and the wave  
No more in spring-floods o’er the sand beach crawls,  
But furious drowns in one o’erwhelming grave  
Thy hallow’d haunts it watered as a slave.  
Drive on, destructive flood, and ne’er again  
On that devoted isle let man remain.”

**H**ARMAN BLENNERHASSETT, an Irish aristocrat, sold his patrimony for \$160,000 and in 1797 brought his cultured wife to live on an island in the Ohio River near the edge of civilization. For eight years they enjoyed the splendor of their miniature empire. Then Blennerhassett's implication in the Aaron Burr conspiracy lifted him to national notoriety and shattered his fortune and happiness. After the death of Blennerhassett's descendants the other members of the family revealed the sinister secret of his marriage, which darkened and explained the tragedy of Blennerhassett Island.

The Blennerhassetts originally lived in England, where they were in Parliament continuously for five hundred years. Harman Blennerhassett was a direct descendant of King Edward III of England through Constance of Langley, daughter of Edward, Duke of York, and Isabel of Castille. Thomas Blennerhassett, the first of the family to settle in Ireland, went from Flimby Hall, Cumberland, to Kerry during the reign of Queen Elizabeth. Harman Blennerhassett's father was named Conway and lived at Conway Castle, Killorglin. His mother was Eliza, the daughter of Major Thomas Lacey. Harman was born while the family was on a visit to Hampshire, England, and was named after his paternal grandmother, Elizabeth Harman. In his diary kept during the Burr trial he wrote: "My father and mother could never agree whether I was born in 1764 or 1765," though they were sure the day was October 8.

As the youngest of three sons Harman Blennerhassett was not expected to inherit the family estate under the law of primogeniture, which gave an estate to the oldest living son. Therefore he prepared to support himself by studying law at Trinity College, Dublin, where Thomas Addis Emmet, patriot and orator, was his classmate and intimate friend. After serving an apprenticeship at King's Inn Courts, Dublin, he was admitted to the bar in 1790 at



THE BLENNERHASSETT MANSION

—Artist's Conception Based on Research of the Author.

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The reconstruction of the Blennerhassett mansion in the style of the period on the frontispiece was made by Mr. William O'Neal.

## BLENNERHASSETT ISLAND and the Burr Conspiracy

By

NORRIS F. SCHNEIDER

Notes of Lawrence B. Beckwith

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