

# Harman Blennerhassett: Irish Aristocrat and Frontier Entrepreneur

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American historians remember Harman Blennerhassett for the romantic role he and his attractive wife played in the Burr conspiracy. Far more significant, however, is the role he played from 1797 to 1806 as a frontier entrepreneur in the Ohio River Valley. The Blennerhassetts arrived in the United States in 1796, emigrating from Europe for both personal and political reasons.<sup>1</sup> Family friction created by Blennerhassett's marriage to Margaret Agnew, his niece, and Blennerhassett's sympathy toward anti-British movements in Ireland had forced a change.<sup>2</sup> Blennerhassett viewed the United States as a suitable country for a new home, but he wrote to his nephew shortly after his arrival in New York that he would be satisfied with nothing less than what he had possessed in Europe—a landed estate. Kentucky's recent entry into the Union drew his attention to the newly-opened western lands, where there was "an increase of wealth flowing into the country, unequaled in the annals of any other, from emigrations."<sup>3</sup>

The Blennerhassetts wintered in Pittsburgh late in 1796, and in August, 1797, Blennerhassett embarked alone downriver to begin his search for a home. His first stop was at Marietta, in the Northwest Territory where the Muskingum River flows into the Ohio. It took him only one week to decide; when he re-embarked on the river it was not downstream, but back to Pittsburgh to bring his wife

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1. For information concerning Blennerhassett's family past in Europe see: G. Andrews Moriarty, "Genealogical Research in England: The East Anglian Blennerhassetts," *The New England Historical and Genealogical Register*, XCVIII (July, 1944); Therese Blennerhassett-Adams, "The True Story of Harman Blennerhassett," *The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine*, LXII (July, 1901), 351-356; Bernard Burke, *A Genealogical and Heraldic History of the Landed Gentry of Great Britain and Ireland* (London, 1871), 113; Jeremiah King, *County Kerry Past and Present* (n.p., 1931); *Royal Lineage of Our Noble and Gentle Families*, compiled by Joseph Foster (London, 1887), II.

2. Brooke-Watson and Co. to Harman Blennerhassett, October 7, 1795, Blennerhassett Papers, Division of Manuscripts, Library of Congress [hereafter cited as Blennerhassett MSS]; Henry M. Brackenridge, *Recollections of Persons and Places in the West*, (Philadelphia, 1868), 181-182; Foster, II, 782.

3. Harman Blennerhassett to Thomas de Courcey, August 18, 1796, Blennerhassett MSS.



to their new home. The Blennerhassetts returned to Marietta by September. Their financial involvement in the area had begun.

What the Blennerhassetts discovered in the Marietta region was a group of communities just recovering from the devastation of a five-year Indian war that had commenced shortly after the first settlement in 1788. Marietta itself was the oldest settlement in Ohio and the center of government and business for several other settlements, including the attractive site of Belpre, twelve miles down the Ohio opposite the mouth of the Little Kanawha River. Rich bottom soil made the region overwhelmingly agricultural with extensive orchards and excellent crops of corn, wheat, beans and lesser vegetables. Regardless of the visual results of the settlers' agricultural improvements, decades were to pass before the region would lose its wilderness characteristics. It took more than a few years of even the hardest labor to destroy a forest that had stood for centuries. As late as 1807, but four or five clearings existed in the twelve miles between Belpre and Marietta.<sup>4</sup>

The wealth of Harman Blennerhassett soon played an instrumental role in changing the face of this frontier country. At his father's death in 1792, Blennerhassett had inherited £20,000 which he deposited with a London banking firm, Brooke-Watson and Company. Brooke-Watson invested the money in British Funds which subsequently diminished in value, shrinking Blennerhassett's fortune to £13,000.<sup>5</sup> This British stock, over the period of several years, was converted into American stock at Philadelphia. £13,000 was not a large fortune by contemporary European standards, but it made Blennerhassett a wealthy man in the eyes of his frontier neighbors.

Blennerhassett would dispense his wealth during his 1797-1806 residence in the Ohio Valley through five different means. The largest amounts were spent on his estate, which he constructed as a residence and business enterprise. Another chunk of the fortune was invested in a chain of mercantile stores through Blennerhassett's partnership with the Dudley Woodbridge family of Marietta.

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4. Samuel P. Hildreth, *Genealogical and Biographical Sketches of the Hildreth Family* (Marietta, 1910), 181. Further references to the wilderness characteristics of the Belpre area may be found in: Emilius O. Randall and Daniel J. Ryan, *The History of Ohio* (New York, 1912), III, 35-38; Archibald Henderson to Margaret Blennerhassett, January 7, 1823, Blennerhassett MSS; Vol. I, No. 181, Hildreth MSS, Marietta College Archives, Marietta, Ohio. For an excellent general description of the characteristics of the forests of the Old West, see Archer B. Hulbert, *The Ohio River: A Course of Empire* (New York, 1906), 71-72.

5. Brooke-Watson and Co. to Harman Blennerhassett, May 6, 1796, Blennerhassett MSS.



Thirdly, Blennerhassett was defrauded of considerable sums by individuals who played upon his gullibility and unfamiliarity with frontier practices. Fourthly, the scale of living which the Blennerhassetts enjoyed exceeded their income; and fifthly, the Blennerhassett charities accounted for sizable outlays of cash.

Blennerhassett's initial concern was locating a site for his home. He finally decided that it could not be situated in the Northwest Territory because of the shortage of workers there. This scarcity of "well-trained menials" hindered settlers in attempts to develop their land, and also proved "a source of trouble and vexation to housekeepers in the new territory."<sup>6</sup> Since Blennerhassett had plans of operating a plantation, the use of Negroes was seemingly the best alternative open to him, and as slaveholding was prohibited in the Northwest Territory, the site of his home had to be a sizable tract of fertile land near Marietta but within the jurisdiction of Virginia. Elijah Backus, Dudley Woodbridge's brother-in-law, offered to sell Blennerhassett part of a nearby island he owned in the Ohio River opposite Belpre. The island lay two miles below a small Virginia town called Newport at the mouth of the Little Kanawha. In March, 1798, Blennerhassett made an oral agreement with Backus for the purchase of 179 acres of the upper end of the island for \$4,453.51, and a year later the deal was consummated.<sup>7</sup>

The clearing of the site for the house—a rise which was the highest point on the island—probably was begun late in the spring of 1798. This was a considerable undertaking, for the spot was covered with trees which had to be cut down and then have their huge stumps eradicated. Landings had to be constructed for the boats brought in to transport both men and supplies. The job of raising the framework of the house itself took three days and occupied the energies of all the "principal men" of the area. Continued work on the house and the laying-out of the gardens, the latter project personally supervised by Blennerhassett himself, dragged on for three years, hampered by accidents and a shortage of labor. Blennerhassett, to bolster the construction efforts, purchased about ten Negroes who would later serve as house servants, attendants for the grounds, and field hands.

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6. Hildreth MS Notes, Ohio Historical Society Archives, Columbus, Ohio [hereafter cited as Hildreth Notes]. See also Sally Guthrie to Mrs. Allan Medcalf, July 2, 1796, Campus Martius Museum Archives, Marietta, Ohio.

7. Josephine E. Phillips, "The Woodbridge-Blennerhassett Partnership" (unpublished paper, West Virginia University Library, 1958), 16.



As construction continued into 1801 and finally drew to a close, the Blennerhassetts were filled with pride, and their neighbors with awe. Lacking neither good taste nor the money with which to see it materialized, they had raised a mansion in the wilderness, the like of which would never be seen again.<sup>8</sup> The house, built of poplar and oak, was painted with "Spanish White" imported from Philadelphia.<sup>9</sup> Two rectangular wings were connected to the two-storied main house by circular porticos running from its front corners, giving the whole structure an elliptical shape. Farther down on the island through the forest was located the farm of about a hundred acres on which stood barns, slave quarters, and stables. It produced grain and grass for the cattle, horses, and sheep kept there.

The Blennerhassett estate was extremely valuable to the area, for it provided the means, along with Blennerhassett's business ventures, to sustain the entire region economically in its formative years. Blennerhassett, by his own testimony, spent well over half of his fortune on the improvement of the island. On December 15, 1805, he wrote to his friend General Devereaux: ". . . the house and offices I occupy, stand me in upwards of thirty thousand dollars, not to mention gardens and shrubbery, in the English style—hedges, post-fences, and complete farm-yards, containing barns, stables, overseers and negroes' houses, etc., etc."<sup>10</sup> In an age when a laborer received anywhere from twenty-five cents to a dollar for a day's work, the money which passed from the Blennerhassett purse brought a flood of wealth into the area. A local historian, S. P. Hildreth, later wrote: "This sum expended among the merchants, laborers, and

8. Travelers' accounts seldom failed to mention the beauty of the estate. John Bernard in his book *Retrospections of America 1797-1811* (New York, 1887), 176, 188-189, tells of his visit to the island in the summer of 1800: "At the close of another pleasant season in Philadelphia my good friends, Messrs. Clay and Arnott, proposed, for my summer's pastime, a tour to the Ohio as far as the Island of Blennerhassett, whose romantic loveliness was now an all-absorbing theme both with natives and foreigners." Reaching and viewing his goal, he concluded: ". . . until I go to my grave I must bear with me, as of a dream, the remembrance of the beautiful Blennerhassett." In July, 1807, Fortescue Cuming visited the estate and declared that "Blennerhassett's Island . . . is world . . ." [Fortescue Cuming, *Sketches of a Tour to the Western Country* (Pittsburgh, 1810), 110-111.] See also the following accounts: Harris, 125-126; Christian Schultz, *Travels of an Inland Voyage* (New York, 1810), 168; Thomas Ashe, *Travels in America, Performed in 1806* (London, 1808), II, 37-45.

9. Dudley Woodbridge, Jr. to Harman Blennerhassett, August 26, 1803; Dudley Woodbridge, Jr. to Harman Blennerhassett, September 29, 1799, Woodbridge-Gallaher MSS, Ohio Historical Society Archives, Columbus, Ohio.

10. Harman Blennerhassett to General Devereaux, December 15, 1805, Blennerhassett MSS.



farmers of this new region, where money was scarce, was of very great advantage to their interests and Mr. Blennerhassett was the greatest benefactor in this respect that had ever crossed west of the mountains." <sup>11</sup>

Cash in the Marietta region, as elsewhere in the West, was indeed scarce in this period. Early in 1797, General Victor Collot had noted that in Marietta "there are several stores established: the country, nevertheless, is poor, and its progress in resources and in population have been much retarded by the last destructive war of the savages." <sup>12</sup> Woodbridge's brother-in-law, James Backus, nearly a year later was to write his father in the same vein: "The country settles but slowly—very little business & a great scarcity of cash." <sup>13</sup>

The first contacts Blennerhassett made upon his arrival in Marietta were with several of the town's leading citizens, notably Dudley Woodbridge, Senior, formerly of Norwich, Connecticut, and a graduate of Yale College. Woodbridge had early established himself in Marietta as a merchant who drove a hard bargain and who apparently was always on the alert for means to make further profit. By September, 1797, the Blennerhassetts had opened an account at the Woodbridge store. During the winter this contact between the two families led to a serious discussion of a Woodbridge-Blennerhassett business partnership, for Blennerhassett himself was eager to enter some form of mercantile enterprise to make use of his capital. An understanding, again an oral agreement, was reached early in 1798. Dudley Woodbridge and the well-to-do Irishman agreed to a partnership, whereupon Woodbridge promptly asked for a loan of five thousand dollars. Blennerhassett readily arranged it, fixing the installment schedule so that the loan would be repaid by July 1, 1802. Thus, within a few months of his arrival, Blennerhassett had already dispensed a substantial sum of cash.

At this point there was consideration of a switch of partnership, a move suggested by Woodbridge, Sr., who wrote to Blennerhassett

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11. Hildreth MSS, Vol. II, No. 165. For contemporary wages see: *Ohio Company Papers*, ed. Archer B. Hulbert (Marietta, Ohio, 1917), II, 90; "Burr and Blennerhassett," *Daily Register* (Marietta), December 13, 1895. John Bernard stated in his previously mentioned book that "Mr. Clay computed that the estate could not cost less than the building of a town, and that the mere purchase and transport of materials must have involved an expenditure sufficient to have procured a handsome property in any part of the Union."

12. Victor Collot, *A Journey to North America* (Florence, Italy, 1875), 71.

13. James Backus to Elijah Backus, February, 1798, Marietta College Archives.



that ill health and other business affairs prevented his partaking in the enterprise, but that his young son, Dudley, Junior, would take his place. Blennerhassett thus was faced with an inexperienced youth instead of a veteran of finance as his business associate. The projected organization was to be called "Dudley Woodbridge, Jr., and Company" with Blennerhassett being the "Company." Subsequent events were to prove Dudley, Sr., a not entirely trustworthy business associate, for by February 10, 1802, the balance of his original \$5,000.00 loan from Blennerhassett amounted to \$1,473.87, and Woodbridge would fail to repay any more.<sup>14</sup> Sixteen years later Blennerhassett was still trying to make his former partner honor his indebtedness.

Blennerhassett, however, fell willingly into the proposed change in partnership. On April 25, 1798, he wrote from "Belle Isle" to Dudley, Jr., concerning a plan he had for their business relations:

I make no doubt of your papa's sincerity in his assurance that he can not attend to the store as well as you can which interferes with his other concerns . . . My idea is considering his great land concerns, that he should let you and myself embark only and *every way* jointly in interest, he furnished you so much capital as the Interests of his family well understood, can spare, to which I will write an equal capital, and lend besides, say \$2 or \$3000 . . . the principal & furthermore share jointly with you the advantage of a credit I can procure for goods in England, as far as you may think prudent to use it.<sup>15</sup>

Even though the project of importing English goods which would stock the Woodbridge-Blennerhassett stores, went ahead, it was several months before Dudley, Jr., would formally replace his father as Blennerhassett's partner; meanwhile the stock order in England was placed through Blennerhassett's bankers, Brooke-Watson and Co. The cargo was shipped in the autumn of 1798, but not until the following spring did the boat dock in Philadelphia. A huge and varied assortment of merchandise was finally unloaded in Marietta on June 9, 1799. Its invoice entailed a list of twenty-six pages, items that would certainly be sufficient to fill the partners' stores for many

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14. Harman Blennerhassett to David Putnam, March 4, 1818, Woodbridge-Gallaher MSS.

15. Harman Blennerhassett to Dudley Woodbridge, Jr., April 25, 1798, Woodbridge-Gallaher MSS.



months to come.<sup>16</sup> Dry goods, men's and women's clothing, tools, and household articles chiefly comprised the list; many of the articles were needed for frontier building and everyday needs, but there were also dozens of items which, fascinating as they must have appeared, were too luxurious for the tastes of the populace as a whole. The cost of the whole assignment, plus shipping, insurance, and duty charges, was £2,801 Sterling. With such a valuable lot of merchandise to price and sort, it became at last necessary for Blennerhassett and Dudley, Sr., who had not yet decided to dissolve his association with Blennerhassett, to formalize their partnership. On June 15, 1799, "Articles of Agreement" were drawn up and signed by both men providing for equal sharing of profits and costs.<sup>17</sup> In the same month, however, Blennerhassett suddenly received a letter from Dudley, Sr., who was now once and for all bowing out of the picture:

My business is so multiplied that I find I cannot attend to it with our store of goods without keeping me constantly busy day and night which my health will not justify me in doing—I therefore purpose getting Dudley to supervise and intend the business of our goods in every channel that can accrue to our interest. As an inducement I shall relinquish to him a share of the profits. . . .<sup>18</sup>

The partnership with Dudley, Jr., endured until December, 1806, when it was dissolved on Blennerhassett's initiative. During its first three years, it was a verbal one, an arrangement which proved unsatisfactory, for with the lack of written procedures, confusion often arose. Such a situation developed in July, 1801, when Blennerhassett penned the following passage to Dudley, Jr.:

When I wrote to Mr. Lewis to direct him to furnish you with what money you might call for, I contemplated only your private occasions without reference to mercantile matters, and therefore supposed you would not exceed 1000 Dollars.

I by this post, however, write to Mr. Lewis to accept your Drafts if you sh'd think proper to draw at 60 & 90 Days from 1000 to 2000 more . . . .

In every case of calling on him however, you'll remember

16. "Invoice of Goods shipped from London, September, 1798," Woodbridge-Gallaher MSS.

17. "Articles of Agreement," June 15, 1799, Woodbridge-Gallaher MSS.

18. Dudley-Woodbridge, Sr., to Harman Blennerhassett, June 26, 1799, Woodbridge-Gallaher MSS.



he will have to sell a sufficient quantity of my stock at such profit or loss as may be . . .<sup>19</sup>

Not until April, 1802, was a formal written contract concluded outlining the partnership. Then Dudley, Jr., wrote to Blennerhassett that an article of agreement "has heretofore been omitted on yr part from the confidence you have put in me & on my part from a determination not to realize anything until you were made safe as to the stock vested in the goods imported." He then expressed his desire to continue his business connection with Blennerhassett and in doing so "to have the capital continue as large [as] it was on our commencing business, viz. 10,000 or 12,000 Dolls. or a larger sum might be made use of to good advantage."<sup>20</sup> Blennerhassett soon replied: "Regarding the matter of our articles of partnership—I can only say that from every circumstance of its commencement and progress I wish it continued so long as it shall be not only agreeable but profitable to you. Your reliance upon my confidence is not indeed misconcieved [*sic*]."<sup>21</sup>

They were certainly in amiable enough agreement with each other; the only difficulty lay in the fact of insufficient profits. For all its years of existence, the partnership was but a moderate success. To begin with, the investment made in the English goods was unwise. Buyers there were, but not enough to produce a profitable turnover in the huge quantity of goods. In an 1802 business letter, Dudley explained the problem to Blennerhassett:

. . . many of the goods were unsalable in this country & many of them not so well laid in as they might have been for mony & the quantity of some articles so great that I was induc'd to sell many of them at a small profit on credit a considerable part of the sums due for which we have not yet rec'd & some part of it never will.<sup>22</sup>

This was the picture received by hindsight at the end of a three-year period of business. At its start, however, the partnership had seemed promising enough to both: the account of property value and debts owed the company for the year 1799-1800 amounted to \$9,-

19. Dudley Woodbridge, Jr., to Harman Blennerhassett, July 29, 1801, Woodbridge-Gallaher MSS.

20. Dudley Woodbridge, Jr., to Harman Blennerhassett, April 4, 1802, 1801-1803 Letter Book, Woodbridge-Gallaher MSS.

21. Harman Blennerhassett to Dudley Woodbridge, Jr., April 7, 1802, Woodbridge-Gallaher MSS.

22. Dudley Woodbridge, Jr., to Harman Blennerhassett, April 4, 1802, 1801-1803 Letter Book, Woodbridge-Gallaher MSS.



877.54.<sup>23</sup> The profit had resulted from the establishment of several stores in and near Marietta. The main business center was at Marietta under the supervision of Dudley, Jr. Blennerhassett himself established a store on the island which was particularly attractive to the river trade, and there is some evidence that a store was operated for a time at Newport. Branches were eventually set up in Waterford, on the Muskingum above Marietta; at "New Lancaster" on the Big Hocking River; and at Chillicothe on the Scioto. In addition to its own stores, the company acted as distributor of stock items procured for those small merchants in the area who could not afford the expense involved in a buying trip to eastern markets.<sup>24</sup> These items were generally sold on consignment by the company. Secondly, it outfitted store boats, the owner of the boat taking title to the goods, paying the company with a "note in hand," or sometimes taking on a consignment to sell at a stated commission. Thirdly, Dudley Woodbridge, Jr., and Co. established temporary stores at certain locations where there would be a special demand, often seasonal, for dry goods and staple foods. One such store was located at the Scioto salt works (now Jackson, Ohio) which flourished in the early 1800's. Its customers were largely the employees and their families. Another temporary store was set up on the Miami River where the local farmers could bring in their pork during the butchering season. This pork would then be picked up by the ships, which the company either owned or helped stock, as they went down river.<sup>25</sup>

Besides dealing in commodities imported from Europe, the company stores were stocked with and dealt in the more common products of the frontier. They were, for example, gathering points in the collection of ginseng, an herb-like plant valued for its medicinal qualities, which was annually shipped to the eastern ports from where it was sent to China. Animal furs, being taken in trade at the stores, accounted for a great percentage of business transactions. In one Day Book entry for 1800-1801, \$509.66 worth of furs were listed.

23. Dudley Woodbridge, Jr., to Harman Blennerhassett, June 11, 1800, 1799-1801 Letter Book, Woodbridge-Gallaher MSS.

24. Thaddeus Harris during his 1803 visit to Marietta noted that there were eight stores in the town.

25. Blennerhassett and Woodbridge, as early as 1803, were writing instructions on the Miami pertaining to the pork shipment. They were largely responsible for starting Cincinnati on its way toward becoming "Porkopolis," the meat-packing capital of the United States. See Dudley Woodbridge, Jr., to Joseph F. Munro and Co., March 9, 1802, entry, 1801-1803 Letter Book, Woodbridge-Gallaher MSS.



On June 9, 1803, the following collection of furs was described: "196 lbs 20 bears & cubs (\$30); 157 racoons (\$40); 15 fox (\$5); 5 otters (\$12); 11 wild cats (\$4); 5 deer skins (\$2); 3 mink (\$1); 3 fishers (\$1.50); 3 muskrats (.50)." <sup>26</sup> The total worth of the lot was \$96.00. After furs were collected each spring at the company stores they would then be shipped to Philadelphia where Blennerhassett's other business associate, Joseph Lewis, would take over the handling of them. Since Lewis had business connections in London, the furs would be sent there twice a year, in March and November, for public fur sales. Joseph Lewis also assisted Blennerhassett and Woodbridge in their cattle business. What animals they had raised or purchased were driven to Alexandria, Virginia, once a year for sale in the cattle market there. <sup>27</sup> Whiskey was also an important commodity in the trade of the stores, for on the frontier it was often considered a prime necessity of daily life. Whatever was sold to the customer in the Woodbridge-Blennerhassett stores was not always done so on cash terms. Credit was extended to the customer or else payment taken in kind: "To be paid in oats or rye or money" and "To pay in hay" were two notations made by the partners in their account books. <sup>28</sup>

Profits from the Woodbridge-Blennerhassett enterprises fluctuated widely and unpredictably. A case in point was the Big Hocking River (called Hockhocking at the time) store established in December, 1799, and somewhat of a success after one year's business activity, making a profit of \$126.00 out of \$1,100.00 worth of goods handled. <sup>29</sup> By December, 1803, however, the store was out of business, the reason given by Dudley, Jr., in a letter to the store's manager: <sup>30</sup>

You enquire what kind a voyage the Brig has made . . . .  
She has sunk us a considerable sum of money on the voyage  
. . . . The not meeting with a sale for her & the loss we  
met with in the voyage, prevented our purchasing any goods

<sup>26</sup>. "Invoice of skins sent to J. Clarke," June 9, 1803, Woodbridge-Gallaher MSS.

<sup>27</sup>. Harman Blennerhassett to Joseph Lewis, July 30, 1801, Blennerhassett MSS.

<sup>28</sup>. For the importance of frontier credit see: Richard T. Farrell, "Cincinnati, 1800-1830: Economic Development Through Trade and Industry," *Ohio History*, LXXVII (Autumn, 1968), 112.

<sup>29</sup>. Dudley Woodbridge, Jr., to James Converse, December 18, 1800, Woodbridge-Gallaher MSS.

<sup>30</sup>. Dudley Woodbridge to James Converse, December 9, 1803, 1801-1803 Letter Book, Woodbridge-Gallaher MSS.



for the store at Hockhocking . . . as we cou'd not obtain them without involving ourselves in debt, which the returns of the Store for these 10 months past wou'd not justify us in doing.

If we take into view the small amount of sales for prompt payment, the difficulty of collecting debts for goods trusted out, & the reduced prices at which goods are now selling at New Lancaster, we should be dissuaded from continuing the establishment, even if we had a large capital at command. At present all our capital is out, in debts & we are determined to stop (in a measure) purchasing goods until large collections can be made . . . . The principal object of our present communication, is to effect the long talked of plan of bringing our buziness at New Lancaster to a close.

The "brig" referred to in the letter was the company's ship "Dominic." Shipbuilding was another field into which Blennerhassett and his partner had expanded. Vessels were built, launched, manned, and loaded at Marietta and sent down the Ohio each spring when it was in flood so that there would be enough water to enable the seagoing ships to pass over the Letart Falls (the rapids of the Ohio). Blennerhassett's entry into the industry was financially disastrous for him, but it served to funnel another chunk of his fortune into the local economy, helping to lay what was the keystone of the Marietta economy until Jefferson's embargo of 1808. Moreover, shipbuilding provided an impetus for numerous secondary enterprises. The demand for barrels for the packing of pork cargos gave employment to coopers and to the woodsmen hired to spot the best stave timber. The making of ship's stores such as cordage required the raising of hemp and the setting up of rope-walks; at one time there were four rope-walks in Marietta,<sup>31</sup> and so much hemp was raised that it, too, was shipped out as a cargo. Tar had to be manufactured; the need for anchors led to the establishment of iron works; and tallow was manufactured for use in the greasing of launching structures. Moreover, the need for cargo products for shipment downriver spruced up the demand for sheep and beef cattle.

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31. Harris, 123. For information concerning the effects of the shipbuilding industry on Marietta's economy, see: "Memorandum for H. Mills," February 24, 1803, Woodbridge-Gallaher MSS; General Rufus Putnam to General Jonathan Dayton, June 15, 1801, Library of Congress Division of Manuscripts; John Delafield, Jr., *A Brief Topographical Description of the County of Washington in the State of Ohio* (n.p., 1834), 33-34.



Dudley Woodbridge, Jr., and Co. first became involved in ship-building on June 11, 1800, when Blennerhassett received an important letter from his partner in Marietta:

The merchants of this place have contracted to build a schooner of 80 tons,  $\frac{1}{4}$  of which they wish'd us to own but I declin'd doing it until I cou'd see you. I afterwards in our behalf became owner of  $\frac{1}{8}$  rather than it shou'd fail of being built . . . it is I think the only branch of buziness which will enable us to collect our debts & carry on trade in this part of the country.<sup>32</sup>

The support of the company had evidently proved crucial in the ship's construction; this fact may also have been reflected in the changing concept of the boat, called the "St. Clair," for as originally planned it was to be a schooner and when launched on April 15, 1801, it was a brig of 104 tons. Its construction had been hampered by a problem common to all building enterprise in the territory—the lack of skilled carpenters.<sup>33</sup> Another worry to Blennerhassett and Woodbridge was the danger posed by pirates, who were as great a menace on the Mississippi as on the high seas.<sup>34</sup> Captained by a famous veteran of the Revolution, Commodore Abraham Whipple, the "St. Clair" with its three-man crew was safely launched on April 15. The high point of the brig's six-week voyage to New Orleans was reached at Cincinnati where the populace lined the banks to see it pass.<sup>35</sup> The trip to the mouth of the Mississippi must have been a trying one judging by the captain's reaction to it: "Commodore Whipple thinks it the greatest thing he ever did," wrote a correspondent, "and deserves more credit than his going out of Newport in a frigate with dispatches from Congress, after passing seven British frigates . . . ." <sup>36</sup> Anchoring in the middle of the Mississippi to avoid paying a duty to the Spanish customs officials, the brig then carried its cargo of pork, flour, and hemp to Havana where it was sold and a sugar cargo taken on. Then the "St. Clair" sailed to Philadelphia where cargo and boat were sold, the profits assigned

32. Dudley Woodbridge, Jr., to Harman Blennerhassett, June 11, 1800, Woodbridge-Gallaher MSS.

33. Dudley Woodbridge, Jr., to James Backus, November 24, 1800, Woodbridge-Gallaher MSS.

34. Dudley Woodbridge, Jr., to "Messrs. Baker and Comegys," April 16, 1801, Woodbridge-Gallaher MSS.

35. Leland D. Baldwin, *The Keelboat Age on Western Waters* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1941), 168.

36. *Ibid.*, 168.



to Blennerhassett and Woodbridge being paid to their creditors there.<sup>37</sup>

The day after the "St. Clair" was launched, Woodbridge wrote a Philadelphia correspondent that "a gentleman of this place and myself are about building a brig of 160 tons . . ." The gentleman was Harman Blennerhassett and the brig was then being constructed under the supervision of Joseph Barker, the architect of the Blennerhassett mansion. Built entirely at the expense of the Woodbridge-Blennerhassett company, the 160-ton brig, completed early in 1803, was 70 feet on deck and 21 feet on the beam with a hold nine feet deep.<sup>38</sup> Christened the "Dominic" in honor of Blennerhassett's eldest son, its main cargo consisted of three hundred barrels of salted pork destined for sale in New Orleans; it also carried a load of wheat and corn to feed the live pigs being transported aboard. Mr. Williams, the captain, was instructed that if the cargo could not be sold in New Orleans for a reasonable price, he was to sail on to the West Indies and dispose of the produce there. By February, 1803, a crew of five seamen including a mate had been hired, the cargo loaded, a figurehead (a four-foot high wooden Indian) placed on the bow of the boat, and the brig itself decorated with 120 yards of red and white bunting for the send-off.<sup>39</sup> But then a problem arose, completely unexpected but serious enough to grind all the activities to a standstill. The two partners were informed by Griffin Greene, the inspector for the port of Marietta, that it would be necessary for Blennerhassett to become a naturalized citizen of the United States before the "Dominic" could be registered and sail. This letter was written on February 19, one week before the brig was scheduled to depart. Blennerhassett hastened to comply and sent a certificate in a few days. This gesture, however, was unsatisfactory, as Woodbridge desperately informed his partner the day before the set departure date:

Esqr. Greene . . . is sure yr certificate does not make you a citizen & says he can see no other way by which we can obtain a register than by yr having a court of record held in yr county for the purposes of naturalizing you. Pray have whatever is to be doned done soon, as in the meantime we

37. Dudley Woodbridge, Jr., to "Messrs. Baker and Comegys," April 16, 1801, Woodbridge-Gallaher MSS.

38. "Brig Dominic," April 28, 1803 entry, Dudley Woodbridge, Jr., and Co. Letter Book, West Virginia University Library.

39. "Dominic," August 31, 1802 entry, Dudley Woodbridge, Jr., and Co. Letter Book, West Virginia University Library.



are paying a forfeiture of \$5 pr day & losing a fine time to go down the river.<sup>40</sup>

Blennerhassett rushed into action and on March 7, 1803, was naturalized at a Court of Record of Wood County, Virginia. The "Dominic" was thus permitted to sail. From New Orleans the brig sailed to the ports of Saint Thomas and Saint Croix in the Virgin Islands where its cargo was sold for \$1,690.00. The collector of the port, a Mr. New, however, refused for some obscure reason to hand over the bounty for the "Dominic" cargo, "an ugly prospect for our pretty little Brig," wrote Blennerhassett on October 17. His premonition proved correct, for the money was not forthcoming and as late as April 25, 1808, Woodbridge was still trying to collect it.<sup>41</sup>

In this period of shipbuilding, Blennerhassett as usual had been generous with his capital, at one point writing Dudley, Jr.: "You will not therefore hesitate to command so much of my property as you have applied for upon the terms—2000 to 2500 Dollars."<sup>42</sup> The financial disappointment of the "Dominic" forced the closing of the company store at New Lancaster on the Big Hocking. In 1806, the still optimistic Blennerhassett began what were to be his last two business endeavors in the Ohio Valley. On January 16 of that year he wrote to Dudley, Jr., proposing the setting up of two new stores in the company chain, re-establishing the one at New Lancaster and building another at Chillicothe. This move, he calculated, would allow them to sell \$1,600.00 worth more goods than they were presently doing. He also concluded that \$5,000.00 would be needed to finance this expansion but that the sum could probably be procured "from our connections & credit in Philadelphia & New York."<sup>43</sup> Significantly, by this date Blennerhassett had reached the point where he could no longer supply the money himself for the company's transactions. Nonetheless, he was enthusiastic about the company's future and even suggested to Dudley that they attempt to procure the contract available from the federal government for the building of gunboats

40. Dudley Woodbridge, Jr., to Harman Blennerhassett, March 2, 1803, Woodbridge-Gallaher MSS.

41. Dudley Woodbridge, Jr., to Richard Ferguson "Collector of Customs . . . at Louisville," April 25, 1808, Woodbridge-Gallaher MSS.

42. Harman Blennerhassett to Dudley Woodbridge, Jr., October 17, 1803, Woodbridge-Gallaher MSS. As another example of Blennerhassett's generous impulses, see the letter he wrote on December 22, 1800, when Woodbridge was about to begin a trip to Philadelphia: "You may command my pistols as well as anything better I can serve you in; and of course I approve of anything you propose for our joint interest."

43. Harman Blennerhassett to Dudley Woodbridge, Jr., January 16, 1806, Woodbridge-Gallaher MSS.



at Marietta. This latter objective was not achieved, but the New Lancaster and Chillicothe stores were established within the year. Their early success was nullified by Blennerhassett's second financial commitment of 1806. It was during this last year that he was to live in the area that Blennerhassett embarked on his final shipbuilding venture, the construction of boats for the ill-fated Burr expedition, a flotilla that cost him \$1,319.00.<sup>44</sup>

Throughout their stay in the territory, the Blennerhassetts lived on a grandiose scale. While their money lasted, they enjoyed a life of luxury unmatched in the area. Despite their frontier location, the Blennerhassetts insisted on only the best foods, importing freely from the East, and because of the distance involved, often in considerable quantities; on one occasion alone, they ordered one-half chest of "best Hyson Tea", one barrel of "Havannah Sugar", ten gallons of cognac brandy, fifteen gallons of Lisbon wine, one small jar "best olives", one barrel of "Mackerel", six flasks of "Florence Oyl", and 500 Spanish "Segars". Judging from the richness and variety of the materials—velvets, hats, shoes, fans and other women's apparel—which she ordered purchased, Mrs. Blennerhassett must have been the envy of the area's feminine population.<sup>45</sup> Her husband was just as careless in regard to personal extravagances. On November 26, 1801, Blennerhassett informed Dudley, Jr., by letter: "My silver lute is nearly quite unstrung. Can we recover its melody with 50 or 100 Dollars?" One of his largest expenditures involved his most pleasurable pastime—reading. From December 31, 1801, to March 20, 1805, Blennerhassett purchased \$2,487.10 worth of books from John Conrad and Company of Philadelphia.<sup>46</sup>

44. For further information concerning the Marietta shipbuilding, see: Charles H. Ambler, *A History of Transportation in the Ohio Valley* (Glendale, California, 1932), 85-86; Seymour Dunbar, *A History of Travel in America* (New York, 1937), 304; Baldwin, 166-173. Concerning the trade of the period see: Randolph Down, *Frontier Ohio, 1788-1803* (Columbus, 1935), 101-126. For information concerning other Western chain stores and mercantile operations, see: Joseph Barker, *Recollections of the First Settlement of Ohio*, ed. George J. Blazier (Marietta, Ohio, 1958), 38-39; "Diary of Major William Stanley," *Historical and Philosophical Society of Ohio*, XIV (1919), 19-22; Ephriam Blaine Papers, Division of Manuscripts, Library of Congress. Blaine was a merchant located at Uniontown, Pennsylvania, and his merchandizing problems were similar to those of Dudley Woodbridge, Jr., and Company.

45. Mrs. Dudley Woodbridge, Sr., once instructed her son William, while he was in the East, to buy for his sister Lucy a 'Saddle [of] plain leather like Mrs. Blennerhassetts'. [Louise Ran, "Lucy Backus Woodbridge, Pioneer Mother," *Ohio State Archeological and Historical Society Quarterly*, XLIV (October, 1935), 436.]

46. "Acct. with John Conrad and Co.," March 20, 1805, Blennerhassett MSS.



In addition to his fortune being dissipated by a lavish scale of living, Blennerhassett was often victimized by swindlers who played upon his gullibility. Once during the building of the mansion, he bargained with a man, whom everyone in the neighborhood except Blennerhassett knew as a "notorious rogue," for a supply of river clam shells which were used at that time in preparing plaster. The fellow declared that he had to dive into the water six to eight feet deep to collect the shells and so demanded and received fifty cents a bushel for them. In actuality they could be found lying along the shore, and thus Blennerhassett had paid the man nearly five times what the shells were worth.<sup>47</sup> In 1804, Blennerhassett received a letter from a former neighbor in Ireland who informed him that he was sending his son to America to get away from the troubled, revolutionary atmosphere that had enveloped the country. The youth, whose name was Pierce Harte, had had a large income settled upon him by an aunt. As a favor for an old acquaintance, Blennerhassett was requested to look after the boy. He responded generously when the young man arrived, entertaining him and giving him a letter of credit which vouched for his character. Blennerhassett soon learned of his blunder. The letter which he received from Ireland had been forged by the young man himself who really had been disowned by his father. The youth continued on his way down the Ohio and Mississippi without a cent to his name, but living royally on the credit extended him on the basis of Blennerhassett's letter. By the time the ruse could be halted, Harte had run up debts totaling \$4,000.00 which Blennerhassett was forced to make good.<sup>48</sup>

Blennerhassett's costly experiences with swindlers did nothing to dampen his sympathies for the genuinely unfortunate in the neighborhood. His activities in local charity may have been an extension of the Old World custom of the wealthy estate owner providing for the wants of his tenants and neighbors, but the charity of the Blennerhassetts stemmed also from their own natural kindness and sensitivity toward the needs of others. The fact that they felt a deep affection toward those with whom they were closely associated can be seen in their constant desire for guests at their home. Scattered throughout the formal business letters which Blennerhassett sent regularly to Dudley, Jr., are warm sentences which testify to his feelings toward the man who later at the Burr treason trial was to publicly and contemptuously state, "It was common opinion throughout the

47. Hildreth Notes, Ohio Historical Society Archives.

48. Harman Blennerhassett to Aaron Burr, December 21, 1805, Blennerhassett MSS.



country that Blennerhassett had every sense but common sense." 49 On August 2, 1798, Blennerhassett wrote "I am very desirous of seeing you and dear Mrs. Woodbridge down here. I hope you will be able to give us a week." On July 15, 1799, Blennerhassett ended a business note by asking, "When can you spare a day, my dear young friend, to him who hopes yet to be your old one?" 50

The neighbors and acquaintances of the Blennerhassets never hesitated to tap them for financial help, usually without repaying. In November, 1806, a few weeks before he was to quit the area forever, Blennerhassett was asked to pay \$68.20, a sum which represented the combined debts of Joseph Cole, Thomas Neal, and Peter Taylor. In the case of the second, Blennerhassett wrote: "I told Thos. I would answer for him a few things he wanted for his wife who is in expected confinement." Mrs. Blennerhassett was just as susceptible to others' requests, as is shown in a letter she wrote Dudley, Jr., on October 29, 1806: "Mrs. Chamberlain who had lately lost her Husband has commissioned me to get her some black muslin such as is usually bought for mourning . . . [this] I beg be charged to me . . ." 51 Blennerhassett could not bear to see others suffer from circumstances beyond their control. Once during the construction of the mansion, he made the discovery that his foreman, one Flaherty, had dishonestly appropriated for his own use the funds given him to pay the workers. Blennerhassett immediately discharged the man, but in the meantime five of the laborers had been left without pay. Blennerhassett was under no legal obligation to pay them a second time, but he wrote Dudley: "I have determined to secure those men in their wages." 52 His generosity is again borne out by his relations with a Newport resident named John James. James, who owed Blennerhassett a large store debt, had the ill luck to lose his home and all its furnishings by fire. When the Blennerhassets heard of the disaster, they invited James and his wife to dine with them. After dinner, Blennerhassett informed James that, in view of the fire, his store debt was cancelled.

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49. This was doubtless true, but Woodbridge was guilty of inexcusable rudeness in stating so publicly when he could have refrained from doing so. Woodbridge later called upon Blennerhassett in prison and apologized for what he had said about the man who had showered so many kindnesses on him and his family.

50. Harman Blennerhassett to Dudley Woodbridge, Jr., July 15, 1799, Woodbridge-Gallaher MSS.

51. Margaret Blennerhassett to Dudley Woodbridge, Jr., October 29, 1806, Woodbridge-Gallaher MSS.

52. Harman Blennerhassett to Dudley Woodbridge, Jr., March 10, 1800, Woodbridge-Gallaher MSS.



Mrs. Blennerhassett then gave his wife several presents. John James later declared that Mrs. Blennerhassett was "a very kind lady" and "if any people were poor—or in distress She would assist . . ." <sup>53</sup>

During their period of residence in the area the Blennerhassetts also provided for a great deal of the medical needs of the poor—especially the backwoods people who, unlike the majority of farmers in the region, lived constantly on the verge of poverty and suffered acutely from the shortage of medical care. The churches in the area were not sufficiently established as yet to offer aid and the cost of medicines and the freight charges for transporting them over the mountains were often prohibitive. Thus, a monied family such as the Blennerhassetts could make a major contribution.

The Blennerhassett charities climaxed the gradual, corrosive financial ruin which overtook the couple. The charities, compounded with the personal extravagances, the enormous sums spent in building the mansion and landscaping its grounds, and the money lost to swindlers, rendered what profits that were derived from the Woodbridge partnership and the island farm inadequate for their needs. The worsening situation can be traced easily in Blennerhassett's correspondence with Woodbridge. As early as August 7, 1799, Dudley, Jr., was writing: "If you are oblig'd to call faster than money can be collected, I suppose I can borrow some until it can be replaced out of sales." <sup>54</sup> On June 4, 1803, Blennerhassett wrote: "I have, at present, pretty urgent need of learning that state of our strong box, alas, how much cash we can conveniently spare me. I want 100 or 150 Dr. . . ." On February 9, 1805, he informed Dudley, Jr.: "I cannot, without great embarrassment, draw upon Philadelphia for nine months to come, save for such engagements as I am already under." <sup>55</sup> Finally, he was reduced to penning the following note to his partner: "I am without a Dollar upwards of a

53. Hildreth MSS, Vol. I, No. 85-95. James made this statement in his reminiscences which were dictated a few years before his death at the age of 82. But, as he was noted by contemporaries at this time for the remarkable clarity of his memory, the statement concerning the Blennerhassetts is doubtless true. For similar statements confirming the Blennerhassetts' generosity, see: Maria Woodbridge, "The Latter Days of the Blennerhassetts," *Lippincott's Magazine*, XXIII (February, 1879), 239; Walter Curtis to S.S. Sturgis, ca. 1866-1867, Campus Martius Museum Archives. In several letters in the Woodbridge-Gallaher MSS, Blennerhassett directs Woodbridge to give some of his (Blennerhassett's) ordered medicine to individuals in need of it.

54. Blennerhassett was undoubtedly requiring large sums at this time for the progressing construction of the mansion and its grounds and the laying-out of the island farm.

55. Harman Blennerhassett to Dudley Woodbridge, Jr., February 9, 1805, Woodbridge-Gallaher MSS.



week. The last I could raise was appropriated to the satisfaction of a summons served on me by Jasper Gates. . . ." <sup>56</sup> Regretfully, unable to afford its upkeep any longer, the Blennerhassetts decided to sell the island. Blennerhassett wrote to several prospective buyers, including his friend General Devereaux, to whom he described the "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 . . ." Finally he mentioned ". . . the farm, which through want of skill and capital, I am unable to make the best advantage of . . ." <sup>57</sup>

As the year 1806 drew on, so did Blennerhassett's involvement in the Burr conspiracy, marked by his financing the construction of boats above Marietta and the preparation of provisions on the island, which became the center of the expedition.<sup>58</sup> All of this activity aroused the suspicions of the citizens of Wood County who on October 6 held a mass meeting to protest against the "treason" being hatched in their neighborhood. In early December, after President Jefferson's proclamation against Burr, their wrath exploded. The county militia was ordered out to take over the island.<sup>59</sup> With the Burr conspiracy crashing down about his ears, Blennerhassett fled his home at midnight on December 12, barely escaping arrest at the hands of the militia.<sup>60</sup> It set up camp in the mansion and, making the happy discovery of the wine cellar, inflicted thousands of dollars worth of damage on the house and grounds. Mrs. Blennerhassett was confined to her bedroom with her children but was eventually allowed to follow her husband downriver. With the Blennerhassetts gone, the Wood County court seized the estate and sold the remain-

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56. Harman Blennerhassett to Dudley Woodbridge, Jr., May 16, 1806, Woodbridge-Gallaher MSS.

57. Harman Blennerhassett to General Devereaux, December 15, 1805, Blennerhassett MSS. Blennerhassett about this time made at least one trip to the East to talk with prospective buyers.

58. Hildreth MSS, Vol. IV, No. 33.

59. "Report" of the United States Senate concerning the memorial of Margaret Blennerhassett, August 5, 1842, Marietta College Archives.

60. Silas Brown to his cousin, March 7, 1807, Silas Brown Letters, Division of Manuscripts, Library of Congress. Brown was present at the time of Blennerhassett's flight and described it in the previously mentioned letter: "At a silent hour of a gloomy night we must risk our lives & property on the waters of the Ohio . . . to escape the banks of infamous ruffians, Kenaway mobs & robbers. And what added grief to the scene was to see a tender husband (Mr. B) an affectionate Father and loving master followed to the River by his nearest Relatives & friends . . . Here . . . at midnight. . . ."



ing contents of the mansion at a fraction of their worth at the behest of creditors.<sup>61</sup>

Robert Miller, a Kentucky creditor of Blennerhassett, subsequently took over the management of the island farm, raising hemp and using the empty mansion as a storehouse for the crops. It was during his tenure, on the night of March 2, 1811, that the house was burned to the ground through the carelessness of some field hands.<sup>62</sup> Dudley Woodbridge, Jr., wrote a short letter to Joseph Lewis of Philadelphia concerning the property belonging to a former mutual business partner of theirs:

Dear Sir/Your letter of 1st inst making enquiries respecting Mr. Blennerhassett's Island came to hand . . . . There are about 180 acres in that part of the island belonging to Mr. B. As to improvements, they are of no considerable value. They consist of an old farm house, a barn of some value, a small part of an orchard which remains unhurt. The valuable buildings were as you have been advised, all burnt since in Mr. Miller's possession. Indeed, every vestige of improvement both useful & ornamental which was made by Mr. B. is done away . . . . The island presents one continued scene of desolation.<sup>63</sup>

The destruction of the mansion foreshadowed the fate of the Blennerhassetts who, after leaving the Ohio Valley, settled on a Mississippi cotton plantation which they called La Cache, "the hiding place." Mounting debts forced them to put it up for sale in 1815, after which they moved to Canada where Blennerhassett unsuccessfully attempted to make a living practicing law. Finally, they returned to England and found a home with Blennerhassett's eldest sister. On February 2, 1831, he died on the Isle of Guernsey, ending his life in Europe as he had once begun it in America—an exile.

The death of Blennerhassett went unnoticed by the state whose frontier industrial growth was so indebted to his timely investments. Blennerhassett was, undeniably, an eccentric and romantic man, a fact epitomized by his choice of the American wilderness for a residence and continually demonstrated in his New World life-style and management of finances. But for all his eccentricity and romanticism,

<sup>61</sup> Cuming, *Sketches*, 110.

<sup>62</sup> See "Conflagration," *The Western Spectator* (Marietta), March 12, 1811, for a description of the fire.

<sup>63</sup> Dudley Woodbridge, Jr., to Joseph S. Lewis, January 14, 1814, Woodbridge-Gallaher MSS. "Inst" was an abbreviation used at the time to signify "of this month."



the frontier aristocrat made a substantial contribution. After the death of his father in 1792, it had taken Blennerhassett only a decade and a half to disseminate a patrician fortune that had been two centuries in the making. Through a series of capital transfers from Ireland to London to Philadelphia, this fortune finally came to rest in the money-starved area of the Ohio wilderness—\$50,000 in cash which financed business endeavors unprecedented there in their scope and volume. Such pillars of the early Ohio economy as the fur trade, the cattle market, the Cincinnati pork industry and Marietta's shipbuilding were either launched or vitalized by Blennerhassett's wealth. Especially significant was the timing of this influx, for it came during the interval between initial settlement in 1788 and the economic boom of the state after 1812, a period when investment shortages could have proved ruinous. While there were, to be sure, business endeavors by others during this period, none were so widespread as those of Blennerhassett's company, with its network of interests crossing Ohio from Marietta to Cincinnati. Harman Blennerhassett was bumbling and erratic and his business career at best was meteoric—after 1806 he never again became involved in mercantile pursuits—but the presence of this Irish aristocrat on the American frontier can be seen in retrospect as of lasting importance to the state in which he had for a brief and flamboyant time made his home.