

BRIDGING
HISTORY
AT
BLENNERHASSETT
ISLAND

NARRATION DRAFT April 15, 2007

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Bridging History at Blennerhassett Island
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BRIDGING HISTORY AT BLENNERHASSETT ISLAND
NARRATION
A NEW NATION
<p>NARRATOR V/O: When America was young the Ohio River was one of its first highways, a conduit for dreamers moving ever westward. The names we know the region by today were not yet even used.</p> <p>The Ohio River's eastern shore was a colony that stretched to the Atlantic Ocean, and this part of it was called Trans-Allegheny or Trans Montaine Virginia. Trans-Montaine is Latin for "over the mountains." On the river's western shore was the unsettled territory disputed by the French and British, but still controlled by Native Americans. It would later be called the Northwest Territory, a region that stretched west to the Mississippi River and north to the Great Lakes.</p> <p>More and more European settlers would come into the region, and would settle it in the name of providence.</p> <p>It was the Father of Our Country, George Washington, who first surveyed the land. Long before Horace Greeley advised "Go west, young man," this <u>was</u> west and Washington encouraged many people to come to this place on the river to carve his or her destiny.</p>

Bridging History at Blennerhassett Island-Final Draft-April 15, 2007

In late 1700s a community was developing on the Virginia side of the Ohio River at its confluence with the Little Kanawha. The place was called Newport. In this era it was common for much of Virginia's Trans-Allegheny property to be granted to heroes of the Revolutionary War and this region was no exception. The land around Newport, including parts of the town, was granted to Alexander Parker, and in 1810 the town was renamed Parkersburg.

North of Parkersburg two other communities were growing. Isaac and Rebecca Williams were seasoned founders of Williamstown in 1787 on land that she owned.

And similarly to Parkersburg's founding, Dr. Joseph Spencer of Connecticut was granted a 5,000 acre tract of land as a reward for his service in the Revolutionary War. On this property he would found the community of Vienna in 1794.

On the other side of the river the Northwest Territory would be the next great chapter of American development. Explored and settled by the French, coveted by the British, it was chartered by the new country, the United States.

Fort Harmar was built on the Ohio River at its confluence with the Muskingham during the Indian Wars. After those battles had ended, the United States would enact the Northwest Ordinance that would create the nation's first territory, into which it would expand.

The first city the young nation would create in its first annexation would be built around Fort Harmar in 1788 and would be named Marietta, in honor of the French Queen, Marie Antoinette, who helped fund much of the American Revolution against Great Britain.

Down the river from Marietta, and across the river from Parkersburg, the second American settlement in the Northwest Territory was founded. It was called Belle Prairie, French for Beautiful Prairie, but the name was later shortened to Belpre.

A NEW CENTURY

NARRATOR V/O: These were the days when America was forging a new empire. The customs of Europe's Old World would meet with the optimism of America's new world. Anything was possible as a new nation would roll its way West, with the Ohio Valley serving as its gateway.

And in 1803, President Jefferson ratified Ohio as the first

state carved from the Northwest Territory.

The European settlers of the Mid-Ohio Valley were a mix of American culture itself. Some were hardscrabble pioneers, others were pillars of society. And at the end of the 18th Century a new family would come to the area bringing with them titles and lineage.

Harman and Margaret Blennerhassett were British citizens who came to America from their estate in Ireland, first making stops in New York and Philadelphia. They brought with them the gentrified lifestyle to which they were accustomed.

The Blennerhassetts fell in love with what was called at the time Backus Island, which was shaped like a figure eight and sat between Parkersburg and Belpre. They purchased the island's northern acreage to create their new estate and moved onto it in a log home in 1798 as the island took their name.

Slowly their Palladian style mansion would rise and they would assume the lifestyle they had had in Europe.

The glory of their reign on Blennerhassett Island would be short-lived. Their association with former Vice President Aaron Burr would be to their undoing.

It was on this island that Burr, also famous for killing Alexander Hamilton in a duel, would visit and hatch a plan to create a new country in the unsettled Spanish Territories of the Southwest.

The plan would be exposed and President Jefferson charged Burr and Blennerhassett with treason to the United States.

Although both men would be found innocent of the charge, their lives would never again be the same, and Harman and Margaret Blennerhassett would leave their beloved estate behind for an odyssey in search of lost wealth and glory, which they would never again find.

Meanwhile the young nation was beginning to define itself and more people were making the trek over the mountains. Elected officials from Parkersburg found it difficult to get to the state capital in Richmond. Transportation would play a significant role in developing the area.

The Virginia Board of Public Works built the Northwestern Turnpike from Winchester to Parkersburg and it was completed in 1838.

Another valued highway would further open up the area. A more southerly route would be created with the eponymous Staunton-Parkersburg Turnpike, which opened in 1847.

These two roadways made Parkersburg, Marietta, and their sister cities on the river, a center for transportation activities. This reputation as a transportation hub would be sealed when the B&O Railroad reached Parkersburg in 1857. NARRATOR V/O: And then fate stepped in in the form of one word: Oil! Before Texas or Oklahoma, the first great oil booms of the United States would be in the Appalachian Mountains in Pennsylvania and here in the Mid Ohio Valley.

Oil strikes required workers, goods and services. This brought an influx of new dreamers to the region.

But this first oil boom would be interrupted by the nation's greatest conflagration: The Civil War.

Our young nation would define itself in this raging conflict and the Mid Ohio Valley would be thrust into a prominent role.

INSERT INTERVIEW: DAVID MCKAIN (Oil boom)

The Ohio side of the river would serve as a beacon of hope for escaped slaves traveling the Underground Railroad, and the Trans Allegheny side of the river would become a new state. President Lincoln defied law and carved from Confederate Virginia the new Union state of West Virginia.

Now Parkersburg, West Virginia would be a pivot point at the end of the war. Good fortune smiled on the region again with another oil boom in the 1880s. This boom would create many wealthy people in the region and today their stately homes stand as a testimony to the Mid Ohio Valley's Gilded Age.

As the modern era dawned on the valley at the turn of the 20th Century, new economies would arise. At the same time America was developing highways for the growing use of the automobile. 19th Century turnpikes became paved roadways. The Staunton-Parkersburg Turnpike became State Route 47, and the Northwestern Turnpike became US 50.

A NEW ERA

NARRATOR V/O: The area would begin to enjoy a modern prosperity and the foundation created by the oil industry would flourish again with polymer and chemical plants.

By the mid 20th Century there was renewed interest in the Blennerhassetts and their home, which had burned to the ground just a few years after they left it. An archeological study revealed the site of the original mansion. The West Virginia State Park system rebuilt it and furnished it with pieces from the Blennerhassett Estate.

INSERT INTERVIEW: RAY SWICK (Rebuilt Mansion)

The rebuilt mansion opened as a part of the Blennerhassett Island State Park in 1991. The island was served by a ferry that prevented vehicular traffic from tainting the peace and serenity of the environment.

But the biggest thing to happen at the Island was the return of Margaret Blennerhassett.

INSERT INTERVIEW: RAY SWICK (Blennerhassett, post-Burr)

Transportation in the area would take another step forward with the completion of Interstate 77 through the region. And the Appalachian Regional Commission would insure that West Virginia and Ohio would have highways that would connect rural and urban areas.

One of those highways would run from Clarksburg to Parkersburg in West Virginia, and connect to Belpre, Ohio where it would then run to Cincinnati. Called Corridor D, It would upgrade US 50, the former Northwest Turnpike.

The final link in this great undertaking would be a bridge that would span not just the river over Blennerhassett Island, but act as a culmination of dreams and history, as the idea of a connection between the two states comes full circle. Because West Virginia owns the Ohio River, the West Virginia Department of Transportation would be responsible for building the bridge, and would work in conjunction with the Ohio Department of Transportation, which would build the abutments and ramps on the Ohio side of the river.

One hundred seventy years after the Northwest Turnpike was completed, this new bridge would complete Corridor D and create a single highway running from Clarksburg to Cincinnati. So not just any bridge could fill this gap. This bridge would have to be a landmark for the historic region it served. This was no small task as the bridge had unique requirements.

INSERT INTERVIEW: BEN BEERMAN (Design Constraints)

The bridge engineers would run through a variety of ideas before settling on a final design. The original concept was a cabled span of ambitious design. However, the towers would be too tall to meet the requirements of the Historic Preservation Office.

The second design was a suspension bridge that would span over Blennerhassett Island without touching it.

In the United States, suspension bridges had been a staple for spanning wide chasms for a century and a half. America's landscape is dotted with landmark suspension bridges, each the longest in the world at the time of its completion: from West Virginia's own Wheeling Suspension Bridge, completed in 1849; to the Brooklyn Bridge in New York, completed in 1883; and the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, completed in 1937.

Because of their great expense and due to changes in material usage, suspension bridges are rarely built in the modern era, with the most recent one being the new Tacoma Narrows Bridge in Washington State, completed in 2007. A suspension bridge over Blennerhassett Island proved to be prohibitively expensive for taxpayers, so a new design was needed.

INSERT INTERVIEW: BEN BEERMAN (Why a tied-arch bridge)

INSERT INTERVIEW: JIM SOTHEN (Network tied-arch bridge)

A NEW BRIDGE

NARRATOR V/O: The West Virginia Department of Transportation approached historic preservation officers with the idea of placing bridge piers on the island, with the caveat that the bridge would have minimal effect on the environment and it would not route traffic onto the island. Historic Preservation and local community leaders agreed that such a structure would accomplish the goal of preservation and providing a much needed completion of US 50. So a new design was placed on the drawing boards, one which would allow for piers to be placed on Blennerhassett Island, three miles from where the Blennerhassetts themselves lived.

So successful was the design and construction of the bridge that it won an International award of the highest order before it was even opened. The Gustav Lindenthall Award is presented each year to one of the world's greatest bridges that has met a variety of important goals.

INSERT INTERVIEW: JIM SOTHEN (Lindenthall Award)

In June 2008 the bridge was completed with astounding statistics.

INSERT INTERVIEW: BEN BEERMAN

The public got a preview of the new bridge on June 12th as walkers could experience the span close up, and runners inaugurated it with a race.

The next day the bridge was unveiled with pomp and circumstance as dignitaries and the public came together to christen the new span at the ribbon cutting.

INSERT CONGRESSMAN ALAN MOLLOHAN-SPEECH

INSERT GOVERNOR JOE MANCHIN-SPEECH

With that the bridge, connecting West Virginia and Ohio, history and industry, and engineering and aesthetics opened, and setting a world record as the longest tied-arch bridge in the world.

And so time and history converge on Blennerhassett Island once again. A new landmark shares space with the old, and antiquity holds hands with modernity with the opening of the Blennerhassett Bridge!

THE END