

Uncle Cass and The Emperor of Mexico

by Gaye Buzbee Jacobs

“Sir! Are you suggesting that I spy on my best friend? Eliza and I spent our honeymoon with the Blennerhassetts. Harman is one of the most influential men on the Ohio frontier ... and he is as loyal an American as I am!”

The State Department Official narrowed his eyes, leaned heavily on Lewis’s desk, and announced that he had come on behalf of President Thomas Jefferson, regarding the report of a conspiracy being hatched on the Blennerhassett’s estate. The identity of the conspirator behind this was not surprising, as Lewis knew the disgraced former Vice President very well.

“Mr. Cass, this outfit is raising funds for an army of 1,300 men. They’ve built fifteen boats, outfitted with guns, ammunition and supplies and plan to travel down the Mississippi to New Orleans. They’ll create a new country—a monarchy! That scoundrel wants to claim the western territory for himself and secede from the Union. We all know he’s not only wily and shrewd. He evidently wants to regain power and respect. The President thinks it’s about revenge for that tragic duel that ruined his reputation and made him a social outcast. We also believe that Spain is backing him.”

Lewis Cass was stunned. How could Harman be that deeply involved? It made no sense. The Blennerhassetts were a wealthy Irish family who had settled on an island in the middle of the Ohio, downriver from Marietta. Despite the rumors that they had fled England because of their incestuous marriage, they used their vast wealth to create a cultured outpost and wayside in the “far west.” Their home was a sumptuous mansion filled with the finest furnishings imported from Europe, where Margaret Blennerhassett lavishly entertained dignitaries and traveling officials. She was a beautiful, cultured hostess who spoke four languages. Harman was an Irish aristocrat, highly educated and a most generous host.

Lewis, informed that the Governor of Ohio had grown suspicious of the rumors of a revolution being hatched, was implored to visit his friend to either confirm or deny the reports. He found Harman excited and forthcoming about an ambitious plan, including an armed invasion of Louisiana. Due to his sizeable financial backing, he had been promised an Ambassadorship to the Court of St. James, which would allow his return to England, both socially triumphant and extremely wealthy. His wife could also regain her lost reputation in elite British society. Lewis sternly warned him about the dire consequences of such a disastrous undertaking and quickly returned to Chillicothe to report to the State Legislature.

Meanwhile, General James Wilkinson, (the Governor of Louisiana) who had been enticed to participate, “turned traitor to the traitorous cause” and reported the insurrection to President Jefferson. He also provided detailed correspondence, even naming the participants. U.S. Representative Lewis Cass quickly drafted and passed a successful Legislative Bill in early 1806, giving the Governor of Ohio the power to immediately dispatch the Ohio Militia to Blennerhassett Island.

The conspirators learned of the Order a few hours later, and mayhem ensued. Along with the Ohio troops, the Virginia Militia marched to the island, burned all but two boats, and chased the “army” into the countryside. Margaret Blennerhassett and her young children eluded the soldiers, crouching on a high cliff across the river and watching in horror as her beloved island home was ransacked and completely destroyed.

With the supposed “Emperor of Mexico, Aaron Burr” leading the way, a few men escaped, including Harman Blennerhassett. They were captured about a month later in Alabama and brought to trial in Richmond, VA. The conspiracy had been defeated, the traitors arrested, and the attempted secession was crushed.

My uncle, Lewis Cass, was a true patriot and directly responsible for helping to thwart a revolution, dreamed up by a treacherous schemer, the infamous Aaron Burr. The United States of America had survived an attack on its sovereignty.

EPILOGUE: Uncle Cass and The Emperor of Mexico

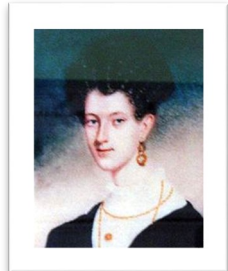
- **Aaron Burr**, had killed Alexander Hamilton in a duel five years before, and in the famous Treason Trial that followed, he was convicted, but acquitted due to a constitutional requirement rule regarding the lack of an “overt act.” However, his reputation and career were both ruined. Burr’s plan centered on forming a new western state, a monarchy, which would include the secession of Kentucky and Tennessee. He then set his sights on the capture of Mexico and possibly Washington, D.C. After the trial he traveled to France to escape creditors and met with Napoleon, who denied his support for a Mexican Revolution. Returning to New York in 1835 under the alias of “Aaron Edwards,” he began to practice law and remarried Eliza Jumel, a very wealthy, socialite widow. He plundered her finances, and within a year her divorce petition was granted. Aaron Burr died the same day.
- **Lewis Cass**, (my 4x-Great-grandmother’s brother) graduated from Phillips-Exeter Academy with his life-long friend Daniel Webster, then moved with his family to Ohio Territory in 1800. He practiced law in Zanesville and Marietta, and was elected to the Ohio House of Representatives. His opposition to Aaron Burr led President Thomas Jefferson to appoint him the U.S. Marshal for Ohio. He was promoted to General while serving in the War of 1812, and later appointed the Governor of the Michigan Territory. During his tenure, Cass amassed a personal fortune, secured the territory around the Great Lakes, built roads, and negotiated treaties with the Chippewa and other Indian tribes.

President Andrew Jackson chose Cass as his Secretary of War, and then U.S. Minister to France. As a United States Senator from Michigan, he ran for president several times but was unsuccessful. He was appointed Secretary of State under President James Buchanan, but in 1860 Cass resigned in protest of Buchanan's failure to secure the Union forts in Charleston Harbor. The famous Mathew Brady photographed Cass on several occasions, including the majestic portrait on the next page, made around the time he joined Buchanan's cabinet.

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- **Maj. Jonathan Cass**, (Lewis' father and my 5x-Great-grandfather) served in the Revolutionary War under General George Washington. He fought in numerous famous battles and was with General Washington at the winter encampment in Valley Forge. Along with almost all the Army Officers who were unable to collect pay or pensions, Maj. Cass received Bounty Lands on the Ohio frontier and took his family, (including young Lewis) from Exeter, NH to the Muskingum River Valley in 1800. He and Mary Gilman Cass (from a prominent family in Exeter, NH) farmed near Dresden, Ohio, for many generations, where the Cass name is still prominent in that part of the state.
- **Harman Blennerhassett** was born in Hampshire, England of wealthy Irish parentage. He married his niece, Margaret, and they left London for America, intending to start a new life. They settled briefly in Marietta, Ohio. In 1797 they purchased 174 acres of land on an island in the upper Ohio River, in Wood County, Virginia (now West Virginia.) The island is located two miles below present-day Parkersburg, West Virginia, a town which was named Newport until 1810, originally belonging to George Washington. The magnificent 7,000-square foot Blennerhassett Mansion was constructed between 1798 and 1800 and no expense was spared. Two sons, Dominic (1799) and Harman (1803), were born to them during their time on the island. A baby girl named Margaret, was also born there but did not survive infancy. Another girl, also named Margaret or Martha, was born during their time in Mississippi. Their youngest child, Joseph, was born in 1812. Margaret extravagantly entertained both the famous and infamous. Among the many prominent guests were government and military officers, Merriweather Lewis, Theodosia Burr Alston, and former **Vice President Aaron Burr**, who sought the financial support of numerous wealthy land-owners, including her husband. Between 1805 and 1806, Harman took part in Burr's disastrous, treasonous plan to form a new country in the western United States. He was held in prison during the Burr trial, but was finally released, and drifted to Mississippi to farm cotton, then to Canada, finding work as a lawyer, then finally returning to England. In 1825, his wife and children joined Harman and are said to have lived in disgrace and poverty on Guernsey Island in the English Channel, where Harman died in 1831.
- **Margaret Agnew Blennerhassett** was born in 1771 in Bishop Auckland, England. According to her biographers, she was quite tall, blue eyed, with long brown hair often bound in a silk headdress. She wrote and published poetry, and spoke fluent French, Italian and German. She accompanied her husband on hunting trips and enjoyed horseback riding. Her father, Robert Agnew, was the Lieutenant Governor of the Isle of Man. She defied social and religious conventions by scandalously marrying her maternal uncle. They shared a 7,000-acre estate in County Kerry until 1795, when their union and Harman's revolutionary ideals prompted them to sell the estate and emigrate to America. After Harman died, she remained in Europe until 1842, when she and her son, Harman, Jr., returned to the United States to petition Congress for restitution for the Blennerhassett Mansion's destruction. Although Henry Clay and his Senate Committee voted in favor of her appeal, she never received the funds, and died June 16, 1842, in a poor house in New York City. The Sisters of Charity buried her in a local cemetery. The Blennerhassetts' three sons also experienced difficult lives: one son simply disappeared after a night of drinking, another starved to death in the attic of a building in New York, and the final son died while serving as a Confederate during the Civil War. There is no record of their surviving daughter's life.



Margaret



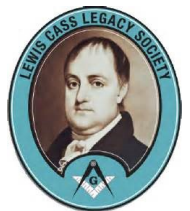
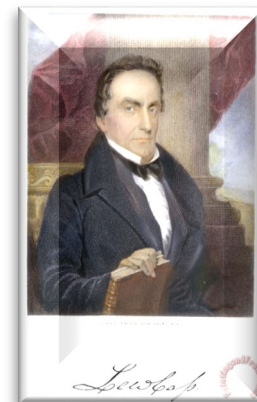
Harman



Marble Statue, by Daniel Chester French
Lewis B. Cass

Given by Michigan in 1889
National Statuary Hall, U.S. Capitol

Author's Note: I passed right by this statue when I visited the Capitol, not realizing at the time that I was his 4x-great-niece!



Their home remained empty for many years before finally burning to the ground. Between 1984 and 1991, the State of West Virginia reconstructed the Blennerhassett Mansion on its original foundations. In 1996, the bodies of Margaret and son, Harman, Jr., were reburied on the land in an historical Episcopal ceremony. Visitors can now travel via riverboat sternwheeler to the island, touring in a horse-drawn carriage, hearing the tragic story of the Blennerhassett's.

The nearby town of Blennerhassett was named for these infamous early residents.

**Blennerhassett Island
Historical State Park
West Virginia**



*"People may doubt what you say,
but they will believe what you do."*

- Gen. Lewis B. Cass