



Blennerhassett Island Historical State Park and the Friends of Blennerhassett, its volunteer group, are pleased that you will visit our park. The Island is open May through last Saturday in October of each year. While visiting our park you should allow at least three hours for a complete tour. This includes the boat trip to and from the island.

The Blennerhassett Museum of Regional History should be the first stop of your tour. It is the perfect orientation for all that you will see throughout the day. Your museum visit begins with viewing the video that briefly explains the lives of Harman and Margaret Blennerhassett. You will then be free to tour the three floors of intriguing archaeological and historical exhibits.

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## The Blennerhassett Museum of Regional History

The Blennerhassett Museum of Regional History opened its doors on April 30, 1988, in response to a long-standing need to preserve, protect and exhibit the region's history. Although the Daughters of American Pioneers' log house museum in Parkersburg's City Park has preserved many artifacts since 1910, its space and visiting hours are severely limited. The next closest museum to the area is in Marietta, Ohio. The Blennerhassett Museum became the first professionally-operated, publicly-funded museum of regional history in west/central West Virginia.

The four-story brick building itself has an interesting past. The Starr Grocer Company constructed its offices and warehouses in 1902. Prospering, the company doubled the building's size in the 1920's and weathered the Great Depression, only to go out of business in the 1940's. Purchased in 1947 by the Guthrie-Morris Campbell Company of Charleston, the structure was sold by them in 1983 to the Blennerhassett Historical Park Commission, which renovated it in 1985 and 1986 through a Federal EDA grant secured by Rene Zabeau.



The Blennerhassett Museum of Regional History is a showcase of three floors of

priceless historical relics and objects of art from the Ohio Valley's past. Exhibits range from prehistoric Indian tools, jewelry, weapons and household items, ca. 9000 B.C., to oil paintings, old clothing, guns and military paraphernalia, furniture belonging to West Virginia's first governor, automobiles of the 19teens, farm implements, 19th-century jewelry and glassware ranging in age from 60 to 200 years old. In the 18th/early 19th century exhibit, visitors can find a "burning glass", a "bubby pot", some Ohio Valley's oldest manuscripts, maps, and a mourning fan - objects of yesteryear that now strike us with their quaintness. Blennerhassett relics are among the museum's most valuable acquisitions. The Blennerhassett Museum indeed has something for every historical interest.

Located on the corner of Second and Juliana streets, the museum is only three blocks from the Blennerhassett Hotel. Parking spaces are located off of 2nd Street, between Juliana and Ann streets, under the bridge overpass. All spaces are designated with a red "M". There is a brown sign on 2nd Street that states "Blennerhassett State Park & Museum Parking Only." Open year-round, the museum requires a separate admission ticket from the island. Come experience the adventure that is the Blennerhassett Museum!

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## Blennerhassett Island



### The island before Blennerhassett

Blennerhassett Island's antiquity spans back to Ice Age hunters 9,000 years ago. During the 1760s, the famous Delaware Indian, Nemaquin, made the island his home. Native American tribes lived on the island almost continuously, until white settlers began to flock into the Ohio Valley in the 1780s.

Many artifacts and tools dating to these ancient residents of Blennerhassett Island are on display at the Blennerhassett Museum of Regional History.

Blennerhassett Island is a noteworthy historic location for a variety of reasons. In addition, it was visited by many renowned figures including George Rogers Clark, King Charles X of France, Johnny Appleseed, Henry Clay and Walt Whitman.

While on the island, visitors can enjoy picnicking, horse-drawn wagon rides, shopping at the Blennerhassett Gift Shop, the refreshment stand, bike rentals, nature walks, and, of course,

touring the beautiful Blennerhassett Mansion. The island ticket booth sells tickets for the mansion and wagon ride tours. It also serves as our first aid station. Blennerhassett's tranquility enthralls many of our visitors as they walk the wagon trail-road encircling the upper end of the island. Rich plant life, huge trees, and varied wildlife are a rare treat. Adding to the charm of the island, lush hardwood groves, long beaches and broad fields provide the habitat for a large deer herd, throngs of waterfowl and other birds.

Costumed volunteers conduct tours through the reconstructed mansion. Self-guided walking tours and horse drawn wagon rides are also available. For visitors needing mobility assistance, a powered cart is onsite for transportation and running daily during island hours, and for evening programs, with the exception of the Mansion by Candlelight event evenings.

Wagon rides operate every day the island is open. General public tickets for wagon ride tours are purchased at the Island Ticket Booth. Wagon rides are horse-drawn and last approximately 30 minutes. Tours are narrated by the wagon driver about the island history. The wagons are covered and can hold 15-20 people. The wagon trail is approximately 2 miles long and goes around the upper portion of the island. Tours go rain or shine.

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## Blennerhassett Mansion

Constructed by a wealthy Anglo-Irish couple named Harman and Margaret Blennerhassett, the Blennerhassett Mansion became known during its brief existence as the Ohio Valley's most beautiful private residence. Beyond its extravagantly landscaped lawns and gardens lay a dark wilderness broken only infrequently by scattered log cabins and a few small settlements. Thus the Blennerhassett Estate seemed like a jewel whose contrast with its crude frontier setting made it sparkle all the more.

Harman and Margaret sold their 7000 acre County Kerry estate in 1795 and emigrated to America, landing the next year in New York City. By the spring of 1798, they had located on the upper end of the Ohio River island two miles below the present-day Parkersburg, West Virginia, and started the construction of their new American home.

To the 18th-century European aristocracy, possessing a fine home was immensely important for it stood as the most outstanding symbol of the family's social status, prestige and wealth. Thus, the Blennerhassetts set out to build a palace in the wilderness, a showplace, and they had both the money and good taste to see their dream through to completion.

When they moved into their house in the late summer, 1800, it contained 7,000 square feet of (daily living) interior floor space and a frontage of 186 feet ~ making it one of the United States' largest homes. It was designed in the Palladian style with walkways and attached wing buildings curving upstream from a central structure like arms welcoming the approaching river traveler.

The mansion's middle section measured 39' x 54' and contained twelve rooms; an entrance hall, dining room, two parlors, two drawing rooms, a library, four bedrooms and a winter kitchen. The wing buildings housed a summer kitchen, servants' quarters and Harman's study. The mansion was filled with fine furniture which its master and mistress had purchased in London, Philadelphia, Baltimore and from local cabinetmakers. Oil paintings, prints, mirrors, many framed in gilt, hung on the walls. Small sculptures, oriental rugs, alabaster lamps and vases and a gold-and-marble clock adorned the rooms.



The Blennerhassett estate appeared so splendid it was nicknamed "paradise," "Eden," and "the Enchanted Island." But it proved a tragically short-lived haven for those who created it. Harman and Margaret became entangled in the ill-fated Aaron Burr Expedition to the Southwest (1805-1807) and fled their island home December 1806. The house burned to the ground in 1811 remaining only a romantic legend until reconstructed 1984-1991 by the State of West Virginia as the centerpiece of its new Blennerhassett Island Historical State Park. Today over 50,000 visitors annually tour the recreated Blennerhassett Mansion to experience its beauty and to learn its story – one of the most unique in our nation's past. – *Ray Swick, Historian.*

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## The Namesake

Harman Blennerhassett, a wealthy Irish aristocrat, settled on the wilderness island in 1798, where he built a magnificent mansion. Designed in the Palladian style (like Mount Vernon), the house contained 7,000 square feet of floor space. Its rooms were furnished with furniture purchased in London and Baltimore, oriental carpets, oil paintings, and porcelain made in Paris. The hardware on some of the interior doors was made of silver. Alabaster lamps were suspended from the ceilings by silver chains. A 2-1/3 acre flower garden and two huge lawns surrounded the house. It was one of the most elegant estates in Virginia and was the most beautiful home west of the Alleghenies.



In 1806, however, Harman became entangled in a mysterious military enterprise with Aaron Burr. As a result, President Thomas Jefferson accused both men of plotting treason in attempting to establish an empire in the Southwest.



Blennerhassett fled the island, but was captured and put into the Virginia State Penitentiary. Although Burr was tried and acquitted and Blennerhassett released from prison, the lives of both men were ruined. Interestingly, most historians now agree that Burr had set his sights on northern Mexico for his dominion, today's state of Texas.

The exquisite mansion accidentally burned to the ground in 1811, eventually leaving no trace of its graceful, semicircular lines. However, modern archaeologists rediscovered its foundations in 1973. Through a continuing program of careful historical and architectural research, the mansion has been recreated for visitors to see. Work on furnishing its interior is still in progress.

## Mansion Tours

The mansion is open every day the island is open. General public tickets for mansion tours are purchased at the Island Ticket Booth. Mansion tours meet at the circle in front of the mansion and last approximately 45 minutes. Tours are guided by docents dressed in period correct costumes. Tours go rain or shine.

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## The Putnam-Houser House – “Maple Shade”



Since 2009, Blennerhassett Island Historical State Park has proudly been offering its visitors an exciting new historical site to visit: an original 18th-century style wooden house that has the unusual distinction of never having been modernized. It exists today as its original owners, Aaron Waldo and Charlotte Loring Putnam, built it 1802, when Aaron Burr had just been elected vice president of the United States to serve alongside the new president, Thomas Jefferson.

The Putnams, both members of prominent New England families, had emigrated to Belpre in the Northwest Territory (today's Ohio) in 1789. Having survived the 1791-1795 Indian war and prospered as farmers on the Ohio Valley frontier, Aaron Waldo and Charlotte thirteen years after their arrival in the wilderness, decided to build a new home for themselves and their growing family. They chose as its site a low bluff in the six-mile-long Belpre settlement overlooking the Ohio River and across from the middle of a long, large Ohio River island soon to be permanently named for their close friends, Harman and Margaret Blennerhassett. The Putnams christened their house "Maple Shade". Legend has it that this was for two maple trees that Charlotte planted in front of her new home and which held special meaning for her for some reason now lost.

Years passed. Generation after generation of Putnams lived in the ageing home which had never passed from their ownership. When the name finally died out in Belpre in 1901, a Putnam daughter moved in with her husband and children and the family homestead became known as the Putnam-Houser house. Through the decades, the Putnams occasionally entertained famous visitors as diverse as the elegant Blennerhassetts, the Methodist Church's fire-breathing evangelist, Bishop Francis Asbury, and gentle, tree-loving Johnny Appleseed. Finally, in 1981, the long saga came to a close: the last of the Putnam-Housers in Belpre died and the Shell Chemical Company became the new owners of Maple Shade and its surrounding acres.

Shell was that rarest of all creatures: a corporation with a heart. While it desperately needed the ground on which Maple Shade stood to expand its nearby plant, it also recognized the house's unique historical stature. Not only was it one of the oldest frame structures still standing in the Ohio Valley, it also was in sound structural shape and had never been modernized by the Putnam-Housers. Shell balked at destroying it as many other industrial organizations would have not hesitated to do.

Within a few years, the problem had a happy ending. Shell offered Maple Shade to Blennerhassett Island Historical State Park, the park accepted, and Shell paid around \$80,000 to move the building by barge to the Island on December 29, 1986.

The calendar ticked off thirteen more years. The park lacked the money to begin restoration, and passing time increasingly showed its neglect as the house leaned, the wallpaper peeled, and small



animals gleefully occupied the old home as its newest residents. The Blennerhassett Island Historical State Park's private financial support group, the Blennerhassett Historical Foundation, surveyed the situation and decided it was time to take action.

In 1999, the foundation, under the leadership of Louise Cruikshank and Mimi Richardson, began the long, difficult task of raising the necessary funds and overseeing the building's restoration. When both of those dedicated ladies died, Dianne Anderson, and later Dick Phillips, took their place. In addition to the park staff, they were assisted by a foundation-sponsored restoration committee, which included members of the Belpre Historical Society. As Belpre was the house's location for 184 years, the society showed a keen interest in saving Maple Shade and contributing to its rehabilitation.

The restoration committee made the decision, a la South Carolina's Drayton Hall, not to furnish the house, so that its architecture and interior design could be more easily seen, appreciated, and enjoyed. Committee members also followed Mr. Phillips' astute suggestion that interpretative "windows" (i.e., framed and lighted panels covered with glass) be cut into the rooms' walls so that visitors can see the house's interior construction.

By 2008, work was far enough along to finally open Maple Shade to the public. The following year witnessed the final touches of restoration when the famous Devenco Company of Decatur, Georgia, installed period-correct exterior window shutters to Maple Shade's front and side walls. The total restoration cost had been \$311,700. Dream had passed into reality, with the gratifying result of a great degree of interest being shown on the part of the public, who have flocked to the house in ever-increasing numbers.

## **Putnam-Houser House Tours**

Putnam-Houser House, or "Maple Shade" is only open to the public Thursday – Sunday. Admission is free and there are no tickets needed. A host(ess) is onsite for greeting and questions

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Information on this page has been lightly edited and rearranged and is from the WV State Parks deactivated website:  
"WV State Parks – Special Places - Past, Present and Future" / "History Rolls Along"