

In the middle of the Ohio River lies an island steeped in early American history. It's where an Irishman and his bride hid from scandal, then built the grandest home west of the Alleghenies, a paradise enmeshed in treason, love, betrayal, political intrigue and the "Trial of the Century."

## Island Eden

### New film tells the story of the Blennerhassetts



By **JAMES E. CASTO**  
For Daily Mail WV

Diana Sole-Walko loves to tell stories. Over the past 30-plus years, MotionMasters, her Kanawha County video production company, has turned out an almost-bewildering array of titles, ranging from television shows and commercials to educational videos and full-length documentaries.

Sole-Walko takes particular pride in the documentaries her company has produced that explore people or subjects that have played important roles in West Virginia history.

"I love telling stories about West Virginia," Sole-Walko said. "West Virginians haven't told their stories very well or very often, especially in visual form. So, as a history buff, it's been my passion to tell those stories."

Her latest documentary, "The Blennerhassetts" is set to debut at 9 p.m. Monday on West Virginia Public Broadcasting. There will also be a free, open-to-the public screening two days earlier, at 8 p.m. Saturday, Aug. 28, at the Smoot Theatre in downtown Parkersburg.

#### Irish couple builds mansion

In 1794, Harman Blennerhassett, a wealthy Irish aristocrat, met and fell in love with Margaret Agnew, his niece who was nine years younger than he was. Their families strongly disapproved of the couple's marriage, which they viewed as incestuous and sinful.

To escape the scandal, the couple fled Ireland and made their way to this country and,

SEE ISLAND EDEN, 7A

MOTIONMASTERS | Courtesy photo  
A Parkersburg resident, Wesley Poole, the principal videographer and editor for "The Blennerhassetts," sets up a shot of the reconstructed Blennerhassett mansion.

## MotionMasters produces a shelf of award-winning documentaries

By **JAMES E. CASTO**  
For Daily Mail WV

CEO Diana Sole-Walko recalls the humble beginnings of MotionMasters, the video production company she heads: "The one-room office was small and sparsely furnished. There were just a couple of us with one phone, a rented camera and no editing system," she says.

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Courtesy photo  
Diana Sole-Walko is a veteran of the communications industry, serving as the CEO of MotionMasters since 1988, and prior to that as its vice president and executive producer.



### Charley West says ...



New film from local award-winning documentary producer tells story of historical aristocratic family

## MOTIONMASTERS

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"But we had journalism degrees, TV news backgrounds and ad agency experience. We also had talent and determination. So we took our story to prospective clients and did what we said we would do for them: produce results."

"Thirty-some years and a lot of hard work later, we're the writers, producers, designers, editors, shooters — the story-

tellers — of MotionMasters. Today, we not only own a fine editing system, we own a couple of them. The cameras, the latest in HD technology, also are ours."

And the storytellers at MotionMasters have put all that high-tech equipment to good use, producing a whole shelf of award-winning documentaries.

The company has produced documentaries about NASA's Katherine Johnson, U.S. Sen. Robert C. Byrd, the Rev. Leon Sullivan, the Supreme Court of Appeals of West Virginia, U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice John Marshall, the West Virginia

State Capitol and "Burning Springs," a history of the state's early oil and gas industry.

The latest MotionMasters documentary, "The Blennerhassetts," will debut Monday, Aug. 30, at 9 p.m. on West Virginia Public Broadcasting.

After that initial airing, it will be offered to other public broadcasting stations, and Sole-Walko says she expects interest from those in neighboring states.

Eventually, the plan is to make it available for streaming on Amazon, like some other MotionMasters productions.

In addition to heading MotionMasters, Sole-Walko is very active in the community. She is a past president of the board of directors of Habitat for Humanity of Kanawha and Putnam, a group she was actively involved with for more than 20 years. She was one of the founders of the Charleston Area Alliance and a past president of the Charleston Chamber of Commerce.

A native of Weirton, she holds two degrees from Marshall University — a B.A. in journalism and an M.B.A., which she completed in 2004.

## ISLAND EDEN

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ultimately, to the Ohio Valley, where in 1796 they settled on a then-nameless island lying two miles downstream from Parkersburg. There they first built a modest house, but then embarked on construction of a magnificent mansion designed in the Palladian style (like George Washington's 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. Their island home was soon known as Blennerhassett Island.

The horseshoe-shaped house, with Eden-like surrounding gardens, was a showplace where the happy couple regularly entertained travelers who made their way down the river.

One such guest, who arrived in 1806, was Aaron Burr. Two years earlier, Burr had killed Alexander Hamilton in a duel. With warrants out for his arrest, Burr was plotting an invasion of Mexico with the idea of setting himself up as its ruler. Seeking financial backers, he urged Harman to join in the scheme. Harman eagerly threw in his lot.

An outraged President Jefferson ordered both men arrested and imprisoned on charges of treason. Burr's subsequent trial — deemed the "Trial of the Century" — saw him acquitted, which also brought Harman's release. However, he and his wife never saw their island paradise again.

### From mansion to park

After its brief brush with history, Blennerhassett Island led a sleepy existence.

The mansion burned to the ground and the island was divided into farms. Later, it was the site of a small amusement park, sometimes used for sporting events. Heavyweight boxer Gentleman Jim Corbett is believed to have boxed there, and early baseball teams, such as a forerunner of the Cincinnati Reds, are thought to have played there.

As early as the 1920s, there were calls for making the island a state park and reconstructing the mansion. But it wasn't until the 1970s that serious work began on that idea.

In 1973, archaeologists unearthed the mansion's foundation. Subsequently, the state of West Virginia spent nearly \$1 million and 18 years recreating the house. The reconstructed mansion was built in the same spot as the original foundation, but the ground under the new mansion was elevated to lift the home off the flood plain.

In 1991, the island was opened to the public for tours and now attracts more than 50,000 visitors each year.

Small sternwheelers pick up visitors at a Parkersburg river landing and carry them out to the island, where they can visit the reconstructed mansion. The trip to the island takes about 20 minutes.

The park is open from May through the last weekend of October each year. For more information, call 304-420-4800 or email blennerhassettislands@wv.gov.

### Making the film

"The Blennerhassett story has interested me for a long time," Sole-Walko said. "It's always been in the back of my mind that I might explore the topic in a documentary. Early in my career, more than 30 years ago, we did a 10-minute



An elaborate dining table at the Blennerhassett mansion is set for dinner, looking much the way it may have looked when Aaron Burr arrived for his fateful visit.



MotionMasters used a high-tech drone camera in the filming of its newest documentary, "The Blennerhassetts."

video for the Blennerhassett Museum. That was before they had even completed the restored mansion."

The old video is still shown at the museum today. "It looks badly outdated. We're going to use excerpts from the new documentary to put together a new, short-form video to replace the old one, so it can finally be retired," Sole-Walko said.

"Three years ago, when we were winding up work on our documentary about NASA's Katherine Johnson, I decided that our next project would be the Blennerhassett story. I knew that doing it would be a real challenge. We had never done a project where we couldn't rely on photographs to illustrate the topic. But the Blennerhassett story unfolded long before photography was invented."

The new documentary features interviews by several historians familiar with the Blennerhassett story, including: Dr. Ray Swick, historian emeritus for Blennerhassett Island Historical State Park; William Reynolds, with the Campus Martius and Ohio River museums in Marietta; and Pamela Douglas Brust, author of "The Hendersons," which tells the story of a family that played a role in thwarting Burr's treasonous exploit.

The COVID-19 pandemic made scheduling interviews difficult. "For months, we were unable to book people for interviews. And we also ran up against the fact that libraries were closed to the public."

Research into the Blennerhassett story proved immensely rewarding, Sole-Walko said. "We were



Dr. Ray Swick, historian emeritus for Blennerhassett Island Historical State Park, prepares for an interview at the Oakland mansion in Parkersburg during production of "The Blennerhassetts" documentary.

excited to learn that Harman kept a journal during his time in prison and even more excited to find we could scan pages of his actual handwriting for use in our film. We hired a voice actor to read some of what he wrote."

Country music star and West Virginia native Kathy Mattea narrates the documentary. "We had never used a female narrator in any of our documentaries before but a female seemed just right this time. Kathy's voice lends such grace to the story. Significantly, she donated her time and talent, and I'm very grateful for that."

Wesley Poole, who has been with MotionMasters for more than 20 years, is the production's principal

videographer and editor. "Wesley is a Parkersburg native and so Blennerhassett Island is literally in his backyard. He spent hundreds of hours weaving together the soundtrack and visuals, and it may just be our best work yet," Sole-Walko said.

### Fund-raising during a pandemic

MotionMasters' documentaries are supported through grants and individual donations. "No one commissions us to do them. We embark on a project and then raise funds as we work on it. For 'The Blennerhassetts' the Covid-19 pandemic has made fund-raising difficult, but we're fortunate to have enlisted some gener-



In 1773, Harman Blennerhassett, a wealthy Irish aristocrat, joined the Society of United Irishmen, a secret group which advocated the overthrow of English government in Ireland, which meant he could have been arrested.



In 1774, Harman Blennerhassett, met and fell in love with Margaret Agnew, his niece who was nine years younger than he was. Their families strongly disapproved of the couple's marriage, which they viewed as incestuous and sinful. To escape the scandal and avoid Harman's possible arrest for his anti-English views, the couple made their way to this country and ultimately to the Ohio Valley.

ous funding partners."

With a grant of \$50,000, the Blennerhassett Historical Foundation signed on as the project's title sponsor.

Major sponsors include the Wood County Commission, with a grant of \$25,000, the Bernard McDonough Foundation and the West Virginia Humanities Council, with grants of \$20,000 each. The City of Parkersburg contributed \$10,000. The Greater Parkersburg Convention and Visitors Bureau, the Marietta Community Foundation, the Parkersburg Area Community Foundation and Regional Affiliates,

and United Bank each contributed \$5,000.

The budget for "The Blennerhassetts" is \$217,000, a figure that was reduced in light of the pandemic and a reduced ability to raise funds. Thus far, more than \$147,000 has been raised and funding is still being sought.

For information about aiding the project, go to storytellers@motionmasters.com.

James E. Casto is the retired associate editor of the Huntington Herald-Dispatch and the author of a number of books on local and regional history.