

Historical Context

Elizabeth (Betsy) Patterson Bonaparte (1785-1879) was the daughter of Baltimore merchant William Patterson. She met Jerome Bonaparte (1784-1860), brother of French emperor Napoleon I, when he visited the United States in 1803, and the two fell in love and married on Christmas eve of that year. The marriage, opposed by Napoleon and by William Patterson, was destined to be short lived, being annulled by Napoleon's decree in 1806, while Jerome remained in Europe, remarried and became the King of Westphalia according to his brother's wishes.

Betsy and Jerome had one child, Jerome Napoleon Bonaparte (1805-1870), who lived with his mother and her family. Jerome graduated from Harvard, married Susan May Williams (1812-1881) in 1829, and lived in Baltimore at the corner of Park Avenue and Centre Street. One of their sons was Jerome Napoleon (1830-1893), who graduated from West Point, was a colonel in the French army, and married Caroline Leroy Appleton Edgar, with whom he had two children. Another son was Charles Joseph (1851-1921), Secretary of the Navy and Attorney General of the United States under Theodore Roosevelt, who married Ellen Channing Day (d. 1924) in 1875.

Reviving Somerset's Napoleon Legend

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Princess Anne, Somerset County, Maryland

Some recently uncovered information lends even more authenticity to the familiar local legend connecting Napoleon Bonaparte with a famous Somerset County home just south of here.

That legend has it that there was an elaborate plot to rescue Napoleon from his island exile and transport him secretly to the United States. Like many legends, this one raised a lot of questions that defied explanation – because some of the who, what, and where portions of the grand plot seemed to be missing. There were always an abundance of rumors, but now a simple document in the Clerk of Circuit Court's office here for 150 years provides a vital link to the story's credibility.

One of the first printed accounts of the plot appears in the book "In Rivers of the Eastern Shore," published in 1944 and written by Hulbert Footner. Footner made the connection between the "Beverly" mansion here and Napoleon when he wrote: "Beverly figures in one of the many schemes to rescue Napoleon from the island of St. Helena. Jerome Bonaparte, Napoleon's youngest brother, married Betsy Patterson of Baltimore in 1803. This did not suit the dynastic plans of the head of the family, and at Napoleon's order the marriage was annulled two years later. Jerome was consoled with the crown of Westphalia and a German princess.

"Notwithstanding the annulment, Jerome retained many friends in America, including the King family of Beverly, and when Napoleon was immured on his lonely island, the Kings were called upon to help rescue him. "Mayor Girod of New Orleans was the ringleader in the plot," Footner wrote "funds were raised to build a fast sloop; plans of St. Helena and its fortifications were studied and details of the attempt carefully rehearsed. The intension was to hide Napoleon in a secret room at remote Beverly until the hunt for him should subside, and he could be safely taken to New Orleans. Shortly before the sloop was to sail, news came of Napoleon's death."

There are documents that establish the friendship of Nehemiah King II, son of the builder of Beverly, and Jerome Bonaparte. Even so, the grand plot described still seemed, until recently, to be minus a few key ingredients.

A substantial link in the scheme of things may have been Pierre "Peter" Gillet, a Frenchman, friend of Lafayette, timber merchant, author of a book on mathematics and an agent of Napoleon. The Guillet connection was discovered quite by accident. A 71 year old retired school teacher in Carrollton, Mo., wrote to Shirely Wilson Richards in Princess Anne seeking genealogy information in an effort to track down here "roots."

She wrote: "My great grandfather, Pierre Guillet, was a refugee from France. He was compelled to leave France because of his being implicated with his brother in an attempt to rescue Napoleon from the British after the Battle of Waterloo in 1815.. The brother was caught and executed, but Pierre escaped to America. I don't know the exact date, but sometime after June 18, 1815."

She went on to say that Pierre Guillet married Mary Jane Porter and they lived in Princess Anne. The family left there in 1837 and moved to New Orleans where Pierre died the same year. Mary Jane and five of their six children moved to Missouri four years later. From that information, Mrs. Richards was not only able to find out about Pierre Guillet,

but also about his wife's family that still lives on what was part of the original Beverly tract.

According to papers on file in the Somerset Clerk of the Court's office, Pierre Guillet became a naturalized citizen of the U.S. in Princess Anne on May 29, 1821. At that time, Guillet signed his name to a statement he would "support the Constitution of the United States and that I do absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to every foreign prince, potentate, state or sovereignty whatsoever and particularly, I do hereby absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to the King of France."

Also filed with these papers is a copy of his report to "Philadelphia City" on June 17, 1816 to file what was apparently the equivalent of an alien report form. That document places his arrival in this country at New York on May 16, 1816 and states "that it is his intention to settle in Sussex in the State of Delaware."

Is it mere coincidence this loyal supporter of Napoleon told authorities he planned to settle in Sussex County only to arrive in the Princess Anne area near the home of a friend of Napoleon's brother? Is it also just a coincidence he would marry into the Porter family that lived on part of what was the original Beverly tract, or that he never applied for citizenship, at the same time denouncing his alliance to France, until after Napoleon's death on May 5, 1821?

Why did he return to New Orleans after becoming apparently settled with a wife and family in Somerset? It would seem that Pierre Guillet's presence in the Princess Anne area is much more than mere coincidence, especially in light of previous tales of the grand plot to rescue Napoleon.

In addition to the naturalization papers, Mrs. Richards also located distant relatives of the former Mary Jane Porter, Barbara Porter Dashiell's mother, Martha Hedges Porter, still has the original sheepskin land patent signed by Maryland Governor Horatio Sharpe in 1765 that created "Porter's Purchase" from land that was part of the original Beverly tract. Mrs. Dashiell's great great grandfather was Wrixham Lewis Porter, and his brother, John, was Mary Jane's father.

Another interesting development that lends credence to the Napoleon connection with Beverly is the discovery of what appears to have been a secret tunnel. Francis L. "Pete" Hayman, present owner of Beverly, said the tunnel was discovered when a large propane storage tank was removed from the back yard. "As they were removing the tank, a portion of the adjacent ground began to cave in," Hayman said. "We tried to follow it back toward the house (about 150 feet away) and did for a while, but most of it appeared to have been caved in for some time and we couldn't follow it any farther."

Hayman, who bought the home in the 1950s, noted that the direction of the tunnel was probably the most significant aspect of its discovery. "It was always assumed that if a did exist, it would lead from the side of the house closest to the creek (King's Creek) and no

one could ever find one on that side of the house," he said. The route accidentally discovered by the removal of the tank also leads to the creek, but represents a much greater distance and approaches from a different side of the house. While these developments seem to verify the theory of Napoleon's escape plot other aspects of the tale may have been destroyed forever as a result of fires that have extensively damaged the Beverly mansion.

The first structure, erected here by Nehemiah King I was destroyed in a 1976 fire. That dwelling, which has been replaced as accurately as possible by Hayman is not generally referred to as Beverly, and is not likely to be the one containing the famous "seret room" because of its size.

The mansion portion was built around 1785 and is a spacious affair that features two-foot thick exterior walls and 18-inch interior walls, both of which are entirely brick from basement ot roof. The ceilings are 14 feet high.

Napoleon's "secret room" was supposedly located behind a false wall in a second floor bedroom, according to some accounts. But Hayman's son, Pat, said the key to the whole idea is the word "secret." "It could be a secret room only in the sense that it had a secret entrance," he said. "If that was the case, it could have been in the basement."

No matter what configuration the mansion may have had in the 1800's, the secret room may have been destroyed in a fire in the 1920s that caused extensive damage. Hayman said the home was restored faithfully because of blueprints and architectural drawings that were made of it prior to the fire. It is now listed on the National Register of Historic Homes.

Perhaps when this restoration was done is also the time that a concrete floor was poured in the basement. There have been several attempts to locate the inner entrance to the tunner since the concrete was poured, with the only result being a cracked floor. Except for the discovery by the senior Hayman, no tunnel, no entrance and no secret room as such have even been discovered. But there is little doubt the home's unusual design and spaciousness could have allowed for such a contrivance.



Beverly Mansion 2005