

1. Intro: book as a kid

One book I loved as a kid was “Famous Mysteries of the Sea”, by Patricia Lauber, published in 1962. I recall first reading this in the sixties, when I was 10. The book is a collection of essays, each concerning a different sea-related mystery: for instance the story of the Mary Celeste, found sailing with no crew aboard; the disappearance of Amelia Earhart; and the sinking of the USS Maine in Havana harbor, among others.

Not long ago I picked up the volume again to read to my young daughter, and found it just as fascinating as I remembered it to be. I thought I’d look into some of the mysteries a bit further, mainly via Google, to see if any new developments had occurred in any of the mysteries.

In some cases there have been developments; for example, concerning the USS Maine, the Navy published an analysis in 1976 entitled “How the Battleship Maine was Destroyed”, by H.G. Rickover, in which it is concluded that a bunker fire, started by spontaneous combustion, likely led to the ship’s destruction when it raised the temperature in an adjacent magazine enough to set off an explosion. There has even been progress in the search for Amelia Earhart – the group TIGHAR (The International Group for Historic Aircraft Recovery) has been researching the possibility that she landed on a reef or beach part of Nikumaroro island – they have turned up some tantalizing clues, though nothing definitive yet.

Tonight I’m going to tell you about one of the other mysteries, which concerns a beautiful and intelligent woman, a mysterious painting, and a lost ship.

The title of the chapter in the book is “The Nag’s Head Portrait”, and the mystery concerns the disappearance of Aaron Burr’s daughter, Theodosia.

1. Aaron & Theodosia Burr

1.1 Aaron Burr

It’s probably a good idea to say a little about Aaron Burr first. While a familiar name to most, his career is generally not well remembered.

Aaron Burr was born on February 6, 1756. His father was the 2nd president of the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University); his mother was Esther Edwards, daughter of the theologian Jonathan Edwards.

He served in the Revolutionary War, taking part in Benedict Arnold’s invasion of Canada. His demonstrated bravery made him something of a hero, and he was appointed to Gen. Washington’s staff. He quit after two weeks, ostensibly because he wanted to return to the battlefield, but it may have been due to personal differences with Washington. While there is little information about their relationship, Washington later slighted him after he had saved an entire brigade (one of whose officers was Alexander Hamilton) during the retreat from Manhattan; according to Burr’s stepbrother, Burr was furious at this.

Subsequently he served at Valley Forge, and later fought at the Battle of Monmouth. He left active service in 1779 due to poor health, studied law, and was admitted to the bar in Albany in 1782.

He succeeded in postwar politics, becoming New York's Attorney General (1789-1791), U.S. Senator (1791-97), and was a candidate for President in 1800, running against Thomas Jefferson. Burr tied Jefferson with 73 electoral votes; the election went to the House of Representatives. After 35 ballots, Jefferson was elected President and Burr Vice President.

Incidentally, Alexander Hamilton was largely responsible for this loss. Over 5 or 6 weeks time in December 1800 and January 1801, he wrote letter after letter in what one historian has called an "hysterical" campaign to prevent Burr from becoming President." "Burr," he had told his correspondents, "loves nothing but himself".

In 1804 he unsuccessfully ran for Governor of New York in 1804. He was attacked in the press by Alexander Hamilton, who was the son in law of the incumbent senator Burr had defeated in 1791, Philip Schuyler; Burr felt that these attacks had cost him the election. Among the claims were that he'd cheated several people out of their inheritances, that he consorted with prostitutes, etc. etc. After certain remarks made during a dinner party, Burr challenged Hamilton to a duel on July 11, 1804, at the Heights of Weehawken in New Jersey, at which he mortally wounded him.

Burr was indicted for murder in both NY and NJ, but the charges were eventually dropped. While dueling had been relatively common up until that point, it was becoming rarer and less popular – after the duel, the outpouring of grief for Alexander Hamilton in New York City was substantial, and Burr became something of a pariah.

In 1805, Burr went West to the Ohio River Valley; the nominal reason was to be able to make inroads into the Spanish possessions in Mexico should war come; he worked with Harman Blennerhassett, who had an island in the Ohio River. It was rumored (primarily by Gen. Wilkinson, commander of the US troops on the Louisiana border, who was also in the pay of Spain) that he wished to establish a separate state in the West, secede from the Union, and form his own monarchy. He was arrested in 1807, tried for treason, and was acquitted. (These events also form the backdrop of Edward Everett Hale's short story, "The Man Without A Country").

In 1782, Aaron Burr married Theodosia Bartow Prevost, widow of a British army officer. Together they had two daughters, only one of which survived into adulthood: "our Theodosia" – born June 21, 1783, in Albany, NY. She died of stomach cancer in 1794.

Burr himself died in 1834, on Staten Island; he is buried in Princeton Cemetery.

From Gordon S. Wood:

Burr is no ordinary historical figure. His life is scarcely credible. Here is a man who skyrocketed to the vice-presidency of the United States and almost seized the presidency; who challenged and killed the leader of the opposition, Alexander Hamilton; who organized his venture into the West perhaps to break up his own country or at least to dismember the Spanish empire; who allied himself in this venture with James Wilkinson, who was both the commanding general of the United States army and at the same time a paid agent of the Spanish. Here is a man who was eventually accused of sedition by this same General Wilkinson, ordered seized by President Thomas Jefferson, chased, captured, and brought back to the East to stand trial for treason in Jefferson's home state; who, though finally

acquitted by Jefferson's enemy Chief Justice Marshall, fled his country in disgrace, only returning years later to live out his life in obscurity.

Add to this that Burr was a freethinking, free-spending aristocrat who lived always on the edge of bankruptcy; who had lynx-like eyes that charmed everyone he met; who was a notorious womanizer who left broken hearts (and numerous offspring) scattered over two continents, ...”

and you might have a sense of the man.

1.2 Theo's upbringing, education

Aaron Burr had read 1791 publication of “A Vindication of the Rights of Women” by Mary Wollstonecraft – and called this “a work of Genius”. He believed women to be intellectually equal to men, and indeed hung a portrait of Mary Wollstonecraft over his mantle.

He intended to raise his daughter Theodosia (b. June 21, 1783) to be as well educated as any man might be. As one historian noted, he saw her as the fourth generation of the Burr-Edwards intellectual dynasty: beginning with Rev. Jonathan Edwards, and Rev. Aaron Burr (Sr.), Aaron Burr himself, and then Theodosia.

She was taught dance, music, several languages and learned to shoot from horseback. By 10 she was ‘writing like a calligrapher’, had a solid command of French & Latin; was studying Terence, translating 40 lines of Latin a day.

She then studied Ancient Greek. At 12, she was reading the Illiad and Odyssey in Greek.

Other subjects included French, German, Italian, Philosophy, Political economy, ancient & modern history, and geography. She learned fencing, ballet dancing, social dancing, ice skating, riding, pistol marksmanship, and could play the harp and pianoforte.

Burr supervised her education as well as he could, writing often when he was away with specific study objectives.

This didn't quite fit the age. One of Burr's friends, Robert Troup, wrote “her reading has been wholly masculine, she is an utter stranger to the use of the needle, and quite unskilled in the different branches of domestic economy.”

Accounts by people who knew her emphasize her wit and charm; with such an education she might have ended up arrogant, overly self-focused, spoiled, or otherwise ‘odd’. She didn't; she was by all accounts fine company.

Her mother grew ill, seriously so in December of 1793. During this time Theodosia cared for her, and wrote her father (who was then in the U.S. Senate) frequently about her condition. Aaron Burr thought of leaving his seat to be with his wife, but she wouldn't allow it.

Theodosia's mother died that Spring, on May 18, 1794; Theodosia was 11.

After this, her father closely supervised his daughter's social education. Specifically this included training in an appreciation of the arts and the intangibles of relating to other people.

She also took over the household, both of Burr's townhouse on Partition St. (now part of Fulton St.) and his estate, Richmond Hill, just outside the of the city (it had been Washington's HQ, and later home to John Adams); it was in what is now known as Greenwich Village. Gilbert Stuart painted her at age 11.

Guests at the house during this time included George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, NY Mayor Edward Livingston, and Talleyrand. (Burr was close friends with a French governess and child (Madame de Senat, and Natalie de Lage de Volude) who had escaped the French Revolution; this often brought them into contact with French circles. Natalie would become Theodosia's best friend.

By the age of 14 Theodosia began to serve as hostess at Richmond Hill, Once when Burr was away in 1797 his daughter presided over a dinner for the Mohawk chief Joseph Brant Thayendanege, Chief of the Six Nations (he had been educated in CT, and had met Aaron Burr in Philadelphia). On this occasion she invited Dr. Hosack, Dr. Bard, and the Bishop of New York, among other notables. Dr. Hosack later attended the dying Alexander Hamilton.

She had been a loss at one to serve that her principal guest would like. She had heard of cannibals among the Indians; later, she wrote with humor, that she had a mind "to lay the hospital under contribution for a human head, to be served up like a boar's head in ancient hall barbaric".

By all accounts it was a sparkling evening.

At age 15, NY Major Livingston escorted Theodosia aboard a visiting French warship, and warned her: "You must bring none of your sparks on board, Theodosia. We have a gunpowder magazine here, and shall all be blown up!"

Burr wrote to her about this time:

"I am indebted to you for a great portion of the happiness which I have enjoyed in life. You have completely satisfied all that my heart and affection had hoped or even wished.

She was courted by Washington Irving, who was about the same age, as well as the artist John Vanderlyn (Burr opposed that).

Burr had seen a painting on the side of Vanderlyn's coach, and become his patron, eventually sending him to Europe to study for extended period. He painted her in 1802. Over the years Vanderlyn did a number of Burr family paintings.

She married Joseph Alston on February 2, 1801; he was a wealthy rice plantation owner and later Governor of South Carolina. While Burr may have desired this because of his future son-in-law's wealth, from all indications they did indeed like each other.

They honeymooned at Niagara Falls, the first recorded couple to do so. They started a trend, followed in 1803 December by Jerome Bonaparte (Napoleon's brother), guest of Burr, and his new wife.

This marriage meant that Theodosia would move to South Carolina. She never seems to have liked it much there, and would return to New York for extended stays fairly frequently.

They had a son, Aaron Burr Alston, born in May of 1802, a little over 9 months after the honeymoon. It was a difficult delivery, and her health had problems after that, and she traveled to Saratoga, NY, Ballston Spa, and other places to restore it.

She accompanied her father to Ohio in the summer of 1806, with her son – this is when Aaron met Harman Blennerhassett, and began to consider what they might accomplish in the West and South, possibly including creating a separate state.

Her medical condition gradually worsened over time; it is likely she had a prolapsed uterus, and eventually perhaps a cancerous tumor. Eventually she was in constant pain.

On October 30, 1802, she wrote (about her confinement in bed) “It certainly relieved me for some time, which proves how easily that cure would have succeeded at first. I have now abandoned all hope of recovery. I do not say it in a moment of depression, but with all my reasons about me.” And later on “The great misfortune of this complaint is, that one may vegetate forty years in a sort of middle state between life and death, without the enjoyment of one of the rest of the other.”

Fortunately she would rebound from time to time, only to fall back into extreme discomfort.

The medicine of the time was often worse than useless; at first she was told she would get better if she stopped nursing her baby. Prescriptions given her included “partial cold bathing”, various bizarre diets, and Mercury (which she was too afraid to take).

Doctors are men who prescribe medicines
of which they know little,
to cure diseases of which they know less,
in humans beings of whom they know nothing.

Voltaire (1694-1778)

In July of 1812, 10-year-old Aaron Burr Alston died of a fever, possibly malaria.

2. The Mystery

After this Theodosia was quite miserable, as might well be imagined. Both her father and her husband were worried about her. They decided she should visit her father, newly returned from Europe, in New York.

Her husband Joseph, by now Governor of South Carolina, by law wasn't allowed to leave the state, so Aaron Burr sent Timothy Green, a lawyer, and an old friend with some medical experience, south to travel back with Theodosia. They booked passage on the ship *Patriot*, from Georgetown to New York.: with William Overstocks as Captain, and Samuel Coon of NY as sailing master.

The *Patriot* was a schooner built for use as a pilot boat. From the historian James Michie's work, she was 63 feet long, a shallow-draft schooner, with a beam of 17 feet, 8 inches, draft of six feet, 8 inches. She was about one year old, with a square stern, and something called a “tuck bow” which

I'm not familiar with. She was registered on November 9, 1811. Probably built in Catskill, NY by Richard Hill, master carpenter, sponsored by several NY City residents. The captain and pilot were both New Yorkers.

In the summer and fall of 1812 she had had a successful career as a privateer. One reference indicates that she arrived at George Town SC after a cruise of 56 days, during which she burnt, sunk, and destroyed 9 British vessels.

For this trip her guns were stowed below and her name was painted out – should the British catch her, they wouldn't know quite what they'd caught. An Alston descendant said that barrels of Alston's rice were aboard to sell in NY to help cover the voyage costs. In addition Governor Alston wrote a letter to the British commander, requesting that the ship with his sick wife be allowed to continue.

The Patriot departed Georgetown on December 30, 1812 – and never arrived in New York.

[TO Aaron Burr.]

Columbia, January 19, 1813.

“To-morrow will be three weeks since, in obedience to your wishes, Theodosia left me. It is three weeks, and not yet one line from her. My mind is tortured. I wrote you on the 29th ult., the day before Theo. sailed, that on the next day she would embark in the privateer 'Patriot', a pilot-boat-built schooner, commanded by Captain Overstocks, with an old New-York, pilot as sailing-master. The vessel had dismissed her crew, and was returning home with her guns under deck. Her reputed swiftness in sailing inspired such confidence of a voyage of not more than five or six days, that the three weeks without a letter fill me with an unhappiness-- a wretchedness I can neither describe nor conquer. Gracious God! Is my wife, too, taken from me? I do not know why I write, but I feel that I am miserable. “

And on January 31, he wrote again:

“This vessel, the same which had been sent by government last summer in pursuit of Commodore Rodgers's squadron, had been selected as one which, from her reputed excellence and swiftness in sailing, would ensure a passage of not more than five or six days.”

While it might have been possible for the Patriot to have been delayed, or captured by the British, it soon became clear that she was indeed probably lost.

For Burr this was the 6th major life blow: the stillbirth or death of three children, the death of his first wife, the disgrace of the duel with Hamilton, the collapse of his western adventure, the spectacle of his trial for treason, the death of his only grandson – and now, the loss of his daughter.

What happened to the *Patriot*? The three main threats were the **British blockading fleet**, **the weather**, and **pirates**. Both Aaron Burr and Joseph Alston thought the ship had been lost in a storm.

Of course many ships have been lost at sea with no trace over the years, and indeed that might have been the case. However, fragmentary information began to emerge years later. At first it was a series of pirate deathbed confessions – the first was reported in the Mobile, Alabama “Register” in

1833, in which a dying pirate confessed to the plunder of the “Patriot”. (I can’t locate the original of this article). From an excerpt in the Alabama Journal:

“It appears from the statement of a respectable merchant of Mobile that a man died in that city recently, who confessed on his dying bed that he had been a pirate and helped to destroy the vessel and all the crew and passengers, on which Mrs. Alston had embarked for New York. He declared, says this gentleman (who is well known to us), that after the men were all killed there was an unwillingness on the part of every pirate to take the life of Mrs. Alston, who had not resisted them or fought them, and therefore they drew lots who should perform the deed, as it had to be done.

The lot fell on this pirate who declares that he effected his object by laying a plank along the edge of the ship and made Mrs. Alston walk on the plank till it tilted over with her. The dying pirate (says our informant) requested his physician to make this story public; but his surviving family will not permit that the name of the deceased should be known.”

There were other confessions: two condemned criminals in Norfolk, Virginia said that they had been part of the crew; a dying sailor in Texas said something similar. In “Fernando de Lemos”, by Charles Gayarre, pub 1872 what the author calls “a mixture of truth and fiction; a novel”, Chapter 29 is entitled “The Fate of the Daughter of Aaron Burr Revealed”; it describes a confession by the noted New Orleans pirate Dominique You that he was involved with the taking of the Patriot. The facts it recounts could all have been drawn from the known details of the story.

One possible new piece of evidence then emerged.

A letter from Jacob Motte Alston, Theodosia’s great nephew by marriage, indicated that the Patriot’s captain had carried a letter from Gov. Alston to the British commander, and that he had actually received it. From the New York Times Saturday Review of Books, May 21, 1902:

“... The captain of the vessel carried with him a letter from Governor Alston to the British Admiral, requesting under the circumstances a safe permit through the fleet to New York...

The war was now over, Governor Alston had died, and no truthful intelligence had been received of the pilot boat or Theodosia until General Thomas Pinckney, a near connection of the family in Carolina, met at a dinner party in London the Admiral of the fleet already alluded to, who stated to him ‘that the letter of Governor Alston had been received and read to him and the request promptly granted, but that a very violent storm had arisen during the night and the fleet was scattered, and doubtless the pilot boat and all on board were lost’. This was the first reliable information which had been received, and the family accepted it as absolutely true.”

This story was widely accepted as true for nearly 100 years; in 1998 the South Carolina archaeologist James L. Michie started looking for proof. He located the logbooks of the British ships patrolling the North Carolina coast between December 30, 1812 and January 5, 1813 – these ships had the mission of stopping and inspecting every ship they could, sinking or taking as prize those that weren’t operating without British leave. He found the logs of the ships HMS *Poicitier*, *Acasta*, *Tartarus*, *Sylph*, *Aeolus*, and *Sophie* – I have not been able to determine if there were other ships present (Michie died in 2004; the article is in “Carologue”, Summer 1998, pp 16-20).

In none of the logbooks is any mention of the *Patriot*, Theodosia Burr, or a letter from Governor Alston. Furthermore, the ship alleged to have stopped the *Patriot*, Admiral Warren's flagship HMS *San Domingo*, "was anchored in Bermuda at the beginning of Theodosia's voyage and did not depart until the morning of January 4, six days after she sailed for New York.

The logbooks do mention a terrible storm which began off the Carolina coast late on Saturday afternoon, January 2, 1813, and continued well into Sunday. According to Michie: "The gale was so severe that the warships furled and reefed most of their sails. Nevertheless, the ferocity of the storm stripped off t' gallant yards and masts, snapped rigging, and tore out chain plate bolts from the hull." The *Patriot* was likely close to the coast at the time – Michie plotted its likely position as just North of Cape Hatteras, **not far from Nag's Head**, when the gale was at its fiercest. "If the ship managed to escape this battering, which continued until midnight, it then faced near hurricane-force winds in the early hours of Sunday. Given this knowledge, the *Patriot* probably sank between 6 PM Saturday and 8 AM Sunday.

One other fragment I found:

"... a Mr. J.A. Elliott of Norfolk, Virginia made a statement in 1910 that in the early part of 1813, the dead body of a young woman "with every indication of refinement" had been washed ashore at Cape Charles, and had been buried on her finder's farm."

3. Nag's Head

Nag's Head got its name from a form of piracy: on stormy nights, the "bankers" as they were known, would hobble several horses and hang lanterns from their necks. As the horses walked about, the lights would bob up and down, looking from sea for all practical purposes like ships riding safely at anchor. Merchant skippers in the off-shore waters would mistakenly think the lights were of other ships closer to shore, would then change course and run aground, allowing the Bankers to pillage their cargoes. This practice occurred from the 1700's up until the 1830's.

Gradually the area changed, becoming home to summer visitors, and other less radically inclined residents.

4. The Painting

There the story stood until an unusual and ambiguous piece of evidence emerged.

In the summer of 1869, Dr. William G. Pool of Elizabeth City, North Carolina, took his family to the seashore, to Nag's Head. He was the first to build a cottage on the ocean side of the island – until that time summer residents stayed on the sound side. Dr. Pool offered his services to the locals in the area; one of them was Mrs. Mann.

The doctor found her living in a crude hut, built of timbers from old wrecks and thatched with reeds – the inside was dark, dirty, and cluttered. In one corner was one very out-of-place item: the portrait of a beautiful young woman.

Painted on a wooden panel, the portrait showed a woman in her mid-to-late twenties – she had piercing dark eyes and black hair tinged with reddish brown. She wore a white dress cut square at the neck, a fashion popular in the early 1800's. It is 17 ½ by 14 ½ inches.

Dr. Pool was fascinated by the painting, and tried to get Mrs. Mann to talk about it; however, she was naturally suspicious and somewhat sullen, and would say little. Gradually as his medical attentions had some positive effects she began to trust the doctor, and told him a little more about it. Finally, she gave him the painting as payment for his services.

Mrs. Mann had been twice married and twice widowed – her first husband was a young fisherman and 'banker' named Joseph Tillett, whom she had married when she was about sixteen. Tillett had given her several gifts in the course of their romance: the portrait; a vase of wax flowers under a glass globe; a beautifully carved shell; two black silk dresses made for a gentleman of small build; and a lace head covering.

Tillett had told her that the items had come from a ship, a pilot-boat-built schooner, that had been driven ashore, with only a black and tan dog aboard. There were no signs of violence, and they could find nothing to tell them the name of the ship or her homeport. There had been little of value – some silks and silver – and Tillett had taken the painting as his share, removing it from the cabin that had been occupied by a woman – the dresses and other items also came from this cabin. Tillett had said that they thought the ship had been the victim of pirates at sea.

Mrs. Mann could not remember the date of the shipwreck, except that it had been in the winter "when we were fighting the English on the sea". In 1869 she was about 70 years old – she could not have been thinking of the Revolution – it must be the War of 1812.

- The date was right – and the *Patriot* was the only ship that went down for a number of months that winter;
- The place was right – the *Patriot* was likely in the area, and very possibly damaged by a storm;
- The kind of ship was right – a pilot-built schooner.
- The portrait resembled Theodosia in eyes, hair coloring, and features.

If this is indeed a portrait of Theodosia, perhaps one she had painted in South Carolina to give to her father, then the fate of the *Patriot* is a bit clearer.

The painting would have been done in 1812, before her son died (June 20, 1812), probably by a Charleston artist: Samuel F. B. Morse, Washington Allston (student of Benjamin West), Thomas Sully, Charles Fraser, Edward Greene Malbone.

Reasons it might well be Theodosia:

- Apparent age of 28, 29
- Piercing dark eyes
- Hair touched with auburn
- Dress cut square at neck, in 1813 fashion
- Heaviness of jaw

Rather short nose
Unique left ear, characteristic of hers

Reasons it's probably not painted by Vanderlyn:
Hair style and parting unlike Vanderlyn
Background brushed in, crude
Skin texture not realistic
On wood, not canvas
No signature

A distant relative of the Burr's, a Mrs. Drake, visited the Pools to see the portrait – she told them about another deathbed confession that had been known among the family. The dying man was Benjamin Franklin Burdick; he told the story repeatedly to the family he was living with, in obvious emotional distress. He was moved to the Cass County Poorhouse in Cassopolis, Michigan in 1850, where he told it to Mrs. Parks, the wife of the local minister. It had been Mrs. Parks who had passed the story on to Mrs. Drake's grandmother.

Burdick's story was similar to the others, piracy at sea, ending with Theodosia walking the plank. However, he added unusual details: the date had been January, 1813 – Mrs. Alston had worn a blue ribbon at her throat, had knelt and prayed for the pirates, her loved ones, and herself – she had asked that word be sent to her husband and father. She had told them that her only child was dead. Burdick also mentioned a black-and-tan dog and a portrait in her cabin.

While Burdick's story may be doubted on the same grounds as the other pirate deathbed confessions (he was old, sick, a criminal, etc.), it has some unusual elements. Burdick was uneducated, apparently did not know how to read – he would not have familiarized himself with the story in the newspapers. He also wasn't mentally very agile – it's unlikely he would have invented the blue ribbon, or the request to send word to Burr and Alston.

There is one element that seems false, in both Burdick's story and that recounted by Mrs. Mann: that the piracy and/or disappearance of the crew and passengers occurred at sea. It is unlikely that pirates would have been operating at sea given the substantial presence of the British Navy. Even *if* the ship had been taken by pirates at sea, they wouldn't have left the silk and silver that Tillett found on board.

The likely conclusion from this is that Tillett and Burdick were “bankers” that discovered that the *Patriot* had been driven ashore by the storm of January 1, 1813. They then murdered all aboard and took what they could. Burdick, speaking in 1850, may not have wanted to incriminate others still alive – and it isn't likely that Tillett would have wanted to relate such details to Mrs. Mann.

Now we're at the end of the evidence. Even in 1869 all those who might have had first-hand knowledge of the *Patriot* were gone. No further documents have come to light – nothing, for instance, to support the hypothesis that Theodosia had a portrait made before her trip. The portrait might be of Theodosia – or of someone who merely resembled her. Tillett's ship may not have even been the *Patriot*.

And so this is where the mystery stands today.



The portrait from Nag's Head, which may have been painted in 1812. Note the heaviness or the jaw.



Theodosia Burr in 1802. Are these two images of the same woman?

In 1894, a very young Robert Frost came to Kitty Hawk. Suffering from acute depression, he felt the need to get away from the pressure of life, and as many similar people do, he came to the Outer Banks. One night, he crossed over the Kitty Hawk beach and walked with a member of the local lifesaving crew on patrol. The patrolman told him Theo's story, and it moved him deeply. Years later, he would recount the experience and her tale in one of his lesser-known but moving poem,

Kitty Hawk:

"Did I recollect
how the wreckers wrecked
Theodosia Burr off this very shore?
'Twas to punish her
but her father more."

The only clue remaining is an unsigned painting of an unknown woman.

5. Final Notes

The painting, if you'd like to see it, is in the Lewis Walpole Library of Yale, in Farmington, CT. The frame says it's by Vanderlyn, but that is unlikely.

I tried to track down any analytical work that might have been done on the painting with the sorts of technologies that have emerged in recent decades. I received this email this afternoon (this an excerpt):

["Robin Jaffee Frank forwarded your recent email regarding the Nag's Head](#)

portrait of Theodosia Burr in the Walpole collection for my reply. I am sorry to report that there does not seem to have been any significant scholarship published on the painting recently.”

In the course of working on this paper I got in touch with several members of the Burr family; it turns out there is some active interest in looking more closely at the painting.

One member is Henry Anderson, who lives in Stoneridge; the Lewis-Walpole Library was given to Yale by his cousin once removed, Annie Burr Lewis (and her husband, Wilmarth Lewis). We were in touch via email – he’ll be back in Stonington tomorrow. He pointed me towards Katherine Woltz, an art history Ph.D candidate at the University of Virginia, writing on the among other things the works of Vanderlyn. (The Lewis Walpole library had given me her contact information as well). We’ve been in touch over the last few days via email.

Katherine is interested in pursuing carbon dating of the wood panel on which the painting was made. As it was at one time in a house that had a fire, this may not be as simple as it sounds. (And there may be other techniques that might be used to better identify it; various types of imaging, brush stroke analysis, etc.) I wanted to mention a few of her comments:

1. Based on other newspaper clippings I assembled, I concluded that the Poole family who sold the painting to Macbeth's, a NY gallery that specialized in American art at the turn of the century, either was gullible and swindled into believing the Nag's Head story, or that the Poole family played a part in creating the myth surrounding the "Nag's Head" portrait. The art dealers' noses start twitching in anticipation of a fabulous meal.
2. The Poole family might have had a hand in creating the myth surrounding the portrait. My reasons for concluding this, briefly, are that when the painting was allegedly "discovered" in a wrecker's shack by Poole, his discovery curiously coincided at a time when there was renewed interest in anything having to do with the Burr family (this was around the 50th anniversary of Burr's death). All of a sudden, a plethora of Burr/Theo etc. portraits were coming available on the market-and when money is involved, what shall we say?

(I did find one account by a well respected resident of Nag’s Head that he had seen the painting in the shack before Pool did.)

3. The Pool name is spelled in differently in different accounts, sometimes with an additional “e”. To me this is significant because in looking into the Burr portraits as a group, it turns out that a descendant of the man who claimed that Burr gave him portraits in payment for a debt (this man was his manservant or cook, I can't remember which), was also named Pool/Poole - this was a woman who was once married to an artist, no less! And according to other articles that I have, it was this branch of the family that sold the portraits for profit and indeed they are the primary source for all the stories "spun" around the portraits and their whereabouts.
4. On the Patriot's fate: I suspect from the newspaper clippings that I found that subterfuge was at play. There are even reports that Theo was her companions were captured, but that the British captain planned to row them to shore and safety-but this never happened as far as I can tell. Theo was carrying AB's letters, many of which detailed his plans to invade the southwest and his dealings with the Spanish and British authorities-I think the British would have given their eye teeth to get this correspondence and indeed it was claimed that it "went down in the ship with

Theo," but I found other citations where AB's "papers" were under lock and key by the British as late as the early 1900s-this by a historian who traveled to London, tried to gain access, and was denied. I think this may be the AB papers confiscated on the Patriot-the fate of Theo and her companions only thickens the plot-I hate to speculate on their fate given the other atrocities I have read about committed by the British during this time.

5. One question is: Why was she so fascinating in the 1880's? Hair style copied, claims of relationship, interest in her history. (Maybe more to do with the social conditions then, but I don't know)

There is a Theodosia Burr who lives in Stonington; she's now got a married name, and uses a nickname instead of "Theodosia". We've only spoken briefly, and I don't want to point her out tonight without her OK.