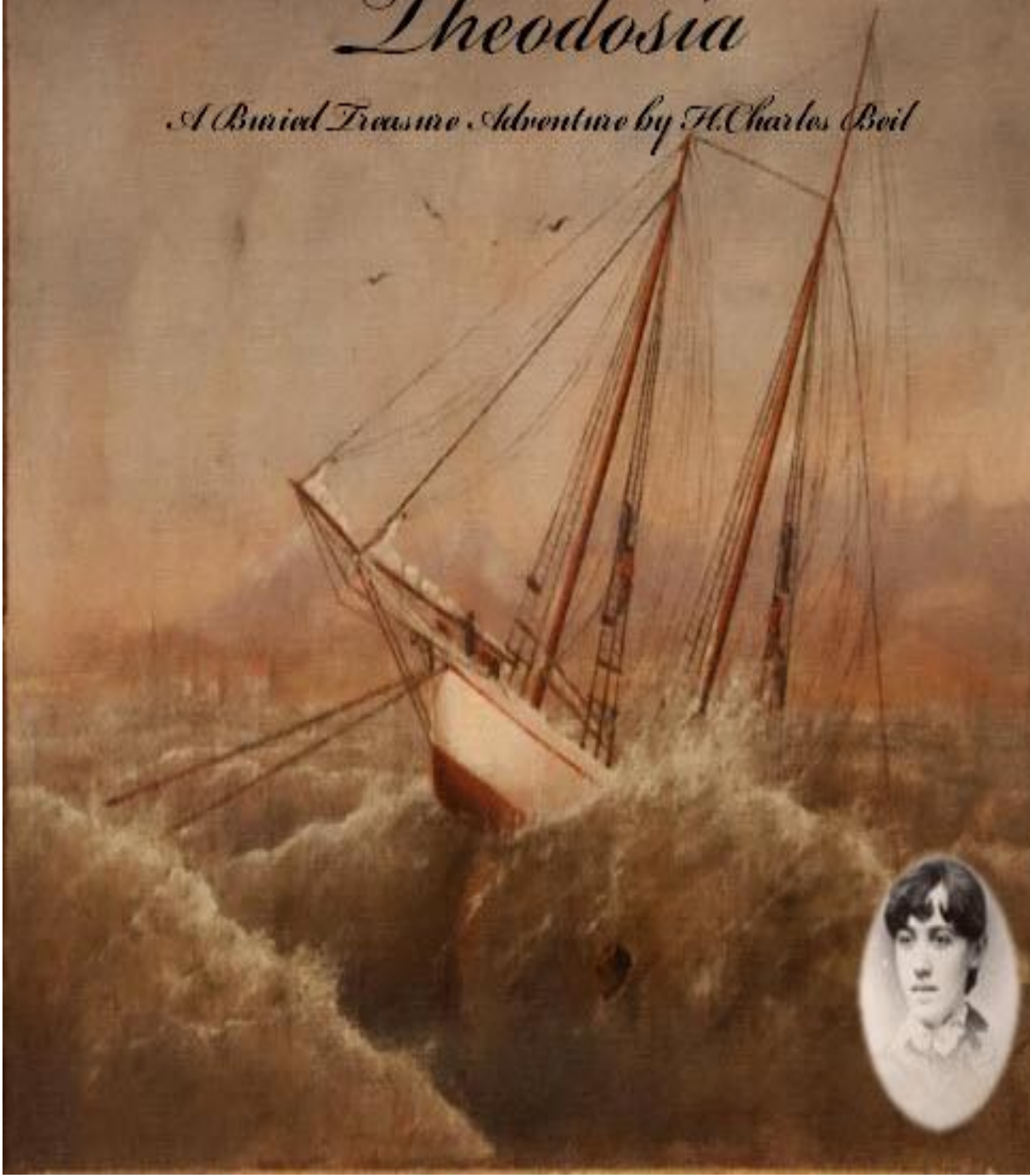


# Theodosia

*A Buried Treasure Adventure by H. Charles Boil*



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*Theodosia*



Theodosia Burr Alston (June 21, 1783 – probably January 2 or 3, 1813) was the daughter of U.S. Vice President Aaron Burr and Theodosia Bartow Prevost. Her husband, Joseph Alston, was governor of South Carolina during the War of

1812. She is supposed lost at sea at age 29, however what is in dispute are the mysterious circumstances surrounding her disappearance and the whereabouts of her money and jewels that she was known to be carrying with her.

Her mother was the widow of Jacques Marcus Prevost (1736-1781), a British Army officer who settled in New York City. She married Aaron Burr in 1782.

Theodosia was born in Albany, New York, but was raised mostly in New York City. Her education was very closely supervised by her father who stressed mental discipline. This type of tutoring was very rarely given to girls of Theodosia's generation. In addition to the more conventional subjects such as French (the French textbook by Martel, *Martel's Elements*, published by Van Alen in New York in 1796, is dedicated to Theodosia), music, and dancing, the young "Theo" began to study the seven liberal arts; arithmetic, Latin, Greek, and English composition. She applied herself to English in the form of letters to her Father Aaron Burr, which were responded to promptly, with the inclusion of detailed criticism.

When Theodosia was ten years old, her mother died. After this event her father closely supervised his daughter's social education, believing that only the finest social upbringing would do for his daughter. Specifically this included training in an appreciation of the arts and the intangibles of relating to other people. By the age of 14 Theodosia began to serve as hostess at Richmond Hill, Aaron Burr's stately home in what is now Greenwich Village. Once when Burr was away in 1797, his daughter presided over a dinner for Joseph Brant, Chief of the Six Nations. On this occasion she invited Dr. Hosack, Dr. Bard, and the Bishop of New York, among other notables. She excelled in social etiquette and was regarded highly.



*Theodosia Burr House*

On February 2, 1801 she married Joseph Alston, a wealthy landowner from South Carolina. They honeymooned at Niagara Falls, the first recorded couple to do so. It has been conjectured that there was more than romance involved in this union. Aaron Burr agonized intensely and daily about money matters, particularly as to how he would hold on to the Richmond Hill estate. It is thought that his daughter's tie to a member of the Southern gentry might relieve him of some of his financial burdens. The marriage to Alston meant that Theodosia would become prominent in South Carolina social

circles. Her letters to her father indicated that she had formed an affectionate alliance with Joseph. The couple's son, Aaron Burr Alston, was born in 1802.

Theodosia's life grew difficult in 1804 when the relationship between her father and Alexander Hamilton (former Secretary of the Treasury) disintegrated and resulted in a duel in Weehawken, NJ on July 11, 1804. Burr fatally shot Hamilton who died the next day. During her father's subsequent murder trial, Theodosia traveled to New York several times and fully supported her father.

Following the baby's birth, Theodosia's health became fragile. She made trips to Saratoga Springs, New York, and Ballston Spa, New York, in an effort to restore her health. She also visited her father and accompanied him to Ohio in the summer of 1806, along with her son. There Aaron met with an Irishman, Harman Blennerhassett, who had an island estate in the Ohio River in what is now West Virginia. The two men made plans to form a western empire, which was later joined by General James Wilkinson. Burr and Wilkinson were rumored to be plotting to separate Louisiana and parts of the western United States from America; the veracity of this claim, with Burr becoming a "king-like" figure of the separated lands, was never proven. Acquitted but still politically ambitious, Burr purportedly schemed to convince several western states to secede and make him the head of the government. In 1807, he defended himself against a conspiracy charge and again Theodosia fully supported him. After a year long, difficult trial, Aaron Burr once again won acquittal and left the United States for exile in Europe.

The War of 1812 had broken out in June between the United States and Great Britain. Her husband was sworn in as Governor of South Carolina on December 10. As head of the state militia, he could not accompany her on the trip north. When Theodosia returned to South Carolina, her health had become more fragile and when her son died of malaria in June 1812, she collapsed. She wrote her father, "Less than a fortnight ago your letter would have gladdened my soul. Now there is no joy, and life is a blank. My boy is gone-forever dead and gone!"

Newly returned from Europe and deeply worried about his daughter, Aaron Burr convinced Theodosia to come to New York for the holidays. Joseph Alston couldn't leave South Carolina and felt uneasy about Theodosia's voyage. The United States and Great Britain were at war, Theodosia's health continued to deteriorate and rumors about pirates along the North Carolina Outer Banks circulated around the Carolinas. It had become a haven for the most blood thirsty of rogues that plied the East Coast of America.



Granting his wife's request, Joseph Alston wrote a letter to the British Navy blockading the coast, asking for safe passage for his wife. Aaron Burr sent a trusted friend and doctor, Timothy Green, to make the voyage with Theodosia and on December 30, 1812 Theodosia, Dr. Green and a maid climbed aboard the schooner *Patriot* which lay moored in Charleston Harbor. Theodosia Burr settled in her cabin with several chests filled with her wardrobe, jewelry, money and fine accessories. She also carried a recent portrait of herself that she intended to give her father as a Christmas gift.

On December 31, 1812, Theodosia sailed aboard the schooner *Patriot* a ship of 63 feet in length and 17 of

beam, from Georgetown, South Carolina. The *Patriot* was a famously fast sailer, which had originally been built as a pilot boat, and had served as a privateer during the War of 1812, when it was commissioned by the United States

government to prey on English shipping. The *Patriot* had just returned from several months of West Indies privateering raids for the United States government with a hold filled with booty from these raids. To disguise the ship, the ship had been refitted in December in Georgetown, her guns dismantled and hidden below decks. Her name was painted over and any indication of recent activity was entirely erased. The schooner's captain, William Overstocks, desired to make a rapid run to New York with his cargo; it is likely that the ship laden with the proceeds from its privateering raids would sell its cargo in New York at auction.

The schooner left from the dock at the end of Cannon Street. Alston made the journey down Winyah Bay, leaving his wife for the last time as *The Patriot* prepared to enter the Atlantic.

*The Patriot and all those on board were never heard from again!*

The journey to New York normally took five or six days. After two weeks had passed with no sign of the *Patriot*, Burr and Alston became frantic. Alston wrote, "Another mail and still no letter! I hear too rumors of a gale off Cape Hatteras at the beginning of the month. The state of my mind is dreadful!" In New York, Burr had already reached the inevitable conclusion. When a friend offered hope that Theo was still alive, Burr replied, "No, no, she is indeed dead. Were she still alive, all the prisons in the world could not keep her from her father."

Theodosia Burr Alston, her fellow passengers and crew, and the *Patriot* itself were never seen again. The *Patriot* had disappeared without a trace. Later it was learned that the British fleet had stopped her off Hatteras on January 2. Governor Alston's letter worked, and the schooner was allowed to pass. Later that night, a gale arose and scattered the British fleet. Beyond that clue, no more was known. Burr sent searchers to Nassau and Bermuda with no success. Why he neglected to send them to the Outer Banks remains a mystery for it is there that Theo met her fate.



Following the *Patriot's* disappearance, rumors immediately arose. The most enduring was that the *Patriot* had been captured by the pirates Dominique You or "The Bloody Babe"; or something had occurred near Cape Hatteras, notorious for wreckers who lured ships into danger to be run aground.

Her father refused to credit any of the rumors of her possible capture, believing that she had died in shipwreck, but the rumors persisted long after his death and after around 1850 more substantial "explanations" of the mystery surfaced, usually alleging

to be from the deathbed confessions of sailors and executed criminals.

One story which was given credence was that the *Patriot* had fallen prey to the wreckers known as the Carolina "bankers". The bankers populated the sandbank islands near Nags Head, North Carolina, pirating wrecks and murdering both passengers and crews. When the sea did not serve up wrecks for their plunder, they lured ships onto the shoals. On stormy nights the bankers would hobble a horse, tie a lantern around the animal's neck, and walk it up and down the beach. Sailors at sea could not distinguish the bobbing light they saw from that of a ship which was anchored securely. Often they steered toward shore to find shelter. Instead they became wrecked on the banks, after which their crews and passengers were murdered. In relation to this, 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.



Writing in the *Charleston News and Courier*, Foster Haley claimed that documents he had discovered in the State archives in Mobile, Alabama, said that the Patriot had been captured by a pirate vessel captained by John Howard Payne and that every person on board had been murdered by the pirates including "a woman who was obviously a noblewoman or a lady of high birth". However, Haley never identified or cited the documents he had supposedly found.

Another myth about her fate traces its origin to Charles Etienne Arthur Gayarre's novel *Fernando de Lemos: Truth and Fiction: A Novel* (1872). Gayarre devoted one chapter to a confession by the pirate Dominique You. In Gayarre's story You admitted having captured the Patriot after he discovered it dismantled off Cape Hatteras following a storm. You and his men murdered the crew, while Theodosia was made to walk the plank: "She stepped on it and descended into the sea with graceful composure, as if she had been alighting from a carriage," Gayarre wrote in You's voice. "She sank, and rising again, she, with an indescribable smile of

angelic sweetness, waved her hand to me as if she meant to say: 'Farewell, and thanks again'; and then sank forever." Because Gayarre billed his novel as a mixture of "truth and fiction" there was popular speculation about whether his account of You's confession might be real, and the story entered American folklore.

The American folklorist Edward Rowe Snow later put together an account in *Strange Tales from Nova Scotia to Cape Hatteras* incorporating the Gayarre story with later offshoots; for example, on February 14, 1903, one Mrs. Harriet Sprague issued a sworn statement before Notary Freeman Atwell, of Cass County, Michigan, claiming to corroborate the details of You's confession in Gayarre's 1872 novel. Mrs. Sprague described the contents of an 1848 confession by pirate Frank Burdick, an alleged shipmate of You when the Patriot was discovered. The pirates left most of Theodosia's clothing untouched, as well as a portrait of Theodosia. Later, "wreckers"; locals known for rifling stranded vessels in often-criminal fashion, discovered the deserted Patriot and one of them carried the painting and clothing ashore, giving it to a female suitor. Years later, a physician caring for the now-elderly woman noticed the unusually expensive oil painting in the Nag's Head shack and it was supposedly confirmed to have belonged to the Alston family. The detail of the painting in Mrs. Sprague's story appears to be derived from a separate legend that first appeared in print in 1878. In 1869, Dr. William G. Pool treated Mrs. Polly Mann for an ailment; in payment she gave him a portrait of a young woman which she claimed her first husband had discovered on board a wrecked ship during the War of 1812. Pool became convinced the portrait was of Theodosia Burr Alston, and contacted members of her family, some of whom agreed, though Pool conceded "they cannot say positively if it was her." None of them had ever seen Theodosia in life. The only person who had actually known Theodosia that Pool contacted was Mary Alston Pringle, Theodosia's sister-in-law. To his disappointment, she could not recognize the painting as one of Theodosia. The unidentified "Nag's Head" portrait is now at the Lewis Walpole Library in Fairfield, Connecticut and today it is generally thought to be Theodosia Burr.

In the years that followed, considerable publicity was given to this theory and in 1888 editor R.B. Creecy, of the *Elizabeth City Economist*, reported that he had interviewed a woman named Stella E.P. Drake, a descendent of the Burrs, who had come to Elizabeth City to see the portrait. "We were startled by her close resemblance to the portrait in question," he said.

The "Nags Head" Portrait, allegedly of Theodosia Burr Alston (Recto and Verso; Courtesy of the Yale's Lewis Walpole Library, Farmington CT)



The following year Mrs. Drake wrote a letter to the Washington (DC) Post, recounting the details of her visit to the home of Dr. Poole. Describing her entrance into the Poole home, she said, "As I turned to go through the door I saw upon the wall above the mantelpiece a portrait of a young woman in white. That is the picture," I exclaimed. "I know it is, because it bears a strong resemblance to my sister."

The picture she saw was approximately 12" x 18" in size and painted on mahogany. It's been reproduced many times and is, together with accounts of pirate confessions and the story of Mrs. Mann, the strongest link in the thread of

evidence concerning Theodosia's fate. There is no manifest today of what Theo carried aboard the *Patriot* that fateful day but it is well known that her personal affects contained her cherished jewelry and money for her Father and it certainly would be in keeping with her devotion to her father to have such a fine portrait in her possession as a gift to him.

Logbooks from the blockading British fleet report a severe storm which began off the Carolina coast in the afternoon of January 2, 1813, and continued into the next day. James L. Michie, an archaeologist from South Carolina, by studying its course has concluded that the *Patriot* was likely just north of Cape Hatteras when the storm was at its fiercest. "If the ship managed to escape this battering, which continued until midnight," he has said, "it then faced near hurricane-force winds in the early hours of Sunday. Given this knowledge, the *Patriot* probably sank between 6 p.m. Saturday [January 2] and 8 a.m. Sunday [January 3]" or was washed ashore the Outer Banks.

The irony, however, is inescapable. Somewhere along this shore, where her father's nemesis had erected a lighthouse to save her, Theodosia Burr Alston lost her life on a stormy January night. And although we may never know exactly how that happened, a suicidal poet may have touched on why.

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:

Kitty Hawk, O Kitty,  
There was once a song,  
Who knows but a great  
Emblematic ditty,  
I might well have sung  
When I came here young  
Out and down along  
Past Elizabeth City  
Sixty years ago.  
I was, to be sure,  
Out of sorts with Fate,  
Wandering to and fro

In the earth alone,  
You might think too poor  
Spirited to care  
Who I was or where  
I was being blown  
Faster than my tread  
Like the crumpled, better  
Leftunwntten letter  
I had read and thrown.  
Oh, but not to boast,  
Ever since Nag's Head  
Had my heart been great,  
Not to claim elate,  
With a need the gale  
Filled me with to shout  
Summary riposte  
To the dreary wail  
There's no knowing what  
Love is all about.  
Poets know a lot.  
Never did I fail  
Of an answer back  
To the zodiac  
When in heartless chorus  
Aries and Taurus,  
Gemini and Cancer  
Mocked me for an answer.  
It was on my tongue  
To have up and sung  
The initial flight  
I can see now might--  
Should have been my own--  
Into the unknown,  
Into the sublime  
Off these sands of Time  
Time had seen amass  
From his hourglass.  
Once I told the Master,  
Later when we met,  
I'd been here one night  
As a young Alastor  
When the scene was set  
For some kind of flight  
Long before he flew it.  
Just supposing I-  
I had beat him to it.



What did men mean by  
THE original?  
Why was it so very,  
Very necessary  
To be first of all?  
How about the lie  
That he wasn't first?  
I was glad he laughed.  
There was such a lie  
Money and maneuver  
Fostered over long  
Until Herbert Hoover  
Raised this tower shaft  
To undo the wrong.  
Of all crimes the worst  
Is to steal the glory  
From the great and brave,  
Even more accursed  
Than to rob the grave.  
But the sorry story  
Has been long redressed.  
And as for my jest  
I had any claim  
To the runway's fame  
Had I only sung,  
That is all my tongue.  
I can't make it seem  
More than that my theme  
Might have been a dream  
Of dark Hatteras  
Or sad Roanoke,  
One more fond alas  
For the seed of folk  
Sowed in vain by Raleigh,  
Raleigh of the cloak,  
And some other folly.

Getting too befriended,  
As so often, ended  
Any melancholy  
Gotterdammerung  
That I might have sung.  
I fell in among  
Some kind of committee  
From Elizabeth City,  
Each and every one

Loaded with a gun  
Or a demijohn.  
(Need a body ask  
If it was a flask?)  
Out to kill a duck  
Or perhaps a swan  
Over Currituck.

This was not their day  
Anything to slay  
Unless one another.  
But their lack of luck  
Made them no less gay  
No, nor less polite.  
They included me  
Like a little brother  
In their revelry--  
All concern to take  
Care my innocence  
Should at all events  
Tenderly be kept  
For good gracious' sake.  
And if they were gentle  
They were sentimental.  
One drank to his mother  
While another wept.  
Something made it sad  
For me to break loose  
From the need they had  
To make themselves glad  
They were of no use.  
Manners made it hard,  
But that night I stole  
Off on the unbounded  
Beaches where the whole  
Of the Atlantic pounded.  
There I next fell in  
With a lone coast guard  
On midnight patrol,  
Who as of a sect  
Asked about my soul  
And where-all I'd been.  
Apropos of sin,  
Did I recollect  
How the wreckers wrecked  
Theodosia Burr

Off this very shore?  
'Twas to punish her,  
But her father more  
We don't know what for:  
There was no confession.  
Things they think she wore  
Still sometimes occur  
In someone's possession  
Here at Kitty Hawk.  
We can have no notion  
Of the strange devotion  
Burr had for his daughter:  
He was too devoted.  
So it was in talk  
We prolonged the walk,  
On one side the ocean,  
And on one a water  
Of the inner sound;  
"And the moon was full,"  
As the poet said  
And I aptly quoted.  
And its being hall  
And right overhead,  
Small but strong and round,  
By its tidal pull  
Made all being hall.  
Kitty Hawk, Kitty,  
Here it was again  
In the selfsame day,  
I at odds with men  
Came upon their pity,  
Equally profound  
For a son astray  
And a daughter drowned.

*But we know that the Patriot did not sink!*

There are houses in every coastal community in North Carolina built wholly or in part from salvaged and wrecked vessels. It was without a doubt washed ashore at Nags Head North Carolina where wreckers took to salvage and dismantling it, rescuing Theodosia's portrait in the process.

Yet the question remains; What of Theodosia's personal affects; her money and jewels? Authority tells us that after she was forced to walk the plank the cargo and booty was divided among the cut throat pirate crew, each getting his share. Their ship upon reaching Ocracoak Bay; it was every man for himself after committing such a dastardly deed. Fifteen years later, a former pirate, "Old Frank" Burdick, confessed a story on his deathbed in a poorhouse in Cassopolis, Michigan . He told a horrifying story of being part of the pirate crew that came upon the dismayed Patriot, of holding the plank for Mrs. Alston, who walked calmly over the side, dressed completely in white. He said she begged for word of

her fate to be sent to her father and husband. He went on to say that once the crew and passengers had been murdered, they plundered the ship and abandoned her under partial sail. He also mentioned seeing a portrait of Theodosia in the main cabin. His story was corroborated by others. He was given a casket of coins and jewels that had belonged to the Lady in White as his share. However, haunted by her image he had buried his treasure of a thousand coins and many dozens of jewels along a prominent trail as he made his journey to the interior of North Carolina leaving behind only a cryptic map to its whereabouts.



*Theodosia Burr Memorial*



## *The Author*

©2015 H.Charles Beil received a degree in History from Duquesne University in 1982; studied historical geology, archeology and oceanography under Skinner and other world renowned geologists, archeologists and scientists and has been an avid treasure hunter for nearly 50 years. He's published numerous articles on the subject of treasure hunting and has been a frequent researcher in the tiny historical societies, large libraries and museums all along the Eastern Seaboard and the Mid-Atlantic States. More than an historian, his finds are in museums and personal collections throughout the country. He is the larger than life "Indiana Jones". Having amassed his fortune for nearly 50 years, H.Charles Beil has now divided his treasure and is reburying it as caches throughout the country with at least one fabulous cache guaranteed to be the largest treasure chest buried in the last 100 years (see the chest in the picture below). Are you ready to begin the treasure hunt of a lifetime? The adventure began with volume one; ***The Lost Cache of Wolf Run***. It continues in this, the 5th buried cache; ***Theodosia***.

For more information on this and other caches buried by H.Charles Beil visit <http://www.TreasureIllustrated.com>

