



## Season 6, Episode 10: Monroe Letter

Gwen: Our next story investigates a possible connection between a family of New England fishermen and piracy on the high seas. As the 19<sup>th</sup> century begins, the newly United States of America faces profound challenges to its sovereignty. Less than 20 years have passed since George Washington defeated King George on land, but the Royal Navy still dominates the high seas, seizing American ships and forcing U.S. sailors to work on British vessels. As maritime merchants cry for an end to this lawlessness, a future American president is dispatched to London to prevent another costly war between the two nations. Now, Gail Steel from Sharpes, Florida, has uncovered a 200-year-old letter from this period signed “J. Monroe,” which she believes links America’s Fifth President, James Monroe, to her ancestors.

Gail: As far as I knew it’s addressed to the Manwarings, my Mother’s side of the family. They were old New England fisherman so I was quite amazed.

Gwen: Hi Gail.

Gail: Hi Gwen I’ve been expecting you. Come on in through to the kitchen.

Gwen: Thank you! Now where did you find it?

Gail: I found it in the bottom of a Tupperware box of old photographs after my Mother passed away. It looks like it’s a letter for a claim on moneys my family loaned to the government.

Gwen: Now why do you think that?

Gail: Because it’s addressed to somebody Manwaring, and that’s my Mother’s side of the family, and the date seems to be – I can’t quite make it out – 1807.

Gwen: Well why don’t you read the whole thing for me. I’ll see it through your eyes.

Gail: I’ll give it a try here. Dear Sir, I have the pleasure to send you a copy of my note to Lord Norwich on the subject of Major Bradbury – I can’t read the next word – claims on this government . Mrs. Monroe and my best wishes, very truly yours and then it says...J.W. Monroe

Gwen: Well, you did a pretty good job with some difficult handwriting.

Gail: I have practiced it a lot (laughs)



Gwen: Well tell me Gail what would you like me to find out about this letter?

Gail: Well I'd like to know first of all if this is an authentic James Monroe signature. I'd like to know to whom in my family it's addressed.

Gwen: You mean to which Manwaring?

Gail: Yes, to which Manwaring.

Gwen: Gail also wants to know who Major Bradbury and Lord Norwich are, as well as if and why her relatives may have loaned the government money. Even though she has some old photos, she knows very little about the Manwarings; they may have been New England fishermen in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. I'll have to take it with me but I promise I'll take very good care of it.

Gail: Alright. I wouldn't entrust it to anyone other than the History Detectives.

Gwen: Well thank you very much Gail.

Gail: Thank you Gwen. I am looking forward to it.

Gwen: The letter appears old, but I have doubts about the connection to Gail's family. Gail's convinced that it says Manwaring here at the top, but I seriously doubt that, I can't tell where she's getting it from. It wouldn't make sense to have the persons name up there. The date is very clear here – April 2, 1807.

Gwen: Why on earth would a family of New England fishermen be owed money by the U.S. government, and have a future American president writing to them? Dear Sir, I have the pleasure to enclose you a copy of my note to Lord Norwich. On the subject of Mrs. Bradbury and co's claim on this government for money deposited at Buenos Aires. To start, the letter doesn't refer to a Major Bradbury, as Gail thought, but rather to Bradbury and company. Whoever they are, they certainly believe they're owed money by some government, and that the funds are in Buenos Aires, which was part of a Spanish colony. First I want to authenticate this letter, and determine whether there is any record of Monroe dealing with a New England family called the Manwarings. So I'm headed to Fredericksburg, Virginia, home to the James Monroe Museum and Memorial Library. Hi. Gwen Wright. Dan Preston is editor of the papers of James Monroe.

Dan: This is the archives.



Gwen: Okay. Dan has roughly 600 Monroe letters in his collection.

Dan: Now you said the letter was from what year it was from?

Gwen: 1807.

Dan: Okay, let's see...

Gwen: I tell Dan about Gail's letter ...and he pulls out an original Monroe signature for comparison.

Dan: We have your letter on the right there and then here is our copy on the left...I don't see any doubt about it that your letter is clearly signed by James Monroe.

Gwen: The contributor thinks this is the name of someone in her family. Manwaring. What do you think?

Dan: It doesn't say Manwaring.

Gwen: I didn't think so.

Dan: It says Portland Place, which was where Monroe lived when he was minister to Great Britain.

Gwen: So the letter appears to have nothing to do with Gail's family. It's some other missing piece of history she's been keeping all these years – but what? Dan says the date may help us. In 1807 James Monroe was living in London as American minister to Great Britain, a key diplomatic posting. He was attempting to represent the affairs of the young republic as it sought out new trading partners around the world. But the British were preoccupied with fighting the Napoleonic Wars against France. To aid their war effort, they assaulted the American merchant fleet at will, seizing ships, and their cargo. But what does all this have to do with our letter?

Dan: Dear Sir, I have the pleasure to enclose you a copy of my note to Lord Howick.

Gwen: She had thought it was Lord Norwich. Who was Lord Howick? Dan explains that Lord Howick was at that time the outgoing British foreign minister. James Monroe would have been in frequent contact with him. But I can imagine it would have been a difficult relationship, considering the ongoing tension between the two Nations.

Dan: It says he's sending a copy of a note.



Gwen: Dan has compiled a catalogue of the letters known to be written by James Monroe. Whatever Monroe wrote to Lord Howick may be summarised here.

Dan: Let's see, here it's 1805, 1807... let's see so this is April.. February.. oh here he is, here we go..30 January 1807.

Gwen: Perfect.

Dan: Presents claim of Bradbury and company for compensation for ship and cargo seized in 1801.

Gwen: It's the Bradbury Company mentioned in Gail's letter. As minister to Britain for the young United States, Monroe appears to be inquiring about a ship that's been seized. Bradbury and co; do you think this was an American company?

Dan: It seems likely, if Monroe as the American minister is presenting the claim to the British government.

Gwen: Let me see what I can find on this company that James Monroe is asking about – and why the British may have seized this particular ship. Here's an ad from the Boston Gazette in 1806...F and C Bradbury are selling sugar at Boston's Long Wharf...that was the commercial hub of Boston in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Here's another ad by Charles Bradbury...rum from the Virgin Islands...of an excellent quality...Liverpool ware, German steel, Spanish iron...and Havana sugar. What's clear from these old advertisements is that Bradbury and Company had ships coming into Boston from all over, from Europe, and the Caribbean. Did the British seize goods like these from Bradbury and Company for their own war effort? And if so, why does Gail's letter refer to money deposited at Buenos Aires? I'm at the Naval War College Museum in Newport, Rhode Island.

John: This is the USS Constitution, built in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Gwen: Professor John Hattendorf is Director of the Museum. He says it wasn't just goods and supplies that were abducted from American merchant ships. The Royal Navy would halt American vessels at sea, both war ships and merchant vessels...they would send an officer aboard and examine the crew, and decide if they felt one of those was a British subject and then take them away and impress them into service in the Royal Navy. Thousands of Americans were impressed against their will in this way. John says impressments put James Monroe at the centre of a storm... potential war between Britain and America.

John: There were certainly some 500 American vessels that were seized by the British. And then maybe 300 by the French



Gwen: So the other European powers also had little respect for the American flag on the world's oceans.

John: The Spanish, the French, were all involved in this.

Gwen: Perhaps it wasn't the British who seized the Bradbury ship; Buenos Aires was under Spanish control in 1801. But then why would the American minister to Britain be lodging a claim? John has a final suggestion, and it involves the correspondence of another future American president.

John: To follow the trail on this I would suggest you look at the correspondence between James Madison and James Monroe.

Gwen: Why Madison?

John: James Madison was the secretary of state in 1807 and he would have dealt with all such claims that the American government was dealing with.

Gwen: Thank you so much, John. The papers of James Madison are being published by the University of Virginia, where Mary Hackett is an associate editor on the project. Hi Mary.

Mary: Hello. How are you?

Gwen: Nice to meet you.

Mary: I found something that I think might interest you

Gwen: Excellent. I had emailed Mary the details of my investigation, and she's uncovered an 1806 letter from the Bradbury's to James Madison in Washington.

Mary: They explained that they are the owners – part owners and agents for the ship *Phoenix* of which Josiah Roberts was the master.

Gwen: Finally, the Bradbury ship has a name. The letter explains that the *Phoenix* sailed from Boston in July 1801 with a valuable cargo. So then what happens to the *Phoenix*?

Mary: Well in December of 1801, the same ship was captured by a Spanish government schooner.



Gwen: Mary says that despite company pleas to return the ship, Spain held onto it for four years before selling everything.

Mary: "The cargo was sold for the sum of 124,000 dollars and the amount was deposited in the Spanish royal treasury at Buenos Aires. The ship was also sold at Montevideo, and that amount of 5,500 dollars was also deposited in the Spanish treasury."

Gwen: So that would have been roughly \$130,000 at that time which would be worth millions today. That was quite a prize.

Mary: Yes it was.

Gwen: But there's no information about what the ship was carrying. And I have another question. Why would James Monroe, the American minister to Great Britain, be so concerned about a ship that had been captured by the Spanish and was then in South America?

Mary: The plot thickens.

Gwen: Ok. What Mary tells me next gives me the missing link. I think Gail is going to be quite surprised by what I've learned. Well Gail you wanted to know if this letter was written by James Monroe.

Gail: Right.

Gwen: And it was indeed.

Gail: Oh good that's great.

Gwen: In fact it's a very important letter.

Gail: Okay

Gwen: However, you also thought that this had been written to one of your ancestors in the Manwaring family

Gail: Right

Gwen: And unfortunately the letter has nothing to do with them.



Gail: Oh, all right.

Gwen: Are you disappointed?

Gail: Well, not really, because if it's written by James Monroe, then I still have a very important piece of American history.

Gwen: While it remains unclear who the letter is addressed to or if the matter was ever resolved – I tell Gail about the Spanish Navy seizing the *Phoenix* and its cargo...and how two future presidents got involved.

Gail: That's amazing, that's a much grander scope than I had envisioned when I first read the letter.

Gwen: I also found out how this claim came to be directed against the British Government.

#### *Flashback*

Mary: In June of 1806, the British seized Buenos Aires. They took the funds from the Spanish treasury and sent them back to London. And the Bradbury's are convinced in this letter they mentioned that their money was part of what was taken from the Spanish treasury and went back to London and they say...we have every reason to believe that the proceeds of the sale of the cargo alluded to constituted a part of this treasure and is now in London." That's terrific.

Gwen: Monroe was making a claim on behalf of an American company but he was also making a claim on behalf of the United States as a sovereign nation.

Gail: My goodness.

Gwen: So this period in history that this letter is a part of was the first assertion of American national identity and economic rights in the world.

Gail: Just to own a piece of history like that is special, even though my family's not involved in it.

Gwen: Do you think that your mother knew something about this letter?

Gail: My mother knew she was dying, she had lung cancer. You would think that with only two daughters that she would have said "girls, I have this valuable piece of history in the bottom of a box. And you know you need to get it, it's for you." Not a word.



Gwen: James Monroe helped draft a potential solution to the worsening relationship between Britain and America. But President Jefferson rejected the Monroe-Pinkney treaty, in part because it failed to provide an end to British impressment of American seamen. On June 18, 1812, James Madison – who had succeeded Jefferson as president – signed a declaration of war against the British Empire. The war of 1812 has been called the conclusion of the American Revolution. Although it wasn't a decisive victory for the U.S., it established American dignity by standing up to the British and demanding respect for our flag.