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The Lost Fortune of the Virginian:
Analyzing the History of the Beale Ciphers Using Historical Land Grants

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One of the most perplexing treasure hunts in American history finds its roots in Buford, Virginia, a rural town in Bedford County. Allegedly in 1817, a Virginian hunting party, later known as the Beale party, led by Thomas Jefferson Beale discovered a trove of bullion and jewels near present-day northern New Mexico around the area north of Santa Fe. The treasure was transported by the Beale party to somewhere in the area of Buford, Virginia, and hidden in a rock-lined vault buried underground, and the Beale party left, leaving behind only a locked box with their confidant, a Buford innkeeper named Robert Morriss. It is believed that the first burial of treasure by the Beale party was in 1819, with 1,014 pounds of gold and 3,812 pounds of silver buried within five miles of Buford's Tavern.¹ Jewels purchased for approximately \$13,000 in Saint Louis, alongside 1,907 pounds of gold and 1,288 pounds of silver were buried in the same location in 1821.² A letter from Beale in 1822 authorized Morriss to open the box in ten years if he had not heard from Beale and a friend of Beale's in Saint Louis would send him the keys to

¹ Carl W. Nelson, "Historical and Analytical Studies in Relation to the Beale Ciphers," *U.S. Department of Defense*, April 15, 1972, 12, media.defense.gov/2021/Jul/15/2002763571/-1/-1/0/DOC656726.PDF.

² *Ibid.*

the ciphers. Unfortunately for Morriss, in 1832 he never received the letter allowing him to do so.³ In 1845, Morriss opened the box to find the three ciphers that would tell the story, details, and location of the vault if deciphered.⁴ These ciphers used substitution keys, where numbers in the cipher would correspond with the first letter of words in a text to spell out the code. To solve the cipher, one would require the ‘key,’ the corresponding text that could be used to correctly decode the message. While a cipher of this sort with a key is quite easy to solve, without the key it is effectively unbreakable. As a result, without the promised keys, Morriss never managed to break any of the codes. However, in 1863 a friend of Morriss’ with whom he had shared the ciphers named James B. Ward broke the second cipher using a copy of the Declaration of Independence as the key, detailing tens of millions of dollars worth of gold, silver, and jewels within four miles of Buford’s Tavern in Buford, Virginia. The other two ciphers remain unsolved to this day.⁵ The Beale Ciphers still have not been cracked, and the treasure remains unfound.

It is important to note that ciphers one and three serve different purposes: cipher one details the location of the vault in Virginia, information irrelevant to the discovery of the treasure if the treasure was indeed moved after the authoring of the ciphers in the early 1820s. The third cipher, as detailed in the letter by Beale to Morriss that was discovered in 1845, “protected the list of Beale party members and certain relatives who were heirs.”⁶ Efforts to decipher the remaining two ciphers should place added emphasis on efforts to decode the third cipher as a result, given the added significance of the historical value those names could provide to unraveling the entire Beale ciphers story.

³ Nelson, “Historical and Analytical Studies in Relation to the Beale Ciphers,” 20

⁴ James B. Ward, *The Beale Papers: Presenting Details of an Alleged Treasure Buried near Goose Creek, Bedford County, Virginia, in Nov. 1819 and Dec. 1821 by Thom. Jefferson Beale and His Associates.* (1885).

⁵ Joe Nickell, “Discovered: The Secret of Beale’s Treasure,” *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, vol. 90, no. 3 (July 1982): 310–11.

⁶ Nelson, “Historical and Analytical Studies in Relation to the Beale Ciphers,” 12.

The question remains however: who exactly was Thomas Beale, and where is his vault? The Beale ciphers are real, and lie not western Virginia but in another location, serving as evidence that the reason the treasure has not yet been found is that it exists in an area outside Buford, Virginia. The significance of the mystery of the Beale ciphers and of Thomas Beale's story itself is multifaceted in nature; whether analyzing the legend from a cryptanalytic perspective, Civil War-era bent, Masonic allegorical exploration, or just pure intrigue in the American culture of secret societies and treasure hunts, the Beale ciphers remain an integral part of both the American historical imagination and in understanding a poorly documented mystery of American history and vast monetary proportions. This paper presents a new perspective on the known history of the Beale ciphers as well as a novel analysis of archaeological work to develop a new direction of research for the location of Beale's vault, proposing a new explanation of the mystery of the Beale treasure.

Prior Scholarship and Genealogy

Greater evidence for the chronology of Thomas Jefferson Beale and his journey out West exists in an oft repeated story of a duel between a Thomas Beale living near Montvale, Virginia, in the early 1800s, and a man named James Risque. Beale then "reportedly fled town" after the conclusion of the duel.⁷ The duel was prior to this Thomas Beale, noted as being from Fincastle, Virginia, leaving for New Orleans, over a woman named Judy Hancock.⁸ At the time, records show Julia 'Judy' Hancock as living in Fincastle, the daughter of Congressman George

⁷ Peter Viemeister, *The Beale Treasure: New History of a Mystery* (Hamilton's, 1997), 95.

⁸ Ibid.

Hancock.⁹ As Julia Hancock married explorer William Clark after his return to Virginia in 1808, it can be assumed that the duel and Beale's travel to New Orleans occurred prior to that year.¹⁰ More recent scholarship has proposed that there was both an elder and junior Thomas Beale, and due to poor records keeping it is not clear which Beale any given piece of historical evidence is applicable to. To further confuse the matter, both 1806 and 1817 have been proposed dates for the Risque and Beale duel. If the 1806 number is accurate, it seems odd that the senior Beale would duel over Hancock, who was a teenager at the time. However, in 1817 Hancock was married to Clark and living in Saint Louis, further confusing the historical narrative.¹¹ Her residency in Saint Louis invites the question of whether she was the friend of Beale's meant to send Morriss the keys to the ciphers in 1832; it would make sense as she died in Saint Louis in 1823, just two years after Beale's final departure from Virginia and one year after Beale's letter to Morriss.¹² What is clear is that James Risque knew Thomas Beale well enough to duel him over Judy Hancock, and that Risque both knew Robert Morriss and was related to James B. Ward.¹³ Risque's relation to the story is both well-documented and central to the historical context of the mystery. Given that Beale left Fincastle most likely in 1806, as the 1817 date would seem quite late, he returned to Virginia and stayed with Morriss, who knew Risque and Ward well, fifteen years later.

Census data does not identify a Thomas Beale living in Virginia at the time; however, four consecutive issues of *The Virginia Herald* in 1817 stated that the postmaster in Fredericksburg, Virginia was holding a letter for one 'Thomas Beal,' a discrepancy in the

⁹ Viermeister, *The Beale Treasure: New History of a Mystery*, 96.

¹⁰ Viermeister, *The Beale Treasure: New History of a Mystery*, 97.

¹¹ Viermeister, *The Beale Treasure: New History of a Mystery*, 118.

¹² Viermeister, *The Beale Treasure: New History of a Mystery*, 189.

¹³ Viermeister, *The Beale Treasure: New History of a Mystery*, 120.

spelling of the surname that is explained by Nelson in accounting for the varied spellings of the Beale family name.¹⁴ An exploration of the origins of Thomas Beale would initially appear to be a fool's errand, as few official documents record a man of his name and description. However, it is important to note that the paperwork and databases of the early 19th century in the United States were far less complete and far easier to miss than the ones we have today. The existence of a "Thomas J. Beale" is acknowledged in Frances Beal Smith Hodges' 1956 work, *The Genealogy of the Beale Family (1399-1956)*.¹⁵ It was a genealogical commonality of the Beale name for it to be alternatively spelled as Beals, Beall, Beal, and such.¹⁶ As so, it is safe to assume that inconsistencies in the spelling of Beale's name throughout the historiographical record are not cause for concern as to the validity of the Beale chronology. Some scholars have argued that a man named after President Thomas Jefferson could not have existed if born shortly after Jefferson's presidency, and cite this oddity as proof of the fraudulent nature of the ciphers and Beale's tale. However, Hodge's genealogy shows that a man named Andrew Jackson Beale, born in 1831, two years into Andrew Jackson's presidency, was a member of the Beale family, meaning there was a clear lack of stigma surrounding the adoption of the names of recent American Presidents in the Beale family.¹⁷

Important conclusions drawn from the facts laid out above, as well as much of Nelson's research into the Beale party, are that "Beale may have used his name with the spelling 'Thomas Beal' and that the Beale party was likely formed in the vicinity of Fredericksburg and the surrounding towns."¹⁸ While contemporary analysis often describes Beale as an almost

¹⁴ Nelson, "Historical and Analytical Studies in Relation to the Beale Ciphers," 16.

¹⁵ Frances Beal Smith Hodges, *The Genealogy of the Beale Family (1399-1956)* (Edwards Bros., 1956).

¹⁶ Nelson, "Historical and Analytical Studies in Relation to the Beale Ciphers," 3.

¹⁷ Hodges, *The Genealogy of the Beale Family (1399-1956)*, 162.

¹⁸ George L. Hart, "The Beale Papers," *United States Department of Defense*, 1964, 17, media.defense.gov/2021/Jul/15/2002763576/-1/-1/0/DOC656779.PDF.

hypothetical figure, Morriss actually gave a quite descriptive account of him in his conversation with Ward: “about six feet in height, with jet black eyes and hair of the same color, worn longer than was the style at the time. His form was asymmetrical [sic] and gave evidence of unusual strength and activity. But his distinguishing feature was a dark and swarthy complexion, as if much exposure to the sun and weather had thoroughly tanned and discolored him.”¹⁹ This extreme detail is odd for an allegory, given that many stories about Beale are far more general in the description of him and those around him, and if the Beale tale was but a Masonic parable for the promise of buried treasure, it seems odd that so many years after its inception such a vivid description would be invented of the man. Rather, the description of Beale somewhat refutes the idea of the legend as nothing more than a Masonic allegory, instead supporting the idea that there may be more to this tale of American history.

One important and often overlooked clue in the Beale case is an issue of *The Franklin Intelligencer* published on July 18th, 1819 that identifies a known lodging place for the Beale party. This paper carried a notice that after July 23rd, 1819, the Franklin Hotel in Franklin, Missouri would be operated by William Beatty and George Armstrong.²⁰ Nelson had not conducted research on the backgrounds and significance of these two men, but had identified them as potential “keepers of the Beale Cypher keys,” a lead difficult to follow due to the destruction of hotel records in the floods that later destroyed the old city of Franklin, Missouri.²¹ The relevance of the greater Saint Louis area to the travels and communications of the Beale party cannot be understated: so much of the chronology of the travels of Beale and his men goes through Saint Louis, that as 1819 came to a close and the Beale party began to travel back

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Nelson, “Historical and Analytical Studies in Relation to the Beale Ciphers,” 4.

towards Virginia once more, it is clear that any information or details on the party are valuable to an understanding of the historical situation.

Any analysis of the legend of Beale's treasure must first be approached by certifying the authenticity of the ciphers left behind. A common criticism of the validity of the story and thus the ciphers is Robert Morriss: the only man to have claimed to know Thomas Jefferson Beale. Morriss failed to "inquire into the background of a man who had spent less than two winters with him,"²² which appears implausible at first examination. Morriss claimed that Beale was "registered from Virginia," which is where the assumption that Beale was a Virginian comes from, but never learned anything about Beale's family or origins. One must wonder why Beale would entrust the secret to a fortune larger than most Americans at the time could even comprehend to a man who barely knew him. Nevertheless, it takes only a brief examination of Virginia's records to show no Thomas Beale of Beale's profile living during the time.²³ However, the compilation of data was done on a county level in Virginia at the time, and several counties had missing information or did not submit profiles of their respective populations.

In accounting for the presence of Beale's party after he left Virginia, explorer Jacob Fowler reportedly wrote in his journal that "the Pawnee and Crowe tribes 'speake on the most friendly terms of the White men and Say they are about 35 in number;' this number is similar to the size of Beale's party" around the early 1820s.²⁴ The presence of Beale at this time is also confirmable: it is believed that the jewels in the vault were obtained in Saint Louis in exchange for silver in order to make transportation easier. This is supported by the availability of jewels

²² Nickell, "Discovered: The Secret of Beale's Treasure," 312.

²³ Nickell, "Discovered: The Secret of Beale's Treasure," 324.

²⁴ Simon Singh, "Treasure by Numbers it's the Holy Grail of Codebreakers, a Riddle that has Obsessed Amateur Sleuths and Government Agencies for almost Two Centuries. in an Edited Extract from His New Book, Simon Singh Reports on the Race to Crack the Beale Ciphers and Claim the 10m Prize." *The Guardian*, Sep 02 1999, 8.

and silverware for purchase at the time of Beale's alleged stay in the Saint Louis area: *The Franklin Intelligencer* lists two advertisements from the time offering large quantities of jewels and silverware for sale: one on September 3rd, 1819 by Charles E. Jeaneret and one on November 12th, 1819 by Charles F. Jarred.²⁵ Morriss, according to *The Beale Papers* later published by J.B. Ward, received correspondence from Beale in early 1822 from Saint Louis.²⁶ That same year, Beale reportedly left the keys for the three ciphers with an unnamed friend in Saint Louis and visited the Planter's Hotel.²⁷ Evidence for Beale's presence in Saint Louis can be confirmed by the fact that there was "a postmaster's notice in an October 1817 copy of *The Missouri Gazette* for an 'S. T. Beall' and an 1820 notice for a 'Thomas Beall' in *The Franklin Intelligencer*."²⁸ Thus, there was clearly a man by the name of 'Beall' or 'Beale' in Saint Louis during the late 1810s and early 1820s. Further research by Nelson under the United States Department of Defense yielded that a letter was held for 'Thomas Beall' in April 1820, who was previously noted incorrectly as 'S.J. Beall'.²⁹ This appears to give credence to the thought that Beale did in fact go West, and that it is unlikely that Morriss fabricated this aspect of the story. Nelson corroborates, stating that "1 April 1820 is in reasonable agreement with Robert Morriss' statement that Beale and his party left Lynchburg for the West in March 1820."³⁰ This would support the premonition that 'Thomas Beall' and Thomas Beale of the Beale ciphers are the same man. However, it remains unclear as to why no evidence of Beale is present past Morriss' account of his departure from Buford for the last time in 1822. It is important to note that

²⁵ Nelson, "Historical and Analytical Studies in Relation to the Beale Ciphers," 4.

²⁶ Ward, *The Beale Papers: Presenting Details of an Alleged Treasure Buried near Goose Creek, Bedford County, Virginia, in Nov. 1819 and Dec. 1821 by Thom. Jefferson Beale and His Associates*, 9.

²⁷ Hart, "The Beale Papers," 9.

²⁸ Nelson, "Historical and Analytical Studies in Relation to the Beale Ciphers," 5.

²⁹ Nelson, "Historical and Analytical Studies in Relation to the Beale Ciphers," 3.

³⁰ Ibid.

Morriss' status as a tavern keeper is authenticated by a known tavern keeper license from November 21st, 1821, and thus his existence as a figure in the historical record is almost certainly legitimate.³¹

Key Figures of the Beale Party

An interesting potential member of the Beale party would be George F. Strother, a man who twice gave notice of a Missouri trip in April of 1820 in a manner consistent with records of the travels of the Beale party. Strother is considered by Nelson to be a likely candidate for the two members of the Beale party who took leave to travel to Richmond in January of 1820, as noted by Robert Morriss.³² Strother named Colonel Armistead Long as a fiduciary responsible for the payment of his bills while in the Missouri Territory.³³ The Bureau of Land Management lists one George F. Strother as filing ten land patents in Missouri between 1824 and 1839 as the sole owner.³⁴ A 1843 filing in Gasconade and Montgomery Counties, Missouri was jointly placed by Strother and a man named Angus L. Langham, who is shown to be a land surveyor in Kansas as of records by the Kansas Historical Society.³⁵ Langham appears to have been a former officer of the United States Army, having been granted an honorable discharge in 1815 as a major in the Tenth Infantry Regiment.³⁶ The land patent between the two is far more interesting

³¹Nelson, "Historical and Analytical Studies in Relation to the Beale Ciphers," 4.

³²Nelson, "Historical and Analytical Studies in Relation to the Beale Ciphers," 13.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Bureau of Land Management. "General Land Office Records." *Patent Details - Blm Glo Records*, U.S. Department of the Interior, <https://glorerecords.blm.gov/details/patent>.

³⁵ Angus L. Langham, "Map Copies from U.S. National Archives." *Kansas Historical Society*, 1834, www.kshs.org/archives/450278.

³⁶ Indiana Historical Society. "Journal of the Treaty Negotiations with the Wyandots," edited by Indiana Historical Society, *Indiana Historical Society*, 1815.

because while the filing is listed as being granted in 1843, the listed authority of the patent (Accession Nr. CV-0098-348) was a cash sale made on April 24th, 1820. This is almost exactly when the Beale party would have been in Saint Louis, and prior documents related to the land filed with the Bureau of Land Management list Thomas D. Carneal, William Rector, and Roger C. Weightman as patent holders on the land.³⁷ Weightman's inclusion in the filing is particularly important as four years after his inclusion in the filing, he was elected Mayor of Washington, DC. Weightman is also significant in that he was later Grand Master of the Freemasons of the District of Columbia, and as such his involvement with a probable member of the Beale party lends credence to the Masonic affiliations of the party, alongside a plethora of further research available on Weightman himself as a possible member of the Beale party.³⁸ Excluding Strother, Rector and Weightman held another six land patents in Missouri together. All of this encourages further examination of the 1820 purchase of land in Missouri, and at the land in particular as a potential site for the relocation of some of the Beale party's treasure.

Land records may give further clues as to where Thomas Jefferson Beale was in the early 1820s. The records of the Department of Interior's Bureau of Land Management shows a cash sale of eighty acres of land in Coos County, Oregon and forty acres of land in Douglas County, Oregon on April 24th, 1820 to "Thomas J. Beale."³⁹ An examination of land records finds that a Thomas Beale, alongside a Lucy Beale and a John R. Kelso, was issued 160 acres of land in Bourbon County, Kansas in 1865 in relation to a military warrant filed on behalf of Captain

³⁷ Bureau of Land Management. "General Land Office Records." *Patent Details - Blm Glo Records*, U.S. Department of the Interior, <https://glorerecords.blm.gov/details/patent>.

³⁸ Allen C. Clark, "General Roger Chew Weightman, a Mayor of the City of Washington," *Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Washington, D.C.* 22 (1919): 98.

³⁹ Bureau of Land Management. "General Land Office Records." *Patent Details - Blm Glo Records*, U.S. Department of the Interior, <https://glorerecords.blm.gov/details/patent>.

Richerson's Company Virginia Militia.⁴⁰ This would have been issued forty-three years after Beale's departure from Buford: thus, Beale would have had to be quite old if this was in fact the same man. Similar land claims were filed in Louisiana in 1847 and 1855, as well as Kansas in 1855. By themselves, these claims do little more than identify one Thomas Beale as an influential member of the Captain Richerson's Company Virginia Militia between 1847 and 1865. As for individual land trails outside of militia activity however, one Thomas J. Beale placed two homestead claims in Mount Diablo, California in 1862.⁴¹ Together, these land claims paint a picture of a potential path that Beale took outside of Saint Louis, New Mexico, and Buford. If this is indeed the same Beale, he may have gone much further West than previously anticipated if he was purchasing hundreds of acres of land in Oregon around 1820. Between 1822 when Beale left Buford and 1847, there is no property trail to follow, but between 1847 and 1865 Beale may have played a role in a Virginia militia that made land claims via military warrant in both Louisiana and Kansas during this period. Further investigation along these lines yields even more illuminating information. The land grants in Bourbon County, Kansas were all slight alterations to the same 160 acre piece of land just west of Fort Scott, Kansas. It is important to note that these claims were filed under an 1855 law (10 Stat. L. 701) that "extended military bounty land laws to Indians, entitling veterans from the Revolutionary War and the Indian Wars of 1818 and 1836 to warrants that could be exchanged for public lands."⁴² The 1865 patent awarded to Lucy Beale (Accession number MW-0184-485) lists the award as "160 acres, in favor of Lucy Beale, widow of Thomas Beale, Corporal, Captain Richerson's Company,

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Mary Frances Morrow, "Indian Bounty Land Applications." *National Archives and Records Administration*, National Archives and Records Administration, <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/1993/fall/indian-bounty-land-applications.html>.

Virginia Militia, War, 1812,”⁴³ inferring that this Thomas Beale was in fact a veteran of the War of 1812 from Virginia, and was dead by April 1st, 1862, the first land claim placed under these circumstances. There is a curious inconsistency in this historical record: Hodges states that Lucy Beale was married in 1806 to Dr. John Estlin Cooke in Fauquier County, Virginia.⁴⁴ There is no stated record of Lucy Beale divorcing or remarrying in the genealogy. It can as a result be concluded that either the genealogy is incomplete, as one “Thomas J. Beale” is referenced without year or detail in the same genealogy among other Beales of the early 19th century in rural Virginia, many of whom served in other Virginia militias in the War of 1812.⁴⁵ Without a full record of Lucy Beale’s history, it is difficult to ascertain how she ended up with the land in Kansas as a widow of Thomas Jefferson Beale. One thing is certain however: records sourced from the Daughters of the American Revolution record a Thomas Beale, married to Lucy Beale, who fought in the War of 1812 in New Orleans and died in 1818.⁴⁶ If this pair of Thomas and Lucy Beale are the same as included on the land patent, it would seem that chronologically this land could not be connected to the Beale case as Beale himself would have been deceased before he could ever bury the treasure. As a result, while the Fort Scott location should not be dismissed, the primary site of intrigue in regards to the Beale treasure should remain in the Saint Louis area. In fact, much of the history of the Beale party seems to center around Missouri as a whole.

There is an interesting piece of the 1865 land grant issued to Lucy Beale, being the inclusion of John R. Kelso on both the claim and the affiliated 1859 survey plat map (DM ID

⁴³ Bureau of Land Management. “General Land Office Records.” *Patent Details - Blm Glo Records*, U.S. Department of the Interior, <https://glorerecords.blm.gov/details/patent>.

⁴⁴ Hodges, *The Genealogy of the Beale Family (1399-1956)*, 157.

⁴⁵ Hodges, *The Genealogy of the Beale Family (1399-1956)*, 163.

⁴⁶ Viermeister, *The Beale Treasure: New History of a Mystery*, 94-95.

425935). Kelso was a one-term congressman who served from March 1865 to 1867, and additionally served in the Union Army with a variety of Missouri units, eventually becoming a captain in Company M.⁴⁷ Kelso's name, alongside a marked point, is visible in Section 23 of the plat map, just South of a bend in Mill Creek.

An important note on James B. Ward in regard to the Beale relation to Kansas is that he, while clearly a real person who published *The Beale Papers*, does not have much on him in surviving records. An intriguing piece of evidence on the life of Ward, however, was that a legal entity under the name James B. Ward was awarded 160 acres of land in Jewell County, Kansas under the Homestead Act in 1862. In 1863, Ward is known to have published *The Beale Papers* from Virginia, and in 1865 Thomas J. Beale, as mentioned above, is listed in land grant filings in Bourbon County, Kansas, correlating with an earlier grant in 1855 southwest of Ward's claim.⁴⁸ All that is known on this matter is circumstantial, yet a man named James B. Ward did in fact relocate to Kansas under the Homestead Act. It is important not to place more emphasis on this piece of information than is due; however, if this Ward were to be the same one who published *The Beale Papers*, his presence in Kansas would provide greater supporting evidence for the relocation of the Beale party's treasure to the state.

Greater Historical Context to the Treasure

If these two men are indeed the same Thomas J. Beale and James B. Ward, it is clear that the Homestead Act and the ability to claim land in the sparsely populated Kansas territory

⁴⁷ U.S. House of Representatives Archives. "Kelso, John Russell," *US House of Representatives: History, Art & Archives*, <https://history.house.gov/People/Detail/16180>.

⁴⁸ Bureau of Land Management. "General Land Office Records," *Patent Details - Blm Glo Records*, U.S. Department of the Interior, <https://glorerecords.blm.gov/details/patent>.

presented an opportunity for the two men. The Homestead Act of 1862 provided 160 acres of land in any surveyed U.S. territory to any American citizen willing to live on and work the land for at least five years, and was proven loyal to the Union.⁴⁹ This likely reduces the chance that either Beale or Ward were Confederate sympathizers, and that the treasure was related to eventual Confederate gold that was later discussed as a similar mysterious hidden treasure. An oft-repeated claim about the Beale Papers is that they were a cover story for Confederate looting of the Mexican Treasury in 1848.⁵⁰ After all, the pamphlet was circulated after the Civil War. However, if that was the case there would be evidence of large quantities of Mexican coins and currency movements during Reconstruction, which do not appear in any significant context in the historical records. While there was likely no relation between the two treasures, the fact remains that while the land awarded through the Homestead Act was free, the cost of relocation was not. Thus, any homesteader likely had some level of pre-existing wealth, since “the poor population in the East lacked the resources to move west.”⁵¹ The Homestead Act could have allowed Beale and Ward to claim land without attracting attention by using the treasure while maintaining the liquid capital to move everything to land far away from Buford. While this is certainly conjecture, it would explain that while the ciphers appear legitimate and the treasure likely real, while Morriss’ story primarily can be corroborated, no one has yet found Beale’s treasure: it simply is no longer in the vault in Buford, Virginia.

The proximity of the land patent itself to Fort Scott, a commercial hub at the time and catalyst in the violent conflicts in Kansas during the 1850s, should not be ignored in any analysis

⁴⁹ Hannah L. Anderson, “That Settles It: The Debate and Consequences of the Homestead Act of 1862,” *The History Teacher*, vol. 45, no. 1 (2011): 119.

⁵⁰ Viermeister, *The Beale Treasure: New History of a Mystery*, 166.

⁵¹ Anderson, “That Settles It: The Debate and Consequences of the Homestead Act of 1862,” 121.

of the potential for the relocation of the contents of Beale's vault to Bourbon County.⁵² One question that has surrounded the Beale ciphers and their affiliated legend of treasure was why no one had found such a massive treasure trove yet. An admittedly far-fetched possibility would be the relocation of the treasure to the military base Fort Scott. While the Fort itself was slightly outside of the limits of Beale and Kelso's claim, it would offer an explanation for the failure for an accidental discovery of a treasure in the two hundred years since the treasure was allegedly buried. There are no permanent residents at the historical site of the Fort, and the only non-restorative archaeological work on record at the Fort occurred in 1992 when a new underground security system was installed at the site to "determine if cultural features and artifacts are located in the areas of primary impact."⁵³ This survey yielded several points of interest for further research at the site.

Through his survey of the site, Clark determined that nearly all artifacts from the Fort were dated after the Civil War, with the notable exception of a brass butt plate recovered at the HS-6 infantry barracks and a dragoon button recovered at the HS-1 officers' quarters. Sites of further research should likely be directed towards the region surrounding HS-1, HS-2, HS-35, and HS-36 due to the difficulties and questions that arose from Clark's attempts to survey the area. While digging small trench segments between HS-35 and HS-36 to the main trench, Clark encountered "disclosed buried features suggesting a wall or foundation."⁵⁴ While this in and of itself would not be particularly unusual, Clark wrote in his report that there was "no prior record of walls or other buried features in this area."⁵⁵ The four aforementioned zones of interest were

⁵² William E. Connelley, "A Visit to Kansas in 1857," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, vol. 13, no. 4 (1927): 543.

⁵³ Caven P. Clark, "Archeological Investigations at Fort Scott National Historic Site, Bourbon County, Kansas: 1992," *Midwest Archeological Center*, Technical report no. 28 (1993): 1.

⁵⁴ Clark, "Archeological Investigations," 9.

⁵⁵ Clark, "Archeological Investigations," 10.

also notable for the prevalence of unmortared limestone beneath the topsoil, which while not evidence of a vault, is certainly worthy of intrigue.

Enter Newton Hyde Hazelwood of Lynchburg, Virginia to the history of the Beale treasure. A friend of Ward's before the Beale Papers pamphlet went to print, Hazelwood became a Freemason in 1873.⁵⁶ His relevance to the mystery becomes apparent when, in 1897, he asks Clayton Hart (the brother of the George Hart who wrote the comprehensive Department of Defense report) to make copies of a parcel of eight sheets of paper that Hazelwood provided with numbers on them, numbers that slightly differ from those published in the actual Beale Papers pamphlet. Hazelwood told Hart that "the numbers in the pamphlet had been changed to protect those to whom the treasure rightfully belonged."⁵⁷ Hazelwood tried to stop Ward from publishing the pamphlet as he believed the proliferation of the ciphers would be "unfair to the legitimate claimants to the treasure."⁵⁸ While some have said that Hazelwood may have been the true author of the pamphlet given his clear intimate knowledge of the case, it would appear he was nothing more than a bystander who had been enlightened as to the more secret details of the mystery.

Cryptanalytic Work in Regard to the Ciphers

In 1970, Dr. Carl Hammer of Sperry-Univac announced that his team's supercomputer, UNIVAC 1108, had run several analyses on Ciphers 1 and 3 and concluded that the "simulations provide[d] convincing evidence that the signatures are both process and data dependent; they

⁵⁶ Viermeister, *The Beale Treasure: New History of a Mystery*, 152.

⁵⁷ Viermeister, *The Beale Treasure: New History of a Mystery*, 154.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

indicate also very strongly that Mr. Beale's ciphers are for real and that it is merely a matter of time before someone finds the correct source document and locates the right vault.”⁵⁹ Hammer’s discovery proved the groundwork for an even more conclusive study by James Gillogly in 1980. On the first cipher, Gillogly found a “pseudo-alphabetical string in the middle of the code” that came from attempting to solve it with a few versions of the Declaration of Independence.⁶⁰ At the time, Gillogly concluded that it was most likely that this was the code that UNIVAC 1108 had decided was purposeful, and that this “statistical anomaly in [the first cipher] suggests that it may be a hoax.”⁶¹ However, Gillogly offered a second explanation: the first cipher was “buried under a second level of encryption.”⁶² At the time, Hammer disagreed with Gillogly on the first conclusion; given the historical evidence of Thomas Jefferson Beale, it seems likely that the signs of intelligent encryption detected by UNIVAC 1108 were not an anomaly, and in fact were genuine signs of cryptanalytic authenticity since circumstantial historical evidence supports the existence of both a Beale party and a corresponding treasure.

While a clear timeline can be established of the events transpiring in and outside of Buford, Virginia relating to Thomas Jefferson Beale and his mysterious treasure, the validity of the ciphers has repeatedly been called into question ever since the publication of *The Beale Papers*. A common refrain by those who doubt the validity of the Beale ciphers and the legend as a whole is that Thomas Beale and his treasure was a hoax. Oftentimes, the detractors of the legend’s validity point to the Freemasons as the origin for this alleged hoax. At face value, the argument makes sense: the Freemasons used the tale of the Beale treasure to generate an

⁵⁹ Carl W. Hammer, “Signature Simulation and Certain Cryptographic Codes,” *Communications of the ACM*, vol. 14, no. 1 (1971): 3–14

⁶⁰ James J. Gillogly, “The Beale Cipher: A Dissenting Opinion,” *Cryptologia*, vol. 4, no. 2 (1980): 116.

⁶¹ Gillogly, “The Beale Cipher: A Dissenting Opinion,” 118.

⁶² *Ibid.*

“allegory of the secret vault, a legendary subterranean depository of lost secrets,”⁶³ a theme common in many Masonic allegories. The only question remaining if this conclusion is drawn from the evidence surrounding the Homestead Act and land claims in these men’s names: why was the legend perpetuated? If the Beale treasure truly was published and popularized by the Freemasons, the claim that the story was an allegory for the corrupting and all-consuming effects of greed, and as treasure hunter Brian Ford later described the legend, a lesson taught “not just by stating it but by having the reader pursue or be tempted to pursue an illusion.”⁶⁴ There is evidence that the Freemasons were, at least to a certain extent, involved in the legend: in addition to Weightman as previously mentioned, James B. Ward, the man who published *The Beale Papers*, was a Mason at the Masonic Grand Lodge of Virginia, and various portions of Beale explanatory letter and *The Beale Papers* uses common Masonic phrases.⁶⁵ In 1973, *Gold in the Blue Ridge* was published, which claimed that “Thomas Jefferson Beale was a third degree Mason of the Scottish rite and the secret of the codes can only be discovered by another Mason.”⁶⁶ This is an interesting idea: could it be that the Freemasons, a secretive society that has existed for centuries, did not fabricate the tale and rather has protected the keys to the ciphers since 1822? This claim is difficult to substantiate not because of implausibility but because Masonic membership is not published by Masonic lodges, and Beale’s membership could not be authenticated.

If the Beale ciphers were fraudulent, as some have claimed, there would likely be a random distribution of numbers in the form of the two unsolved ciphers. However, that is not the

⁶³ Nickell, “Discovered: The Secret of Beale’s Treasure,” 324.

⁶⁴ Denver Michaels, *Strange Tales from Virginia's Mountains : The Norton Woodbooger the Missing Beale Treasure the Ghost Town of Lignite and More* (Charleston SC: History Press, 2021), 100.

⁶⁵ Nickell, “Discovered: The Secret of Beale’s Treasure,” 316.

⁶⁶ Pauline B. Innis, and Walter Dean Innis. *Gold in the Blue Ridge: The True Story of the Beale Treasure* (Devon Pub. Co., 1973), 321.

case. The second Beale cipher was solved using a version of the Declaration of Independence, by searching for a key compatible with an encoding method that “employs a specified document whose words are simply numbered consecutively, and first letters of these words are sought out at random to match the letters of the cleartext or message.”⁶⁷ Critics of the solution often point to the hundreds of different versions of the Declaration of Independence as proof of an elaborate hoax meant to ensnare treasure hunters. However, it seems more likely that Ward simply knew the key to the second cipher, and this in and of itself is a suspect fact, as Ward’s knowledge of the cipher was probably not random or accidental. In his 1964 report to the Department of Defense, George Hart surmised that the “stumbling of a novice upon a method of [breaking the ciphers] lies rather beyond the range of possibility, and the conviction follows that they were in possession of the key of not only [cipher] No. 2 but also of No. 1 and No. 3,” a conclusion that would likely mean that the “treasure referred to has long since been removed and converted.”⁶⁸ In essence, it is possible that Ward had access to all three keys, publishing only the solution to the second cipher and moving the treasure from its resting place in secret.

It is difficult to guess the correct key to either of the remaining ciphers using historical clues as there are seemingly infinite variations of source texts to choose from. In developing a theory for the different possibilities, however, it would appear that any potential key to either cipher could not have been published after 1821. In evaluating the qualities of the only known key, that being the key to the second cipher— a version of the Declaration of Independence— it would be safe to assume that the other key texts would be widely circulated and culturally significant to patriot-affiliated groups. Looking across political, religious, and fraternal

⁶⁷ Hammer, “Signature Simulation and Certain Cryptographic Codes,” 3–14.

⁶⁸ Hart, “The Beale Papers,” 8.

organizational affiliations of early American society, the keys would likely be Protestant theological texts, Masonic or otherwise significant fraternal order texts, or political treatises by founding members of American philosophy and politics.

The only widely circulated Bibles in the United States at the time, the Tyndale Bible, is not a key to either cipher, begging the question asked by Gillogly: are the first and third ciphers buried under a second layer of encryption?⁶⁹ The Tyndale Bible specifically is known as one of the first Protestant Bibles translated into English, and after the Reformation the transitory Bible from Lollardy to contemporary Protestantism.⁷⁰ That combined with the fact that it was consistent in publication and text included in circulation, it would seem a prime candidate for a significant text to serve as a key for one of the remaining unsolved ciphers. The fact that it is not a solution for either presents one of three possible explanations: the remaining keys are not religiously-based texts, one or both of the remaining ciphers are buried under a second layer of encryption as suggested by Gillogly, or the ciphers themselves are a hoax as alleged by some prior scholars. All three of these explanations have basis, and as such it is difficult to ascertain the solution to the mystery of the Beale ciphers via a cryptanalytic analysis. As it would be, if the United States intelligence community is unable to solve the ciphers using advanced technology and methods in codebreaking, the only plausible manner in which research could discover the location of the alleged treasure would be to apply historiographical methods.⁷¹

The use of the Declaration of Independence as the key for the second cipher, alongside the pervasive theme of Thomas Jefferson's life and legacy throughout the mystery of the Beale ciphers, makes a compelling argument for the other two ciphers being Jeffersonian in nature as

⁶⁹ Gillogly, "The Beale Cipher: A Dissenting Opinion," 116-119.

⁷⁰ Su Fang Ng. "Translation, Interpretation, and Heresy: The Wycliffite Bible, Tyndale's Bible, and the Contested Origin." *Studies in Philology* 98, no. 3 (200): 317.

⁷¹ Nelson, "Historical and Analytical Studies in Relation to the Beale Ciphers."

well.⁷² If that is the case, it may not make a difference: that initial usage of the Declaration of Independence as a key depends on a typo and multiple numbering errors. If those problems were pervasive in the other two ciphers, it would be nearly impossible to solve from a cryptanalytic perspective even with the other two keys. As a result, the only manner in which the mystery of the Beale ciphers can be solved is through historiographical and archaeological analysis and exploration.

Conclusion

An array of conclusions can be drawn from the legend of Thomas Beale's treasure, and indeed, many have. Thomas Beale can authentically be traced in small portions of his life throughout the United States, from Saint Louis to Virginia and even possibly to Kansas. While the mystery and lack of information surrounding the ciphers makes it difficult to reach an indisputable conclusion, it is clear that the treasure no longer lies in Virginia, the ciphers cannot be broken by cryptanalytic methods, and that Hancock, Risque, Strother, and Weightman are crucial figures in understanding the mystery regardless of whether they were members of the Beale party or not. Beale's treasure may or may not lie in northeastern Kansas or the Saint Louis area, but it seems convincing that if the treasure is real, it lies somewhere other than western Virginia. The treasure that has eluded generations of amateur and professional treasure hunters was not necessarily a hoax or an allegory fabricated solely to push Masonic ideologies, and while it may possibly have been influenced by Masonic thought or individual Freemasons, the legend of Thomas Beale appears primarily plausible. Further research should specifically focus on the

⁷² Viermeister, *The Beale Treasure: New History of a Mystery*, 50.

Bourbon County, Kansas site outside of Fort Scott, particularly on the site in Section 23 of the 1859 survey plat map of Beale and Kelso's land patent and on Lucy Beale's relation to Thomas Beale, particularly focusing on the history of the family and land between 1821 and 1859. In addition to the land in Fort Scott, there is a possible connection to the Beale party in land purchased by George F. Strother in Missouri between 1824 and 1839. There are a variety of names connected to those land patents, and thus it is important to research further the possibility of George F. Strother and Roger C. Weightman being members of the Beale party, particularly given their affiliations, circumstantial evidence, and connection to land in Saint Louis around the time of the Beale expedition. In addition, Judy Hancock's life, as well as that of James Risque, seems pertinent to future conclusions and understandings of the case of the Beale ciphers. To conclude, Beale's treasure is most likely real and relocated, although all proof is circumstantial, and its discovery would bear outsized significance in both historical research, cryptography, and the field of American studies.

About the author

Simon Rosenbaum is a sophomore in the College of Arts and Sciences at Vanderbilt University double majoring in American Studies and History, with minors in Sociology and Jewish Studies. His historical interests and independent research surround United States history and political history, particularly the Reconstruction Era and the Gilded Age. He began researching the history of the Beale ciphers as an independent project and wrote much of the article while in Dr. Jacob Sauer's writing seminar on Pseudoarchaeology. Outside of historical research, his interests focus on international relations and national security studies.

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