

Bio: Benjamin Fletcher
by Pamela Hutchison Garrett, 2015

Benjamin Fletcher served as the English Governor of New York from 1692 to 1698. Among many things, his administration saw his meeting with the 'Sachems of the Five Nations', the building of Trinity Church, and the establishment of the first printing press in the colony. At the close of his New World service, he left office amid questions about his extravagant land grants, and associations with pirates. This brief biography focuses primarily on the personal life of Benjamin Fletcher – his home, family, and friends. For years I have sought an answer to the question – How is Benjamin Fletcher related to my 8xgreat-grandfather, Peter Mathews? To date, I have not come up with a satisfying answer to that question, but evidences of their connectedness continue to grow.
Pamela Hutchison Garrett, July 2015

Benjamin Fletcher was christened at the church of St Lawrence Jewry in London on the 14th of May 1640. He was the second born son of William Fletcher and Abigail Vincent, who had married in 1634. His father, William Fletcher was a freeman of the Worshipful Company of Clothiers (Haberdashers) in London, and was noted as a linen draper. He was also among the Irish Adventurers who invested in the brewing wars in Ireland. In 1643, as the conflict between the Royalists and the Parliamentarians was heating up, the Earl of Essex (Parliamentarian) called out the London Militia to assist the besieged city of Gloucester. William Fletcher heeded the call, and family sources tell us he was “slain before Gloucester”. See more of his story in the article entitled, The Death of William Fletcher at Gloucester, found at the Markham of Chesterfield Blog.



Stamp of Ben Fletcher

Benjamin Fletcher was probably about age five when his father died. It is not certain whether he had any living siblings at the time of his father's death. There is some question as to whether his older brother, William Fletcher, died in childhood. His mother, Abigail Vincent Fletcher, was secondly married to Christopher Webster, merchant tailor of London, sometime between 1643 and 1652. More specifically, evidence suggests that she remained a widow for several years before remarrying about 1650, when she was around the age of thirty-six. Whether she had children with Webster is unknown. Benjamin Fletcher may have been about age ten or eleven when he gained a step-father.

Nothing is known about Benjamin Fletcher's childhood years with his mother, or whether he lived in the home of his step-father Christopher Webster, outside London. In 1653, when Benjamin Fletcher was about fourteen years of age, his step-father gave a statement related to William Fletcher's investment in the "Irish Adventure":

19 Jul 1653; Deposition by Christopher Webster, of Beckingham, in Kent, gentleman, aet 36 or thereabouts. He well knew Wm Flesher, of London, "linen draper", deceased, and Benjamin Flesher is his eldest son and heir. His father made no assignment by will of his Irish adventure. Signed, certified and dated by Robt Aylett.

A few months later, in 1654, Christopher Webster wrote to Jarvis Fibbrand (Fairbane), "I beg you, when you hear my son-in-law [step-son], Benjamin Flesher, called, to draw for him for a barony in Westmeath". Benjamin Fletcher did benefit from his father's Irish investment, and received land in county Westmeath in Ireland. He would later refer to it as his "small patrimony of land". It is of interest that the 1659 Census of Ireland shows, "Christopher Webster and James Dillon, gentleman; Kilkenny Barrony, Lowe Baskin Townland, Dromraney Parish, County Westmeath." It is doubtful that Christopher Webster ever lived in Ireland. He continues to be taxed in county Kent, England. But, Benjamin Fletcher did remove to Ireland and, many years later, his son Benjamin Fletcher jr, is identified as being of Low Bashir (Lowe Baskin). This is possibly the same property shown for Christopher Webster in the 1659 census.

No records have been found to identify Benjamin Fletcher's education. He was, without question, literate. He achieved high rank in the military, and was eventually appointed by the King to serve as colonial governor of New York. It is likely that he had some academic preparation for these tasks.

Toward the close of Benjamin Fletcher's life he found himself an avowed enemy of Richard Coote, Lord Bellomont, who replaced him as New York Governor. Bellomont, in a critical attack, outlined Fletcher's climb to the governorship of New York:

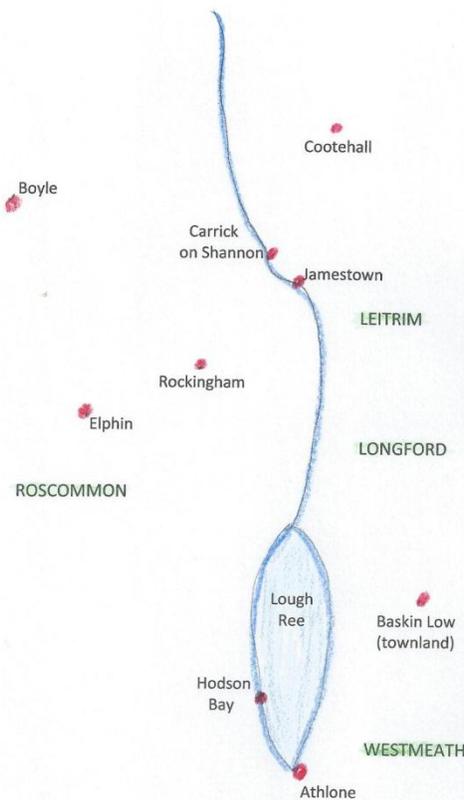
... he was only a poor Tory commoner who had been "an under-actor on a stage in Dublin," advanced to be a barber or valet de chambre to an Irish lord, afterward a cornet of horse, then captain of foot, and finally major in Colonel Beaumont's regiment, which was a laughingstock and not worthy of the name of regiment.

It would be a delightful compliment to Benjamin Fletcher's story to know more of his time on the Dublin stage, and his experience as a valet, but no documentation has been found. Records suggest that Fletcher chose the military life as a young man, and served for almost twenty-five years, primarily in Ireland. No evidence has been found of occupation beyond the military.

From 1663-1685 he served in the forces under the Duke of Ormonde, rising from cornet to captain. When the Irish army was reorganized by James II, he with other Protestant officers, transferred to England and joined the Princess Anne of Denmark's Regiment of Foot, a regiment noted for its Protestant spirit. During the campaigns in Ireland of William III, in which his "small patrimony of an adventure" was destroyed, Fletcher distinguished himself and, recommended by such powerful patrons as the Earl of Athlone, Sir Robert Southwell and William Blathwayt, was the King's own choice to direct the war in New York.

[source] Dictionary of American Biography; Vol 11, sup 1-2; Bio of Benjamin Fletcher.

During his years of military service in Ireland, Benjamin Fletcher met and married Elizabeth Hodson, daughter of John Hodson and Abigail Madden. John Hodson, a priest of the Church of England (Ireland), probably served several Irish parishes before being appointed Dean of Clogher (near Enniskillen) in 1661, and then Bishop of the Diocese of Elphin in 1667, a position he held for almost twenty years. Benjamin Fletcher was among the overseers of the estate of John Hodson, when he died in 1685. Elizabeth Hodson was probably born in Ireland between 1640 and 1650, and Fletcher and Hodson likely married around the year 1670, when Benjamin Fletcher was in his late 20s or early 30s.



**Fletcher and Mathews Families
Points of Interest in North-Central Ireland**

It is unknown where Benjamin Fletcher and Elizabeth Hodson first took up residence. As a Captain in the Lifeguard of Horse, an appointment he received in 1665, they may have had the opportunity to reside on his property in county Westmeath. A small scattering of records between 1665-1685, suggest that he was primarily “stationed” at the fort at Jamestown. Note has been made of three children born to Benjamin Fletcher and Elizabeth Hodson, who were living at the time of Benjamin Fletcher’s death – Benjamin Fletcher jr, Vincentia Fletcher, and Catherine (Ratham) Fletcher. It is not known whether they had other children who died in childhood.

In Oct 1689, when Benjamin Fletcher was in his early fifties, he was noted as Major, under John Beaumont, in the Princess Anne of Denmark’s Regiment of Foot. About eighteen months later, in March of 1691, we come across our first record of association between Benjamin Fletcher and Peter Mathews:

24 March 1691; Whitehall; Commissions . . . for Francis Napper, gent, to be lieutenant of that company whereof Lieutenant-Colonel Benjamin Fletcher is captain in the regiment of foot commanded by Colonel John Beaumont; for John Fairbrother, gent, to be ensign in the same regiment; for Peter Mathews, gent, to be quarter-master in the same regiment; and for Leonard Lloyd gent, to be adjutant in the same regiment.

During the Irish struggles of 1689 - 1692, Fletcher distinguished himself in military service. His "Princess Anne" regiment saw action at the siege of Carrickfurgus (1689), the Battle of Boyne (1690), and the sieges of Cork, Kinsale, and Limerick (all 1690). This disruptive period resulted in the destruction of Fletcher's property in county Westmeath. It was not long after, in March of 1692, that the English King William appointed Col Benjamin Fletcher to the position of Governor in the New York colony. His bio in the Dictionary of American Biography tells us:

It was thus with the reputation of a "very assiduous" officer, a zealous Protestant who had suffered for his faith, and a defender of "free and property principles," but also a refugee and "necessitous man" desirous to recoup his fortunes, that he came to New York.

At the time of Benjamin Fletcher's New York appointment, we again find his name coupled with Peter Mathews:

. . . for Colonel Benjamin Fletcher to be captain of the company of foot, in New York, of which Colonel Henry Slaughter was late captain; for Peter Matthews, gent, to be Lt of the company of foot in New York of which Col Benjamin Fletcher is Captain . . .

Benjamin Fletcher and Peter Mathews went on to several years of service together in New York, Fletcher making rising appointments and generous grants to Mathews. There are a number of evidences of a family relationship between Benjamin Fletcher and Peter Mathews, one of the more revealing being a comment made by Richard Coote, Lord Bellomont, in speaking of Peter Mathews, "He was bred up from a child with Col Fletcher." It seems most likely that Peter Mathews is a nephew, or possibly younger cousin, of Benjamin Fletcher. In this database see the feature article titled, [Peter Mathews and Benjamin Fletcher – What's the Connection?](#)

Benjamin Fletcher arrived in New York on the 29th of August 1692, and the following day announced his appointment as Governor. In a letter written to the Board of Trade years later, he mentions, "going with my wife, children and family to so remote a part . . ." It has not been determined when the Fletcher children were born, but several things suggest that they were teenagers, or perhaps young unmarried adults, during the years their father served in New York (1692-1698). The Fletcher family set up housekeeping at the Governor's mansion within Fort William. "His luxuriously appointed residence in the fort, staffed by nineteen servants, was the talk of the town." (New York City Mayors, Caliendo, 2010)

The pictures painted of Gov Benjamin Fletcher by biographers and "storytellers" color him in different ways; from pious churchman to extravagant profligate. He was a devout supporter of the Church of England, and was instrumental in the founding of New York's Trinity Church. He established good relationships with many of New York's early Dutch families. According to the records of the Dutch Church in New York City, Benjamin Fletcher and his wife Elizabeth stood as Godparents for Corsen, VanCourtland and DePeyster children. But, there can be little doubt that he took advantage of his position of power, to live elegantly, and to further himself and his friends financially.

One of the more "romantic" pictures of Benjamin Fletcher centers around his association with "pirates". He was known to accept bribes for their protection, and was sometimes referred to as "friend of the pirate". It is not clear what his relationship was with the infamous Thomas Tew, but stories are told of Tew lavishing jewels upon the governor's wife and daughters, and in return, Tew's own wife and daughters attending the governor's elegant parties in rich silks and diamonds. (Pirates by Jan Rogozinski; What Price Wall Street by Forrest Davis, 1932)



**Thomas Tew and Benjamin Fletcher
by Howard Pyle**

After five-plus years of service in New York, cries were raised against Governor Fletcher, and he was recalled to England in April 1698. His family accompanied him home to England, and he set about to defend himself against the charges of his successor, Richard Coote, Lord Bellomont. William Blathwayt was a faithful defender of Benjamin Fletcher, and interesting details of the charges brought against Fletcher, and the subsequent clearing of him from most, appear in the William Blathwayt book referenced below.

Six months after the Fletcher family returned to England, Elizabeth Hodson Fletcher died. There is a monument to her memory in St James Church, London; *“A Monument for Elizabeth, Wife of Colonel Ben. Fletcher, late Captain General, and Governor in Chief of his Majesties Province of New York in America, and Daughter of Dr. John Hodson, Lord Bishop of Elphin in Ireland, 1698.”*

Sometime after Elizabeth Fletcher’s death, Benjamin Fletcher and his children returned to Ireland. Despite his rich dealings in New York, Fletcher seems to have struggled in the last years of his life to make ends meet. He was past the age of sixty when he returned to Ireland. He may have set about to restore his property in county Westmeath. An unidentified source records his death:

Coll Benjamin Fletcher, Late governr of New York, died at Rokingham, near Boyle [county Roscommon Ireland], on 28 May, between 6 and 7 of ye clock 1703.

Fortunately a brief abstract of the Will of Benjamin Fletcher of Dublin, Ireland, appears in Bethem’s Abstracts. Bethem tells us that the Will was dated 30 October 1701, and recorded in 1703. It includes a sketch of his Coat of Arms, and mentions his three children, Vincentia Fletcher, Ratham (Catherine) Fletcher and Benjamin Fletcher; also his estate in county Louth, Ireland. The identity of the “estate in county Louth” is uncertain.

Only one minor record of Vincentia Fletcher has surfaced for the period after her father’s death. It is unknown if she married or had descendants. Catherine Fletcher married Rev William Piers and raised her family in the area around Lowe Baskin, county Westmeath, where her father’s “small patrimony” resided. It is not known if Benjamin Fletcher jr married, or had descendants, but in the records of the College of Arms he is recorded as being of Low Bashir, county Westmeath. Indications are that Low Bashir is the same as Lowe Baskin.

Closing note: Several of the references in this biography of Benjamin Fletcher appear on his Timeline of Records, found in this database. Further details on sources are given there.

Do you want to know more?

[Link to Benjamin Fletcher](#)

[Timeline of Records: Benjamin Fletcher](#)

[Bio: Benjamin Fletcher from the Dictionary of American Biography](#)

[Sketch: The Princess Anne Regiment of Foot 1685 – 1692](#)

[Peter Mathews and Benjamin Fletcher – What’s the Connection?](#) (Feature Article)

[Sketch: Our Colonial Governor – Three Theories](#)

[Sketch: Fort George – Protecting Colonial New York](#)

[Sketch: Pirates in the family](#)

Further Reading:

- [William Blathwayt, a late seventeenth century English administrator](#); Gertrude Ann Jacobsen; Yale University Press, 1932.
- New York City Mayors, Vol 1; Ralph J. Caliendo; Xlibris 2010.
- Pirates! Brigands, Buccaneers, And Privateers In Fact, Fiction, And Legend; Jan Rogozinski, 1996.
- What Price Wall Street; Forrest Davis, 1932.
- War, Finance and Faction in Colonial New York and Administration of Benjamin Fletcher 1692-1698; James Shenstone Leamon, 1961 thesis from Brown University; University Microfilms, 1979.
- Governor Fletcher’s Recall; James S Leamon, 1963; published in the William and Mary Quarterly, third series, 20, 1963.
- Pirates, Merchants, Settlers, and Slaves: Making an Indo-Atlantic Trade World, 1640—1730; Kevin P McDonald; dissertation published by ProQuest in 2008; available online.

Photo credits:

- Stamp belonging to Benjamin Fletcher (1640-1703), from the British Armorial Binding database, “under the sponsorship of The Bibliographical Society of London in conjunction with the University of Toronto Library”. It demonstrates the Fletcher Arms (A cross flory between four escallops), and Crest (An arm in armour embowed holding a spear in fess Helmet of an Esquire).
https://armorial.library.utoronto.ca/stamps/FLE002_s1
- Fletcher and Mathews Families Map; a rough sketch map prepared by Pamela Hutchison Garrett, 2015.
- Thomas Tew and Benjamin Fletcher, a drawing by Howard Pyle.