

## Sketch: Athlone Ireland 1690-1691

By Pamela Hutchison Garrett, January 2016

*My 8xgreat grandfather, Peter Mathews, was a soldier in Ireland before immigrating to America in 1692. My search for his ancestors has invited me to take a hard look at a man named Benfletcher Mathews. On the 7th of April 1691 Benfletcher Mathews was buried at St Michan Church in the city of Dublin, Ireland. In the burial records of the church a small notation rests beside his name – “who was driven out of Athlone”. This sketch sets about to discover what event might have driven Benfletcher Mathews from the town.*

I begin this sketch with several assumptions which may, or may not be true. First, that Benfletcher Mathews was a Protestant occupant of the town of Athlone in county Leitrim Ireland, around the year 1690. Second, that Benfletcher Mathews is related to my 8xgreat-grandfather Peter Mathews – possibly his father, brother, or cousin. Research on my Mathews grandfather indicates that he was a military man throughout his life. In 1691, Peter Mathews and his likely kinsman, Benjamin Fletcher, were serving in the Princess Anne of Denmark Regiment, stationed in counties surrounding Athlone.

So, I have asked myself the questions – Was Benfletcher Mathews a member of the garrison at Athlone in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century? –Or, was he a merchant or man of business in the town of Athlone? To date, I have found no records placing a person by the name Mathews in Athlone in that time period.

When James II came to the English throne in 1687 he began to strengthen the position of Catholics in England, Scotland, and Ireland. Among the Irish Protestants this was a cause for worry. Benjamin Fletcher, and his brother-in-law Daniel Hodson lived outside of Athlone, in the adjoining county of Roscommon. They were among the Protestant “traitors” who were named in King James 1687 Bill of Attainder, and they stood to lose their property, and even their lives. In 1688, when James II’s Protestant son-in-law William was called to the throne, tensions rose, and the Jacobite (Catholic) – Williamite (Protestant) conflict reigned in Ireland for several years.

As a part of that conflict, two sieges were raised against the town of Athlone in July 1690 and July 1691. It is the first siege that may bare relation to Benfletcher Mathews. By the time of the second siege, he was already dead.

Athlone, in the year 1690, was a divided town. The English settlers were established on the east bank of the river Shannon, while the Irish resided on the west bank. Was Benfletcher Mathews a member of the English community at Athlone?



**The Siege of Athlone 1691, by Victor Ambrus\***

In John Frederick Finerty's, "The People's History of Ireland" (1907), he tells the Siege story this way:

*William's first attempt was made against Athlone, which is the most central fortified place in Ireland, situated masterfully on the river Shannon, the commerce of which it commands for many miles. The garrison was commanded by an aged veteran of the Confederate war, Colonel Richard Grace, to whom fear was unknown. General Douglas, with 12,000 men and a fine battering train, including several mortars, was detached from the Williamite army at Dublin to attack the town. He appeared before it on July 17, and sent an offensive message for immediate surrender to the governor. Colonel Grace discharged a pistol over the head of the startled envoy, and said: "That is my answer!" The siege began when the messenger returned. Athlone, divided by the Shannon, is partly in Westmeath and partly in Roscommon. The latter portion alone was defensible. Colonel Grace abandoned the Leinster side, called "Englishtown," after leveling the works. He also destroyed the bridge, thus confining himself to "Irishtown," where still stands the strong castle. Douglas bombarded it furiously. Grace responded fiercely and honors were about even, when news arrived in the English camp that Sarsfield, at the head of a powerful Irish force, was en route from Limerick to raise the siege. For seven days the English general rained balls and bombshells on Athlone, but, on the seventh day, the indomitable Grace hung out a red flag on the castle, to indicate that the fight was to be to a finish, and that quarter would be neither taken nor given. The English doubled*

*their efforts to subdue the place, but made no impression. Finally Douglas, in abject fear of Sarsfield, raised the siege and left the town amid the cheers of the defenders of the Connaught side. The garrison and people gave Governor Grace an ovation, which, indeed, no warrior, young or old, better deserved.*

Did Benfletcher Mathews flee Athlone when Col Grace abandoned the Englishtown and leveled the works?

In another account, Harman Murtagh's "The Siege of Athlone 1690", we learn:

*Grace had apparently decided that the Leinster side of Athlone was untenable . . . The day before the Williamites arrived, he burned and evacuated the Englishtown and withdrew across the river into Connaught.*

*[following the siege] One group particularly affected by Douglas's retreat were the Protestants of the area. Previously, they had had the benefit of protection from the Irish but their friendship for the besiegers compromised their position and many chose to abandon their homes and harvests and retreat with the Williamites, by whom they were 'hardly used.'*

The burial of Benfletcher Mathews at the Dublin church followed almost nine months after the first Siege of Athlone. The suggestion that he might have been "driven out of Athlone" as a result of the siege is, at this point, no more than an idea to consider. But, it does open up interesting possibilities.

Do you want to know more?

[Link to Benfletcher Mathews in database](#)

Further Reading:

- Vicissitudes of a Garrison Town – Athlone at the End of the Seventeenth Century; Harman Murtagh; as published in the Journal of the Old Athlone Society; Vol 1, No 1, 1969.
- The Siege of Athlone 1690; Harman Murtagh; as published in the Journal of the Old Athlone Society.
- Athlone in the Seventeenth Century, Rev Professor Stokes; as published in the Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland, 1892.

\*About the illustration:

Victor Ambrus is a celebrated British historical illustrator. Within his prolific body of work are numerous battlefield illustrations, including this scene of the 1691 Siege of Athlone. See his 2012 book, "Battlefield panoramas - from the siege of Troy to D-Day". He made a major contribution to the reopening of Athlone Castle in 2012, with his large scale illustrations that "bring the stories and characters of Athlone to life". Consider a visit to the [Athlone Castle Museum](#).