

## **Bio: Benjamin Fletcher from the Dictionary of American Biography**

*From the Dictionary of American Biography, Volume 21; Dumas Malone, Harris Elwood Starr; C. Scribner's Sons, 1944; beginning at page 315; article written by Helen C Boatfield.*

FLETCHER, BENJAMIN (d. May 28, 1703), soldier, colonial governor, was the son of William Fletcher and his wife Abigail Vincent, of the parish of St. Lawrence Jewry, London, perhaps the Benjamin Fletcher baptized in that church May 14, 1640 (Burke, post, pp. 361-62; The Publications of the Harleian Society, LXX, 1940, 48). William Fletcher was killed at Gloucester in 1643. His son, according to a hostile source, made his way as an actor in Dublin and as a barber to an Irish lord (Jacobsen, post, p. 313). From 1663 to 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. He was commissioned governor of that province in March 1692; shortly after, Pennsylvania was added to his commission (for a two-year period), and he was given the command of the Connecticut militia. 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.

Arriving in New York on Aug. 30, 1692, Fletcher found "a divided contentious impoverished people," but he was confident that, disunion and poverty overcome, the "Noble Colonies of British" would soon drive the "handfull of Vermin" in Canada into the sea (Documents, post, III, 846, 856). He soon found, however, that merely to maintain the frontier defenses taxed all his efforts. His celerity in visiting the exposed posts at Albany and Schenectady impressed the Indians and won thanks from the Assembly, but adequate supplies of men and troops from the colonial and the home governments were slow to come. The additional regiments sent from England, recruited from Newgate and badly paid, were always deserting in a country where the spade was better paid than the sword and the people ready to shield fugitives. New York felt itself too heavily taxed for its neighbors' defense; Connecticut and Pennsylvania were tenacious of their charter rights and, irritated by lectures on their evasiveness, were reluctant to meet demands; and more distant colonies were as backward in furnishing their quotas. Fletcher's pleas and complaints could only impress the English authorities with the necessity for the unified control he urged, not with his own efficiency. Probably no governor could have soothed the factional struggle or restrained the illegal trade that flourished in New York. Fletcher did, as directed, discharge the Leislerian leaders from formal proceedings, but he was disposed to look hardly upon the party of the dead "rebell" and allied himself with the conservatives, Nicholas Bayard, William Nicolls, and others, who dominated the Council. Their profits in evasion of the trade laws and the grants of landed estates were shared by the governor. Naturally, though he

conceded the “privileges of Englishmen and Magna Charta,” he had little sympathy for colonial self-government as shown by “those Republicans” of Connecticut, or for the New York Assembly’s “contention for superior right of Government.” Despite angry rebukes and dissolutions—Fletcher had not “Studied much the art of cajoling an assembly” (Collections of the New York Historical Society, post, II, 205)— that body was able to assert its power to limit revenue grants to a fixed term, inspect accounts, and print its proceedings. Two benefits he did bestow on the colony. He brought William Bradford from his Philadelphia prison and set him up as royal printer (Bulletin of the New York Public Library, January 1928), and, a devout Anglican himself, he obtained a grant for the settlement of a Protestant ministry and was a liberal benefactor to Trinity Church, the charter of which he signed in 1697. Complaints of Fletcher’s rule were carried to London and found a ready hearing by Whig opponents of the Tory administration. Robert Livingston, seeking payment of his claims, the Leislerians out for restoration of property, William Penn and Fitz-John Winthrop, appearing for their colonies, arrayed themselves against him. They presented full accounts of interference in elections and arbitrary treatment of opponents, of mishandled military funds and acceptance of bribes, and, most serious, of excessive land grants and protection to pirates. His recall was asked “gently or in disgrace, if we be rid of him” (Documents, IV, 224). The Board of Trade, deciding for unified control in 1697, appointed Richard Coote, Earl of Bellomont already selected for governor of Massachusetts, as governor of New York, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire.

Bellomont, reaching his post in April 1698, sent his predecessor home under heavy bond and began a thorough search into his delinquencies. For a time Fletcher worried his accuser by sending back reports of his high favor at court and probable return. But the investigation by the Board, based on Bellomont’s voluminous and often exaggerated reports, resulted in his being censured for laxity in enforcing the laws against pirates and his excessive land grants. The attorney-general was ordered to bring prosecution in the Exchequer (Narcissus Luttrell, *A Brief Historical Relation of State Affairs*, 1857, IV, 521), but whether by influence of his patrons or delay, Fletcher seems to have escaped action. In 1702 he was petitioning for his military pay to save him from ruin. The next year he died in Ireland, near Boyle. His wife, Elizabeth, daughter of Dr. John Hodson, bishop of Elphin, Ireland, died in 1698, leaving a son, Benjamin, and two daughters.

Boatfield’s References –

Fletcher's official career is covered in:

O’Callaghan, *Docs. Relative to the Colonial History of the State of N. Y.*, vols. III–IV (1853-54)

*Calendar of State Papers, Colonial Series, America and West Indies, 1689-1699*

*Calendar of Treasury Papers, 1702-1707* (1874)

For his military career:

*The MSS. of the Marquis of Ormonde, Vols. I–II,*

*Hist. MSS. Commission, 14th Rept., App., Pt. VII* (1895-99)

Dalton, *English Army Lists and Commission Registers, 1661–1714*, vols. 11–111 (1894-96)

Cannon, *Hist. Records of the British Army: the Eighth, or the King’s Regiment of Foot* (1847)

Family information is found in:

Burke, *The General Armory of England, Scotland, Ireland, and Wales* (1884)

Hatton, *A New View of London* (1708), I, 299

O'Hart, *The Irish and Anglo-Irish Landed Gentry, When Cromwell Came to Ireland* (1884)

See also:

Davis, "The Administration of Benjamin Fletcher in New York," *Quart. Jour. N. Y. State- Hist. Asso.*, Oct. 1921

Osgood, *The Am. Colonies in the Eighteenth Century* (1924), vols. I–11

Jacobsen, *Wm. Blathwayt* (1932)

Smith, *The Hist. of the Late Province of N. Y.* (1829)

*N. Y. Hist. Soc. Colls., Pub. Fund Ser., vols. I, II* (1868, 1870).]

### **A follow-up comment by Pam Garrett –**

I have long been curious about the statement made in the first paragraph of Helen Boatfield's biography of Benjamin Fletcher, "His son [Benjamin Fletcher], according to a hostile source, made his way as an actor in Dublin and as a barber to an Irish lord (Jacobsen, post, p. 313)." I was recently able to locate the Jacobsen book referred to, and read the expanded version of this comment:

*Many of the charges which were made against Fletcher were unquestionably true. He had connived at piracy, he had made criminally extravagant grants of land, and he had disported himself in a ridiculous fashion, what with his coach and six and his pompous boasting of "his great interest and credit at Whitehall, which would baffle any complaints against his administration." The truth is, that while he did possess the military skill with which Blathwayt credited him, he was an exceedingly poor civil governor. Bellomont, with his fairly high social standing both in England and in Ireland, and his strong Whig propensities, could dismiss Fletcher socially with the scornful comment that 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.*

[source] William Blathwayt, a late seventeenth century English administrator, by Gertrude Ann Jacobsen; Yale University Press, 1932.

There is further discussion of the relationship between William Blathwayt and Benjamin Fletcher in Jacobsen's book. Portions of the book are available online through Hathi Trust, and might prove of interest.

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