

PUBLIC ARCHIVES OF CANADA
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LESTER, BENJAMIN AND COMPANY

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[microfilm, reel A-574]

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History of the firm of Benjamin Lester and Company

Selections from the papers of Benjamin Lester & Company, and members of the Lester and Garland families, were microfilmed in 1962 from originals then in the possession of Rev. George H. Lester-Garland of Bath, England, and now in the Dorset County Record Office. The following history of the family provides some indication of the records which survived but were not copied as well as information about the selections filmed.

The family of Lester was an old established family of Poole, but the first of the line with whom these papers are concerned was Francis Lester (1668-1738), son of John and Martha Lester. Francis had a large family, of which Benjamin seems to have been the youngest. Amongst the children were Francis, who was sent to Lisbon at a very early age as an apprentice in the firm of Lewin, wine merchants, and Abraham who was cut off with a shilling in Francis' will, "unless he return to his duty". There is no record of Abraham's fate, but Francis became a Jesuit, much to his parents' grief, and died in Portugal. A ring of his survives, made apparently from copper and in the form of a crucifix. The following letter from Francis to Francis, dated 8 August 1722, is not without interest from the light it sheds on the personalities of both and the home background.

"Dear Child. This comes to Acquaint you yt throw ye mercy of God we ar all in good health. I pray God itt may find you ye same & yt we may not be wanting to Returne all possible prayers for all his mercy. This I recommed to you as my charge yt you live a godly Rithous & sober life in all godlinesse & honesty. I desire yt you nott give uour mind to much to abstract notions butt att all convanient times to study ye Scriptures which is only Able to make you wise unto Salluation & yt you Garde against all Popish and superstitious notions which is my daily prayer for you. I have sent you ye Books you sent to me for yt is Plutarches Moralls in 3 vollams, and an old book intituled Ye Way to ye Tree of Life which I take to be a usefull book you did not send for, ye other book is sent for butt is nott yet come. I am very sorrow for your indisposition of which you complaine to your mother butt say nothing to me. I pray God restore you.

My humble sarvice to your master to whome I hope you convey itt with all dutifull respectt. Mr. /?/ desires to call here in his way to Lisbon next month. I have sentt you a crown by Capt. Weston. If you have any such thing as fine sweetmeets or anything yt is fitt to make a presant to a Ladey may buy itt & send itt by ye first safe hand for which I have sentt you five shillings more by ye same Above in all 10s. I had yours of ye 16th past am glad to hear you have a good prospectt of wine. Shall desire Master Robertt to send me a quarter casque of beste Red & I will pay for itt to his order. For anything you would have pray writte to me who with prayer to God for your growth in grace and knollidge of him am

your affectionate father."

Francis at this time was, as set forth in his will, a prosperous cooper of Poole, concerned with making casks both for the Newfoundland fish trade and also the Portuguese wine trade. The business involved considerable timber transactions. He was also concerned with oil and fish from Newfoundland, adding this and a certain amount of wine importation to his main business as cooper and timber merchant. He was in correspondence with Trinity, Bonavista and Twillingate in Newfoundland as well as German timber merchants in Hamburg and other places.

On the death of Francis, the business was continued in Poole by two of his sons, Isaac and Benjamin. Isaac continued in Poole, but Benjamin, after marrying Susannah Taverner, looked after the other end of the Newfoundland trade, taking his wife out and raising his family there. In the Trinity Church registers his first child appears as being born in 1751. He was thus established before that year in the place which was to be the scene of his strenuous life till 1768. The first record of Benjamin Lester is a worn leather-bound book in which the first entry is dated at Trinity in December 1761. The volume is a daily account of weather, meals, work on his ship building - for he had started a dock yard at Trinity - conversations and interviews, and every kind of incident among his "people" including adventures in the woods and on the ice. But the greatest interest is in his account of the occupation of Trinity by the French in July of 1762. A schooner and three sloops appeared in the harbour under the command of Chevalier de Boisgelin, Monsieur Castelnau, M. Monpassant, Chevalier de la Motte, M. Le Britenear and Chevalier Gallisonear. St. Johns was in the hands of the French, and a ship sent by Benjamin to try and make contact had been captured. Though there was a fort at Trinity, it had no garrison. Benjamin Lester was at a loss what to do, as the French landed 130 men, and the inhabitants were fleeing in boats and into the woods. He made the best of it, doing all he could to preserve the stores on which the life of his people depended. The account of his relations with the French commanders is both amusing and illuminating, but he was heartily glad to see the last of the fleet on August 2nd, when the approach of Lord Colville made it necessary for the invaders to make a move. The book then goes on to describe his return to England in a ship he had just built and by cunning had saved from destruction by the French. He encountered vile weather, being able neither to light a fire for cooking nor able to dry the saturated clothes of the crew. One man was swept overboard clinging to the boom, but was rescued. He sailed on Dec. 17, 1762 and arrived at Plymouth on Jan. 7, 1763. The volume also contains specifications for construction of various sizes of ships, indicating that he undertook some naval work at his dockyard in Trinity. There still exists a fine painting of his fleet at Trinity about 1790, consisting of some 30 ships, square riggers and sloops; unfortunately the artist is unknown. Benjamin Lester made several voyages between Poole and Newfoundland till 1768, when he seems to have finally settled in Poole and left the Newfoundland end to agents, though controlling the business from Poole.

The next series of diaries [not filmed] is that of his brother Isaac Lester (d. 1778), in Poole, written in long narrow books (4 x 18 inches). These volumes offer a day by day account of all his interests, business, family political etc. and are chiefly of domestic interest.

After his death Benjamin continued the diaries in precisely the same way in the same books until his own death in 1802.

His entries are of great interest as they cover the period of American War of Independence and the wars with Spain and France, which had a very great impact on Atlantic trade.

Benjamin by this time had become a man of considerable importance and wealth. His trade had expanded from the Newfoundland Trade to a very wide contact with Portugal, Italy, and Germany. He owned a large fleet of ships, and had "Plantations" all along the East Coast of Newfoundland and in the Labrador. He was Mayor of Poole, 1779 - 1783, and represented the Town and County of Poole in Parliament, 1791 - 1796. In addition to the diaries there survive his letter books as Mayor and Member of Parliament, and these throw a good deal of light on the problems which confronted Merchant Adventurers in the Atlantic and Mediterranean. As Mayor he was much concerned with arranging convoys for the Newfoundland fleet against American, French and Spanish naval ships and privateers, and he did a bit of privateering on his own. He writes to Mr. Robinson, Comptroller of the Navy in August 1780.

"I am fitting out a ship for the support and relief of my people at Newfoundland which I intend to arm and I find from the Collector of customs they have 10 guns without carriages and 3 swivells that were seized the 19 October 79 but they have no order for the sale of them tho I understand they are condemned. I shall esteem it a favour if you will cause the necessary directions to be given on this occasion as it will be of service to me".

Members of Parliament wielded great power at this time and it was of great importance to Poole that their representative should be a merchant who would look after their interests. One of the great features of the position was the patronage exercised by Members and their ability to profit by inside Government information. Benjamin Lester made full use of his influence as ex-Mayor and Member, and he formulated a number of suggestions for the protection of trade and retention of privileges. He was much concerned by the activities of the press gangs, and suggested that each ship should have a skeleton crew which should be immune from the press, making it up from "youngsters", who if they were unlucky enough, might be caught. The Press Gang was a serious problem for ship owners. He recounts how one of his crews fought back with the result that several lives were lost. This called for an enquiry and trial. Rather surprisingly his men seem to have been acquitted of murder, and he writes with much appreciation to the officer who presumably held the court.

Benjamin by now had become a man of wealth, landed property and considerable local influence, and had been joined by his son-in-law, George Garland, to whom he handed over more and more of the control of the business. Benjamin had one son, John, and three daughters, Amy (Garland) Rachel (Austen) and Sarah (Pointer). John appears to have taken little interest in the trade and in his turn became Mayor and Member of Parliament. John had one child who died at a young age. Benjamin Lester looked to the children of his son-in-law to carry on the great business he had created under the name of Lester. He left a substantial legacy of property to his grandson, Benjamin Lester Garland, on condition that he assume the name of Lester. Benjamin Lester Garland (son of George Garland and Amy Lester) did assume the name and was thence forward known as Benjamin Lester Lester.

Sarah Lester Pointer had a romantic history. She and the eldest son of the heir to a hereditary title fell in love, but such was the pride of both fathers, that neither would make the first advance towards the marriage. The lovers were finally parted and both married off to other parties. This did not end their affection, and many years afterwards when they had both lost their partners and were free to marry (both fathers being dead and the heir in possession of the title and his independence) the marriage was arranged. A short time before the ceremony, the wife of John Lester (who had been knighted and become Sir John) and his sister Sarah the intending bride were chatting together in their old home, when Sarah foolishly said "When I am married I shall take precedence of the Knights lady". This infuriated Lady Lester who fled to her husband and he immediately sent for his lawyer and inserted a clause in his will to the effect that unless Sarah gave a bond within a year that she would not marry the magnate in question she was to lose the very large inheritance he had planned for her. She had seven children by her first marriage and was left badly provided for at her husband's death. She first gave a bond that under no circumstances would she renounce her marriage, but in the course of a year of distracted division of mind between her interests and those of her children, on the very last day signed the bond. But this was not the last, as it was in legal doubt if the day on which Sir John died was to be included in the year's grace she had been given, as she signed the bond on the day of Sir John's death. The whole affair had to be brought before the court of Chancery; but eventually was decided in her favour. This decision affected the Lester business.

Benjamin Lester had divided his business between his son John, and son-in-law George Garland. George Garland actively directed his share, but at Sir John's death, his share was sold after another suit in Chancery as to the division of Sir John's estate between his widow and the sister Sarah above-mentioned, Sir John having no heir. Thus the old business under the name of Lester became extinct when in 1812 Sir John's share of Benjamin Lester and Company was sold. There exists a very interesting list of the plantations and estates in Newfoundland and Labrador that were sold by auction in London in 1812, but unfortunately no record of the proceeds of that sale.

In ensuring the continuance of the name, and business of Lester, by requiring Benjamin Lester Garland to assume the name of Lester, Benjamin Lester had hoped that his grandson would preserve traditions. Benjamin Lester Lester (as he now was known) had different ideas. He in his turn had become Member of Parliament and his interests were in Poole fishing. He refused a splendid offer of his father George Garland, of practically a sleeping partnership in the trade, and devoted himself to a political life. George Garland had a large family, and he had set all his sons up in business in Lisbon and Leghorn, where they acted as his agents. On Benjamin Lester Lester's refusal to take active part in the Newfoundland business, George sent his two youngest sons, George Garland jr. and John Bingley Garland, out to the island to manage affairs there. They settled at Trinity, where they largely rebuilt the old house of Benjamin Lester. A picture exists showing the house, dockyard and wharves at Trinity as they were before the house was rebuilt. It was likely one of the first brick houses to be built in Newfoundland, as the picture dates from about 1770.

George and John Bingley Garland arrived in Newfoundland in 1821. George died in 1830. John Bingley was left after his father's death in 1825 to carry on alone. This was the John Bingley Garland who became first Speaker of the Newfoundland House of Assembly. The letter books of George Garland senior are mostly concerned with family affairs, but there is much information to be gleaned from those of John Bingley Garland, especially as regards his difficulties, as Speaker, with the Governor and Council. He could not stand the quarrels for more than a year, believing the division of authority between Council and Assembly impracticable, as it proved to be; and after rejecting a suggestion that he should join the Council, resigned. Family affairs in England now called for his attention, and leaving Newfoundland for good he finally disposed of his whole interests in the Trade in 1849. The list of the Plantations then sold combined with those sold after Sir John Lester's death are an indication of the surprising scope of the business built up by Benjamin Lester. His interests extended all along the East coast of Newfoundland North of Conception Bay, and into the Labrador, his furthest North appearing to be Venison Harbour. His contacts with George and John Cartwright, who were much interested in the native population of Indians in Labrador, though few, are of particular interest.

With John Bingley Garland this long established and continued connection came to an end. Neither of his sons were interested in the old trade. Though the old house at Trinity, and the headquarters in Poole continued in the family till 1902, all activity had long since ceased.

List of volumes copied

1. Journals of Benjamin Lester,
1761-1764
with specifications for the construction of vessels,
rated from 20 to 100 guns, apparently taken from Navy
Office regulations of 1719 and 1745.
2. Letterbooks of George Garland sr.
1794-1815
1816-1826
(extracts only)
3. "Captain's Letterbook", 1827-1832
with index, kept by John Bingley Garland and
George Garland jr.
4. Letterbook of John Bingley Garland,
1832-1834
(extracts only)