

Benjamin Lightfoot

David Rollenhagen, Miller

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Benjamin Lightfoot was born in 1726 to Samuel and Mary Lightfoot shortly after they relocated from New Garden to Chester. He was the oldest of four sons, and their mother died when he was six years old, in 1732. Mary Lightfoot, their aunt, moved from New Garden to Chester to help care for them.¹

Benjamin followed in his father's footsteps and became a surveyor, mostly on lands in Berks County. He learned the trade under his father's tutelage, and they worked together as a father and son team on many surveys. This is reflected in the record books they both kept for the years 1734-1739.^{2,3}

Benjamin's father and three brothers relocated to Pikeland in 1747, but by that time Benjamin was engaged elsewhere. In 1752 an Act of Assembly was passed for the formation of Berks County out of sections of Philadelphia, Chester and Lancaster counties. Edward Scull of Philadelphia County, Benjamin Lightfoot of Chester County, and Thomas Cookson of Lancaster County were commissioned to "within six months, meet together, and run, mark out, and distinguish the boundary line between those counties and the county of Berks".⁴ Because of the role Benjamin played in this survey, he was appointed sheriff of Berks County in 1752, a position he held until 1754.⁵

The business of land surveying provided ample opportunities for land speculation. For a number of years Benjamin engaged in this activity with Edward Biddle of Philadelphia and James Starr of Reading.⁶ Another offshoot of the land surveying business was road surveying, due to the particular survey system used in Pennsylvania. In 1759, Benjamin surveyed the road line from Pottsville to Shamokin. He included not only bearings and distances, but possible stopping places and the cost of road construction.⁷

Benjamin Lightfoot was not totally preoccupied with surveying, and he engaged in entrepreneurial activities as well. These included a commercial venture in which he traded items such as tea kettles, Irish linens, colored sewing silks and cotton goods.⁸ On another occasion, he proposed to a friend, James Raynell, a business plan for baking ship biscuits. He detailed the costs, methods and help that he would need to build the bakery and oven, and the cost of transporting the biscuits to Philadelphia. He anticipated a profit of six pounds per week.⁹ It is unclear whether either of these ventures ever succeeded.

Benjamin Lightfoot's correspondence and even his field records provide further insight into his personality. His writings indicate a very witty and humorous individual with a philosophical side as well. For example, original poetry can be found throughout his field book from 1744 to 1751.¹⁰

In a letter to his close friend Edward Pennington, Benjamin admits to having visited a French doctor for an illness, who prescribed a purge. His comment was "it wrought me smartly upward tho' very little downward".¹¹

Apparently, Pennington was unsuccessfully courting a lady. Benjamin offers this encouragement: ". . . I think of beauties as Philip of Macedon did of cities—there is none so expugnable but an ass laden with gold may enter into it, or as the Spaniard said, pearl and gold bullets may do much upon the impregnablest beauty . . ." ¹²

Benjamin Lightfoot married Elizabeth Shoemaker in 1772. He was 46, she was 20. Their daughter Elizabeth was born in 1775.¹³ During these years Benjamin grew tired of the surveying tasks and the people he had to deal with. He wanted to retire, possibly also because of ill health, but continued surveying to provide for his family.¹⁴

Benjamin died in 1777 in Berks County, still surveying.¹⁵ He was 51 years of age, and he died the same year that his father Samuel died.

Foot Notes

1. Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Collection 371, Lightfoot Family Papers, page 2.
2. HSP, page 12.
3. It is difficult to reconcile the survey book dates with Benjamin's age. In 1734, Benjamin was eight years old.
4. J. Smith Futhey and Gilbert Cope, History of Chester County, page 50.
5. HSP, pages 3-4.
6. HSP, page 3.
7. John Barry Love, The Colonial Surveyor in Pennsylvania, page 94.
8. HSP, page 4.
9. Love, page 217.
10. HSP, page 12.
11. Love, page 216.
12. Love, page 214.
13. Exeter Monthly Meeting Records.
14. Love, page 216 and page 217.
15. Love, page 217.