

James Blake of Rotherhithe, Timber Merchant

By Wayne C. Ripley

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- 1 THE identity of William Blake's paternal grandfather, James Blake I,¹ rests on two documents associated with Blake's father: first, James Blake II's apprenticeship indenture with the linen draper Francis Smith, where James Blake I is identified as "James Blake of Rotherhithe in the County of Surrey Gentleman,"² and, second, the duty paid on the apprenticeship, where James Blake I is named "James Blake of Rotherhith."³ Given both James Blake I's residence in Rotherhithe and James Blake II's probable age at the time of his apprenticeship, G. E. Bentley, Jr., identifies the "James y^c S[on] of James & Eliz: Blake" who was christened at St. Mary, Rotherhithe, on 12 April 1722, as William Blake's father.⁴ Bentley, then, associates this couple with the James Blake and Elizabeth Baker who were married, "[p[e]]' Banns," at St. Olave, Southwark, on 30 April 1721.⁵
- 2 Beyond this chain of evidence, Bentley also raises the possibility that Blake's grandfather could be identified with James Blake, a timber merchant who died in Ratcliff, Middlesex, in 1754. He bases this "tempting" speculation on the proximity of Ratcliff and Rotherhithe, and on the fact that this man's will refers to several people who share names

with members of Blake's extended family.⁶ James Blake of Ratcliff had a son and a grandson named James (like Blake's father and brother), a wife named Elizabeth (like Blake's paternal grandmother and the middle name of his sister), a brother named John (like Blake's brothers—one of whom died before the other was born),⁷ and a daughter-in-law named Ann (a possible nickname for Catherine, though one not previously associated with Blake's mother).⁸

- 3 I have now uncovered what I believe to be James Blake II's admission paper for the Freedom of the City of London, which includes new information that seems to validate Bentley's suspicion. The document labels its James Blake as "a Haberdasher" who resided at the time in the "Minories." The Minories was a major road in the parish of St. Botolph Aldgate, and it is where the master of James Blake II, Francis Smith, had his shop. In October 1743, James Blake II was presumably still living with Smith, and he was not listed in the St. James rate books at Glasshouse Street until 9 June 1744. Why, however, he was applying for the Freedom of the City just nine months before the end of his apprenticeship, which would have granted it anyway, is unclear.
- 4 Whatever the answer to this and other questions it raises, the document identifies James Blake II's father as "James Blake of Rotherhith / in Surrey Timber Merch."⁹ The shared professions of this "James Blake of Rotherhith" and James Blake of Ratcliff make it a near certainty that Bentley's association of the two men is correct. Beyond the coincidence of family names in the 1754 will, there is now the coincidence of both apprenticeship and Freedom of the City documents with fathers from Rotherhithe named James Blake, with the son in both cases having the same name and the same profession of haberdasher. It seems safe to assert as fact, then, that James Blake I was a timber merchant who must have moved from Rotherhithe to Ratcliff sometime between 1743 and 1754, where he died three years before William was born.

I'd like to thank my colleague Andrew Higl for his assistance.

1. As this formulation suggests, I refer in this note to Blake's grandfather as James Blake I and his father as James Blake II.
2. G. E. Bentley, Jr., *Blake Records*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004) 2-3. Hereafter abbreviated *BR*(2).
3. Board of Stamps, Apprenticeship Books, series IR1, piece 15 (National Archives, via *UK, Register of Duties Paid for Apprentices' Indentures, 1710-1811*, ancestry.com).
4. *BR*(2) 2, 848n3 (to "Prelude" section). Church of England Parish Registers, 1538-1812 (London Metropolitan Archives, via *London, England, Church of England Baptisms, Marriages, and Burials, 1538-1812*, ancestry.com).
5. *BR*(2) 2. Church of England Parish Registers, 1538-1812 (London Metropolitan Archives, via *London, England, Church of England Baptisms, Marriages, and Burials, 1538-1812*, ancestry.com).

6. *BR*(2) xxxi.

7. Bentley's claim that James Blake II had a brother named John is not supported by any documentary evidence. As he concedes, "The evidence that John Blake was related to the poet's father the hosier consists simply in the fact that they lived in the same house" (*BR*[2] 735). But if the equation of James Blake of Rotherhithe and James Blake of Ratcliff holds, it seems more likely that the "Jno Blake" (*BR*[2] 734n) who was listed in the 1743 watch rate book for the Glasshouse residence a quarter before James Blake II entered was, instead, the uncle of James Blake II. In addition to the explicit reference to James Blake of Ratcliff's brother in the 1754 will, James Blake II himself turned only twenty-one in April 1743, meaning that a younger brother would not yet have been of age.

8. *BR*(2) xxxi-ii.

William Mayor

Thursday the 6 Day of October
And in the twentieth Year of the Reigne
of King George the Second of Great
Britain &c.

4

John Francis Blake of London
in the City of London

This Day Mr Chamberlain having presented unto this Court
James Blake to be made free of this City as the forty fifth of
Fifty granted unto him by this Court the 22th of September 1743 to be applied
toward the Discharge of the publick Debts of this City; His Order is
that the said James Blake be admitted into the
Freedom of this City by Redemption in the Company of
Wheelwrights paying unto Mr Chamberlain for this City's
Use the sum of forty Shillings & eight Pence

If this Order is not executed
in three Months it shall
be void

M. M.

Andrew Boson }
Robert Walker } Vinners }
Thomas Shackleton }
Edw Smith } Carman }
Math Colyer }
6 Oct. 1743
Allowed and taken for Security
in the Lord Mayor's Court
John Partridge.

(Minors)

Freedom admissions papers, 1681-1930 (London Metropolitan Archives, COL/CHD/FR/02, via London, England, Freedom of the City Admission Papers, 1681-1930, ancestry.com).

Willimott Mayor

Thursday the 6th day of October 1743
And in the Seventeenth Year of the reign
of King George the Second of Great
Britain &c.

Son of James Blake of Rotherhith
in Surrey Timber Merch. ^t

This Day Mr Chamberlain having presented unto this Court
James Blake _____ to be made free of this City as the forty fifth of
Fifty granted unto him by this Court the 22:^d of September [illeg.] ¹⁷⁴¹ to be Applied
toward the Discharge of the publick Debts of this City; It is Ordered
that the said James Blake _____ be Admitted into the
Freedom of this City by Redemption in the Company of _____
Wheelwrights _____ paying unto Mr Chamberlain for this City's
Use the Sum of forty ^{Six} Shillings & eight pence

Man

N[?]B If this Order is not Executed
in three Months it is Void
a Haberdasher

Andrew Bason }
Robert Walker } Vintners }
Thomas Shackleton Ha[ber]d[a]sher }
Edw^d Smith Carman }
Nath Collyer[e] Mercer [?] } Allowed and taken for Security
in the Lord Mayors Court

6 Oct.^r 1743

John Partridge.

(Minories)