

## Jackson's "Fixed Star"

*John Q. Barrett\**

On April 5, 1952, Milton Joseph Fletcher, age ninety, died in Sarasota, Florida.<sup>1</sup>

Justice Robert H. Jackson soon learned the sad news, and he grieved. More than forty years earlier, when Jackson was seventeen years old, he had attended Jamestown High School in Jamestown, New York, for a post-graduate year. Milton Fletcher had been Robert's JHS Principal. He became one of the most important friends and influences in Jackson's life.

Robert Jackson grew up about six miles southeast of Jamestown, in the hamlet of Frewsburg, New York. He attended Frewsburg High School. That is where Milton Fletcher first saw Jackson. During one winter, perhaps in 1909, Mr. Fletcher took his JHS debate team by sleigh to Frewsburg. They competed against the home team. It won—or as Fletcher saw it, Jackson won the contest for Frewsburg HS. Fletcher's daughter said that "[f]rom then on, I doubt if there was anyone who watched Robert's brilliant career with more pride, pleasure, and sincere affection than my father did."<sup>2</sup>

But that account skips over Milton Fletcher's own direct and very significant influence on Robert Jackson's career and his life. When Jackson began to matriculate at Jamestown High School in Fall 1909, Principal Fletcher got to know him, liked him, and extended himself to give him special teaching. One example was

---

\* Professor of Law, St. John's University, New York City, and Elizabeth S. Lenna Fellow, Robert H. Jackson Center, Jamestown, New York. I emailed an earlier version of this essay to The Jackson List on April 5, 2021. This updated version is dated April 7, 2021.

For an archive of hundreds of Jackson List posts, many of which include document images or photographs, visit <http://thejacksonlist.com>. This piece is posted there with "live" hyperlinks.

To join the many thousands who subscribe to The Jackson List, which does not display recipient identities or distribute their email addresses, use the "Subscribe" button at <http://thejacksonlist.com> or email me at [barrettj@stjohns.edu](mailto:barrettj@stjohns.edu).

Copyright © 2021 by John Q. Barrett. All rights reserved.

<sup>1</sup> See *Milton J. Fletcher Dies in Florida*, JAMESTOWN POST-JOURNAL, Apr. 4, 1952, at 1.

<sup>2</sup> Letter from Louise S. Fletcher to Irene G. Jackson, "Friday" [Oct. 15, 1954] (original), in Robert H. Jackson Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Washington, D.C., Box 6, Folder 5.

---

*JACKSON'S "FIXED STAR"*

---

Economics—Jackson wanted to study it but JHS had no such course, so Fletcher, although very busy, agreed to tutor Jackson in the subject. Another example was United States History—Jackson had already taken that course in Frewsburg, so he did not repeat it in Jamestown, but he spent time a lot of time talking and learning history with Fletcher.



Milton J. Fletcher in 1895

---

JACKSON'S "FIXED STAR"

---

Milton Fletcher was interested in the law and encouraged Robert Jackson to pursue that career. At one point during his Jamestown High School year, Jackson saw Fletcher on the street car—that was how Jackson commuted between Frewsburg (home) and Jamestown. They sat together and talked. They spoke of a violin concert the night before. Robert was struck by the large fee that the performing artist had earned. Fletcher told him, “Bob, you study law and tend to your business, do as you can with it, and you’ll get a \$500 fee someday.” Jackson later said that he “thought about that a great deal—it couldn’t be!,” he concluded. But with encouragement from Fletcher and others, Jackson found less materialistic, more substantive reasons to study and practice law. (And of course Fletcher turned out to have underestimated some of the legal fees that Jackson would earn.)

Robert Jackson and Milton Fletcher stayed in contact in Jamestown. In 1919, Fletcher moved up from JHS Principal to Superintendent of the city’s schools—which lawyer Jackson’s children soon attended. When Fletcher retired in 1932, Jackson gave the speech honoring him at that year’s JHS alumni dinner. After Jackson moved to Washington in 1934, they wrote letters and occasionally saw each other in person. They had, *de facto*, a father-son relationship that meant a great deal to each of them.

Following Milton Fletcher’s death in April 1952, Justice Robert H. Jackson attended the JHS alumni reunion that June. About 1,000 people were there, in sweltering heat. The alumni association presented a portrait of Fletcher to the high school. Then Justice Jackson spoke for eight minutes about Mr. Fletcher.

To hear a recording of Jackson’s 1952 speech, embedded in a Jamestown radio broadcast following Jackson’s death two years later, click here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v5Y2zxIGbME>

(The introduction begins at time counter reading 0:20. Jackson’s speech begins at 3:20.)

---

JACKSON'S "FIXED STAR"

---



June 26, 1952

Also note the speech that lawyer Robert Jackson had given twenty years earlier to Jamestown High School alumni and the community, including Jamestown Schools Superintendent Milton Fletcher himself, on the occasion of his retirement. Alas, there seems to be no surviving audio recording of this June 30, 1932, speech. But Jackson's text is here: <https://www.roberthjackson.org/speech-and-writing/tribute-to-milton-j-fletcher/>.

If you know, as millions do, Justice Jackson's famous 1943 opinion for the Supreme Court in *West Virginia State Board of Education*, holding unconstitutional the State actions compelling Jehovah's Witness schoolchildren to pledge allegiance to and salute the American flag, then you know this line:

If there is any fixed star in our constitutional constellation, it is that no official, high or petty, can prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or other matters of opinion or

---

*JACKSON'S "FIXED STAR"*

---

force citizens to confess by word or act their faith therein.<sup>3</sup>

In Robert Jackson's 1932 tribute to Milton Fletcher, you will see in plain words how much of Jackson began at home, in his community, in its school, and in Milton Fletcher's special teaching and leadership.

You will see that Jackson twice called Fletcher his "fixed star."

---

<sup>3</sup> 319 U.S. 624, 642 (1943).