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Michael G. Schene

Branch of Special Programs of the National Park Service, Denver

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Judah P. Benjamin.

Photograph courtesy of U.S.F. Special Collections.

THE DARING ESCAPE OF JUDAH P. BENJAMIN

by Michael G. Schene

An interesting and intriguing facet of the history of the Gamble Mansion/Judah P. Benjamin Memorial Site, located in Ellenton, Florida, was the escape of the Confederate Secretary of State, Judah P. Benjamin, to England. Benjamin was born in 1811, on St. Thomas Island in the West Indies; he settled with his parents in Charleston, South Carolina around 1817. He later entered Yale but did not finish, perhaps due to financial problems. Drifting into the South, Benjamin established a thriving law practice in New Orleans. There he became interested in the cultivation of sugar and purchased a plantation – Belle Chasse – on the Mississippi River in 1846. He prospered until the Mississippi flooded his plantation, destroying his house and crop. He then turned to politics, and he was elected to a number of positions, finally serving as United States Senator from Louisiana. With the secession of the state in 1861, he resigned his position and joined the Confederate government.

He was first appointed Attorney General and then late in 1861, was appointed Secretary of War. He held this position until March of 1862. He was then selected as Secretary of State, a position that he continued to hold throughout the remainder of the war. Possessing a trenchant mind, he was perhaps the most outstanding member of Jefferson Davis' cabinet.¹ With the fall of Richmond, Benjamin accepted the fact that the war had been lost and began a long and torturous adventure to avoid capture and escape to England.

On April 1, 1865, General Robert E. Lee advised the Confederate government that his position in Richmond was untenable and the city would have to be evacuated immediately. This sent Benjamin – as well as other high-ranking Confederate officials – into a frenzy to collect vital papers, documents and monies. Gathering these items together, Benjamin, along with other Confederate leaders, left Richmond and set out for Danville, North Carolina, the following day. General Lee's surrender on April 9, turned the retreat of these Confederate leaders into a desperate gambit to avoid capture and the sure retribution that they felt would be meted out to them by the victorious Union. Benjamin joined the remaining Confederate officials in the southward flight, vowing that he would never be taken alive.

Leaving Danville on April 10, the party journeyed to Greensboro, North Carolina. Here they were rebuffed by the citizens, partially as a result of growing Union sentiment, and also due to the fear that in aiding these Confederate fugitives, they would later suffer punishment. On April 15, the party left Greensboro and pushed on to Charlotte, North Carolina. Trekking ever southward, they finally reached Abbeville, South Carolina on May 2. The following day, May 3, as the group reached the Vienna Valley on the west bank of the Savannah River (twenty miles from Washington, Georgia), Benjamin bid his final adieu to Jefferson Davis, and struck out on his own hoping to avoid capture. His parting words were that he hoped to find a place that would be as far from the United States as possible.²

Benjamin realized that his familiar face would make it difficult for him to elude his pursuers.³ He decided to disguise himself as a Frenchman traveling through the South, and accompanied by a Captain H. J. Leovy, Benjamin now calling himself Monsieur Bonfals, made his way south.⁴ To complete his masquerade, Benjamin grew a full beard, wore goggles and a wide brimmed hat, and encircled his rotund figure in a massive cloak.⁵ Crossing the Florida-Georgia border, he abandoned "Monsieur Bonfals" and adopted the ploy that he was a farmer looking for land for himself and some friends from South Carolina. He decided to authenticate his deception and



John Thomas Lesley.

Photograph from *Tampa Town, 1824-1886: Cracker Village with a Latin Accent* by Tony Pizzo.



This postcard entitled “An Old Spanish Mansion near Tampa, Florida” is actually a picture of Gamble Mansion.

Postcard courtesy of U.S.F. Special Collections.

induced a farmer’s wife to make some homespun clothing for him. He also secured the roughest and cheapest tack for his horse and, thus equipped, began a slow journey – always avoiding inhabited areas – toward central Florida.⁶ Crossing the Suwannee River about the 15th of May,⁷ Benjamin reached Central Florida in about five to six days, or around May 20.⁸ From here he “intended going to East Florida and trying to cross the Gulf from Indian River, but I learned that there was not a vessel to be found there, and that the risk of detection would be great.”⁹

Desperate to flee the country and seemingly thwarted in his effort, Benjamin made his way to the west coast of Florida and was aided in his escape by Major John Lesley of Tampa.¹⁰ Lesley secreted Benjamin, now operating under the alias of Mr. Howard, to the beautiful mansion formerly owned by Major Robert Gamble, Jr. (then living in Tallahassee) located on the Manatee River.¹¹ Captain Archibald McNeill, operating the plantation for the Confederate government, offered the fugitive shelter and hospitality. There Benjamin completed his plans for pursuing his escape from the United States.

The Mansion, well known as a Confederate refuge, was continually searched by Union forces. During one of their surprise “visits,” Benjamin was almost captured and shortly after this

unpleasant episode, he decided to forsake the comfortable Mansion for simpler but safer accommodations.¹² He crossed the Manatee River and stayed with Captain Frederick Tresca while plans for his continuing escape were finalized. Benjamin had chosen well in seeking the services of Tresca. Tresca was intimately acquainted with the waters off the west coast of Florida, and had great experience in outfoxing the Federals as a blockade runner during the war. The enterprise, however, seemed doomed to certain failure lacking a seaworthy vessel, until a Captain Currie came forward and volunteered the use of his yawl, which had been sunk in a creek for two years in order to conceal it from the enemy. Finally, on May 23, Captain Tresca, H. A. McLeod, and Benjamin set sail from Whittaker's Bayou on Sarasota Bay.¹³

After countless difficulties and several encounters with his pursuers, Benjamin and his companions finally arrived at Knight's Key (now Marathon) on July 7. Here they procured a larger craft, the *Blonde*, and set forth for Bimini, finally reaching the island on July 10. After further adventures and several misfortunes, Benjamin finally arrived at Southampton, England, on August 30, 1865.¹⁴ An expatriate, today this daring ex-Confederate remains commemorated for the escapade that brought him to the Gamble Mansion.

¹ Allen Johnson, ed., *Dictionary of American Biography*, 20 volumes (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1939), 2:181-186.

² Robert E. Meade, *Judah P. Benjamin, Confederate Statesman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1943), pp. 312-318.

³ Benjamin was well-known throughout the country as a short rotund individual. Johnson, *Dictionary of American Biography*, 2:192.

⁴ Louis Gruss, "Judah Philip Benjamin," *Louisiana Historical Quarterly*, 19 (October, 1936):965. Gruss maintains that Benjamin was accompanied by a Captain Leovy. John H. Reagan, *Memoirs, with Special Reference to Secession and the Civil War* (New York: Neale Publishing Co., 1906), pp. 210-211. Reagan, the Confederate Postmaster General, states that Benjamin left the main body on May 3, with another Confederate official. Reagan, a contemporary, is excellent on details to this point, but has no knowledge of Benjamin's activities after May 3. Reagan states that Benjamin apparently adopted the disguise because he knew of a Frenchman that was traveling in the Southern states and stated that he could speak broken English like a Frenchman. To encourage further the disguise, he let Leovy answer all questions and had them relayed in Leovy's broken French. Meade, Benjamin, p. 318. John Taylor Wood, "Escape of the Confederate Secretary of War," *Century Magazine*, 25(1893-1894):2, supports Meade's statement that Leovy was a Colonel. I checked his name in the Confederate service records and found that an H. J. Leovy was not listed. U.S. National Archives. War Department Collection of Confederate Records. *Index to Compiled Service Records of Confederate Soldiers*. Roll 282. He may, however, have been a staff officer and thus included in the *Compiled Service Records of General and Staff Officers and Nonregimental Enlisted Men*, a source that was not consulted.

⁵ Wood, "Escape," p. 2.

⁶ Pierce Butler, *Judah P. Benjamin* (Philadelphia: George W. Jacobs and Co., 1906), p. 363. An older biography, Butler's book is important because it contains the entire letter that Benjamin wrote about his adventures. John Taylor Wood entered Florida on the 15th of May and rode to a General Finnegan's near Madison. Here he learned that Benjamin had been in the neighborhood but "had gone off at a tangent." Wood, "Escape," p. 3.

⁷ About the 15th of May, Benjamin crossed the Suwannee River at Moseley's Ferry. Alfred J. Hanna, *Flight into Oblivion* (Richmond, Va.: Johnson Publishing Co., 1938), p. 196. Hanna took this information from John Taylor Wood's complete diary. The extract contained in *Century Magazine* does not include this information.

⁸ Butler, *Benjamin*, p. 363. Benjamin's letter indicates that he was traveling very slowly, about thirty miles a day, "till I reached Central Florida." This letter, as well as other accounts, establishes the fact that Benjamin did reach Central Florida. From here, we are not able to carefully document his subsequent progress through Florida.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 364; Meade, *Benjamin*, p. 321; Hanna, *Flight*, p. 197. Laura McDuffee, *The Lures of Manatee* (Bradenton, Fla.: The Manatee County Historical Society, 1960). p. 31. McDuffee's account of Benjamin's travels and his connections from the time that he arrived on the west coast until he departed for Bimini was used by both Hanna and Meade in their work. McDuffee quotes from a number of local citizens who aided Benjamin while he was at the Mansion, but unfortunately the work is not cited. So there is no way of verifying these firsthand accounts. Further, there is no bibliography to determine where McDuffee obtained her material, in certain cases. McDuffee's assertions that Benjamin did stay at Gamble Mansion before leaving for Bimini are supported by H. A. McLeod, who published an account of his adventure with Benjamin in the *Galveston Daily News*, May 27, 1894. McLeod apparently served with Captain Lesley, Company K, 4th Florida. Possibly he was from this area and familiar with it. Official records indicate that a Hiram A. McLeod enlisted at Tampa in August, 1861, joining Captain Lesley's Company K, 4th Florida Regiment. He served until January 1864, when he left the service as a sergeant. U.S. National Archives. War Department Collection of Confederate Records. *Compiled Service Records of Confederate Soldiers. Florida*. Roll 56. We know from his account in the *Galveston Daily News* that the H. A. McLeod, mentioned above, enlisted at "Tampa Bay with Captain Leslie [sic], Company K, Fourth Florida." Although we cannot be certain, H. A. and Hiram A. are probably one and the same.

¹¹ McDuffee, *Lures of Manatee*, p. 200. McDuffee, quoting from the Rev. William B. Tresca, whose father assisted Benjamin, states that: "After the War in 1865 Captain Lesley of Tampa escorted Mr. Benjamin to the Manatee River – arriving at Captain Archibald McNeill's, who then with his family occupied the Gamble Mansion on the north side of the Manatee River" (p. 162). McLeod maintains that Benjamin used the name Boyd while he stayed at the Mansion. *Galveston Daily News*, May 27, 1894. McDuffee, *Lures of Manatee*, p. 159, states that when Benjamin arrived at the Mansion he was known as Mr. Howard. There is apparently no way to resolve this inconsistency.

¹² Hanna, *Flight*, p. 199.

¹³ McDuffee, *Lures of Manatee*, p. 162-163; Butler, *Benjamin*, p. 364; McLeod, *Galveston Daily News*, May 27, 1894.

¹⁴ Hanna, *Flight*, p. 203-208; Meade, *Benjamin*, pp. 322-325; Butler, *Benjamin*, pp. 364-371.