



Florida Civil War Escape Story - Judah Benjamin, Confederate States of America

By Norm Dasinger

Disguises and Escapes and Yankee Raids and Sailing Ships all make up the fantastic story of Confederate Secretary of State Judah P Benjamin in Florida in 1865.

When the Confederate capital in Richmond fell to General Grant and the Union Army on April 2, 1865, Jefferson Davis, the President of the Confederate States of America, and his cabinet had already taken flight south through Virginia. Eventually, Davis would be captured in Georgia in May but many of his cabinet had previously departed from their leader in an 'every man for himself' escape.

Benjamin was a Jew. He was the first Jewish man ever to be appointed to a cabinet level position in American history. The next such appointment would be made by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1906. Growing up in Charleston, South Carolina, Judah was smart. He attended Yale University for three years but left before earning a degree. He probably figured the school had nothing more it could teach him. With \$5 in his pocket he headed for New Orleans and became an attorney. He was perhaps the best constitutional lawyer in the nation before being selected to United States Senate by the Louisiana legislature prior to the War Between the States.



Judah P. Benjamin

When Jefferson Davis began to assemble his cabinet in 1861, Benjamin was first on his list. Appointed as Attorney General, Benjamin later served as Secretary of War and finally Secretary of State.

In 1865, the Confederate government collapsed, and Benjamin decided to attempt to make his way to the Bahamas and eventually London where he hoped he could begin a new career. Disguising himself as a Frenchman seeking to purchase land, he let his beard grow longer and began to make his way across Georgia toward Florida. He came into Madison County and travelled thru Pasco County eventually he arrived at the Gamble House near Bradenton.



The Judah P. Benjamin Confederate Memorial at Gamble Plantation

Archibald McNeil – a well know blockade runner - owned the large plantation and first refused Benjamin entry into the Gamble House. Convinced by Captain John T. Lesley, who was guiding Judah through Florida, McNeil agreed to let him stay. Soon, there was a Federal raid on the house, but Benjamin was not detected. After a week, he was taken to Captain Fred Tresca in Sarasota and they sailed out of Sarasota Bay on their way to the Bahamas on a ship owned by McNeil. In route the vessel was stopped and searched, and Benjamin pretended to be a Jewish cook and the Yankee sailors reluctantly believed him. Finally, they left Nassau for London, but Benjamin's ship promptly blew up and the entire crew had to make their way back to the Bahamas. On August 30th, they sailed into Southampton England.

Benjamin never returned to the United States. He became a very successful attorney in London and is buried in France in a cemetery plot owned by his wife's family.

Today, the Gamble House is a Florida State Park called The Judah P Benjamin Confederate Memorial at Gamble Plantation. The site is in Ellenton near Bradenton on the Gulf coast. The house is open for tours.

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