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Rodney H. Kite-Powell II

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# THE ESCAPE OF JUDAH P. BENJAMIN

By Rodney H. Kite-Powell, II



**Judah P. Benjamin**

— From *Edge of Wilderness*,  
by Janet S. Matthews

In 1935, the McKay family of Tampa presented the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) with a sword which once belonged to Judah P Benjamin, Secretary of State of the Confederate States America. The sword was then placed on display in the newly renovated Gamble Mansion in Ellenton, Florida. How the sword made it from Benjamin's steamer

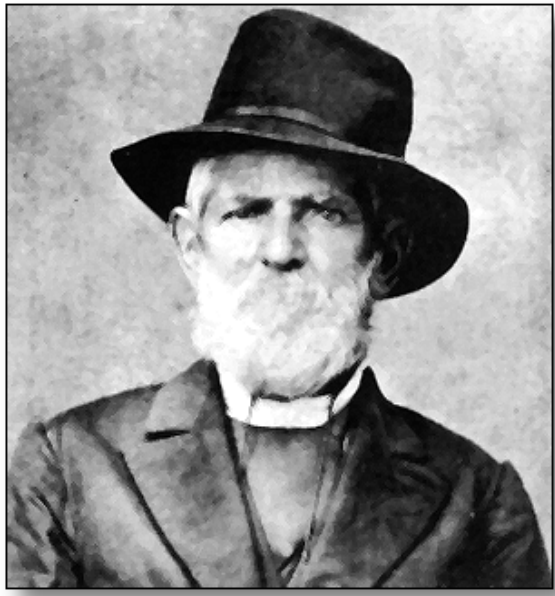
trunk in June, 1865 to the Gamble Mansion seventy years later is still a matter of some debate. Even more uncertainty surrounds how Benjamin made his way from Richmond, Virginia to Manatee, Florida, and then out of the country, at the end of the Civil War. One particular aspect of Benjamin's escape, the events between his arrival at Brooksville and his arrival at the Gamble Mansion, is at the center of this uncertainty. The sword, along with two prominent Tampa families, are inextricably linked to this leg of Benjamin's journey. Both the Lesleys and McKays lay claim to the honor of helping Benjamin on his trek through central Florida. The Lesleys have a more plausible story, but the McKays had the sword. The families agree on all other points of Benjamin's escape except concerning who helped Benjamin from Brooksville to the Gamble.

Benjamin served in three different cabinet positions for the Confederate States under President Jefferson Davis. In February of 1861, Benjamin took the post of Attorney General. In September of that same year, he moved to the office of Secretary of War. After a brief tenure at that position, he changed again, this time becoming Secretary of State (March, 1862), a post he would hold until the end of the war. Benjamin received both praise and condemnation in his capacity as Davis' trusted adviser. Historians would later dub him the "Brains of the Confederacy."

Perhaps the *New York Times* best summarizes Benjamin's escape. On page four of the August 3, 1865 edition,

Benjamin is said to have arrived in Havana on July 25th, after "a mythical escap[e] from Florida." The writer stated simply, "The truth is he got out of Dixie somehow."<sup>1</sup> The "mythical" story of Benjamin's escape was told by everyone from United States soldiers searching for him to twentieth century biographers writing about him. One man who helped Benjamin get out of Florida, Hiram A. McLeod, wrote his own version nearly thirty years after the fact.<sup>2</sup> Also, descendants of some of the participants and alleged participants have written from their families' perspective. Finally, there is Benjamin himself, who wrote to his sister from the Bahamas just after arriving there from Florida. None give a complete record of Benjamin's trail, but when taken together, with some reasoning added, an accurate account takes shape.

Benjamin broke away from President Davis's escape party on May 3, near the South Carolina/Georgia border. From there, he traveled south, with Florida as his goal. It

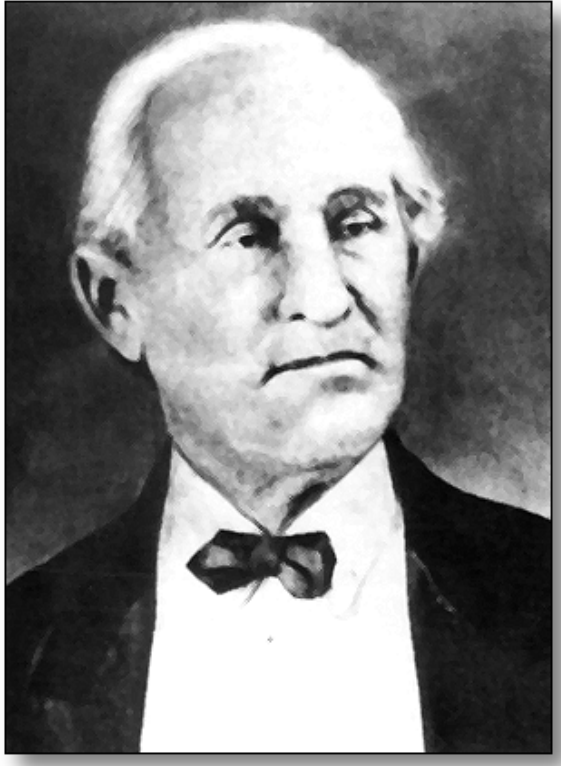


**Captain and Reverend Leroy G. Lesley**  
— Courtesy Lesley Family

is known that the group, including Benjamin, passed through Abbeville, South Carolina, as they made their way south. Some historians say Abbeville was the site of "the last Cabinet meeting". Benjamin himself says that the group remained together until they reached Washington, Georgia.<sup>3</sup>

While traveling through Georgia, Benjamin took on the disguise of a Frenchman seeking land on which to settle. He was able to speak broken English like a Frenchman, and he wore a disguise of a hat, goggles, cloak, and full beard, which he had recently grown. This disguise is cited in almost every work dealing with Benjamin's escape. What is sometimes also cited is the fact that he had a Colonel H. J. Leovy with him as a travel companion through Georgia. It is also alleged that before he left Richmond he had a Confederate passport made which stated he was a Frenchman traveling through the south. Most sources also note that he used an alias as part of his Frenchman ruse, either M.M. Bonfals, Monsieur Bonfals, or just Bonfals. If he really did use this alias, it shows that the fleeing Benjamin, who lived most of his adult life in New Orleans, Louisiana, still had a sense of humor. Bonfals is French/Cajun for "good disguise."

After entering Florida, Benjamin shed the disguise of a Frenchman in favor of another — that of a farmer. To complete this disguise, he had "a kind farmer's wife . . . make [him] some homespun clothes just like her husbands. [He] got for [his] horse the commonest and roughest equipment that [he] could find."<sup>4</sup> This quote is repeated in almost every version of Benjamin's escape. It originated from a letter Benjamin wrote to his sister shortly after arriving in the Bahamas in July of 1865. Benjamin's first major biographer, Pierce Butler, was the first to publish these letters. Butler had



**Captain James McKay, I — 1808-1876**

— From *Tampa: The Treasure City*

access to what little of Benjamin's papers still existed. The letters Benjamin wrote to his sister, Mrs. Kruttschnitt, are of immense importance. In an effort to dissuade historians from writing his biography, Benjamin, throughout his post-Civil War life, destroyed all of his personal and business papers. Butler was a friend of a descendant of Benjamin, and she allowed him access to what papers of his remained.

Benjamin traveled through north Florida alone. He probably entered the state in late May, and headed toward Brooksville. It is at this point of the story where the Lesley and McKay theories split. That Benjamin was secreted through central Florida in early June is generally accepted as true. The debate lies in the question of who helped him. The simplest explanation is that Captain Leroy G. Lesley, and his son Major

John T. Lesley, took Benjamin to Manatee, and the Gamble Mansion. The more complex theory involves the McKay family.

According to the Lesley family, while Benjamin was in Abbeville he approached, or was approached by, the Lesley family, who informed him that they had family members in Florida who would assist in his escape. Benjamin made his way south, finally reaching Brooksville, likely in late May or the first week of June. In Brooksville, Benjamin was to contact Captain Lesley. When he finally located Lesley, plans were quickly put in place to spirit Benjamin to a port on the Gulf of Mexico, his first step in leaving the country.

Captain Lesley immediately sent for his son, Major John T. Lesley, then at his home in Tampa. Upon his arrival at Brooksville it was decided that without further delay the Secretary must set out for the Florida coast near Manatee where a boat would be provided to commence the recommended journey to Cuba. Here, or later at Manatee, Benjamin objected to the Cuban destination with the reason that he had little confidence of finding protection there under the weak Spanish government, and preferred chancing it to one of the British islands of the Bahamas, a government that had unofficially professed friendship for the Confederacy.<sup>5</sup>

Most of coastal Florida had been occupied by Union troops since the middle of the war, so finding a suitable port would prove difficult. It was decided that the small community of Manatee would be best. The Lesley's knew Archibald McNeill, who was living at the Gamble Mansion with his family at the time. Most sources place Benjamin in Major Lesley's care on the trip south, while others name his father as



**The author with the McKay Sword**

— Author's Collection

Benjamin's guide. Benjamin was passed off as Mr. Howard, a friend of the Lesleys.

When Benjamin and the Lesleys arrived at the Gamble Mansion, McNeill was ready to take in his new border. A room was prepared in the house, where Benjamin could keep an eye out for Federal boats on the Manatee River. While Benjamin was at the Mansion, it was raided by a Federal search party looking for the fleeing Confederate. Benjamin and McNeill barely got out of the house and into some bushes in time.

The Lesley side of the story was promoted by Theodore Lesley, who served as Hillsborough County's official historian in the 1960s and 70s. Several local writers use the Lesley's explanation of events in their histories. Lesley himself gives a brief historiography of Benjamin's escape in a 1957 letter: "Much later, in the 1920s, there began to appear other accounts, written by members of the second generation, which brings in new names and episodes which, of course, are open to question."<sup>6</sup> Perhaps he is

referring to the McKay theory, which first appears in the 1920s.

The McKay argument, a more complex and less believable explanation of Benjamin's voyage to Manatee, involves Captain James McKay and his son, Major John A. McKay. This story has Major McKay traveling to Brooksville to bring Benjamin to Tampa, where he would stay for a week while further arrangements were made. Benjamin allegedly stayed in the McKay home, which stood less than half a mile from Fort Brooke, which was by this point occupied by Union troops. While it is possible that this did occur, it is highly unlikely. In his letters to his sister, Benjamin wrote that he stayed away from populated towns as much as possible. Why would he let himself be brought to Tampa, and then stay for a week before moving on?

The McKay theory has been advanced, for the most part, by Donald B. (D. B.) McKay, who was also at one time Hillsborough County's official historian. The theory has undergone some changes over the years, evolving to include the Lesley family. At first, the McKays were the only ones responsible for Benjamin's safe passage from Brooksville to Tampa. This story was advanced in an article in the April 5, 1927 *Tampa Daily Times*. The writer states that Captain James McKay received word that Benjamin was in hiding, so he brought him to Tampa. After staying at the McKay home for about a week, Benjamin set out, with James McKay as his guide, for the Manatee River. McKay took Benjamin to the Gamble Mansion, but McNeill would not allow Benjamin inside, fearing a Federal search party would discover the fugitive. Instead, "a huge pile of cordwood was arranged with a small vacant space inside that became Benjamin's 'home' while he awaited the



**Lucy Jane Sandwich, second wife of Leroy G. Lesley, wearing a dress made from the silk fabric sent to her by the grateful Judah P. Benjamin**

— Courtesy Lesley Family

arrival of a small schooner in which to escape to the Bahamas."<sup>7</sup>

The *Times* writer added another detail to back the McKay side of the argument.



**The McKay Sword, Gamble Plantation State Historic Site**

— Author's Collection

At the end of that stage of the flight which took him [Benjamin] to McNeal's wood-pile, Mr. Benjamin presented to the senior Captain McKay the sword he was wearing and it was a prized possession of his for several years."<sup>8</sup>

This was the first mention of a sword in Benjamin's escape. D. B. McKay was the publisher of the *Tampa Daily Times* when the aforementioned article was published.

There was a time, In the 1920s, when the McKays did not have the sword. It was in the possession of Colonel H. C. Spencer. The sword was given to Spencer by Donald S. McKay, one of James McKay's sons, as a "token of friendship."<sup>9</sup> It is not known how or when the sword returned to the McKay family.

The sword again gained attention, in June of 1935, when the *Tampa Daily Times* ran a story featuring D. B. McKay holding the sword under the headline "Museum to Be Given McKay Heirloom."<sup>10</sup> The museum was the Museum of the Confederacy in Richmond, Virginia. For whatever reason, the Museum of the Confederacy did not get the sword. Instead, it went to the UDC and the Gamble Mansion.

Through the efforts of Robert Perry, Park Manager of the Gamble Plantation State Historic Site, the author was able to examine the sword. The sword's scabbard was signed, in ink, "To James McKay Senior from Judah P. Benjamin." Written in pencil, also on the scabbard, is the name "Capt. Tresca," the date "1865," and "[illegible] sword made for [illegible] states in Richmond, Va." While the sword is from the Civil War era, it is impossible to tell if it was, in fact, Benjamin's.

In 1956, D. B. McKay, in his "Pioneer Florida Page" from the *Tampa Sunday Tribune*, restated the family position. "A McKay family legend is to the effect that Secretary Benjamin spent a week in Tampa concealed in the home of Captain James McKay before going to Ellenton."<sup>11</sup> He further states that Benjamin gave James McKay his sword in appreciation for his efforts. It is interesting to note that McKay referred to the story as a "family legend."

By 1950, a combination version of events appeared. In Karl Grismer's *Tampa*, edited by D. B. McKay, both fathers, Captain James McKay and Captain Leroy G. Lesley, take Benjamin to the Gamble Mansion.<sup>12</sup> In 1959, the softened McKay story again appeared, this time in *Pioneer Florida*. Both the McKays and the Lesleys are credited for guiding Benjamin to the Gamble Mansion. "At Brooksville, Florida, he [Benjamin] enlisted the aid of Captain Leroy G. Lesley, whose son, Major John T. Lesley, took him to Tampa, where he was hidden for several days in the home of Captain James McKay."<sup>13</sup> As to what happened after the McKays drop Benjamin off in Manatee, the Lesley theory continues, as do the ideas of other historians.

After about two weeks, and one Federal raid, Benjamin left the Gamble Mansion for a more secluded hiding place. Some sources place him at the home of Captain Frederick Tresca, who was one of the two men who took Benjamin to the Bahamas. This is as likely as any story. By his own account, Benjamin spent almost a month in central Florida waiting for a boat to take him to Cuba or the Bahamas. A boat was finally found, probably in Clearwater, and Benjamin was taken overland to Sarasota Bay to meet it.

The two men who agreed to sail Benjamin to the Bahamas were Captain Tresca and

Hiram A. McLeod. They left, according to Benjamin, on June 23. The trip was necessarily slow; they had to resupply often, remain vigilant for Union gunboats, and the weather did not always cooperate. On two separate occasions their boat was chased by Federal ships. The first time, they were able to hide near Gasparilla Island. The second time they were not as fortunate. While still on the west coast, they were boarded by a Union search party. Benjamin was able to avoid detection by donning a cook's apron and smearing himself with grease. It is sometimes reported that one of the Federal troops remarked he had never seen a Jewish cook before.<sup>14</sup>

The three men finally arrived in Bimini on or around July 10. Benjamin's voyage, and the risks inherent in it, were not over yet. Even before reaching the Bahamas, they were struck by a terrible storm, which gave Benjamin his first view of a waterspout. After arriving in Bimini, Benjamin sought passage to Nassau. He was told that a sponge boat was making the trip, and on July 13, he set off in the sponge-laden boat, bound for Nassau. After a day at sea, the sponges, which were wet when the boat left Bimini, had begun to dry and expand. The boat soon split apart and sank. Benjamin, along with three deckhands and a pot of rice, were able to get into the skiff the boat was towing behind it. They were picked up that evening by the British Lighthouse yacht *Georgina*, which itself was bound for Bimini. Back in Bimini on the 15th of July, Benjamin once again sought passage to Nassau. One source says he found Tresca and McLeod and had them take him.<sup>15</sup> Regardless, Benjamin probably arrived in Nassau on July 21, after six storm-filled days at sea.<sup>16</sup>

Fate was not through with Benjamin yet. He finally arrived in Havana on July 25, and

from there he left for Britain. His first attempt was cut short by a fire onboard his steamer. The ship was able to return to port on time, but had the fire not been noticed when it was, the ship would have been lost. His second attempt at crossing the Atlantic was successful, and on August 30, Benjamin arrived in Southampton, England.<sup>17</sup>

Benjamin could only look back in wonder over the events of the past four months. In that short span of time, Benjamin had gone from the position of Secretary of State of the Confederacy to fleeing fugitive to American ex-patriot in England. Back in Florida, nobody spoke openly about the stranger who so recently passed through their midst. While Benjamin did send some gifts of fabric and the like, his lasting legacy is his sword, enclosed in a museum's plexiglass case, not ten miles from the point where he touched American soil for the last time.

No story of Benjamin's escape is complete without the inclusion of some of the stranger assertions made by some authors of Benjamin's escape. The McKays are a source of two oddities, both mentioned above: Benjamin staying a half a mile from Fort Brooke for a week and Archibald McNeill not allowing him inside the Gamble Mansion. Other authors have different notions about Benjamin's stay at the Gamble, and how he got there. In Gussie Turner's *Turners and Allied Families*, she asserts that her relatives took part in helping to hide Benjamin. Before Major Lesley took Benjamin to the Gamble he enlisted the aid of Major William I. Turner. Major Turner hid Benjamin in a swamp on his property for several days. According to Turner's history:

The swamp was hot, steamy, and full of mosquitoes. It was quite a trial for Benjamin who was used to a life of luxury. The Turner Family was so afraid

that he would be discovered that they gave him food only once a day. This was late in the afternoon when they went into the swamp to feed the hogs. They never went into the swamp in the same place, but entered from a different direction each time they carried food to Benjamin and the hogs.<sup>18</sup>

Perhaps the best story centers around how Benjamin found the Gamble Mansion. Two of Benjamin's biographers, Meade (1943), and Evans (1988) have similar stories about Benjamin finding a parrot. In both stories, Benjamin is resting on the side of the road when he hears a voice say, "Hi for Jeff." At first he thinks he is just tired and hearing things, but the voice repeats itself several times. He finally notices a parrot in a nearby tree. He throws some stones at the bird, in an effort to make it take flight, hopefully leading him to the bird's owner. In Meade's version, the owner is a Confederate sympathizer who gives Benjamin some clothes and food.<sup>19</sup>

In Evans's book, an implication is made that the bird's owner lived at the Gamble Mansion. He states that the owner of the bird let Benjamin stay for a few days at his house, and while he was there, the house was raided by a Federal search party. Benjamin was forced to run out of the kitchen door and into the nearby thickets. The homeowner's dog followed him, and Benjamin had to scoop the dog into his arms to hold his mouth closed. This is very similar to a story which appears in other sources, only the Gamble Mansion is mentioned, and it is McNeill who has to pick up and quiet the dog.

How exactly did Benjamin get out of Dixie? Authors have been writing about his journey for over one hundred and thirty years. Whatever the content, the stories of



Benjamin's escape from the United States are very interesting. More importantly, they all add something to our understanding of the past.

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<sup>1</sup> *New York Times*, August 3, 1865, 4.

<sup>2</sup> Hiram A. McLeod was interviewed by a reporter from the Galveston *Daily News*, and that interview appeared in the May 27, 1894 edition of that paper. The Historical Records and State Archives Surveys of the Works Progress Administration compiled this interview into a history of Benjamin's escape, published in Jacksonville, Florida, in 1937.

<sup>3</sup> Pierce Butler, *Judah P. Benjamin* (Philadelphia, 1906), 363-364. Letter from Benjamin to one of his sisters, Mrs. Kruttschnitt, dated July 22, 1865, from Nassau, Bahamas.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 363.

<sup>5</sup> Excerpt from a letter from Theodore Lesley to Mr. C. H. Schaffer of the Florida Park Service, dated March 1, 1957. Theodore Lesley wrote to many people on the topic of his family's role in the escape of Benjamin. Lesley Collection, University of South Florida Library Special Collections. For another account of the Lesley version, see Donald J. Ivey, "John T Lesley: Tampa's Pioneer Renaissance Man," *Sunland Tribune* 21 (November 1995), 8. Also, Hernando pioneer, Samuel E. Hope, backed up the Lesley version in a letter to the *Confederate Veteran* magazine in 1910. See *Confederate Veteran* 18 (June 1910), 263.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> John L. Hackney, "Tampa Safe Haven for Judah Benjamin," *Tampa Daily Times*, April 5, 1927, 2B. Hackney spells McNeill's name McNeal.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Tampa Daily Times*, June 3, 1935.

<sup>11</sup> Donald B. McKay, "The Pioneer Florida Page," *Tampa Sunday Tribune*, December 16, 1956. A Gamble Mansion brochure, prepared by the Florida Park Service in the 1950s (?), states: "Later on, from abroad, he [Benjamin] sent a bolt of silk dress goods, buttons, needles and thread to Mrs. Lesley. He sent

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similar gifts to Mrs. McNeill, Mrs. Tresca and to others to show his gratitude. To Captain McKay he sent an inscribed sabre which is on exhibit at the Memorial." (emphasis added)

<sup>12</sup> Karl Grismer, *Tampa: A History of the City of Tampa and the Tampa Bay Area of Florida*, edited by Donald B. McKay (St. Petersburg, 1950), 149.

<sup>13</sup> Donald B. McKay, *Pioneer Florida*, 3 vols. (Tampa, 1959), 3: 182.

<sup>14</sup> The following sources use the 'cook disguise' in their treatments of Benjamin's escape: Lillie B. McDuffee, *The Lures of Manatee: A True Story of South Florida's Glamorous Past* (Manatee, 1933); Grismer; Hackney; McKay, *Pioneer Florida*; Eli Evans, *Judah P. Benjamin: The Jewish Confederate* (New York, 1988); Robert Douthat Meade, *Judah P. Benjamin: Confederate Statesman* (London, 1943); and a letter written to the *Savannah Morning News*, April 15, 1877 (April 20, 1877 edition) by E.M.G. It is interesting to note that McLeod never mentioned the disguise in his account of Benjamin's escape. A. J. Hanna's *Flight Into Oblivion* does not mention this episode. Hanna remains impartial in the Lesley/McKay debate, stating the Lesley side and referring readers to an *Atlanta Journal* (March 10, 1935) article which covers the McKay theory.

<sup>15</sup> Meade, 321.

<sup>16</sup> Evans, 318-320.

<sup>17</sup> Meade, 325.

<sup>18</sup> Gussie W. Turner, *Turners and Allied Families* (Bradenton, 1989), 65.

<sup>19</sup> Meade, 319.