Judah Benjamin: The Man and the Statesman

Neil Schaefer
Judah Benjamin:  
The Man and the Statesman

Neil Schaefer

Seminar Paper
Presented to the Department of History  
Western Oregon University  
in partial fulfillment  
of the requirement for the degree of  
Bachelor of Science  
Spring 2002

Approved ____________________________ Date __________

Approved ____________________________ Date __________

Hst 499: Dr. N.P. Sil (Spring 2002)
I

Jews in the pre-Civil War period were split just like many other Americans. Jews in the south supported slavery and some supported the Union in the north. Being a small minority in the United States, Jews faced many challenges of discrimination that stemmed from similar beliefs in Europe and other parts of the world. New Orleans was a safe haven for Jewish people in the early to mid 19th century allowing them to succeed in areas that may have proved to be more challenging in the north. Many young Jews found opportunities in the south, including an aggressive young man by the name of Judah Philip Benjamin. He overcame a childhood as a member of an underprivileged minority and a despised religion to become a famous and influential statesman because of his drive and passion for the law and his ability to communicate and inspire those around him. He was powerful a advocate of whatever group he represented. His orator skills and his ability to rise to the top were his strong points, earning him many accomplishments. This ability enabled him to be at the top of his class in school, made him a prominent lawyer and senator in the south, and a successful statesman in the Confederate government. He even was able to rise to the top level of achievement as a lawyer in England after his escape from the fallen Confederacy. Judah Benjamin achieved nearly all of the goals he set for himself, perhaps with the exception of the survival of the Confederacy.
He was significant in the issues of the times. In Louisiana, he was influential in the commercial growth of the area, in the Senate he was an advocate for the policies favoring the South, in the Confederacy he was the chief strategist for the military and foreign affairs, and in England he was again influential in the area of law. He went from being a disadvantaged Jewish boy in the South to one of the most powerful and influential persons in the Confederate government. He was honored with his portrait on the two-dollar Confederate bill.

II

Not much is known about the history of the Benjamin family. "There never was a family whose members seemed to know so little of their own history," observed one of his nephews.  

Judah was born a British citizen on August 11, 1811 at St. Croix, a British island in the West Indies. The Benjamin family was Jewish. Judah's father, Philip, was originally from Spain and his mother, Rebecca, was originally from Portugal. In 1815 when Judah was only four years old and the war of 1812 was threatening the United States the Benjamin family moved to Charleston, South Carolina to live with an uncle in Charleston, South Carolina. His father, Philip Benjamin was Americanized in Charleston, where Rebecca had five more children, with Judah being second born. Beyond the bare minimum of his education, not much is known about Judah's early history.

Judah was a very bright young man. His parents thought education was the first priority of his life so they enrolled him in Fayetteville Academy where he excelled, rising

---

3 Ibid., 4
to the top of his class. Fayetteville Academy was a school known for its distinct scholars from various southern states. He attended this academy with many men who would one day gain national recognition as United States Senators and even a Vice-President. He was the motivated studious type, who studied through recess while other children played. In 1825 while only fourteen years old, Judah Benjamin enrolled at Yale. His family was not wealthy enough to pay for this prestigious education, but he was lucky enough to find generous friends to sponsor him. Since its birth in 1718, Yale had committed itself to producing some of the most prominent individuals in the United States. Nathan Hale, David Bushnell, Eli Whitney, several of the men who signed our Declaration of Independence and many other esteemed men attended Yale, proving Yale a worthy institution.

Tradition in Charleston was altered with Judah Benjamin. Normally, when a Jewish family needed money to send their children to school, a wealthy Jewish merchant and the President of the Hebrew Orphans’ Aid Society, Moses Lopez, would be the financial backer. This was not the case with Benjamin. A fellow member of Benjamin’s class at Yale stated, “his expenses were defrayed by a charitable lady of Massachusetts.” Even with this statement, inferences that Judah Benjamin made in his own writings disagree with official accounts of the mysterious financial support. Once again, a lack of records has led to another unknown part of Judah Benjamin’s life. There is no credible

---

4 Butler, Benjamin, 26.
5 Ibid., 6
7 Butler, Benjamin, 27.
source definitely identifying where Judah Philip Benjamin obtained his money to pay for three years at Yale College.

While Judah studied at Yale he discovered his true love in life: debating. He eventually decided to study law. After attending Yale from 1825 to 1827, Judah was asked to leave the College. The reasons behind his expulsion are very vague due to documentation that has since been destroyed, but it is known that he left due to "shame" related to "improper conduct." There were also speculations that Judah became involved with gambling and was stealing from other students. In Colleges such as Yale, students were held to a much higher standard in both academic and in moral conduct. Students, who did not follow both of these seriously, were removed.

After his mysterious departure from Yale, Judah wrote a letter of apology and permission to re-enter as a student:

Highly Respected Sir:

It is with shame and diffidence that I now address you to solicit your forgiveness and interference with the Faculty on my behalf. And I beseech you, Sir, not to attribute my improper conduct to any design or intentional violation of the laws of the college, nor to suppose that I would be guilty of any premeditated disrespect to yourself or any member of the faculty. And I think, Sir, you will not consider it improper for me to express my hopes that my previous conduct in college was such as will not render it too presumptuous in me to hope that it will make a favorable impression upon yourself and the faculty.

Allow me, Sir, here to express my gratitude to that Faculty for their kind indulgence to my father in regard to pecuniary affairs; and also to yourself and every individual member of the Faculty for their attention and paternal care of me, during the time I had the honor to be a member of the institution.

With hopes of yet completing my education under your auspices, I remain, sir, your most respectful and obedient servant.

---

8 Evans, Jewish Confederate, 7.
J.P. Benjamin

P.S. May I solicit, Sir (if it is not too troublesome to you) the favor of a few lines in answer to this letter, that I may be able to judge the possibility of my return to the University?10

The letter Judah wrote had some interesting points. We know that the reasons for Judah’s leaving the University are only speculation at this point. The letter does, however, indicate that he was involved in something for which he was ashamed. He apologized for his improper conduct to any design or intentional violation of the laws of the college. He also mentioned his father in the letter: “Allow me, Sir, here to express my gratitude to that Faculty for their kind indulgence to my father in regard to pecuniary affairs; and also to yourself and every individual member of the Faculty for their attention and paternal care of me, during the time I had the honor to be a member of the institution.”11 When mentioning his father on the financial affairs, it was almost as if he was using him as a scapegoat for his wrong doings. This could help explain allegations of his involvement in stealing from other students. “The needy Jewish student at Yale had been both a desperate gambler and a thief,” explained Benjamin’s roommate at Yale, who admittedly turned Benjamin in to the Faculty.12 Judah may have thought that if he explained his situation, the dean would understand and accept his apology and readmit him under a closer supervision.

The drafting of this letter did not readmit Benjamin to Yale; instead he faced years of humiliation due to his expulsion. By the time Judah was 16 years old he had suffered through the disappointment of his family, friends, benefactors, and himself.

---

10 Evans, Jewish Confederate, 20.
11 Ibid., 7.
12 Butler, Benjamin, 28.
Regardless of the reasons for his expulsion, the ongoing humiliation pushed the young man to leave it all behind and go to New Orleans where the Jewish population would work to his advantage.

III

In 1828 at the age of seventeen, Judah Benjamin arrived in New Orleans with less than five dollars in his pocket and no idea where to start. The city of New Orleans was very promising for young lawyers and Benjamin’s brief education at Yale became a positive factor in his accomplishments. New Orleans was a larger, diverse city with many opportunities to succeed for minorities who would have trouble succeeding in other big cities. New Orleans was also the home of the largest Jewish population in the United States. Louisana had become part of the United States through the Louisiana Purchase from the French in 1804. This left New Orleans a very French place with a diverse population. Until he was able to get himself established, Benjamin worked odd jobs for various companies, finally landing a job as an apprentice at a commercial law firm. At this point in his life, Judah made his first professional contacts, including a circle of other young ambitious men.

By the time Judah P. Benjamin was twenty years old, he led a life independent from his family. He was living on his own in New Orleans as an educated Jewish man. He did not like to advertise the fact that he was Jewish due to persecution and

14 Evans, Jewish Confederate, 8.
hardships.\textsuperscript{15} It was very difficult for Jewish men to succeed in the early 19\textsuperscript{th} century, but Judah was beating the odds, even at such a young age.\textsuperscript{16}

For the next few years Judah worked to build his law practice and get out on his own, but at the age of twenty-one he encountered problems. Judah had no intention at this point in his life to leave law practice, but he knew if he wanted to succeed he had to learn the Napoleonic Code, which was a the first French Civil Law Code intended to organize the legal system in France written in accordance to the French Revolution. This code was written in French, a language all too foreign to him. As a favor to a local insurance agent, Judah agreed to teach his French-speaking daughter English, if she would, in return, teach him French. Benjamin studied with the 16-year-old woman named Natalie and eventually courted her. They courted for a couple of months before he proposed marriage in 1833. To avoid religious difficulties, he used a fake name, for the Catholic ceremony and agreed to raise their children Catholic, rather than Jewish.\textsuperscript{17}

Prior to the wedding, Benjamin successfully mastered the Napoleonic Code and established a budding law practice. In 1832 he was admitted to the Louisiana State Bar and spent the next seven years handling appeals to the Louisiana Supreme Court. This far in his life, Judah Benjamin’s dreams and ambitions included the success of his law practice, the control of his family, and the avoidance of his religion. He had always resented his dramatically Jewish name; meaning “the lion” (an implication of strength and courage) because he felt his Judaism was a burden to his life.\textsuperscript{18} As Judah progressed

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{15} Butler, Benjamin, 46.
  \item \textsuperscript{16} Evans, Jewish Confederate, 13.
  \item \textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 26.
  \item \textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 5.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
in New Orleans he slowly backed away from his Jewish roots, never once being seen at the Synagogue.¹⁹

IV

Judah P. Benjamin thought of himself as Jewish, but he chose not to practice his religion. He was somewhat ashamed of his background because Jewish men had not yet proved to make a difference in society. He kept his religion partly because he wanted to be the first American-Jewish man to be successful, but also because his religion was his one connection to his parents and siblings. Judah P. Benjamin never left Judaism for Catholicism, but when his first child was born, he stuck with his promise to raise her Catholic.²⁰

In the early 1800’s New Orleans had the largest Jewish population in not only the South, but the entire United States. This of course made it much more possible for Americans with Jewish backgrounds to have the opportunities that may not have been possible in other parts of the United States. The Jewish faith was changing, not only in the United States, but also all over the world. Jews were making their way out of the ghettos and integrating themselves into the modern world, to practice their religion and their trades. Their jaunt into the modern world brought about some change in themselves and the importance of their religion. “The Jewish community was wondering if there was really any aspect of Judaism worth retaining.”²¹

Many changes were brought to the Jewish people. By 1828 the cry for a different form of Orthodox religion was so strong that the First Reform Congregations in New

²⁰ See Evans, Jewish Confederate, 26.
²¹ Bertram Wallace Korn, The Early Jews of New Orleans, (Waltham, Massachusetts, American Jewish Historical Society, 1969), 211.
York and Baltimore were founded. It was not until 1853 that Reform Judaism, the Reform Temple Sinai, had come to New Orleans. This reform abolished dietary laws, changed the day of worship from Saturday to match the Christian religions on Sunday. Also, Biblical laws that defined Judaism were changed to match that of a more contemporary life and modern culture.\textsuperscript{22} It was also the view of Bertram Wallace Korn, who claimed that it was after the Louisiana Purchase before Jewish immigrants really started to migrate to the south including the New Orleans. Due to the city being both accepting as well as lax towards different religions, it was easy for people to blend into the New Orleans culture.\textsuperscript{23} It was also not uncommon for Jewish families to allow family members to give up Judaism and take up the more accepted religion of Catholicism.\textsuperscript{24}

In the attempt to complete a few of his dreams and ambitions, Benjamin ruined other opportunities and goals that he held. His law practice did, indeed, begin to succeed, and he became a very wealthy and well-known lawyer in the South. Yet his relationship with his wife, Natalie, and his daughter, Nettie, suffered from his professional success. He spoiled the two women in his life with wealth, but at the same time he neglected them. Benjamin would buy his wife and daughter anything they desired and would try to gain their love through material items, rather than the traditional love and affection. His career blossomed and he thought it was best to move the family out to Bellechasse into a massive mansion. Bellechasse was a large sugar plantation in the Parish of Plaquemine, located below New Orleans.\textsuperscript{25} Natalie Benjamin was isolated in her new life because

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 245.  
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 212.  
\textsuperscript{24} While New Orleans became the commercial hub of the Gulf and the Caribbean, many Jewish merchant families established themselves there.  
\textsuperscript{25} Butler, Benjamin, 48.
Judah was so absorbed with his overly successful career and was not willing to integrate his family and work life.26

Judah Benjamin was very flexible as a child and his adaptation skills proved to be a major collaborator to his ever-changing environment and life. This was due to the move from British lands to American lands as a young boy. He was fairly laid back and willing to adjust his life to whatever the given situation. Yet, one aspect of his upbringing left him lacking the knowledge of stable family life. Judah’s parents had separated when he was a young boy so he did not know what it was like to have a strong family.

When Benjamin was married and had a child, the influence of his parents and their dedication to their careers became too overbearing. He married Natalie and soon had very similar experiences. Mr. Benjamin was unable to find an even balance between his wife and his career, thus dooming his marriage forever. Realistically he knew that he would not be able to successfully balance a wife from such a different background with his career. Natalie Benjamin grew up with a father who worked in the family owned shop and her mother stayed home with her. When she married Benjamin it was a shock to her lifestyle to have a husband who was always working and not able to dedicate much time to her and their family.27

Judah Philip Benjamin’s career continued to blossom, but as he tried to raise social classes to become a gentleman of property and to transcend his birth status, Natalie felt she could no longer stand beside him. Feeling uncared for and misused, Natalie packed up her only child and sailed to Europe. In resentment of the fact that his wife left

27 Ibid., 106-7.
him due to his career and success, Judah decided to sell his first house in Bellechasse and build yet a bigger and more glorious house. His new home had over twenty rooms and every fixture was top-of-the-line, with no details overlooked. Soon after, finding less contentment now than before, Benjamin left Bellechasse altogether and went back home to New Orleans.²⁸ He had succeeded in one of the ambitions he had at twenty years old, but in the process he ruined another.

Back in New Orleans, Benjamin made his name as the leading commercial lawyer in the city by 1842 at only thirty-one years of age. At this time in his career he was representing insurance companies who were being sued by slave owners to recover the slaves they had lost because of an uprising sea on the brig Creole.²⁹ Being a pragmatist, he accepted what he could not change and build his career on issues he could influence.³⁰ Having this stance in his life led him into politics. This was the first change in an upcoming shift in his life style.

VI

The start of Judah Benjamin’s political career was in the lower house of the state legislature when he was elected as a Whig in the later part of 1842. Ten years later, he was elected to the United States Senate.³¹ During his first term as a U.S. Senator, Benjamin decided it was time to make up for misguided dreams regarding Natalie and his daughter. Experiencing financial trouble for the first time in years due to flooded crops at the abandoned Bellechasse plantation, Benjamin sold the house and bought a more

²⁸ Ibid., 35.
³⁰ Evans, Jewish Confederate, 37.
³¹ Goodhart, Five Jewish Lawyers, 8.
modest house in Washington D.C. He enticed Natalie from Paris to Washington to reenter his life as Mrs. Benjamin. He made promises of balls and parties and spent over ten thousand dollars to prepare the house for her homecoming. In 1859 Natalie left again, for the last time. She felt that Judah idolized her and gave her everything, except the love needed to make a marriage and a family work. She went back to Europe and never set foot in the United States again. At this point, Judah realized his dreams of having a family were no longer as important for him anymore. He was relieved when Natalie left him because she had wrecked his life in Washington. Natalie created drama and had a continuous cloud of rumors within the Congressional ladies. The rumors and constant chatter regarding Natalie created emotional stress and personal humiliation for Benjamin. With Natalie and Nettie back in Paris, Mr. Benjamin could return to his work and continue to lead a life driven by his political career.\(^{32}\)

Following his election to the United States Senate in 1852, J.P. Benjamin was immediately recognized as one of the keenest debaters and the most finished orators in the body of the Senate. He was also the first Jew in American history to be elected to the United States Senate and was reelected in 1858 after allying himself with the Democrats. Benjamin was elected in 1852 as a Whig, but in 1858 the issue of slavery and the election of the New Republican Lincoln corresponded to the collapse of the Whig party, this caused him run as a Democrat.\(^{33}\) Before he could actually take his seat in early 1853, President Millard Fillmore nominated him as a justice to an open position in the United States Supreme Court. It was a seat that was offered to a Southerner who was to represent the southern ideals of Alabama and Louisiana. The Senate was not going to

---

\(^{32}\) See Evans, *Jewish Confederate*, 105.

\(^{33}\) Robbins, *Jefferson Davis*, 3.
approve any nominations of the Whig President and they rejected all three previous candidates. If Fillmore nominated Benjamin, the Senate was expected to confirm his nomination.\textsuperscript{34} This was indeed the highest honor ever received by a Jewish-American man. Benjamin decided to decline the honorable nomination in favor of a more active political career.\textsuperscript{35} While Benjamin was in the Senate he made friends with Jefferson Davis, a fellow Senator, after an argument in which included name-calling directed at Benjamin. Benjamin's response to Senator Davis was a formal challenge to a duel later that day. Davis knew that he had been wrong in his accusations and apologized to Benjamin the next day. This started a long and eventful friendship.\textsuperscript{36}

Like all Southerners, Benjamin's life took a sudden jolt in late 1860. In November of 1860, the Southern states made preparations to secede from the Union and in February of 1861, Louisiana did secede. At this point, in loyalty to Louisiana, Benjamin left his Senate career behind to accept the position of Attorney General of the Confederate States of America to which he was appointed by friend and Confederate President, Jefferson Davis.\textsuperscript{37} As secession was underway, participants viewed it much like a second American Revolution. "The tea has been thrown overboard," declared the \textit{Charleston Mercury} when Lincoln was elected to the presidency. "The revolution of 1860 has been initiated," observed Pierre Soule, former leader of the Douglas Democrats in Louisiana. Senator Judah P. Benjamin of Louisiana described the "wild torrent of passion" that was "carrying everything before it" as "a revolution; a revolution of the most intense character" that could "no more be checked by human effort than a prairie

\textsuperscript{34} Evans, \textit{Jewish Confederate}, 83.
\textsuperscript{35} Goodhart, \textit{Five Jewish Lawyers}, 8.
\textsuperscript{36} Robbins, \textit{Jefferson Davis}, 4.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 8.
fire by a gardener’s watering pot.”38 Senator Benjamin, along with many other southern Senators, supported the “revolution” or succession without any reservations.

VII

Many people thought Benjamin was very successful as a lawyer and as a Senator, while others felt the exact opposite. In fact one biographer thought Judah P. Benjamin’s entire life was a huge failure. “He should not have failed. He may have been a great lawyer. To be a great man, he failed too often.”39 He was thought to have failed in his military career as well. Benjamin was named Attorney General and quickly passed on to Secretary of War when Walker retired due to poor health. The same biographer stated that Judah Benjamin did not have any special military knowledge so he was obnoxious to the soldiers.40 When he was Secretary of War, many of the Confederate generals opposed to his vigorous administration and he struggled to gain recognition from Great Britain and France. Recalling Benjamin’s lack of military experience, the conflicts he encountered were expected. His lack of experience insured that he was unlikely to urge an independent point of view.41

While Benjamin was Secretary of War he wrote a letter to General Johnson regarding the loss at Fort Henry and Fort Donalson under Brigadier-Generals Floyd and Pillow, who withdrew to avoid being taken prisoner by the Union troops. The Letter to General Johnson as follows:

40 Ibid., 118.
41 Goss, Books of the Times, C29.
The reports of Brigadier-Generals Floyd and Pillow are unsatisfactory, and the President directs that both of these generals be relieved from command until further orders. In the mean time you will request them to add to their reports such statements, as they may deem proper on the points submitted. You are further requested to make up a report, from all the sources of information accessible to you, of all the particulars connected with the unfortunate affair, which can contribute to enlighten the judgment of the Executive and of Congress, and to fix the blame, if blame there be, on those who are delinquent in duty.

J.P. Benjamin

This letter was written when the South was in retreat. Several battles had been lost in Tennessee and the South was looking for options and answers. Benjamin’s letter could be looked at in two different ways. First, it may have been written out of anger due to the Confederate losses. Punishment for their losses may very well be what Benjamin had in mind. Second, Benjamin could have been extremely cautious. He didn’t want second-rate Generals fighting in his army. Most likely, it can be attributed to his experience in law and finance. When numbers did not add up and laws were broken there were changes that had to be made. Benjamin was a very successful lawyer and later proved to be a great Secretary of State, but leading an army may have been his weakness.

VIII

The area where Judah Benjamin flourished was in his logical thinking, due to his many years of legal education and vast experience as a lawyer. He predicted the Civil War would be a long one, so he urged the government to ship 100,000 bails of cotton to England so the South could buy arms and ammunition with the proceeds. Unfortunately, the Southern government did not follow his suggestions and the South lost the war partly

---

due to lack of arms. Had they taken his advice, the South might have a chance at winning the Civil War.

The 100,000 bales of cotton had also been considered a bribe, in hopes of getting the French on the Confederate side and breaking the Northern blockade. Benjamin speculated that the bales would cost the Confederacy a sum of $4.5 million, but would correspond to a grant from France of $12.5 million at the market price of twenty-five cents per pound in Europe. Benjamin hoped that the French would take up his offer, break the blockade, and consider free trade with the Confederate States of America. John Slidell was the agent in charge of this operation. In an interview with Napoleon, Slidell found that France wanted to help and respected the Confederacy. Napoleon III supported that if England continued to procrastinate, the French would act alone in sending aid to the South. Napoleon’s final decision however, was to not act until England would also commit. Support for the Confederacy was not popular in Europe. Benjamin’s failure to secure French recognition for the Confederacy, break the Northern blockade, and sign trade treaties was no fault of Secretary of State, Judah P. Benjamin. The Confederacy lost because of the shortcomings of its armies and the surplus of cotton in Europe in this time period.

Later, in another bold attempt to get European support, Benjamin proposed to offer slaves freedom if they enlisted and fought in the army. He presented this offer in the African Church in Richmond in February of 1865, with the full support of Jefferson

43 Goodhart, Five Jewish Lawyers, 8.
Davis. Davis was normally opposed to arming slaves, but in the Confederacy's desperate situation he saw the need. This act would not only increase the manpower of the Confederacy, but also attract the Europeans who had outlawed slavery previous to the American Civil War. On February 10, 1865, bills were introduced to the Senate and the House approved, and signed into law only one month before the surrender at Appomattox.46

After his appointment as the Secretary of State in March of 1862, Benjamin's ability as a politician proved to be prominent. He received one of the Confederacy's highest honors when his portrait was printed on the Confederate two-dollar bill. There is no evidence of what this bill was really worth, but as a statesman his image was prominent. Benjamin was involved in several operations had intentions of not only to hurt the Union, but also to help the Confederacy gain trade partners with Europe. Benjamin appointed several diplomats and agents to travel to Europe in hopes to win over the English and the French by way of propaganda. He used men such as Henry Hotze and James Murray Mason as tools to promote the Confederate agenda. Hotze was in charge of overseeing the production of a daily newspaper in England called The Index. This paper spread propaganda intended to gather support from the British. Short on money, the Confederate agents accomplished what they could. In a letter to Hotze, Benjamin expressed his approval, writing...
Your dispatch continues to afford interesting and gratifying proof of the intelligent zeal with which you are performing your duties...I have had occasion to examine The Index more particularly since I last wrote and observe a progressive and marked improvement in its contents. Your plan of engaging the services of writers employed in the leading daily papers and thereby securing not only their cooperation but educating them into such knowledge of our affairs as will enable them to counteract effectually the misrepresentation of the Northern agents appears to be judicious and effective.47

The conclusion of the letter also included a budget increase for Hotze for his project in England authorized by President Davis. In a return letter, Hotze thanked Benjamin and assured him and President Davis that the increased funds would be ample for the proper development of his plans.

James Murray Mason was also working in Europe, particularly in France. His job was to encourage the French and the British to aid and recognize the Confederacy. In a letter to Mason, Benjamin said that there were indications France and England would soon recognize the Confederacy. He felt that it was a favorable time to encourage the English and the French to come to the rescue, by restoring the pre-blockade conditions and obtain a monopoly on trade with the Confederacy. Mason stated in a letter to Benjamin that the Europeans would soon recognize the Confederate States and trade would soon follow.48

The Confederate propaganda also consisted of demonizing the North and their current financial conditions. In a letter to the Honorable Dudley Mann in Brussels, Belgium, Secretary of State Judah Benjamin wrote on the struggling conditions in the North. He state:

For some months past the United States have been able to uphold their sinking finances by the sale of large amounts of public stocks in the German markets. These sales are reported to have reached a total varying for thirty-one million pounds of sterling. The annual interest on the public debt was at the end of last month, $81,778,649. This sum already exceeds the total revenue of the United States as it exists prior to the succession of the Southern States. That revenue, at derived from all sources and form all the States thus united, amounted, for the year ending June 30, 1860, to $76,752,039.49

Benjamin used this financial information to persuade the Europeans to support and defend the position of the Confederacy. By undermining the Union’s financial situation, Benjamin argued the British and French, would be better off developing ties to the Southern States. He went on to say,

The facts thus presented demonstrates that if the United States persists, as it now threatens, in carrying out on the war for another year, the burden of their public debt will be such as to render it absolutely impossible for them to pay, even if actuated, with entire unanimity, by a sincere desire to meet their obligations.50

This letter was intended to undermine the position of the United States and consolidate support for the South. Benjamin proved himself an effective Secretary of State by his involvement in gathering support for the Confederacy. The foreign policy seemed to have merit where the domestic policies of the Confederacy could have used some more attention.

Although the Confederate States had a well-trained army, a legitimate reason for secession, and great leadership, they failed to supply the military. On April 2, 1865 General Lee officially surrendered to Grant and the South lost the war. In fear of the probability that the leaders of the Confederacy would be tried for treason and executed, Benjamin and the other leaders fled the country. Benjamin disguised himself as a

50 Ibid.
Frenchman and rode horseback, determined he would never be taken alive. In an attempt to avoid detection, Benjamin and Davis decided it was time to end their companionship and they agreed to part, off to their own separate lives. Judah acquired a wagon and horse and crossed Georgia into Florida. He hoped that in Florida he would find a way to escape into the West Indies, but he could not. After many trials, he finally hired a fishing boat and made it to England in August 1865 at the age of 54.

IX

When Judah Benjamin reached England, he restarted his career as a lawyer and even contemplated going to Paris in search of Natalie. His love for the law and need for income made him decide to stay in England and enroll as a law student at the Inns of Court in London in January 1866. Since Benjamin was born on the British Island of St. Croix in the West Indies he was able to reclaim his right to British citizenship. Times were tough at first for Benjamin. His letters to his friends back in New Orleans indicated that for the first few years, work was slow. He occupied his time by writing a book, *The Sale of Personal Property*. The publication of this book increased his opportunities and encouraged English solicitors to send him clients. His law practice was once again alive. By the mid 1870's, he was one of the most successful lawyers in England. In a short span of only six years he had risen to the top rank in his profession, the Queen's Council.

---

52 Ibid., 25.
His income rose to an estimated $200,000 a year by the last few years of his practice.\textsuperscript{54}

He showed that he was capable of again starting from scratch and proving his ability in law.

The thought of searching for his wife and daughter came to him as an option now that he was living in Europe, but he decided that he valued his independence and practiced his true love, the law.\textsuperscript{55} In a letter to the English Bar in reply to a kind welcoming letter, Benjamin wrote:

\begin{quote}
From the bar of England I never, so far as I am aware, received anything but a warm and kindly welcome. I never had occasion to feel that anyone regarded me as an intruder. I never felt a touch of professional jealousy. I never received any unkindness. On the contrary, from all quarters I received a warm and cordial welcome to which, as a stranger, I had no title, except that I was a political exile, seeking by honorable labor to retrieve shattered fortunes, wrecked in the ruins of a lost cause.\textsuperscript{56}
\end{quote}

Benjamin practiced law until the end of his life. On May 6, 1884, Judah P. Benjamin died in Paris, France. He was buried in a Catholic cemetery at P'ere Lachaise, identified only as Philippe Benjamin with nothing on his gravestone to prove he

\textsuperscript{54} "Judah P. Benjamin," \textit{The Green Bag}, 1, no.9, (1889): 365-66.
\textsuperscript{55} Naresh, \textit{English Bar}, 2.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 5.
was anyone other than an ordinary person. This was later changed to reveal his correct name and honor him as the statesman he was. His death proved his dedication to his career, for as long as he could still work, he could live, but with out his career Judah had nothing. He had withdrawn completely into his hard work, loneliness, isolation, and life without intimacy; so once his career ended, he had nothing more worth accomplishing.

Right before his death, he rekindled the relationship with his long-estranged family, but his dreams of being close were long past and Benjamin never had the dedication to his family that he had for his career. Benjamin had not kept in contact with his daughter until he moved to Paris for the last few years of his life. Once in Paris, Judah Benjamin and his daughter formed a close relationship and a few weeks before his death he walked his daughter down the aisle at her wedding.

There is much controversy considering Judah’s escape from the United States. Congress believed that Judah P. Benjamin could not be trusted after being the Confederacy’s Secretary of War. At the same time Judah fled from the United States, the Confederacy’s gold disappeared. Various leaders from the Union had suggested that Benjamin took the gold with him to prevent the Union from capturing it. Although there has never been any proof of this accusation, Judah Benjamin always kept his composure and stayed under control.

57 Philippe Benjamin was used on his grave stone to associate him with the Catholic Church rather than his Jewish faith.
58 Ibid., 13.
59 Evans, Jewish Confederate, 403.
60 Robbins, Jefferson Davis, 52.
61 Bradford, Portraits, 130.
62 Hertzberg, Escaping, 7.
X

Judah P. Benjamin led a very active and controversial life. He had many varying occupations some which contributed to society and controversial because of the lack of information about his life. Before Benjamin died, he burned all of his personal papers and documentation of his life.\(^\text{63}\) Lacking biographical information, historians had to piece together fragmentary evidence of Benjamin’s life. The information is so scarce that in retrospect some historians have even made the accusation that Judah Benjamin was involved in the plot for Lincoln’s assassination.\(^\text{64}\) These historians dislike Benjamin and have found enough holes in his past that the assassination plot could have been a product of Judah P. Benjamin. Judah’s life has been left to the historian’s interpretation. Many historians and biographers believe that Benjamin was highly intelligent, an outstanding orator, and had great success as a lawyer, planter and politician.\(^\text{65}\) Another states, “The truth is, he was a man placed in a position too large for him, and he rattles about in it...In short he was a rather ineffectual gentleman.”\(^\text{66}\) Whether Judah Benjamin was successful or not is relative to the historians’ interpretation. He did, however, prove himself a capable leader and statesman during his public life. He rose to the top in almost every situation he involved himself in.

Judah P. Benjamin was not a product of the world of which he was born. He had the strength and intelligence to counteract society and societal expectations of him. He did not fulfill all of his expected ambitions from age twenty, but he did accomplish more than he ever expected of himself. He went to a well-known college; he led the most

\(^{63}\) Ibid., 18.
\(^{64}\) Goss, "Books of the Times", 7.
\(^{65}\) Robbins, Jefferson Davis, 52.
\(^{66}\) Bradford, Portraits, 149-50.
successful law and political career of any Jewish man in his historical era, he was the only significant Jewish leader in the Confederacy during the Civil War, and continued his strive for excellence in Europe. In this sense, his life did take an unexpected course. When he left his family in 1828, they thought he would disappear and never make a difference in this world, but 175 years later Judah Philip Benjamin is still talked and written about. He proved himself a capable and prominent politician.

Where Benjamin inherited his leadership skills is unknown. Of course, some people do not believe that Judah possessed any at all, therefore the question does not need to be answered, but other people believe that he was one of the greatest men of the Confederacy. Neither Judah's parents nor grandparents were involved in military, law, or even the government. His father was a shop owner and his mother made dried fruit. Judah was a man of mystery without leaving any leeway to investigate his character. Had Judah not burned all personal documents from his life, it would be much easier to determine the positions and beliefs behind this man of law, politics, and war.
Bibliography


O’Eugenio, Rosalind. Yale University Celebrates 300 Years of Academic History