

## John Forbes Benjamin

Just as all families have the proverbial "Black Sheep," so perhaps, does every city and hamlet have a comparable person in the annals of their history. From records and from recollections of old timers, John Forbes Benjamin left memorable, if not honorable, footprints on Shelby's sands of time.



Benjamin was a native of New York, born in 1817. He came to Shelby county at an early date, sometime before 1846, and settled at Shelbyville. He was an attorney of no ordinary ability and was possessed of a great shrewdness, sagacity and aptness for money making. He took advantage of every legitimate (and according to reliable sources, many not so legitimate) means to add to his finances. One of his notoriously "shady" deals was the popularly told story of bribes to keep young men out of the war. This "blood" money was added to by his successful trek with the 49ers.

Evidently the man was a combination of Dr. Jeckyl and M. Hyde. It is reported by those who knew him best that he was an excellent Sunday school teacher and could make such a beautiful prayer it would bring tears to the eyes of a sinner. Nevertheless, in time Mr. Benjamin became possessed of a considerable fortune, estimated at about \$75,000.

After the war Benjamin and his wife, Diana, moved from Shelbyville to Shelbyna where he built a handsome and comfortable house costing over \$15,000. All the reports regarding Mrs. Benjamin are complimentary and pitying. To intimates she related she and her husband had been happy until his political position had taken him to Washington and she had been left alone, except for servants. Too, it seems Mr. Benjamin held firmly to the purse strings as far as his wife was concerned. One of Shelbyna's store owners reported Mrs. Benjamin as coming in and having the necessary yardage of calico laid back for a dress because she had no money to pay for it. The merchant insisted that she take the material and pay for it later, which she did.

The Benjamins were childless, and while in Washington Benjamin formed the acquaintance of some ladies named Welsh. One, Miss Minnie Welsh, he took under his patronage and gave assistance financially and in many other ways. Following her marriage to a man named Hammond, he assumed similar companionship with her sister, Guy H., a beautiful and winsome lady, but guilty of breaches of propriety becoming a lady. Married to a Mr. Allen, she eloped from him at Los Angeles, Calif., and in male attire concealed herself in the stateroom of Mr. Benjamin on board a vessel bound for San Francisco. She was apprehended and the elopement frustrated.

In Washington and elsewhere General Benjamin introduced Guy Allen as his adopted daughter and she called him "papa." She made at least one trip to Shelbyville with him and with him elsewhere on various occasions. It was never questioned that the general, old and mature as he was, was very much attracted to, if not infatuated with the fascinating young lady. Her enemies alleged that his relations with her were illicit, as had been those he formerly maintained with her sister. Mrs. Benjamin did not recognize Guy Allen as any adopted daughter, nor did she approve of her intimacy and familiarity with the general. Mrs. Benjamin and some of her friends had been informed that Mrs. Allen was a Washington adventuress, pretty and engaging but wily and wicked.

In April 1876, while at Shelbyna, Benjamin made a will which was witnessed by W. A. Reid, Daniel Taylor and other citizens of the county. By the provisions of the will Guy Allen was to receive specific legacy to the General's military clothing and equipment, his private silver plate and his diamonds. She was also to receive the income from the proceeds of the investment on one-half of his estate remaining after certain other legacies had been paid. The investment was to be made in U. S. or Missouri bonds, the interest which was to



Most Famous House in Shelbyna, "The Benjamin House," built in 1874 by "Old Col. Benjamin," one of first two brick houses in town, furnished with silver plated plumbing and imported marble fireplaces.

be paid to Mrs. Allen during her life and "not to be controlled by her husband."

Also in the will the general directed there should be erected over his grave a monument costing not more than \$5,000 on which should be inscribed: "John Forbes Benjamin, born in Cicero, N. Y., Jan. 23, 1817, died at . . . , 18 - - . A captain, major, lieutenant colonel and brigadier in the Federal Army, and a member of the 39th, 40th and 41st congresses."

In Washington the rooms of General Benjamin and those of Mrs. Allen adjoined and communicated. In the early winter of 1877 General Benjamin suffered from colds and neuralgia. On the first of March he was seized with a violent attack of pleuro-pneumonia and died March 8. At the time of his death Mrs. Allen was lying very ill in an adjoining room and was not told of his death until 10 days after it occurred. The General's body was shipped to Shelbyna where it was buried in the lawn in front of his house.

The will was one of the most hotly contested in the annals of the state.

The immediate relatives attempted to set aside the will and in April, 1878 brought suit in the Shelby county circuit court to have it set aside, on the ground that it had been fraudulently obtained and made; that the principal beneficiary, Mrs. Guy H. Allen, had an undue influence over the testator, etc. It was insinuated that there had been foul play in the transaction. Some even thought the general had been drugged in his last illness and that a will different from the one shown had been his original and last will.

After two "hung" juries in Shelby county, and a third trial upholding the will, the Supreme Court of the United States finally ruled on April 15, 1886 in favor of Mrs. Allen and the Washington executors. All opposition was then withdrawn and the will was probated.

Mrs. Benjamin, the widow of the General, did not survive him but a few months. She died in Shelbyna the following summer and was not buried beside her husband, but in the Shelbyville cemetery, and as yet there is no stone to mark her grave, or that of her husband. His remains were moved to the Shelbyville cemetery June 12, 1889 by the Grand Army of the Republic, and interred beside his wife.

With no marker and no glowing epitaph to leave as a reminder of one who made history, of a kind, he was remembered by the old people who knew him, only as "Old Benjamin."