

BENJAMIN, George (cont)

If Benjamin had thought about it, he would have realized that

he had achieved an enormous amount in the two short years he had been in Belleville. Not four months earlier he had scored a remarkable electoral triumph. On January 4, 1836 at the annual Thurlow Township meeting in the Belleville courthouse, Benjamin ran for the office of clerk (or chairman) of the township, which included Belleville. A vote by show of hands gave Benjamin 69 votes to 68 for Dr. Anson Hayden of Hayden's Corners. After a written ballot was demanded, both candidates rounded up additional supporters and the final vote gave Benjamin the clerkship by a count of 144 to 122.

The victory of such a recent arrival was strong evidence of the confidence in which Benjamin was held by the community. But it was more than that. Benjamin had made no secret of his religion. The previous summer, he had been listed as one of the members who donated to the fund for the new synagogue building in Montreal. Benjamin must have been aware of how unusual it was for a Jew to be elected to public office. In fact, his election as clerk was the first recorded instance of a Jew being elected to municipal office in British North America. A month later, Benjamin had added another office to his list of achievements. On February 18, 1836, Lieutenant Governor Francis Bond Head granted him a commission as a

notary public entitled to swear oaths. This was the first such recorded appointment of a Jew by a Canadian government, although Eleazer Levy of Quebec had received a similar appointment by imperial commission from Britain, 70 years earlier.

In Benjamin was to think back 1836, probably the most important thing he had done since he arrived in town was the launching of the *Intelligencer* in September, 1834. Its motto called for a contented populace. "Let there be harmony in things essential," it ran, "Liberality in things not essential, Charity in all." Benjamin's prospectus had promised to be "just and advantageous alike to the governed and governing. If men are anxious to shine as political writers," he wrote, "let them adopt a fair, honest course for the welfare of the public." Notwithstanding its professed independence, the *Intelligencer* was labelled as conservative by others. Benjamin's eloquence and cutting humour were used to give public support for his views on a wide range of issues. He opposed free trade with the United States, which he felt would hurt Canadian farmers, saying "it is a charming name because it tends to seduce reflection and attention. It is anything but free trade, unless that be called free which gains riches to one and ruin and poverty to the other."

He supported Lieutenant Governor Head's resistance to the notions of responsible government raised by the Executive Council led by Robert Baldwin. He called Marshall Spring Bidwell, the radical speaker of the assembly, "a master spirit of mischief." By 1836, the editor of Kingston's *British Whig* had noted that Benjamin did not tolerate observations by outsiders on the political affairs of Hastings "as he regards that field entirely as his own."

Although the *Kingston Chronicle and Gazette* had given the *Intelligence* only six months to live, it had survived. Benjamin had become one of the leading journalists in the province and was frequently quoted by other papers. While no one at the time knew it, the *Intelligencer* would continue to survive, standing, over 150 years later, as Ontario's oldest operating newspaper.

But all that mattered to George Benjamin that day, as he stood in the *Intelligencer* office planning what to do, was that the slander be forgotten. He folded up the paper and went on with his work.

Intell

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