

Bethinking of Old Orleans

C.W.Lattin
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Judge Benjamin L. Bessac
1807-1871

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"I cherish three precepts: Loving care, Moderation, Humility. Persons of loving care are brave. Being moderate, they are generous. Being humble, they can rise to eminence."

Las-Tzu - Tao Ching

Benjamin L. Bessac was born in Greene County, NY March 12, 1807. Upon the death of his mother when he was 12, he went to live with his grandparents. In the fall of 1821 Benjamin's father moved to the town of Clarence, Erie County, where he rented a small shop and began work as a blacksmith. He also shortly thereafter, purchased 160 acres of land along the Tonawanda Creek six miles south of Lockport.

In June 1822 the elder Bessac wrote to his son Benjamin, encouraging him with glowing accounts, to come to Clarence. Accordingly, Benjamin boarded a seven-horse wagon in Albany and started for the Holland Land Purchase. They traveled slowly making only fifteen miles a day. Arriving in Canandaigua, Benjamin then took a stage the rest of the way to Clarence where he arrived July 22, 1822.

The following autobiographical account from Pioneer History of Orleans County tells of his experience at Clarence. "It was here, in July, 1822, in what was then called 'the north

woods' that I commenced my pioneer life, and for the next three years, and until October 1825, I shared in the hardships, labors and privations of the early settlers. During that time I assisted in chopping and partly clearing forty acres of heavily timbered land and erecting a comfortable log building. Being possessed of a strong, athletic frame, and a good robust constitution, and never having been sick a day in my life, I endured the hardships and labors of the wilderness with cheerfulness and pleasure, and I often look back to those days and reckon them among the happiest of my life... I concluded in the fall of 1825 to abandon my pioneer life, return to the east, obtain an education and study a profession. Accordingly October 2nd, 1825, I left my ax and handspike and went to Lockport, got on board the canal boat 'De Witt Clinton' and sailed for the east. Stopping in Albion for the boat to take on loading I took an excursion through that low, muddy, and as I thought unsightly young village. I little thought then that 'Newport', as it was called was destined to be my future home. I then pronounced Newport a queer place on which to build a town."

After a brief stay in Rochester, Benjamin Bessac arrived home on November 2, 1825, three years after he had left for the wilderness. To earn some money he taught a winter school in his native town and during the spring of 1826 hired out as a farm laborer for \$9.00 per month. In the winter of 1826-27 he again taught school and then entered Greenville Academy, in Greene County during the spring. During the winter of 1827-28 he again taught school, this time at Marbleton, Ulster County, N.Y. He also continued his own education through the spring of 1829.

In April 1830 he married Deborah Dickinson of East Hadam, Conn. She was at the time, a teacher at a female seminary in Troy. During the fall of 1830 they moved to Mobile, Alabama where she opened a most successful female seminary. He worked as a clerk in the United States Bank there. In December 1831 Deborah died suddenly and Benjamin returned to New York State in March 1832. In the spring of 1833 he entered into the study of law with Amasa Mattison in Cario, Greene County. In the fall of 1833 he entered the law office of Judge Hiram Gardner of Lockport where he remained until April 1835 when he moved to Albion and commenced his own practice of law.

In June of that year he married Caroline Baker of Albany County. They erected a fine home located on North Main Street in Albion which is now the residence of Mr. and Mrs. Curtis L. Lyman Sr. Although Benjamin Bessac was from a Quaker background, he and his wife joined the Presbyterian Church in Albion. During the years 1837 and 1839 Benjamin Bessac served as President of Albion. (This position carries the title of mayor now.)

Benjamin Bessac was appointed Orleans County Judge of the Court of Common Pleas serving a term from Feb. 7, 1841-Jan. 10, 1846. This office was abolished by a new constitution in our state effective in 1846. After this, our county judges were elected rather than appointed. Judge Bessac was elected District Attorney in 1853 and served one term of three years. He died in 1871 at the age of 65 of a kidney infection indicating Brights Disease complicated with Apoplexy. An obituary from the Orleans American is quoted in part as follows: "For more than 36 years his portly form and pleasant countenance have been familiar to the people of Orleans County. No man ever lived here who had made more acquaintances or was wider known... no breath of suspicion ever tarnished his official name... morning and evening he could be seen at work in his garden or among his favorite trees. He generally kept a horse, cow and pigs and loved to feed and care for these with his own hands. They too, learned to know and love him."