

Reuben Moore Benjamin (1833-1917)

Reuben Moore Benjamin was born on June 29, 1833, in Chatham Center, New York, which is about 20 miles southeast of Albany. His grandfather, Ebenezer Benjamin, fought in the American Revolution, and his father, Darius Benjamin, served in the War of 1812. Reuben's mother was Martha Benjamin, and he had five brothers, one of whom died as a baby.

Reuben grew up on the family farm and attended local school until he was 14. After that, he went to Kinderhook Academy in Kinderhook, New York, and later graduated with honors from Amherst University in 1853. He then became the principal of Hopkins Academy in Hadley, Massachusetts, before attending Harvard Law School in 1854. Though it's not clear if he graduated, he went back to Amherst in 1855 to work as a tutor while earning his master's degree.

After his father died in 1850, Reuben's family moved to Bloomington, Illinois, and wrote to him about the area's opportunities. So, in 1856, Reuben moved to Bloomington, where he studied law under Asahel Gridley and John Wickizer. He passed the bar exam on September 5, 1856, with Abraham Lincoln among the examiners. Lincoln even helped him get certified. Though it's unclear how close their relationship was, Lincoln was said to visit Reuben's house before becoming President.

Reuben lived in a beautiful house at 510 E. Grove Street, which had been built by John L. Routt, who later became governor of Colorado. Reuben married Laura Woodin on September 15, 1856, in Chatham, New York. They had no children but enjoyed a happy marriage. The couple moved into their Grove Street home in October 1856.

Reuben started a law partnership with his former employers, Gridley and Wickizer, which lasted two years until Gridley retired. Afterward, Reuben and Wickizer continued the partnership until 1862, when Wickizer joined the Union Army during the Civil War. Reuben also enlisted in the army, serving for a short time due to health problems. He worked in a supply regiment, bringing supplies to Union troops in Memphis, Tennessee.

After the war, Reuben formed a law partnership with Thomas F. Tipton, and later Captain J.H. Rowell joined them until he became the state's attorney. Reuben continued working with Tipton until 1869, when Lawrence Weldon joined the firm. When Tipton became a judge in 1869, Reuben and Weldon formed a new partnership, which lasted until Reuben was elected a judge of McLean County in 1873.

Reuben was also active in politics. In 1869, Illinois held a constitutional convention to update its laws, and Reuben was elected as one of 85 delegates. He worked on several important committees, including the Bill of Rights, and helped draft important regulations to control railroad rates. He believed the government should limit the power of big corporations. In 1872, Reuben worked on a case that helped stop unfair practices by railroad companies. He also helped pass laws to regulate railroads and warehouses. He continued to speak out against monopolies, even writing articles on the subject in 1906 and 1911.

Reuben became a McLean County judge in 1873 and served until 1886, when he retired to focus on other legal work. In 1888, he formed a final law partnership with John Morrissey, a former student. He retired from active law practice in 1893, at the age of 59, as he had promised himself.

During his retirement, Reuben was involved in the community. He helped establish the law school at Illinois Wesleyan University and taught there for many years. He also helped create the Phi Delta Phi law fraternity's chapter at the university in 1878. He was awarded an honorary law degree in 1880 for his contributions to the school.

Reuben continued to write political articles after he stopped teaching in 1912 and even wrote some poetry. His home life was quiet, and although he didn't have children, he was surrounded by family and staff. He was not very religious, though his wife Laura was active in the Presbyterian Church.

Reuben passed away on August 4, 1917, at the age of 84, after a two-year decline in health. He was buried next to his wife, Laura, in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery. He was remembered for his hard work, ambition, and well-rounded career.