

Wolf Benjamin
President: 1823-1827

Perhaps the best known and most widely admired Jew in Philadelphia in the early 19th century, Wolf Benjamin served as president from 1823-27. Among other things, he led the congregation in supporting the United Hebrew Beneficial Society and forming relationships with the growing Ashkenazic congregation in New York.

Born in England, Wolf Benjamin was in the liquor business. Suffering from discrimination, he moved to Jamaica and then, in 1813, to Philadelphia. A religious man versed in rabbinical literature and law, he quickly became a leader of the Jewish community, becoming president of Rodeph Shalom only ten years after arriving in Philadelphia.

His tenure was not an easy one. With an imbalance in the number of Jewish men and women in the city, there was a rise in intermarriage. Through a series of sometimes contradictory resolutions, Rodeph Shalom first barred membership to men who intermarried but later allowed intermarried men to remain members, provided they raised their children Jewish. Even prior to the surge of German immigration, Benjamin wanted Rodeph Shalom to build and own an appropriate home, and he created a building fund with mandatory contributions. This fund proved inadequate but his vision was adopted by subsequent presidents, eventually leading to the renovation a former church building on Juliana Street (which, as it turned out, proved too small after twenty years).

Many years after Wolf Benjamin's death, the son of a close friend, recalled Benjamin's standing in the community: "There was never a Jew [in need] who came to Philadelphia that did not come to Mr. Benjamin who received him as a brother and relieved his want, and there was never a rich one who failed to call on him and enjoy his society."

Written by Fred Strober