



Temple Israel FOUNDATION

Biographical Information Sheet

Wisebart

Benjamin W. Wisebart (Weisbart)
Born: September 28, 1841 (Louisville, Kentucky)
Died: December 15, 1895¹ (Denver, Colorado)
Married to: Celestine Lesem (Denver 1882)

Benjamin W. Wisebart was the child of German Jews who came to the United States before the American Civil War. He was nearly a generation older than many fellow German-Jewish merchants in Leadville. His sister, Frances Wisebart Jacobs, was a prominent Colorado pioneer nicknamed the “Mother of Charities” for her efforts extending from Benevolent societies, to free kindergarten, and ultimately to the present in the form of the National Jewish Hospital.² Her impressive reputation and extended charitable activities earned the inclusion of her portrait in the Colorado State rotunda. Frances and Benjamin both came to Colorado in the early 1860s; Francis settled with her husband in Denver and Benjamin looked to the gold fields of Gilpin County, brimming with entrepreneurial enthusiasm. His time in Leadville would come once his career had matured in Central City and Denver. He traveled to Leadville in the middle to late 1880s and his sojourn there was brief but timely.

Benjamin’s father, Isaac Wisebart, likely came to the United States from Bavaria as a young man. Given his birth year of 1810, Isaac may have arrived in America as early as the 1830s or 1840s. Officially, Isaac and his family first appear in the 1850 United States Census as residents of Cincinnati, a center of Reform Judaism. Benjamin was listed as 9 years old in this census and Frances was 7 years old.³ Isaac’s wife Rosetta Marx was born in England in 1817 and died in Cincinnati in 1885.⁴

Benjamin and Frances both spent their young adulthood in Cincinnati.⁵ Frances can be documented in Central City as early as 1863, and it is probable that Benjamin was with her at this time.⁶ However, the first documented evidence of Benjamin in Colorado is an advertisement in an April 1865 edition Black Hawk’s *Daily Mining Journal*. In partnership with “O. K. Jacobs”, Benjamin and their “OK Store” touted:

“Here we come with songs to greet you!! Go to the OK Store and Buy Clothing at reduced prices!”⁷

An elaboration of items including revolvers and the latest styles from New York rounded out the gregarious advertisements which continued throughout 1865.⁸ His success endured and the 1870 United States Census listed Benjamin as a 28 year old clothing retailer in Central City. By that year he had amassed combined monetary and real estate assets totaling to a very respectable \$26,000.⁹ An advertisement in a Central City newspaper during 1870 for an event at a theater he owned and operated named “Wisebart Hall” explains the numbers behind Benjamin’s amassed fortune.¹⁰ He would later be elected as a Republican representative to the Colorado Territorial Legislature as well as Central City’s fifth mayor.¹¹

Benjamin remained in Central City until 1877; that year he was mentioned as a trustee of a new opera house in that city.¹² Starting in 1878, he is listed in the Denver City directories where he would appear for the remainder of his life.¹³

While he was never listed in a Leadville city directory, he was a permanent resident of the city for a short time. According to a March 1880 issue of the *American Israelite*, Benjamin was mentioned as a resident of Leadville (incorrectly spelled “Weisbart”).¹⁴ This was likely a temporary arrangement as he is listed as a clothing dealer and resident in the Denver city directory for that year.¹⁵ As we will see, he had extended family and friends in the Carbonate City so he may have simply spent



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a summer here. Later in his insurance career, he often visited as a salesman while working for Travelers Insurance. He was listed in the *Israelite* as an esquire, however details of his background in the law are unknown. In 1882, he was mentioned in a short Lake County legal notice titled *B. W. Wisebart et al. vs. John Thompson* which provided little detail of the case.¹⁶

Benjamin was known enough in Leadville to justify a lengthy description of his wedding in an edition of the *Leadville Daily Herald* in early September 1882. He married the sister of Leadville insurance agents Louis and Sam Lesem; while the wedding took place in Denver, a number of Leadville residents were present.¹⁷

Insurance was Benjamin's later life career. He was listed as a clothing dealer in Denver City Directories until 1885, when he was first identified as an insurance agent for Travelers. That same year he was in Leadville as part of the investigation of the disappearance of Jacob Bernheimer, then chief of Travelers bureau in Leadville.¹⁸ The *Carbonate Chronicle* elaborated:

...It is said that Bernheimer was dismissed from his position on Saturday night last, after a partial examination of his accounts by Mr. Wisebart. That it was developed that a defalcation existed in the sum of \$925. Anything in addition to this which comes from the friends of the gentleman, and not from the company, could not be ascertained. The reporter sought Mr. Wisebart, who is now in custody of the office, this morning. That gentleman was overturning some dusty documents, and said,

*'We have nothing to give you at present. Mr. Lesem [Benjamin's brother in law and former chief agent of the Leadville bureau] arrived in the city yesterday and departed with the books for Denver last night, where he will continue investigation... [Benjamin continues after questioning]... 'But I have got nothing to say about Mr. Bernheimer.' And the gentleman became as dumb as an oyster...'*¹⁹

Benjamin does not appear in Leadville for several years after 1885, despite his success and prominence in Denver. His final appearance in the Carbonate City was during the winter of 1888. As a special agent for Travelers Insurance, Benjamin guided Colorado State Militia General and Leadville 79er Frank Reardon as part of a guided "ciceronage" of Colorado.

Benjamin remained in Denver and his successes in that city are well documented. Existing newspapers do not reveal another visit to Leadville. Benjamin died in 1895 at the relatively young age of 54. He was buried the Congregation Emanuel Cemetery on Quebec Street.²⁰



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¹ *Find A Grave* for “Benjamin W. Wisebart”

² *Pioneer Women* Abrams Page 51.

³ 1850 United States Census

⁴ *Find A Grave* for “Rosetta Wisebart Marx”

⁵ *Find A Grave* for “Benjamin W. Wisebart”

⁶ *Jewish Denver*, Abrams Page 13.

⁷ *OK Store*. The Daily Mining Journal (Blackhawk, Colorado). Saturday, April 1, 1865. Page 3 & 4.

⁸ “A. Jacob & Co.’s Column” Daily Mining Journal, April 8, 1865. Page 3.

⁹ 1870 United States Census

¹⁰ “Miscellaneous” Daily Register Call, December 15, 1870. Page 4.

¹¹ *Pioneers, Peddlers, and Tskikim*. Uchill. Page 145.

¹² “State News” Daily Denver Tribune, May 29, 1877. Page 2.

¹³ Denver City Directory 1878 p. 379 through 1895. Page 1131.

¹⁴ “Local and Domestic” The American Israelite, March 5, 1880. Page 6.

¹⁵ Denver City Directory 1880. Page 379.

¹⁶ “The District Court” Leadville Democrat, May 21, 1881. Page 5.

¹⁷ “Wisebart-Lesem” Leadville Daily Herald, September 3, 1882. Page 4.

¹⁸ For more information on the Bernheimers see <http://www.jewishleadville.org/bernheimer.html>

¹⁹ *Bernheimer’s Bullion*. Leadville, Colorado: Carbonate Chronicle. October 31, 1885. Page 6.

²⁰ *Find A Grave* for “Benjamin W. Wisebart”



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AUTHOR: Trevor Mark

EDITOR: William Korn

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STABLE URL: <http://www.jewishleadville.org/wisebart.html>