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CIVIL WAR TO CIVIL RIGHTS: BENJAMIN HELM BRISTOW (PUBLIC SERVANT)



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ELKTON — Benjamin Helm Bristow was born in Elkton, Ky., in 1832. He was a lawyer, served the Union in the Civil War, and was the first solicitor general of the United States and a U.S. Treasury secretary. As solicitor general (1872 – 1874), Bristow aided the U.S. attorney general by arguing cases before the Supreme Court. He was instrumental in prosecuting and destroying the Ku Klux Klan in the South during Reconstruction.

Bristow believed in equality. He advocated for Kentucky

African Americans to be able to testify against white men at trial and for public financing to pay for public education for all races. Most white Southerners did not support Bristow's advocacy platforms. The South had established Jim Crow laws that explicitly banned African Americans from testifying against white men and denied or severely curbed public financing for African American education.

President Ulysses S. Grant appointed Bristow as the secretary of the treasury (1874 – 1876). He excelled as well there as he had as solicitor general. Bristow promoted the idea of tying American currency to the Gold Standard and helped expose the Whiskey Ring, a collection of politicians who worked with distillers throughout the Midwest to steal millions of dollars of federal taxes on liquor. Bristow resigned from the Treasury Department in 1876. He formed a successful law practice in New York City in 1878 and argued many cases before the U.S. Supreme Court. He died in 1896.

The Kentucky Historical Society (KHS) links Kentuckians with their past via archival collections that document people from every walk of life, reaching back to 1509. Letters, diaries, oral histories and photographs, as well as the first and second Kentucky Constitutions, are included. Find these and other KHS collections online at khscatalog.kyvl.org

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