

Benjamin Kurtz Focht - Journalist, Publisher & Politician

Benjamin Kurtz Focht was a popular and energetic man-about-town in Lewisburg and Washington DC, known for his journalism and political work.

Focht was born March 12, 1863 in New Bloomfield, Perry County, PA. He was one of the children of Lutheran minister Rev. David Heinlein Focht (a descendent of John George Focht, who emigrated from Neustadt, Germany in the 1700's to Northampton County, PA) and Sarah Brown (a daughter of John Brown, an early settler of Lewisburg, Union County PA). Sarah and the children moved to Lewisburg in 1864 after the death of Rev. Focht.

Focht attended Bucknell Academy at Lewisburg, Susquehanna University and Pennsylvania State College. Apprenticed at age 15 to J. R. Cornelius, publisher of the *Lewisburg Chronicle* newspaper, he learned the printing trade.

In 1882, 18-year old Focht was a founder and co-owner of the *Local News*, and in 1883, as sole owner, changed the newspaper's name to the *Lewisburg Saturday News*. He became an influential writer, and served as editor and publisher of the paper until his death in 1937. The *Saturday News* offered editorials "of the soundest thought on our national policies," political discussion, social news and correspondence, business advertisements, legal notices and feature articles. In the 1930's a subscription cost \$2 per year for the weekly paper. Focht's publishing company also printed booklets, such as *Housewife's Delight: The Saturday News Cook Book*.

Focht married Florence Edith Wolf, daughter of H. G. Wolf (Mifflinburg businessman and Farmer's Bank president) in 1887. They had four children: Edith Virginia Focht 1896-1921, Ellen Focht 1892-1969 (who married Ralph Richards), and Brown Focht 1904-1979.

Focht entered politics as a delegate to the Republican state convention in 1889. He was elected to the Pennsylvania State Assembly for two terms, 1893-1897, and to the Senate for one term, 1901-1905. As a representative for Union County, Focht secured a free bridge over the Susquehanna at Lewisburg, and improved rural roads. He supported veteran's benefits and free textbooks in public schools. He did not endorse teachers' minimum pay at \$35 per month, preferring decisions on teachers' wages be made at the local level.

Benjamin Focht was elected to ten terms in the US House of Representatives, 1907-1913, and 1915-1923. Among his assignments was chair of the War Claims Committee, which was responsible for processing claims for damages incurred by individuals, organizations or businesses due to any war in which the US was involved. He also served as chairman of the Committee on the District of Columbia, then the district's governing body, and was known as the Mayor of Washington DC.

He ran, but was unsuccessful in getting re-elected again until 1933, then was twice more elected and served in Congress until his death in 1937.

In 1915 Benjamin Focht introduced the first Old Age Pension bill, to provide for individuals over age 65 who did not have enough income to meet their needs. Focht's bill, albeit changed, was later incorporated into the Social Security Act of 1935.

Benjamin K. Focht died March 27, 1937 and is buried in the Lewisburg Cemetery. His tombstone honors him as the "Father of Old Age Pensions."



Benjamin Focht and son in front of his Saturday News office, Market Street, Lewisburg