

## **Benton, Thomas Hart** <sup>[1]</sup>

### **Benton, Thomas Hart**

by Edwin A. Miles, 1979

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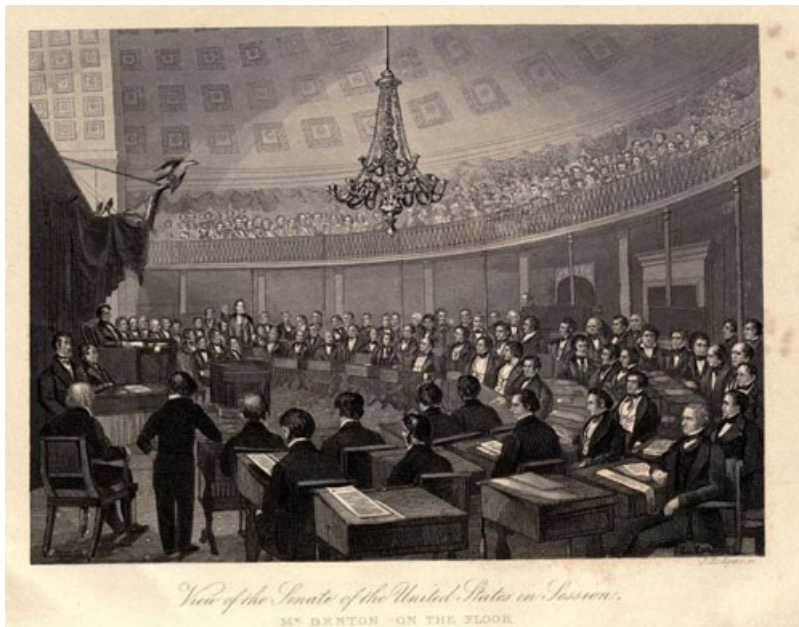


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Biographical Directory of  
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Congress. <sup>[2]</sup>Thomas Hart Benton, senator and representative from Missouri, was born near Hillsborough, the third child and eldest son of Jesse and Ann Gooch Benton. His paternal grandfather, [Samuel Benton](#) <sup>[3]</sup>, was a substantial landed proprietor in [Granville County](#) <sup>[4]</sup> who served as a justice of the peace and a member of the colonial assembly prior to the [Revolution](#) <sup>[5]</sup>. Jesse Benton moved from Granville to [Orange County](#) <sup>[6]</sup>, became a prominent lawyer, and was a member of the assembly in 1781. Owner of a plantation on the banks of the Eno River, he also speculated heavily in Tennessee and Kentucky lands. His wife was the niece and ward of Thomas Hart, a wealthy Virginia landowner and merchant who became one of the leading settlers in early Kentucky. Thomas Hart Benton thus belonged to a family well established in [Piedmont](#) <sup>[7]</sup> North Carolina.

Jesse Benton died during the winter of 1790–91, leaving his widow and seven children with an apparently large estate, though title to much of the land he claimed was never validated. Thomas Hart Benton attended school in Hillsborough and entered [The University of North Carolina](#) <sup>[8]</sup> shortly after Christmas 1798. His stay at Chapel Hill was brief, for he left in disgrace less than three months later, following his expulsion from the [Philanthropic Society](#) <sup>[9]</sup> after he confessed to stealing money from his roommates. Although this incident was known to many contemporaries, it was rarely used publicly by his opponents during his long and often stormy career in public life. Nevertheless, one modern biographer believes the realization that this youthful blot upon his record would probably be fully aired in a national campaign influenced Benton's inflexible refusal to seek the presidency or vice-presidency. Another biographer maintains that this episode "gave him an overreaching need to prove himself" and contributed to his "trigger-touchy sense of personal honor."

In 1801, Ann Gooch Benton moved with her children to a 2,560-acre tract near the present-day village of Leipers Fork, Tenn., about twenty-five miles southwest of Nashville. This land was all that Jesse Benton's heirs were able to obtain of the more than 20,000 acres he originally claimed in Tennessee. As the oldest son, Thomas Hart Benton assumed the role of *paterfamilias* in establishing a plantation on the "widow Benton's settlement." He later taught school while undertaking a course of readings to prepare himself for a legal career. He was admitted to practice at Franklin in 1806. He also took a keen interest in politics, as a supporter of the [Thomas Jefferson](#) <sup>[10]</sup> administration and a proponent of state judicial reform. As a member of the [Tennessee Senate](#) <sup>[11]</sup> in 1809, he secured the enactment of some of the court reforms he had earlier advocated. Although his law practice soon became quite flourishing, his health was for a time precarious; he ultimately recovered from an incipient attack of tuberculosis, a disease that took the lives of three of his sisters during the family's residence in Tennessee.



"View of the United States Senate in Session. Mr. Benton on the Floor."  
From "Thirty Year's View."

<sup>[12]</sup>Benton actively supported entry into the War of 1812 <sup>[13]</sup> and was elected colonel of the Second Regiment of Tennessee Volunteers. He also became an aide de camp to General Andrew Jackson <sup>[14]</sup>, whose friendship he had earlier won. He accompanied Jackson on his expedition to Natchez in 1813 and on the return march to Tennessee after Jackson's refusal to obey the War Department's order to disband his troops in the Mississippi Territory. Benton shortly thereafter went to Washington, where he obtained the government's consent to honor Jackson's claim for the expenses incurred on the unauthorized march from Natchez to Nashville. Upon his return from Washington, an incident occurred that led to a decade-long rupture between Benton and Jackson. In Benton's absence, Jackson had served as William Carroll's <sup>[15]</sup> second in a duel with Jesse Benton, Thomas's brother, who was wounded in the affray. Informed of Jackson's role in the affair, Thomas Hart Benton voiced his disapproval, and when Jackson sought to "horsewhip Tom Benton" for his alleged impudence, a brawl ensued at a Nashville tavern and one of the Benton brothers wounded Jackson in the shoulder so seriously that he nearly lost his left arm. Though Benton remained under Jackson's command, he was disappointed in not being assigned to action, and he was en route to Washington to seek a transfer to the Canadian front when his fellow Tennessee soldiers participated in the routing of the British army at New Orleans on 8 Jan. 1815.

Later that year, Benton moved to Missouri, which he had first seen on the trip down the Mississippi River to Natchez in 1813. Settling in St. Louis, he quickly became one of the leading lawyers of the city, developing a considerable practice in land claims and titles. His interest in politics, in which he sided with the city's older French faction, soon involved him in numerous controversies, including one with Charles Lucas, whom he killed in a duel on 27 Sept. 1817. Benton was widely criticized for provoking a second meeting between Lucas and himself and never consented thereafter to participate in an affair of honor.

On 20 Mar. 1821, Benton married Elizabeth McDowell, a member of a prominent Lexington, Va., family.

While continuing his law practice, he served as editor of the St. Louis Enquirer <sup>[16]</sup> from 1818 to 1820, in which capacity he championed western interests and the statehood movement in Missouri. In the congressional controversy on the latter question, he took a militant position on the proslavery side, and upon the admission of the new state he was elected one of its U.S. senators. He was subsequently reelected four times and served until 3 Mar. 1851, the first senator to hold office for thirty consecutive years. As a freshman senator, Benton worked hard to broaden the base of his political support in Missouri, proving himself adept at the representation of special interests. More significantly, in view of his later political career, he began to emerge as a spokesman for political democracy and a liberal national land policy.

In the presidential campaign of 1824, Benton supported Henry Clay <sup>[17]</sup>, who had married his cousin, Letitia Hart, although Clay's American System <sup>[18]</sup> was repugnant to Old Republicans, such as John Randolph <sup>[19]</sup> of Roanoke and Nathaniel Macon <sup>[20]</sup>, with whom Benton had become intimate friends. In the meantime, his strained relations with Jackson had been repaired during the latter's tenure as senator from Tennessee from 1823 to 1825. When Clay was eliminated from consideration for the presidency in the election by the House of Representatives in 1825, Benton supported Jackson over John Quincy Adams <sup>[21]</sup> and William H. Crawford <sup>[22]</sup>. During the political battles of the Jackson administration, Benton occasionally took an independent course, as evidenced by his support in May 1830 of the Maysville Road Bill, which Jackson vetoed.

Benton's greatest influence upon Jacksonian policy was in matters relating to banking and currency. An opponent of all banks and an advocate of an exclusively metallic currency, he earned for himself the cherished nickname "Old Bullion," and his influence upon the administration's policies in these matters has led some historians to view him as a member of Jackson's "Kitchen Cabinet." With Van Buren <sup>[23]</sup> in the White House, Benton continued to champion hard-money principles, although he reluctantly supported the administration's Treasury Note legislation, passed in order to meet the financial exigencies caused by the Panic of 1837 <sup>[24]</sup>. More to his liking was the new president's Independent Treasury

plan, whose enactment in July 1840 he approved as leading to a divorce of the federal government from all banking institutions and as a step toward ending the acceptance of bank notes by the treasury. Benton became one of the national leaders of the hard-money or Locofoco wing of the Democratic <sup>[25]</sup> party in opposition to the pro-bank conservatives, many of whom joined the Whig party <sup>[26]</sup>.

During the administrations of William Henry Harrison <sup>[27]</sup> and John Tyler <sup>[28]</sup>, Benton found himself once again in opposition. His die-hard determination to support Van Buren, who had been defeated by Harrison in 1840, in his bid for another term in 1844 led to a further weakening of Benton's political position in Missouri. Although he had denounced the Adams-Onís Treaty of 1819 for surrendering American claims to Texas and had advocated the purchase of Texas from Mexico during the Jackson administration, he vehemently denounced the Texas annexation treaty of 1844, which was generally popular in his state. Although he had supported Van Buren at the Democratic convention of May 1844, he endorsed the party presidential candidate, James K. Polk <sup>[29]</sup>. Nevertheless, the Whigs widely distributed Benton's speeches on the Texas issue in an effort to weaken Polk's candidacy, and his opponents in Missouri cited them in an effort to defeat the senator's bid for a fifth term. In November 1844, the same month that Polk won a narrow victory over Clay in the presidential contest, the Missouri legislature reelected Benton, although by his smallest margin of victory in twenty-four years. On 28 Feb. 1845, Congress passed a joint resolution providing for the annexation of Texas.

With President Polk, Benton's relationship and influence varied from time to time. In the early stages of the Mexican War <sup>[30]</sup>, Benton, then serving as chairman of the Senate Military Affairs Committee, was a major adviser to Polk. At one time the president was prepared to appoint him a lieutenant general in command of both the military and diplomatic efforts in Mexico, but Benton's enemies in Congress succeeded in blocking the legislation necessary to revive the rank held previously only by George Washington. The Senate later confirmed his appointment as major general, but he declined the commission because he was not given chief command of the army over the two Whig generals, Zachary Taylor and Winfield Scott. Benton took a keen interest in the Mexican War controversies involving the dashing Colonel John C. Frémont <sup>[31]</sup>, who had married his daughter, Jessie Ann. He ultimately broke irrevocably with Polk in February 1848, when the president declined to disallow a court martial verdict finding his son-in-law guilty of insubordination.

In the controversy over slavery in the territories in the late 1840s, Benton took a stand that further alienated many of his constituents. Although he voiced disapproval of the Wilmot Proviso <sup>[32]</sup> as dangerous to the preservation of the Union, he voted for the organization of the Oregon Territory with a rider prohibiting slavery. His opposition to Calhoun's Southern Address of January 1849, endorsed by a majority of the members of Congress from the slaveholding states, prompted the Missouri legislature to pass a resolution instructing the state's senators to "act in conformity" with the proslavery position. Declining to accept these instructions, he took the issue to the people in a vigorous stumping tour of the state in the summer and early fall of 1849. Yet despite his growing hostility to the southern extremists, he supported Lewis Cass, the regular Democratic candidate for the presidency in 1848, over his old friend Van Buren, the standard bearer of the newly created Free Soil <sup>[33]</sup> party.

Benton opposed the Compromise of 1850 <sup>[34]</sup> on the grounds that it was "a *capitulation* to those who threatened secession." The debates on that question involved him in the most acrimonious personal controversies of his senatorial career, culminating in a confrontation with proslavery Henry S. Foote <sup>[35]</sup> of Mississippi, who brandished a revolver when he apparently thought that Benton intended violence. When the omnibus bill embodying the compromise was finally divided into separate pieces of legislation, Benton voted for most of the individual bills. The proslavery Missouri Democrats, led by Benton's senatorial colleague David R. Atchison <sup>[36]</sup>, were determined to block his bid for a sixth term. In January 1851, a coalition of anti-Benton Democrats and Whigs in the legislature chose a proslavery Whig as his successor.

For Benton, defeat did not mean retirement. In 1852 he was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives from a southeastern Missouri district that included St. Louis. While awaiting the beginning of his congressional term, he began the writing of his Thirty Years' View <sup>[37]</sup>, a massive history of the workings of the American government during his senatorial career. Published in 1854 by D. Appleton and Company, it sold more than fifty thousand copies. Although he supported Franklin Pierce <sup>[38]</sup> for the presidency in 1852, he soon denounced the new president's policies, opposing the Kansas-Nebraska Bill <sup>[39]</sup> and the administration's designs on Cuba. In 1854 he was defeated for reelection to the House in a campaign during which the ill health of his wife kept him in Washington. He also failed in a bid for Atchison's seat in the Senate in 1855; a bitter legislative battle led to a senatorial vacancy for two years, because no candidate could obtain a majority. In his last try for political office, a campaign for the governorship in 1856, he ran third in a race won by a proslavery Democrat. In the presidential campaign of that year, Benton supported the Democrat James Buchanan <sup>[40]</sup>, even though his son-in-law Frémont was the candidate of the new Republican party. He opposed the Republicans because he believed that such a sectional party might endanger the preservation of the Union.

Benton's last years were saddened by tragedies and setbacks, which nonetheless failed to conquer his spirit. After ten years of invalidism, his beloved wife died in September 1854; and the following February his residence in Washington was consumed by flames, destroying his papers and the partially completed second volume of the *Thirty Years' View*. The fire, while delaying publication, did not prevent him from completing the work. Volume two, covering the period from 1837 to 1851, appeared in May 1856, only six months later than originally planned. It was a spirited vindication of Benton's pro-Union course in the sectional controversies of his later senatorial career. In 1856 and 1857 he visited several northern states on an extended lecture tour, cut short because of painful injuries he received in a railroad accident at Pittsburgh in May 1857. Returning to Washington, he wrote a critical essay attacking the Dred Scott decision and defending the right of Congress to legislate on the subject of slavery in the territories. Despite rapidly failing health, he resumed work on a project begun earlier, the sixteen volumes of the Abridgment of the Debates of Congress from 1789 to 1856 [1850] <sup>[41]</sup>,

most of which were published posthumously. He completed work on the last volume on 9 Apr. 1858, only one day before his death from a disease diagnosed as cancer of the bowels.

By many of his contemporaries, Benton was considered equal if not superior to Clay, Calhoun, and Webster, with whom he often contended on the floor of the Senate. Though a household word in his day, he made less impression on later generations, partly because most nineteenth-century historians were Whiggish in their sympathies, and twentieth-century scholars have tended to view Jackson, not Benton, as the symbol of the political movement they both espoused. As an orator, Benton was never as popular as his senatorial rivals, because his speeches tended to be long, statistical, and bookish; his enemies accused him of playing "schoolmaster" to his colleagues by flaunting his self-acquired learning, of which he was inordinately proud. Because of his egotistical and overbearing nature and his strong, unyielding convictions, he acquired a host of enemies. Though pompous and austere in public, he was warm and tender enough in his familial relationships to attract the attention of such an inveterate foe as John Quincy Adams.<sup>[21]</sup>

Benton's early senatorial career won him recognition for his advocacy of political democracy and a liberal public land policy, and he later achieved prominence as the champion of hard money. But it was his steadfast devotion to the Union, in the face of mounting sectional sentiment in Missouri, that won him a place among the eight congressional leaders whom John F. Kennedy believed best exemplified the quality of political courage. His concern for the survival of the Union caused him to reject both proslavery and antislavery extremists; thus, while opposed to the extension of slavery, he never espoused emancipation. Though the Civil War<sup>[42]</sup> that he had fervently hoped to avert began only three years after his death, Missouri did not join the ranks of the Confederacy<sup>[43]</sup>, thanks in part to his long crusade for the Union and the work of such men as Frank P. Blair, Jr., and B. Gratz Brown, former protégés whose political principles he had helped to mold.

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