

Eaton, John Henry ^[1]

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18 June 1790–17 Nov. 1856



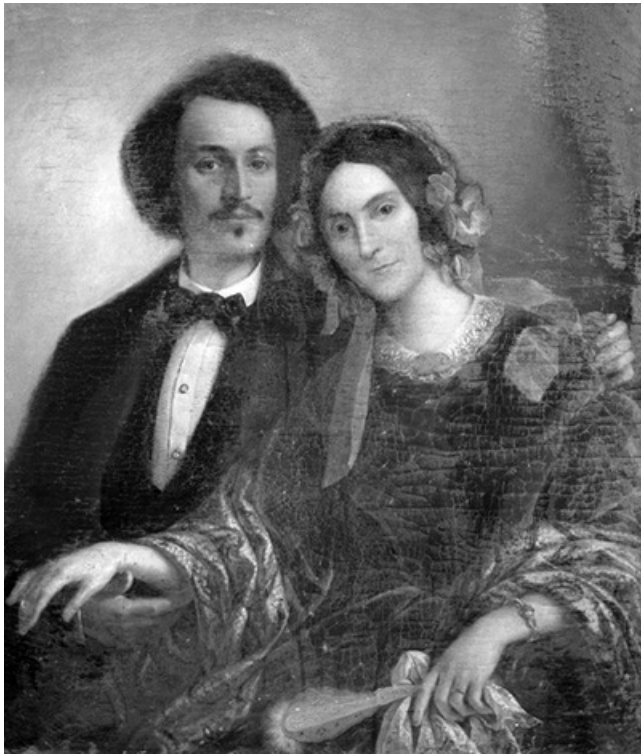
"John Henry Eaton." 1873. By Robert Walter Weir. Oil on canvas.

^[2]John Henry Eaton, U.S. senator, member of Andrew Jackson ^[3]'s cabinet, governor of the Territory of Florida, and U.S. minister to Spain, was born in Halifax County ^[4] near the town of Scotland Neck, the son of John and Elizabeth Eaton. The father was a maker of chaises, coroner of the county, and representative in the Assembly—thus obviously a man of some importance in the community. The 1790 census lists the senior Eaton as enslaver of twelve people, and the manuscript record of the 1810 census reports his enslavement as numbering sixteen; in addition, he had acquired a large tract of land in middle Tennessee.

John Henry Eaton attended The University of North Carolina ^[5] from 1802 to 1804, and, according to university records, was registered for those years as a sophomore and junior. In 1825, he received an honorary M.A. from the university. After he left college Eaton read law, and in 1808 or 1809 moved to Franklin, in Williamson County, Tenn., to take up residence on lands owned by his father. Here he was to meet his future wife, Myra Lewis, daughter of William Terrell Lewis, a prosperous landholder. Myra and her sister were the wards of General Andrew Jackson; thus Eaton's marriage brought not only additional wealth but also opened for him a career in politics. Quite important in his emergence to public notice was a biography of Andrew Jackson, started by John Reid but completed by Eaton. The volume was published in 1816 and, though by no standard can it be classed as good biographical writing, received sufficient publicity to warrant at least three English and two German editions.

In 1818 Eaton was appointed to the U.S. Senate to fill a vacancy caused by the resignation of George W. Campbell; at the end of the term he was elected as a Democrat. Eaton served in the Senate from September 1818 to 9 Mar. 1829, when he resigned to become secretary of war in President Jackson's cabinet. He remained in that position only until June 1831. After Mrs. Eaton's death, he had, on 1 Jan. 1829, married Margaret ("Peggy") O'Neale (or O'Neill) Timberlake, the attractive daughter of a Washington tavern keeper. This second marriage caused a rift in the cabinet, attributed largely to the cabinet wives. In 1833 Eaton sought unsuccessfully to regain his seat in the Senate; the following year Jackson appointed him governor of the Territory of Florida, and in 1836 envoy extraordinary and minister plenipotentiary to Madrid. The latter appointment he held until 1840, during which time Mrs. Eaton enjoyed great social success. Eaton broke with Jackson in 1840, when the former declined to support Van Buren for president.

Eaton lived comfortably in Washington for the remainder of his life. He was not a church member, and perhaps because of this his funeral service was conducted at the Eaton home on I Street. He was buried in Washington's Oak Hill Cemetery. The obituary in Washington's *Daily National Intelligencer* spoke warmly of him, and noted that the chief justice had announced adjournment of the Supreme Court for the afternoon of the eighteenth in order that the justices, members of the bar, and officers of the Court might attend the funeral. Eaton's second wife, who possessed considerable charm, remarried, this time to a young Italian dancing master who subsequently eloped with her grand-daughter.



"John Henry Eaton and His Wife Margaret (Peggy) O'Neale." Painting. 1851-1900. Image courtesy of the National Endowment of the Humanities.

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"John Henry Eaton and His Wife Margaret (Peggy) O'Neale." Painting. 1851-1900. Library NEH Negatives. The Frick

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