

## **McKay, James Iver** <sup>[1]</sup>

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by Daniel M. McFarland, 1991; Revised by SLNC Government and Heritage Library, December 2022

**17 July 1792–14 Sept. 1853**

James Iver McKay, attorney and congressman, was born in [Bladen County](#) <sup>[2]</sup> near Elizabethtown, the son of James and Mary Salter McKay. His mother was the daughter of William Salter. Some sources list his middle initial as "J" and his birth date as 1793. After attending the [Raleigh Academy](#) <sup>[3]</sup>, he became a lawyer. In 1817 he was appointed U.S. district attorney for North Carolina.

McKay represented Bladen in the [state senate](#) <sup>[4]</sup> from 1815 to 1818 and in 1822, 1826, and 1829–30. In December 1830 he was a strong contender for governor in the Assembly, but after nine ballots [Montfort Stokes](#) <sup>[5]</sup> was selected instead. In 1831 McKay ran without opposition, as a Jackson man, for the congressional seat of the Wilmington District, beginning a career in Washington, D.C., that stretched over eighteen years. Dr. Lewis Dishongh opposed him in 1833 and 1835, but after that his congressional seat was relatively safe. When in 1847 the Whigs combined his district with that of another Democrat, his colleague, James C. Dobbin, stepped aside to allow him to run for reelection. McKay easily defeated Robert K. Bryan, an independent [Democrat](#) <sup>[6]</sup>, and William R. Hall, a [Whig](#) <sup>[7]</sup>. In 1846 Democrats in the [Assembly](#) <sup>[4]</sup> supported him first for the U.S. Senate and then for governor, but Whigs won both contests. At the Democrats' Baltimore convention in 1848, the North Carolina delegation supported him on the first two ballots as a candidate for vice-president of the United States; subsequently, the convention nominated William Butler of Kentucky.

During his first years in Congress, McKay served on the Committee on Expenditures in the State Department, the Commerce Committee, and the Military Affairs Committee. By the [Twenty-fifth Congress](#) <sup>[8]</sup>, in 1837, he had become chairman of the latter committee. In the Twenty-sixth Congress he was chairman of the Committee on the Post Office and Post Roads. For his last two terms he served as chairman of Ways and Means, where his conservative management of affairs gave him the reputation of "Watch-dog of the Treasury."

In 1837 former president [John Quincy Adams](#) <sup>[9]</sup> described McKay as "a very sensible, well-meaning, timid man, forever struggling between an anxious desire to correct abuses and a shivering terror of being cast off by his party." In 1840 Adams, a Whig, called McKay "a political Mrs. Candour, smooth as oil in outward form, and fetid as a polecat in inward savor." By 1841 Adams felt that "McKay fancies himself a great financier, affects great moderation, and covers an insidious and invidious spirit under a mask of candor. . . . He is a plain, mean-looking man, with a blacksmith air, and as careless of dress as myself; mild, gentle, wary in discourse and conduct, and priding himself upon occasionally voting against his party." In February 1849, a few days before he retired from Congress, McKay stormed out of a meeting with [James K. Polk](#) <sup>[10]</sup>. The president commented in his diary for 4 February, "I knew he was a man of peculiar temperament and manner."

McKay was active in militia affairs before he went to Congress and was frequently addressed as "general." He married Ann Eliza Harvey, and they had one son who died in infancy. Four and a half years after retiring from Congress, McKay died in Goldsboro. His will instructed that the people he was enslaving be freed and sent to Liberia and that his home, Belfont, be given to Bladen County as an experimental farm and orphanage.

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#### **Subjects:**

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[Lawyers](#) <sup>[14]</sup>

Public officials <sup>[15]</sup>

**Authors:**

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**Origin - location:**

Murfreesboro <sup>[17]</sup>

Wayne County <sup>[18]</sup>

Goldsboro <sup>[19]</sup>

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