

Did a Nebraska State Auditor Shoot a U.S. President?

"Nobody opposes Benton, sir, nobody but a few black-jack prairie lawyers. These are the only opponents of Benton. Benton and the people, Benton and Democracy are one and the same sir, synonymous terms, sir, synonymous terms."

- Senator Thomas Hart Benton

Displayed prominently on a wall of the reception area in the Auditor of Public Accounts' office is a large display containing images of Nebraska State Auditors.



Photos on the wall of the Nebraska State Auditor's office.

In that collage of images was the following portrait purporting to depict Thomas H. Benton, who served as Nebraska State Auditor from 1889 to 1893:



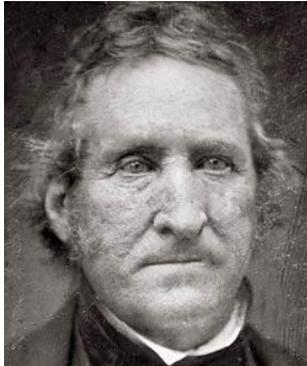
The picture of Thomas H. Benton on the mural.

Despite having been included in the photo display for as long as anybody can remember, the above image was noted recently to bear a striking resemblance to this photograph of a former U.S Senator from Missouri, also named Thomas H. Benton:



Senator Thomas Hart Benton.

Thomas Hart Benton (1782-1858) represented Missouri in the U.S. Senate from 1821 to 1851 and was a dominant force in the politics of his era. A burly, brash, two-fisted legislator who was as comfortable pummeling his opponents as eviscerating them with his razor-sharp wit and magnificent oratory, Benton was the first member of the U.S. Senate to serve five terms in that body.



Senator Thomas Hart Benton in his prime.

Benton's prizefighter physique and combative personality inspired fear in many of his colleagues, earning him notoriety as a "brutally overbearing and dangerous man." This was a perception that Benton himself did little to discourage. When once accused of being quarrelsome during debate, Benton growled:

Mr. President, sir . . . I never quarrel, sir. But sometimes I fight sir; and whenever I fight, sir, a funeral follows, sir!

This was no idle threat, as those acquainted with Benton's violent past well knew. In 1817, Benton shot rival attorney Charles Lucas in the neck during a confrontation on the infamous "Bloody Island" sandbar, a notorious dueling site in the Mississippi River opposite St. Louis.

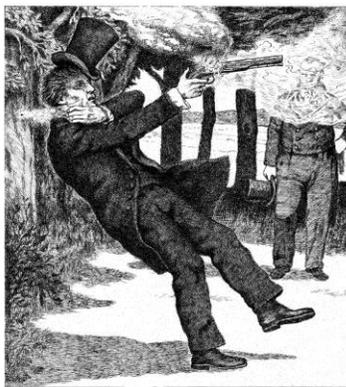
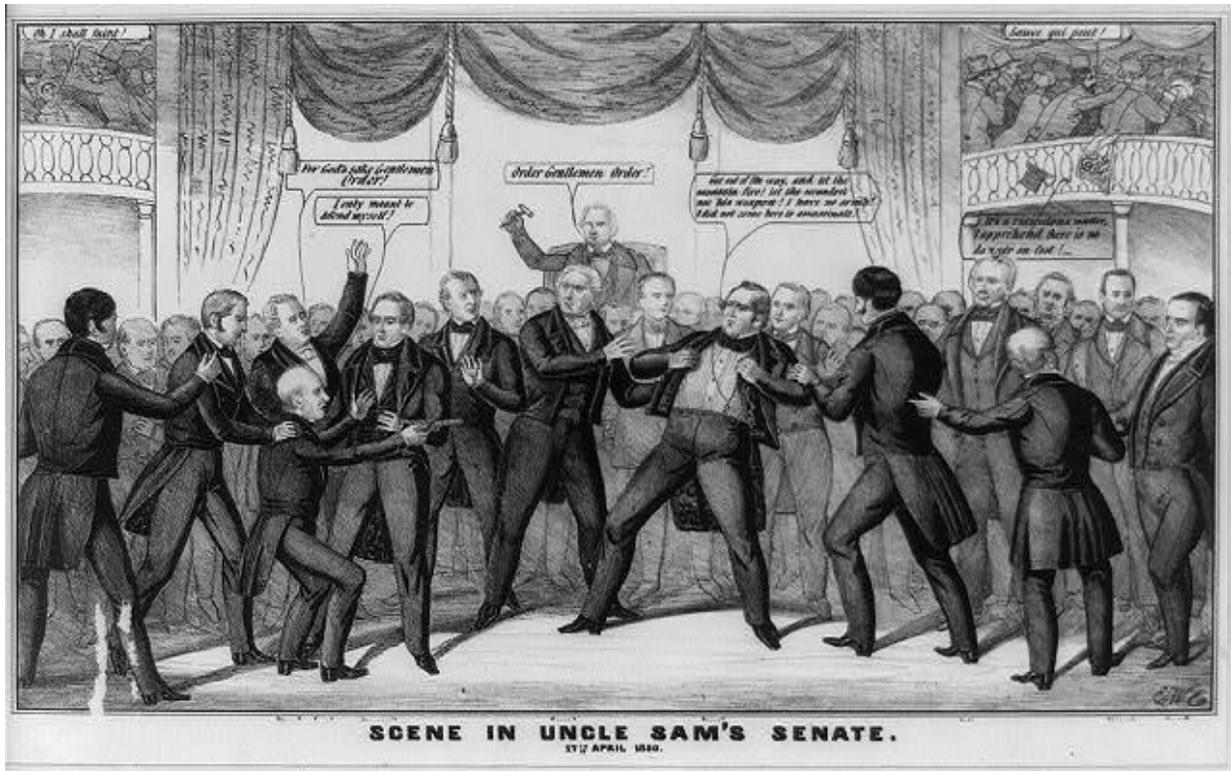


Illustration of Lucas' wounding.

A little over a month later, Benton challenged Lucas to another duel. This time, Benton killed him with shot to the midsection.

Increased age and notoriety did nothing to lessen Benton's ferocious temper. Taking offense at words spoken by Mississippi Senator Henry S. Foote during heated Senate debate in 1850, an enraged Benton rose from his seat and strode glowering toward his diminutive colleague. Seeing the murder in Benton's eyes, Foote drew a pistol and pointed it at him. While their stunned colleagues watched in horror, Benton continued toward Foote, bellowing:

I have no pistols! Let him fire! Stand out of the way and let the assassin fire!



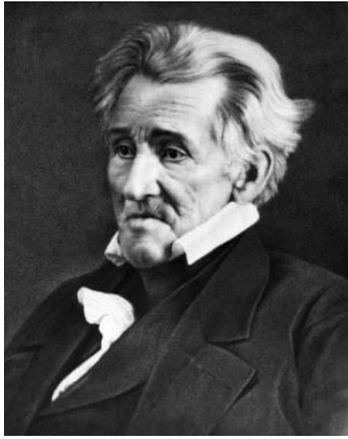
Newspaper illustration of the 1850 confrontation between Senators Benton and Foote.

Fortunately, bloodshed was averted when quick-thinking members of the body intervened, wrestling Foote to the ground and disarming him.

Benton's dangerous reputation and bellicosity both on and off the Senate floor belied a first-rate intellect and an exceptionally facile mind honed by extensive reading and exhaustive study of a vast array of topics. Fluent in French and Spanish alike, Benton spent countless hours in the Library of Congress researching not only the issues of the day but also the Bible, classical literature, world history, and the writings of the Founding Fathers. Consequently, Benton earned well-deserved renown as a "walking encyclopedia" and a "debater second to none in effective presentation as well as preparation" who "smothered listeners with the volume of his research and erudition."

A staunch Jeffersonian Democrat, Benton became the country's loudest voice for westward expansion, advocating tirelessly for the eventual "manifest destiny" of his countrymen to settle North America from coast to coast. Benton was also a champion of hard money, wearing proudly the sobriquet "Old Bullion" for his fierce opposition to both paper currency and a central Bank of the United States – both of which he despised as threats to the freedom, independence, and overall welfare of the common man.

Prior to any of this, however, Benton achieved notoriety for an 1813 brawl with the future seventh president of the United States, the indomitable Andrew Jackson. Those few moments of mayhem left Jackson lying near death in a pool of his own blood and set the stage for Benton's future political career.



President Andrew Jackson in old age.

Benton's altercation with Jackson can be traced back to both men's service during the War of 1812. Praised for his military prowess during that conflict, Jackson acquired true celebrity status as the victor of the Battle of New Orleans, in which he led American backwoodsmen to a crushing defeat of invading British forces in January of 1815.



Andrew Jackson at the Battle of New Orleans.

Fifteen years his junior, Benton first met Jackson while a youthful observer at a superior court trial over which the future president was then presiding during his stint as a circuit-riding judge in the western district of Tennessee. The 17-year-old Benton was greatly impressed by Jackson's "cordial and graceful manners, hospitable temper, elevation of mind, undaunted spirit, generosity, and perfect integrity."

Taking up the practice of law, Benton eventually tried a case in Jackson's courtroom. An uncharacteristically modest Benton later recalled that daunting experience: "He found my effort to be better than it was. He complimented me greatly, and from that time our intimacy began."

Having served as Major General of the Tennessee Militia since 1803, Jackson was commissioned Major General of U.S. Volunteers by President James Madison after a fledgling United States declared war on Great Britain on June 18, 1812. Given their mutual admiration, it is not surprising that Jackson appointed Benton as his aide-de-camp.

Another member of Jackson's staff was Inspector General William Carroll. A courageous soldier and future governor of Tennessee, Carroll became embroiled in a disagreement with Benton's younger brother, Jesse. When Jesse Benton challenged him to a duel, Carroll asked Jackson to serve as his second. Jackson did his best to avoid involvement in the dispute, even riding many miles to meet with the younger Benton in a futile effort to convince him to reconcile with Carroll. In the end, however, Jackson felt compelled to support his own Inspector General and agreed reluctantly to side with him on the field of honor.

Though reputedly an excellent marksman, Jesse Benton appears to have lacked his older brother's physical courage. Carroll compensated for his lack of expertise with a dueling pistol, on the other hand, with an abundance of bravery. When the duel between the two occurred in Nashville, Tennessee, on June 14, 1813, Benton fired first, inflicting a slight wound on Carroll's thumb. As Carroll prepared to return fire, Benton turned and crouched in a covering attempt to shield himself from his adversary's bullet. Benton's reward was a painful wound in the buttocks, which made him a laughingstock throughout the region.

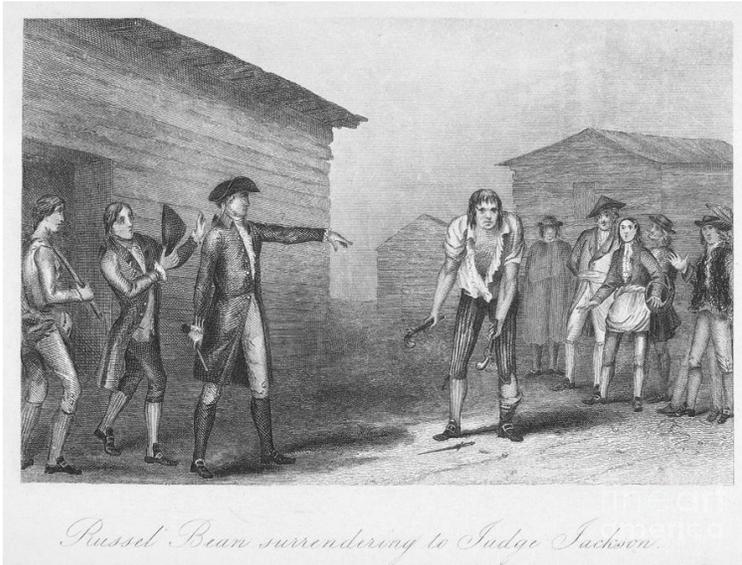
Thomas Hart Benton was understandably dismayed by this embarrassing turn of events. Blaming Jackson, Benton began a public campaign to discredit his former benefactor. This was a risky game, as Jackson had proven himself a supremely dangerous man to antagonize. Nicknamed "Old Hickory" for his physical toughness and ferocious temper, Jackson had proven his mettle from an early age. A 13-year-old Jackson participated in the American Revolution, during which he was captured and received a permanently disfiguring gash across his forehead from the saber of a British officer whose boots he had refused to clean.



Young Andrew Jackson refusing to shine the boots of a British officer.

Years later, a pistol-brandishing Judge Jackson singlehandedly subdued a hulking Tennessee outlaw who had scared off the local sheriff and an entire posse. The chastened criminal would later explain his decision to surrender to Jackson:

Why, when he came up, I looked him in the eye, and I saw shoot, and there wasn't shoot in nary other eye in the crowd; and so I says to myself, says I, hoss, it's about time to sing small, and so I did.



Judge Andrew Jackson captures Tennessee outlaw.

Jackson would participate in numerous duels throughout his life. An aggressive and hard-eyed killer when angered, the bullets that he carried in his gaunt body testified to his fearlessness. Benton was not intimidated, though, writing to Jackson, “The terror of your pistols is not to seal my lips.” It was only a matter of time before the simmering feud between the two erstwhile friends would boil over into violence.

That day arrived on September 4, 1813, when Jackson and two friends, John Coffee and Stockley Hays, encountered the Benton brothers in the lobby of the City Hotel in Nashville, Tennessee. Wielding a riding whip, Jackson shouted, “Now you damned rascal, I am going to punish you. Defend yourself!” Thomas Hart Benton reacted by reaching into his pocket, presumably for a weapon. Jackson whipped out his own pistol and continued to advance. Before Jackson had a chance to fire, however, Jesse Benton shot him from behind with a handgun loaded with two balls and slug.

Knocking Jackson to the ground, the heavy slug shattered his left shoulder, severing an artery in the process. One of the balls missed, but the other lodged in his arm. As he fell, Jackson squeezed off a shot at Thomas Hart Benton that went wild. Seeing Jackson sprawled helplessly on the floor in a spreading pool of blood, Jesse Benton pulled another pistol to administer the coup de grace. Fortunately for Jackson, a bystander intervened, giving Coffee and Hays time to rush to the aid of their wounded friend.

Hays charged Jesse Benton with a sword cane, but the point snapped on the younger brother’s vest button. Undeterred, Hays threw Jesse Benton to the ground and stabbed him repeatedly with a dagger. Jesse Benton thrust into Hays’ side the same pistol that he had intended to use on the prostrate Jackson and pulled the trigger, but the weapon misfired. Only then did onlookers drag the two men apart.

Meanwhile, Coffee pulled his own pistol and fired at Thomas Hart Benton. Missing his mark, Coffee continued the attack by using the empty gun as a club. Retreating slowly from the frenzied assault, the elder Benton tumbled backwards down a flight of stairs at the rear of the hotel. Almost as suddenly as it had begun, the free-for-all was over.

The gravely wounded Jackson was carried to the neighboring Nashville Inn, where doctors worked feverishly through the night to save his life. So grievous was the wound inflicted by Jesse Benton that Jackson's blood soaked completely through two mattresses. Nevertheless, Jackson refused to allow the shattered limb to be amputated. "I'll keep the arm," he insisted.

While Jackson hovered between life and death, Thomas Hart Benton stood in the street below his hotel window, roaring defiance and invective. Benton even broke a ceremonial sword that Jackson had been wearing and dropped during the fray. In the long run, however, Benton knew that his involvement in the shooting of one of Tennessee's most popular citizens would prove a personal and professional liability to him in that state. Consequently, Benton sought greener pastures in Missouri, moving there to launch his political career.

Though bed ridden for almost a month, Jackson lived up to his "Old Hickory" moniker and made a full recovery. Not until 1832 did Jackson undergo an operation without anesthesia in the White House to have Jesse Benton's bullet removed from his arm. By that time, Jackson and Thomas Hart Benton had settled their differences and, in addition to forming a powerful political alliance, renewed their earlier friendship.

Before attending a formal dinner party later on the same day of the surgery, Jackson had the removed pistol ball sent to Benton as a humorous token of his esteem. Benton declined to accept the gift, responding with a tongue-in-cheek legal analysis: "The general has acquired clear title to it in common law by twenty years of peaceable possession." Upon being reminded that Jackson had carried the ball for only 19 years, Benton replied jokingly, "Oh, well, in consideration of the extra care he has taken of it – keeping it constantly about his person, and so on – I'll waive the odd year."

The close bond between Benton and Jackson endured for the remainder of their lives. On his deathbed in June of 1845, Jackson penned short farewell notes to a handful of his closest companions. Benton was one of the recipients. For Benton's part, the bloody clash with Jackson in 1813 only enhanced his reputation as a man to be reckoned with. When once asked if he knew Jackson personally, Benton answered:

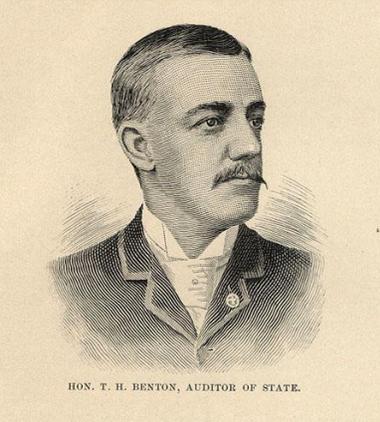
Yes, sir, I knew him, sir; General Jackson was a very great man, sir. I shot him, sir.

On another occasion, Benton explained:

Yes, I had a fight with Jackson. A fellow was hardly in fashion then who hadn't.

Thomas Hart Benton died of natural causes at the age of 76 in 1858, only four years after Nebraska achieved territorial status and almost 10 years before statehood. Given that the Thomas H. Benton who served as Nebraska's Auditor of Public Accounts did not assume office until 1889, it is clear that he was not the same Thomas Hart Benton who shot future president Andrew Jackson – even though the image that once graced the wall of the State Auditor's office indicated differently.

This is the actual Thomas H. Benton who served as Nebraska State Auditor from 1889 to 1893 and whose picture has assumed its rightful place on the office display:



Thomas H. Benton, Nebraska State Auditor (1889-1893)

The story does not end there, however

Despite his violent past and gruff exterior, Missouri Senator Thomas Hart Benton was an exceptionally loving and indulgent husband and father who showered his family with affection. Benton was especially devoted to his daughter, Jessie Ann Benton (1824-1902), and insisted on providing her with a rigorous education rare for girls of that era. Benton also paid close attention to her socialization, taking the pretty and precocious young Jessie to Washington, D.C., to mingle with dignitaries and accompany him at official governmental functions.



Portrait of a young Jessie Ann Benton.

Under her father's dotting tutelage, Jessie grew into an accomplished and refined young lady. Jessie became fluent in both French and Spanish, even helping to translate secret State Department documents, and was well versed in a broad array of scholarly subjects, including classic and contemporary literature.

By the age of 15, Jessie was widely admired for her great beauty, charm, intelligence, and poise. It was also at that age when she met a dashing army officer and future western explorer named John Charles Fremont. Despite her parents' initial objections, Jessie married Fremont in 1841.



John C. Fremont



Jessie Benton Fremont

For the next 50 years, until his death at age 77 in 1890, John C. Fremont would have a remarkable and rather controversial career, mapping the West with famed mountain man Kit Carson, leading the military expedition that secured California for the United States at the height of the Mexican-American War, serving as a U.S. Senator and two-time presidential candidate, and being promoted to Major General of the Union Army during the Civil War. At his side through thick and thin was his devoted wife, Jessie Benton Fremont, who was instrumental in her husband's many achievements.

The story comes full circle with the city of Fremont, Nebraska, which was established in 1856 and named after John C. Fremont. In addition to bearing the name of the man who married Thomas Hart Benton's notable daughter, that Dodge County municipality is also the home of current Nebraska State Auditor Charlie Janssen.



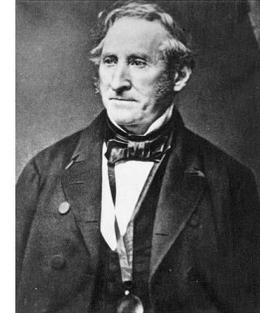
State Auditor Charlie Janssen



John C. Fremont



Jessie Benton Fremont



Sen. Thomas Hart Benton

Did a Nebraska State Auditor shoot a U.S. president? No, but a famous U.S. senator participated in such a shooting – and, though not a resident of this state, his indirect ties to Nebraska are real nonetheless.