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THWARTED WARRIOR: THE LAST YEARS OF THOMAS HART BENTON IN TENNESSEE, 1812-1815*

By William N. Chambers

Nearly fifteen years of Thomas Hart Benton's young-manhood were spent in Tennessee. The story of this period has never been fully told, though the man became famous as one of the first senators from Missouri, as Andrew Jackson's leading legislative lieutenant, as the great enemy of the United States Bank and friend of hard money, as the first man to serve in the Senate for thirty years, and as a radical Democrat to the day of his death.

Young Benton came to Tennessee with his family in 1801. He had been born near Hillsborough, North Carolina, in 1782, had grown up in a semi-Tory, seaboard atmosphere, had attended the University of North Carolina, and had been disgraced and expelled in his freshman year. Settling near Franklin, Williamson County, in Tennessee, he taught school, practiced law, wrote articles for the Nashville press demanding a reform of the Tennessee courts, served a term as state senator, and generally distinguished himself as a young man about the county. His frontier experiences countered the early conservative influences on his life, and helped mold him as a western leader with western views. His experiences in the years 1812-1815 helped broaden these perspectives, and also led to his decision to leave Tennessee, with the result that when Thomas Hart Benton became famous, he did so not as a Tennessean but as a Missourian. After serving his thirty years in the Senate (1821-1851), and two years in the House (1853-1855), and writing and editing several books, he died in 1858.

This is the story of Thomas Hart Benton's experiences in the War of 1812—a colorful episode in his career, which reflects Tennessee's participation in the war in which she earned the name, the Volunteer State.

* * * * *

In the spring of 1811 Thomas Benton of Franklin, Tennessee, might have read in the Nashville *Democratic Clarion* an advertisement—"For sale in the Clarion office, price 75 cents the single, 50 cents by the dozen, *The Military Instructor*, Containing all Steuben's regulations for the discipline [*sic*] of an army, that can apply to the militia."¹

¹This article is a continuation of William N. Chambers, "Thomas Hart Benton in Tennessee, 1801-1812," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* (Nashville), VIII (1949), 291-331, and both are studies toward a biography of Benton to be published soon.

²*Democratic Clarion and Tennessee Gazette*, March 22, 1811. Hereafter cited as *Democratic Clarion*.

This card suggested the mood of the times, and young Benton's mood too. For the train of abuses and insults heaped on the young republic by a Tory government in England had convinced the men of the West at least that their local militias might soon have to prove their "decepline." At the end of January, 1812, Thomas Benton indicated where he stood. He sat down and wrote a letter to his friend Andrew Jackson, major general of the Tennessee militia—"In the event that a volunteer force should be raised, there is no question, I fancy, but that you will command the division which goes from this state; and as I have always been resolved to quit the gown for the sword, whenever the sword was to be used, I mean, on some terms or other, to be in that corps." The young man could raise troops, but he thought a more eligible situation would be as aide to the General—"the natural inclination which all young men feel, or ought to feel, to advance themselves in the world, has induced me to say to you, that if you should lack an officer of this kind, and should be able to find none better than myself, that I should deem myself honored by your approbation." In short, Benton was willing.²

The elaborate, self-consciously elegant sentences rolled on. If he were appointed and went on an expedition, young Benton would "make an experiment of my capacity to use the pen as well as the sword," by keeping a journal of the expedition and memorable transactions. "You Sir, who feel a generous wish to see young men come forward by their own intrinsic strength, will not smile at this presumption. . . . I think with Tacitus, that every man should aim at doing something worthy of being written, or at writing something worthy of being done."³

A bill to raise volunteers had passed the House thirteen days before Thomas Benton mailed his letter, and it passed the Senate the day after he wrote.⁴ But the news did not reach the headlong border lawyer until a raw day in February, when the mail arrived at his law office. Immediately, he was at work drawing up a plan to put three volunteer regiments in the field. When he was finished, he saddled his horse and rode thirty miles to the Hermitage to see Andrew Jackson, charging through rain, hail, sleet, and wind, along poor roads deep in mud mixed with ice. The Major General was struck with the plan, and prepared to act upon its proposals.⁵ But things did not go so quickly. In the capital, Representative Felix Grundy of Tennessee fretted that the chief of the army, old Henry Dearborn, was doing

²Thomas H. Benton to Andrew Jackson, Nashville, January 30, 1812, Jackson Papers (Library of Congress).

³*Ibid.*

⁴*Annals of Congress*, 12 Congress, 1 Session, 801, 112.

⁵[Thomas H. Benton], *Addresses on the Presentation of the Sword of Gen. Andrew Jackson to the Congress of the United States* (Washington, 1855), 32-33. Hereafter cited as [Benton], *Addresses on the Sword*.

nothing,⁶ and all official Washington seemed to "have the slows." In Tennessee the restless Benton had to content himself with lesser glory. On April 29, 1812, he received a commission as captain of a volunteer infantry company attached to the Twenty-First Regiment of the state militia. His brother Nathaniel Benton was his ensign.⁷

Promptly, the ambitious soldier found himself concerned, not with war against England but with raids by Indians. The red men, spurred on perhaps by England and Spain, carried out foray after foray against the white settlements. In May, for example, four Indians came into a lonely house in McSwine's Bottom on the Duck River south of Franklin, took a nine-day-old child from the lap of a woman who was sitting in the parlor, threw it against the wall and killed it, and shot the woman in the jaw and in the knee, scalped her, and jabbed arrows into her body, and then went on to find and kill other members of the family.⁸ Young Thomas Benton, by this time promoted from captain to major, was ordered to Nashville by Colonel William P. Anderson to give his advice on ways of catching the Indians,⁹ but though troops were sent promptly into the forest around Duck River they saw no red men and heard no red men.¹⁰

Finally, however, the war Thomas Benton waited for was declared. By June 18, 1812, the joint resolution had passed both houses¹¹—finally even the pacific James Madison and his Congress had had enough from England. By Independence Day, the great news reached the Cumberland. In Franklin for the annual July 4 celebration, Thomas Benton could read in the Nashville paper—"WAR. By the mail last night we received the declaration of war against Great Britain. . . .

*A day, an hour of virtuous liberty
Is worth an eternity in bondage.*¹²

The crowd at the July Fourth meeting, swelled by the news of war, cheered and cheered the routine toasts, the repeated volleys fired by a company of light infantry, and the martial music. Among the volunteer toasts was one by Thomas Benton—"The War against England: Honor and life to its friends: confusion to its enemies."¹³

In the midst of the exultation, young Major Benton planned action to

⁶Felix Grundy to Andrew Jackson, Washington, February 12, 1812, in John Spencer Bassett (ed.), *Correspondence of Andrew Jackson*, 6 vols. and index (Washington, 1926-1933), I, 215.

⁷Commission Book, 1807-1812 (manuscript in Tennessee State Archives, Nashville, Tennessee), 266.

⁸*Democratic Clarion*, May 19, 1812.

⁹William P. Anderson to John Coffee, Nashville, May 19, 1812, Coffee Papers (Dyas Collection, Tennessee Historical Society, Nashville).

¹⁰*Democratic Clarion*, May 23, 1812.

¹¹*Annals of Congress*, 12 Congress, 1 Session, 297, 1637.

¹²*Democratic Clarion*, July 4, 1812.

¹³*Ibid.*, July 8, 1812.

suit his resolution. With British agents stirring the red men to attack, the war against the Indians was now a part of the war with England; thus Major Benton was proud to be able to report to General Jackson that Captain Mason's company had met and defeated a troop of Creeks. He was "glad he has got some blood: it will keep the war alive." But more was needed, a full-scale expedition against the Creeks was necessary—and in the square at Franklin and on the roads the volunteer major talked with people and got them to agree that they would join such an expedition. The only question for the volunteers was the federal government—now that a great war had been declared, would it finally countenance a full-sized operation?¹⁴

The question was not immediately answered; meanwhile, the militia drilled, and waited for the word to be given.¹⁵ Would there never be an end to marking time? Young Benton feared there would not, at least not soon enough to suit his ambition, his expanding hunger for drama and military glory. Thoroughly impatient, he resolved to go to Washington himself at the beginning of the session of Congress. The real theater of war was on the Canadian border. Perhaps some additional federal troops would be raised to go there; if so, the volunteer major would like extremely to have an appointment among them.¹⁶ Fighting Indians was all right, but the British troops were the real enemy, and he longed like his idol Lord Chatham to be in the field and at 'em. Why must a man wrest from a reluctant officialdom the chance to fight his country's enemies?¹⁷

At last, the word *was* given, and Thomas Benton was again in a spin of action. The volunteers were called to form a state militia division, which in the federal service would go down the Mississippi to defend New Orleans, where a British attack was expected. "Every Man of the western Country turns his eyes intuitively upon the mouth of the Mississippi," General Jackson proclaimed to his citizen-soldiers in November, 1812: "He there beholds the only outlet by which his produce can reach the markets of foreign or the atlantic States: Blocked up, all the fruits of his industry rots upon his hand—open and he carries on a trade with all the nations of the earth."¹⁸ If the diction and orthography were a bit faulty, the sentiment was appealing. The men of the Cumberland rose to the call, and made ready for a mid-winter rendezvous at Nashville.¹⁹

¹⁴Thomas H. Benton to Andrew Jackson, Franklin, July 4, 1812, Jackson Papers (Library of Congress).

¹⁵Marquis James, *The Life of Andrew Jackson* (Garden City, 1940), 143-45.

¹⁶Thomas H. Benton to Henry Clay, Franklin, October 2, 1812, Henry Clay Papers (Library of Congress).

¹⁷Cf. Thomas H. Benton, "Auto-Biographical Sketch," in *Thirty Years' View; or, A History of the Working of the American Government for Thirty Years, from 1820 to 1850*, 2 vols (New York, 1883), I, iii.

¹⁸Jackson's Announcement to His Soldiers, November 14, 1812, in Bassett (ed.), *Correspondence*, I, 241-42.

¹⁹*Democratic Clarion*, December 15, 1812.

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Young Major Benton was General Jackson's right arm in raising troops in the Franklin area. He made speech after speech,²⁰ dashing from muster ground to muster ground, waving the General's proclamation, ardently striving to stimulate the courage and patriotism of the community.²¹

His abilities were soon marked by Thomas Benton's comrades. On a cold Saturday late in November, 1812, the ninety men who were to be officers of the Second Division of Tennessee Volunteers met in Nashville. There the proposed division of 1,500 men was separated into one regiment of cavalry and two regiments of infantry, and the council of officers elected the field officers who would lead the expedition to New Orleans, naming Thomas H. Benton colonel of the Second Regiment, Infantry.²² Promptly, the young commander provided himself with a gorgeous uniform. The enlisted men might appear, according to General Jackson's orders, in blue or butter-nut or brown, homespun or not, with hunting shirts or coats, and white pantaloons and vests to be worn on parade; but the field officers must wear the uniform of their grade as prescribed by the regular army.²³ When Colonel Benton put on his plumage, and mounted an elegant horse, his friends were sure he was the finest looking man on the continent.²⁴

The division as a whole was called to muster on December 10. Companies in the various counties made ready, while the citizens of Williamson proved their ardor by raising five hundred dollars to equip their troops.²⁵ Finally, the day came—bitterly cold, truly the first day of winter, with a heavy snowfall which began in the morning and drove violently with the wind until night. Despite the weather, companies poured into Nashville in shoals until 1800 men had reported, and the next day, with the country still bound in snow, another two hundred volunteers arrived.²⁶

Soon after the muster, Thomas Benton had another job—Andrew Jackson announced that Thomas H. Benton would perform the duty of "first Aid," in addition to acting as "colonel commandant" of the Second Regiment, Infantry.²⁷ The day before Christmas, Colonel Benton had his regiment organized, and could certify to the United States a roll of his field and staff officers, "destined for the defense of New Orleans and the low-countries."²⁸

²⁰Thomas H. Benton to ?, Senate Chamber, [1837?], Benton Letters (Pennsylvania Historical Society, Philadelphia).

²¹Benton, "Auto-Biographical Sketch," *loc. cit.*, iii.

²²*Democratic Clarion*, November 23, 1812.

²³General Orders, Hermitage, November 23, 1812, in Bassett (ed.), *Correspondence*, I, 242-43.

²⁴Thomas J. C. Fagg, "Thomas Hart Benton," *Missouri Historical Review* (Jefferson City), I (October, 1906), 23.

²⁵*Democratic Clarion*, December 1, 1812.

²⁶*Ibid.*, December 15, 1812.

²⁷*Ibid.*, December 22, 1812.

²⁸Muster Roll of Field and Staff Officers, Second Regiment, Tennessee Volunteers, December 24, 1812, in Benton Letters.

While the division made ready, the Colonel had a unique opportunity to indulge his sense of the dramatic. An unfortunate private, one Oliver Bush, deserted his company. Desertion was a grave danger to a militia corps, and when Bush was convicted General Jackson determined to make a bitter example of the first case he had had. At three in the afternoon of December 14 the two infantry regiments were drawn up along a front of a quarter of a mile. Young Oliver Bush, surrounded by bayonets which pointed at his back, his breast, and his sides, was conducted to the head of the line, followed by the music of the fife-and-drum. The guard halted the prisoner, the music stopped, and then the Officer of the Day on horseback—Thomas Benton—advanced and stopped before the first company. He must have been an imposing figure, with his tall, stout, but straight body, and his large head topped with wavy sandy hair. After a moment, he looked up at the company and spoke:²⁹

Soldiers, I am commanded by the general, to superintend the execution of the sentence which a court martial has pronounced upon Oliver Bush.

Oliver Bush, a private in Captain Wallis's company of volunteers, has been convicted of the crime of desertion. By this crime, the most infamous which a volunteer could commit he has rendered himself unworthy of associating with the voluntary defenders of their country. The court martial have sentenced him to be expelled from the camp of the volunteers; and have forbid him ever again to enter it. The officers, non-commissioned officers, and privates of the volunteer corps are forbid ever again to associate with him; his crime having brought a disgrace upon their name which can only be wiped off by driving him eternally from their presence. In expelling him from the camp, in turning him loose, exposed to the scorn of his fellow citizens, which will pursue him wherever he goes, the court martial has pronounced upon Oliver Bush, the severest sentence which it was in their power to inflict.³⁰

When Colonel Benton had finished, the music began again. The guard marched the prisoner to the next company, and the Colonel repeated his exhortation over Oliver Bush's head; and so on, through twenty-two companies, until the end of the line was reached. There, Oliver Bush was driven straight off at quick step, the rogue's march playing at his rear. When he was a mile and a half from camp, he was turned loose by the guard, his coat wrong side out, to face the hoots of the people wherever he went.³¹

Not only did Thomas Benton execute the sentence against Oliver Bush—he wrote out the whole story and gave it to the Nashville press. As aide-

²⁹*Democratic Clarion*, December 22, 1812.

³⁰*Ibid.*

³¹*Ibid.*

de-camp, he acted as a sort of public relations officer, and this job was strictly in the line of duty; but as he wrote, he could not help revealing between the lines that he relished his part both in the field and at his desk.³²

By the beginning of 1813, the division was ready to move out to meet the British and drive them from the mouth of the Mississippi, in case they should succeed in effecting a landing at that point.³³ On January 8 Colonel Benton received orders from General Jackson to superintend the embarkation of the First Regiment, Infantry, down the Cumberland River and to march his own troops overland. At half past twelve, noon, the signal was given to slip the cables, and the flatboats wheeled into the Cumberland; looking on, Colonel Benton observed that every face was animated with joy. At one o'clock, the Second Regiment set out, with Colonel Benton marching on foot at the head of his seven hundred men. He summarily ordered all the private boats he could find along the way to be impressed into the public service, so his men too might be afloat before they left the Harpeth region.³⁴

With the journey to New Orleans begun, Thomas Benton started to keep the journal he had promised he would write the year before.³⁵ As he wrote, he sent installments to the Nashville paper, in which he revealed himself as the owner of a rolling, Gibbonesque, if sometimes diffuse prose style.

After seeing his men on their way,³⁶ Colonel Benton at four in the morning turned back to Nashville. There he joined Colonel Anderson, who was on his way to take command of his regiment at Fort Massac on the Ohio. At midnight, the two colonels set out from Nashville by boat. "The

³²*Ibid.*

³³*Ibid.*, January 19, 1813. Meanwhile, the troops were supposed to reinforce General Wilkinson at New Orleans, with a view to occupying Spanish-held West Florida.

³⁴Thomas H. Benton to Andrew Jackson, Robertson's Landing, January 9, 1813, in *ibid.*

³⁵[Thomas H. Benton], "JOURNAL of a Voyage from Nashville, Ten., to New Orleans in the winter of the year 1813, by the Tennessee Volunteers under the command of Gen. Jackson," in *The Clarion*, February 9, 1813. (On this date the name of the *Democratic Clarion* was changed to *The Clarion*.)

The authorship of this JOURNAL is readily established. It contains internal evidence, in references to the feelings and emotions of Colonel Benton as well as details of his doings which could have been known only by him, and which perhaps in addition would have been of interest only to him. Further, it was the basis of an attack in the papers on Thomas Benton by William B. Lewis, in which Lewis called Benton the author, and in the outcome of which Benton did not deny but rather assumed the responsibility of authorship. Cf. *The Clarion*, February 23, May 5, 1813. Finally, the style of the JOURNAL, if immature and arty, is still early Bentonian. The Colonel mentions himself only in the third person. The JOURNAL has not been used by any Benton biographer or, so far as the writer has discovered, by any other scholar. The compiler of Andrew Jackson's correspondence notes that Thomas Benton intended to write a journal, but appears not to have known whether he ever did and in any case not to have seen a copy. Bassett (ed.), *Correspondence*, I, 256.

³⁶Thomas H. Benton to Andrew Jackson, Robertson's Landing, January 9, 1813, in *Democratic Clarion*, January 19, 1813.

night was intensely cold," Thomas Benton wrote in his journal,

but still, and nothing was heard to interrupt the silence that reigned save the hollow murmuring of the water which broke upon the rocky shore. . . . Col. Anderson placed himself at the helm; the other officers stood by him. No one said he was afraid; but the question of Caesar to the pilot, *Quid times?* repeatedly and involuntarily occurred. Finally, recollecting that they were fatalists, they gave the boat to the stream, surrendered themselves to their destiny, and went below to the cabin.—Having floated two hours, they came to for the balance of the night.³⁷

Five days later, at Clarksville, sixty-seven miles downstream from Nashville, Thomas Benton stopped to wait for his regiment. The division was short of flour, and General Jackson commanded his aide to secure some from merchants he knew were hoarding it. The impetuous Colonel Benton "sent out the bayonet," and soon "this weapon had produced him 70 barrels of flour," at eight dollars a barrel. But ten days were lost for want of boats, which meant that the whole division would finally be delayed that long. And all because the quartermaster had left boats in the hands of business men who wanted them to get their private inventories to market!³⁸ Sitting at his diary, Thomas Benton calculated that the delay would cost the United States \$20,000. Why, he asked himself, should not a commanding general have control over all his officers, including his quartermaster? "As things stand at present," he wrote in a passage he sent to the *Nashville Clarion*, "if an army is stopped on its march for want of bread, or stuck in the mud for want of transportation, all that the general can do is to send a complaint to the president, perhaps a thousand miles off; the delinquent commissary, or Quarter Master, at the same time sends his counter-affadavit." Meanwhile, "the season for action passes entirely away."³⁹

By January 23 boats had been found and everyone was anxious to catch up. On the way down the Cumberland that night, the boats ran into a storm—

Suddenly the sky was overspread with thick clouds, and squalls of wind and rain drove at intervals with great violence. The steersmen were driven from the helm; & the boats floated at random. Still it was deemed practicable to go on . . . Having floated for two hours in this way, the boats received a sudden shock, and the officers rushed to the bow; but the darkness was so impenetrable

³⁷[Benton], "JOURNAL of a Voyage," Entry of January 10, in *The Clarion*, February 9, 1813.

³⁸Entries of January 15, 17, *ibid.*, February 16, 1813.

³⁹Entry of January 17, *ibid.*

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that they could not see upon what they had struck. Nothing was distinguishable until candles were brought. It was then perceived that they had been driven stern foremost against the left bank.

The boats were pushed off, and they went on until they had reached an island area where passes could not be distinguished without light.⁴⁰

By noon the next day, the boats had crossed into Kentucky. Finally, at dark on January 26, the regiment reached Smithland, a little town at the confluence of the Cumberland and the Ohio.⁴¹ The big river was a mass of crushing, grinding ice floes, and the old timers at Smithland advised against entering the stream. "It rested with Col. Benton. . . to decide. He had never before felt the responsibility of command; and his anxiety became painful as he reflected that upon a word which he was to speak, it might depend whether a multitude of fine men should perish in the ice, or live to see their friends again." Finally, he gave the word to go ahead, after securing long poles spiked with iron to keep off the sheets of ice. "The order," the Colonel noted, "was obeyed with perfect alacrity"⁴²—and so the regiment was on its way to the great Mississippi River, on its way to a planned rendezvous with General Jackson at Natchez.⁴³

By the morning of January 31, the banks of the Ohio were falling wider apart. Soon, the dark brown highway of the Mississippi was before the little flotilla, and one by one the flatboats were caught in it and carried downstream. Above New Madrid, in the vast, unsettled Missouri Territory, the regiment stopped and Colonel Benton wrote his General a letter. Every exertion was being made to catch up, and the boats were putting off at daybreak and stopping just in time to tie up at dark; it was unsafe to navigate the river with its treacherous sawyers and shifting sandbars without light.⁴⁴ Progress down the Mississippi was swift. By the evening of February 13, 1813, three days before the cavalry arrived, Colonel Benton and his command met General Jackson at Natchez on the lower Mississippi.⁴⁵

Given a few days and the 2,070 men⁴⁶ could go on as a body to New Orleans. There, Andrew Jackson, Thomas H. Benton, and their fellow ambitious Tennesseans might strike the first decisive blow of a generally indecisive and discouraging war.⁴⁷ But the vision of glory was not to be realized. The volunteers made camp near Natchez, or Natchey as General

⁴⁰Entry of January 23, *ibid.*, March 9, 1813.

⁴¹Entry of January 26, *ibid.*

⁴²Entry of January 27, *ibid.*

⁴³*Ibid.* In this edition the JOURNAL stops.

⁴⁴Thomas H. Benton to Andrew Jackson, Some Miles above New Madrid, Monday Night, February 1, 1813, Jackson Papers (Library of Congress).

⁴⁵Andrew Jackson to James Wilkinson, Natchez, February 16, 1813, in Bassett (ed.), *Correspondence*, I, 276.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*

⁴⁷*Cf.* [Benton], *Addresses on the Sword*, 34-35.

Jackson sometimes wrote it—and there they waited for orders—and waited . . . and waited.⁴⁸

It was a wearisome time, devoted to routine garrison tasks. On the night of February 27, when the troops had been at Natchez a month and a half, Thomas Benton was making the grand round of guard posts as Officer of the Day. When he came to Captain Terrill's post, he was arrested because Captain Terrill did not recognize the countersign. The Colonel was sure that Captain Terrill acted out of a sense of duty, and he related the occurrence to General Jackson only to explain his failure to make a second grand round.⁴⁹ On the afternoon of February 28, the Colonel found that one of his companies was out of meat, "on account of bad pork received from the contractor which was thrown away by his men," and there were deficiencies of meal and meat in some of the ten other companies, too.⁵⁰

And so on. . . and so on. . . until word finally came from the War Department. On February 5 Secretary John Armstrong had written Major General Andrew Jackson,⁵¹ and on March 15, the orders finally reached him at the volunteers' camp.⁵² That afternoon, Colonel Benton received a message to come to the General's tent. There, the ramrod-thin commander, stiff with rage, showed him the Secretary's note⁵³—the British were no longer expected at New Orleans that winter, and General Jackson would disband his troops *where he was*, dismissing them from public service. Meanwhile, he would accept the thanks of the President of the United States!⁵⁴ With the full agreement of his aide-de-camp, General Jackson determined not to obey the order to turn his men loose in the wilderness five hundred miles from their homes. He would lead his volunteers as a body back to Nashville and discharge them there—if he had to pay the transportation costs himself!⁵⁵

In a few days, the division was on the weary road home. Slowly the troops crawled north, along the Natchez Trace, through the Choctaw nation,⁵⁶ balked, thwarted, the fine chance at glory on which they had so much counted, all gone.⁵⁷

But the trip down the Mississippi and back to Nashville was not a complete loss to Thomas Benton, at least. On the journey he discovered

⁴⁸Andrew Jackson to James Wilkinson, Cantonment Near Washington, February 20, 1813, in Bassett (ed.), *Correspondence*, I, 277.

⁴⁹Report of the Officer of the Day to General Jackson, Camp of Volunteers Near Washington, February 27, 1813, Jackson Papers (Library of Congress).

⁵⁰Report on Provisions by Thomas H. Benton, [February 28, 1813], in *ibid.*

⁵¹John Armstrong to Andrew Jackson, Washington, February 5, 1813, in Bassett (ed.), *Correspondence*, I, 275.

⁵²Andrew Jackson to John Armstrong, Camp of Volunteers Near Washington, Mississippi Territory, March 15, 1813, in *ibid.*, 291.

⁵³[Benton], *Addresses on the Sword*, 35.

⁵⁴John Armstrong to Andrew Jackson, Washington, February 5, 1813, in Bassett (ed.), *Correspondence*, I, 275-76.

⁵⁵[Benton], *Addresses on the Sword*, 35-36.

⁵⁶*The Clarion*, March 30, 1813.

⁵⁷[Benton], *Addresses on the Sword*, 37.

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⁶⁰Ibid
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and realized the vastness and importance of the great West beyond the Mississippi. In a sense, Thomas Benton was thirty before he found himself. The West beyond the great continental artery was the future, a potential paradise of prosperous freeholding farmers, a coming Arcadia on the Jeffersonian model. But Thomas Benton had to see the vast-flowing river and the black land beyond before he broke entirely from his seaboard background and from the lawyer's shell of precedent and safe usage.⁵⁸

If Thomas Benton did not realize his passion to trim the Imperial lion's claws, he found a fight of another kind on his hands when he returned to Nashville. It was a purely personal matter, but one that touched his pride and even the question of his literary skill.

It began with the remarks the Colonel had made about quartermasters in his journal. When Major William B. Lewis read these opinions,⁵⁹ his blood rose—he was the deputy quartermaster for the volunteer division, and he was sure the remarks were aimed at him. He immediately sat down to write the most insulting letter possible in reply, identifying the author of the journal and burlesquing him—"Most inimitable Journalist!—He mounts his stilts, and at every step, kicks out a star!" Safe in Nashville, Major Lewis gave himself free reign sporting at the absent Benton's expense. To be sure, *he* had never walked a dozen miles at the head of his regiment, "and that too, for the sole purpose of being gazetted"; but then he had never been guilty either of sublime rhapsodies on the faintly glimmering beams of the moon! And what was this "*Quid times*" business when the boat left Nashville? "It is true, *I suppose*," the Major wrote with juvenile sarcastic emphasis, "that no one said he was afraid, but, why turn pale? Why tremble?"⁶⁰

If Major Lewis did not answer the charges he thought aimed at him, he managed at once to impugn Colonel Benton's motives and courage, and to roast his literary excesses. One of the Colonel's friends printed a reply the next week. He pointed out with annoying logic that Colonel Benton had named no names, so that "no man sir unless his conscience was both tender and sore could have discovered insinuations there." As for Thomas Benton, he *did* stay up nights looking after his soldiers, as a good officer should, and he hardly lacked courage for he had volunteered to go out and fight.⁶¹

Here the war of words rested until the returning troops paraded through Nashville on April 22. Everyone was proud of the division's chief, General Jackson, and Thomas Benton in particular praised and exalted

⁵⁸Jessie Benton Fremont, "Biographical Sketch of Senator Benton in Connection with Western Expansion," in John Charles Fremont, *Memoirs of My Life* (Chicago and New York, 1887), I, 2.

⁵⁹*The Clarion*, February 16, 1813.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, February 23, 1813.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, March 2, 1813.

his General's glory. At dinner with a group of fellow officers at Clayton Talbot's tavern in Nashville, he spoke of the solicitude Andrew Jackson felt for his men and of his magnanimity in refusing to discharge them into the wilderness at Natchez.⁶² But Colonel Benton came in for his share of praise, too, at least in the *Clarion*—"in the late expedition he shared every fatigue with the most common soldier, and in no case shunned the mire his men had to wade through. In camp his police was admired by all—we hope he may have an opportunity of signalizing himself in the field." Unlike some of the other officers, Colonel Benton planned to pursue the course of arms until the war was won.⁶³

Meanwhile, Thomas Benton had seen the *Clarion* with Major Lewis's letter in it, and he was in a passion. The afternoon he arrived in Nashville, at four o'clock exactly, tired and dusty from the journey as he was, he wrote Major Lewis. "Words are not to be employed," he fumed; "I shall neither give nor take explanations: my mind is made up, and you must fight me sir. . . I lay before you the pistol, the sword, and the dagger: take which you like." There was no time to waste, for he planned to leave the state, he declared, as he dispatched his messenger, Ensign Lyttleton Johnston. The meeting should be in Kentucky in two or three days, or at sun up if Lewis wanted it in Tennessee.⁶⁴ The nimble Major sidestepped. He couldn't fight, because he was too busy disposing of public property left over from the expedition; when this business was done, he would indulge the Colonel in his propensity.⁶⁵

Such dodging would not do for Thomas Benton. Within the hour, on Friday afternoon, he sat down at his desk in the camp near Nashville and answered Lewis's note. The Major was as much in the public service when he penned his insults as he was now, and, "in a word you must fight me sir or you must flinch openly. I give you until the rising of the sun on Tuesday morning." He had said he was leaving the state. To delay was to say that, as Lewis had attacked the Colonel when he was 500 miles to the south, he would fight when Benton was 500 miles to the north.⁶⁶ When Major Lewis once again regretted that he just couldn't say when he might fight, the impatient Benton decided that Lewis was "*a cockaded and gold-laced coward*." He rode to the printer's in Nashville, had all the correspondence set up and run off, and distributed it as a handbill.⁶⁷

⁶²Statement of William Quarles, Nashville, July 21, 1813, Jackson Papers (Chicago Historical Society).

⁶³*The Clarion*, April 27, 1813.

⁶⁴Thomas H. Benton to William B. Lewis, Nashville, April 22, 1813, in *ibid.*, May 5, 1813.

⁶⁵William B. Lewis to Thomas H. Benton, Nashville, April 23, 1813, in *ibid.*

⁶⁶Thomas H. Benton to William B. Lewis, Contonment Near Nashville, April 23, 1813, in *ibid.*

⁶⁷Duel Correspondence Circular, April, 1813, copy in Benton Papers (Missouri Historical Society).

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This nettled Major Lewis, who now tried a few defiant drumbeats of his own. He *would* meet the Colonel, *sometime*—and hadn't Thomas Benton in publishing his leaflet taken an easy, safe way out of the situation?⁶⁸

If William B. Lewis really thought he could get away with this, he didn't know Thomas H. Benton. Sitting at his candle about nine o'clock that night, the Colonel snapped back a note—he would postpone his trip if Lewis would name the day, the hour, and the place; it might be any day soon, any hour, any place. As to the accounts, the Colonel knew this was fiddle-faddle. He had talked with many people who told him they had been paid or put off with frivolous pretexts. *Now*, what would the Major do?⁶⁹ The Major, very simply, declined once more to be definite.⁷⁰

This was Thomas Benton's first experience, or near-experience, with what was known as the field of honor. He now gave the whole of the Benton-Lewis correspondence to his friend the Nashville editor. He was ashamed, he told the "PEOPLE OF THE STATE OF TENNESSEE," of staying to settle a personal quarrel when the republic was attacked, but his *honor* had required it. Now he was going away, to seek an active, *honor-able* place in the war. He could not resist a final melodramatic flourish—"if the chances of war prevent me from returning, suffer me not to be lied out of your friendship by men without honor, without shame, without public character."⁷¹ If he had been somewhat over-wrought in the whole affair, if it was all a bit absurd, Thomas Benton had nonetheless bested his adversary without loading a pistol.

With this letter-writing wonder out of the way, the young Colonel was free to pursue his martial ambitions. He was on his way to Washington to seek a new military career with some action in it. Before he left, he rode by the Hermitage to get a letter of introduction to the Secretary of War from Major General Jackson, praising him for "having abandoned a profitable profession, for the tented fields." The General knew at first hand Thomas Benton's fitness to command—"his uniform good conduct, his industry and attention to the dicipline [*sic*] and police of his regiment speak more for his fitness than words, and a personal acquaintan[c]e with Colo. Benton will soon decide on the capacity of his mind." Once again, the orthography was faulty but the sentiment good.⁷²

The Colonel planned to do something for his General in return. All of Andrew Jackson's drafts for money to pay the expenses of bringing his division back from Natchez had been refused payment by the auditors at

⁶⁸William B. Lewis to Thomas H. Benton, Nashville, April 26, 1813, in *The Clarion*, May 5, 1813.

⁶⁹Thomas H. Benton to William B. Lewis, Nashville, April 26, 1813, in *ibid.*

⁷⁰William B. Lewis to Thomas H. Benton, Nashville, April 27, 1813, in *ibid.*

⁷¹*The Clarion*, May 5, 1813.

⁷²Andrew Jackson to John Armstrong, Hermitage, May 10, 1813, in Bassett (ed.), *Correspondence*, I, 307.

New Orleans; and now Thomas Benton undertook to present the General's case again at the national capital.⁷³

It was a long trip to Washington. The Colonel left Nashville on May 10, journeyed past Knoxville, and across the mountains and down the Virginia Tidewater, until at last on May 26 he was at the capital.⁷⁴

Certainly the town with its muddy streets, unfinished buildings and provincial ways, was no city to compare with New York or Philadelphia. But to Thomas Benton, who had never seen a larger place, it might have been another London. The young man got his first glimpse of the national Congress in action in the Capitol; it all seemed very slow, and he could smell the political intrigue that hung over every maneuver. He visited some of the departments, noticing particularly how the War Department machinery creaked along, and he chatted at the White House with mild, little President Madison, who asked carefully after General Andrew Jackson's health.⁷⁵

After almost twenty days of conferences, delays, and just plain waiting, the Colonel was at last able to accomplish something. He managed to convince Secretary of War Armstrong that there must be some place for a willing young man in the war, and that Tennessee would gladly put more men in the field. And, carefully combining dynamite with diplomacy, he proved himself a successful lobbyist for General Jackson's claims—only, however, by working out himself a scheme for payment which he managed to get the Secretary to adopt. He wrote triumphantly to his mentor, saying that he hoped to be on his way home in a few days, his business finished and a new career before him.⁷⁶

By June 18 Thomas Benton's new appointment was confirmed by the Senate. Under the newly commissioned Colonel John Williams of East Tennessee, a political enemy of Andrew Jackson,⁷⁷ he was to serve as lieutenant colonel of the Thirty-Ninth Infantry Regiment, regular army—a regiment whose flesh would have to be recruited back in Tennessee. One of his ensigns was to be a young man from the Cumberland region named Sam

⁷³[Benton], *Addresses on the Sword*, 37.

⁷⁴Thomas H. Benton to Andrew Jackson, Franklin, July 25, 1813, Jackson Papers (Library of Congress).

⁷⁵Thomas H. Benton to Andrew Jackson, Washington, June 15, 1813, *ibid.*

⁷⁶*Ibid.* Remembering and recounting this incident many years later, Colonel Benton said that he had to threaten the Administration with the loss of the political support of the state of Tennessee, in order to get the War Department to honor General Jackson's claim. [Benton], *Addresses on the Sword*, 38. This sounds a little like frontier exaggeration, for no reference to any such threat appears in the letter the Colonel wrote Andrew Jackson from Washington at the time. Nonetheless, the story is repeated and apparently given its face value in the chief biography of Thomas Benton. William M. Meigs, *Life of Thomas Hart Benton* (Philadelphia, 1904), 71-72. And the earliest biographer of Thomas Benton also summarizes this account and appears to accept it as accurate. Theodore Roosevelt, *Thomas H. Benton* (Boston, 1899), 29.

⁷⁷*Cf.* Thomas P. Abernethy, *From Frontier to Plantation in Tennessee* (Chapel Hill, 1932), 241.

Houston.⁷⁸ For his services Lieutenant Colonel Thomas H. Benton, USA, would receive \$1,543.08 a year, while his privates would get \$96.00 each for the same period.⁷⁹ Two days later Thomas Benton wrote out his acceptance—the commission had reached him at Crawford's in Georgetown, on the bluffs overlooking the Potomac above Washington.⁸⁰ In another two days, the young man was on his way home.⁸¹

Back in the Cumberland, there was news, disturbing, and startling. His younger brother Jesse, of whom Thomas had written that he expected him to do something in the war or perish, told him that he very nearly *had* perished, but in a way quite different from the heroic one Thomas had envisioned.⁸² The erratic Jesse had agreed to serve as Ensign Lyttleton Johnston's second in a challenge to Major William Carroll, thereby returning the favor Ensign Johnston had done Thomas in his affair with Major Lewis.⁸³ But the Johnston-Carroll quarrel had not ended as peaceably as the Benton-Lewis affair. For reasons of his own, Major Carroll refused to honor Ensign Johnston's challenge.⁸⁴ When he heard this, Jesse Benton tartly suggested to Carroll that he himself might stand in Johnston's place; if the Major would not meet the Ensign, surely he would not refuse Jesse Benton of Benton Town.⁸⁵

To Major Carroll, this was all a great weariness. He called on General Jackson, who tried to dissuade Jesse Benton by insisting that he, Jesse, had no quarrel with Carroll. But young Jesse, with all his brother's impetuosity and none of Thomas's judgment or style, would have none of such pacifications. The duel was set, with General Jackson acting as Billy Carroll's second and arranging the details of the meeting. The men fought on June 14. Both were wounded, young Jesse Benton dangerously.⁸⁶ When the command to fire was given, Jesse, frightened, pulled his trigger, turned his back to Carroll, and quickly assumed a low squatting position, so that the Major's ball lodged in the very widest part of Jesse Benton's frame.⁸⁷

When Thomas Benton heard all this on his arrival at Nashville, he exploded. Perhaps Jesse had no quarrel with Billy Carroll, perhaps young Jesse had played the poltroon by making a bullseye of the seat of his pants,

⁷⁸*Complete Regular Army Register of the United States . . . 1779 to 1879* (Washington, 1881), 121, 167.

⁷⁹*Ibid.*, 191.

⁸⁰Thomas H. Benton to General Armstrong, Crawford's, Georgetown, June 20, 1813, Correspondence of the Adjutant General's Office (National Archives, Washington).

⁸¹Thomas H. Benton to Henry Clay, Crawford's, Georgetown, June 22, 1813, Henry Clay Papers.

⁸²*The Clarion*, June 15, 1813.

⁸³William Carroll to A. J. Donelson, October 4, 1824, in Bassett (ed.), *Correspondence*, I, 311, n. 1.

⁸⁴William Carroll to Jesse Benton, Nashville, June 11, 1813, in *ibid.*, 311.

⁸⁵Jesse Benton to William Carroll, Nashville, June 12, 1813, in *ibid.*, 312.

⁸⁶*The Clarion*, June 15, 1813.

⁸⁷William Carroll to A. J. Donelson, October 4, 1824, *loc. cit.*

perhaps poor Jesse was a fool in general; but family feeling required the proud, ambitious, newly-appointed lieutenant colonel to take Jesse's side. He was particularly angry at Andrew Jackson. Why, on the very day the General had been superintending the shooting of his brother, Thomas Benton was in the War Department in Washington pleading the General's case!⁸⁸

Still, the Colonel picked no quarrels. He stayed at Franklin, keeping himself remarkably close for a usually vociferous and high-rolling young man;⁸⁹ but this did not keep the local gossips from rattling, and soon rumors reached the Hermitage that the Colonel had been making ill-natured remarks against the General.⁹⁰ As a matter of fact, back in Franklin Thomas Benton had said to intimates that Andrew Jackson had been hypocritical in pretending friendship to both Carroll and Jesse.⁹¹ Now the General sent an ominous note to his ex-aide—had Benton threatened to make a publication against Jackson? had Benton spoken disrespectfully of Jackson? and finally had Benton threatened to challenge Jackson to a duel?⁹²

When he received this note, the Colonel took a grip on himself and sat down to compose a reply. What he had said, he wrote, "may be reduced to three or four heads." He *had*, he wrote (though he took a great many words to tell it), said *one*, that it was poor business for a man of Jackson's age to conduct a duel between two young men; and, *two*, that Jackson had meanly drawn the challenge from Brother Jesse; and, *three*, "that if you could not have prevented a duel you ought at least to have conducted it in the usual mode, and on terms equal to both parties;" and, *four*, that Jackson had on the contrary conducted it in "a savage, unequal, unfair, and base manner." He had not challenged Andrew Jackson, but "the terror of your pistols is not to seal my lips." What Thomas Benton thought was true, he would speak, without either seeking or declining a duel.⁹³

When the Colonel folded, sealed, and posted his letter, he knew that his friendship with the Caliph of the Cumberland was ended. In reply, General Jackson read the young man a homily—"It is the character of the man of honor, and particularly of the *soldier* not to quarrel and brawl like the fish woman."⁹⁴

So the matter rested throughout the hot days of August, and so it

⁸⁸Thomas H. Benton to Andrew Jackson, Franklin, July 25, 1813, Jackson Papers (Library of Congress).

⁸⁹Thomas H. Benton to Henry Clay, Franklin, August 23, 1813, Henry Clay Papers.

⁹⁰Andrew Hynes to Andrew Jackson, Nashville, July 16, 1813, in Bassett (ed.), *Correspondence*, I, 309-10.

⁹¹Statement of Lemuel P. Montgomery, n. p., n. d., Jackson Papers (Chicago Historical Society).

⁹²Andrew Jackson to Thomas H. Benton, Hermitage, July 19, 1813, in Bassett (ed.), *Correspondence*, I, 310.

⁹³Thomas H. Benton to Andrew Jackson, Franklin, July 25, 1813, Jackson Papers (Library of Congress).

⁹⁴Andrew Jackson to Thomas H. Benton, Hermitage, July [28 or later], 1813, in Bassett (ed.), *Correspondence*, I, 314.

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might have passed off altogether. But on September 4, Thomas and Jesse Benton came to Nashville on business, and put up at Talbot's Hotel, an inn they knew General Jackson did not frequent.⁹⁵ The town gossips, perhaps anxious for a brawl, and perhaps anxious to see Thomas Benton trimmed down, rushed to the Hermitage to tell the news. Soon, the General and his oak-tall friend Colonel John Coffee arrived and took rooms at the Nashville Inn. They then walked to the postoffice, and on their return they went out of their way to pass the hotel where the Bentons were,⁹⁶ where they saw Jesse Benton step from the pavement into the hotel. Promptly Jackson and Coffee followed Jesse Benton inside, and there in the hall near the back portico of Talbot's the General came face to face with Thomas Benton.

"Now defend yourself you damned rascal!" Jackson cried.⁹⁷

The words were a fuse which set off a paroxysm of gunfire, pushing, pulling, wrestling, fist-fighting, shoving, gouging, stabbing, and jabbing. The General drew a pistol from under his coat,⁹⁸ and strode toward Thomas. Promptly, Jesse aimed and fired on Andrew Jackson from a sort of ambush in the bar-room next to the passage, while Jackson shot at Thomas, and Thomas drew his gun and fired twice at the General in return. In the crash of pistols, Jackson toppled to the floor, blood spurting from his left arm, while the muzzle-blast of his weapon scared a hole in Thomas's coat sleeve. The towering Colonel Coffee now charged through the smoke. He blazed away at Thomas, but his ball slashed harmlessly past the young man's head into the wall.⁹⁹

By this time three other men were in the battle. The struggling, weaving figures lunged through the hall and into the bar-room. Disarmed, Thomas found John Coffee and Alexander Donaldson rushing him with drawn daggers, while Jesse was attacked by Charles Hammond with a dagger and by the gigantic Stokeley Hays with a sword cane. Retreating backwards down the hall, the Colonel received five slight knife wounds. In the bar-room, Hammond and Hays got Jesse on his back and stabbed at him while he tried to parry the blades with his bare hands. He was saved only when another warrior, James Sumner, rushed in and helped drive off his attackers. In the struggle Jesse clapped a pistol to the body of Stokeley Hays to blow him through, but the gun missed fire.¹⁰⁰

The melee now came to its peak. Fending off the daggers and clubbed

⁹⁵*Account of a Duel with General Jackson*, Circular by Thomas H. Benton, September 10, 1813 (Tennessee Historical Society).

⁹⁶James Parton, *Life of Andrew Jackson*, 3 vols. (New York, 1860), I, 393.

⁹⁷Certificate of James W. Sitler, Nashville, September 5, 1813, in Bassett (ed.), *Correspondence*, I, 317.

⁹⁸*Ibid.*

⁹⁹*Account of a Duel with Andrew Jackson*, Circular by Thomas H. Benton.

¹⁰⁰*Ibid.*

pistols of John Coffee and Alexander Donaldson, the bulky, dignified, imperial Thomas Benton managed to fall backwards down a flight of stairs at the rear of the hotel.¹⁰¹

This bit of slapstick ended the engagement, and now General Jackson was discovered lying, bleeding, in the back door.¹⁰² The man who had advised his junior officer against brawling like fish women had precipitated a fray in which he very nearly lost his own life. He was carried from Talbot's to the Nashville Inn, where he soaked two mattresses through with his blood. Meanwhile, Thomas and Jesse Benton strutted in front of Talbot's, denouncing General Jackson as an assassin and a defeated assassin at that, defying him to come out and renew the battle. Finally Thomas Benton took to the public square a sword of Jackson's he had found, and ceremoniously broke it in two in front of the watching crowd.¹⁰³

From his position as a rising star in the community, Thomas Benton was suddenly reduced to the place of a pariah. Soon after the brawl, he wrote—"I am literally in hell here." He had the meanest wretches under heaven to contend with, liars, affidavit makers, and shameless cowards, for all the puppies of Jackson were at work on him. Truly, he thought, "the scalping-knife of Tecumpsy is mercy compared with the affidavits of these villians." Nothing but a decisive duel could save him, "for it is a settled plan to turn out puppy after puppy to bully me, and when I have got into a scrape, to have me killed somehow in the scuffle." He saw no alternative but to kill or be killed, for he would not crouch to Jackson.¹⁰⁴

Before the brawl was two weeks past, Thomas Benton thought his decisive duel was at hand. The man with whom the whole business began, Major Billy Carroll, published a statement of his position. Thomas Benton interpreted this as a challenge to himself, and wrote Carroll—"The challenge which you addressed to me in your publication of yesterday is accepted."¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹James, *Jackson*, 153.

¹⁰²Certificate of James W. Sitler, Nashville, September 5, 1813, *loc. cit.*, 317.

¹⁰³Parton, *Jackson*, I, 394-95. The account given here of the brawl with Andrew Jackson is based chiefly on Thomas Benton's circular in which he sets forth the story in characteristic fashion, with each item numbered, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8. In addition other authorities have been used to fill out the picture, as indicated. The story of the affair which appears in most published works follows Parton, who says that he had his account of the business orally from an old friend of the parties who in turn got it directly from Colonel Coffee—when, Parton does not say. *Ibid.*, 396. Now, Thomas Benton's account appeared six days after the event, and therefore seems better evidence than an oral reminiscence, told and retold and finally put in print in 1860, and Parton himself reprints the Colonel's circular with the note that his account is, perhaps, as true as Colonel Coffee's. *Ibid.*, 397-98. Of course, it must be admitted that the brawl was something not even witnesses could have described uniformly and with complete accuracy, and certainly the descriptions of participants can give only partial and biased pictures. The only solution, and the one attempted here, seems to be that of giving a reconstruction, carefully built from a comparison and dovetailing of all accounts into the one chiefly followed.

¹⁰⁴Thomas H. Benton to ?, n.p., n.d., quoted in *ibid.*, 395-96.

¹⁰⁵Thomas H. Benton to William Carroll, September 16, 1813, Jackson Papers, Second Series (Library of Congress).

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But Major Carroll disappointed the anxious young man, by replying that he was sorry if his remarks had corroded Thomas Benton's feelings, but he did not see how they could be misunderstood. He challenged no one, though he would meet Benton if Benton challenged him.¹⁰⁰ No fight took place to drain off the ill feeling, and the feuding parties went on being angry at each other.

Meanwhile, on September 14, 1813, the *Clarion* ran a notice—"The Officers attached to the 39th U. S. Regt. of Infantry, are required forthwith to repair to Nashville—John Williams, Col. Commandant."¹⁰⁷ The regiment's second-in-command, Thomas Benton, had gone down to Franklin after his brawl with Andrew Jackson.¹⁰⁸ The *Clarion*-call now brought him back to Nashville, with visions of glory once again marching in his head. When finally the new regiment was formed and trained, he hoped, he and Colonel Williams might lead them into the heart of the fighting on the Canadian border.¹⁰⁹ The young man could not know that he would never see the St. Lawrence he longed to cross.¹¹⁰

Disappointments began at once. While Thomas Benton was helping organize the Thirty-Ninth, news came from Fort Mims, far to the south near Mobile Bay in Mississippi Territory.¹¹¹ A party of Creek warriors, spurred by the British and the Spanish, had murdered upwards of three hundred settlers including women and helpless children. Immediately Andrew Jackson, physically weakened as he was, called for "retaliatory vengeance" and ordered his volunteers to rendezvous on September 24.¹¹² By November, the troops were in the field, and at Tallasahatchie and at Talledega, towns

¹⁰⁰William Carroll to Thomas H. Benton, September 16, 1813, in *ibid.* The story has been widely circulated that Thomas Benton was scared out of Nashville, and out of Tennessee, by General Jackson and his puppies, or that he left the area immediately because of the fight. One biography of Andrew Jackson broadly implies this (Parton, Jackson, I, 396), and another excellent study says—"Friends [of Jackson] vowed to even the score. 'I'm literally in hell here,' Tom Benton wrote and left town." James, *Jackson*, 154. But a man who will not crouch, and who vows to kill or be killed, and looks for a duel to settle the score himself, does not sound like one who is ready to be scared out of town. And the fact is that "Tom" (no where in any contemporary account or record the writer has seen does the usage "Tom" appear) did not leave town—he was in and near Nashville on September 12, on November 22, and until at least the middle of December, 1813. Cf. below. That Thomas Benton *two years later*, when the war was over, removed to Missouri because he felt his opportunities in Tennessee were curtailed or eliminated because he was on the outs with Jackson, is possible. But the evidence available leaves this proposition only a conjecture, and no more.

¹⁰¹*The Clarion*, September 14, 1813.

¹⁰²*Account of a Duel with Andrew Jackson*, Circular by Thomas H. Benton.

¹⁰³Thomas H. Benton to William P. Anderson, Franklin, November 22, 1813, Coffee Papers.

¹⁰⁴Thomas H. Benton to George W. Campbell, Camp Anderson, Near Nashville, December 10, 1813, Correspondence of the Adjutant General's Office.

¹⁰⁵James Truslow Adams (ed.), *Atlas of American History* (New York, 1943), plates 88-89.

¹⁰⁶General Orders of Andrew Jackson, September 19, 1813, in Bassett (ed.), *Correspondence*, I, 319-20.

a hundred or so miles below the Tennessee border near the Georgia line,¹¹³ the militia met and defeated the Creeks under Chief Red Eagle.¹¹⁴

Had Thomas Benton remained in the volunteers, he might have gone on these avenging adventures. As it was, while his old comrades won glory in battle, the young lieutenant-colonel faced the prosaic task of recruiting and training a new command; the victories were going to men like Billy Carroll, now a colonel, John Coffee, now a brigadier general, "and other puppies of the Genl. [Jackson]!" Young Benton would have given half his earthly goods to be with Colonel Anderson on the St. Lawrence. "Like you I have taken up the sword to learn the trade of a soldier," he wrote; "and this is nowhere to be learnt but. . . upon a theatre which affords scope for action and employment." To a man hankering for action, waiting was torture!¹¹⁵

The weeks dragged on, and the Colonel found himself still at Camp Anderson near Nashville. While he trained his 300 men, he wrote the Adjutant General that he would be gratified to find the Thirty-Ninth next summer on the Canadian border. He did not want his term of service to pass away "in the performance of mere parade duties." From Nashville to Lake Erie, he argued, was not more than a thirty days march, after which it would be but a few days journey by water to the scene of battle.¹¹⁶

The weeks stretched out into months, 1813 gave way to 1814, but at last the Thirty-Ninth was ready to march. It was ordered south to join General Jackson, and to reinforce a militia that was meeting reverses and melting away,¹¹⁷ despite victories over the warriors or Red Sticks at Emuckfaw and Enotachopco.¹¹⁸ By the beginning of February Thomas Benton and his regiment were with the volunteers near Fort Strother, in the valley of the Coosa River south of Tallasahatchie and north of Talledega. Now, with dependable if green regular troops, Andrew Jackson planned a final drive against the Indians—and now, Thomas Benton could hope again for a day of glory on the battlefield. At last he was in the field with troops he had recruited and trained, and ready to take the center of action against the Red Sticks.¹¹⁹

But once again, the Colonel was doomed to disappointment. The de-

¹¹³Adams (ed.), *Atlas*, plates 88-89. All geographical references in this section henceforth are based on this citation, unless otherwise specified.

¹¹⁴Andrew Jackson to Willie Blount, November 4, 1813, and to John Armstrong, November 20, 1813, in Bassett (ed.), *Correspondence*, I, 341, 356.

¹¹⁵Thomas H. Benton to William P. Anderson, Franklin, November 22, 1813, Coffee Papers.

¹¹⁶Thomas H. Benton to George W. Campbell, Camp Anderson, Near Nashville, December 10, 1813, *loc. cit.*

¹¹⁷James, *Jackson*, 166-68.

¹¹⁸Andrew Jackson to Rachel Jackson, January 28, 1814, in Bassett (ed.), *Correspondence*, I, 444-47.

¹¹⁹Andrew Jackson to Thomas Pinckney, Fort Strother, February 5, 1814, in *ibid.*, 457-58.

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cisive battle was fought at Tohopeka on the Horseshoe Bend of the Tallapoosa River about 150 miles south of the Tennessee border, and the Thirty-Ninth was in the center and fought gloriously,¹²⁰ sustaining casualties of seventeen killed and seventy-two wounded.¹²¹ But Thomas Benton was not there—at the last minute, he had been ordered back to Tennessee on recruiting duty. From Camp Hamilton on the Coosa, the ambitious young man spelled out his bitterness to the Adjutant General—"the first wish of my heart is to do duty with the regiment to which I belong," but failing this, he begged for employment with *some* corps in the active use of arms.¹²²

The hostilities now shifted south, and in a few months Thomas Benton found himself in the field again. By the beginning of July, he was with the Thirty-Ninth at Mount Vernon near the tip of Mobile Bay, in command of the regiment *vice* Colonel Williams who had gone to Washington.¹²³ Here the Lieutenant Colonel learned that the Indians were scattered along the Escumbia River as far as Pensacola in Spanish West Florida. The fact that the Red Sticks had been pushed south meant that the Gulf country at least was more menaced than ever,¹²⁴ and the Indians were living well off farms and herds of cattle abandoned by fleeing settlers. Is there anything, Thomas Benton wrote General Thomas Flournoy, in command at New Orleans, to forbid the Thirty-Ninth going to Pensacola to bayonet these villains?¹²⁵ Without waiting for an answer, the young commander and his troops set out three days later for the Escumbia, to "remove these rascals a little farther off."¹²⁶

Once more, the Colonel's hopes of action rose. Why stop at guerilla raids? Why not go on to *occupy* the Red Sticks' headquarters at Pensacola, and thereby win a base from which troops could constantly scour the Escumbia and keep it clear of Indians?¹²⁷ What if Pensacola was a Spanish town, in Spanish territory? Why should a restless commander be content with small expeditions, full of fatigue and lacking in honor, affording only temporary relief to the inhabitants?¹²⁸

Soon, an expedition was ready. It moved toward Pensacola, and on July 12 it was joined at Cockran's Cowpen by a body of Mississippi Territory volunteers under Lieutenant Colonel George H. Nixon, whose troops

¹²⁰Report of General Jackson to Governor Blount, Fort Williams, March 31, 1814, in *ibid.*, 489-92.

¹²¹*The Clarion*, May 10, 1814.

¹²²Thomas H. Benton to the Adjutant General, Camp Hamilton on the Coosa River, February 11, 1814, Correspondence of the Adjutant General's Office.

¹²³Thomas H. Benton to General Flournoy, Mount Vernon, July 5, 1814, Jackson Papers (Library of Congress).

¹²⁴Thomas H. Benton to Governor Holmes [of Mississippi Territory], Mount Vernon, Mobile River, July 8, 1814, Benton Papers, Personal Miscellany (Library of Congress).

¹²⁵Thomas H. Benton to General Flournoy, Mount Vernon, July 5, 1814, *loc. cit.*

¹²⁶Thomas H. Benton to Governor Holmes, Mount Vernon, July 8, 1814, Benton Papers, Personal Miscellany.

¹²⁷Thomas H. Benton to General Flournoy, Mount Vernon, July 5, 1814, *loc. cit.*

¹²⁸Thomas H. Benton to Governor Holmes, Mount Vernon, July 8, 1814, *loc. cit.*

Thomas Benton had called into service. At last, the ambitious warrior thought, he would see some action. But a third time his hopes were balked, for on July 13, after getting his troops across the Alabama River fifty miles above Pensacola, Lieutenant Colonel Benton was taken very ill and was obliged to return himself to Fort Stoddard! Above Pensacola the expedition under the command of George Nixon *did* meet the Indians and fight gallantly—but Thomas Benton wasn't there.¹²⁹ After the battle the Indians retreated to Pensacola, and there they remained through July and into August.¹³⁰

Meanwhile, the Indian wars were brought to a close. In June Andrew Jackson had been commissioned brigadier general and brevet major general in the regular United States army, given command of the Seventh or Southwest Military District, and ordered to deal with the Creeks.¹³¹ On August 9 he called a council with the Indians and presented them with a take-it-or-fight treaty by which the United States acquired practically all of the Creek lands and the warriors were left beaten and helpless.¹³² As the General moved to set up his headquarters at Mobile, the frontier rejoiced that Spanish and British attempts to maneuver against the United States through the Indians were at last ended.¹³³

Less than two months after the Escumbia expedition, Thomas Benton was in the field again. He was ordered by General Jackson to Montgomery's Redoubt, near old Fort Mims on the Alabama River above Mobile Bay,¹³⁴ where he was to watch the British who had made their headquarters at Pensacola.¹³⁵ Before long he sent what he thought was exciting news to General Jackson. From a man named Boyles, who wandered between American and Spanish territory, he had learned that ships were setting out from Pensacola for Mobile Point, with a miscellaneous cargo of British, Indians, escaped Negro slaves, American deserters, and "refuse Spaniards."¹³⁶ But the staff at Mobile was not so sure the information was as important as the impetuous Thomas Benton thought. One of General Jackson's aides warned Thomas Benton not to fall into a British trap, and suggested that Boyles had been sent by the English to divert American attention from Pensacola.¹³⁷

This chilly communique did not slow the Colonel. He went on sending

¹²⁹George H. Nixon to Andrew Jackson, Camp Near Escumbia, July 19, 1814, Jackson Papers (Chicago Historical Society).

¹³⁰Andrew Jackson to Secretary Armstrong, Fort Jackson, July 31, 1814, in Bassett (ed.), *Correspondence*, II, 23.

¹³¹*The Clarion*, June 14, 1814.

¹³²James, *Jackson*, 176-78.

¹³³*The Clarion*, August 23, 1814.

¹³⁴*Cf.* Bassett (ed.), *Correspondence*, II, 9, n. 3; 70, n. 2.

¹³⁵Thomas H. Benton to Andrew Jackson, Montgomery's Redoubt, September 2, 1814, Jackson Papers (Library of Congress).

¹³⁶Thomas H. Benton to Andrew Jackson, Fort Montgomery, September 11, 1814, 7 PM, Jackson Papers (Library of Congress).

¹³⁷Thomas L. Butler to Thomas H. Benton, Mobile, September 12, 1814, in Bassett (ed.), *Correspondence*, II, 47-48.

what information he had, and was soon rewarded with news that a dozen British men-o'-war had been sighted at Mobile Point. Still the General thought the whole thing a "faint" to save Pensacola!¹³⁸ Let Lieutenant-Colonel Benton be careful of border adventurers, who must be watched lest being trusted they prove doubly useful to the enemy. . . and so on. . . and so on.¹³⁹ But, as headquarters ground out these smug cautions, the British *did* strike at Fort Bowyer at the mouth of Mobile Bay, in an attack that was barely repulsed.¹⁴⁰ Apparently headquarters had been wrong, and the border spy and the Colonel right, about British intentions; apparently, in short, it was no "faint" the English had in mind but a real thrust into American territory.¹⁴¹

This suspicion was confirmed by news from abroad. Across the Atlantic the word came—"Wellington's army to America! . . . Bonaparte dethroned. Peace in Europe; English coming to swallow U.S."¹⁴² It now seemed that the decisive battle might really be expected—and from New Orleans General Jackson received a frantic cry for help.¹⁴³ Sure that any British force would set out overland from Pensacola, the General promptly called for volunteers from Louisiana¹⁴⁴ and planned a full-scale attack against his old, favorite target.¹⁴⁵

The great movement that was in the offing would require Thomas Benton's troops. Gather your regiment, a command from headquarters read, and bring them to the Perdido Bay just west of Pensacola.¹⁴⁶ By September 18 the Lieutenant-Colonel was on the way, stopping briefly at Blakeley's Farm where he expected to be joined by Colonel Nixon with his mounted men.¹⁴⁷ On September 20 he issued a manifold order—*one*, the mounted group to press on to Perdido Bay; *two*, the troops under Colonel Nixon to proceed toward Pensacola "by rapid marches," to contact the Thirty-Ninth there; *three*, all mounted men at Fort Montgomery to proceed toward Pensacola to meet the Thirty-Ninth; *four*, all effectives at Fort Montgomery and half those at Prim's Fort to follow the mounted men.¹⁴⁸ By September 22 the

¹³⁸Thomas L. Butler to Thomas H. Benton, Mobile, September 13, 1814, in *ibid.*, 48.

¹³⁹Thomas L. Butler to Thomas H. Benton, Mobile, September 15, 1814, in *ibid.*, 49.

¹⁴⁰Andrew Jackson to Robert Butler, Mobile, September 17, 1814, in *ibid.*, 49-50.

¹⁴¹Andrew Jackson to Secretary James Monroe, Mobile, September 17, 1814, in *ibid.*, 50.

¹⁴²James, *Jackson*, 180.

¹⁴³Committee of Safety to Andrew Jackson, New Orleans, September 18, 1814, in Bassett (ed.), *Correspondence*, II, 51.

¹⁴⁴Proclamation to the People of Louisiana, Mobile, September 21, 1814, in *ibid.*, 57.

¹⁴⁵James, *Jackson*, 194.

¹⁴⁶Thomas H. Benton to Colonel Hayne, Fort Montgomery, October 4, 1814, Jackson Papers (Library of Congress).

¹⁴⁷Thomas H. Benton to Andrew Jackson, at Blakeley's, September 18, 1814, Jackson Papers (Chicago Historical Society).

¹⁴⁸Military Order, Thomas H. Benton, September 20, 1814, Benton Papers, Personal Miscellany.

Colonel was on the Bay of Perdido.¹⁴⁸

The battle seemed imminent, and another time the sniff of action thrilled Thomas Benton's nostrils. But the assault was delayed, and the Colonel found himself back at Fort Montgomery,¹⁵⁰ where he soon had to worry about the depleting strength of his regiment as men took their discharges when their year of service was up.¹⁵¹ Meanwhile, he had his troops get the post "in a tolerably respectable state of defense"—there wasn't much else to do anyway.¹⁵²

Finally, however, in the last week of October General Jackson formed his force again for the attack on Pensacola. He had been waiting for orders from Washington, but now he determined on his own to march¹⁵³ at the beginning of November with three thousand men, including the seven hundred regulars of Thomas Benton's Thirty-Ninth Infantry.¹⁵⁴

The supreme moment was at hand. But at this supreme moment, Thomas Benton and six of his fellow officers were ordered back to Tennessee; the depleted Thirty-Ninth must recruit new members. When they heard the news, the seven protested to the Adjutant General:

Finding ourselves unexpectedly ordered upon the recruiting service at a moment when active operations were about to commence, unwilling to be seen creeping home at such a period, desirous of being employed in some way, and anxious to avoid an interference with any arrangements which have been made for the public service; we respectfully request that we may be permitted to serve in the rank of the file. . . now under the command of Major Blue in the service of the United States.

The signers included one lieutenant colonel (Benton), one major (Peacock), four captains (Davis, Hengar, Jones, Payne), and one lieutenant (Dunkin).¹⁵⁵

The answer at General Jackson's headquarters was—no. The commander applauded the patriotic ardor the officers' protest breathed, but he had to give places which might win laurels to others who had served with him in the winter campaign. Recruiting it was, and once again Thomas

¹⁴⁸Military Order, Thomas H. Benton, Bay of Perdido, September 22, 1814, Benton Letters.

¹⁴⁹Thomas H. Benton to Andrew Jackson, Fort Montgomery, September 28, 1814, Jackson Papers (Library of Congress).

¹⁵⁰Thomas H. Benton to Colonel Hayne, Fort Montgomery, October 10, 1814, Jackson Papers (Library of Congress).

¹⁵¹Thomas H. Benton to Andrew Jackson, Fort Montgomery, October 16, 1814, Jackson Papers (Library of Congress).

¹⁵²Andrew Jackson to Secretary Monroe, Pearce's Stockade, October 26, 1814, in Bassett (ed.), *Correspondence*, II, 82-83.

¹⁵³James, *Jackson*, 196.

¹⁵⁴Thomas H. Benton and Others, to the Adjutant General, Fort Montgomery, October 25, 1814, Jackson Papers (Library of Congress).

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Benton's soldier's career was blighted before it had blossomed.¹⁵⁶

But this did not hold the ambitious Lieutenant Colonel for long. He was tenacious as well as mettlesome, and he determined a last time that he *would*, somehow, get into the fighting on the major war front. He would go to Canada alone, if he could not go there with his outfit! He got Colonel Williams to order him to Washington, and once again he made the long trip over the mountains, carrying a petition from the officers of the Thirty-Ninth asking for action.¹⁵⁷ As he travelled, in December, 1814, and January, 1815, troops under Andrew Jackson fought the long-expected battle with the British around New Orleans. The struggle ended in a triumph which established General Jackson's reputation throughout the land.¹⁵⁸ But for the fifth time, Thomas Benton, seeking service, was absent when his fellow Tennesseans marched down the glory road!

In Washington, the Lieutenant Colonel prepared a memorandum for Adjutant-General Parker. He was there, he noted on January 23, *first*, to settle his accounts; *second*, to request employment for his regiment on what he still thought the principal theatre, the North; and *third*, to request northern service for himself if the request of the regiment could not be granted.¹⁵⁹ He submitted a certified abstract showing that he had disbursed \$1,600 for the regiment since November 30, 1814.¹⁶⁰ And then he waited. . . and waited. . . and waited.

Toward the beginning of February, rumors of peace reached Washing-

¹⁵⁶Col. Robert Butler (and Jackson) to Thomas H. Benton, Pierce's Stockade, October [26], 1814, in Bassett (ed.), *Correspondence*, II, 65-66.

¹⁵⁷Memorandum to the Adjutant General, by Thomas H. Benton, Washington, January 23, 1815, Correspondence of the Adjutant General's Office. According to one authority, Thomas Benton acquired about this time a quadroon girl as a mistress—a girl who later married the son of the co-founder of Memphis and went there to live. James, *Jackson*, 306. Telling this tale, James offers no documentation, and researches by the writer around Nashville and Franklin failed to unearth anything more positive. In response to a request from the writer, James recalled that he got the story from a memoir about the city of Memphis. Letter from Marquis James, Rye, New York, August 15, 1948. A survey of a dozen or more volumes finally resulted in discovery of the story in James D. Davis, *The History of the City of Memphis*, . . . Also, the "Old Times Papers" (Memphis, 1873), 73. Though the tale is repeated in a couple of recent histories of Memphis, clearly following Davis' account, the story he gives seems unlikely. He says that Thomas Benton picked up "Mary" in New Orleans when he was there commanding a regiment under General Jackson, and that he brought her back and kept her (presumably in Tennessee) for two or three years when he turned her over to the man who married her. The fact that Benton was not at New Orleans with Andrew Jackson, but in Washington, and the fact that he moved to St. Louis in the late summer or fall of 1815 makes it hard to understand when or how he acquired the girl or how he could have kept her in Tennessee two or three years. Finally, the whole thing seems out of character for Benton. All this, and some other minor difficulties in the story, seem to indicate that the tale cannot be credited. It must be noted that Davis went to Memphis only in 1824. Thus, though he doubtless did find a "Mary" there as wife of the son of the co-founder, the Benton part of the tale he must have had at second or third hand.

¹⁵⁸James, *Jackson*, 218-64.

¹⁵⁹Memorandum to the Adjutant General, by Thomas H. Benton, Washington, January 23, 1815, *loc. cit.*

¹⁶⁰Statement of Accounts by Thomas H. Benton, Georgetown, January 23, 1815, *ibid.*

ton. Sitting in his room in Georgetown, Thomas Benton wrote out the news in a letter he sent back to Mobile,¹⁰¹ and then waited some more. At last he was rewarded with an order to proceed to Canada.¹⁰² But before he left Washington definite word came—"Glorious News! Orleans saved and peace concluded. . . Who would not be an American? Long live the republic! All hail! last asylum of oppressed humanity!" The treaty had been signed at Ghent on December 24, 1814, even before the decisive, final blow Andrew Jackson had launched at New Orleans.¹⁰³ The war was over, and for a last time Thomas Benton had missed his chance.

This was the effective end of Thomas Benton's career as a soldier. He received his honorable discharge, dated June 15, 1815.¹⁰⁴ Finding himself without employment, and without immediate responsibilities, he faced a major decision, one of the most important of his life: should he return to Tennessee, and try to take up his old life, or should he strike out on some new path? His brawl with the King of the Cumberland, Andrew Jackson, and the passions this had aroused, meant that any attempt to re-establish himself around Nashville would be difficult. In addition, in his trip down the Mississippi in 1813, he had caught a glimpse of the greater New West beyond the river, the vast, unsettled, rough, but potential Missouri Territory, and his thoughts in 1815 turned to this area. There, he might build a new fortune with his own hands!¹⁰⁵

Before the summer of 1815 was out, he had made his decision—Thomas Benton took the long road to St. Louis, to settle on the banks of the great Mississippi itself.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰¹Cf. Uriah Blue to Thomas H. Benton, Mobile, March 10, 1815, *ibid.*

¹⁰²Benton, "Auto-Biographical Sketch," *loc. cit.*, iii.

¹⁰³*Niles Weekly Register* (Baltimore), VII (February 18, 1815), 385.

¹⁰⁴*Complete Regular Army Register*, 213.

But Thomas Benton never lost his lust for military glory—perhaps in part because as a young, vigorous man his ambitions in this direction had been so utterly thwarted. When twenty years later the United States found itself at war again, with Mexico, the Missouri senator, by that time in his sixties, was once again straining to get into the field. A bill was proposed to create a lieutenant general over all the troops in Mexico, and it was generally expected that if the bill passed, the Tennessee President, James K. Polk, would appoint the former Tennessee Colonel to the post. In this connection Thomas Benton justified his possible appointment to the supreme command on the grounds that his service in 1812-1815 gave him seniority over any active commander then in the field. But the bill was defeated, and once again Thomas Benton was denied military action. Cf. Benton, *Thirty Years' View*, II, 678-79.

¹⁰⁵Thomas H. Benton to James P. Preston, St. Louis, November 14, 1819, Preston Papers (Virginia Historical Society).

¹⁰⁶Benton, "Auto-Biographical Sketch," *loc. cit.*, iii.

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