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A HISTORY OF VIOLENCE: THOMAS HART BENTON AND THE IMPACT OF DUELING
IN THE POLITICS OF THE OLD SOUTHWEST

AN HONORS THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS OF HONORS STUDIES IN HISTORY

BY KALEB COX

SPRING 2012
HISTORY

THE J. WILLIAM FULBRIGHT COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES,
THE UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS

Acknowledgments

I would like to extend a very sincere thank you to Dr. Patrick Williams for all of his assistance with this project. His thoughtful guidance and patience has helped me not only in this venture but in countless others over the last two years. I could not have hoped for a better teacher and advisor. My only hope is that I did not drive Dr. Williams to hop on the whiskey wagon too many times throughout the course of this project.

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Introduction

As the would-be duelists made their way across the Mississippi River from St. Louis at dawn, they must have thought about the ritual they were about to perform. Arriving on the banks of Bloody Island, the two men calmly prepared. They stood only yards apart with pistols ready, like actors on a stage awaiting their cue. No sooner had it begun than it ended. The larger man stood facing his adversary, unharmed by the ball his opponent had fired from only 10 feet away. The other lay collapsed on the ground, bleeding to death from a gunshot wound through the heart. With one of his last breaths the fallen man exclaimed, “You have persecuted me and now have murdered me!” Recognizing he was as good as dead, the man ordered his doctor not to dress his wound, knowing he would never make it off the island alive.

Thomas Hart Benton walked away unharmed from this duel with Charles Lucas on September 27, 1817. Despite dueling having increasingly fallen out of favor in much of the United States during the early nineteenth century, Benton seemed to have escaped not only physically unscathed but politically and socially unscathed as well. At first glance, Benton’s reputation and political prospects seemed only to be enhanced after his performance on Bloody Island. He would become one of the first pair of U.S. Senators from Missouri only three years later and eventually become a towering figure in national politics.

This essay will explore his political ascendancy after killing a man in a duel – during a time when dueling in many ways seemed to be in disrepute. Benton’s duel and subsequent election to the Senate will serve as a case study of dueling’s role in politics in the trans-Mississippi region. But this new look at Benton’s political ascendancy also contributes to the scholarship concerning Missouri’s transition from territory to state. Through a geographic

analysis of the Missouri General Assembly vote for U.S. Senators in 1820, this essay will shed light on an election that is largely ignored or oversimplified by historians.

Chapter 1: Dueling and Honor on the Frontier

Individual armed combat has been a heavily romanticized aspect of America's past. Duels, in the context of this paper, are not the hot-blooded shoot-outs taking place outside saloons in western boomtowns, however. The duel was a ritual replete with ceremony, always carried out in cold blood before witnesses. It could be conducted with swords, knives, pistols, or many other weapons. It had a strict code of rules and was a way for men to resolve disputes outside of the judicial system. The set of norms that regulated dueling had three main functions. First, it defined the conduct that justified a challenge to the "injured" party. Secondly, it laid out the circumstances under which the injured party would be acting dishonorably if he failed to challenge. It also elaborated the acceptable responses of the challenged party and the conduct of the seconds. The seconds represented the parties (or principals) in their dispute and were charged with seeking resolution of the dispute and arranging for a duel if required.¹

Dueling has often been traced back beyond the beginnings of recorded history. The polymath John Selden, a seventeenth-century legal scholar, documented examples of mythic duels ranging from David and Goliath, Menelaus and Paris, to Hector and Ajax.² Personal combat as a means of adjudicating disputes existed in sixth-century Burgundy in the form of trial by combat. Each party, willing to defend his truth with his sword, would submit himself to the judgment of Heaven with the belief that God would side with the one who was right.³ The two parties in dispute (or their "champions") would fight in a legally sanctioned duel,

¹ Warren F. Schwartz, Keith Baxter, and David Ryan, "The Duel: Can These Gentlemen Be Acting Efficiently?," *Journal of Legal Studies* Vol. 13 No. 2 (June 1984): 321-322.

² John Selden, *The duello, or single combat: from antiquity derived into this kingdom of England; ... By the learned Mr. Selden. Printed in the year 1610. And now reprinted.* (London: Gale ECCO Print Editions, 2010), 12-13.

³ Robert Baldick, *The Duel: A History of Duelling* (London: Hamlyn Publishing Group, 1970), 13-15.

with the winner being carried to victory by the Divine supporting his righteous cause. Over the centuries the duel emerged, becoming closely associated with ideas of chivalry, and was generally accepted among the European elite.⁴ Although laws were sometimes passed to restrict dueling, the practice continued and was often viewed with the idea, in the words of Selden, that: “Antiquity hath allow’d it, Reason confirmed it, therefore so I leave it.”⁵ Many treatises on dueling, known as *codes duello*, sought to codify and give order to the practice. Codes duello appeared all across Europe, and each region had its own rules of how a proper duel should be carried out. As Europeans began to make their way across the Atlantic, they took the institution of dueling along with them.

In Europe and America dueling was deeply rooted in a highly complex system of honor, closely tied with one’s social standing and reserved only for elite gentlemen. Systems of honor existed in almost every region of the United States in the eighteenth century but were most strongly rooted in areas of the country with strong agricultural economies and significant numbers of plantation owners and, thus, slaves.⁶ The strength and persistence of dueling in the South had a lot to do with the honor system’s intrinsic connection with slavery. Systems of honor, existing long before African American slavery, worked to identify, maintain, and augment one’s power and prestige. But as slavery developed in the South, it too became the way to identify, maintain, and augment one’s power and prestige. Even Alexis de Tocqueville noted the natural association of honor with possessions (in this case, slave property). Slave ownership offered distinction beyond its monetary value. Over time, white man’s honor and black man’s slavery became indistinguishable in the collective mind

⁴ Ibid., 31.

⁵ Selden, *The duello*, 15.

⁶ Dick Steward, *Duels and the Roots of Violence in Missouri* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 10.

of the South.⁷ These southern societies espoused a strict racial hierarchy, the maintenance of which required the subordination of all to community values. Bertram Wyatt-Brown has argued that these strict ideas of racial hierarchy led to the fervent defense of white manhood and exaggerated notions of honor. Ideas of honor and hierarchy were so important that those who failed to uphold the appropriate standard of white virtue were unseated from their positions in the community.⁸ The correlation between plantation society and honor was one of the reasons why dueling persisted well into the nineteenth century in the Old South, long after it fell out of favor in the increasingly industrialized North.

As understood in the nineteenth-century South, honor could only be bestowed upon an individual by his community. Honor was almost entirely based on the community's perception of the individual, or, in other words, his reputation.⁹ Not only was honor prescribed by the community but so too were status and rank. In this way, class and honor were inextricably linked. A gentleman who wanted to both preserve and perhaps even augment his social standing/reputation had *at all times* to take into consideration public perception of every private act.¹⁰

This sense of honor stemming from the watchful gaze of the community gave license to dueling. With every gentleman's social collateral invested in this system of honor, members of the elite had a personal stake in preserving the system that gave it power and authority. Because the honor system was independent from the legal code, leaving no formal policing of the system, infractions against one's honor had to be settled by internal

⁷ Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 16, 22, 73.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 17, 357.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁰ Joanne Freeman, *Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the New Republic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 174.

mechanisms within that system. One of the last resorts for an unresolved dispute (of significant magnitude) between two parties was to fight a duel.

The duel became a crucial tool used by men to preserve their personal status and to create hierarchical stability within the community.¹¹ As the historian Dick Steward writes, “The cult of honor required an act of courage to vindicate honor; the action in turn solidified or conferred social status and reputation, which in turn became the conduit for even greater reward.”¹² This greater reward could be political power, as honor was seen as a prerequisite for most government posts, especially in the territorial governments of the early nineteenth century where many of these posts were filled by appointment rather than popular election.

The use of dueling in a political context gave rise in the late eighteenth century to a variant of the duel known as the political duel. The political duel was based more on the defense of one’s political reputation and political ideals than one’s personal honor per se (although those things could be difficult to separate). Sometimes these duels were used as a means to eliminate one’s political opponents or rivals. This type of duel occupied a very distinct place within the grand history of dueling in the United States, existing primarily in areas without organized political parties and in times of intense political factionalism, where small groups of elites dominated governance.¹³

The 1804 Burr-Hamilton duel is one of the most famous examples of a political duel but also shows how public attitudes toward the practice appear to have been changing by the nineteenth century. In his affair, Burr manipulated the code of honor to redeem his reputation after the humiliation of losing the New York gubernatorial election in 1804.¹⁴ But the

¹¹ Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 369; Steward, *Duels and the Roots of Violence in Missouri*, 32.

¹² Steward, *Duels and the Roots of Violence in Missouri*, 76.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁴ Freeman, *Affairs of Honor*, 189.

obloquy that attended Burr's killing of Hamilton suggested that the affair of honor was becoming a scorned practice, especially in the Northeast. In 1803, only seven states or territories had laws prohibiting dueling. In the aftermath of Hamilton's death, more states began to pass anti-dueling laws. Seeing the horrors associated with the practice through the death of such a prominent figure of the early republic, many legislators in northern states felt compelled to revise or create laws against dueling.¹⁵

Yet the political duel hardly disappeared in certain regions of the country, including in Thomas Hart Benton's trans-Mississippi home. Both Missouri's southern elements and frontier setting surely preserved the tradition there longer than in the Northeast. Slavery was thriving in Missouri, and Benton himself was a southern man, born in North Carolina and spending his early career in Tennessee. His rival – and, ultimately, victim – Charles Lucas, while not growing up in the South, came from a family of slave-owners. He moved from Pennsylvania to St. Louis at the age of 13, when his father John B. C. Lucas was appointed as Judge of the United States Court in Upper Louisiana in 1805. After going off to college for five years, Charles Lucas returned to St. Louis in 1811 to study law and eventually became the United States Attorney for the Missouri Territory.¹⁶

Slavery gave the region a distinctly southern culture, having existed in what today is Missouri since the mid-eighteenth century when the territory was under French rule. Soon after St. Louis's founding in 1764, slaves made up one-third of its residents. In the 1750s and

¹⁵ Matthew Byron, "Crime and Punishment: The Impotency of Dueling Laws in the United States" (PhD dissertation, University of Arkansas, 2008), 24-30.

¹⁶ Frederic L. Billon, *The Annals St. Louis in its Territorial Days 1804-1821* (1888; repr. St. Louis: Arno Press Inc., 1971), 213-216.

1760s, about 40 percent of the households between Ste. Genevieve and St. Louis owned slaves.¹⁷

Slavery continued to expand as the region developed over the next 50 years. After the United States acquired French Louisiana and established the Louisiana Territory in 1805, rich landowners began to transplant their fortunes to the frontier.¹⁸ The land, though cheap, was not free, and the market for land favored the wealthy. As these men moved west, they brought with them their human property. By the mid-1810s, slaves accounted for about 18 percent of the St. Louis population. In Missouri as a whole, the slave population more than tripled between 1810 and 1820 (from 3,011 in 1810 to 10,222 in 1820), making up 15 percent of total population.¹⁹ With the continued influx of slaves and slaveholders into the Missouri Territory, the southern attachment to honor became all the more entrenched.

But dueling persisted longer not only in slave societies but also on the frontier. The term “frontier” is often difficult to define because the borders it seeks to describe are usually neither entirely rigid nor fluid. As the frontier develops, parts begin being incorporated under a dominant political authority, and thus the “line” that divides the periphery from the established political structure is slowly pushed outward. Stephen Aron neatly defines the frontier as “a meeting place between peoples of differing ways from distinct polities.”²⁰ This definition is intentionally vague but seems to encompass territorial St. Louis (and territorial Missouri) very nicely. Missouri had long been a meeting place for many different cultures and polities including the French, British, and Spanish empires, the United States, and a

¹⁷ Stephen Aron, *American Confluence: The Missouri Frontier from Borderland to Border State* (Bloomington, Indiana: University of Indiana Press, 2006), 46, 53.

¹⁸ Adam Rothman, *Slave Country: American Expansion and the Origins of the Deep South* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2005), 45.

¹⁹ Aron, *American Confluence*, 173-174, 198.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, xvi.

multitude of Indian nations. Frontiers also experience the diverse patterns of immigration embodied by Thomas Hart Benton, Charles Lucas, and his father John B. C. Lucas, who came from Tennessee, Pennsylvania, and France respectively. Between 1810 and 1820 the non-Indian population of the Missouri Territory tripled, mostly due to migration from Kentucky and neighboring states. These new settlers found that they could get by more easily and get ahead more readily than in the places from which they came.²¹ As William Darby, a contemporary of Benton, wrote, there was “no position... more favorably situated for the accumulation of all that comprises wealth and power” than that of St. Louis.²² The men who came to the frontier were ambitious, hardworking, and hungry for power and prestige.

Thomas Hart Benton fit this mold of the frontier man. As he left his home in Tennessee he declared that he was an “adventurer ready to begin a new theater” and sought to create “some foundation of character and fortune.”²³ This politically ambitious and intellectually capable young man had decided to go to the frontier, like so many others, to start anew and create his own fate. But as people like Benton left their homes, they traveled to these western outposts packing cultural baggage.²⁴ One of the most notable traditions that these transplanted settlers brought with them was the institution of dueling. As S. Charles Bolton says of Arkansas, which until 1819 was a part of the Missouri Territory and also a site of frequent brawling among the elite, duels were “an expression of culture that the settlers brought with them.”²⁵

²¹ Ibid., 67, 158.

²² Ibid., 169-170.

²³ Steward, *Duels and Roots of Violence in Missouri*, 60.

²⁴ Ibid., 17.

²⁵ S. Charles Bolton, *Arkansas, 1800-1860: Remote and Restless* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1998), 34-35.

If newer Missourians transplanted institutions of honor, including the duel, from the South, they also found that previous distinctions of rank and class hierarchy were not firmly established in territorial Missouri. When writing about the St. Louis area in the early 1820s, Reverend Timothy Flint argued that dueling was largely the result of a single group of people: “the ambitious, fiery, and ungovernable spirits [who] emigrate to obtain consequence and make their fortune ... [and] have not as yet had their place or their standing assigned them in public opinion.”²⁶ As a visible demonstration of one’s honor and class, the duel could be an avenue for upward social mobility and a tool to justify a newly hatched hierarchy.²⁷ Not surprisingly then, many of those connected to the Lucas-Benton affair also fought duels of their own. Luke Lawless, Benton’s second in the Lucas-Benton duels, fought a duel in France and challenged a man to a duel in St. Louis in 1820. Joshua Barton, Lucas’s second in his series of duels with Benton, fought two duels on the Mississippi frontier. Benton’s surgeon, Dr. Bernard Farrar had killed one of his friends in a duel in 1810 in Missouri.²⁸

But other aspects of the frontier setting besides its social fluidity promoted dueling as a means of dispute resolution among the elite. On the American frontier in the early 1800s, legal codes were still developing and laws against assault and character defamation were generally absent or difficult to enforce.²⁹ But even if legal recourse was available, many gentlemen decided against going through the legal channels and instead settled their disputes on the field of honor. Litigation of a dispute, even if successful, was often viewed as an

²⁶ Ibid., 34-35.

²⁷ Steward, *Duels and Roots of Violence in Missouri*, 7-12.

²⁸ Ibid., 30-35, 50, 54-56.

²⁹ Jack. K. Williams, *Dueling in the Old South: Vignettes of Social History* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1986), 24-25.

unsatisfactory way to redeem one's honor.³⁰ Bertram Wyatt-Brown writes that the reason for extralegal avenues for dispute resolution "was not the inadequacy of frontier justice, but rather the continuation of primal modes of social control that farming and pastoral folk still found useful as their ancestors had before them."³¹ Many Missourians believed that some crimes were best addressed outside of the courts.

Another reason for the persistent popularity of the political duel, in particular, on the frontier was the absence of mass political parties. The factions within the St. Louis political community did not have recognizable political ideologies or enlist widespread popular support during Missouri's territorial days. Neither side made an attempt to appeal to the citizenry under the pretense of egalitarianism, making few concessions to popular politics.³² Political mobilization of voters was a secondary concern as long as the trans-Mississippi area remained in territorial status. Relatively few public offices were filled by election and most positions were appointed directly from Washington.

Joanne Freeman writes that the political duel began to decline with the rise of political parties. With established political parties, the importance of personal reputation slowly fell to the wayside as loyalty to one's party, as opposed to personal honor, became more important in gaining appointments and other positions.³³ Political struggles, until the eve of Missouri's statehood, generally occurred within the elite rather than between blocs of voters. In this type of political environment, personal reputation (along with its political implications) was paramount to the aspiring western politician.

³⁰ Steward, *Duels and the Roots of Violence in Missouri*, 55.

³¹ Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 447.

³² William Nisbet Chambers, *Old Bullion Benton, Senator from the New West: Thomas Hart Benton, 1782-1858* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1956), 70; Steward, *Duels and the Roots of Violence in Missouri*, 41-42; William E. Foley, *The Genesis of Missouri: From Wilderness Outpost to Statehood* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1989), 283.

³³ Freeman, *Affairs of Honor*, 283-284.

Yet ironically, while the political elite practiced dueling, they seemed to preach against it. Politicians in Missouri had felt compelled to follow the Northeast in passing anti-dueling laws, seemingly to advertise that civilization was replacing barbarism on the frontier.³⁴ In an effort to attract settlers to the Missouri Territory (and later, to the state of Missouri), legislators seemed to agree that, whether enforced or not, the existence of these laws would help give Missouri the appearance of order. In January of 1814, the General Assembly of the Territory of Missouri passed an act stating that anyone involved in a duel, even a second or surgeon, could be prosecuted under Missouri law. Even if the duel was never carried out, under the provisions in the Missouri Territory law code the simple challenge of a duel was punishable by law. The penalty for violating this law included a fine “not exceeding two hundred dollars” and disenfranchisement.³⁵

These dueling laws appeared to be, at least initially, relatively ineffective at mitigating the practice, particularly among the law-making classes. Passion, revenge, honor, and a very loose interpretation of self-defense were usually sufficient for a duelist to win acquittal for murder or violation of an anti-dueling statute. In most murder cases the assailant did not even have to prove that he had tried to avert a hostile encounter (as was the case in William Blackstone’s volumes of jurisprudence that were so revered in America). Juries recognized certain rights unrecognized by law, such as that the survivor of a fatal duel was to be acquitted, and denied other rights actually granted by law, such as a fair and impartial jury. According to Dick Steward, frontier Missouri saw jurors selected who had themselves

³⁴ Steward, *Duels and the Roots of Violence in Missouri*, 89.

³⁵ Territory of Missouri Legislature, General Assembly. *An Act for the prevention of vice and immorality*, Regular sess., Chapter 102. (January 8, 1814). *Session Law Library*. HeinOnline. <http://heinonline.org> (accessed March 8, 2012).

stood accused of the same crime. This absence of impartial juries may have contributed to the few dueling convictions in Missouri.³⁶

The prospect of prosecution seems to have rarely dissuaded would-be duelists from carrying out their interviews. Henry S. Geyer published his *Digest of the Laws of Missouri Territory* in St. Louis in 1818.³⁷ However his exceptional familiarity with a law code that included an anti-dueling statute had not stopped him from fighting a duel on Bloody Island in 1816. He challenged Captain George H. Kennerly and permanently damaged Kennerly's leg on their second exchange. Geyer faced no legal prosecution for his role in the duel and went on to become a constitutional delegate in 1820, a member of the Missouri House of Representatives in 1820 (where he later became Speaker), and eventually succeeded Benton in 1851 as a U.S. Senator from Missouri.³⁸ Even hot-blooded shoot-outs rather than the controlled violence that dueling represented were often not prosecuted, as in the case of William McArthur, who in 1816 was running as a candidate for the Missouri territorial legislature. Auguste De Mun, who had previously denied a challenge from McArthur to duel, was killed by McArthur near the courthouse square in Ste. Genevieve after an impromptu fight broke out between the two parties.³⁹

The failure to prosecute duelists was more the norm than the exception. Despite a persistent outcry in the press against dueling, most duelists were able to avoid legal reprimand. Oftentimes the public was seen as condoning the duel as well. An editorial slamming the practice in the *Missouri Gazette* simultaneously recognized its acceptance in the territory:

³⁶ Steward, *Duels and the Roots of Violence in Missouri*, 84, 87-88.

³⁷ Henry S. Geyer, *Digest of the Laws of Missouri Territory* (St. Louis: Missouri Gazette Office, 1818).

³⁸ Steward, *Duels and the Roots of Violence in Missouri*, 35-36.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 47-48.

A murderer in *our* country is driven from society, and hunted down like a wild beast of prey, but *here* [in Missouri], he is the favourite of the fair, caressed by the great, gaped and stared at by the multitude, that a noted murderer of this country, whose hands have been crimsoned by the heart's blood of thoughtless persecuted youth, is to be elected by the people to some high and honorable station in the government!⁴⁰

Not all men who engaged in dueling in the trans-Mississippi were able to avoid any court time however. In 1820, Major Richard Gentry killed Henry Carroll in Howard County, Missouri in what some contemporaries called a duel. The fray appeared to be much more improvised than the ritualized Lucas-Benton fight; Dick Steward refers to the fight as the first of the “western” duels in Missouri. Gentry was soon indicted for murder and went on trial in 1821. None other than Thomas Hart Benton headed his defense team, claiming that the Carroll faction had brought pistols to the region with the purpose of using them to kill Gentry. Eventually all charges were dropped and Gentry was let free. Gentry went on to find political success as the postmaster of Columbia and as a state senator in 1826.⁴¹

Even in the few cases where a gentleman was prosecuted for dueling or issuing a dueling challenge, convictions were uncommon. The exception came in the successful dueling prosecution of William Bennett of Illinois. In 1819, Bennett was involved in an exceptionally strange duel where, supposedly unbeknownst to him, the seconds decided to load both guns with powder only. When Bennett fired, however, his pistol ejected a bullet into the heart of his opponent, Alonzo Stuart. Bennett, along with the two seconds, went on trial for murder. Again, Thomas Hart Benton rose to the occasion to defend a fellow duelist and was able to have the two seconds released after a vigorous defense. However Benton was unable to win the case for Bennett, who was later hanged in 1821.⁴² Bennett was the only person in the United States hanged for his participation in a duel. Matthew Byron suggests

⁴⁰ *Missouri Gazette*, August 14, 1818.

⁴¹ Steward, *Duels and the Roots of Violence in Missouri*, 51-53.

⁴² Baldick, *The Duel*, 123-124.

that the reason why more duelists were not executed for their role in dueling rested on the notion of a “fair fight.” Bennett’s dishonorable act of loading his gun with a bullet stained the entire affair, marking it as categorically “unfair” in the public eye.⁴³

During the late 1810s and early 1820s, the frequency of political dueling in Missouri reached its climax. Dick Steward, in his study of Missouri duels, lists no fewer than 11 political duels occurring between 1816 and 1824, a number exceeding all of the political duels that would occur in the 30 years following this period.⁴⁴ Thomas Hart Benton, through his affair with Charles Lucas, would be far more representative of his time and place than William Bennett in fighting political duel on the trans-Mississippi frontier and suffering little from doing so. Benton’s series of duels with Lucas serve as a case study for the role of the political duel in frontier politics.

⁴³ Byron, “Crime and Punishment,” 42.

⁴⁴ Steward, *Duels and the Roots of Violence in Missouri*, 46-55, 70-73.

Chapter 2: The Lucas-Benton Duel

Charles Lucas and Thomas Hart Benton were Missouri's rising political stars of the late 1810s and seemed destined for an eventual clash. They were just the sort of aspiring frontier politicians who might resort to the duel as a means to gain greater class standing and reinforce their self-images as honorable gentlemen. Young, well-connected, and politically ambitious, Benton and Lucas had become two of the most prominent lawyers in St. Louis. Benton specialized in land claims, finding the profession to be one of the most remunerative, given the great number of conflicting claims with the shifting of jurisdiction between France, Spain, and the United States. Both of these men were leading figures of their particular faction within the St. Louis political arena: Benton led the "junto" faction (dominated by old-French business leaders and holders of large amounts of Spanish land grants), and Lucas and his father led the "anti-junto" faction (which was peopled by American settlers coming to St. Louis after the Louisiana Purchase) within the Democratic-Republican party.⁴⁵ However, neither one of these factions had a clearly defined political ideology nor resonated with the common people of the frontier; politics was still the business of the elite. The main issue at stake between the two political factions was, as stated by William Nisbet Chambers, "Who was to get the major share of Missouri's virgin lands?"⁴⁶ Charles Lucas had deep, elite roots in St. Louis stemming from the success and popularity of his father, Judge John B. C. Lucas.⁴⁷ Benton on the other hand was an up-and-coming attorney attempting to make a name for himself in Missouri.

⁴⁵ Chambers, *Old Bullion*, 64, 70.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁴⁷ Steward, *Duels and the Roots of Violence in Missouri*, 58.

In St. Louis, as well as other frontier outposts, the courts were the centers of community life.⁴⁸ It was during a trial at the St. Louis Circuit Court in October 1816 that Benton began his feud with Charles Lucas. Lucas himself later noted that this was the “start of the dispute between T.H. Benton and myself.” During the attorneys’ final pleas, each accused the other of “deny[ing] the truth.” Lucas stated that there was no evidence to support Benton’s position in the case. Benton then said “I contradict you sir,” to which Lucas replied “I contradict you sir.” Benton retorted “If you deny that you deny the truth.” Lucas, in response, said “If you assert that, you assert what is not true.”⁴⁹

Benton eventually lost the case and remained bitter toward Lucas for what Benton saw as an insult to his honor.⁵⁰ If each man claimed to be the sole possessor of truth, then the other man must surely be propagating lies. Such an accusation would have been a terrible sting to one’s honor. It was at this point that Benton first challenged Charles Lucas. Lucas declared that we would not be called to account privately for his actions in court and refused to offer Benton the satisfaction of a duel.⁵¹

It should be noted that Benton was hypersensitive to issues of honor. This might be attributed to a multitude of reasons, including the death of his father Jesse when the younger Benton was 10. As his biographer Elbert B. Smith writes, “Life as the only ‘man’ in a large family including five younger children probably increased both his feelings of self-importance and his sense of responsibility in matters of discipline.” But the most cited reason for Benton’s hypersensitivity to honor is an incident that occurred in 1799 at the University

⁴⁸ Chambers, *Old Bullion*, 63.

⁴⁹ Charles Lucas, “Statement of the causes of difference between T.H. Benton and me,” 11 August 1817, John Baptiste Charles Lucas Family Papers (1754-1943), Box 8, Missouri History Museum Library, St. Louis, Missouri.

⁵⁰ Chambers, *Old Bullion*, 66.

⁵¹ Charles Lucas to Thomas H. Benton, 15 November 1816, Lucas Papers, Box 7.

of North Carolina. Benton was not nearly as wealthy as his roommates and was often chided by his peers for his lack of cash. When Benton's academic bills came due, he had yet to receive funding from his mother to pay for his schooling. So Benton stole money from his three roommates, hoping to replace the cash before it had even been missed. Unfortunately for Benton, his roommates discovered that they had been robbed and turned Benton in. On March 29, 1799, Benton was expelled from the university by a unanimous vote of the Philanthropic Society.⁵² William Nisbet Chambers put it best when he wrote,

Thomas was swamped in the sea of humiliation. Out of this sea there emerged, apparently, new drives to prove himself and to vindicate his honor.... These drives were to render him, in the long future, compulsively touchy about his honor, extraordinarily proud of the learning he was forced to acquire on his own, and inordinately determined to achieve a station in life.⁵³

Benton's hypersensitivity to honor can also be witnessed in his scuffle with General Andrew Jackson in 1813. After Jackson called Benton a "rascal" in a Nashville hotel, a large fight broke out between Benton, Jackson, and several others. Jackson raised his pistol on Benton who fired twice at Jackson in return. Benton received five knife wounds in the fight and Jackson was shot in the arm.⁵⁴ This wild affray shows that Benton, like Jackson, was a brawling man from a brawling culture. Also like Jackson, Benton began his political career as a frontier attorney.

On the frontier, the legal profession was the easiest stepping stone for men who wanted to enter the arena of politics. In early 1817, shortly after his abortive challenge to Lucas, Benton got his first political appointment as a member of the Board of Trustees for Schools in St. Louis. He was even rumored to be mounting a bid for Congress (i.e. as a

⁵² Smith, Elbert B, *Magnificent Missourian: The Life of Thomas Hart Benton* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1958) 19-22.

⁵³ Chambers, *Old Bullion*, 16-17.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 51-52.

territorial delegate) in the 1817 elections; but it eventually turned out to be just that: rumor.⁵⁵

Despite not seeking an office, the elections of 1817 would have a dramatic impact on Thomas Hart Benton's life and future career.

On August 4, 1817, as Benton approached the voting clerks, Charles Lucas confronted Benton, challenging his right to vote by asking if Benton had paid his taxes.⁵⁶ To this verbal assault on his honor, Benton retorted, with all the unwritten rules of honor in mind, "Gentleman, if you have any questions to ask, I am prepared to answer, but I do not propose to answer charges made by any puppy who may happen to run across my path!"⁵⁷ When Benton spoke these words, he could not have predicted the exact outcome of the altercation that would soon unfold with Lucas, but he knew that his words would take their rivalry to the next level. In that time, certain slurs such as *rascal*, *scoundrel*, *liar*, *coward*, and *puppy* were off-limits – fighting words that were used at one's peril.⁵⁸

Even if Lucas had preferred to dismiss Benton's comment, he had to take into account how his reaction would be received by the St. Louis community. The code of honor dictated that he must defend such an all-out assault on his honor. Against the backdrop of intense political factionalization in St. Louis during this period, these two men seemed compelled to fight for political reasons as well for personal honor. Dick Steward, in referring to the opposing factions of Lucas and Benton, writes that "compromise and conciliation would be construed as deference to a social arrangement that would be tantamount to recognizing the inferiority of one's own group.... Both sides used honor as a means of

⁵⁵ Ibid., 71.

⁵⁶ Charles Lucas, "Statement of the causes of difference between T.H. Benton and me," 11 August 1817, Lucas Papers, Box 8. At this time, voting was contingent on the payment of payment of one's taxes.

⁵⁷ Chambers, *Old Bullion*, 72.

⁵⁸ Freeman, *Affairs of Honor*, xvi.

empowerment.”⁵⁹ This political aspect of the Lucas-Benton affair is crucial to understanding the motives of the parties involved.

Surely recognizing the significance of such an insult, Lucas wrote to Benton demanding a duel on August 11, 1817. He wrote “I am informed you applied to me the on the day of the election the epithet of ‘Puppy.’ If so I shall expect that satisfaction which is due from one gentleman to another for such an indignity.”⁶⁰ Benton accepted Lucas’s challenge and agreed to fight him the next day at dawn. Luke Lawless, the second for Benton, and Joshua Barton, the second for Lucas, drew up the terms for the duel and signed them on behalf of the principals.

Lucas, despite his youth, was no stranger to the custom of dueling. After lambasting John Scott, the junto candidate for territorial delegate, before the 1816 election in the pages of the *Missouri Gazette*, Scott issued a challenge to Lucas that was accepted. That same month, Lucas received and accepted another dueling challenge from Thomas Wright. Though dates for both duels were established and the affair highly publicized, neither duel was carried out.⁶¹ Still, these instances show that Lucas was well acquainted with the code duello and was willing to defend his virtue on the field of honor.

On August 12, 1817, Charles Lucas and Thomas Hart Benton fought the first of their two duels on the sandbar in the Mississippi River that, afterward, would colloquially become known as Bloody Island. Since dueling was technically illegal in the Missouri Territory, many would-be duelists sorted out their affairs of honor on the sandbars of Mississippi River, a jurisdictional gray area that existed beyond the authority of territorial law enforcement. At

⁵⁹ Steward, *Duels and the Roots of Violence in Missouri*, 76.

⁶⁰ Charles Lucas, “Challenges Benton for calling him a “Puppy” on the day of the election,” 11 August 1817, Thomas Hart Benton Papers (1790-1958), Box 1, Missouri History Museum Library, St. Louis, Missouri.

⁶¹ Steward, *Duels and the Roots of Violence in Missouri*, 45.

dawn, six men, consisting of the two duelists along with their seconds and their surgeons, rowed out to the infamous sandbar across from Madame Roy's.⁶² Lucas and Benton, according to contemporary accounts, were both cool and collected as they took their positions 30 feet apart.⁶³



Bloody Island Map, 1853, Missouri State Archives

After the command “Fire!” was given both men fired their pistols. Lucas hit Benton below the right knee but the ball did not even pierce Benton’s trousers – leaving only a small contusion. Benton’s ball, however, was much more destructive, going through Lucas’s neck just to the left of his windpipe. As blood poured from the wound, Lucas’s surgeon, Dr. Garrit Quarles, deemed his principal unfit to continue. Lawless asked Lucas if he were satisfied and Lucas replied that he was – meaning that he would not ask for a second firing or another meeting. Lawless then told Benton Lucas’s response, to which Benton loudly stated that he

⁶² Joshua Barton, “Articles regulating the terms of the personal interview between Thomas H. Benton and Charles Lucas,” 11 August 1817, Benton Papers, Box 1.

⁶³ Joshua Barton to John B. C. Lucas, 3 October 1817, Lucas Papers, Box 8.

was not satisfied. Lucas agreed to duel Benton again as soon as he had sufficiently recovered from his wound. Shortly after this declaration, Lucas fainted as he was being helped back to his boat.⁶⁴

The St. Louis community soon brimmed with gossip concerning the Lucas-Benton duel. Opinions on the way the dispute was being handled caused many people to divide themselves into pro-Benton and pro-Lucas factions. The course that Benton chose to follow in carrying out the affair was quite unusual – additional duels were uncommon, especially, as in Benton’s case, those requested by the challengee. According to John Lyde Wilson’s 1838 dueling manual titled *The Code of Honor*, the challenger could ask for additional satisfaction “if the insult be of serious character.” However Wilson makes no mention of a challengee requesting additional satisfaction after the challenger has declared that he is satisfied.⁶⁵ Benton’s request of an additional duel makes the Lucas-Benton affair atypical of affairs of honor at this time, likely giving rise to the talk of Benton being vengeful and possessing ulterior motives.

For example, John B. C. Lucas, in response to Benton’s request for another duel, wrote that Benton “demands eagerly the remainder of Mr. Lucas’s blood” and that the dispute was no longer “an affair of honor” but “merely and simply an affair of blood and extermination.”⁶⁶ Gentlemen involved in affairs of honor had to be very cautious about how the affairs were carried out: conducting them in the wrong way could be even more damaging to one’s reputation and honor than the initial insult. Rumors about Benton wishing to duel Lucas out of vengeance and bloodlust could seriously damage his reputation. Rumors

⁶⁴ Chambers, *Old Bullion*, 73.

⁶⁵ John Lyde Wilson, “The Code of Honor or, Rules for the Government of Principals and Seconds in Dueling” in *Dueling in the Old South: Vignettes of Social History*, Jack K. Williams, (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1986), 96-97.

⁶⁶ Chambers, *Old Bullion*, 73.

were powerful political tools among the elite in the early nineteenth century, and many politicians rose to prominence or fell into oblivion because of well placed rumors disseminated in the proper circles.⁶⁷

The rumors about Thomas Hart Benton's vengefulness may have been logical considering that Benton refused to end his feud with Lucas. In the month following the initial encounter Luke Lawless wrote that "in pursuing Mr. Lucas further his [Benton's] conduct would assume an aspect of vengeance foreign from his heart, and that the sympathies and opinions of his fellow-citizens would possibly be raised against him."⁶⁸ Some did indeed question Benton's motives. Timothy Flint of St. Louis wrote that "No new man can ascend to eminence, without displacing some one [sic] who is already there."⁶⁹ Whether Benton truly wanted to rid himself of a rival or not, for a rumor to that effect to spread publicly only incited further ire from Benton. Perhaps Benton believed that his reputation was still at stake at the end of the first duel.

But communal pressure coupled with the urging of his friends led Benton to withdraw his request for a second meeting with Lucas. Luke Lawless wrote to the *Missouri Gazette* on September 20, 1817, stating that "Benton in thus yielding to the intreaties of friendship and to the dictates of his conscience did not imagine that he was furnishing a means of calumny to his enemies, or that the motives of his conduct could possibly be misunderstood."⁷⁰

Even after Benton withdrew his request, however, charges that he was vindictive continued to circulate in the streets of St. Louis. These charges seemed to imply that Benton was using an affair of honor as an excuse to eliminate a political and professional rival. Even

⁶⁷ Freeman, *Affairs of Honor*, 66.

⁶⁸ Steward, *Duels and the Roots of Violence in Missouri*, 71.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 43.

⁷⁰ *Missouri Gazette* (St. Louis), September 20, 1817.

though a duel might, in fact, dispose of a political rival, it was certainly never to be pursued with that as an explicit goal. With these charges likely to stain Benton's reputation, Benton again felt compelled to defend his honor. He promptly resubmitted his challenge to Lucas, vaguely citing the rumors as his reasoning. Benton's original challenge to Lucas has not survived to this day, as he later burned documents relating to his affair with Lucas.⁷¹ But Benton seemed to feel that the rumors about his motives had substantially smeared his reputation and he needed to amend the damages. He appeared to have thought that the only way to salvage his reputation would be to take to the field of honor once again. So it seems that Benton, who was charged with bloodthirstiness after wishing to continue the feud, felt compelled to address these charges by continuing the affair and perhaps begetting more bloodshed! Though perplexing today, Benton must have felt that the only way to defend his reputation (within the context of the system of honor) was to prove himself honorably through dueling, despite the fact that his reputation was suffering precisely because of his belligerence.

On September 26, 1817, Lucas replied to Benton, writing,

Although I am conscious that a respectable man in society cannot be found who will say he has heard any of those reports from me and tho' I think it more probable they have been fabricated by your own friends than circulated by any who call themselves mine, yet without even knowing what reports you have heard I shall give you an opportunity of gratifying your own wishes and the wishes of your news carriers.⁷²

Being sufficiently recovered from his wound received at his first interview, Lucas was set to meet Benton once again on the morning of September 27, 1817. The terms for the second duel were almost identical to the first – except that the distance between the two combatants

⁷¹ Thomas Hart Benton. *Auto-Biographical Sketch of Thomas H. Benton* (Columbia: State Historical Society, n.d.), v.

⁷² Charles Lucas to Thomas H. Benton, 26 September 1817, Lucas Papers, Box 8.

was shortened to only 10 feet.⁷³ The same six men, along with an additional second for Lucas, Eli Clemson, rowed out once again to Bloody Island. Just as in the first encounter, after the duelists each declared that they were in fact ready, the command “Fire!” was to be given (by Clemson, as determined by the drawing of lots) followed by a count of “One... two... three...” in which the duelists had three seconds to fire their pistols. However when the time came, Clemson forgot to say “Fire!” and instead began with the count to three.⁷⁴

According to accounts, Benton looked toward Clemson, having realized the count had been performed incorrectly. Lucas began to raise his gun as Lawless, dutifully charged with ensuring a fair duel for his principal, reached for his pistol. Benton then quickly raised his gun and fired at the same moment as Lucas. Joshua Barton later wrote that “Both of them presented and fired so nearly together that I would not distinguish two reports.”⁷⁵ Whereas Lucas’s ball missed Benton entirely, Benton’s shot had found its mark. Lucas fell to the ground after the crash of thunder, Benton’s ball having ripped through his left arm and into his heart. The following account of events was given by Lucas’s second Joshua Barton:

After Mr. Lucas fell Col. Benton stepped up to him and twice repeated these words. “Charles it is an unfortunate affair. It is very unfortunate!” (whether he asked Mr. Lucas if he forgave him, I am not confident; but from the answer given it would seem he did) Mr. Lucas’ reply was; “Colonel, you have murdered me and I never can forgive you.” But immediately added “Yes Colonel Benton, I am a persecuted man. You have persecuted me and now have murdered me, but I can forgive you. I do forgive you!” He at the same time held out his hand which Col. Benton received. Col. Benton then stooped down as if to assist in raising him up but finding assistance unnecessary he observed to Mr. Lucas “Your friends are with you” and left the ground.

Mr. Lucas declared several times that he was a dead man and when the Doctors would express a belief or hope that the wound was not mortal he constantly

⁷³ Joshua Barton, “Articles regulating the terms of the personal interview between Thomas H. Benton demanding and Charles Lucas answering,” date unspecified, probably 26 September 1817, Benton Papers, Box 1. This information was not made public.

⁷⁴ Chambers, *Old Bullion*, 75.

⁷⁵ Joshua Barton to John B. C. Lucas, 3 October 1817, Lucas Papers, Box 8.

replied that it was. That they need not dress it for the ball had entered his body and he was certainly dead.

Words to that effect were the last I heard having stepped off a few paces for a coat to warm him in and when I returned with it he neither spoke nor seemed to know me.⁷⁶

Lucas died at the age of 25, 10 years Benton's junior.

The fact that Charles Lucas died in his duel with Benton is somewhat unusual. One might assume that deaths from dueling happened quite frequently. However in actuality, fatalities were exceedingly rare. John Lyde Wilson estimated that about one in every 14 duels led to a death, with only one in six duels resulting in any injury at all.⁷⁷ Why did so many duels end with both combatants sustaining no injury whatsoever? First, the choice of weapons played a large role. With the exception of New Orleans (where swords were the weapons of choice), almost all duels in early nineteenth-century America were fought with smoothbore pistols.⁷⁸ Smoothbore weapons differ from modern firearms in that they are not *rifled*. Rifling gives the projectile a predictable and consistent spin that allows for increased accuracy. Smoothbore weapons, by contrast, have no way to give the projectile any sort of predictable spin and thus accuracy was very low, even over relatively short distances.

However shorter distances certainly increased the possibility of injury. The closing of the distance for the second duel gave the interview a greater potential for bloodshed. For all the talk of Benton's vengefulness, it was Lucas who made the second duel more potentially deadly, for it was he who chose to close the distance to 10 feet for the second duel.⁷⁹ Lucas wrote that Benton was known to be the superior shot of the two and that a shortening of the

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Schwartz, Baxter, and Ryan, "The Duel: Can These Gentlemen Be Acting Efficiently?," 324.

⁷⁸ Williams, *Dueling in the Old South*, 8.

⁷⁹ Wilson, "Code of Honor," 95.

distance would decrease the advantage that Benton had. In a letter, Lucas revealed that he saw the shortened distance as a way of “making the combat equal.”⁸⁰

But inaccuracy of firearms was not the only reason for relatively few deaths from dueling. The main reason can be found in the culture of honor. Fighting a duel was a way for both parties to reaffirm or improve their reputation and thus their social standing within the community. Merely accepting a duel and then coming to arbitration before the duel took place still offered great benefits with respect to one’s reputation (though not as great as if the duel was actually performed).⁸¹ A gentleman simply going through with the duel proved to the community that he was brave enough to exchange fire with another man. In the eyes of society, wounding someone or being wounded in a duel really had no more positive effect on one’s reputation or honor than if no injury had been sustained at all. After surviving the first exchange unscathed, it was quite common for both parties to reconcile their dispute, being as now both had most likely been socially elevated.

The fact that Lucas had been killed and that Benton had shot through the omitted command “Fire” could only enhance the impression that Benton had acted to eliminate a potential rival. Noticing that the community might react negatively to what was supposed to be an affair of *honor*, all of the parties present at the dueling grounds signed a statement declaring that “the meeting which took place this morning between those gentlemen [Benton and Lucas] was conducted in a perfectly fair and honorable manner and that the parties presented and fired together with and acted with coolness and deliberation.”⁸²

⁸⁰ Joshua Barton, “Charles Lucas relating to new terms for the next meeting with Mr. Benton,” September 1817, Lucas Papers, Box 8.

⁸¹ Schwartz, Baxter, and Ryan, “The Duel: Can These Gentlemen Be Acting Efficiently?,” 338.

⁸² Luke Lawless, Joshua Barton, Bernard Farrar, Garrit Quarles, Eli Clemson, “Declaration signed by Lawless, Barton, Farrar, Quarles, Clemson,” 27 September 1817, Lucas Papers, Box 8.

Despite these assurances the St. Louis press continued to attack Benton for his role in the bloody feud. The *Missouri Gazette*, an anti-junto newspaper publication, had harsh words. John B. C. Lucas wrote on October 4, 1817 that:

The high standing of Col. Benton as a professional duelist, as a great proficient in the art of shooting men down, produced on Lucas, as I presume, an effect quite different from that which it might have produced on many others. It precluded him from avoiding the combat lest it should be attributed to test his youthful pride, his eloquence of honor get the better of his prudence, the challenge was accepted, they met on the next day the 27th, in the morning, Lucas fell, he could be killed but not subdued.⁸³

The elder Lucas, along with *Gazette* editor Joseph Charless, continued to hound Benton for the rest of his life, actively trying to prevent Benton from finding jobs as an attorney and acquiring political posts.

But Benton's prosecution through the pages of the *Missouri Gazette* was the only trial that he would ever face for killing Charles Lucas. Benton had broken the law but never had any legal action brought against him for his role in the deadly duel. As with many duels in Missouri, there is no record that Benton was indicted, much less put on trial for killing a man in a duel.⁸⁴

Despite many irregularities in the Lucas-Benton affair including Benton (as challengee) requesting a second encounter, Lucas (as challenger) selecting the distance of the second duel, and the mistaken count by Eli Clemson, the duel itself was conducted with a fairly high degree of punctilio in most other regards. Much of the St. Louis community, with the exception of John B.C. Lucas, seemed to agree that it was carried out within the dueling standards of the day and that it was not an outright assassination of Charles Lucas. Benton

⁸³ John B. C. Lucas, *Missouri Gazette*, October 4, 1817.

⁸⁴ Michael Everman, Email to author, February 14, 2012. Through personal communication with Michael Everman, an archivist at the Missouri State Archives in St. Louis, it was found that no records in the civil case or criminal case records database show Benton being indicted for any dueling crime.

was able to escape career-ending ridicule because despite the questions about his motivation, his duel was viewed to be within the bounds of contemporary dueling standards.

Dick Steward writes that settling an affair “within the bounds” of dueling is what separated the duel from an impassioned and barbaric exchange.⁸⁵ There is little evidence beyond the editorial pages of the *Gazette* that the second duel stirred much controversy. Fighting the “correct” type of duel certainly must have helped Benton avoid political disgrace at a time when adhering to established conventions were of extreme importance. Following the elaborate standards for an affair of honor were perhaps even more important in the 1810s when dueling was increasingly coming under attack legislatively and through the press in many parts of the country, including in the Missouri Territory.

On the frontier, dueling continued to serve as a way to improve one’s political prospects through the reinforcement and augmentation of one’s reputation and honor. But as Missouri advanced toward statehood, Missouri settlers would take an increasingly active role in Missouri’s politics, as is strongly evidenced in the 1820 general elections and the General Assembly’s vote for Missouri’s first two U.S. Senators. To these settlers, the duel remained an institution of the elite that was not practiced among the populace. How these men viewed the political duel would have important consequences for Benton in the years to come.

⁸⁵ Steward, *Duels and the Roots of Violence in Missouri*, 8.

Chapter 3: The Missouri Elections of 1820

Perhaps key to Benton's political survival after the duel was that the focus of politics was shifting in the territory. After 1817, politics was becoming increasingly popular in Missouri with the prospect of statehood on the horizon and the rise of the slavery issue in national politics. The first mass political mobilization in the Territory of Missouri took place in 1820, and voters seemed almost singularly focused on this issue. The issue of slavery eclipsed all others and created a new alignment of political factions in Missouri. The issue seemed to overshadow personality, former alliances, or the deadly quarrels fought among the Missouri elite. As politics moved from the elite to the masses, the importance of violence in politics declined. As we see in the case of Benton's election, duels did not go entirely unnoticed by the populace but appeared to have a very localized impact on the Missouri vote.

In the intervening years between the affair with Lucas in 1817 and his election to the U.S. Senate in 1820, Benton was hard at work improving his political stock. He continued his purchase of town lots in the St. Louis area and expanded his land holdings.⁸⁶ He also joined with a dozen other men as a proprietor of the new "Town of Osage" where he, along with the other speculators, tried to advertise the prospective town as the future center of Missouri.⁸⁷ Through his business ventures and legal work, Benton eventually came into contact with territorial Missouri's banking circles. In 1818, believing that the Bank of St. Louis was speculating with paper money, Benton and other stockholders stormed the bank and forcibly padlocked the doors. The bank was never to reopen and Benton was indicted for this act but later acquitted, just as all of the other rebel stockholders who participated were.⁸⁸ He

⁸⁶ Chambers, *Old Bullion*, 77.

⁸⁷ *Missouri Intelligencer and Boons Lick Advertiser* (Franklin, Missouri), June 11, 1819.

⁸⁸ Smith, *Magnificent Missourian*, 65.

continued his involvement in banking matters in St. Louis, being elected to the Board of Governors of the Bank of Missouri on May 1, 1820.⁸⁹

Perhaps Benton's most crucial political move during this period was in 1818 when he bought an interest, along with two others, in the recently created newspaper, the *Western Emigrant*. Before the newspaper was the *Emigrant*, it had been the *Western Journal*, which was founded in 1815 to combat St. Louis's only newspaper and bastion of anti-junto rhetoric, the *Missouri Gazette*. Shortly after Benton took ownership of the *Emigrant*, the newspaper changed its name once more to the *St. Louis Enquirer*. Benton became the editor of the *Enquirer*, giving him a widely read forum to counter *Gazette* editor Joseph Charless and to promote the ideas associated with Benton's junto faction of St. Louis's politics.⁹⁰

Over the next two years, Benton and Charless would be entrenched in a bitter newspaper war. Their newspapers took on the heavy political biases characteristic of that era's journalism, with Charless spending countless pages of the *Gazette* berating Benton and the *Enquirer*. Charless had a close relationship with John B. C. Lucas and frequently gave Lucas a vehicle to attack Benton with hopes of damaging Benton's political strength.⁹¹

As editor of the *Enquirer*, Benton was able to reach a large audience on a variety of issues, none more important for the historical development of Missouri than that of slavery. The issue of slavery split the citizens of the territory into two camps – those who were restrictionists wishing to limit slavery's development either immediately or in the future, and those who were anti-restrictionists, desiring slavery's continued existence in Missouri and the continued importation of slaves into Missouri. The *Enquirer* became a stronghold of pro-slavery, anti-restrictionist rhetoric with Benton as its standard-bearer. Articles filled the

⁸⁹ Chambers, *Old Bullion*, 90.

⁹⁰ Smith, *Magnificent Missourian*, 67.

⁹¹ Chambers, *Old Bullion*, 76.

newspaper defending slavery: “if Congress should impose the contemplated restriction, it would be transcending their constitutional powers, depriving the people of Missouri of their inherent and constitutional rights and breaking the pledged faith of the nation.”⁹² The slavery issue appealed to a much larger audience than earlier important political issues, such as Spanish land claims, which mostly concerned the elite. Missourians, with their stake in the institution of slavery, now had a reason to mobilize politically.

Benton himself was a slave owner and came from a slaveholding family, owning three slaves at the time of his affair with Lucas.⁹³ Even many citizens who were generally uninterested in slaveholding understood that Missouri’s future depended on immigration – and that the restriction of slavery in the area would shut out many potential settlers.⁹⁴ Benton spent a great deal of his time as editor attacking alleged restrictionists, even though restrictionists were difficult to come by. As evidenced by the 1820 election for constitutional convention delegates discussed below, anti-restriction would become the more popular opinion by the 1820 elections.

The emergence of the slavery issue in 1819 soon led to a modification of political lines. The old “junto” and “anti-junto” groups increasingly transformed themselves into factions based on the issue of slavery as it related to statehood.⁹⁵ Charless and Lucas, members of the “anti-junto,” became the dominant leaders among the restrictionists. Benton, through his position at the *Enquirer*, assumed an almost militant leadership position in the anti-restrictionist faction of Missouri politics and in this manner became adored by much of the Missouri populace. These newly formed factions would become opposing armies as the

⁹² *St. Louis Enquirer* (St. Louis, Missouri), August 4, 1819.

⁹³ Elbert B. Smith, “Thomas Hart Benton: Southern Realist,” *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 58, No. 4 (Jul., 1953), 797; Steward, *Duels and the Roots of Violence in Missouri*, 68.

⁹⁴ Chambers, *Old Bullion*, 92.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 93.

1820 elections approached. Even though the political landscape shifted, Benton's previous association with the junto was still widely known in St. Louis at the time of the 1820 elections. The junto and anti-junto labels followed their former members even as the political scene slowly shifted away from these older factional distinctions. In the mean time, several smaller elections throughout the Missouri Territory would serve as proxy battles in this growing political war.

In August 1819, Missouri citizens went to the polls to fill the position of territorial delegate. The race was between John Scott, a pro-slavery member of the St. Louis junto, and Samuel Hammond. Scott was supported by Benton's *Enquirer* and went on to win the election.⁹⁶ On November 29, 1819, an election was held in St. Louis in which Benton was elected as a trustee for the town, a position he had run for the previous year and lost.⁹⁷ Benton, along with other pro-slavery advocates like Scott, saw political success as the Missouri crisis became more heated.

In January of 1819, an editorial appeared in the *Gazette* addressing Benton's duel and his recent election to the St. Louis Board of Trustees:

We are now satisfied, that *even in St. Louis*, no more than one fifth of the whole votes given could be gotten for him [Benton]; the state of the public opinion being thus ascertained, we are safe enough; for we know how the people of the country, the humane and peaceful farmers, view professional duelists. We know their abhorrence for the man who depending upon his superiority of skill, did seek coolly and deliberately, during the twelve months after the blood of a youth, most promising, amiable and inoffensive, whose usefulness and steadiness had far outstript his years: and after having shot him in the throat, never was satisfied until he shot him through the heart.⁹⁸

In this editorial, Charless suggested that the court of public opinion had tried Benton and declared him guilty, and that Benton would never rise to the positions of prominence that he

⁹⁶ *St. Louis Enquirer*, August 18, 1819.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, December 8, 1819.

⁹⁸ *Missouri Gazette*, January 15, 1819.

and the members of his junto faction thought laid before him. Charless's understanding of public opinion would turn out to be wrong.

Just as Benton began to take a more prominent part in politics, so did the territory's citizens take on a more active role in the political process as Missouri marched toward statehood. This began with the election of delegates to the territory's constitutional convention in May 1820. Here, the people made their voice heard on a variety of different issues that were important to them including debt relief, public land grants, and, most importantly, slavery. The previous year, Missourians found their right to slavery under attack by a single-term congressman from New York, James Tallmadge. By introducing an amendment to the Missouri statehood bill that would prohibit the further introduction of slavery into Missouri, Tallmadge ignited a firestorm that shook the nation's politics.⁹⁹ Many Missourians took to the polls to ensure that the future of their state included the institution of slavery.

Several candidates wrote letters addressed to the voters stating their position on the issues and soliciting votes for the upcoming election. These letters began to fill many of the local newspapers as the election drew closer.¹⁰⁰ Benton, after not being included on an anti-restrictionist slate of candidates at a caucus meeting, chose not to run in the constitutional delegate elections.¹⁰¹ As the returns came in, all of the restrictionists were soundly defeated. The election assured that delegates to the convention would write a constitution that would keep Missouri safe for slavery.¹⁰² Even influential men in the St. Louis power structure such as John B. C. Lucas were unable to overcome the large amount of public opposition to their

⁹⁹ Robert Pierce Forbes, *The Missouri Compromise and Its Aftermath* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 35.

¹⁰⁰ *Missouri Intelligencer*, April 15, 1820, April 22, 1820.

¹⁰¹ Chambers, *Old Bullion*, 95.

¹⁰² Aron, *American Confluence*, 182.

restrictionist tendencies.¹⁰³ As the constitutional convention convened during the summer months, aspiring politicians, many of them convention delegates, began their bid for state office. At the end of August, voters went to the polls once again to elect their state officeholders, including representatives, state senators, and the governor.

During the Jacksonian era Benton was known as one of the great champions of the people and of popular interests. However, even with the popularity of the anti-restrictionist cause, Benton, prior to his election to the Senate, seemed not quite so well-liked by the populace at large. Benton, who had previously aligned himself with the interests of St. Louis's French merchants, was careful not to reveal the extent of his relationships with the French elite to the public. He began his political career as the protector of property and a defender of the rights of the wealthy and privileged: it was not until after his election to the Senate that he began to accept broader popular democracy.¹⁰⁴ It was this more elitist-minded Benton who was up for election in October of 1820.

To be elected to the Senate, Benton needed the support of a majority (27 votes) of the Missouri General Assembly, which included 40 members of the House and 12 members of the Senate. Gaining that majority would turn out to be more difficult than Benton must have originally envisioned. Many of Benton's political allies, who made up the *junto's* power structure, did not win their 1820 general elections, most notably former governor William Clark of Lewis and Clark fame.¹⁰⁵ For better or for worse, Benton's fate was to be decided not by the voting males of the territory, but by their elected officials.

As early as July, Benton was mentioned in many of the local newspapers as being a front runner for the U.S. Senate position. The unofficial *junto* "caucus" selected Benton and

¹⁰³ *Missouri Gazette*, May 10, 1820.

¹⁰⁴ Aron, *American Confluence*, 193-195.

¹⁰⁵ Chambers, *Old Bullion*, 96-97; Foley, *Genesis of Missouri*, 297.

John R. Jones for Senate, with Nathaniel Cook for one of the three Superior Judges.¹⁰⁶

Another anti-restrictionist, David Barton, was also selected to be one of the Superior Judges, but that seems to be due more to his anti-restrictionist stance than his loyalties to the junto (Barton was previously aligned with anti-junto faction).¹⁰⁷ All four of these men, along with John B. C. Lucas and Henry Elliott, would run for a U.S. Senate seat in October. Though Benton was probably pleased that his name was circulating as a potential candidate for Senate, he was anxious to disassociate himself from his old junto, a faction that was still fairly unpopular with the general public. Although Benton and Barton both held an anti-restrictionist stance, Benton's previous association with the junto put him in a more precarious political position. Benton published an article in the *Enquirer* written by "a member of the convention" stating, "As one of that body I take the liberty of stating that it is wholly and entirely untrue to the best of my knowledge and belief, as I never heard of such a thing as the caucus in question until the account of it was seen in that paper [the *Gazette*]; and since then I have heard almost every member speaking of it as false and calumnious."¹⁰⁸ With the exception of this article describing the caucus, no other accounts mentioning any of the candidates by name appeared in either the *Herald* or the *Gazette*; and no information concerning the election of the two U.S. Senators was published until after the votes were recorded.

In spite of this lack of news coverage, historians largely see three front runners on the run-up to the Senate election – David Barton, John B. C. Lucas, and Thomas Hart Benton.¹⁰⁹

Barton is largely recognized as the most popular man at the convention (serving as the

¹⁰⁶ *Jackson Missouri Herald* (Jackson, Missouri), July 15, 1820; *Missouri Gazette*, June 28, 1820 and July 12, 1820.

¹⁰⁷ Steward, *Duels and the Roots of Violence in Missouri*, 54.

¹⁰⁸ *St. Louis Enquirer*, July 5, 1820; *Jackson Missouri Herald*, July 15, 1820.

¹⁰⁹ Chambers, *Old Bullion*, 98; Smith, *Magnificent Missourian*, 70.

convention chairman) and his election to the Senate increasingly appeared to be a sure thing.¹¹⁰ In May he had run as a candidate for convention delegate and his name was mentioned in the newspapers as being a candidate for the Missouri House of Representatives as well.¹¹¹ Benton's biographer Elbert B. Smith writes that Lucas was actually the leading contender for the second Senate seat.¹¹² The old junto, whose candidate for governor lost to Alexander McNair, was now put to the test as it tried to catapult its primary candidate, Thomas Hart Benton, into the Senate.

As the Assembly organized, John Scott, who was confined to a bed due to illness, began a massive letter-writing campaign to many state officials arguing for Benton's candidacy for the Senate. Writing Nathaniel Cook, another senatorial hopeful, Scott said "You ought to place Benton on your ticket for the Senate, and induce McNair to lend his aid.... Benton must not be sacrificed. He has done all things for the party and within the power of man – expences [sic] were no object to him." The next day Scott wrote to Barton, "For God's sake, exert yourself for Benton as well as yourself... We must act so as to save our friends."¹¹³ Benton could only hope that his well advertised alliances with Scott and Barton would yield him considerable assistance as he tried to shake his junto image and claim himself first and foremost as a supporter of slavery in Missouri.

On Monday October 2, 1820, the General Assembly convened to elect the first pair of senators from Missouri. As the votes were counted, David Barton and Thomas Hart Benton emerged as the victors. Barton received 34 votes and Benton received 27 votes, just enough to give him a majority. John B. C. Lucas was next with 16 votes, Henry Elliott with 10, John

¹¹⁰ Floyd C. Shoemaker, "David Barton, John Rice Jones and Edward Bates: Three Missouri State and Statehood Founders," *Missouri Historical Review* Vol. 92 No. 3, (April 1998), 255.

¹¹¹ *St. Louis Enquirer*, July 22, 1820.

¹¹² Smith, *Magnificent Missourian*, 70.

¹¹³ Chambers, *Old Bullion*, 98.

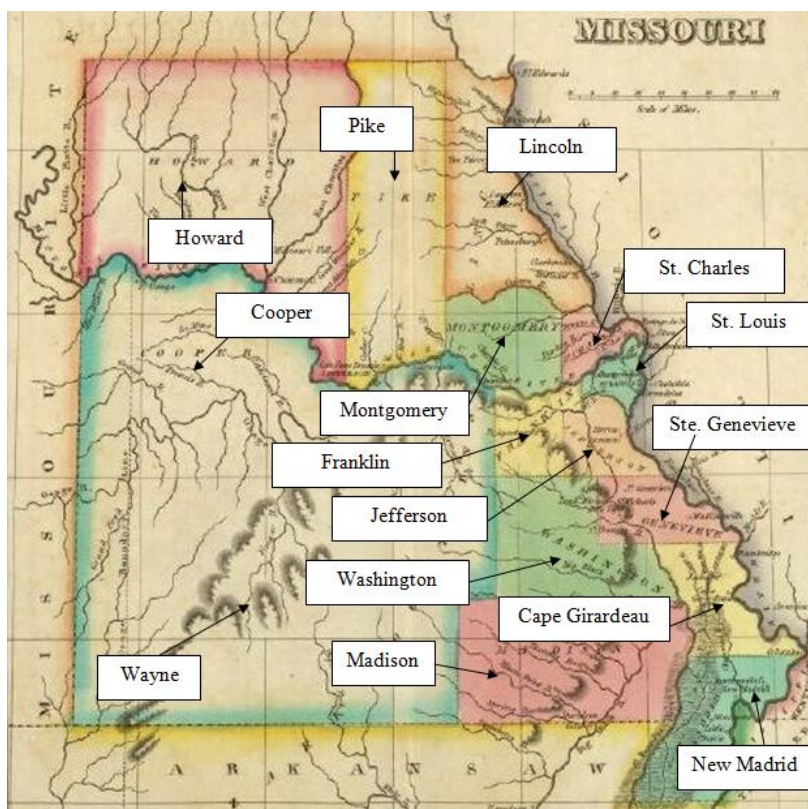
R. Jones with nine, and lastly Nathaniel Cook with eight.¹¹⁴ The only leading member of the junto to emerge from the elections with a significant political position was Benton.

Discovering why Benton, and not any other members of the St. Louis junto, was able to win broad support in the General Assembly during the Senate vote is critical to understanding the political climate in Missouri in 1820.

House Vote						
County	Barton	Benton	Cook	Elliott	Jones	Lucas
St. Louis	6	2	2	1	2	1
St. Charles	2	3	0	0	0	1
Lincoln	1	1	0	0	0	0
Pike	1	2	0	0	0	1
Montgomery	2	2	0	0	0	0
Howard	6	6	2	0	0	0
Cooper	4	2	1	0	0	1
Franklin	1	1	0	0	0	0
Washington	0	0	0	2	0	2
Ste. Genevieve	2	1	0	2	1	2
Wayne	0	0	0	1	0	1
Cape Girardeau	0	1	0	3	1	3
New Madrid	2	2	0	0	0	0
Total	27	23	5	9	4	12

Senate Vote						
County	Barton	Benton	Cook	Elliott	Jones	Lucas
St. Louis	2	1	1	0	0	0
Howard and Cooper	4	2	2	0	0	0
St. Charles	1	0	0	0	1	0
Jefferson and Washington	0	0	0	0	1	1
Ste. Genevieve	0	1	0	0	1	0
Cape Girardeau and New Madrid	0	0	0	0	2	2
Madison and Wayne	0	0	0	1	0	1
Total	7	4	3	1	5	4

¹¹⁴ *Journal of the Senate of the State of Missouri, at the First Session of the First General Assembly; Began and Held in the Town of St. Louis, on Monday, the 18th September, 1820, and of the Independence of the United States, the Forty-Fifth*, (St. Charles: Robert McCloud, Printer to the State, 1821), 32-34.



Map of Missouri, 1822. David Rumsey Collection

Historians such as Floyd Shoemaker seem to gloss over Benton's first senatorial election and attribute his success largely to the help and influence of David Barton.¹¹⁵ This is a gross oversimplification of Benton's statewide appeal (Benton actually received votes in more House districts than Barton and received votes from the same number of Senate districts as Barton). Elbert B. Smith too mentions Barton's endorsement of Benton as a critical factor in his election. Both Smith and William Nisbet Chambers, Benton's two biographers, write that Benton's liberal position on Spanish land grants helped him gain the critical vote of Marie Philip Leduc of St. Louis County, thus giving him the 27 vote majority

¹¹⁵ Shoemaker, "Statehood Founders," 257.

needed to become a U.S. Senator.¹¹⁶ However none of these historians mention the importance of the slavery issue to the General Assembly vote or the overwhelming support of representatives from a particular geographic region of Missouri. These superficial examinations of Benton's 1820 election fail to explain why neither Jones nor Lucas nor any other candidate could defeat a person as seemingly unlikeable as Benton.

As Shoemaker admits, Benton had many reasons for being unpopular: this could have been "on account of his reputation as a troublemaker, his limitless egotism, his duel with Charles Lucas in 1817, whom he killed on their second provoked meeting, or his law practice for claimants of Spanish land grants,— all powerful and unpopular factors."¹¹⁷ By looking at the geographic breakdown of the General Assembly vote, it would appear that the real reason for Benton's appeal was his position on slavery. As can be seen from the election of convention delegates and state officers, slavery was the number one issue on voters' minds, something for any representative to consider when selecting a senator to represent Missouri's ideals in Washington. Jones, despite being a slave owner, had a reputation as a moderate.¹¹⁸ Lucas, in spite of writing articles to the *Missouri Gazette* attempting to explain his extremely complicated position on slavery, was viewed simply as a restrictionist. After losing the election to the constitutional convention, Joseph Charless defended Lucas in the *Gazette* and elaborated on Lucas's position on slavery:

Mr. Lucas has stated in the Missouri Gazette, before the election, & in hand bills, both in English and French, that he was in favor of slavery; that he was in favor of the further introduction or importation of slaves in Missouri: the only difference which exists between him and the other eleven candidates (eight of whom have been elected) is, that he is in favor of the importation of slaves for a limited time, whilst the others are in *favor of perpetual, or eternal importation*.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶ Smith, *Magnificent Missourian*, 70; Chambers, *Old Bullion*, 98-99.

¹¹⁷ Shoemaker, "Statehood Founders," 257.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 260.

¹¹⁹ *Missouri Gazette*, May 10, 1820.

In the eyes of Missouri voters, there was really no gray area on the issue of slavery: either the candidates were in favor of slavery now and for all eternity, or they were for the “restriction” of slavery in Missouri. Cook and Elliot were not mentioned at length in any of the major newspapers of the period before the senatorial election and therefore their positions on slavery cannot be determined.

By looking at a geographic breakdown of the General Assembly vote, Benton appears to have done exceptionally well in the area known as Boone’s Lick (or Boon’s Lick) Country – far better than he did in his own St. Louis. Boone’s Lick Country encompassed approximately 30,000 square miles along both sides of the Missouri River.¹²⁰ Boone’s Lick Country has been variously defined, but for the purpose of this study it includes the counties of Howard, Cooper, Pike, Montgomery, and Franklin. Farmers composed the majority of settlers in Boone’s Lick Country during Missouri’s territorial days.¹²¹ These farmers found a vast open countryside that fit well with their ideas of individualism. In 1815, a Boone’s Lick squatter wrote “There, I lived as happy as Lord Selkirk on his island. I was monarch of all I surveyed. My rights – there were none to dispute.”¹²²

In this region one would find the staunchest supporters of slavery anywhere in Missouri. Most of the immigrants from this region came from Kentucky, Virginia, North Carolina, and Tennessee. These settlers brought with them a distinctly southern culture, particularly their wide acceptance of slavery.¹²³ One longtime resident of Boone’s Lick

¹²⁰ Aron, *American Confluence*, 164.

¹²¹ Douglass Hurt, *Agriculture and Slavery in Missouri’s Little Dixie* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1992), 6.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 43.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 6.

Country estimated that “nine tenths of the people” there were “in favor of slavery.”¹²⁴ The Boone’s Lick region had over 40 percent of Missouri’s total slave population. Howard County, which provided Benton more votes than any other, alone had over 2,000 slaves, accounting for over 20 percent of the Missouri slave population.¹²⁵ In the Missouri House, Howard County was matched only by St. Louis in terms of its number of seats, each with seven representatives. The combined district of Howard and Cooper Counties in the Missouri Senate had four senate seats, double the number of the next largest districts of St. Louis and a combined Cape Girardeau and New Madrid senatorial district.

Robert Shalhope writes that Boone’s Lick Country, with a large slaveholding population and large number of seats in the state legislature, dominated the Democratic Party of Missouri during the Jacksonian era and allowed that party, in turn, to dominate the state.¹²⁶ He states that Benton maintained his senatorial position and his power in national politics by catering to this pro-slavery group for almost 30 years – despite taking a decidedly moderate position on the slavery issue once in Congress. However, Shalhope’s study completely ignores the impact of the “Boonslick Democracy” on Benton’s initial election in 1820. Benton’s biographers Smith and Chambers are even worse: they make no mention of the impact of Boone’s Lick Country’s support of Benton in any of his senatorial elections.

¹²⁴ John Craig Hammond, *Slavery, Freedom, and Expansion in the Early American West* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007), 72.

¹²⁵ Historical Census Browser. Geospatial and Statistical Data Center. Retrieved March 18, 2012, from the University of Virginia, <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/collections/>.

¹²⁶ Robert E. Shalhope, “Thomas Hart Benton and Missouri State Politics: A Re-Examination,” *Bulletin of the Missouri Historical Society*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (April 1969), 172.

Slave Population of Missouri by County, 1820 Census		
County	Total Slaves	Percentage of Territory's Total Slaves
Cape Girardeau	865	8.46%
Cooper	637	6.23%
Franklin	209	2.04%
Howard	2,089	20.44%
Jefferson	212	2.07%
Lincoln	242	2.37%
Madison	371	3.63%
Montgomery	526	5.15%
New Madrid	291	2.85%
Pike	676	6.61%
St. Charles	682	6.67%
St. Louis	1,810	17.71%
Ste. Genevieve	983	9.62%
Washington	425	4.16%
Wayne	204	2.00%
Missouri Total	10,222	

Slave Population by Region, 1820 Census	
Region	Percentage of Slave Population
Boone's Lick Country	40.47%
St. Louis and St. Charles County	24.38%
All Other Counties	35.15%

Boone's Lick Country overwhelmingly supported two candidates – David Barton and Thomas Hart Benton. Barton received 18 of his total 33 votes from the region, accounting for over 52 percent of his total vote.¹²⁷ Benton was a close second with 15 votes from Boone's Lick Country. The candidate with the third most votes from Boone's Lick Country was Nathaniel Cook with only five votes. Clearly, this slaveholding region of Missouri played a very significant role in swinging the election for Barton and Benton. Benton received 15 of his 27 total votes from this region, accounting for over 55 percent of his total vote.

¹²⁷ Missouri State Legislators 1820-2000, Missouri State Archives, Jefferson City, Missouri. Accessed through Missouri Secretary of State Website, <http://www.sos.mo.gov/archives/history/historicallistings/molega.asp>.

Boone's Lick Country Vote (House)						
County	Barton	Benton	Cook	Elliott	Jones	Lucas
Pike	1	2	0	0	0	1
Montgomery	2	2	0	0	0	0
Howard	6	6	2	0	0	0
Cooper	4	2	1	0	0	1
Franklin	1	1	0	0	0	0
Total	14	13	3	0	0	2

Boone's Lick Country Vote (Senate)						
County	Barton	Benton	Cook	Elliott	Jones	Lucas
Howard and Cooper	4	2	2	0	0	0
Total	4	2	2	0	0	0

Total Votes Coming from Boone's Lick Country					
Barton	Benton	Cook	Elliott	Jones	Lucas
18	15	5	0	0	2

Percent of Candidate's Total Votes Coming from Boone's Lick Country					
Barton	Benton	Cook	Elliott	Jones	Lucas
52.94%	55.56%	62.50%	0.00%	0.00%	12.50%

Percent of Boone's Lick Country's Votes					
Barton	Benton	Cook	Elliott	Jones	Lucas
90.00%	75.00%	25.00%	0.00%	0.00%	10.00%

Despite doing well in the counties along the Mississippi River, Cook, Elliott, Jones, and Lucas were all unable to gain widespread support in Boone's Lick Country, dooming their Senate candidacies. The members of the General Assembly seemed to vote as many of their constituents had and selected the candidates with the most fervent pro-slavery stances, perhaps swallowing their concerns about some of the more unpalatable aspects of a candidate's background. It further appears, as evidence in the following section will also

suggest, that the slaveholding region of Boone's Lick Country not only voted for Benton because of his anti-restrictionist stance, but because this area (and slaveholding areas of Missouri more generally) seemed more tolerant of dueling. The settlers of this area likely had a strongly established sense of honor stemming from their southern heritage and were thus more likely to defend the practice of dueling.

But were Benton's more unsavory characteristics entirely ignored? Was Benton able to emerge from his fatal duel with Charles Lucas only three years earlier with no political repercussions whatsoever? By looking at the General Assembly vote by county, Benton received only two of St. Louis's seven house votes and one of St. Louis's two senate votes, leaving Benton with three of St. Louis's total nine votes. One might expect that Benton, being a St. Louis resident for many years, would enjoy a more significant hometown advantage. But even Nathaniel Cook of Ste. Genevieve was able to match Benton's votes in both the House and Senate.

Total Votes Coming from St. Louis					
Barton	Benton	Cook	Elliott	Jones	Lucas
8	3	3	1	2	1

Percent of Total Votes Coming from St. Louis					
Barton	Benton	Cook	Elliott	Jones	Lucas
23.53%	11.11%	37.50%	10.00%	22.22%	6.25%

Percent of St. Louis County's Votes					
Barton	Benton	Cook	Elliott	Jones	Lucas
88.89%	33.33%	33.33%	11.11%	22.22%	11.11%

Had slavery been driving the vote entirely, Benton should have done better in St. Louis. By 1820, St. Louis had a population with a larger percentage of slaves than Missouri as a whole.¹²⁸ But, St. Louis gave Benton only 33 percent of her votes (three of nine), compared with 75 percent from Boone's Lick Country (fifteen of twenty votes).

St. Louis, as opposed to the slaveholding region of Boone's Lick Country, chose not to support Benton in large numbers. In fact, St. Louis County was one of Benton's areas of weakest support. Despite St. Louis's large number of slaves and slaveholders, along with Benton's stance as a staunch anti-restrictionist, St. Louis assemblymen were not willing to cast their votes for one of their hometown boys. Something particular to St. Louis, it would seem, prevented Benton from doing well in that district. Here we might finally detect the political impact of the Lucas duel. As listed earlier, there were many unsavory things about Benton's personality and past associations, things less likely to be drowned out by the slavery issue in his (and Lucas's) hometown. Dueling appears to have been one of the most unpopular aspects of Benton's candidacy in St. Louis.

By 1820, duels were attacked even more fiercely in St. Louis newspapers than they had been in 1817. On February 17, 1819, an article in the *Missouri Gazette* reported a dueling death as a murder, stating "We understand that the murder was of that description which results from the practice of dueling."¹²⁹ On August 11, 1819, the *Gazette* had an obituary section entitled "Duels and other Murders," where two of the four deaths in that section were attributed to dueling.¹³⁰ As late as March 4, 1820, fewer than seven months before Benton's election, a duel was reported in the *Missouri Intelligencer* with the headline "Awful Catastrophe!" and was reported that "public excitement has consequently been very

¹²⁸ Aron, *American Confluence*, 173-174.

¹²⁹ *Missouri Gazette*, February 17, 1819.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, August 11, 1819.

great at this horrible transaction.”¹³¹ This headline referred to the Gentry-Carroll “duel” in the Boone’s Lick region. The press portrayed dueling as a simple act of murder, despite being mostly tolerated by law enforcement, the territory’s elite, and the much of the populace on the Missouri frontier.

It appears that Benton had not been fully pardoned for his fatal duel by the people who knew him best. While Benton may have also lost St. Louis support because of his bitter newspaper war with Joseph Charless at the *Missouri Gazette* and his association with the junto, Benton’s part in the ever more inglorious institution of dueling could have finally caught up with him. Although the prevailing view was that dueling could sometimes augment one’s reputation and even catapult an aspiring politician into greater seats of power, other examples of men suffering politically from duels exist. By the 1820s, even other frontier politicians, despite dueling’s more widespread acceptance in the trans-Mississippi region, sometimes found that their duels actually damaged their political standing. Arkansas’s territorial secretary (in effect lieutenant governor) Robert Crittenden killed the territory’s congressional delegate, Henry W. Conway, in an 1827 duel. Dueling was illegal in the Arkansas Territory but was widely condoned by popular opinion and Crittenden was not successfully prosecuted. In spite of this, Crittenden’s political hopes disappeared after his duel, with some believing that Crittenden suffered politically by killing Conway.¹³²

Nevertheless, Benton was able to rise to great political heights after participating in a deadly duel. The circumstances surrounding the 1820 U.S. Senate election allowed Benton the opportunity to overcome his bloody past and spend the next 30 years in Washington as a Missouri’s strongest voice. His support of unrestricted slavery in Missouri gained him

¹³¹ *Missouri Intelligencer*, March 4, 1820.

¹³² Bolton, *Territorial Ambition*, 109, 146.

enough votes throughout the Missouri Territory to transcend all other disagreeable aspects of his personality and his past. In the end, dueling was simply too widespread of an institution to leave an irremediable stain on Benton, and thus he was able to overcome his violent past with few lasting repercussions.

Epilogue: Violence in Politics

Dueling did not disappear from Missouri with statehood. In fact, it became more frequent in the Jacksonian era, with dueling cases in the 1830s exceeding the number of Missouri duels in the 1820s.¹³³ But it had clearly lost its cachet. As Missouri entered the Jacksonian age of popular democracy, the code duello became a shadow of its former self. Duels were often carried out in non-traditional manners (such as great distances between the two combatants) that greatly reduced the likelihood of injury, leading to a decrease in the number of fatalities.¹³⁴ And these more frequent duels were no longer fought between politically prominent men as often as had been the case in territorial Missouri. The development of mass political parties in the first years of statehood provided elites another means of competing for power.¹³⁵ These changes all led to the decline of the political duel. Statehood also brought increased resistance to the practice of dueling more generally.

Missouri's leaders had long realized that extensive violence did not convey a good image for a territory trying to attract settlers and applying for statehood. They had already passed the anti-dueling law of 1814 and addressed the issue of dueling at the constitutional convention. In July 1820, the convention's General Assembly agreed to Section 29 which states that "The general assembly shall have power to pass such laws to suppress the evil practice of duelling, as they may deem expedient."¹³⁶ The motion passed by a vote of 21 to 13. The future senatorial candidates Barton, Cook, and Jones all voted against the section.

¹³³ Steward, *Duels and the Roots of Violence in Missouri*, 116-117.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 118.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹³⁶ Journal of the Missouri State Convention, General Assembly. Section 29. (July 5, 1820). *Session Law Library*. HeinOnline. <http://heinonline.org> (accessed March 8, 2012).

In an attempt to further discourage the practice of dueling, or perhaps to make a tongue in cheek sally against its enthusiasts, Representative Robert D. Dawson of New Madrid moved to amend the approved section at the convention by adding that the General Assembly “may pass laws to compel persons desirous of fighting duels, to fight unto death, in the presence and under the direction of a sworn officer, to be appointed for that purpose.”¹³⁷ Whatever Dawson’s motives, the motion was soundly defeated by a vote of seven to 31. While wishing to appear to be restricting dueling, many members of the assembly did not wish to see the affair of personal honor placed under the authority of state with such harsh restrictions. This amendment, if passed, would have made the duel very similar to the government sanctioned judicial duels of old.

Given the strong connection between elites and dueling, a bill was passed by the Missouri General Assembly in 1822 that required attorneys and legal officials to swear an oath stating “I do solemnly swear, or affirm (as the case may be) that I will, to the best of my judgment, execute the duties imposed on me by the act more effectually to prevent duelling, so help me God.”¹³⁸ Senator Abraham Byrd from Cape Girardeau made a show of opposing the bill, stating that it would deprive the state of its finest talent and its “effect would be to place the citizens of the community upon equal footing.”¹³⁹

In a sense, this legislation had more teeth than the earlier anti-dueling statute. In one of the most publicized duels of the 1820s, Judge Abiel Leonard killed Major Taylor Berry. Berry did not die on the field of honor but rather three weeks later of pneumonia caused by

¹³⁷ Journal of the Missouri State Convention, General Assembly. Proposed Submission for Section 24. (July 11, 1820). *Session Law Library*. HeinOnline. <http://heinonline.org> (accessed March 8, 2012).

¹³⁸ Laws of the State of Missouri, General Assembly. *An Act more effectually to prevent Duelling*, 2nd General Assembly, 1st sess., Chapter 31. (December 13, 1822). *Session Law Library*. HeinOnline. <http://heinonline.org> (accessed March 8, 2012).

¹³⁹ Steward, *Duels and the Roots of Violence in Missouri*, 45-46

the bullet that pierced his lungs. Because the cause of death was deemed pneumonia, Leonard could not be charged with murder.¹⁴⁰ However he was charged and convicted of violating the 1822 statute that barred attorneys and other legal officers from dueling. He was thus “incapable of holding, or being elected to any post” and thereby debarred and disenfranchised.

Yet Missourians seemed to still be reluctant to actually hold people to account for dueling. After receiving a petition with over 1,400 signatures, the Missouri General Assembly in December of 1824 passed “an Act for the Relief of Abiel Leonard” and restored to him “all the rights, privileges, and liberties of a citizen” of Missouri.¹⁴¹ Leonard’s relief seems not to have been due to any powerful political or social connections; he was a sickly man from Vermont with no previous aristocratic trappings who had an unsuccessful litigative career.¹⁴² His relief seems to have come more from a tacit acceptance of dueling rather than political favoritism.

A geographic breakdown of the votes from the Missouri House and Senate on the “Act for the Relief of Abiel Leonard” shows significant patterns. St. Louis and St. Charles districts divided equally for and against Leonard’s relief. The counties to the south of St. Louis along the banks of the Mississippi voted overwhelmingly against Leonard, with 10 voting against the act and only two voting for it. In the Boone’s Lick Region to the west of St. Louis along the Missouri River, however, the legislators voted overwhelmingly for Leonard’s relief by a vote of 14 to five. If one excludes Boone County and Callaway County, counties centered around the city of Columbia (a city that Major Berry had helped found and

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 106.

¹⁴¹ Private Acts of the 3rd General Assembly of the State of Missouri, *An Act for the relief of Abiel Leonard*, 3rd General Assembly, 1st sess., Private Laws, Chapter 13, (December 22, 1824). *Session Law Library*. HeinOnline. <http://heinonline.org> (accessed March 8, 2012).

¹⁴² Steward, *Duels and the Roots of Violence in Missouri*, 100-103.

where he was a popular political figure), the vote for Boone's Lick Country favored Leonard 14 to one.¹⁴³

The geographic distribution of the vote concerning Leonard's relief is stark. Leonard, before his duel, was not financially stable and had the "spectre of poverty" floating over him.¹⁴⁴ However Leonard began to see political success after his fateful duel with Major Berry, becoming a state representative for Howard County and later a justice on the Missouri Supreme Court.¹⁴⁵ The Boone's Lick region not only accepted Leonard's use of political violence but seemed to reward him for it in the years to come.

Just as Leonard, a convicted duelist, found his greatest support in Boone's Lick Country, so too had Benton found his strongest support for his election to the Senate from this same region. Not only was Benton able to solicit the vote of the Boone's Lick region because of his hard-line stance on slavery, but this region also seems to have been the most broadly accepting of the practice of dueling. Boone's Lick Country still viewed dueling as a viable form of extralegal dispute resolution as well as a legitimate political weapon – even into the early 1820s.

But the favorable opinions of dueling in the Boone's Lick region did not extend throughout all of Missouri. Along the banks of the Mississippi, dueling had been treated unfavorably in the press for years, most notably by Charles's *Missouri Gazette*. The most important turning point in the history of the political duel in Missouri can be seen in the aftermath of the Rector-Barton duel. Although seeing no legal reprimand, this infamous 1823

¹⁴³ Ibid., 107-108.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 103.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 112; *Missouri State Legislators 1820-2000*, Missouri State Archives, Jefferson City, Missouri. Accessed through Missouri Secretary of State Website, <http://www.sos.mo.gov/archives/history/historicallistings/molegl.asp>.

duel fought outside of St. Louis had many political consequences and long-lasting implications for the use of violence in the politics of Missouri.

The Rector and Barton clans were engaged in a highly political feud mainly concerning William Rector, the surveyor-general of Illinois, Missouri, and Arkansas. The Bartons charged William Rector with nepotism in the *Missouri Republican*. With both William Rector and David Barton serving in Washington at this time, their younger brothers, Thomas Rector and Joshua Barton, would serve as proxies to defend the honor of each of their families. The two men dueled on June 30, 1823, with Thomas Rector mortally wounding the younger Barton. By this time the political duel would bring graver consequences than it had for Thomas Hart Benton. William Rector lost a critical political appointment that President Monroe reneged on after hearing news of the affair.¹⁴⁶ William would die in his home some years later as a poor and broken man.

The political duel's fall from widespread acceptance in Missouri is best evidenced in the aftermath of this affair. David Barton blamed Governor Alexander McNair for not stopping the duel that killed his brother and not apprehending Rector during the duel's aftermath. Barton then challenged the Missouri governor to a duel in December of 1824, but he received no response. This prompted him to challenge McNair yet again a week later, with McNair rejecting this challenge as well. This rejection marked what Steward called a turning point in the duel's political utility in Missouri.¹⁴⁷ The fact that the governor of Missouri could in 1824, and again in 1825, choose to reject a duel challenge without fear of political ruin showed how much the political duel had fallen out of favor in Missouri.

¹⁴⁶ Steward, *Duels and the Roots of Violence in Missouri*, 54-56.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 56-57.

The duels that persisted after Missouri's statehood were not expressly political but were instead mostly motivated by personal affairs of honor. Dick Steward writes that, "The diminution of politicized murder was in large measure due to the end of the era of intense factional discord. Conversely, the development of political parties provided the ruling class with less violent ways in which to compete for power.... By 1825 the age of the political duel was nearing its end."¹⁴⁸

In Steward's study of dueling during the Jacksonian era in Missouri, he showcases at least 16 different duels that occurred in Missouri or involved Missourians as principals from 1828 to 1849. Out of these 16 duels profiled, only six were politically motivated. Many of these six "political duels" were very strange in nature. Two of them were strictly pugilistic affairs and another was fought in 1840 by A.B. Chambers and Thomas Hudson with rifles at 40 yards. Another "political duel" of this period is known as the "umbrella duel" and occurred in 1849 when Frank P. Blair struck Lorenzo Pickering in the face with his umbrella on the streets of St. Louis. Steward considers the infamous Pettis-Biddle affair of 1831 little more than a suicide pact between the two participants – who chose to duel at a distance of five feet. All of these "duels" were extremely unusual in the context of the political duel of the late 1810s and early 1820s and would hardly have been referred to as duels in Missouri's territorial days.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 57.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 117-132.

Missouri Duels between 1825-1849 in Dick Steward's Study			
Affairs of Honor	Year	Nature of the Affair	Method
*Rouse-Purdham	1830	Political	Fisticuffs
Harrison-Randolph	1828	Personal	Duel
Lt. Charles May-Unknown	1830	Personal	Duel
Lowe-Fear	1854	Personal	Duel
Harmony Mission "duel"	1840s	Personal	"Joke" or "Caricature" Duel
*Pettis-Biddle	1831	Political	Duel/Suicide Pact
Skinner-Messurvey	1837	Personal	Duel
Le Lange-Tates	1838	Personal	Duel
*Jones-Bryan	18??	Political	Fisticuffs
*Chambers-Hudson	1840	Political	Duel with rifles at 40 yards
*Colt-Wilson	1840s	Political	Duel
Heisterhogen-Kibbe	1845	Personal	Duel with broadswords
Estill-Young	1845	Personal	Duel
Glover-Buckner	1846	Personal	Duel/Shootout
Burr-McMannus	1847	Personal	Duel with rifles at 60 yards
*Blair-Price	1849	Political	Hit with an umbrella
* Denotes political motivation			

The brutality of the Pettis-Biddle duel changed how dueling was perceived in Missouri. Within a few years of the duel, judges, police officers, and grand juries began to enforce anti-dueling laws more vigorously. Many would-be duelists were indicted after issuing a challenge to duel, and other affairs were stopped by authorities before the duels could occur.¹⁵⁰ The state legislature also passed a law in 1835 that increased the maximum fine to \$1,000 and added potential jail time for up to one year for convicted duelists, seconds, and surgeons, even if none of the parties involved were injured or killed.¹⁵¹ Even then, though, Missouri's penalties seem to have been much milder than newly revised anti-dueling laws in other states. By this time, many states, such as New York, Alabama, and Georgia,

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 119, 123.

¹⁵¹ *The Revised Statutes of the State of Missouri: Revised and digested by the Eighth General Assembly during the years one thousand eight hundred and thirty-four, and one thousand eight hundred and thirty-five.* (St. Louis: Argus Office, 1835), Article VII, Section 1, 201-202.

saw penalties exceeding seven years in prison for convicted duelists. Other states, including Tennessee and Massachusetts, instituted penalties that banned duelists from holding public office.¹⁵² Missouri included neither lengthy prison sentences nor disenfranchisement clauses into its 1835 anti-dueling law, making Missouri an outlier even in the 1830s.

Although challenges continued to be issued throughout the 1830s and 1840s, fewer of the parties felt compelled to travel to the sandbars of the Mississippi for the sake of honor. The only one of the six political duels in Missouri during the Jacksonian era that resembled a “typical” frontier political duel was in the 1840s between J.B. Colt and Singleton H. Wilson on Bloody Island. The difficulty in identifying the classic sort of political duel during the Jacksonian era in Missouri that in any way bore resemblance to the political duels of territorial Missouri clearly demonstrates the decline of the political duel soon after Missouri’s entry into statehood.¹⁵³

In the decade before the Civil War, however, political dueling seemed to make something of a comeback. Steward notes two political duels at the University of Missouri in the early 1850s. In 1852, Robert Grant killed George Clarkson over a political quarrel and, in 1853, William W. Thorton killed Benjamin F. Handy in a political duel. The “last political duel” in Missouri, stemming from ideological differences within the Democratic Party, took place in 1856 between B. Gratz Brown and Thomas C. Reynolds. The affair ended with Brown being shot in the leg and a friendship being renewed between the two parties. These three duels appeared to have been fought with the punctilio of earlier times that, for the most part, had not been seen in the political duels of the previous two decades.¹⁵⁴ This increase in

¹⁵² Byron, “Crime and Punishment,” 53, 60-64.

¹⁵³ Steward, *Duels and the Roots of Violence in Missouri*, 127.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 151-161.

the number of political duels on the run-up to the Civil War might be attributed to increased political polarization in Missouri.

Missouri politics in the 1850s, like that in Kansas, was quite contentious. Evidence for increased political factionalization can be seen in the increase in the number of Missouri dailies from five to 16 during the 1850s. Most of this political factionalism, just as in the late 1810s in territorial Missouri, emanated from the divisiveness of the slavery issue.¹⁵⁵ The factionalism of the 1850s led to a plethora of competing positions within the Democratic Party and the exodus of anti-slavery Democrats to the embryonic Republican Party. This divisiveness ended Benton's Senate career, but not before a Mississippi senator pulled a gun on him during the debate over the Compromise of 1850. Though elected 30 years before largely due to his support for slavery, Benton was considered by many of his fellow Democrats to be insufficiently militant in the defense of slavery's expansion by this time.¹⁵⁶

As in the 1810s when Missouri was approaching statehood, increased political factionalism leading up to the Civil War seems to have created a more fertile ground for the political duel to take root. Yet the political duels of the latter period were not as frequent or widespread as in the golden age of political dueling leading up to Missouri's statehood. Despite political factionalism being present in both of these periods, the contributing factors were quite disparate. Whereas the surge of political dueling in Missouri during the late 1810s was primarily due to elite factionalization, the political factionalism 40 years later was more the product of a mobilized electorate.

In a sense, Thomas Hart Benton's series of duels with Charles Lucas in 1817 are significant for their typicality, rather than because they brought any dynamic shift in the

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 156.

¹⁵⁶ Chambers, *Old Bullion*, 360-362; Smith, *Magnificent Missourian*, 232-238.

broader history of political violence in Missouri. They occurred at a time when the political duel was an integral part of Missouri's honor system and a useful tool for political ascendancy. Benton's duels seemed to fit the mold for fair fights under the code duello. As such, his affair was not viewed with overwhelming condemnation and, in any case, by the time the Senate election occurred, Missourians had other things on their minds. Benton found that any damage his duels with Lucas caused him was experienced only locally in the 1820 election, demonstrating that violence was recognized by many as the way that politics was conducted in the Old Southwest.

While hardly unusual, Thomas Hart Benton's affair with Charles Lucas nevertheless was a significant event in the life and career of one of the most influential figures in antebellum American politics. His reputation as a duelist would follow him for the rest of his life, and his series of duels with Lucas continues to be one of the most frequently mentioned episodes of Benton's career. Understanding why this affair arose, how it was carried out, and the political repercussions of his duels are critical to evaluating Thomas Hart Benton's life. A thorough biography of Benton has not been completed in over 50 years. This study demonstrates, at very least, the need for a modern scholarly biography.

The lives of useful and eminent men should be written, not for the dead, but for the living. They should display not a vain panegyric, but a detail of circumstance which would lead the living to the same line of conduct and the same honorable result.¹⁵⁷

- Thomas Hart Benton, 1818

¹⁵⁷ Chambers, *Old Bullion*, Epigraph.

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