

# Historical Reports on OSU Building Names

## Senator Thomas Hart Benton and Benton Hall and Annex

### Research Coordination and Introduction

Dr. Stacey L. Smith

### Building Historical Research Team

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Oct. 17, 2017



**Oregon State**  
University

In August 2017, the Building and Place Names Evaluation Workgroup began the process of generating historical reports on four OSU campus buildings and their namesakes under consideration. These buildings/namesakes were Arnold Dining Center (Benjamin Lee Arnold), Avery Lodge (Joseph C. Avery), Benton Hall and Annex (Thomas Hart Benton), and Gill Coliseum (Amory T. “Slats” Gill). The purpose of these reports was to gather and analyze historical evidence to explore, reveal, and contextualize the lives and viewpoints of the namesakes, and the histories of the buildings.

## Research Team

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Dr. Stacey L. Smith (OSU history department) assembled a research team made up of scholars from OSU and the broader Oregon community and coordinated the research with the OSU Special Collections and Archives Research Center (SCARC). The research team scholars were chosen for their extensive professional credentials in history or related disciplines, their strong record of high quality research and publication, and their expertise on the eras in which the building namesakes lived or the controversies surrounding them.

The research team included:

**Dr. Thomas Bahde** (Arnold Dining Center): Thomas Bahde earned his Ph.D. in History from the University of Chicago, with an emphasis in the 19th-century United States and comparative slavery. He teaches in the Honors College at Oregon State University and is the author of *The Life and Death of Gus Reed: A Story of Race and Justice in Illinois During the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Ohio University Press, 2014).

**Dr. Stephen Dow Beckham** (Benton Hall): Stephen Dow Beckham is the Pamplin Professor of History, Emeritus, Lewis & Clark College. A graduate of the University of Oregon (B.A.) and UCLA (Ph.D.), Beckham taught for 42 years. His courses covered U.S. History, the American West, Native Americans, and seminars in research methods. He is a former “Oregon Professor of the Year” and recipient of the Asher Distinguished Teaching Award, American Historical Association. He is the author of numerous books, articles, monographs, expert witness reports, and has served as the writer of museums exhibits and master plans from the Library of Congress to the Hong Kong Museum of History. Beckham and his wife reside in Lake Oswego. They are heavily involved in the Beckham Estate Vineyard growing and producing Pinot noir wines.

**Dr. Marisa Chappell** (Gill Coliseum): Marisa Chappell earned her Ph.D. in history from Northwestern University in 2002 and is an associate professor of history at OSU. Her expertise is in post-1945 U.S. history with an emphasis on politics, social policy, and the political economy of race and gender. She has published *The War on Welfare: Family, Poverty, and Politics in Modern America* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010) and co-authored *Welfare in the United States: A History with Documents* (Routledge, 2009). She is currently working on a book about the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN), which organized low- and moderate-income Americans in the last third of the twentieth century.

**Dr. Dwaine Plaza** (Gill Coliseum): Dwaine Plaza earned his Ph.D. in Sociology from York University, Canada, in 1996. He is a professor of sociology at OSU and Associate Dean of the OSU College of Liberal Arts. His research expertise is on migration in the English-speaking Caribbean, and he has also conducted and published extensive research on immigrant communities in Oregon and the history of race and athletics at Oregon State University. He has received research grants from the Canadian International Development Research Grant and the Centre of Excellence for Research on Immigrants and Settlement. He is also the winner of the Oregon Innovators in Education Award (2000) and the OSU College of Liberal Arts Bill Wilkins Teaching Award (1999).

**Dr. Stacey L. Smith** (Avery Lodge): Stacey L. Smith earned her Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin, Madison in 2008 and is an associate professor of history at OSU. Her scholarship focuses on connecting the history of the U.S. Civil War and Reconstruction with the history of the North American West. She is the author of *Freedom's Frontier: California and the Struggle over Unfree Labor, Emancipation, and Reconstruction* (University of North Carolina Press, 2013), which won the inaugural David Montgomery Prize in U.S. labor history from the Organization of American Historians. She has also published articles in the *Pacific Historical Review*, the *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, and the *Journal of the Civil War Era*. She is currently working on a book on African American abolitionists and civil rights activists in the Pacific West.

## Methods and Approaches

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There is a great deal of information and misinformation circulating about each of these OSU buildings and their namesakes. For this reason, the researchers agreed to adhere to rigorous research standards. Whenever possible, they documented their claims with primary sources, first-hand accounts of historical events, including newspaper articles, oral histories, census records, diaries, letters, and official institutional or government documents. They drew extensively on primary sources in the holdings of OSU SCARC. Archivists Larry Landis and Natalia Fernandez, and graduate student assistant Michael Dicianna, provided invaluable help in locating these sources. Dwaine Plaza and Marisa Chappell also reached out to longtime OSU and Corvallis community members to collect oral histories about Amory T. “Slats” Gill. Susan Hayes, a Corvallis community member, donated her time, expertise, and research materials to help the research team reconstruct the history of the Benton County citizens’ fundraising campaign to build Benton Hall.

The research team also relied on secondary sources, accounts written by historians. They avoided non-scholarly secondary sources such as anonymous or crowd-sourced websites, blogs, or non-scholarly history books without thorough citations. They depended, instead, on scholarly books with extensive citations. The researchers also tried to address apocryphal or unsubstantiated information circulating about each namesake. Finally, the research team extensively documented their own research with detailed footnotes. The team strongly encourages readers to examine the footnotes carefully for more information about the historical sources on which the reports are based.

## Historical Interpretation, Contextualization, and Conclusions

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History is an interpretative discipline. Historians gather as many primary and secondary sources as they can about a given topic. They then analyze these sources and read them against each other to construct interpretations of what happened in the past. For some topics, primary source evidence simply does not exist or it is very incomplete. For other topics, primary sources are abundant. Primary sources that survive from the past often have problems: they can be biased, one-sided, filled with inaccuracies, or silent on important issues. Some primary sources may directly contradict other primary sources. For this reason, historical research is not aimed at uncovering incontrovertible truths about the past; instead, the historian's job is to make well-reasoned conclusions based on a limited and often problematic pool of available primary sources. Historians evaluate which kinds of sources are likely to be more reliable than others. They make informed speculations, educated guesses, based on the quality and quantity of primary source evidence that they find.

The types of interpretations historians make, and the kinds of primary sources they look at, also depend on the time period in which they conduct their research. For instance, at the turn of the twentieth century, during the height of Jim Crow, few professional historians examined primary sources produced by African Americans or accorded African Americans much role in U.S. history. This changed during the civil rights movements of the 1950s and 60s. Scholars began to seek out accounts by African Americans and to argue that black civil rights activists were critical to remaking national politics. All historical scholarship is, then, a product of its time. Our interpretations of historical figures change over time as community values and ideals change. Historical scholarship is generally not aimed at evaluating whether a historical figure was mostly “good” or mostly “bad.” Rather, historians seek to contextualize individuals’ lives, to determine what views they held, why they held them, where they fit in the broader societies in which they lived, and what repercussions these views had for their communities (past and present). In seeking to contextualize the views and actions of historic building namesakes, the historical researchers attempted to address the following questions identified by the Building and Place Names Evaluation Workgroup:

- 1) Actions taken vs. viewpoints held: Do the historical figure’s actions differ from expressed viewpoints? Are these differences significant and meaningful?
- 2) Public vs. private persona: Did the figure express or act on exclusionary or racist views in public life? Or, did such acts or views primarily shape their private life?
- 3) The progression of an individual’s viewpoints and life as a whole: Did the figure’s actions or views change substantially over time? Did the person recant or attempt to rectify past behavior later in life?
- 4) Broader social/institutional context: Historical figures are shaped by the cultural values of the time in which they lived. Can you comment on whether the person’s views or actions aligned or did not align with the mission of OSU or the broader society of the period? It might help to consider whether the person’s views were widely held by other Americans, Oregonians, or OSU community members during their lifetime, or whether they were an outlier in their community. Comparison with other important or well-known figures of the period may be helpful.

The historical reports on OSU building namesakes show that people who lived in the past were complex. In some cases, it may not be easy to make cut and dry conclusions about whether these building namesakes held or acted on exclusionary views. The lack of primary sources, disagreement among sources, and contradictions in individuals' own behaviors, result in many “grey areas” where the evidence is inconclusive.

The research team members refrained from making recommendations about building names. It will be up to the OSU community—faculty, students, staff, administrators, and Corvallis residents—to discuss and debate the legacies of these historical figures. It is our hope that the historical reports will generate an honest, open dialogue about the past, and about OSU's present mission and values.

**Senator Thomas Hart Benton**  
**and**  
**Benton Hall and Annex**

**Prepared by**  
**Dr. Stacey L. Smith**  
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Oct. 17, 2017



**Oregon State**  
University

## **Part I:**

### **The Naming of Benton Hall and Benton County**

Prepared by  
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Benton Hall is named in honor of the citizens of Benton County who were the driving force behind its construction.<sup>2</sup> In 1885, the Methodist Church, South, relinquished control over the state agricultural college in Corvallis. The Oregon state legislature then passed an act that reorganized the state agricultural college and required the citizens of Benton County to pay for the construction of a college building at the cost of at least \$25,000. The building had to be constructed by January 1887 and be free of all debts. Failure to meet this requirement would likely mean the relocation of the agricultural college to another city such as Albany, Oregon, which competed for the designation.<sup>3</sup> Raising the vast sum of \$25,000 and erecting the building in less than two years was a daunting task. The 1880 census found only 6,403 residents in the entire county—who made up only around 1,400 households—and the act placed a major financial burden on the county’s

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<sup>1</sup> The author would like to thank Corvallis researcher Susan Hayes for her hard work gathering dozens of primary sources to make this report possible. Ms. Hayes was integral in the production of this research and the historical research team on building names owes her a debt of gratitude for her assistance.

<sup>2</sup> *Oregon State Board of Higher Education Meeting Minutes*, May 13, 1947, (1947), 74, Oregon State University Special Collections and Archives Research Center, Corvallis, Ore. (hereafter SCARC).

<sup>3</sup> William G. Robbins, “From Church to State: The Sectarian Roots of Oregon State University, 1868 – 1888,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 117, no. 1 (Spring 2016), 92 – 93; “An Act to confirm the Location of the State Agricultural College at Corvallis, in Benton County, Oregon, and to provide for the Maintenance and Government thereof,” Feb. 11, 1885, *The Laws of Oregon, and the Resolutions and Memorials of the Thirteenth Regular Session of the Legislative Assembly Thereof* (Salem: W.H. Byars, 1885), 10 – 13.

citizens.<sup>4</sup>

Benton County residents were nonetheless determined to secure the state agricultural college in Corvallis once and for all. A group of citizens filed articles of incorporation for the State Agricultural College Association, a fundraising organization that solicited donations (“subscriptions”) to the building fund. Nine prominent men, including F.A. Horning, Punderson Avery, and Milton Sherman Woodcock (future Oregon Agricultural College regent), led the organization. Benjamin Lee Arnold, the college president, immediately donated \$1,000 to the fund and agreed to canvas Corvallis to solicit \$500 subscriptions from local residents.<sup>5</sup>

Fundraising continued for the next year. The state legislature agreed to ease some of the financial burden by reducing the building cost to \$20,000 and extending the deadline for construction to January 1889. The *Corvallis Weekly Gazette* encouraged every county resident to contribute to the cause, noting that the new land grant agricultural colleges “are to become the foremost schools in the United States.”<sup>6</sup> Benton County residents heeded this advice. “Subscribing very liberally,” they managed to raise \$9,000 by spring 1886.<sup>7</sup> Still, the high cost of the building construction was a significant hurdle. By December 1886, the Association was still \$6,000 short of the \$20,000 fundraising requirement. The Portland *Oregonian* speculated that “some other town might have a show of getting the agricultural college if it could raise the required

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<sup>4</sup> Statistics calculated by Susan Hayes from “Oregon Census Data, 1850 – 1920,” U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1920. This number included the population of what is now Lincoln County, but was then part of Benton County. By 1890, Corvallis had only grown by 399 people.

<sup>5</sup> “Articles of Incorporation, The State Agricultural College Association,” Feb. 9, 1885; and “Minutes of the 1885 Meetings of the Incorporators of the State Agricultural College Association,” March 23, 1885, both located in folder 171.23, State Agricultural College Association, Box 171, Memorabilia Collection, SCARC; *Oregonian*, March 29, 1925, p. 11; “Museum has Document on Explanation of Location,” *Corvallis Gazette-Times*, March 5, 1925, p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> “An Act to Amend an Act entitled ‘An Act to Confirm the Location of the State Agricultural College at Corvallis, in Benton County, Oregon, and to Provide for the Maintenance and Governance thereof,’” November 21, 1885, *Laws of Oregon and the Resolutions and Memorials of the Thirteenth Legislative Assembly Thereof* (Salem: W.H. Byars, 1885), 8; *Weekly Corvallis Gazette*, Nov. 27, 1885, p. 4.

<sup>7</sup> *Statesman Journal* (Salem), May 22, 1886, p. 3.



amount.”<sup>8</sup>

Benton County residents overcame these obstacles. We do not have documentation about how they managed to make up the funding shortfall. One source reports that citizens went door-to-door canvassing across the county to raise the final money for the building.<sup>9</sup> There is also evidence that the State Agricultural College Association lowered the minimum subscription cost from \$100 to \$25 to encourage participation from a broader range of people.<sup>10</sup> Finally, it is possible that the state legislature was willing to overlook the actual cost of the building so long as the structure was an adequate size to meet the college’s needs. Whatever the circumstances, the State Agricultural College Association hired an architect and builder and laid the cornerstone for the new building in August 1887. The cornerstone dedication was a joyous community event that drew hundreds of attendees. Prominent citizens gave speeches. Freemasons and other fraternal organizations held a parade. Corvallis women prepared “a beautiful and bountiful” meal for the guests. Citizens donated dozens of items—including a list of building donors, several newspapers, and cutting-edge surgical instruments—to be encased in the cornerstone. Construction finished in 1888 and Oregon’s governor approved the new building, thus firmly establishing the agricultural college in Corvallis.<sup>11</sup>

For decades, the building was known only as the “Administration Building.” In 1947, OSU President August Strand decided that since new administration buildings were going up on campus, the old Administration Building needed a new name. He proposed renaming it “Benton

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<sup>8</sup> *Morning Oregonian* (Portland), Dec. 17, 1886, p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> “State College Incorporated in 1885,” *Corvallis Gazette-Times*, Aug. 4, 1980.

<sup>10</sup> The original incorporation documents listed \$100 as the minimum subscription price, but later sources indicate that the organization was selling subscriptions for \$25 each. “Articles of Incorporation, The State Agricultural College Association,” Feb. 9, 1855 and March 13, 1886; A. Gellatly subscription receipt, May 4, 1887, folder 149.1, State Agricultural College Association, 1870 – 1887, box 149, Memorabilia Collection, both located in SCARC; *Weekly Oregon Statesman* (Salem), March 26, 1886, p. 6.

<sup>11</sup> *Weekly Oregon Statesman*, Aug. 19, 1887; Kenneth Munford, “OSU’s Benton Hall Hides Rich Heritage,” Nov. 17, 1986, *Corvallis Gazette-Times*.

Hall” in “recognition of the fact that the building, oldest of the existing campus structures, was built in 1887 from funds contributed by citizens of Benton County.” The State Board of Higher Education approved the name.<sup>12</sup> In naming the building, Strand likely meant to commemorate a pivotal moment in the university’s history when local citizens united forces and pooled their resources to secure the college a permanent home in Corvallis.

Benton Hall is thus indirectly named after Benton County, which is itself named for U.S. Senator Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri. Oregon’s Provisional Government created Benton County on December 23, 1847. Many of the white Americans who migrated to the Oregon Country had resided in Missouri before their departure. Benton spent much of his career in the U.S. Senate and the House of Representatives promoting the cause of westward expansion and the interests of these overland migrants. He and his fellow senator from Missouri, Lewis F. Linn, had both pressed for a federal land law that would bestow large tracts of public land on the white inhabitants of Oregon. Benton and Linn finally achieved their goal when Congress passed the Oregon Donation Land Act in 1850. Under this act, each adult white male U.S. citizen could claim 320 of federal land for himself, and, if he was married, an additional 320 acres in the name of his wife. The adjacent counties of Benton and Linn were thus named in honor of the two Missouri politicians who had been among the most vocal advocates of white Oregonians’ land interests.<sup>13</sup>

The remainder of this report, by Dr. Steven Dow Beckham, presents detailed research on the namesake of Benton County, and the indirect namesake of Benton Hall, Thomas Hart Benton.

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<sup>12</sup> *Oregon State Board of Higher Education Meeting Minutes*, May 13, 1947, (1947), 74, SCARC.

<sup>13</sup> David D. Fagan, *History of Benton County, Oregon* (Portland: A.G. Walling, 1885), 324; David Alan Johnson, *Founding the Far West: California, Oregon, and Nevada, 1840 – 1890* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 42 – 44; Malcolm Clark, Jr., *Eden Seekers: The Settlement of Oregon, 1818 – 1862* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), 236 – 39. The Oregon Donation Land Act did allow men of no more than one-half Native American ancestry to apply for a land claim provided that they were U.S. citizens. This part of the law acknowledged the multiracial heritage of many Oregon inhabitants.

## **PART II:**

### **Senator Thomas Hart Benton**

Prepared by  
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Thomas Hart Benton lived fully. He spent decades on the public stage as a politician, newspaperman, and promoter of causes and individuals. When failing re-election to the Senate in 1850, he collected his speeches and essays, published as *Thirty years' view; or, A history of the working of the American government for thirty years, from 1820 to 1850* (1854). Benton was a man of strong opinions, vibrant action, and public exposure. He was a product of the rough-and-tumble frontier society of North Carolina during his youth and of Tennessee and Missouri as an adult. He lived in a nation swept by currents of change. These included the rise of industry, the spread of the Cotton Kingdom, Indian removal and westward expansion, and burgeoning transportation systems of canals, roads, steamboats, and railroads. His years in the U.S. Congress were marked by controversies over slavery, Nullification, the Bank of the United States, annexation of Texas, creation of new territories and states, and the Mexican War. Benton had opinions about all of these matters.

Historian Elbert B. Smith articulated a measure of the man when he wrote “Benton was no ordinary person.” He pointed out Benton’s engagement in frontier brawls, duels, physical size, brute force, and temper, but observed: “He possessed also a keen mind and an extensive self-acquired education, which eventually gained him recognition as one of the best-informed men

in public life.”<sup>1</sup>

## **Slavery and African Americans**

Benton lived all of his life surrounded by slavery. Born in 1785, he was the son of Jesse Benton and Nancy Ann (Gooch) Benton. He grew up on the family farm worked by slaves in Orange County, North Carolina. His father, a lawyer, planter, and investor in the Transylvania Company, died in 1790 leaving a widow, eight children, and a complicated estate of land taxed, unsurveyed speculation land, and debt.<sup>2</sup> Thomas Hart, his uncle, helped settle some of the inheritance issues and at his death, gave Nancy Ann Benton and her children a tract of 3,200 acres and six slaves in Tennessee. When Jesse Benton’s estate was divided in 1811 in Williamson County, Tennessee, each of his children received 216 acres and slaves.<sup>3</sup> Thomas H. Benton received Old Tom and his wife Dorcas, valued at one cent, plus \$159.99 in compensation for higher value slaves willed to his siblings.<sup>4</sup>

In 1815 Benton, a lawyer, became the influential editor of the *Missouri Enquirer*, a St.

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<sup>1</sup> Elbert B. Smith, “Thomas Hart Benton: Southern Realist,” *The American Historical Review*, 58(4)(July, 1953), 795-796.

<sup>2</sup> William Nisbet Chambers, “As the Twig is Bent: The Family and the North Carolina Years of Thomas Hart Benton, 1752-1801,” *The North Carolina Historical Review*, 26(4)(October, 1949), 403.

<sup>3</sup> The Williamson County, Tennessee, Tax Book, confirmed, however, Nancy Benton retained ownership of eight slaves. In settlement with Thomas Hart in 1808, Nancy Benton retained 1,280 acres and five slaves. William N. Chambers, “Thomas Hart Benton in Tennessee, 1801-1812,” *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, 8(4)(December, 1959), 299, 307.

<sup>4</sup> Durwood T. Stokes, “Thomas Hart in North Carolina,” *The North Carolina Historical Review*, 41(3)(July, 1964), 334-335; William Nisbet Chambers, *Old Bullion Benton, Senator from the New West, Thomas Hart Benton, 1782-1858* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1956, p. 25-26, 38. There is no evidence Thomas Hart Benton manumitted his slaves nor that he acquired others. Review of the federal census records of 1820, 1830, 1840, and 1850 and the separate Slave Schedule for 1850 did not yield information on his immediate family, perhaps because the Bentons lived alternately in St. Louis and Washington, D.C. None of the numerous genealogical postings for the Benton family on Ancestry.com identify them in the federal census schedules. Ken S. Mueller’s *Senator Benton and the People: Master Race Democracy on the Early American Frontiers* (2014) failed to identify how many slaves Benton owned or for how long.

Louis newspaper. On the eve of his bid for the Senate, Benton spoke forcefully for the sovereignty of Missouri whose transition from territory to state was under consideration in Congress. While abolition might become the order of the day in the future, Benton insisted in 1819 that no other part of the Union and “no process of reasoning can make it right that they [citizens of Missouri] should be *forced* to surrender their slaves.” Benton argued that to prohibit slavery was “contrary to the rights of the State.”<sup>5</sup>

The slavery issue became more and more a national debate in the 1840s. The rise of the abolition movement coincided with the necessity for decision-making about the nation’s expansion from sea to sea with the Oregon Treaty (1846) and the Mexican cession in the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo (1848). Benton, then a senior member of the Senate, espoused opinions similar to Abraham Lincoln. Both knew slave property was protected by the Constitution and, though both disliked slavery, they supported the nation’s governing document. They, however, refused to endorse expansion of slavery into new territories. In 1849 Benton traveled widely in Missouri delivering speeches on slavery. In Jefferson City, he declared, “My personal sentiments, then, are against the institution of slavery, and against its introduction into places in which it does not exist. If there was no slavery in Missouri today, I should oppose its coming in.”<sup>6</sup> Benton also campaigned in 1849 against the practice of instructing the state’s senators on how to vote on key issues, including slavery in the territories. He denounced John C. Calhoun’s “Southern Address” that declared “the Federal Government has no right to extend or restrict

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<sup>5</sup> Chambers, *Old Bullion Benton*, pp. 92-93.

<sup>6</sup>Anonymous, “Senator Thomas Hart Benton,” <http://shsmo.org/historicmissourians/name/b/bentonsenator/> [Viewed September 4, 2017]. Benton’s strong views inspired his attack in August, 1849, on proslavery Missouri Supreme Court Judge James H. Birch. He accused Birch of beating his wife and of keeping “his own negro wench.” Birch sued for slander in *Birch v. Benton*. See Mark M. Carroll, “‘All for Keeping His Own Negro Wench’: *Birch v. Benton* (1858) and the Politics of Slander and Free Speech in Antebellum Missouri,” *Law and History Review*, 29(3)(August, 2011), 835-897.

slavery, no more than to establish or abolish it.”<sup>7</sup>

Senator Henry S. Foote, an advocate of the “Southern Address,” became so agitated over Benton’s opposition that on April 17, 1850, he drew, cocked, and pointed his five-chamber pistol at Benton on the floor of the Senate. Benton made the most of the moment, shouting: “Let him fire! Stand out of the way! I have no pistol! I disdain to carry arms! Stand out of the way, and let the assassin fire!” Colleagues disarmed Foote and Benton escaped unharmed. Benton’s tilt toward the Free Soil position cost him his seat in the Senate. After three decades of dedicated service to his state and leadership of key committees and programs in the Senate, his political career was nearly over. He served a two-year term in the House of Representatives between 1852 and 1854 and retired.<sup>8</sup>

Near the end of his life Benton weighed in again on slavery in the issues raised by the opinion authored by Chief Justice Roger Taney in the case of *Dred Scott v. Sanford*. The U.S. Supreme Court upheld the court decision in Missouri that an enslaved man named Dred Scott was not entitled to his freedom, though he had lived in Wisconsin and Minnesota where the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 prohibited slavery. Congress, according to Taney, did not have the power under the U.S. Constitution to close out slavery from the federal territories. Infuriated by the ruling, Benton wrote the *Historical and Legal Examination of that Part of the Missouri Compromise Act, and the Self-Extension of the Constitution to Territories, Carrying Slavery Along With It* (1858). In this polemical essay Benton argued that “Congress exercised, and rightfully, supreme authority

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<sup>7</sup> Chambers, *Old Bullion*, pp. 344-345; Dennis K. Boman, “The Dred Scott Case Reconsidered: The Legal and Political Context in Missouri,” *The American Journal of Legal History*, 44(4)(October 2000), 417.

<sup>8</sup> Elbert B. Smith, *Magnificent Missourian: The Life of Thomas Hart Benton* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1957), 271, 287-289. In 1856 the new Republican Party, steadfast in its opposition to expansion of slavery into the territories, nominated Benton’s son-in-law, John C. Frémont, as its first candidate for the presidency of the United States. Benton, however, declined to support Frémont’s bid.

over these Territories” under the Constitution in a manner similar “as a father does for his children.” He concluded the courts had made a “great error” based on the “naked assumption, with a reason to support it, or a leg to stand upon” (Benton 1857). Benton believed Scott should have been free.

### **Indian Removal**

As a proponent of expansion and development of the United States as a continental nation, Benton endorsed federal and state sovereignty over tribes and their removal to places farther west. In his essay “Indian Sovereignities Within the Nation,” Benton railed against “intermeddlers,” “pseudo-philanthropists,” and “European sympathies” that swirled around the Indian Removal Act of May 28, 1830. This act aimed to remove tribes living in the southeastern U.S.—including the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Creek, Choctaw, and Seminole—from their homelands and resettle them in Indian Territory. Benton disdained the Cherokee tribal leadership, especially of half-bloods, who attempted to check the state of Georgia’s jurisdiction over the Cherokees. Benton concluded his essay with a long sentence: “One Indian hanged, some missionaries imprisoned, the writ of the Supreme Court disregarded, the Indians removed; and the political and pseudo-philanthropic intermeddlers left to the reflection of having done much mischief in assuming to become the defenders and guardians of a race which the humanity of our laws and people were treating with parental kindness.”<sup>9</sup>

In 1835 Benton was a prominent apologist for yet another Cherokee Removal treaty. He quoted the treaty preamble affirming the Cherokee wanted to make a “clean disposal of all their possessions east of the Mississippi” in a final land cession, were ready to join their relatives in

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<sup>9</sup> Thomas Hart Benton, *Thirty Years View; Or, a History of the Working of the American Government for Thirty Years, From 1820 to 1850* (New York: D. Appleton Company, 1856), Vol. 1, pp. 163-166.

Indian Territory, and there “could establish and enjoy a government of their choice, and perpetuate a state of society, which might be most consonant with their views, habits, and condition, and which might tend to their individual comfort, and their advancement in civilization.” The treaty required payment of \$5 million and removal expenses Benton estimated at \$7 million—the value of the purchase of Louisiana Territory in 1803. “And this in addition to seven millions of acres granted for their new home,” he added. Removal, according to Benton was a “wise and humane policy.”<sup>10</sup>

In 1836 Senators Benton and Linn and Congressman Albert Harrison of Missouri advocated opening Indian lands between the western boundary of their state and the Missouri River. Known as the Platte Purchase, the tract included rich soil and fine forests. The area had been reserved by the Treaty of Prairie du Chien in 1830 as the new homeland for the Sac, Fox, Sisseton Bands of Sioux, Omaha, Iowa, Otoe, and Missouri Indians. Other treaties in 1832 and 1833 provided for removals of the Potawatomis, Chippewa, and Ottawa to this same area, but Congress refused to ratify the Tippecanoe and Chippewa treaties until the Platte region in western Missouri was excluded. In 1836 the government voided the Treaty of Prairie de Chien and folded the Platte Purchase into Missouri to create six new counties. Because the lands lay north of 36 degrees 30 minutes North Latitude and became part of Missouri, they were opened for slavery in violation of the Compromise of 1820. Benton and Linn had unleashed further dispossession of Native Americans, this time in territory west of the Mississippi River.<sup>11</sup>

The removals were but later chapters in the “Trail of Tears” that commenced during the

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<sup>10</sup> Benton, *Thirty Years View*, Vol. 1, pp. 624-625.

<sup>11</sup> H. Jason Combs, “The Platte Purchase and Native American Removal,” *Plains Anthropologist*, 47(182)(August, 2002), 269-273; Billy J. McMahon, “‘Humane and Considerate Attention’: Indian Removal from Missouri, 1803-1838, MA. Thesis, Northwest Missouri State University, 2013.



presidencies of Jefferson and Madison and accelerated in the 1820s with a succession of new treaties. These agreements, dictated by the United States, compelled the Cherokee, Creek, Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Seminole to remove from the Southeast to Indian Territory west of the Mississippi River. Other tribes from the Ohio and Missouri valleys, as well as the Oneida of upstate New York, also had to abandon their homes to go to reservations in Indian Territory. The removals were sometimes carried out in winter, contracted to the lowest bidders, fraught with insufficient food, horses, and wagons, and were often absent of medical care. Thousands of Native Americans perished in these forced migrations to lands belonging to other tribes. Benton, however, saw a coincidence of good impacts: the treaties opened tribal lands for Euro-American settlement and the Indians were given “new and unmolested homes beyond the verge of the white man’s settlement, in a country temperate in climate, fertile in soil, adapted to agriculture and pasturage, with an outlet for hunting, and abounding with salt water and salt springs—it left them to work out the problem of Indian civilization.”<sup>12</sup>

Benton was particularly irritated with Alexis de Tocqueville’s criticisms of Indian removal in *Democracy in America*. “His error in all that he has here written is profound” noted Benton. He asserted the French traveler had denigrated both Andrew Jackson and American national character. Benton argued that the United States since 1789 had paid out nearly \$90 million for purchases of Indian lands, plus it had created “a large establishment for the special care of the Indians, and the management of their affairs; a special bureau presided over by a commissioner at Washington City; agents, sub-agents, and interpreters resident with the tribe . . . .”<sup>13</sup> Benton gratuitously assumed the tribes were eager to abandon their traditional lifeways, religion, and

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<sup>12</sup> Benton, *Thirty Years View*, Vol. 1, p. 690.

<sup>13</sup> Benton, *Thirty Years View*, Vol. 1, pp. 692-693.

languages for transformation into members of Euro-American society.

### **Manifest Destiny**

No subject excited the imagination of Senator Benton as much as the American West. During his years in Congress Benton became one of the foremost proponents of American expansion. In the 1820s he envisioned creation of a national road connecting Missouri and Santa Fe. In 1823 he pushed a resolution through Congress requesting the president to send a military expedition to claim the North Pacific Coast, but, with no funding, the resolution languished.<sup>14</sup> Benton grasped the technological promise of steam and became an ardent advocate of a national railroad system spanning the continent. He seized the ideas of Asa Whitney, an American trader in China, who in 1844-45 promoted spanning North America with a railroad to open commerce directly with Asia.<sup>15</sup>

In the 1840s Senators Benton and Linn of Missouri became eager backers of the Oregon Trail explorations of John C. Frémont of the Topographical Engineers. Frémont, married to Benton's eldest daughter, Jessie, was soon heralded as the American "Pathfinder," merging reality with the fiction of James Fenimore Cooper. Benton and Linn helped secure federal appropriations for publication of Frémont's diaries, carefully edited and revised by Jessie Benton Frémont.<sup>16</sup> In 1845 the government printed the accounts of the several Frémont explorations accompanied by a series of detailed maps of the Oregon Trail executed by cartographer Charles Preuss (1803-1854). These were reprinted in 1846 by D. Appleton and Company of New York

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<sup>14</sup> Barbara Cloud, "Oregon in the 1820s: The Congressional Perspective," *Western Historical Quarterly*, 12(2)(April, 1981), 150.

<sup>15</sup> Robert S. Cottrill, "Early Agitation for a Pacific Railroad," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 5(March, 1919):396-414.

<sup>16</sup> Benton, *Thirty Years View*, pp. 478-479.

and by H. & E. Phinney of Cooperstown as *Narrative of the Exploring Expedition to the Rocky Mountains in the Year 1842, and to Oregon and North California in the Years 1843 and 1844*.<sup>17</sup>

Frémont's accounts and the Preuss maps became the most popular guide to the overland trails.

The *Congressional Globe* on May 28, 1846, published Benton's essay, "The Destiny of Race." Benton believed no event in human history compared to the "beneficent change on earth than the arrival of the van of the Caucasian race (the Celtic-Anglo-Saxon division) upon the border of the sea which washes the shore of eastern Asia." There he saw the 400 millions of Asia, "once the foremost of the human family in the arts of civilization but torpid and stationary for thousands of years," interbreeding with white Americans. He wrote:

The sun of civilization must shine across the sea: socially and commercially, the van of Caucasians, and the rear of the Mongolians, must intermix. They must talk together, and trade together and marry together. Commerce is the great civilizer—social intercourse as great—and marriage greater. The White and Yellow races can marry together, as well as eat and trade together.

Of this merger, however, "the White Race will take the ascendant, elevating what is susceptible of improvement—wearing out what is not." Benton saw the disappearance of the "Red Race" as the "effect of divine law," namely God's will. "I cannot repine that this *Capitol* has replaced the *wigwam*—Franklin, and Jefferson, have taken the place of *Powhatan*, *Opechonecanough*, and other red men, howsoever respectable they have been as savages," he wrote.

African Americans were not part of Benton's new calculus of ascendant civilizations. He championed the Caucasian race as "far above the *Ethopian*, or *Black*—above the *Malay*, or *Brown* (if we must admit five races)—and above the *American Indian*, or *Red*." To Benton the course of

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<sup>17</sup> John C. Frémont, *Narrative of the Exploring Expedition to the Rocky Mountains in the Year 1842, and to Oregon and North California in 1843* (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1846).

history was clear: “It would seem that the White race alone received the divine command, to subdue and replenish the earth! for it is the only race that has obeyed it—the only one that hunts out new and distant lands, and even a *New World*, to subdue and replenish.”<sup>18</sup>

Benton’s vision was that the United States had the destiny to transact the dream of Columbus—going west to find the East. He articulated this concept in his “Passage to India” speech in 1849 in St. Louis to the Pacific Railroad Convention:

Let us beseech the National Legislature to build the great road upon the great national line which unites Europe and Asia—San Francisco at one end, St. Louis at the other; and which shall be adorned with its crowning honor—the colossal statue of the great Columbus—whose design it accomplishes, hewn from the granite mass of a peak of the Rocky Mountains, overlooking the road—the mountain itself a pedestal and the statue a part of the mountain—pointing with outstretched arm to the western horizon, and saying to the flying passengers, ‘There is the East, there is India.’”<sup>19</sup>

## Conclusions

Thomas Hart Benton was one of the nation’s most dynamic and visible politicians in pre-Civil War America. Elected to five terms in the Senate and one term in the House of Representatives, he became famed as an orator and a combative advocate of causes. He was a product of his times. He was a Southerner by birth and a slave-owner by inheritance. Although he opposed the extension of slavery into the territories, he was no abolitionist and couched his opposition to slavery in terms of protecting the federal union, not the civil liberties of those held in bondage. His legacy on slavery is controversial and discomfoting.

Benton perceived Native Americans as “savages” who, in order to be saved, had to be

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<sup>18</sup> Thomas Hart Benton, “The Destiny of Race.” *The Congressional Globe*, May 28, 1846.

<sup>19</sup> B. R. McElderry, Jr. “The Inception of ‘Passage to India,’” *PMLA*, 71(4)(September, 1856), 839.

moved west to permit the filling in of the nation by Euro-American agrarians. He endorsed the Indian Removal Act (1830), spoke favorably on behalf of several removal treaties, and argued that Congress had appropriated tens of millions of dollars to buy Indian lands and fund civilization programs. His financial calculations were that the nation had more than paid adequately for land and services to Indian tribes. He denigrated those who espoused tribal sovereignty and took great umbrage when Alexis de Tocqueville criticized treatment of Native Americans in *Democracy in America* (1835).

Benton became one the strongest congressional proponents of Manifest Destiny. It seemed natural to him that the United States was to spread from sea to sea. He endorsed and promoted the explorations of his son-in-law, John C. Frémont, and championed national roads and railroads. Benton expanded his ideas on American destiny into themes founded on race. He saw Caucasians at the pinnacle of achievement and African Americans and Native Americans as largely devoid of civilization. To weld his commercial concepts of the “Passage to India” to race, Benton, however, envisioned inter-racial marriage between Caucasians and Asians.

To his contemporaries Benton was sometimes too much to handle. He was involved in brawls, feuds, libel suits, a fatal duel wherein he killed his opponent, and so exercised Senator Foote that the congressmen drew his pistol and threatened to kill him on the floor of the Senate. Benton’s opposition to expansion of slavery into the new public domain acquired in the 1840s eventually cost him his seat in the Senate. Benton thus created a legacy of controversies during his own lifetime and ones that disturb and provoke Americans of the twenty-first century.

### **Thomas Hart Benton’s Relationship to Benton Hall and Benton Annex**

Benton Hall, the oldest building on the Oregon State University campus, was erected in 1887-88 as a multipurpose facility. Long known as the Administration Building, it housed the

offices of the president, deans, faculty, auditorium, classrooms, laboratories, and the campus library. The institution had its origins in 1858 as Corvallis Academy, then became Corvallis College administered by the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. It granted its first bachelor's degree in 1865 and in 1885 became a state institution. The school was known informally as Oregon Agricultural College until 1907 when the name became official. The institution was renamed Oregon State College in 1937 and in 1961 became Oregon State University.

A bit of confusion exists about the identification of Benton Hall. On May 1, 1964, Barbara Rice's article in the *OSU Daily Barometer* carried the headline "Benton Hall Named After Senator; Oldest Building on Campus."<sup>20</sup> Rice was wrong. The Administration Building was named Benton Hall in 1947 when all administration offices were moved to a new campus building. The Registrar and Business Office were the last to use the old building. An unsigned news story stated: "The name Benton hall was suggested to honor the citizens of Benton county who in 1887 raised \$25,000 to construct the building as a means of getting the college located permanently in Corvallis."<sup>21</sup> The *Corvallis Gazette-Times* on May 14, 1947, noted the State Board of Higher Education made the name change to honor the citizens of Benton County who raised money for the building in 1897. The news story erred by ten years.<sup>22</sup>

The renaming was affirmed again in 1957 in the *Corvallis Gazette-Times*. E. B. LeMon noted:

The name Benton was selected to honor the people of Benton county, who provided the

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<sup>20</sup> Barbara Rice, "Benton Hall Named After Senator; Oldest Building on Campus," *OSU Daily Barometer*, May 1, 1964.

<sup>21</sup> Anonymous, "Old Administration Building Name Changes—Now Known as 'Benton Hall,'" [Clipping of 1947 in Department of Special Collections, Valley Library, Oregon State University, Corvallis, Oregon].

<sup>22</sup> Anonymous, "'Benton Hall' to be Name of Old College Administration Building," *Corvallis Gazette-Times*, May 14, 1947.

funds for the original construction. By a legislative act, the State Agricultural college of the State of Oregon, as the institution was officially designated was to be permanently located, provided the citizens of Benton county, on or before January 21, 1889, would cause to be erected, on the designated site, brick buildings at the cost of not less than \$20,000. Thus the foresight and initiative of Benton county residents made Corvallis the permanent home of Oregon State college. It is these events which give historic significance to Benton County.<sup>23</sup>

Benton Hall Annex, erected in 1892 as the “Station Building,” became an administrative office and chemistry lab. Between 1902 and 1972 it housed the campus bookstore, student health service, and a paleontology lab. About 1972 the structure was re-named Benton Hall Annex and, since 1973, has housed the Women’s Center. Its name derived from adjacent Benton Hall.

The names Benton Hall and Benton Hall Annex thus honor the residents of Benton County who believed in higher education and, most particularly, in securing a permanent home for agricultural education in the heart of the Willamette Valley. They contributed their resources and energies to transform Corvallis College into a state institution and, ultimately, into a major research university. Benton Hall and Benton Hall Annex honor their commitment and philanthropy.

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<sup>23</sup> E. B. LeMon, “Benton County Gave \$20,000 Building,” *Corvallis Gazette-Times*, June 16, 1957.

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