

Clearly the better shot of the two—in fact, one of the best in Tennessee—Dickinson made merry on his journey to the Kentucky dueling ground with a large group of friends, confident that he would win. He delighted his companions with his quick wit and demonstrations of his shooting skills. After severing a string with a bullet shot from a distance of twenty-four feet, Dickinson left the pieces with an innkeeper on the way. "If General Jackson comes along this road, show him *that!*" he gloated. Jackson, by contrast, was all business, plotting strategy with his companions, knowing he was at a disadvantage. They decided that since Dickinson was the better shot, it would be best to let him fire first. That way, assuming he lived, Jackson could take careful aim back at Dickinson and not be thrown off his mark by trying to draw and fire faster.

Arriving at the chosen site, the parties took their positions. At the order to fire, Dickinson quickly raised his pistol and shot Jackson in the chest. But the general did not fall. Instead, he stood his place, clutching at his chest with teeth clenched. "Great God!" a horrified Dickinson cried. "Have I missed him?" Stunned, he was ordered back to his mark. Jackson was now free to shoot him at his leisure. Slowly and deliberately he raised his pistol, took aim, and squeezed the trigger. Nothing happened. The pistol hammer had stopped at half cock. In what could have only been an agonizing wait for Dickinson, Jackson slowly drew back the hammer, aimed again, and fired. The bullet ripped through Dickinson's body and he bled to death. "I'd have hit him," Jackson quipped, dismissing his own injury. "if he had shot me through the brain."

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Despite all the criticism of the cold-blooded way in which Jackson had killed Dickinson, that encounter at least met all the stringent contemporary requirements for civilized quarreling. Not all of Jackson's fights did. Seven years after killing Charles Dickinson by the rules, he was badly wounded in what was a gutter brawl by comparison. It all started when a junior officer named William Carroll asked Jackson to serve as his second in a duel he was to fight with one Jesse

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Overreaction Jackson

Andrew Jackson was one of dueling's most ardent enthusiasts. This may have had something to do with the marked homicidal tendencies he exhibited throughout much of his career, coupled with a hair-trigger temper and an overheated sense of personal honor. Sources vary as to exactly how many ritual combats Old Hickory participated in, either as a principal or second, but the frequency is by all accounts astonishing. And though Jackson was spared death on the field of honor, he was left full of lead for the rest of his life.

Perhaps his most notable duel was fought in 1806 with a well-connected Tennessee lawyer named Charles Dickinson. It was this conflict, which arose out of horse racing debts, that left the future president with a bullet permanently embedded near his heart, and his reputation shot as well. Dickinson had publicly declared Jackson to be "a poltroon and a coward," which, given the general's allergy to even the slightest insult, immediately resulted in a challenge. Dickinson accepted and the two agreed to an encounter in Logan County, Kentucky, just over the Tennessee border. They would face each other at a distance of twenty-four feet.

Benton. Jackson, at age forty-six, wisely demurred. "Why, Captain Carroll, I am not the man for such an affair," he wrote. "I am too old. The time has been when I should have gone out with pleasure; but, at my time of life, it would be extremely injudicious. You must get a man nearer to your own age." But Carroll persisted, and Jackson eventually agreed.

The duel between Carroll and Benton was a ridiculous affair, with Benton taking a squatting position as he wheeled around to shoot at Carroll. In the process, he caught a bullet in his behind, along with a sharp reprimand from Jackson for his disgraceful technique. Thomas Hart Benton, Jesse's brother and an aide-de-camp to Jackson, was away in Washington working on the general's affairs when the duel occurred. Upon returning to Tennessee and learning of his brother's humiliation, Thomas Hart Benton threatened revenge. Word of his anger and threats soon reached Jackson, who wrote Benton asking if what was being said was true. Benton responded with four points, the first of which Old Hickory may have very well agreed with: "That it was very poor business in a man of your age and standing to be conducting a duel about nothing between young men who had no harm against each other, and that you would have done yourself more honor by advising them to reserve their courage for the public enemy."

Whether or not Jackson agreed with the points, the issue still remained as to whether Benton wanted a duel or not. "I have not threatened to challenge you," Benton wrote. "On the contrary I have said that I would not do so; and I say so still. At the same time, the terror of your pistols is not to seal my lips. What I believe to be true, I shall speak; and if for this I am called to account, it must ever be so."

So, although there was no official challenge, Benton continued to bad-mouth Jackson all over Tennessee. This infuriated the general, whose reputation was only just beginning to recover from the Dickinson affair. He swore he would horsewhip Benton the next time he saw him. That opportunity came in Nashville, where Jackson and the Benton brothers were staying for a time. Making their way to the post office soon after arriving in Nashville, the general

and his companions walked deliberately past the inn where the Bentons had rooms. This was a fairly clear indication that they were spoiling for a fight. Thomas Benton stood out front, "looking daggers" at them, as Jackson's companion John Coffee noted. "Do you see that fellow?" Coffee asked Jackson in a hushed tone. "Oh yes," the general replied, "I have my eye on him." For some reason, though, Jackson did not attack. Instead, he and his group proceeded to the post office, picked up their mail, and headed back in the same direction.

Now both Bentons were standing outside the inn. As Jackson came abreast of Thomas Benton, the future president suddenly wheeled on him, brandished a whip, and yelled, "Now, you damned rascal, I am going to punish you. Defend yourself!" With that, Benton reached into his pocket as if going for his gun. Jackson then drew out his own gun and forced his adversary back inside the inn. As this was happening, Jesse Benton slipped away and took another position inside. As his brother was being forced in, Jesse fired at Jackson, shattering the general's arm and shoulder. Jackson fired at Thomas as he fell, but his shot missed.

Racing in from the street, John Coffee immediately saw his friend lying prostrate in a pool of blood and fired at Thomas Benton. Missing, he then tried to club him with his pistol, but Benton retreated, falling out of the building backward down a flight of stairs. Another of Jackson's companions, his nephew Stockley Hays, tried to run Jesse Benton through with his sword cane, but the weapon hit a button and broke. As the two men wrestled on the ground, Hays resorted to stabbing Jesse Benton repeatedly in the arms with a dirk. The crowd pulled them apart before Benton was in a position to shoot Hays.

As the melee came to end, Jackson was carried away to the Nashville Inn. He was bleeding profusely, saturating two mattresses. A physician in attendance suggested amputating the shattered limb, but Jackson wouldn't hear of it. "I'll keep my arm," he ordered before drifting into unconsciousness. The bullet remained with him for the next twenty years, along with the one lodged near his heart. The Bentons, meanwhile, were loudly denouncing Jackson as a failed as-

sassin. Coming across a small sword the general had dropped in the encounter, Thomas Hart Benton snapped it in two while shouting insults about Jackson. He then paraded the pieces across the public square. Yet despite his bravado, Benton was well aware of the true danger he now faced from Jackson and his outraged associates: "I am literally in hell here," he wrote; "the meanest wretches under heaven to contend with—are at work on me. . . . I am in the middle of hell, and see no alternative but to kill or be killed; for I will not crouch to Jackson; and the fact that I and my brother defeated him and his tribe, and broke his small sword in the public square, will for ever rankle in his bosom and make him thirst for vengeance. My life is in danger. . . . for it is a settled plan to turn out puppy after puppy to bully me, and when I have got into a scrape, to have me killed somehow in the scuffle."

Benton's fears turned out to be baseless. He was spared the wrath of Old Hickory. In fact, the two later became political allies when they were both elected to the U.S. Senate. Jesse Benton, on the other hand, cursed Jackson to his grave.

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Andrew Jackson proved himself a violent foe when it came to defending his own honor but went nearly insane with rage if anyone dared besmirch the good name of his wife, Rachael. He had fallen in love with the pipe-smoking frontier woman while she was separated from her first husband, Lewis Robards. That marriage had been a disaster, and Rachael moved away to Natchez in Spanish Florida. Jackson accompanied her there, ostensibly to protect her on the dangerous journey south. Rachael was eventually divorced from Robards, although the legality of the divorce was later called into question, making Rachael a possible bigamist when she married Jackson in 1791. Such marital limbo made her a target for many of Jackson's political enemies, including the first governor of Tennessee, John Sevier.

After a series of political clashes, Sevier verbally accosted Jackson, then a judge on the Tennessee Superior Court, outside the Knoxville courthouse in 1803. "I know of no great services you have ren-

dered to the country except taking a trip to Natchez with another man's wife!" Sevier taunted. With that crack Jackson went berserk. "Great God!" he bellowed. "Do you mention *her* sacred name?" Pistols were immediately drawn and shots fired, but neither man was hit and they were quickly separated. Jackson was still enraged, however, and challenged Sevier to a formal duel. When the governor hedged, Jackson posted him in the *Tennessee Gazette*: "Know ye that I, Andrew Jackson, do pronounce, publish, and declare to the world, that his excellency John Sevier . . . is a base coward and poltroon. He will basely insult, but has not the courage to repair."

When the two did eventually meet on the field of honor, they immediately started shouting insults and profanities at one another. Jackson rushed forward with a raised stick, threatening to cane Sevier, who drew his sword. This sudden movement frightened the governor's horse, which trotted away with his pistols in the saddle bag. Jackson took full advantage of the situation, drawing his own pistol as Sevier ducked for cover behind a tree. This was not how gentlemen were supposed to fight! Seeing his father's peril, Sevier's son drew his own pistol on Jackson, while Jackson's second drew on the son. At a stalemate, and realizing how foolish the whole scene had become, the parties withdrew. They were alive, but enemies still. Rachael, meanwhile, would endure far more abuse when her husband later ran for president, and she died just before he took office.¹

1. See Part V, Chapter 2.



“May God Almighty Forgive Her Murderers”

The presidential campaign of 1828 was a rematch of the contest four years earlier between John Quincy Adams and Andrew Jackson. That election had been settled in the U.S. House of Representatives, with Adams prevailing. According to Jackson's supporters, Speaker of the House Henry Clay had used undue influence to get Adams elected, and their suspicions of a “corrupt bargain” struck between Adams and Clay only intensified when Adams appointed Clay secretary of state. “So you see,” Jackson said at the time, “the Judas of the west [Clay] has closed the contract and will receive the thirty pieces of silver. His end will be the same. Was there ever such a bare faced corruption in any country before?”

Jackson's supporters, determined not to have victory snatched away from them again, launched a populist crusade designed to show Adams as an elitist who, like his father, would be delighted to have a monarchy established in the United States. “King John the Second,” they called him, a despiser of the people and of the popular will. “His habits and principles are not congenial with the spirit of our institutions and the notions of a democratic people,” declared one Jacksonian. Adams, it was said, lived in “kingly pomp and splendor.”

in his "presidential-palace." Old Hickory, on the other hand, was presented as a man of the people, and it was to the ordinary folks that his campaign was directed. Parades, barbecues, and street rallies were organized across the country by Jackson's "Hurra Boys," as his campaign workers were called, while hickory brooms, hickory sticks, and hickory canes became popular gimmicks.

Adams, in the tradition of George Washington, maintained an aloof posture toward campaigning, which he deemed undignified. His followers, however, engaged in an all-out assault on Jackson, helping to make the campaign of 1828 one of the most vicious in U.S. history. "You know that he is no jurist, no statesman, no politician," an Adams pamphlet warned; "that he is unacquainted with orthography, concord, and government of his language; you know that he is a man of no labor, no patience, no investigation, in short his whole recommendation is animal fierceness and organic energy. He is wholly unqualified by education, habit and temper for the station of President." And this was just a tiny BB in the anti-Jackson arsenal.

Old Hickory was lampooned as a homicidal maniac with an insatiable lust for blood. In one memorable broadside, a Philadelphia editor printed a "Coffin Handbill" which excoriated Jackson for the execution of six militiamen charged with desertion during the Creek War in 1813. The widely circulated handbill, with "Some Account of the Bloody Deeds of General Jackson" screaming across the top, was bordered in black and pictured six coffins, one for each of the men executed under Jackson's orders. It went on to detail how the soldiers had served their tour of duty and only wanted to go home. One of them, John Harris, was a "Preacher of the Gospel," the handbill proclaimed, and had patriotically volunteered for service only to be "shot dead" at Jackson's behest. Though the Jackson camp tried to counter the inflammatory circular with their own version of the event—that Harris and the others had tried to incite a mutiny, stole supplies, and burned down a backhouse before deserting, and were fairly tried and convicted—the damage was done. Even if the "Coffin Handbill" exaggerated, Adams partisans argued,

there were plenty of other examples of Jackson's blood lust. (In this, they did have a point: See Part II, Chapter 4.)

Far crueler were the attacks on Jackson's family. He was reduced to tears when he saw newspaper accounts branding his mother a "common prostitute," and was enraged when old charges of bigamy were revived against his wife, Rachael.¹ "Ought a convicted adulteress and her paramour husband to be placed in the highest offices of this free and Christian land?" railed one newspaper. Jackson's ultimate victory over Adams was bittersweet. His beloved Rachael died just after his election, and Jackson was convinced the slanders against her were the cause. "May God Almighty forgive her murderers," he exclaimed at her grave site, "as I know she forgave them. I never can." And he never did.

1. See Part II, Chapter 4.