

Bethune, Lauchlin ^[1]

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by Harry L. Watson, 1979; Revised by SLNC Government & Heritage Library, April 2023

April 15, 1785 - October 10, 1874

Lauchlin Bethune, congressman and planter, led the Democratic ^[2] party in the upper Cape Fear ^[3] region in the 1830s, the formative years of the second American party system. He was born in Cumberland County ^[4] and lived there most of his life in the sandhills district of Quewhiffle. He was educated privately and at the Lumberton Male Academy. His political career began in 1817, when he was elected state senator from Cumberland. He served six more terms in the senate, in 1818, 1822–25, and 1827. In 1831, Bethune sought the seat in Congress held by freshman Representative Edmund Deberry ^[5] of Montgomery County ^[6]. In that election, Bethune won the right to represent the Seventh District by the narrow margin of thirty-seven votes. Deberry was an opponent of Andrew Jackson ^[7] and later became the standard-bearer of the local Whig party ^[8]; Bethune ran against him as a supporter of Jackson.

Once in Washington, Bethune's career in the Twenty-second Congress was not outstanding. He served as a member of the Committee on Elections but never addressed the House during his term of office. His votes were cast consistently in support of Jackson's administration and the principles of limited government. Thus, in crucial roll calls, he voted against congressional attention to internal improvements ^[9], against expanding the jurisdiction of the U.S. Supreme Court ^[10], and against the rechartering of the Bank of the United States.

After serving one term, Bethune lost his seat in Congress to Deberry. The two politicians continued to contest the seat in 1835 and 1837, Deberry winning by increased majorities on both occasions. Bethune's major political service thus arose from his activities as party spokesman and organizer and not from his tenure in office. Throughout the 1830s and 1840s, he acted as chairman of Democratic meetings in Cumberland County and as a delegate to district and state conventions of the party. In his campaign circulars and addresses, he popularized opposition to the protective tariff, opposition to federal support of internal improvements, and support of states' rights ^[11] and promoted the other standard doctrines of his party.

The only exception to his consistently Democratic views was his banking policy. Bethune's shifting positions on this subject indicate the growing power of party regularity on the opinions of local political figures in the Age of Jackson. In June 1832, Bethune expressed public disapproval of the rechartering of the Bank of the United States ^[12] as a matter of policy. He did not regard the bank as unconstitutional, for he proposed remedying its monopoly features by the chartering of two or three national banks in its stead. But when Jackson vetoed the recharter a month later on constitutional grounds, Bethune reversed himself. In 1836 he introduced resolutions to a meeting of the Cumberland County Democratic party that denounced banks and all chartered corporations as dangerous instruments of "associated wealth," which had always been the "main key stones of monarchies and aristocracies." The resolutions passed unanimously, and extreme hostility to all banks was the principal feature of Bethune's congressional campaign circular of 1837.

After his defeat in that election, Bethune no longer sought public office but retired to his plantation. The next decades brought him more success from agriculture than he had ever enjoyed in politics. While he was still a state senator, he had been the owner of 11,500 acres in Cumberland County. By 1860 he enslaved thirty-eight people. His political hostility to "associated wealth" clearly did not interfere with his private ambitions, nor did his economic opinions arise from a life spent in poverty.

Bethune was buried in the Presbyterian Cemetery in Aberdeen.

Additional information from NCpedia editors at the State Library of North Carolina:

This person enslaved and owned other people. Many Black and African people, their descendants, and some others were enslaved in the United States until the Thirteenth Amendment abolished slavery in 1865. It was common for wealthy landowners, entrepreneurs, politicians, institutions, and others to enslave people and use enslaved labor during this period. To read more about the enslavement and transportation of African people to North Carolina, visit <https://aahc.nc.gov/programs/africa-carolina-0> ^[13]. To read more about slavery and its history in North Carolina, visit <https://www.ncpedia.org/slavery> ^[14]. - Government and Heritage Library, 2023

References:

Harry L. Watson, "'Bitter combinations of the neighbourhood': The Second American Party System in Cumberland County, North Carolina" (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1976).

Additional Resources:

North Carolina. *Acts passed by the General Assembly of the State of North Carolina [1833-1834]* Newbern [N.C.]: Printed by Arnett & Hodge, Printers to the State, 1833; 1834. <https://digital.ncdcr.gov/Documents/Detail/acts-passed-by-the-general-assembly-of-the-state-of-north-carolina-1833-1834/1955775> [15] (accessed April 9, 2013).

N.C. General Assembly. *Revised statutes of the State of North Carolina, passed by the General Assembly at the session of 1836-7, including an act concerning the Revised statutes and other public acts, passed at the same session : together with the second charter granted by Charles the 2d to the proprietors of Carolina, the great deed of grant from the Lords Proprietors, the grant from George the 2d to John Lord Granville, the Bill of Rights and Constitution of the state, with the amendments thereto, the Constitution of the United States, with the amendments, the Treaty of Peace of 1783, the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence, with a short narrative thereof. [vol. 2].* Raleigh [N.C.]: Turner and Hughes, 1837. 1837. <https://digital.ncdcr.gov/Documents/Detail/revised-statutes-of-the-state-of-north-carolina-passed-by-the-general-assembly-at-the-session-of-1836-7-including-an-act-concerning-the-revised-statutes-and-other-public-acts-passed-at-the-same-session-...-v.2/2691256> [16] (accessed April 9, 2013).

"Edmund Deberry 1787-1859." N.C. Highway Historical Marker K-33, N.C. Office of Archives & History. <https://www.ncdcr.gov/about/history/division-historical-resources/nc-highway-historical-marker-program/Markers.aspx?sp=Markers&k=Markers&sv=K-33> [17] (accessed April 9, 2013).

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From:

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1 January 1979 | Watson, Harry L.

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