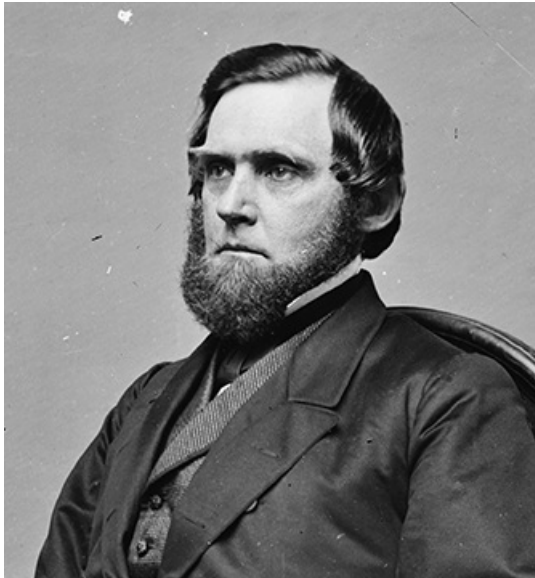


## **Etheridge, Henry Emerson** <sup>[1]</sup>

### **Etheridge, Henry Emerson**

by Robert B. Jones, 1986

**28 Sept. 1819–21 Oct. 1902**



"Emerson Etheridge". Photograph. [between 1855 and 1865]. LC-BH82- 4585 B. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

<sup>[2]</sup>Henry Emerson Etheridge, congressman and clerk of the U.S. House of Representatives, was born in Currituck, the son of Thomas and Elizabeth Harvey Etheridge. In 1831 he moved with his family to West Tennessee, settling near the middle fork of the Obion River in Weakley County, where he received a common school education, read law, and was admitted to the bar in 1840. Beginning his practice at Dresden, Tenn., he was soon active in Whig <sup>[3]</sup>politics and served in the state house of representatives from Weakley County from 1845 to 1847. Possessing the ability to absorb and recall at will large quantities of information as well as a gift for political satire, Etheridge became one of the most noted orators in the state. In 1852, he was elected as a Whig to the U.S. House of Representatives. Reelected as a candidate of the American, or Know-Nothing, party <sup>[4]</sup> in 1854, he lost his bid for a third consecutive term in 1856. Two years later, again carrying the banner of the American party, he was successful and served in the strife-filled congressional session of 1859–61.

While in Congress, Etheridge was forced to make agonizing choices between sectional and national allegiances as the country moved closer to civil war. He strongly opposed the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 with its repeal of the Missouri Compromise restriction on slavery. He saw this as a misguided Democratic proposal that might rekindle emotions North and South on the slavery issue. Condemning the measure as one that would add no new slave states to the nation but would dangerously heighten sectional tensions, he joined a small group of seven Southern Whigs who voted against the measure. Although he supported the institution of slavery <sup>[5]</sup>, Etheridge opposed the calls of some in the late 1850s for a reopening of the African slave trade. He characterized it as an inhuman traffic repugnant to all civilized and Christian people. Concerned about growing sectional bitterness, in 1857 on the floor of the House he denounced Northern and Southern extremists and declared that dismemberment of the nation would endanger or destroy slavery and the liberty of all Americans. There was a remedy for every sectional complaint and grievance through the ballot box within the Union, he said. In 1860, Etheridge backed fellow Tennessean John Bell <sup>[6]</sup> for president on the Constitutional Union ticket. The following January he tried unsuccessfully to have the House consider a compromise proposal, similar to that of Senator John J. Crittenden of Kentucky, designed to placate both sections on the slavery question.

The war years were tumultuous ones for Etheridge. Returning home in the spring of 1861, he joined other Tennessee Unionists in an effort to defeat the movement for secession in the state. On one occasion when he attempted to make a Union speech in Paris, Tenn., secessionist supporters broke up the meeting, and one Unionist was killed in the disorder that followed. When Tennessee joined the Confederacy, he fled to Washington. His dedication to the Union earned him election to the post of clerk of the House of Representatives in July 1861. After Tennessee came under military control, Etheridge became a political supporter of military Governor Andrew Johnson <sup>[7]</sup>. President Abraham Lincoln's decision to make emancipation of slaves a war aim alienated Etheridge from the Republican party <sup>[8]</sup>. Angry at what he considered a Republican betrayal of Southern Unionists <sup>[9]</sup>, he cooperated in an unsuccessful plot in December 1863 to give control of the Thirty-eighth Congress to a coalition of Democrats and border state Unionists. The plan involved his use of his

position as clerk to invalidate the credentials of a number of Republican congressmen. As a result of this, he was defeated in his bid for reelection as clerk, and he became an ardent opponent of the Republican administration.

In the Reconstruction <sup>[10]</sup> era immediately following the war, Etheridge emerged as a leader among Conservative Unionists in Tennessee opposed to the Radical Republican administration of Governor William G. Brownlow <sup>[11]</sup>. While running for Congress from his home district in 1865, he denounced the state government so stridently that he was arrested by federal army troops and tried before a military commission on charges of encouraging sedition and insurrection. He was held until after the election and then was acquitted on both counts. Two years later, Etheridge was the Conservative Union party candidate for governor. He and Governor Brownlow engaged in an aggressive and acrimonious campaign marred by incidents of violence and voter intimidation. Unable to attract the ballots of newly enfranchised blacks and lacking the votes of ex-Confederates who backed him but were disfranchised, Etheridge lost the election. Defeat was followed by victory, however, for in 1868 he was elected to a two-year term in the state senate representing Henry, Obion, and Weakley counties. Unhappy with the policies of the resurgent Democratic party, which absorbed the Conservative organization following Reconstruction, Etheridge returned to the Republican party in 1876 and campaigned actively for presidential nominee Rutherford B. Hayes. The Republican state convention selected him to run for governor in 1878, but he declined the nomination. From 1891 through 1894 he served as surveyor of customs in Memphis.

In addition to his political activities, Etheridge was also a dedicated supporter of the temperance movement <sup>[12]</sup>. In 1870 the state legislature authorized the creation of a new county called Etheridge, named for this prominent politician, but it was never organized. He married Fannie M. Bell of Dresden in 1849 and they had two children, Emma and John Bell. Congressman Etheridge died in Dresden and was buried in Mt. Vernon Cemetery, Sharon, Tenn.

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Biographies <sup>[17]</sup>

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