

Thomas, James Houston ^[1]

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by William S. Powell, 1996

22 Sept. 1808–4 Aug. 1876

James Houston Thomas, congressman and lawyer, was born in Iredell County ^[2], the son of Isaac J., a physician, and Asenath Houston Thomas. Called Houston, he was seven years old when he moved with his parents to Tennessee, where he attended rural schools. In 1830 he was graduated from Jackson College in Columbia, Maury County, Tenn. He then studied law, was admitted to the bar in 1831, and began practicing in Columbia. On 17 Aug. 1843 he became a law partner of James K. Polk ^[3], whose family had migrated to Maury County from North Carolina a few years prior to the arrival of the Thomas family. Elected district attorney general in 1836, he served until 1842. While Polk was president of the United States (1845–49), Thomas wrote to him on many occasions concerning cases in which his firm was involved. As a Democrat Thomas served in the U.S. House of Representatives during the Thirtieth and Thirty-first Congresses (4 Mar. 1847–3 Mar. 1851). Although unsuccessful in his 1850 bid for a third term, he was again elected in 1858 and held his seat from 4 Mar. 1859 to 3 Mar. 1861.

On 17 Jan. 1861, when the possibility of secession was being widely considered, Thomas spoke in Congress in favor of remaining in the Union "with dignity" if possible, but he was critical of the North for its attitude towards the South. "The Southern states," he reminded his colleagues, had a common interest and a common destiny that Southerners would protect "peacefully if we can but forcibly if we must." His words were printed and distributed in Tennessee as well as in other Southern states.

Having supported the governor of Tennessee in bringing about secession, Thomas was elected to the Provisional Confederate Congress ^[4]. He was an outspoken Southern nationalist and urged the invasion of Kentucky, where it was anticipated backing would be found for the Confederacy. He served only one term, however, after which, in February 1862, he returned to his law practice in Columbia. After Nashville, together with much of central Tennessee, was occupied by Federal troops, Thomas moved to Alabama. Returning home in 1864, he was arrested for treason and imprisoned until the end of the war by Unionist officials who held power in the state. Afterwards he moved to Fayetteville, Tenn., forty miles southeast of Columbia, to practice law and was living there at the time of his death. His body was returned to Maury County for burial in the cemetery of St. John's Episcopal Church at Ashwood, of which he was a member.

Thomas was married on 20 Dec. 1832 to Margaret Meeds Stephens (1810–49), the daughter of the Reverend Daniel Stephens, D.D., rector of St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Columbia. Their children were James David (1833–34); James Daniel (1835–99), a Confederate captain of engineers; Margaret Stephens (August–September 1839); and Mary Catherine (1844–1920).

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Additional Resources:

"Thomas, James Houston, (1808 - 1876)." *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress*. Washington, D.C.: The Congress. <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=T000170> ^[5] (accessed May 28, 2013).

State of the Union. Speech of Hon. James H. Thomas, of Tennessee, in the House of Representatives, January 17, 1861

(1861)), from the Internet Archive: <https://archive.org/details/stateofunionspee00thom>. [6]

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