

# Naval Bookshelf

## *The Old War Horse: The USS Benton on Western Waters, 1853-1865*

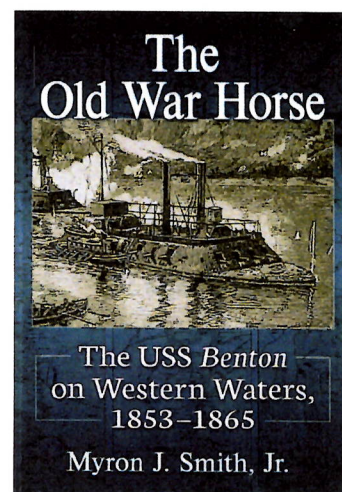
By Myron J. Smith, Jr.

Reviewed By David A. Welker

IN *THE OLD WAR HORSE*, the veteran author of ten other books detailing the naval war on the Western Waters writes an engaging, insightful “biography” of one of the Civil War’s most important converted river ironclads. Readers of every interest level will enjoy joining Smith on this journey, a path followed by many of the war’s riverine ships; however, few such vessels have received the thorough documentation of *Benton*’s unique story.

Smith works chronologically through *Benton*’s “life,” beginning with her distinctive origin as a submarine. Not a submarine as known today, but rather a utility boat for clearing sunken obstacles hindering prewar commerce on the Mississippi. Baptized *Submarine No. 7*, she was a twin-hulled catamaran, covered above the waterline by a massive spiderweb-like framework for working the winch that removed underwater “snags.” Designed and built by James B. Eads—better known for constructing the City-class ironclads in his Carondelet, Missouri shipyard—her conversion into a warship is detailed, as is the sometimes-complicated process of her sale to the government. The author particularly explains the ethically questionable role of U.S. Army Major General John C. Frémont, who had, by the time of the vessel’s commissioning on February 24, 1862, renamed her USS *Benton* in honor of his father-in-law, Senator Thomas Hart Benton. Although retaining her prewar engines left *Benton* underpowered and slow, carrying 16 smoothbore and rifled guns—the only ship in her flotilla bearing four forward-firing guns—*Benton* was a formidable floating battery.

The bulk of Smith’s account covers the many important actions in which *Benton* participated. Serving as Flag Officer Andrew H. Foote’s flagship—a role she played for several top naval commanders—her first combat came in the fight for Mississippi’s Island No. 10. *Benton* next moved south to operate against Confederate positions at Fort Pillow and Memphis, helping secure Union control of the upper Mississippi. After a running battle with the Confederate ironclad CSS *Arkansas*, *Benton* supported Union efforts to capture the South’s last Mississippi citadel, Vicksburg. Overnight on April 16, 1862, *Benton* led the force which famously ran past Vicksburg’s defending guns, setting up naval support for Grant’s land operations that would later capture the city. Smith’s account of



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this nerve-wracking event is well told. *Benton*’s last action was in the unfortunate Red River Campaign, which was troubled by the enemy, low water levels, and controversial claims that seizing valuable cotton to enrich senior army and navy officers was the operation’s true motive. Smith handles these issues with aplomb. *Benton*’s story sadly ends with her joining other Civil War riverine warships in being ignominiously sold for scrap and parts.

Although this reviewer would have welcomed more maps, particularly those clarifying *Benton*’s detailed role in her naval actions, Smith’s work is an enjoyable read that will find a welcome place on every Civil War naval history enthusiast’s shelf.



David A. Welker is U.S. Government historian and has authored several Civil War books: *The Cornfield: Antietam’s Bloody Turning Point* (Havertown, PA: Casemate Publishers, 2020), *Tempest at Ox Hill: The Battle of Chantilly* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2002), and *A Keystone Rebel: The Civil War Diary of Joseph Garey, Hudson’s Battery, Mississippi Volunteers* (Gettysburg, PA: Thomas Publications, 1996). Mr. Welker and his wife reside in Centreville, VA.