

Allen, William ^[1]

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by H. B. Fant, 1979

See also: [Nathaniel Allen](#) ^[2]

18 Dec. 1803–11 July 1879



William Allen. Image courtesy of the Biographical Dictionary of the United States Congress.

^[3]William Allen, congressman, governor of Ohio, lawyer, and nationally prominent Democratic leader, was born in [Edenton](#) ^[4], one of three natural sons of [Nathaniel Allen](#) ^[5] (ca. 1755–1805) and Fanny Coulston. Nathaniel had been a member of the North Carolina convention that rejected the federal Constitution in 1788, and in 1802 he had represented Edenton in the state's House of Commons. Orphaned when young, William relied upon his half sister, Mary Granberry Allen Thurman, whose husband, the Reverend Pleasant Thurman, ministered to [Methodist](#) ^[6] churches at Edenton until 1811, at Lynchburg, Va., until 1819, and at Chillicothe, Ohio, for years thereafter.

The facts of William's early schooling are obscure. He recalled in later life that he left an apprenticeship in Lynchburg to follow the Thurmans to Ohio, where he attended Chillicothe Academy and developed his lifelong interest in books. Located on the Scioto River in south central Ohio, Chillicothe had been the capital of the Northwest Territory and had served as the first capital of Ohio; it remained the courthouse town of Ross County. The Scioto Valley merited William Allen's toast as "the granary of the state, the stock-yard of the West."

Allen passed the examination for the Ohio bar at the age of twenty-one. He may have begun professional training under the lawyer Gustavus Scott, but he refined his legal knowledge and undertook active practice in and from the Chillicothe office of Rufus King's son, Edward (1795–1836). Edward King was captain of the local militia company, the Chillicothe Blues, which Allen joined in 1825. Allen's performances in the Fourth of July programs at Chillicothe in 1829 and 1830 brought him to widening public notice, and when King was commissioned a major general in 1831 and removed to Cincinnati, Allen was chosen to command the Blues.

Allen's patriotic oration of 1829 was printed in Chillicothe's influential Whig weekly, the *Scioto Gazette* ^[7]; but politically both he and the nephew he brought into law partnership with him, Allen Granberry Thurman (1813–95), proved staunch proponents of Jacksonian Democracy. During the [Civil War](#) ^[8], the pair stood out as antiwar Democrats. In 1831, Captain Allen ran unsuccessfully for the Ohio legislature. On 22 Oct. 1831, when Chillicothe was celebrating the opening of navigation on the Ohio Canal to Lake Erie, Allen, as commander of the Blues, rendered formal military honors to Ohio's Whig governor, Duncan McArthur, a Chillicothe pioneer who had become a militia general before the [War of 1812](#) ^[9] and had improved the fine local estate known as Fruit Hill.

When the Jacksonian Democrats of Ohio's Seventh Congressional District selected Allen in the fall of 1831 to try for the district seat in the U.S. House of Representatives, the [Whigs](#) ^[10] prevailed upon Governor McArthur to run against him. In the ensuing contested election, Allen was declared the winner by a single vote, 3738 to 3737. He sat in the Twenty-third Congress, 4 Mar. 1833–4 Mar. 1835.

In his campaign for reelection to the House, Allen was defeated by William K. Bond. In January 1837, however, there was enough Van Buren sentiment in the Ohio legislature to put Allen into the U.S. Senate (on a vote of 55 to 52) to replace the respected incumbent, Thomas Ewing. Six years later the legislature voted to retain Allen in the Senate for another term. This son of North Carolina thus represented Ohio in the Senate at Washington in the Twenty-fifth through the Thirtieth congresses, 4 Mar. 1837–3 Mar. 1849. Cooperation of Democrats and Free Soilers in 1849 led to the replacing of Allen

with Salmon P. Chase.

Allen rightly sensed in 1846 that his own course in the Twenty-ninth Congress would gain him more favor with the people than all his past life together. As chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations he shared in the expansionist triumphs of a Democratic administration headed by President [James K. Polk](#) [11]. In particular, Allen's stand on Oregon brought national notice, including wry mention in a chapter of [Herman Melville](#) [12]'s fanciful *Mardi*, published in 1849.

Senator Allen opposed the extension of [slavery](#) [13] but abhorred abolitionism. In other respects, even his successor, Senator Chase, could write from Washington in 1854: "Your general course in Congress, as a Senator from Ohio had my entire approval and that feeling has been increased by the more intimate knowledge of it which I have gained from the *Congressional Globe* [14] since I have been here. The firmness with which you opposed the schemes of corruptionists, the steadiness with which you insisted on the rights of the U. States in our controversies with England, your advocacy of publicity in Executive Proceedings of the Senate especially commend my admiration."

During Allen's first term in the U.S. Senate he was married to Effie McArthur Coones, only daughter and considerable heiress of Duncan McArthur of Fruit Hill. She died at Washington, D.C., 3 Mar. 1847, leaving a young daughter, Effie, Allen's only child. Effie grew up to become the wife of David H. Scott, M.D. Allen had the Scotts and their children live with him at Fruit Hill, where after his Washington years he cherished books and practiced farming and stock-raising. During the 1850s and 1860s, though he did not aggressively seek office, he continued a party asset, and both he and his kinsman Thurman emerged politically during the [Reconstruction](#) [15] era, Thurman as U.S. Senator from Ohio, 1869–81, and Allen as the septuagenarian governor of Ohio, 1874–76. His service at Columbus was so creditable that Democrats, especially in Ohio, wanted him to seek further preferment.

William Allen died at Fruit Hill and was buried at Grandview Cemetery, Chillicothe. The State of Ohio commissioned the sculptor Charles H. Niehaus to carve the white marble statue of Allen that graces Statuary Hall in the Capitol at Washington.

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Ross County Historical Society (Chillicothe, Ohio), for Allen memorabilia.

"William Allen, of Ohio," *New York Times*, 30 June 1879.

Additional Resources:

William Allen, Biographical Directory of the United States Congress: <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=a000150> [3]

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