

Alston, Willis ^[1]

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1769–10 Apr. 1837

Willis Alston, congressman, was born at the family plantation on Fishing Creek, near Littleton, in Halifax County ^[2]. His parents were John Alston (1740–84) and Ann Hunt Macon, daughter of Gideon and Priscilla Jones Macon and sister of Nathaniel Macon ^[3]. The interrelated Alston, Seawell, Jones, Hawkins, and Macon families furnished many political leaders to Halifax and Warren ^[4] counties.

At twenty-one, after attending Princeton ^[5], Willis was elected to the House of Commons and served from 1790 to 1792. He was elected to the state senate in 1794 and served two years. In 1798 he defeated Thomas Blount ^[6] for the seat in Congress from Halifax and Tar River District. He served in the Sixth and seven succeeding congresses (March 1799 to March 1815).

Alston and Blount were opposed again in 1800; Alston kept his seat by 638 votes. Former Governor William R. Davie ^[7] lost to Alston in 1803 by 823 votes. Alston went on to defeat John Binford in 1804, William Cherry in 1806, Daniel Mason in 1808, and Joseph H. Bryan ^[8] in 1810. In 1813, Daniel Mason opposed Alston a second time, offering himself as a "peace candidate," because Alston had voted for war the year before. By the end of the War of 1812 Alston had decided not to run again and did not run in 1815.

When Alston first went to Congress, while John Adams ^[9] was still president, sessions were held in Philadelphia. There Alston roomed at the same place as his uncle, Nathaniel Macon ^[3], and another freshman congressman, John Randolph ^[10]. The alliance did not last long. After the government moved to Washington and Jefferson became president, Randolph and Macon became disillusioned with Jefferson's leadership and parted company with Alston. Early in 1804 and again in 1811, Alston and Randolph came to physical violence over differences. Alston became the most influential Jeffersonian supporter in the North Carolina delegation between 1807 and 1815, serving most of the time on the powerful Ways and Means Committee ^[11] and becoming a friend of John C. Calhoun ^[12] and the War Hawks ^[13] during the War of 1812 ^[14].

After his return home in 1815 Alston continued to be active in politics and was elected to commons each year between 1819 and 1824. He supported funds for internal improvements ^[15], led a movement to investigate the accounts of state treasurer John Haywood ^[16], launched a campaign to make state banks redeem their notes in specie, and became an active supporter of Calhoun for the presidency. It was during this period that he married for the second time, on 29 May 1817, and four of his five children were born.

In 1824, Hutchins G. Burton ^[17] resigned his Halifax District seat in Congress to become governor. Willis Alston and George Outlaw ^[18], supported by W. H. Crawford forces, entered a special election for the position, Outlaw winning by about two hundred votes.

Outlaw soon became ill, however, and in 1825, Alston regained his old seat. This time he served three terms (March 1825 to March 1831), opposing the tariff and staunchly supporting Calhoun. In 1828 he supported the Jackson-Calhoun ticket and was suggested by the Calhoun forces in the North Carolina assembly as their choice for governor. After Jackson's term began, Alston became chairman of the House Elections Committee; but with the split between Jackson and the Calhoun forces in 1831, Alston decided to give up his seat from Halifax in favor of his friend, John Branch ^[19], late secretary of the navy. During the 1832 presidential campaign, Alston was an elector on the ticket supporting Philip P. Barbour for vice-president against Jackson's candidate, Martin Van Buren; during the Nullification controversy, he was vocal in his support of South Carolina.

Alston was married twice, first to Pattie Moore of Halifax County ^[2] and second to Sarah (Sallie) Madeline Potts of Wilmington ^[20]. There were no children of the first marriage, but five were born of the second union: Charles; Ariellah, who married James B. Hawkins; Leonidas; Missouri, who married Archibald Davis Alston; and Edgar. Alston died in Halifax and was buried in the private burying ground at his plantation Butterwood, not far from where he was born.

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://aaahc.nc.gov/programs/africa-carolina-0> ^[21]. To read more about slavery and its history in North Carolina, visit <https://www.ncpedia.org/slavery> ^[22]. - Government and Heritage Library, 2023

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D. H. Gilpatrick, *Jeffersonian Democracy in North Carolina* (1931).

Perry M. Goldman and James S. Young, *The United States Congressional Directories, 1789–1840* (1973).

Joseph A. Groves, *The Alstons and Allstons of North and South Carolina* (1901).

W. S. Hoffmann, *Andrew Jackson and North Carolina Politics* (1971).

J. W. Moore, "Early Baptist Laymen in North Carolina," *Raleigh Biblical Recorder*, 14 Jan. 1891.

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Additional Resources:

"Willis Alston." *First Census of the United States 1790*. Edgecombe, Halifax, North Carolina. Series M637. Roll 7. Page 463. Family History Library Film 0568147. Accessed May 22, 2023 from Ancestry.com.

Willis Alston Letter, 28 April 1800, Collection Number: 01331-z, The Southern Historical Collection, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Libraries: <http://www.lib.unc.edu/mss/inv/a/Alston,Willis.html> [23]

Willis Alston in the Biographical Directoy of the United States Congress <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=A000167> [24]

"Willis Alston, Jr. 1769-1837." N.C. Highway Historical Marker E-66, 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=E-66> [25].

Subjects:

Biographies [26]

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Authors:

Mcfarland, Daniel M. [28]

Origin - location:

Halifax County [29]

From:

Dictionary of North Carolina Biography, University of North Carolina Press. [30]

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