

Atwater, John Wilbur ^[1]

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by John Macfie and Nell Atwater, 1979

27 Dec. 1840–4 July 1910

John Wilbur Atwater, U.S. congressman, state senator, and farmer, was born in the community of Farrington in eastern Chatham County ^[2], the son of Jahaza Atwater and Sally Stone. His grandfather, Moses Atwater, a saddler by trade, lived in southern Bingham Township of Orange County ^[3] but had extensive holdings in Baldwin and Williams townships of Chatham. Atwater genealogical records indicate that the progenitor of this family was David Atwater, one of the first planters of New Haven, Conn. He originally lived at Royton in the county of Kent, England, where the Atwaters had resided for generations. David came to New England in 1637 at the age of twenty-two and married Damaris Syare of Southampton, L.I. He occupied seat three of the First Church of Christ in New Haven. Its first building is said to have been erected on land once owned by Joshua Atwater, David's brother. According to family tradition, a direct descendant, Enos, left the Atwaters of New England for unknown reasons and settled in southern Orange County, where a son, Titus, father of Moses, purchased land in 1794 and 1796.

John W. Atwater attended local schools, including William Close Academy, and was about to enter college when the Civil War ^[4] broke out. He enlisted in the Confederate ^[5] army and served in Company D, First Regiment, North Carolina Volunteer Infantry; he was with General Robert E. Lee ^[6] until the surrender at Appomattox. He then returned to his farm. However, agriculture had fallen into a state of severe stagnation. The confiscation of livestock, emancipation of labor, low prices, and the crop-lien system ^[7] led to a sense of despair that eventually culminated in the formation of the Populist ^[8] party.

This was essentially an agrarian revolt against the restrictive credit policies of the times. The Populists had been preceded by the National Grange ^[9], which came to North Carolina in 1873, and which supported cooperative ventures and educational and social activities. It was followed by the Farmers' Alliance, with aims similar to those of the Grange but without the Grange's reluctance to enter political activity to get support in the legislature. Atwater joined the Alliance in 1887 and served two terms as president of the Chatham chapter. In 1890 he was elected a state senator as an Alliance Democrat. The radical wing of the Alliance, which included Atwater, subsequently became disillusioned and, abandoning all hope of support from the Democrats ^[10] and the Republicans ^[11], formed the People's or Populist party in 1892. At a convention held in August, 72 counties were represented by 495 delegates. They won three seats in each house. Among those elected to the senate was Atwater; he was reelected in 1896 and in 1898 was elected by the Populists to the U.S. Congress ^[12], where he served from March 1899 to March 1901. He was an unsuccessful candidate for reelection in 1900 and returned to farming.

Atwater was married first, in 1861, to Eugenia E. Farrington. Five children were born to them: Alfred Sidney, John Bunyan, Harriet Lee, Addie Susan, and William M. In 1883, Atwater married Alice Farrington; daughter, Lillian, died in infancy. In 1899, Atwater and Sophrina J. Baldwin were married.

Something of an omnivorous reader, Atwater gave most of his library to the public shortly before his death. He was a Methodist and Sunday school superintendent of the Mt. Pleasant Church of Chatham County and was interred in its cemetery.

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Origin - location:

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