

Townsend, Newman Alexander ^[1]

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by William S. Powell, 1996

1 May 1882–11 Apr. 1951

Newman Alexander Townsend, lawyer, legislator, judge, and federal official, was born in the community of [Raynham](#) ^[2], [Robeson County](#) ^[3], the son of the Reverend Jackson and Sarah Melissa Oliver Townsend. The Townsend family had emigrated from the parish of Raynham in Norfolk, England. He attended [Oak Ridge Military Institute](#) ^[4] and was



Image of Newman Alexander Townsend, from University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's Yackety Yack Yearbook, [p.31], published 1905 by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

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^[5]graduated from [The University of North Carolina](#) ^[6] in 1905, studied law there in 1905–6, and was admitted to the bar in February 1906. He was president of his senior class and, selected a member of the all-southern football team of 1904, was considered one of the greatest ends ever to attend the university. He began to practice law in [Dunn](#) ^[7], where he was mayor in 1911–12, town attorney during the period 1917–21, and represented [Harnett County](#) ^[8] in the General Assembly sessions of 1921, 1923, 1925, and 1927. From 1927 to 1930 he was a superior court judge and in 1930–31 served as executive counsel to Governor [O. Max Gardner](#) ^[9].

In 1934 Townsend went to Washington, D.C., as a special assistant attorney general of the United States to work with the assistant solicitor general in the Department of Justice and to organize a new office in that department to perform special tasks for the president. His principal duties pertained to executive orders, a position that brought him into association with President Franklin D. Roosevelt. The *New York Times*, for example, reported on 7 May 1939 that Townsend had conferred with Roosevelt on government reorganization. Although he intended to remain in this position for only six months, he stayed nine years. Among his most significant acts were negotiating acceptance of Paul Mellon's National Gallery of Art gift and preparing the legal argument that rationalized lend-lease in 1940. Apparently he also played a key role in the preparation of Roosevelt's deed of gift establishing the presidential library. Townsend was exceedingly modest about his role in Washington, and there was virtually no contemporary recognition of his contributions, nor did his name appear in the standard biographical volumes of the time. In 1944 Townsend joined the Washington law firm of Gardner, Morrison, and Rogers, of which he later became a partner. He married Myrtle Agnes Wade of Dunn in 1909, and they had three children: Newman A., Jr., Benjamin O., and Sarah Margaret. He died in Washington and was buried in Greenwood Cemetery, Dunn.

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