

Watts, Alston Davidson ^[1]

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by T. Harry Gatton, 1996

12 Mar. 1866–15 July 1927

Alston Davidson Watts, Democratic political leader, legislator, public official, and newspaper publisher, was born in Shiloh Township, [Iredell County](#) ^[2], near Statesville, the son of Margaret Morrison and Thomas Alexander Watts. His father was a sheriff of Iredell County (1874–88), and the Watts and Morrison families were early settlers of the region.

Watts attended Professor J. H. Hill's school in Statesville, briefly high school at Huntersville [Bingham School](#) ^[3] in Mebane, and [Davidson College](#) ^[4] in the class of 1887. Although he read law privately, he never applied for a license. Initially he held a number of clerkships in various county offices. Broadening his political horizon, he went in the early 1890s to Washington, D.C., as secretary to Representative [John S. Henderson](#) ^[5] of Salisbury. In 1897 he and James A. Hartness, later secretary of state, purchased the *Mascot*, a weekly newspaper in Statesville. For a number of years Watts devoted his attention to the paper, building a solid political base along with Hartness, Iredell's chief Democratic leader at that time.

He was elected to the state house of representatives in 1901 and 1903 and to the state senate in 1913. In the house he was the leader in the 1903 adoption of the Watts law, the harbinger of Prohibition. Not considered a moral issue but a popular political move, the idea did take on a moral appeal for the [Democratic party](#) ^[6]. Watts rapidly became one of the top figures in the political network of U.S. Senator [Furnifold Simmons](#) ^[7]. He was recognized for his organizational ability and early on became the target of anti-Simmons partisans. On 11 July 1913 he resigned his seat in the senate to become secretary to Simmons, as the partisan political wars were being waged in earnest between the Simmons and anti-Simmons groups. From his job with Simmons he was able to keep a tight hand on political patronage. Watts was described as the alter ego of the senior senator; his political knowledge was considered astute and his actions daring. Later President Woodrow Wilson appointed him collector of internal revenue for western North Carolina with headquarters in Statesville. After leaving that position, he established a tax auditing firm in Statesville in 1919.

Although Watts had been identified with the young politicians who returned the state to the Democratic party, his loyalties moved to the Simmons organization. He practiced the art of practical politics, possessed a unique ability to remember names and election statistics, and mastered detail and political technique. These qualities were helpful in electing [Cameron Morrison](#) ^[8] governor in 1920 over [O. Max Gardner](#) ^[9]. When the [General Assembly](#) ^[10] enacted legislation in 1921 creating the Department of Revenue, Morrison appointed Watts the first commissioner of revenue, effective 1 May. Watts served until personal scandal forced him to resign on 29 Jan. 1923. Early Sunday evening, 28 January, police made a surprise raid on his Fayetteville Street apartment, found a woman and others, and charged him with an indiscretion. Strongly defending his innocence, he refused to put the blame on others, handed his resignation to Governor Morrison, and returned to Statesville, where he was hospitalized. The incident was hailed by his opponents and condemned as a frame-up by his partisans. The *News and Observer* kept the episode alive. In defense of Watts, the *Greensboro Daily News* attacked his accusers and said that he was more honorable than they, noting his long service and record of honesty in financial affairs and his contributions to the Democratic party.

Watts did not lose the support of his political friends or the conservative leaders of his party, and he attended the [1924 Democratic National Convention](#) ^[11]. Although failing health restricted his activities, he continued his income tax business. When he died in the H. F. Long Sanatorium in Statesville at age sixty-one, the *Greensboro Daily News* published an obituary with a photograph on the front page, lauded his career, and noted that he "has for years been on his way to becoming a legendary figure." At his funeral were a majority of the state's top political figures, who recalled his career in the Democratic faith. Watts, who never married, was buried beside his parents in the New Sterling Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church cemetery in Shiloh Township, six miles west of Statesville.

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