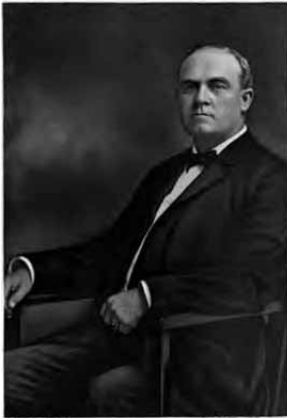


## **Adams, Spencer Bell** <sup>[1]</sup>

### **Adams, Spencer Bell**

by Joseph F. Steelman, 1979; Revised November 2022.

**15 Oct. 1860–12 Jan. 1943**



*Spencer B. Adams*

Spencer Adams. From  
Biographical history of North  
Carolina from colonial times to  
the present. Courtesy of the  
Internet Archive.

<sup>[2]</sup>Spencer Bell Adams, lawyer, judge, and Republican <sup>[3]</sup> party leader, was born near Dobson, in Surry County <sup>[4]</sup>, the son of John A. and Sara A. Adams, who came to North Carolina from Pittsylvania County, Va., in 1857 and purchased an estimated eleven thousand acres of land. The Adams family owned a large number of enslaved people. In politics, they opposed secession, supported the Whig party <sup>[5]</sup>, and in 1860 endorsed the Constitutional Union party led by John Bell of Tennessee. After the outbreak of the Civil War <sup>[6]</sup>, however, John A. Adams and his family supported the Confederate <sup>[7]</sup> cause. Spencer Bell Adams's father died in 1862, his mother in 1873. Thrown upon his own resources at an early age, Adams attended school at Riceville, Va., later enrolling in the Booneville Academy in Yadkin County <sup>[8]</sup> and subsequently in a private school in Rockingham County <sup>[9]</sup>. In 1881 he entered the Dick and Dillard law school in Greensboro <sup>[10]</sup>. In February 1882 he completed legal studies and was licensed to practice in the state courts.

Adams commenced his law practice in Yanceyville, Caswell County <sup>[11]</sup>. As a Republican party stalwart, he was elected clerk of the superior court and probate judge for Caswell County in 1882 and reelected in 1886, 1890, and 1894. In 1896 he resigned this office and was elected judge of the superior court. In this latter capacity, Adams handed down a notable decision in the case of *Wood v. Bellamy*, involving efforts of the Fusionists <sup>[12]</sup> (the coalition of Republicans and Populists) to abolish state institutional offices, recharter eleemosynary institutions under different names, and fill the vacated positions with political appointees. This action, Adams maintained, would subject state institutions to undue political pressure and interference; his decision was subsequently upheld by the state supreme court <sup>[13]</sup>. In 1898 Adams resigned as superior court judge to run for Congress in the fifth district, a Democratic <sup>[14]</sup> party stronghold. In this contest he was defeated by his Democratic opponent, William Walton Kitchin <sup>[15]</sup>. In the same year Adams moved to Greensboro <sup>[10]</sup> to practice law. He was chosen by Republicans as secretary and treasurer of the North Carolina Railroad <sup>[16]</sup>, a position he filled from 1899 to 1901.

In May 1900, the Republican state convention nominated Adams as its gubernatorial candidate to oppose Charles B. Aycock <sup>[17]</sup>. The Republican losses of 1898 and the white supremacy violence of the Red Shirts <sup>[18]</sup> and the Wilmington Coup <sup>[19]</sup> and the suffrage amendment <sup>[20]</sup> presaged defeat. However, Adams's receipt of over 125,000 votes and his successful pressure on Aycock to take a more forthright stand on the issue of public education indicate that he managed a creditable campaign. President Theodore Roosevelt <sup>[21]</sup> appointed Adams chief judge of the Choctaw and Chickasaw Citizenship Court in the Indian Territory in July 1902. This court completed its work at the end of 1904, and Adams returned to Greensboro to resume his legal practice.

In 1905 Adams became involved in a bitter factional dispute in Republican ranks that involved state chairman Thomas S. Rollins and former United States Senator Marion Butler <sup>[22]</sup>, who were pitted against Congressman Edmond Spencer Blackburn <sup>[23]</sup>. The strategy of the Rollins, Butler, and Adams faction involved the resignation of Rollins as state chairman

and his replacement by Adams. Subsequently, Adams was chosen over Spencer Blackburn as state chairman in the 1906 Republican state convention in Greensboro. The faction to which Adams belonged was believed to represent the established leadership of the party and was strongly endorsed by the *Daily Industrial News* <sup>[24]</sup> of Greensboro. Adams maintained that as chairman he augmented party membership, and the congressional and state races of 1908 attested to formidable gains in the Republican vote. In 1910 Adams was replaced as Republican state chairman by John Motley Morehead <sup>[25]</sup> of Charlotte <sup>[26]</sup>. Presumably Morehead's election represented a change from the old office broker leadership to the new business and industrial spokesman. Adams was a North Carolina delegate in the Republican National Convention of 1900 and served as a delegate-at-large and member of the platform committee in the 1908 national convention.

Adams continued to practice law in Greensboro. His colleagues took note that during a long career as attorney he frequently represented the oppressed and underprivileged.

Adams combined an interest in farming with his professional and political activities. For many years he operated a stock farm in eastern Guilford County <sup>[27]</sup>. In 1917 he sold this farm and purchased another near Whitsett, known as Wildwood Stock Farm, where he raised shorthorn cattle and Berkshire hogs.

In 1894 Adams married Lizzie L. Swift. Six children, four daughters and two sons, were born to this union. When Adams died, he was survived by three daughters. He was buried on 15 Jan. 1943 in Green Hill Cemetery in Greensboro.

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## Additional Resources:

Finding Aid of the Adams and Swift Family Papers, 1856-1928, NC Office of Archives & History: [http://ead.archives.ncdcr.gov/PC\\_1764\\_Adams\\_and\\_Swift\\_Family\\_.html](http://ead.archives.ncdcr.gov/PC_1764_Adams_and_Swift_Family_.html) <sup>[28]</sup>

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Marion Butler Papers, 1862-1938 (collection no. 00114). The Southern Historical Collection. Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. <http://www.lib.unc.edu/mss/inv/b/Butler,Marion.html> <sup>[29]</sup> (accessed January 15, 2013).

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## Subjects:

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Judges <sup>[31]</sup>

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Public officials <sup>[33]</sup>

## Authors:

Steelman, Joseph F. <sup>[34]</sup>

## Origin - location:

Guilford County <sup>[35]</sup>

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