

Alston, Lemuel James ^[1]

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Alston, Lemuel James

by Timothy J. Wiest, 1979

1760–1836

Lemuel James Alston, U.S. congressman and jurist, was the son of Solomon, Jr., and Sarah Alston of Granville (now Warren) County. His great-grandfather [John Alston](#) ^[2] had emigrated from Bedfordshire, England, by 1711; he founded one of the two colonial branches of Alstons in the Carolinas. Solomon Alston died by the time his son was eleven years old, but nothing else is known of Lemuel's boyhood. Shortly after the [Revolutionary War](#) ^[3], Lemuel moved to Greens Mill, S.C., where he invested in real estate and established a law practice.

In 1786, Alston received at least one grant of 418 acres of land in the vicinity of Greens Mill from South Carolina Governor [William Moultrie](#) ^[4]. Within a short time, he acquired several other tracts, securing the most extensive landholdings in the area. His division of property into lots for resale, "Alston's Plat," became the basis for the city of Greenville.

As a lawyer and one of the area's leading citizens, he won election to the [U.S. House of Representatives](#) ^[5] in 1806 and reelection two years later. In the national capital he boarded with a distant cousin, [Willis Alston](#) ^[6], a long-term North Carolina congressman. Both tended to support the Jeffersonian majority, but Lemuel retained enough independence to vote against that majority and against his more powerful cousin on some issues. The South Carolina representative's career in the House was undistinguished. He abstained from active participation in floor debate. Like most Jeffersonians, he voted for the [Embargo Act of 1807](#) ^[7], the [Nonintercourse Act of 1809](#) ^[8], and [Macon's Bill No. 2](#) in 1810 ^[9], dependably supporting their basic propositions through all phases of debate. His voting record indicates a willingness to uphold most measures designed to maintain and occasionally increase U.S. defenses, but he seems to have refrained from belligerent hostility to either Great Britain or France. On one other significant issue, southwestward expansion, Alston's position suggests that he personally was already casting a longing eye toward expansion: he consistently supported the organization of Orleans Territory for statehood. In his only vote against expansionism, he opposed agreement with a Senate proposal restricting the rights of free blacks in Orleans Territory. His attitude toward blacks may have been ambivalent, however; when the vote was retaken, he reversed his position.

After serving his second term he lost his seat to his immediate predecessor, Elias Earle, in 1810. Five years later, by rumor still rancorous over his constituents' rejection, Alston sold his remaining 11,028 acres of Greenville real estate to another North Carolina native son, [Vardry McBee](#) ^[10], and moved southwest, relocating in Grove Hill in the Alabama Territory. He immediately assumed prominence there, presiding over both the Clarke County orphans' court and the county court from 1816 to 1821. After 1821 he withdrew from public life, retiring to Alston Place in Clarke County, where he died at the age of seventy-six.

Alston was married twice, first to Elizabeth Williams, and then, after her death, to another Elizabeth Williams, the widow of his first wife's half brother, Joseph Williams. He fathered eight children, all by the second Elizabeth; only four survived infancy. His only direct descendants were born to his son William Williams.

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

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Biographical Directory of the United States Congress:<http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=A000165>

^[1]

The Alstons and Allstons of North and South Carolina; (1901), The Internet Archive:
<https://archive.org/stream/alstonsallstonso03grov#page/n7/mode/2up> ^[12]

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