Alston, Louis Watson [1]

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by Claiborne T. Smith, Jr., 1979

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Louis Watson Alston, philanthropist, was born at Maple Cottage in the southeastern part of Warren County [2], known from early times as "the Fork." The youngest of the eight children of Philip Guston Alston and his wife, Jane Crichton, he grew up on inherited lands that his ancestor, Philip Alston, son of the immigrant John Alston [3] of Chowan, began purchasing in 1760, part of the "Clun Seat" tract of ten thousand acres. Succeeding generations of the Alston family had made this a thickly settled rural neighborhood with a web of interlocking relationships. Before the Civil War [4], it was one of the most opulent sections of the state. Post-Reconstruction poverty was accordingly more marked here, and Louis Alston often spoke of those difficult times.

The boy's mother died when he was nine years old, and he then made his home with his oldest sister, Mrs. Archibald Davis Williams, at Linwood in Franklin County [5]. His father married as his second wife Mrs. Lucy McColl Roper and moved to Marlboro County, S.C. Louis Alston attended the famous Graham School in Warrenton and then was graduated from the Atlanta Dental College.

Influenced by his father's residence in South Carolina, Dr. Alston settled in Camden, S.C., to practice. Here he met and married Charlotte Niven McKinney, member of a wealthy Binghamton, N.Y., family. Her parents, William Allison McKinney and Mary Elizabeth Niven, had wintered in Camden for many years.

After marriage in 1913, the Alstons went to live in Savannah. In 1916 they moved to Morganton, N.C., where Dr. Alston practiced his profession and began to raise flowers commercially. As time passed, he devoted less and less time to dentistry. Mrs. Alston eventually inherited a large estate, and as a consequence Dr. Alston found himself increasingly involved in business affairs. Twins were born to the Alstons, one of whom, Robert Niven, died in infancy. As the surviving child, Mary Niven, grew older, her parents spent the winters in Baltimore, both to be near her school and to provide her with the stimulus of urban life. The pattern thus established lasted the rest of their lives; they lived in an apartment in Baltimore in winter and in their Morganton house in summer.

Throughout his life, Alston was a devoted communicant of the Episcopal [6] church. As a boy living in the country and later as a student, Emmanuel Church in Warrenton came to be the focus of his religious life. In Baltimore, he attended the Cathedral of the Incarnation both because it was near his apartment and also because, being near Johns Hopkins [7], the parish had developed a ministry to college students and faculty in which he had a particular interest. The church was a major recipient of Alston's philanthropy. The Baltimore cathedral, Grace Church, in Morganton and his childhood parish in Warrenton received substantial help from him.

There are numerous examples of Alston's personal and often, as befitted a modest man, anonymous philanthropy. During World War II [8], he was profoundly troubled by the privations of the English clergy. He had read some of the works of Dr. S. C. Carpenter, dean of Exeter [9], and admired them, and he made the dean a number of practical gifts designed to make life a bit easier during the war years. For a long period, Alston saw to it that certain elderly and impecunious persons whom he had known as a child were provided with funds for some of the comforts as well as the necessities of life.

No doubt influenced by boyhood instruction from his sister, Alston maintained a lifelong interest in nature and the cultivation of the soil. He once commented to a friend that the only two worthwhile occupations were medicine and farming, in the sense of improving the land. His knowledge of botany was vast, especially of the trees, shrubs, and flowers of his native North Carolina. He was also interested in birds, and his library contained a complete set of Audubon's *Birds of America*, the earlier works of Alexander Wilson [10], and a fine set of the works of the eighteenth-century Englishman John Albin.

Alston died in Baltimore. By his will the bulk of his estate was divided into five equal parts among the University of the South [11] and the dioceses of North Carolina, East Carolina, Western North Carolina, and Central New York. In each instance the principal of the gift was to be invested, and Alston specified the uses to which the income was to be put. In the case of the University of the South, the income was to be used for its School of Theology [12]. The diocesan bequests stipulated that the income be used for theological education, work among college students, and supplementation to the salaries of the lower paid clergy. The diocese of Western North Carolina was also required to provide assistance to the aged and infirm.

Alston's daughter, a musician and novelist (under the penname Marian Niven), resides in New York.

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Additional Resources:

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