

Hill, Joseph Alston ^[1]

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by William A. Blount Stewart, 1988

1800–35

Joseph Alston Hill, orator and lawyer, was the younger son of [William Henry Hill](#) ^[2] (1767–1808) and his wife Eliza Ashe, the daughter of General [John Ashe](#) ^[3] (1720–81) and Rebecca Moore Ashe, who was the daughter of Colone [Maurice Moore](#) ^[4] and the sister of General [James Moore](#) ^[5] and Judge Maurice Moore. Hill was born at Hilton, his father's residence on the Cape Fear near Wilmington. He was named for Governor Joseph Alston, his first cousin, the son of his aunt Mary Ashe and William Alston of Waccamaw, S.C.

William Henry Hill, Joseph's father, represented the Wilmington district in Congress from 1799 to 1803. He was the son of William Hill, the ancestor of the distinguished family of that name on the Cape Fear. [William Hill](#) ^[6], the father, was a native of Boston and a graduate of Harvard in 1756. He had come to North Carolina because of his health and settled at Brunswick, where he taught school and married Margaret Moore, daughter of Nathaniel Moore. His oldest son, John, was an original member of the [Society of the Cincinnati](#) ^[7], having taken part in the Battle of Eutaw Springs as a lieutenant in the Fourth Regiment, North Carolina Continental Line. His other son, William Henry Hill, was appointed by President George Washington as U.S. district attorney. He served in the Sixth and Seventh Congresses when party feeling ran deep and bitter, because, for the first time, the election of president in 1801 was thrown into the House of Representatives. William Henry Hill voted with Henderson, Grove, and Dickson for Aaron Burr against Alston, Stone, Stanford, Mason, and Spaight for Thomas Jefferson. (Hill's nephew was Governor Joseph Alston of South Carolina who married Theodosia Burr, the only daughter of Aaron Burr.) A [Federalist](#) ^[8], Hill was appointed judge of the United States District Court for the District of North Carolina by President John Adams at the close of his term, but the designation was withdrawn by President Jefferson. Hill returned to Hilton, his home near Wilmington, where he died at age forty-two.

Joseph Alston Hill was nine when his father died, and his mother immediately directed his education. He was graduated from Yale College and trained for the bar at the celebrated Litchfield Law School. He came to the bar with a mind probably better disciplined than any man who had preceded him in North Carolina. He seems to have inherited rare oratorical powers from his grandfather, General John Ashe, one of the most influential political leaders of the colony who was a member of the [Committee of Correspondence](#) ^[9] (1773) and, earlier, speaker of the North Carolina Assembly (1762–63); he died in Continental service on 4 Oct. 1781. (Ashe was the son of [John Baptista Ashe](#) ^[10], prominent in the colonial annals of North Carolina, and his wife Elizabeth Swann, daughter of Speaker [Samuel Swann](#) ^[11] and Elizabeth Lillington Swann.)

In the Internal Improvement Convention at Raleigh in 1833, when he debated the ablest men of the state, Hill carried—over great opposition—all the resolutions he submitted. According to tradition, so remarkable was his ability in these debates that his claim to leadership was generally, if not universally, conceded. At the time Judge [William Gaston](#) ^[12] pronounced Hill the most brilliant man of his age in North Carolina.

Hill had served in the North Carolina legislature in 1826, 1827, and 1830. He died a young man, but one who had developed extraordinary talents.

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From:

Dictionary of North Carolina Biography, University of North Carolina Press. [22]

1 January 1988 | Stewart, W. A. Blount

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