

Holton, Alfred Eugene ^[1]

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Holton, Alfred Eugene

by Gordon B. McKinney, 1988

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Alfred Eugene Holton, lawyer and [Republican](#) ^[2] political leader, was one of eight children of Quinton and Harriet Holland Holton. He was born near Jamestown, [Guilford County](#) ^[3], into a most unusual family that shaped his life. His father was a farmer and a Methodist Protestant minister. The Methodist Protestants had left the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, to protest acceptance of slavery as church doctrine. During the [Civil War](#) ^[4], the elder Holton apparently served as the state moderator for the Methodist Protestants but was prevented from preaching himself because of his criticism of slavery. Thus, A. Eugene grew up in Iredell and Yadkin counties a confirmed Methodist, but he was also a member of a family that rejected many of the dominant ideas found in North Carolina at the time.

The family also directed young Holton into his career. His early legal training came from his grandfather, Jesse Holton, and his father. According to family tradition, Quinton Holton trained aspiring lawyers and several hundred young men read under his direction. The Holton children were reputed to have walked around with copies of Blackstone under their arms. Four of them became lawyers: A. Eugene ^[5], Samuel, John Q., and their sister [Tabitha](#) ^[5]—the first woman licensed to practice law in North Carolina.

After some formal education in the Iredell and Yadkin public schools and a brief experiment as a schoolteacher in [Iredell County](#) ^[6], Holton began the career his family had chosen for him. He studied the law further with Judge [Albion W. Tourgée](#) ^[7] of Greensboro and received his license to practice in 1874. The fact that Tourgée was a staunch Republican indicates that Holton had followed his father's lead in opposing the dominant political forces of his time. For most of the next two decades he was a law partner of Mann Reece in [Yadkin County](#) ^[8]. In 1880 and 1882, he was elected as a Republican to represent that county in the North Carolina House of Representatives.

In December 1891 Holton married Mary Elizabeth Petty of Guilford County. They continued a family tradition by having a large number of children. There were twelve in all and they all survived to maturity, including George R., Frank P., Mary, John W., Harriet H., Elizabeth P., Theodore R., A. Eugene, Jr., Eleanor, David M., Walter, and Rebecca.

With the appearance of the [Populist party](#) ^[9] in North Carolina politics in 1892, Holton again became active in the Republican party, this time as a leader among Republicans who tried to bring about [fusion](#) ^[10] between their party and the Populists. In the summer of 1894, he was elected chairman of the Republican state committee. He was startled to find that in "some counties we had no organization" and worked diligently to correct the situation. The fusion victory in the fall elections gave Holton great prominence, and he became a candidate for the U.S. Senate. He ran as a traditional Republican against [Jeter C. Pritchard](#) ^[11], who had endorsed free silver and had worked closely with Populist leader [Marion Butler](#) ^[12]. At the Republican legislative caucus in January 1895, Pritchard defeated Holton by a vote of 30 to 18 and was subsequently elected to the Senate.

Although disappointed by this reversal, Holton continued to work hard as state chairman. He aligned himself with Congressman Thomas Settle III in an effort to block Pritchard's domination of the party organization. He supported the gold standard and Speaker of the House Thomas B. Reed for president in 1896, when Pritchard worked for free silver and William McKinley. Holton readily accepted McKinley's nomination when the national convention rejected free silver. He then helped to maneuver the Republicans into a complex legislative fusion arrangement in 1896 that allowed the Populists and Republicans to retain control of the state legislature and brought about the election of Republican [Daniel L. Russell](#) ^[13] as governor of North Carolina. In 1896 he also moved to Waughtown near Salem and formed a law partnership with Major J. E. Alexander that lasted until 1902.

As a reward for his services—and probably because Senator Pritchard wanted to remove a dangerous rival from active politics—Holton was appointed U.S. district attorney for the Western District of North Carolina by President McKinley in 1897. He held this position continuously for seventeen years until he was replaced in the spring of 1914 by a Democrat nominated by President Woodrow Wilson. Holton had an excellent record in office and won universal respect for his impartiality by sentencing Republican officeholders to long prison terms for abusing their public trusts. Theodore Roosevelt once remarked "that no man in the United States had a better record as District Attorney than Gene Holton of North Carolina."

After leaving office, Holton remained active in Winston-Salem. He formed a law firm with his son George that would last until his death. He was also the founder and president of the Forsyth Roller Mills, which was started to help local grain farmers. At the same time, he was named to the boards of directors of several banks and businesses. In May 1928, he suffered a severe stroke and lost consciousness. He never recovered and was buried at the Springfield Friend's Church in Guilford County. Holton was an excellent example of a white North Carolinian who became an active Republican. His family background inclined him towards unorthodox politics and a legal career. He never deviated from that pattern and performed his work with dedication and a high degree of skill.

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