

## Graham, William Alexander <sup>[1]</sup>



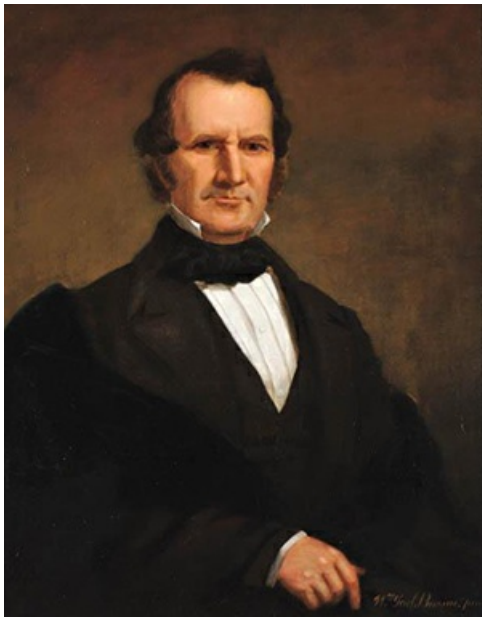
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## Graham, William Alexander

by Max R. Williams, 1986

**5 Sept. 1804–11 Aug. 1875**

See also: [William Alexander Graham](#) <sup>[2]</sup>, Research Branch, NC Office of Archives and History,



Portrait of William Alexander Graham by William Garl Browne, circa 1845-1875. Image from the North Carolina Museum of History.

<sup>[3]</sup>William Alexander Graham, lawyer, planter, and governor, was the eleventh child and youngest son of Joseph and Isabella Davidson Graham. He was born on Vesuvius Plantation, the family home in eastern [Lincoln County](#) <sup>[4]</sup>. Both parents were staunch Presbyterians of Scotch-Irish ancestry; their progenitors had migrated first to western Pennsylvania before resettling in the more congenial climate of [Mecklenburg County](#) <sup>[5]</sup>. An iron entrepreneur and sometime public servant, [Joseph Graham](#) <sup>[6]</sup> (1759–1836) had achieved local fame as a young but dedicated Revolutionary officer. Isabella Davidson Graham (1762–1808) was the accomplished daughter of the John Davidsons whose Mecklenburg home, Rural Hill, was renowned as a seat of gracious living. [John Davidson](#) <sup>[7]</sup>, himself a Revolutionary patriot, was a substantial farmer and practical blacksmith who, with his sons-in-law [Alexander Brevard](#) <sup>[8]</sup> and Joseph Graham, pioneered the Catawba River valley [iron industry](#) <sup>[9]</sup>. The Grahams and Davidsons were noted for their sagacity, frugality, diligence, and public spirit. William A. Graham embodied these familial traits.

Under the supervision of a devoted father, now a widower, young Graham enjoyed the pleasures of a rural boyhood, learned the rudiments of plantation and furnace management, and prepared for a professional career. He attended classical schools in nearby Lincolnton and Statesville before completing preparatory education in the [Hillsborough Academy](#) <sup>[10]</sup>. In January 1821, after an examination by Professor [William Hooper](#) <sup>[11]</sup>, he was admitted to [The University of North Carolina](#) <sup>[12]</sup>. An active member of the Dialectic Society, Graham was an able, industrious student who shared first honors in the distinguished class of 1824.

Subsequently, as was customary for aspiring lawyers in that day, he studied with an established attorney. Graham's mentor was the eminent [Thomas Ruffin](#) <sup>[13]</sup>, of [Orange County](#) <sup>[14]</sup>, who later became an outstanding jurist and chief justice of the [North Carolina Supreme Court](#) <sup>[15]</sup>. By March 1828, having received county and superior court licenses, Graham had established a practice as a member of the highly competitive Hillsborough legal community. Within a few years he became one of the more successful members of the North Carolina bar, maintaining a lucrative practice until his death. In time he owned three plantations worked by slave labor, although agriculture was never his primary interest.

It was always necessary that Graham earn a livelihood for himself and his numerous family, but clearly the law and agriculture were secondary in importance to his abiding preoccupation with public affairs. Prompted by a sense of noblesse oblige, he entered public life in the early 1830s just as new political alignments were emerging. Graham joined

with other opponents of [Andrew Jackson](#) <sup>[16]</sup> to form the [Whig party](#) <sup>[17]</sup>. Associated with the Federal wing of that party in the state and nationally, he embraced Henry Clay's American System—supporting a national bank, a judicious tariff, federally financed [internal improvements](#) <sup>[18]</sup>, and the distribution of excess treasury funds to the states. Despite the vicissitudes of sectional controversy and political change, he remained a conservative but ardent Unionist. However, with other Southern Unionists, he was destined to experience grave disappointments as [secession](#) <sup>[19]</sup>, [Civil War](#) <sup>[20]</sup>, and [Reconstruction](#) <sup>[21]</sup> became realities.

If officeholding is any criterion, few North Carolinians have enjoyed public confidence for so long as Graham. This fact is more notable because his aristocratic bearing seems incompatible with the rise of democracy which paralleled his years in politics. He was borough representative from Hillsborough in the legislatures of 1833, 1834, and 1835; and, after the constitutional reforms of 1835, he represented Orange County as a member of the House of Commons in the 1836, 1838, and 1840 legislative sessions. He was speaker of the House of Commons in the latter two sessions. From December 1840 to March 1843, he represented North Carolina in the U.S. Senate. There he generally supported Clay in his dispute with "His Accidency," President John Tyler, but not to the extent of endangering the national Whig party. Displaced by a Democratic legislature elected in 1842, Graham ran successfully for governor in 1844, defeating [Michael Hoke](#) <sup>[22]</sup>, a formidable western Democrat. He was easily reelected in 1846. Thus he was North Carolina's governor from January 1845 to January 1849. Much of his attention was absorbed by the [Mexican War](#) <sup>[23]</sup>, of which he disapproved; nevertheless, Governor Graham supported the national commitment and raised and officered a politically controversial North Carolina regiment. An able administrator, his governorship was characterized by concern for humanitarian causes and internal improvements, especially railroad development.

After declining European diplomatic appointments offered by Zachary Taylor, Graham agreed to become secretary of the navy in July 1850, when Millard Fillmore formed a cabinet that supported the proposed compromise measures then before Congress. Initially his role was largely political, as he promoted passage and acceptance of the Compromise of 1850. He viewed the compromise as the final resolution of long-standing sectional controversies. To both North and South he advocated moderation, advising the North that faithful execution of the Fugitive Slave Law was essential to perpetuation of the Union. Although he knew little of naval affairs and never fully grasped the significance of contemporary technological advances, Graham was an experienced administrator. He relied heavily on knowledgeable advisers such as career officer [Matthew Fontaine Maury](#) <sup>[24]</sup>. Secretary Graham was the moving spirit in several notable activities including a constructive program of personnel reforms, exploration of the Amazon basin, and the Perry expedition to Japan. The authoritative naval historian [Samuel Eliot Morison](#) <sup>[25]</sup> has characterized Graham as one of the best navy secretaries in the nineteenth century.



Presidential campaign poster for the Whig Party, 1852, with portraits of Winfield Scott and William Alexander Graham. Image from the North Carolina Museum of History.

<sup>[26]</sup>In the summer of 1852, the Whig party nominated Winfield Scott and William A. Graham as its presidential and vice-presidential candidates, respectively. Although Graham, with most Southerners, preferred Fillmore, he sought to reassure the South that Scott was sound on the slavery question. He failed. Scott carried only four states as Democrat Franklin Pierce even outpolled the Whig ticket in North Carolina by a narrow margin. This campaign, which revealed a fatal internal division, presaged the demise of the national Whig party. Northern and Southern Whigs had diverged irrevocably because of the moral dilemma over slavery. A disappointed Graham resettled in Hillsborough and sought to provide educational and social opportunities for his maturing progeny. He served in the North Carolina Senate of 1854, but declined other requests in the 1850s that he seek office. However, he refused to abandon his Whig principles, avoiding the temptation to join many political friends in the [American party](#) <sup>[27]</sup>. Not until 1860, in the desperate crisis of a "house dividing," did he acknowledge the futility of Whiggery. Then he united with conservative

men of all sections in founding and promoting the Constitutional Union party. The hope that moderate candidates might be elected proved vain. In December 1860, James Alexander Hamilton of New York made an abortive appeal to the Pennsylvania presidential electors that they vote for Graham for president as a possible means of preserving the Republic.

After the election of Abraham Lincoln, Graham, who was sounded unofficially about a post in the new cabinet, counseled patience and conciliation. He urged North Carolinians to rely on the Constitution as a sufficient guarantor of their rights, advising that there would be time enough to seek proper remedies after an overt, illegal action by the national government. In February 1861, with the Confederacy a reality, Graham led Union men in defeating a statewide referendum to call a convention to consider disunion. However, after the firing on Fort Sumter and Lincoln's call for troops, he accepted the inevitable, declaring that "blood was thicker than water." Although he abhorred secession, he was overwhelmingly elected to represent Orange County in the Constitutional Convention of May 1861. In opposition to the original secessionists, now in the ascendancy, Graham stood unsuccessfully for the convention presidency and supported an abortive resolution upholding the right of revolution as the appropriate response to tyranny. Only when there seemed no honorable alternative did William A. Graham cast his vote for secession.

Having done his best to prevent disunion, Graham supported the Confederate cause to the extent his principles allowed. With [Thomas Ruffin](#) <sup>[13]</sup>, he negotiated the terms by which North Carolina would enter the Confederate States of America; and he remained an active participant in the deliberations of the Convention. But the Civil War was troublesome to him and to many other Southern Unionists. On the one hand, five of his sons were Confederate officers and innumerable relatives and friends were involved militarily. (Three nieces were married to Confederate generals "Stonewall" Jackson, [Daniel Harvey Hill](#) <sup>[28]</sup>, and Rufus Barringer.) Their commitments had to be adequately sustained by his political and economic efforts; but, on the other hand, the rights of the states and the citizenry had to be protected against the encroachments of a government at war. Herein lay the fatal flaw—how could a nation predicated on state sovereignty command the unity necessary to win the war? Graham became the champion of personal liberties, constitutional government, and [states' rights](#) <sup>[29]</sup>. As such, he was a frequent critic of the Davis administration. He sometimes found himself in strange company. He was allied with old-line Whigs, Americans, and former southern rights Democrats—most surprisingly, perhaps, his erstwhile adversary William W. Holden.

In the spring of 1862, in order to replace Governor [John W. Ellis](#) <sup>[30]</sup> who had died in office the previous July, Holden, indefatigable editor of the *North Carolina Standard*, encouraged Graham to run for governor and praised him in extravagant terms editorially. Graham declined, but joined Holden and many old Unionists in electing the popular [Zebulon B. Vance](#) <sup>[31]</sup>. Subsequently, he and Holden were among Vance's most intimate advisers. Eventually the three men diverged in their views, and each came to represent a discernible segment of North Carolina opinion. While protecting the state's interests, Vance became convinced that honor required a fight to the finish. Meanwhile, by the summer of 1863, Holden was disenchanted to the extent of promoting a movement looking to separate peace initiatives by individual states. Both men sought the endorsement of Graham, who publicly affirmed confidence in Vance. Nevertheless, by 1864 Graham, now a Confederate senator and an open opponent of the Davis government, hoped earnestly for a negotiated peace based on the *status quo ante bellum*. He was a moving spirit in the fruitless Hampton Roads Conference of 3 Feb. 1865. He favored reunion over independence but balked at talk of emancipation. His conservative racial views caused him to oppose the enlistment of slaves in Confederate armies. If slavery and the accompanying social system were abolished, he believed, all was lost.

When the end was in sight, Graham left Richmond to warn Vance that the Confederacy was collapsing and to advise that North Carolina should look to its own interests. Vance demurred but authorized Graham and [David L. Swain](#) <sup>[32]</sup> to surrender Raleigh to William T. Sherman, whose armies menaced the capital. This they did, though some North Carolinians never fully understood their motives. Years later, after both Swain and Graham were dead, Vance disparaged their realistic service to the state.



Portrait of Susannah Sarah Washington Graham, wife of governor William Alexander Graham, by William Garl Browne, 1855. Image from the North Carolina Museum of History.

<sup>[33]</sup>Reconstruction <sup>[21]</sup> was particularly frustrating for Graham. He felt as though he and other former Unionists should be quickly rehabilitated politically so as to lead in the process of reunion. Instead, because of his service to the Confederacy, he was forced to apply for pardon—necessarily seeking the endorsement of William W. Holden <sup>[34]</sup>, now provisional governor of North Carolina. His pardon application of July 1865 revealed the plight of Southerners who had worked to preserve the Union until they saw no honorable alternative. But, ironically, Holden, the erstwhile secessionist turned peacenik, was in a commanding position. Graham's pardon was delayed on the pretense that he was inopportunistically critical of presidential Reconstruction. Nevertheless, he was elected to the state senate in November 1865, but declined to be seated before his pardon. In early December the legislature elected him to the U.S. Senate. He presented his credentials to that body, having been assured that admission to Congress would automatically result in the full restoration of his citizenship. But he, with others elected under the Johnson <sup>[35]</sup> Reconstruction plan, was denied his seat. Congress had begun to assume direction of the Reconstruction process. Needless to say, the Congressional Reconstruction acts, the activities of the Union League <sup>[36]</sup>, the organization of the Republican party, the measures adopted by the Constitutional Convention of 1868 <sup>[37]</sup>, and the election of Holden as governor galvanized Graham's opposition to imposed reunion, which he considered grossly unjust. Universal manhood suffrage for blacks, whom he deemed unprepared for full political responsibilities, was particularly galling to Graham whose own disabilities prevented him from voting and holding office. He became an outspoken advocate of the conservative position and of white supremacy. Although he never held public office after 1865 (his disabilities were not removed until 1873), William A. Graham was a leader of the redemption movement in North Carolina. Except for his role as a prosecutor in the impeachment trial that removed Holden from office in March 1871, his influence was manifest in the activities of old friends and younger men, especially his son John W. Graham <sup>[38]</sup>, Plato Durham <sup>[39]</sup>, and the fiery Josiah Turner, Jr. <sup>[40]</sup> An advocate of further constitutional reform, he was elected a delegate to the Constitutional Convention of 1875 <sup>[41]</sup>, but died before it assembled.

Ironically, Graham's national reputation was more easily regained. He carried on an extensive correspondence and was evidently widely esteemed. In 1867, he was appointed to the original board of Peabody Fund <sup>[42]</sup> Trustees and served faithfully in that capacity until his death. He was also on the arbitration commission to settle the Virginia-Maryland boundary dispute, and by 1875 he had become the principal figure in the long-delayed deliberations of that group.



A photograph of William Alexander Graham and his seven sons, May 20, 1875. Image from the North Carolina Museum of History.

<sup>[43]</sup>On 8 June 1836, Graham married Susannah Sarah Washington (1816–90), daughter of John and Elizabeth Heritage Cobb Washington of New Bern. Their long union was felicitous and productive. The Grahams had ten children, eight of whom survived both parents. Their offspring were Joseph <sup>[6]</sup> (1837–

1907), John Washington [38] (1838–1928), William Alexander [44] (1839–1924), James Augustus (1841–1909), Robert Davidson [45] (1843–1904), George Washington (1847–1923), Augustus Washington [46] (1849–1936), Susan Washington (1851–1909), Alfred Octavius (1853–54), and Eugene Berrien (1858–63). All who survived childhood were afforded an excellent education and achieved notable careers in their own right. Four sons were attorneys, two were physicians, and one—William Alexander, Jr.—was a planter and North Carolina commissioner of agriculture. Susan Washington Graham married Judge Walter Clark [47].

Graham died unexpectedly at Saratoga Springs, N.Y., where he had gone to attend a meeting of the Virginia-Maryland Arbitration Commission. He was buried in the cemetery adjacent to the Hillsborough Presbyterian Church. His memory is perpetuated in the name of a small city in Alamance County [48] and a county [49] in western North Carolina. A marble bust of Graham [50] adorns the capitol building in Raleigh and an oil portrait by William Garl Browne [3] hangs in the Museum of History, Raleigh.

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