

Odell, James Alexander ^[1]

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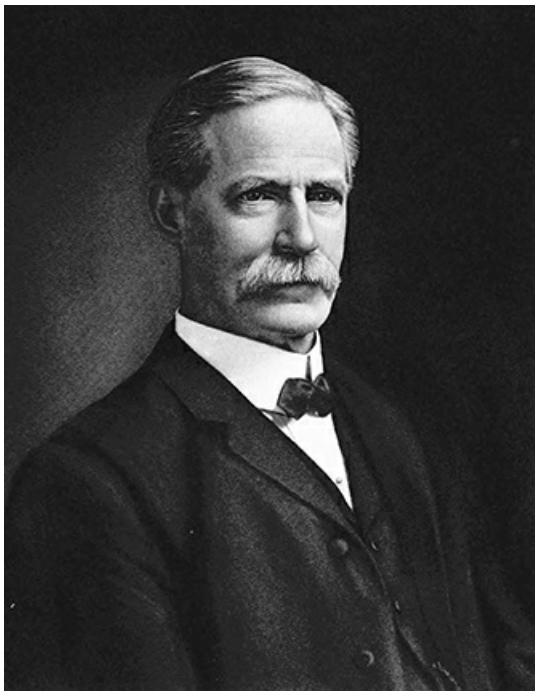


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Odell, James Alexander

by Tom E. Terrill, 1991

4 Nov. 1841–10 Feb. 1930



A 1905 engraving of James Alexander Odell.
Image from [Archive.org](#).

^[2]James Alexander Odell, merchant and business leader, was born at Cedar Falls, [Randolph County](#) ^[3], the son of James, a farmer, and Anna Trogden Odell. After completing his studies at Middleton Academy in his native county, Odell opened a general merchandise store at Cedar Falls in 1865. In 1868 he moved to [High Point](#) ^[4], where he started and operated a similar store. In 1872 Odell, his brother, John M., who became a prominent textile manufacturer in Concord, and W. H. Ragan founded a general merchandise store in [Greensboro](#) ^[5]. Gradually they shifted to hardware, and in 1884 the Odell Hardware Company, one of the largest of its kind in the South, was incorporated. Odell served as president of the firm until 1912, when he retired and assumed the duties of chairman of the board of directors, a position he held until his death.

With [John M. Odell](#) ^[6] and [Julian Carr](#) ^[7], he also founded the Durham Cotton Manufacturing Company; the first cotton mill in Durham, it opened in 1884 with 224 looms and 8,600 spindles. James A. Odell was president of the company for two years, then a stockholder and a director. In addition, he was vice-president of the Odell Manufacturing Company in Concord and the Five Cent Savings Bank of Greensboro, director of the Piedmont Bank, president of the Mount Airy Granite Company, stockholder and director of the Kerr Bag Manufacturing Company of Concord, and stockholder of the Morgan and Hampton Company in Nashville, Tenn. Odell was a founder of the J. M. Odell Manufacturing Company of Bynum and the People's Bank. He was a director of the Greensboro Insurance Company (later a part of the [Jefferson Standard Insurance Company](#) ^[8]) and of the Greensboro Loan and Trust Company (later the Greensboro Bank and Trust Company).

A [Democrat](#) ^[9] and a [Mason](#) ^[10], Odell served on the Greensboro Board of Aldermen and was active in the municipal reform and [temperance](#) ^[11] movements. When [Greensboro College](#) ^[12] nearly collapsed financially in 1882, he and several others became guarantors for the college; later he gave the school substantial gifts of money. A member and lay leader of the West Market Methodist Church in Greensboro, he gave the church its initial endowment of fifty thousand dollars. He also served as treasurer of the Board of Finance of the North Carolina and Western North Carolina Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South; as a delegate to the denomination's General Conferences in 1890, 1894, and 1902; and as a member of its Book Committee.

In 1865 Odell married May J. Prescott, the daughter of James and Retsy Prescott. She died on 26 Dec. 1918. They had no children. He was buried in Green Hill Cemetery, Greensboro.



An undated flyer from the Odell Hardware Company of John M. Odell, advertising wood stoves. Image from the North Carolina Museum of History.

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