

# Adeline Alston Owner and Manager of One of Chatham County's Largest Plantations

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November 2020

Between Pittsboro and Siler City, just north of highway 64, stands the former home of John Jones Alston and Adeline Williams Alston (sometimes called the Alston-DeGraffenriedt house). For sixty-four years, this was the home of Adeline Williams Alston who, as its owner for forty-four of those years following the death of her husband, managed one of Chatham County's largest plantations. Here we will try to construct her story as best we can from many fragments of information and a little speculation.<sup>1</sup>



*Alston-DeGraffenriedt house, 2018.  
Photo by Jonathan Cox.*

Why is Adeline's life of interest? In part, we are interested because the immense wealth of the Alston family makes it notable in Chatham

County history. We are also interested in the lives of women, about whom it is often difficult to gather information because few records about them were created and even fewer remain. This would likely have been the case even for Adeline if she had not been widowed early and thrust into managing affairs usually the purview of men. We are fortunate that an assortment of papers about the family, including some directly related to Adeline, were saved and deposited for preservation at the NC Archives by Dr. Kenneth Lessler, who purchased the Alston-DeGraffenriedt house in 1972.<sup>2</sup> In addition, well-researched documentation has been produced for the property's National Register status,<sup>3</sup> and Adeline's g-g-g-grandson, Steve Brooks, has conducted extensive genealogical research. We rely heavily on these sources and supplement with additional research.

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<sup>1</sup> A note on spelling. Adeline Williams Alston spelled her name differently, sometimes as "Adeline" and sometimes as "Adaline." We are using "Adeline." Similarly, the DeGraffenriedt family members sometimes spelled their surname with a final 't' and sometimes omitted it; sometimes with a lower case 'g' and sometimes with an upper case 'G.' We are using "DeGraffenriedt."

<sup>2</sup> North Carolina State Archives, Alston-DeGraffenriedt Papers, Chatham County, 1773-1970. PC 1575.1-1575.8. References will be in the form PC 1571.x.

<sup>3</sup> National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet: Alston-DeGraffenriedt Plantation Boundary Increase/Amendment, Chatham County, NC. US Department of the Interior, National Park Service. References will be in the form: NR section:page. This well-researched document does contain at least one error, related to the death of Adeline, dating that death at the time property was divided. We located two obituaries for Adeline that demonstrate this was several years before her actual death.

Our focus on Adeline certainly does not mean that the challenges she faced were somehow more important than those faced by other Chatham County women. On the contrary, wives of yeomen farmers and laborers (who comprised most Chatham citizens) had to provide major labor on behalf of their family's welfare in the absence of enslaved labor, and, if widowed, they were left with vastly fewer resources with which to provide for their families. We believe that Adeline's privileged life deserves attention, nevertheless.

Some might ask whether it is appropriate to share the story of someone whose history includes the enslavement of other people. We believe that it is—that the abhorrent practice of slavery in Chatham County should be examined, not ignored or glossed over. Adeline's way of life, indeed, the Alstons' way of life, depended upon the enslavement of other human beings, as did the economy and entire social structure of the slaveholding states prior to the Civil War. In Adeline's time, slave ownership was, to most, a measure of wealth and success. And even now, too often, the wealth and success of families or individuals in the planter class is remembered without acknowledgment of the inhuman practice that created and supported their privileged way of life. While narratives that focus only on the positive attributes of those who were much admired in their day are less disturbing, they are also incomplete and thus untrue. We have chosen to include the uncomfortable truths in this narrative.

Adeline's history is, admittedly, uncommon in many ways. She was the child of wealthy parents and then the wife of a wealthy husband, widowed early with 9 children, left with an extremely large estate to manage, experienced the Civil War and loss of wealth, and managed her family's finances during the transition from slave-based to sharecropper-based economy. The Alston family's ownership of large numbers of enslaved persons is a notable aspect of the family's tenure in North Carolina and in Chatham County. Adeline was among the largest owners of enslaved people in the County in 1850 and 1860. Unfortunately, the papers available to us tell us little about her relationship with those persons she enslaved. None of the information we have addresses the question of whether Adeline was kindly or harsh in her dealings with the people she enslaved. Where slaves are mentioned, they are being hired out or their monetary value established, reinforcing the view that they were viewed primarily as property, not people. In the end, while knowing Adeline's treatment of her slaves would help us understand her better, the facts of enslavement always contained the inherent threat of cruelty. Even the kindest of slaveholders might eventually rent their laborers to unkind people or suffer financial misfortune necessitating the breaking up of slave families and selling them to different owners. That inherent threat was a constant in the life of everyone held in bondage.

Indeed, in researching Adeline Williams Alston's life we find numerous examples of this fragility for her family's slaves. Her father's 1838 will, for example, includes "*I give and devise to my daughter Adaline Alston all the negro slaves and other effects heretofore put in her possession, in addition thereto I give to my said daughter Adaline at the death of my wife negroes Mariah and her children Washington, Sam, John, William, Minerva & Matilda*

and also *Minerva's child Adaline and their future increase.*" This implies that some people were "put in her possession" at the time of her marriage and that others were forced to leave their homes later. Additionally, when Adeline's father-in-law, Chatham Jack Alston, died in 1841, his slaves were divided among his children and one was given to his grandson, John Jones Alston II. These people, whose lives were thus changed, were not even named in the will. After Adeline's husband died in 1842 the slaves were divided among their children, with lives in considerable flux all the way until 1854 when a final settlement was made.

Where information is available about the Alston enslaved people, we will share it. One available document, the 1854 division, does list some of the family's enslaved workers by name. That will be shared (see [Appendix D](#)) in the hopes that it provides difficult-to-find information for descendants of those persons.

Adeline was born in 1805 to Major William W. Williams and Elizabeth Kinchen Kearney of Franklin County, NC. Her father has been described as "Louisburg's wealthiest planter."<sup>4</sup> We know little of Adeline as a young person except the glimpses we get in a letter she wrote in 1820, at age 15, to her older half-sister Temperance.<sup>5</sup> It suggests that she was fun-loving and had a good sense of humor, but that she could use a little tutoring in grammar and spelling. In the letter she mentions her family's plantation, Vine Hill,<sup>6</sup> now also a National Register property. Just two years after writing this letter, Adeline would marry. A letter that another sister, Margaret, wrote to Temperance, suggests that the Williams family "*had a kind Father and Mother, Brothers & Sisters*" as Adeline grew up.<sup>7</sup> Several siblings, in letters to Temperance, reminisced fondly about their youth at Vine Hill.

**Excerpt - Letter from Adeline Williams  
to Older Half-Sister Temperance  
21 Sep 1820**

*Dear Sister  
For the first time I attempt to address a few lines to you hoping you will condescend to answer them. Martha and I have just returned from fishin. We caught a great many fish as many fish as many as four. I caught one all most as large as my finger. Tell Tom we wished for him to fish with us. We went to Vine hill and could see no one but tuf [?]....*

Adeline (17) married John Jones Alston (30), also the child of a wealthy planter in 1822. John Jones Alston was born in 1792 and was a student at UNC in the early 1800s. His father, Joseph John ("Chatham Jack") Alston, one of Chatham's wealthiest planters, built John a house on Harland's (now Holland's) Creek west of Pittsboro in 1810. The house was probably built as a relatively simple structure originally, but was expanded in 1822, when John and Adeline married. The house was one of several between Pittsboro and the

<sup>4</sup> Megan Funk, Comprehensive Architectural Survey of Franklin County, North Carolina, April 19, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Letter from Adeline Williams to her older half-sister Temperance in 1820. In Calvin Jones papers, Southern Historical Collection, UNC-CH. Transcribed by Steve Brooks.

<sup>6</sup> Vine Hill, in Franklin County, was near a number of other plantations of note in Warren County, including plantations owned by members of the Alston family.

<sup>7</sup> Catherine W. Bishir, *The House Marina Built: Cherry Hill, A Plantation House and its Family.* 2004. Cherry Hill Historical Foundation, Inc., BW&A Books, Durham, NC., p. 12.

Rocky River, along what is now US Hwy 64, that Jack built for his children. Although John Jones Alston and Adeline lived in the house, the house and property were only willed to John in 1841, at Chatham Jack's death.

Adeline and John were first cousins—their mothers being sisters. Their family illustrates the extensive and complicated interconnections among very wealthy families like the Alstons. Adeline Williams was also descended from the Alston line, as her grandmother Williams had been born an Alston. Adeline's sister Patsey, named for Chatham Jack's wife, married John Jones Alston's younger brother, Nathaniel Macon Alston, and lived near Adeline and John.

Chatham County was also the home of other Alston kin with close ties to John and Adeline. Chatham Jack's brother and sister both founded large families in Chatham and they lived close by. Letters suggest extensive interaction among the family members—both social and business relationships. John and Adeline's daughter Elizabeth would lament, “...*there is no society besides the family. I have but few acquaintances my own age. Our visiting is confined to the family.*”<sup>8</sup> (See [Appendix A](#) for details on the Alston family, including an illustration of John and Adeline's many shared ancestors and a list of other Chatham County Alston kin.)

What was John and Adeline's plantation like early in their marriage? Unlike most Chatham County farms, which were worked by the farm owner and his family, John and Adeline's plantation was a large-scale operation, dependent upon enslaved labor. Although smaller than many coastal plantations, their plantation was large for the central Piedmont, and certainly for Chatham County. Such farms were multi-crop producers, growing corn, tobacco, cotton, and a variety of garden produce for plantation consumption and requiring structures in addition to the main house, such as stables, storehouses, granaries, and barns. John and Adeline's plantation consisted of the main house, kitchen, pig-boiling pit, hand-dug well, smokehouse, cabins for enslaved workers, barns, and likely additional specialty structures such as a laundry or craft cabins. Some of these are still preserved on the property, along with sections of farm roads that would have served traffic from Pittsboro to the west, as well as for getting plantation products to market.<sup>9</sup>

Many of the enslaved persons on the plantation would have engaged in agriculture, but others may have been crafts persons. Receipts in the Alston archive suggest that crafts persons enslaved by Chatham Jack Alston likely produced clothing and shoes and other leather goods. An 1830 receipt suggests that gun manufacture or repairs may have been among the skills practiced on John and Adeline's plantation. Receipts for cotton and wool cards suggest that some cotton and wool may have been spun and woven into cloth on the plantation. Purchased fabrics, including “linen, negro cottons, flannel, silk, calico, and

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<sup>8</sup> Bishir, p. 12.

<sup>9</sup> NR 7:1-3; NR 8:17.

muslin, edging, ribbons, and needles,” indicate that clothing was being made on the plantation.<sup>10</sup>

The living quarters for John and Adeline’s enslaved workers would have been constructed of logs with chimneys of local fieldstone. Several cabins were near the main house—probably the living quarters of enslaved workers who worked in the main house or in crafts. Other cabins were located near the fields, so that agricultural workers would be near their work.

We assume that John and Adeline’s relationship followed the expectations of their time for marriages. When women married, their rights and interests were absorbed into those of their husbands. Wives had no independent right to own, purchase, sell, or contract for property. As a result, during the twenty years of their marriage, Adeline likely had little to do with the business dealings of the family and operation of the plantation. During this time, she is mostly “out of sight” to us—surviving documents provide few references to her activities.<sup>11</sup>

Much of the wealth of the Alston’s planter class at this time consisted of enslaved people. As early as 1810, at age 18, John enslaved fifteen persons. (His father, Chatham Jack, enslaved 168 at that time.) In 1820, John had enslaved 34 persons, of whom 12 were under fifteen years of age. Eighteen of the enslaved workers were employed in agriculture; two in commerce. The 1830 census (after John and Adeline’s marriage) lists the number of persons enslaved by John at 74, putting him among the largest slaveholders in the county. It is probable that some of this increase was due to a “dowry” that Adeline brought into the marriage, given the wealth of her own family.<sup>12</sup>

The plantation was a large producer of cotton and tobacco during the 1830s. Such produce was hauled by wagon over rough, muddy dirt roads to Fayetteville or to Raleigh. There were tolls on many of these rough roads. From Raleigh, tobacco was shipped on the railroad to Petersburg, Virginia. High freight costs and spoilage of the produce due to inadequate transportation to major markets were major challenges. Transportation costs reduced profits and were, in part, why Chatham County, along with other Piedmont counties, relied on corn as a major crop for local sales, rather than tobacco and cotton. In fact, corn substituted for cash in many economic transactions. John Alston, however, was able to diversify his agricultural products and use cash for some business transactions.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> NR 8:18.

<sup>11</sup>During these twenty years Adeline was pregnant about one-third of the time, and then recovering from childbirth eight times in addition. Her firstborn, Elizabeth Martha Alston, arrived only a little over a year after the marriage, and the other children were born every two or three years thereafter until she was widowed in 1842. We also know that she experienced, during her marriage, the deaths of one sister, her father, and her father-in-law. A timeline of Adeline’s life is included in [Appendix A](#).

<sup>12</sup> Adeline’s father, William Williams’ will references as part of her inheritance “all the negro slaves and other effects heretofore put in her possession,” and also allocates by name, additional enslaved persons to be given to Adeline at the death of her mother.

<sup>13</sup> NR 8:9-10, 21.

An overseer was a common feature of plantation business as a means of providing the owner with a more leisurely life. In 1836, John made a contract with William Yearn to be overseer, likely not the first such contract and certainly not the last. Yearn was to be responsible for crop growth, husbandry, and the enslaved “hands.” He was to be paid \$200 and “800 weight of pork, two barrels of corn, two bushels of wheat, and two milk cows.”<sup>14</sup>

By 1840 John Jones Alston owned more than 4,000 acres in Chatham and Moore counties.

The census schedule lists 106 enslaved persons for John Jones Alston—sixty working in agriculture and two in manufacturing and trade. In April, 1841, John’s father, Chatham Jack died, leaving John Jones Alston “a tract of 300 acres lying on Harland Creek including the house in which he lives...”<sup>15</sup> Only now did John and Adeline own the house and property where they had been living since their marriage.<sup>16</sup>

**Part of 1836 contract between  
John Jones Alston and William Yearn**

As overseer, Mr. Yearn was “to attend to the various interests of the Plantation, to cultivate the land with industry and skill in husbandry he is to rise early in the morning so that the stock is fed [horses, cows, hogs, sheep] and that the hands under his direction are at their work by sunrise or before and remain with them through the day....”  
For failure to fulfill his obligations, Mr. Yearn was “liable to be turned off the plantation.” [NR 8:10]

Only a year and a half later, John suffered a sudden stroke and died at age 50. At the time John died, he and Adeline, now 37 years old, had been married 20 years. Adeline had eight children and was pregnant with a ninth. She likely had no experience running the business affairs of the plantation in which she was abruptly thrust as owner, or perhaps even how to relate to the overseer to whom she would give orders. But she did have many of John’s relatives<sup>17</sup> close by from whom she could seek advice about managing the plantation as well as raising nine children. She also had the labor of many enslaved persons and the management of an overseer at her disposal.

John’s very sudden and rapidly failing health did not allow time for him to make a written will, so he made an oral statement, as sworn in court by two witnesses, that “I give all my property to my wife [Adeline] to do with as she pleases.”<sup>18</sup> This was an unusual circumstance that resulted in much subsequent litigation involving Adeline. Legally, an oral will could convey only personal property (such as enslaved persons and household goods)—not real estate, and widowed women were entitled only to a “dower share” of 1/3 of a husband’s estate. (See [Appendix B](#) for John’s obituary.)

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<sup>14</sup> NR 8:20.

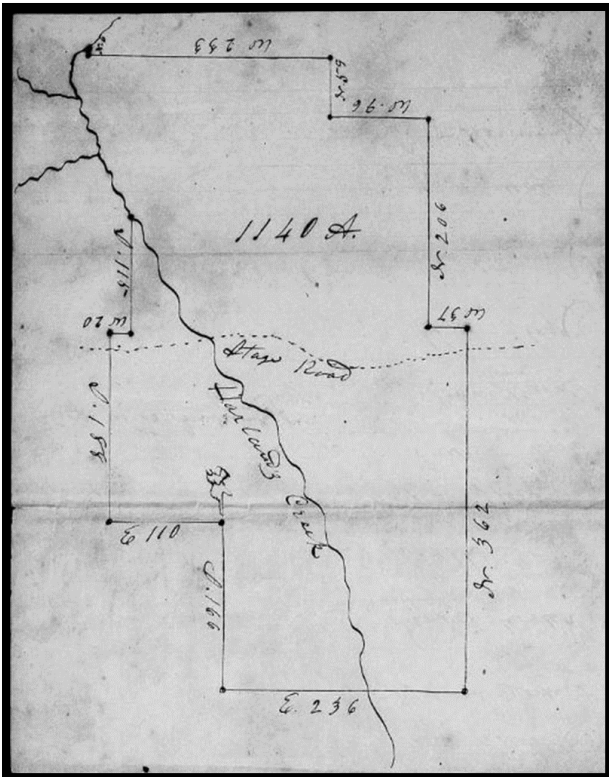
<sup>15</sup> NR 8:10.

<sup>16</sup> His father, Chatham Jack Alston, was a highly successful businessman and large landowner. It is not unreasonable to assume that he was a large presence in the lives of Adeline and John. (See [Appendix B](#) for an excerpt from Jack’s will and [Appendix A](#) for more on Chatham Jack.)

<sup>17</sup> Including at least two sisters and four brothers of her late husband. See [Appendix A](#) for more on the Chatham relations of Adeline and their proximity.

<sup>18</sup> NR 8:10 and court records.

In 1845, Adeline received her dower settlement. At his death, her husband had owned 4,078 acres located in Chatham and Moore counties.<sup>19</sup> Because his will did not apply to his land, inheritance of his land was treated as though he had died without a will. By traditional dower provision, Adeline would have been entitled to one-third of this property, but she agreed to receive the 1,140-acre Chatham County parcel on which her home was located, which was somewhat less than the third to which she was entitled.<sup>20</sup> The location of Adeline's property is shown on the 1870 Ramsey map, where she is the Mrs. Alston just to the west of Pittsboro. A later postal map shows the locations of some Chatham communities. See [Appendix C](#) for both maps.



*Dower property allocated to Adeline Alston*

At the time of his death in 1842, John left Adeline with at least \$1560 in outstanding debt notes.<sup>21</sup> John was a businessman and farmer. In 1837, he was listed in a Whig newspaper (*Carolina Watchman*) as a “commissioner” in Chatham County for the sale of stock in the Fayetteville and Western Railroad, which was chartered but like many others in North Carolina never built. It is likely, too, that he bought and sold land, that he borrowed/paid debt on various crops, and possibly provided security for others to borrow money. Any or all of these could have contributed to the debt owed at his unexpected death.

Soon after Adeline acquired ownership of her dower share of the land, she was sued for some of her husband's past debts. The court ordered the county sheriff put her dower land and home up for sale to the highest bidder. Fortunately, her own bid of \$273.47 proved to be the highest. Her agent in the transaction was the man who would become her son-in-law, Delia's future husband, John B. DeGraffenriedt.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup> How he acquired all of this land, aside from the portion coming from his father's will, we have not researched.

<sup>20</sup> North Carolina Estate Files 1663-1979, Chatham County, A, Alston, John Jones 1842. p. 16. North Carolina Estate files (for John Jones Alston) FamilySearch.org accessed 26 July 2020. Plat on p. 18. Referred to subsequently as NCEF.

<sup>21</sup> NR 8:19. \$1,560 in 1842 is the equivalent of over \$49,000 today.

<sup>22</sup> Chatham County deed AH/247 5 Feb 1849. We do not have additional information regarding the nature of the claim against John or why the claim could be made against Adeline's dower. The amount of her bid was substantially lower than the value of her land and home, worth about \$9,000 today, which leads us to suspect although unable to prove, that the process was pro forma. DeGraffenriedt and Delia Alston's marriage date cannot be found, but it seems likely that it was after he served as Adeline's agent.

Also in 1845, daughter Elizabeth, then over 21 years old and married (to Alston A. Jones), petitioned the court asking that the remaining real estate (other than her mother’s dower share)—nearly 3,000 acres in Chatham and Moore Counties—be divided among herself and her siblings. The court ruled that the remaining land should be divided equally among Elizabeth and her siblings and appointed agents to execute that division.<sup>23</sup> Adeline’s ownership of her dower share of the real estate and the personal property, which included the substantial number of enslaved people, was not in dispute.

In March of 1850, Adeline was confronted with a yet another lawsuit, this time involving her youngest daughter, Adeline Eugenia.<sup>24</sup> The younger Adeline had been born in April 1843, six months after her father’s death. As was the patriarchal nature of North Carolina law and custom, she and John’s five other still-minor children (referred to as “orphans” by the law) had been appointed a guardian by the court in November 1848. Mothers were thought unable to manage their children’s affairs—particularly financial matters. Guardians were usually appointed only if the father had an estate. The guardian for John and Adeline’s minor children was a cousin of both John and Adeline, William Alston Rives.<sup>25</sup>

<b>The Children of John Jones and Adeline Williams Alston</b>	
Elizabeth Martha Alston	b. 11 Feb 1824 - d. 8 Jun 1876
John Jones Alston	b. Mar 1827 - d. ~1900-1903
Delia Alston	b. 17 May 1829 - d. 2 Jul 1914
Lavinia Margaret Alston	b. 1831 - d. 1867
William Williams Alston	b. ~1833 - d. 1862
Marina Temperance Tunstall Alston	b. 7 Feb 1836 - d. 13 Sep 1910
Nathaniel “Macon” Alston	b. 8 Aug 1838 - d. 7 Jul 1875
Henrietta Ann Alston	b. 28 Sep 1840 - d. 13 Mar 1915
Adeline Eugenia Alston	b. 1 Apr 1843 - d. 20 Apr 1915

In the petition to the court, Rives noted that the daughter Adeline had been born after John’s will and death and therefore she should be treated as though her father had died without a will. Because her mother had previously given enslaved persons to two of her other children, Rives argued that the younger Adeline should be given one-tenth part of her father’s personal estate. In this case, John’s personal estate would consist largely of enslaved persons, the source of significant wealth. The lawyer for Adeline the elder stated that Adeline did not know the law and sought the advice and assistance of the court in resolving this matter. In December 1850, Judge Nash ruled that the younger Adeline was entitled to one-tenth of the personal estate owned by John at his death. She was awarded nine enslaved persons valued at \$2,833 in an 1854 settlement. Adeline the elder was allotted the remaining enslaved persons valued at \$25,691.14.<sup>26</sup> These sums, in 2020 dollars illustrate the wealth of Adeline’s family at this point in time. Adeline’s share of the enslaved persons, for example, was valued at \$25,691.14 in 1854. In 2020 dollars \$25,691

<sup>23</sup> NCEF pp. 21-29 and Chatham County Deed AH/294 describes that division.

<sup>24</sup> Adeline the younger is referred to variably as “Adeline” or “Eugenia” in other documents.

<sup>25</sup> NCEF pp. 35-36, 45.

<sup>26</sup> Supreme Court Case 5721, 42 NC 172, Dec 1850, transcribed by Steve Brooks. All dollar conversions established using <https://www.officialdata.org/us/inflation>, accessed 18Aug2020.



would be \$792,448. [See [Appendix D](#) for the names and valuations of individual enslaved persons listed in the accounting of John Jones Alston's estate as of 1844.]

It was the guardian's responsibility to manage the property and finances of his charges. Included in John Jones Alston's estate file are many pages on which William Alston Rives accounts for income and expenses for each of the Alston children for which he is guardian. The income was derived from renting the child's portion of inherited land, and, in daughter Adeline's case, also from hiring out the enslaved persons she was granted in this settlement.<sup>27</sup>

In the 1850 census, seven of Adeline's children (all but married daughters Elizabeth and Delia)<sup>28</sup> were listed as part of her household, including son John J., age 23, whose wife Mary Clark Alston is also listed in the household. John's occupation is listed as "none." (Interestingly, John and Mary were also listed in a separate household in the 1850 census. It appears that Adeline's household was canvassed in August and John and Mary's separate household in November, so they are counted twice. In his own household, John is listed as a farmer, but no values are recorded for real estate or personal values.) Family lore suggests that Mary Clark, who married John Jones Alston in 1846, may have come to Chatham as a tutor for the Alston children. Receipts indicate that numerous payments for tutors were made over the years—yet another aspect of plantation life that Adeline would have managed, providing evidence of her interest in the education of her children.<sup>29</sup>

Adeline reported that her 1850 farm was valued at \$10,000.<sup>30</sup> There was a change in crops from cotton and tobacco to wheat, Indian corn, oats, hay, peas and beans, Irish potatoes, and sweet potatoes. More emphasis was placed on husbandry—and the extent of the working plantation is suggested by Adeline's livestock holdings: 5 horses, 6 asses/mules, 18 milk cows, 4 working oxen, 22 other cattle, and 115 swine.<sup>31</sup> Adeline's home manufactures were valued at \$225.<sup>32</sup> Her slaveholdings appear to have decreased since her husband's death, but with 58 enslaved workers, she was still a large slaveholder for the area.<sup>33</sup> Adeline's involvement with managing her enslaved workers is evidenced by an 1855 letter in which John McKay assures her that her concerns about the health of the enslaved persons she rented him and who are working at his river farm both in farming and in turpentine were unwarranted.<sup>34</sup> It would be comforting to interpret Adeline's concern about the health of the enslaved persons she rented to Mr. McKay as evidence of

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<sup>27</sup> NCEF pp. 37-70.

<sup>28</sup> Elizabeth had married Alston A. Jones, and had three young children by 1850. Delia had married John B. DeGraffenriedt, and had one young daughter. Both Jones and DeGraffenriedt were wealthy Chatham planters.

<sup>29</sup> PC 1575.4.

<sup>30</sup> The \$10,000 value in 1850 would be \$332,181 in 2020. All dollar conversions established using <https://www.officialdata.org/us/inflation>, accessed 15Aug2020.

<sup>31</sup> 1860 Agricultural Census microfilm.

<sup>32</sup> Almost \$7,500 today.

<sup>33</sup> We know from Adeline the younger's suit that Adeline had given enslaved persons to several children since 1840, but we don't know how many or a further explanation for the decrease.

<sup>34</sup> NR 8:19; PC 1575.7 Miscellaneous slave papers.

her concern for them as human beings. Seen in the context of renting them, however, we cannot discount that her concern may have been for her property.

Also listed in the 1850 census was Adeline's overseer, James Webster, who along with his wife and eight children, lived on the plantation. A January 1, 1858 contract stipulated that a new overseer, George Dismukes, would be paid \$150 for the year, be furnished "*with the house he occupies, and attached ground for growing potatoes, corn, and a cotton patch.*" It also promised that he would be provided with 300 pound of pork, three barrels of corn, two barrels of flour, 50 pounds of coffee, and 50 pounds of sugar.<sup>35</sup>

Letters written between 1840 and 1860 reflect Adeline's involvement in the running of the plantation. Activities covered by the letters include the shipping of tobacco and cotton to Fayetteville, hiring out enslaved workers, collection of debts and law suits. There are records of several land transactions during this period, with Adeline buying and selling property.<sup>36</sup> While she conducted much business through agents and overseers, she was clearly a sharp businesswoman who pursued what was owed to her, even when the opponent was a relative. One example came in her dogged pursuit of a debt her brother-in-law, Samuel Jackson, owed to John at the time of his death. She prevailed, but not without bad feeling.<sup>37</sup>

Similarly, in a series of letters from her cousin and agent, William Alston Rives, to Adeline in the 1850s, we see revealed a bit of her character. The first, in 1851, relates to the hiring out of one of the enslaved persons, named Jane. Acting as Adeline's agent at a monthly hiring court, Rives had accepted a bid for Jane. Rives explained that the man hiring Jane had failed to pay and missed several agreed-upon appointments for returning Jane. Rives had had to go to some trouble to retrieve her. Nevertheless, Adeline thought that Rives should pay for what she lost in the hiring agreement. He offered to capitulate, but suggested that if Adeline was unhappy with his services, she might want to look for another agent before the next hiring season. A later letter, in 1854, from Rives reveals that he had been retained as Adeline's agent, and was handling several additional business matters, so their relationship must have been repaired after the "Jane matter."<sup>38</sup>

Another letter of interest, written to her brothers-in-law, Gideon and Robert Alston by Adeline in 1852, may have been about a business matter or perhaps a personal one, but it reveals a bit more about her conciliatory skills. She writes, "*I have no doubt if we could see each other and talk the matter over (and not let our passions get the better of our reasons) that would could fix the matter... So far as the east is from the west, so far is my intention*

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<sup>35</sup> P.C. 1575.1, NR 8:11.

<sup>36</sup> In Jan 1849, she bought two pieces of property at Sheriff sales using William Alston Rives as agent—100 acres on Terrell's Creek; the other 300 acres also on Terrells Creek—AH/202. In Mar 1850, she purchased 141 acres on Harlands and Lick from her brother-in-law Nathaniel M. Alston—AI/6. On Jan 1851, she sold 297 acres on Harlands to Samuel Gilmore—AH/472.

<sup>37</sup> See [Appendix B](#) for an excerpt from a letter about this disagreement.

<sup>38</sup> See [Appendix B](#) for the full text of the 1851 Rives letter and a subsequent letter from Rives from 1854 suggesting that his relationship with Adeline had improved and that he had been retained as her agent in some business matters.

from saying and doing any thing to give offence and if I have it is an error of the head and [not?] the heart.” Her letter both wrestles with the matter in dispute and invites Gid’s wife, Eveline, to bring the family to “*spend Christmas Day with us.*”<sup>39</sup>



*Adeline’s signature from one of her letters.*

In 1860, Adeline’s household as listed in the census consisted of herself and three of her children, Nathaniel Macon (22), Marina (24), and Adeline Eugenia (17). Several of her other children lived nearby.<sup>40</sup> In this period just before the start of the Civil War, Adeline owned fewer acres of land and she listed the cash value of her farm as just \$4,000.<sup>41</sup> She raised a large quantity of a number of crops, and tobacco again became one of her dominant crops though this was not so for the entire county. The value of her livestock increased. The value of homemade manufactures was listed at \$900, indicating that the plantation produced items for sale. According to the 1860 schedule enumerating enslaved persons, there are three separate listings for “A. Alston,” and it is impossible to sort out whether all of these are Adeline. The number enslaved by Adeline is therefore between 40 and 119 persons. There is little doubt that she was one of only 9 (out of 769) slaveholders in the county who enslaved more than 50 persons.<sup>42</sup>

Little is known about the family during the Civil War years. Although the battles did not infringe on the plantation (the closest battles being Petersburg in the north and Bentonville in the southeast), the marketability of crops became increasingly difficult as the war progressed. Several of the male members of the family served in the Confederate Army, including at least two of Adeline’s three sons.<sup>43</sup> In 1861 John Jones Alston, II enlisted in Co. M, NC 15th, as a private. John was discharged about six months later due to “chronic nephritis and enlarged prostate.”<sup>44</sup> Nathaniel Macon Alston enlisted in April of 1861 and served in Co. M, NC15th, until July 1862 when he transferred to Co. I, NC 32<sup>nd</sup>.<sup>45</sup> Adeline’s son-in-law, Benjamin R. Bryan, Adeline Eugenia’s husband, was also in the

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<sup>39</sup> See [Appendix B](#) for the full text of the 1852 letter from Adeline to brothers-in-law Gideon and Robert.

<sup>40</sup> We cannot locate 1860 census records for Adeline’s older son, John Jones Alston and his family, but believe that he likely was living with Adeline or nearby and perhaps just missed by the census. Elizabeth’s husband, Alston A. Jones died in 1855 and left her a wealthy widow with four children. She still resided in Chatham in 1860. Delia and her husband John Baker DeGraffenriedt lived on the DeGraffenriedt plantation in the Silk Hope area with their daughter Pattie and young Mary Grimmer, a “lady.” Lavinia married the wealthy Rev. William Barringer in 1850, and lived in Greensboro with him and five children. William Williams Alston, single, is recorded as living near St. Lawrence Post Office, as a farmer with substantial real estate and personal wealth. ([Appendix C](#) provides a postal map showing the location of St. Lawrence.)

Ann (Henrietta Ann) Alston married Joseph J. Taylor, also a farmer of means, in April of 1860, and the couple lived near Pittsboro.

<sup>41</sup> “Just \$4000” would be nearly \$125,000 in 2020.

<sup>42</sup> NR 8:12.

<sup>43</sup> No military records for William Alston have been located. Probate papers indicate that he died in Chatham County in 1862.

<sup>44</sup> Weymouth T. Jordan: North Carolina Troops, A Roster.

<sup>45</sup> Roster of Confederate Veterans from Chatham County, NC, p.1; Ancestry Historical Data Systems, comp. U.S., Civil War Soldier Records and Profiles, 1861-1865 [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2009.

**FATAL OCCURRENCE.**—The Accommodation train, on the N. C. Railroad, which left here on Sunday morning last, was run into by the freight train between High Point and Jamestown, killing Mrs. N. M. Alston, wife of Macon Alston, of Chatham county, and injuring several other persons. Mrs. Alston had been on a visit to her relations in this place, and left here on Sunday morning.

We learn that the passenger train was standing on the track or running very slowly, when the freight train overtook it and struck the rear coach. The accident occurred on a down grade, and we suppose it was impossible to stop the freight train after it came in sight of the passenger train.—*Charlotte Democrat.*

Confederate cavalry, 63<sup>rd</sup> Regt. NC Troops, and appears to have served for at least two years.<sup>46</sup>

The Alstons were not to escape other losses. Adeline experienced the deaths of two of her children in the 1860s—William in 1862<sup>47</sup> and Lavinia in 1867. In 1864, Nathaniel's wife, Zilpha Hill, was killed in a train accident,<sup>48</sup> and the couple's only child,

Mary Wilson Alston, had died in infancy in 1863. Nathaniel would remarry in 1866. Additionally, another grandchild, Marina Bryan, the child of Adeline Eugenia Alston Bryan, died in 1862.

During the Civil War, upper-class Southern women sought opportunities to participate in the conflict. Their contributions ranged from sewing tents and uniforms to knitting socks and gloves to raising funds for the purchase of ships.<sup>49</sup> The Alston women did their part to support the war effort. The 25 Aug 1864 *Daily Confederate* lists Chatham contributions. Noted alongside the donations of many of her neighbors and relatives is Mrs. Adeline Alston's contribution of Irish potatoes, onions, mustard, and red pepper.

After the war and emancipation, Adeline lost much of her wealth—which had consisted largely of land

**CHATHAM CONTRIBUTIONS.**

Miss Kate Long, 6 chickens, 4 doz eggs, and vegetables; Mrs. M. A. Olive, onions, butter, eggs and chickens; Mrs. Dr. Berry, 4 chickens, 3 doz eggs and vegetables; Mrs. N. M. Hill, six chickens, vegetables, herbs, linen, and 2 bushels apples; Mrs. John Womack, 4 chickens and vegetables; Mrs. James Moore, 1 peck of dried fruit, 2 shirts, 4 pr drawers, and a lot of old linen; Fred J. Davis, 1 bbl of potatoes and onions; Mrs. Gidson Alston, 1 bushel of flour, 1 bushel of potatoes; Junius Alston, butter and 2 bottles of vinegar; Mrs. O. S. Poe, vegetables; Mrs. Long, black tea; Miss Euphemia Long, 3 chickens; Miss Laura Hanks, 1 package of lint and 9 of herbs; Mrs. J. A. Leach, 5 chickens and vegetables; Thos. B. Harris, 1 bushel of Irish potatoes, 6 lbs of butter, and vegetables; Mrs. Henry Burns, 3 doz eggs, 2 chickens, butter and vegetables; Mrs. Eliza Clegg, 3 doz eggs, 1 peck of onions; Mrs. Maurice Waddell, old linen; Mrs. Maria McClenahan, butter and eggs; Robert P. Alston, 1 peck of apples and 20 lbs of butter; Mrs. Adeline Alston, Irish potatoes, onions, mustard and red pepper; Mrs. Nettles, vegetables; Mrs. John J. Jackson, vegetables; J. Small, 2 bushels apples, 1/2 bushel potatoes; Mrs. Tinnia, 1 peck of onions; Mrs. Dr. Waddell, 1 bottle catsup, 1 bottle of pulverized thyme, and vegetables; Wm. Griffin, potatoes and onions; Mrs. Betty Phillips, half bushel potatoes, 2 chickens and 1 doz eggs; Mrs. Jno. Manning, chickens and vegetables; Mrs. Dennis, vegetables and chickens; Mrs. C. Cotton, butter, chickens and vegetables; Mrs. Geo. Thompson, chickens and vegetables; Mrs. Wright Cotton, 1 bushel potatoes, 1 loaf of bread, 1 barrel of vegetables; Mrs. Dr. McClenahan, a large variety of vegetables.

<sup>46</sup> Ancestry tree of Brent Fallin, accessed 7 Aug 2020.

<sup>47</sup> William was apparently single when he died. His property was divided among his surviving siblings in Chatham County Deed AM/259.

<sup>48</sup> *The Weekly Standard* (Raleigh), 27 Jul 1864.

<sup>49</sup> Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention*, UNC Press, 1996, pp.23-28.

and enslaved workers. Without workers to do the work, land had lost much of its value. An entry in one of her account books reads “*All of the negroes who have not quit work before the 24th of Oct 1865 quit on that day except Henry Betsy & Bethiah.*”<sup>50</sup>

The same account book indicates that after her enslaved workers were emancipated, Adeline hired sharecroppers to keep some income coming from the plantation. For example, a contract dated February 18, 1868 between Adeline and Madison Alston, a freedman,<sup>51</sup> stipulated that she furnish the land and provide Madison Alston with a house for which he was to pay her “*when the crop is gathered.*” He was to haul and cut wood and keep up the fences. Adeline was to provide him with five barrels of corn, and was to receive one-third of all the crops, except the garden produce. Madison agreed to “*not keep liquor to sell and to behave himself in an orderly manner.*”<sup>52</sup> Additionally, Adeline’s oldest son, John, signed an agreement with freedman Samuel Leach, which among other things stipulated that “*Sam’s wife agreeing to do the washing, ironing, cooking and milking of the said John Alston’s mother.*” It appears from this same document that Sam Leach’s wife Emmeline actually lived in the house with Adeline, since Sam agreed to board the rest of his family.<sup>53</sup>

The war caused a decrease in wealth of owners of plantations and businesses and an increase in their debts. In response, the new 1868 state constitution included a bankruptcy article that protected some of the property of debtors from those threats by their creditors. The protected property included the debtors’ (1) “homestead and the dwellings and buildings used therewith” and (2) “things other than shelter necessary for existence.”<sup>54</sup> Almost immediately, Adeline filed for bankruptcy under the new provisions.<sup>55</sup>

A remarkable letter from son John’s wife, Mary, to her sister, Sarah Clark Butts, dated January 10, 1869 gives insight into the lives of the Alston family after the end of the Civil War and the disruption their loss of enslaved labor had created. Mary’s letter illustrates the closeness of the relationship between Adeline and her son John and his family. Mary refers to Adeline as “*Ma Alston*” and says that Adeline called their new cook “*Adeline Williams,*” after herself.<sup>56</sup> The letter also suggests that John and Mary may have lived with Adeline, as Mary discussed allowing a roving photographer to use “*the ball room*” for his labors and the “*vast am’t of trouble to have him here.*”<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> P.C. 1575.3, Account Book, Vol. 1, 1832-1850, 1865-1868; cited in NR 8:12.

<sup>51</sup> Probably the same Madison Alston listed among the inventory of enslaved persons prepared for the settlement with Adeline the younger.

<sup>52</sup> PC 1575.3 Account Books, Vol. III, 1865-1874, and Vol. IV, 1870-1876; cited in NR 8:13.

<sup>53</sup> See [Appendix B](#) for full text of the work agreement with freedman Samuel Leach dated 1 Apr 1867

<sup>54</sup> John V. Orth, North Carolina State Constitution with History and Commentary, UNC Press, 1993, p. 150-151.

<sup>55</sup> Her son John also took advantage of the new law; as his wife wrote, “Mr Alston is safe under the homestead law, which allows \$1,000 or land and \$500 of perishable property, so what little he owes can never trouble him.” Mary Clark Alston to her sister, Sarah Fulton Clark Butts, January 10, 1869.

<sup>56</sup> Neither the cook called “Adeline” nor her children are given the dignity of names in the rest of the letter. The 1870 census does not include “Adeline” but does have two other women of approximately the right age, “Hester” and “Nannie.” The letter mentions that “Adeline” formerly belonged to the Goodwyn (Nettles) family.

<sup>57</sup> Mary Alston to her sister, Sarah Butts, January 10, 1869. See [Appendix B](#) for the full text of this letter.

any thing as fine indications as I ever saw. ~~But~~ We have had a Photographic Artist boarding at Leok Brooks road and we let him have the ball room to take pictures in, ever since 4 weeks before Christmas, & we all had our likenesses taken; but they are dearly paid for, I assure you, like all cheap things, for it was a vast amt of trouble to have him here.

Excerpt from letter by Mary Clark Alston to her sister, Sarah Fulton Clark Butts, 10 Jan 1869, describing allowing a roving 'photographic artist' use of the family ballroom to take pictures.

Mary went on to describe herself as teaching school to earn enough money to pay "our servants." She was taking pupils from the immediate neighborhood. Clearly accustomed to having her every need satisfied during slavery, Mary complained about the state of servants after the war, saying, "I have been doing ... my own cooking & cleaning up & this kept me busy all the time." She had been unsuccessful in hiring good household staff, as "I would get a white woman & think I was doing wonderfully for a while then would be compelled to discharge her, then cook for three or four weeks & try another & rest – a week or so, then try another. The last one I thought would certainly do, but she was so lazy, ignorant, roguish & filthy, her skull as thick as a horseblock! I could not stand her."<sup>58</sup>

So, she was quite happy when "a nice negro woman came along & I hired her and her family at \$3½ for month & board." She goes on to describe this new hire as "a first rate cook, washer & ironer, wool & cotton spinner, knitter & seamstress" who "has a grown daughter who cleans up the house & waits on table & c & c & can sew, knit & spin; she will work in the field when spring comes." Additionally, "the woman has 3 other children, two little boys, the largest of which can hoe corn & chop cotton....I am perfectly delighted with my servants." She continued to state that "they have



This photograph is believed to be Adeline based on other photos that appear to be from the photographer who used the ballroom in 1869.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

*no free-negro airs at all, behave just exactly like our slaves used to, & seem as well satisfied as we are. I really think a great deal of them, I respect them for their principles. They cordially hate 'poor white trash,' as they call them & seem to look up to us as their best friends."* Continuing to exult in her fortune in finding these new household servants, Mary stated "*they seem to feel as if they have been wandering about for a long time, & had just got back home. They say they despise to wait on poor white folks, & seem to think it an honor and privilege to wait on us, so different from most of them.*"<sup>59</sup> The key to this sentiment is clearly the word "seem," but it does convey the feelings of Adeline's family, stripped of the enslaved people they had long been accustomed to having, trying to find some certainty in a world turned upside down.

Mary's letter also notes her husband's success with cotton as a cash crop, saying that "*cotton growers even on a small scale always have money.*" She says that her husband "*... intends planting 5 acres in corn & the rest in cotton if he can get the funds necessary to carry on a cotton crop & I hope we will do better than we've done in years. Cotton is the thing now. If a man makes cotton, he can buy corn very easily.*" Her discussion of cotton emerged from the years of struggling to find new opportunity after the Civil War. The stress created by the struggle is reflected in Mary's comment on the last visit her sister had made to the Alstons (presumably shortly after the end of the war): John "*hates to think of it, he was so worried to death that he was not himself. Sh! That was a troublesome time.*"<sup>60</sup>

In 1870, Adeline was 65 years old. That year's census does not list anyone else living with her in her home and she is listed as "keeping house." Of course, it is likely that there was household help living nearby, perhaps in one of the former slave cabins if not in the house itself. Listed adjacent to Adeline in the 1870 census are her daughter, Elizabeth Gunter<sup>61</sup> and several of her children, and Adeline's son, John Jones Alston II, his wife Mary and children, and several servants. Elizabeth and John's families are listed as separate households, but it is likely that they were all living on the homeplace, perhaps even in the same house with Adeline. John Jones Alston, for example is listed as having servants, but no real estate or personal property, which would be unlikely if he were living in a separate household.<sup>62</sup>

In the early 1870s, Adeline's daughter Elizabeth moved to Texas to join her husband, who had moved there earlier. Son John also made lengthy visits there, presumably scouting for better fortunes than North Carolina offered after the war. John's wife Mary remained with Adeline, as evidenced in a letter dated March 29, 1873 from Mary to her daughter, Mollie, who was then staying with John's brother, Nathaniel Macon Alston. "*As Ma & Relia are*

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Elizabeth's first husband, Alston Jones died in 1855. She remarried, to John William Gunter, in 1860. The family would ultimately settle in Texas, where Elizabeth died in 1876. John William Gunter was already in Texas at the time of the 1870 census, presumably exploring a better living.

<sup>62</sup> William died in 1862. Delia, Marina, and Ann were all still living in Chatham County in 1870. No census record has been located for Nathaniel and his family, but his children are born in Chatham in 1870 and 1871, so the family likely is still living there. Adeline Eugenia's family is probably not in Chatham in 1870.

going up to Macon's to-morrow, I feel that I most drop you a line if it is Sunday. They have gone to Hickory Mountain to-day to hear Mr. Moore." (Relia is likely Aurelia Jones, Elizabeth's oldest daughter, who we know lived with Adeline off and on.) This is yet another reason we believe that John's family had lived with or close to Adeline for many years. John left his family with Adeline and went back and forth to Texas multiple times, eventually returning to North Carolina by the mid-1870s.<sup>63</sup>

By 1870, and with enslaved labor no longer available, crop production on Adeline's plantation had decreased dramatically, as had the number of livestock.<sup>64</sup> Although her land holdings remained unchanged and although she continued to own one of the largest farm operations in the county, the value of her real estate had declined from \$4,000 to \$3,000 between 1860 and 1870.<sup>65</sup> Adeline was landlord to an unknown number of sharecroppers whose crops provided food and income for her. She appears to still be managing the affairs of the plantation. In 1876, for example, she signed a contract with Shack Alston which specified that in exchange for the use of her land and a small house, he was to grow small grains, corn, and cotton. He was to give Adeline one-third of all the grains he raised; one-fourth of all the cotton if he manured the field, or one-third if he did not.<sup>66</sup> She may have sold some of the acquired crop to local neighbors. An undated note among family papers read: "*Mrs. A. Alston Will you please send me two bushels of wheat Eliza C. Hamlet.*"<sup>67</sup>

The 1880 census lists Adeline as a farmer. Listed in her household is Aurelia Jones, recorded as "niece," but probably her granddaughter, Elizabeth's daughter.<sup>68</sup> Aurelia Jones was listed as 24 years old and single.<sup>69</sup> An adjacent household lists two servants. Most of the nearby households appear to be black sharecroppers. Four of Adeline's children are living within the county. Two more of Adeline's children had died in the 1870s—Nathaniel Macon in 1875 and Elizabeth in 1876—and John's wife, Mary had died in 1877.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> It is possible that John returned to Chatham for good only after Mary's death in 1877. He remarried in Chatham in 1879, confusingly, to another woman named Mary—Mary Headen. Census records in 1880 and 1900 have him living in Chatham County.

<sup>64</sup> From 3,000 pounds of tobacco to none, as well as the number of livestock, e.g., cattle from 129 head to 13.

<sup>65</sup> NR 8:13.

<sup>66</sup> PC 1575.1, Folder 14, Contract, Tenant Farmer, 1876; cited in NR 8:14.

<sup>67</sup> PC 1575.1, Folder 15; cited in NR 8:11.

<sup>68</sup> We speculate that Aurelia is listed as "niece" because it is John's wife, Mary, her aunt, who is responding to the census questions.

<sup>69</sup> Aurelia is also listed in another household—that of her aunt Ann Alston Taylor and her husband Joseph.

<sup>70</sup> Adeline Eugenia had married Benjamin R. Bryan, in 1860. The family did not stay in Chatham County. Several children were born in Swain County, NC, and in 1880 they were in Texas.



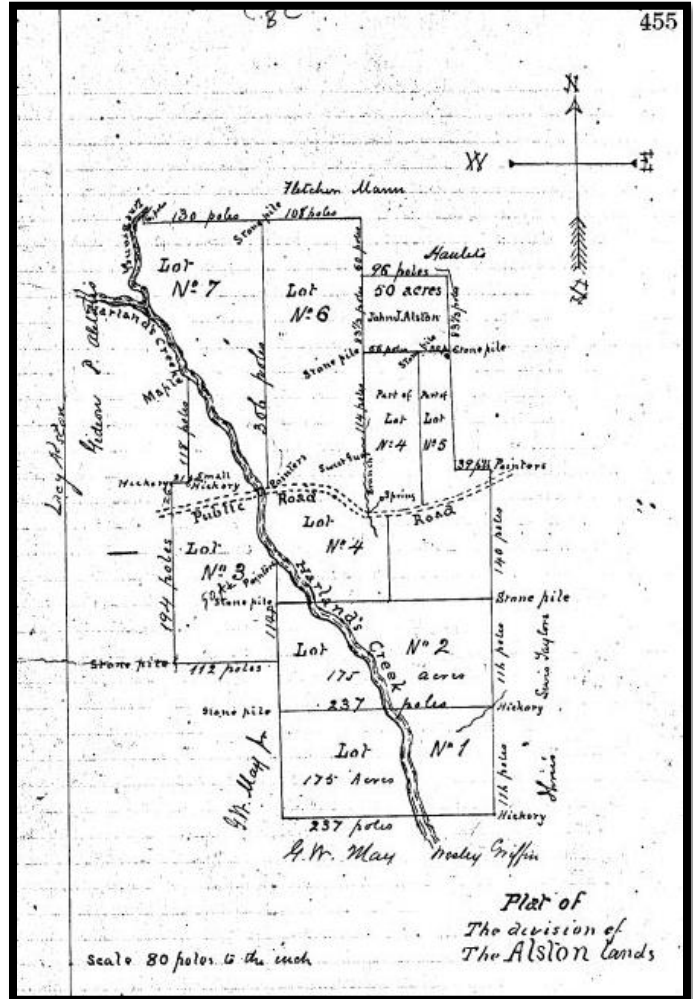
In 1881, the 1,184 acres Adeline owned were divided into eight parcels by the court and distributed to her children or their heirs.<sup>71</sup> Four of Adeline's children were deceased by 1881.<sup>72</sup> Their shares went to their heirs. The three surviving daughters each got a share of the property, with the 202 acres on which Adeline's house stood allocated to her daughter, Delia Alston DeGraffenriedt. Surviving son John received only 50 acres. The reason for this seeming inequity is probably specified in the court proceeding that precipitated the division, but we have not located that record.<sup>73</sup>

**Distribution of Adeline's property to her children or their heirs**

Lot #	Heirs	Acres
Lot 1	Adeline Eugenia Bryan*	175
Lot 2	Elizabeth Gunter heirs	175
Lot 3	Roena Alston (widow of N. Macon)	152
Lot 4	Lavinia Barringer heirs	152
Lot 5	Marina McClenahan	138
Lot 6	Delia DeGraffenriedt**	202
Lot 7	Anna Taylor	202
	John J. Alston***	50

\* Title held by John B. DeGraffenriedt  
 \*\* House parcel, although house not mentioned in division  
 \*\*\* For reasons unspecified in the deed, John J. Alston's 50 acres plus a cash allocation from another heir was to be 1/36 of the valuation of the entire property.

From Chatham County deed BC/452-455



Interestingly, the 175-acre parcel allocated to Adeline Eugenia Bryan was titled to Delia's husband, John B. DeGraffenriedt, who had been a successful planter before emancipation but of smaller scale than Adeline. The title trail to the property indicates that Adeline Eugenia and her husband B. R. Bryan had sold her future share in the property in 1877,

<sup>71</sup> Chatham County Deed BC/455. We have not located the court document that precipitated this action, so we don't know Adeline's role in it. In all likelihood, she initiated the division, or perhaps she was ill or disabled so that someone else was acting on her behalf.

<sup>72</sup> Deceased before the 1881 division were Elizabeth (d. 1876); Lavinia (d. 1867); William (1862); and Nathaniel (1875).

<sup>73</sup> It was not uncommon for some children to get greater or lesser shares because the parent had previously provided for that child. We find no record of Adeline deeding property to any of her children, but deeds would not necessarily have been registered. It is also possible that John obtained land from other Alstons or from his wife's family.

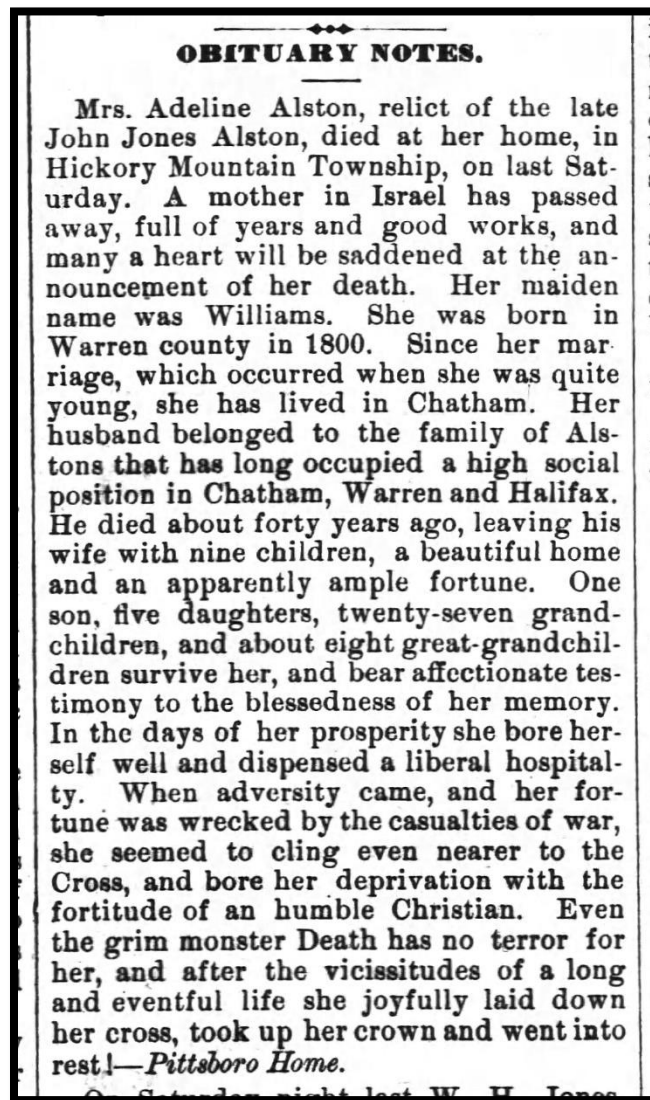
and through a series of sales, John B. DeGraffenriedt obtained title to her share.<sup>74</sup> Shortly after 1881, other heirs of Elizabeth and Lavinia also sold their shares to John B. DeGraffenriedt.<sup>75</sup>

It seems likely that Adeline initiated the 1881 division of her property. If she were somehow incapacitated, someone could have initiated it on her behalf, but we have nothing to suggest that that was the case. Were these land transfers to take place immediately, or at Adeline's death? What were the provisions for Adeline herself? The document does not answer these questions.

Adeline Williams Alston died 13 Jun 1885.

From *The Chatham Record*, 18 Jun 1885

*"Two Deaths - Two citizens of this county died last week, one of them in the very prime of life, the other in the 'sere and yellow leaf' ....released from the infirmities of old age....taken by the great Reaper like the fully ripened grain....Mrs. Adaline Alston died at her residence on Hickory Mountain, on the 13th inst., in the 81st year of her age. She was the oldest person of the Alston name, a family well known not only in this county but in this and other states. For more than forty years she had been the widow of J.J. Alston, Esq., and had survived several of a large family of children. Accustomed to every comfort that wealth could bestow until overtaken by the misfortunes of war, she bore with Christian resignation the reverses of adversity, and is now at rest."*



*Adeline Alston obituary from the Weekly Raleigh Register, 24 Jun 1885*

Surprisingly, we do not know where Adeline is buried. While several of Adeline's children are buried in the Pittsboro Methodist

<sup>74</sup> Chatham County Deed AW/22: Bryans sell to A. C. [Asa] Eubanks, 1877; AW/351 Eubanks default, purchased at courthouse sale by W. L. London, who sells to Henry Thomas Fields; AZ/155 Henry Thomas Fields to John B. DeGraffenriedt, 1879.

<sup>75</sup> BC/358 from Will C. Barringer; BC/359 from Aurelia Jones and her siblings; BG/37 from Victor N. Barringer; BG/469 from John A. Barringer, et al.

Church cemetery, older members of the family, including Adeline's husband John, are buried in the Joseph John Alston graveyard between Pittsboro and Siler City, near Chatham Jack's former residence. Adeline's husband, John Jones Alston, has a marker there, but there is no marker for Adeline. Why no marker was erected for her in this or some other graveyard is a mystery. Adeline does have a memorial of sorts. The house she lived in for 64 years still stands and is a Chatham County National Register property.<sup>76</sup>

One cannot overlook Adeline's participation in the enslavement of many people. But given that significant flaw as viewed from the 21<sup>st</sup> century, she was an unusual person for her times. She was raised to be a dependent married woman, typical of the plantation class, and for twenty years, she fulfilled that role. After her husband's death, Adeline did not remarry, nor does the evidence suggest that she allocated the role that had been fulfilled by her husband to another male. Rather, it appears that she not only took on the responsibilities normally associated with the men of the family, but that she did so quite successfully. During Adeline's long widowhood, contracts with overseers and tenants, correspondence with intermediaries and agents, law suits, receipts, and letters suggest that Adeline actively managed the plantation and the needs of her large family. She arranged credit, scheduled payment and collection of debts, marketed crops, bought and sold land, and hired out enslaved workers. At the same time, she managed her household, arranging for the education of her children and medical care for her family and enslaved persons. It is our hope that this effort to share what we could find about her life will preserve a slice of Chatham County history that previously has not been elaborated upon.

### **Appendices:**

[Appendix A: Alston Family Information](#)

[Appendix B: Excerpts from Original Documents](#)

[Appendix C: Maps](#)

[Appendix D: Distribution of enslaved persons in 1854 settlement between Adeline Williams Alston and her youngest daughter, Adeline E. Alston](#)

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<sup>76</sup> The plantation after Adeline: The agricultural census for 1890 is not available, but it is assumed that John DeGraffenriedt, like other owners in the county at that time, rented his farmland to tenants and sharecroppers. We do not know whether the DeGraffenriedts lived in the house, but speculate that they might have, since the house became known as the Alston-DeGraffenriedt house. After John DeGraffenriedt's death in 1899, his wife, Delia, moved to Durham to live with their daughter Martha (Patty) Peay and Patty's husband Thomas L. Peay. The Peays continued to run the farm as a sharecropping operation. After Delia DeGraffenriedt's death in 1914, her daughter Patty inherited the farm, and when Patty died in 1921, the Alston-DeGraffenriedt house was left to her four daughters, who used the house as a country retreat. During the DeGraffenriedt/Peay ownership of the house, sharecropping operations continued. The property continued to be farmed by sharecroppers as late as 1940, when a square notch log mule barn was built by Frank Allston, a sharecropper and descendent of one of Adeline Alston's enslaved workers. At least a portion of the property continued to be farmed by a black family into the 1960s. From NR 8/15.