

Cemetery Mystery at Hailbron

Alstons, Hills, Londons and More

By Connie McAdams, * April 2021

Take a 20- to 30-minute walk southwest from the Courthouse in Pittsboro and you might stumble across an old cemetery hidden in the woods. There's a low, rectangular-shaped rock wall with a simple iron gate enclosing the small space. In the spring, periwinkle blossoms



*The William Alston Cemetery
after cleanup by Connie McAdams.*

carpet the ground.

Otherwise, there are weeds and sticks, briars and vines, with one gnarly tree in the northeast corner. There are fieldstones within the walls that almost certainly mark graves, and, in one corner, a large ledger grave marker for Ann S. Hill.



*Fieldstone marker in the William
Alston cemetery.*

The Chatham County Historical Association's cemetery records (found on CemeteryCensus.com) reveal that this is the William Alston cemetery. According to these records, there are 10 graves, but only one inscribed marker—for Ann S. Hill, who died November 9, 1838. Three other burials were identified by John London: Anne Yeargan Alston, the wife of William Alston (d. 1786), and two young children of Anne and William Alston—Samuel Yeargan Alston and William Chancy Alston. My research found that several other members of the Hill family are also likely buried here. More on that later.

So, who was William Alston, and why is he not buried in the cemetery that bears his name? And who is Ann S. Hill, and what is her connection to the Alstons? What's the story of this place where members of the two families are buried? The cemetery raised these questions that led me to research the Alston and Hill families as well as the property on which the cemetery lies.

William Alston

Chatham County was officially established in April 1771. William Alston was appointed County Court Clerk in December 1773. He was the third Clerk of the Chatham County Court,

but was the first to actually live in Chatham County. He served in this position until May 1776. It is notable that William Alston was the clerk who first recorded the court minutes without mentioning the “King” or the “year of the king’s reign.” This patriotic “omission” from November 1775, was a way of announcing that Chatham County no longer recognized the sovereignty of King George, III. William also served in the military as a Lieutenant Colonel in the Third North Carolina Battalion 1776-1778.



Old well near cemetery.

The exact location of William Alston’s home during these early years of the county is not clear. It seems logical that he lived somewhere near the final resting site of his wife and young sons. One of William Alston’s descendants, Michael Roper, described the homesite as south of Roberson Creek and north of Alston Chapel Church Road. That fits with the location of the cemetery. Rock and brick remains of a structure and of an old well can still be found in the general area of the cemetery. In Chatham County deed B/19, dated April 29, 1775, William Alston purchased from John Harrington, 212 acres on the south side of Robertson Creek.

William Alston was born in 1748 in Halifax County, NC. He was the son of Joseph John Alston and Elisabeth Chancy, and the grandson of Colonel John Alston who probably immigrated from England to what is now northeastern North Carolina in the late 1600s. Williams’ father Joseph John Alston didn’t live in Chatham, but he purchased multiple tracts of land here. In his 1780 will he mentions several parcels of land in Chatham. In this will he also says “I give and devise unto my son, William Alston, his heirs or assigns all the negro slaves which are now in his possession, excepting the following...” He then lists 9 names, Hannah, Hagar, Silva, Nancy, Press, Boatswain, Nursery Rose, Rachael, and Sam. He directs these nine enslaved people to be loaned to William until William’s children “arrive to lawful age” at which time “the negroes are to be divided among William’s children.”

William Alston and his wife Anne Yeargan Alston had six children. Their son John Joseph married Betsy Jones, and died in 1816. One of John and Betsy’s two daughters married Dr John DeGraffenreid. It was their son, John Baker DeGraffenreid, who married “Chatham Jack” Alston’s granddaughter Delia Alston. William and Anne’s sons William Chancy and Samuel Yeargan both died young and are buried in the family cemetery. Oroodates (Oroon) married Marium (probably McDaniels). Oroon and Marium had no children but records show that his widow, Marium, freed her slaves after his death. Daughters Mary Ann (who married Edwards Rives) and Nancy Ann (who married Robert Palmer) were left in the care of relatives after William and Anne died. Nancy and Mary Ann both had many children. Most of William Alston’s descendants can trace their ancestry through Nancy Alston Palmer or Mary Ann Alston Rives.

Anne Alston died in 1786 and, according to John London’s account, is buried in the family cemetery. William Alston died in 1788, about two years after his wife’s death. He had gone to Sulphur Springs, Virginia, for his health. He died and was buried there—solving the mystery of why he is not buried with his wife and children. William is mostly remembered for his family connections. His wife, Anne Yeargan Alston, was a distant cousin of President Thomas Jefferson. William’s older brother, Philip Alston, is widely remembered from his “House in the

Horseshoe" in Moore County. His youngest half-brother was Joseph John (Chatham Jack) Alston who arrived on the scene in Chatham County after William's death. Both William Alston and his brother, "Chatham Jack" are connected to the historic Alston DeGraffenreid house which still stands a few miles west of Pittsboro. William's granddaughter married into the DeGraffenreid family and it was William's great-grandson, John DeGraffenreid, who married "Chatham Jack's" granddaughter, Delia Alston, who grew up in the house. In 1881 they took possession of the property and home now known as the Alston-DeGraffenreid house (which "Chatham Jack" had built for his own son).

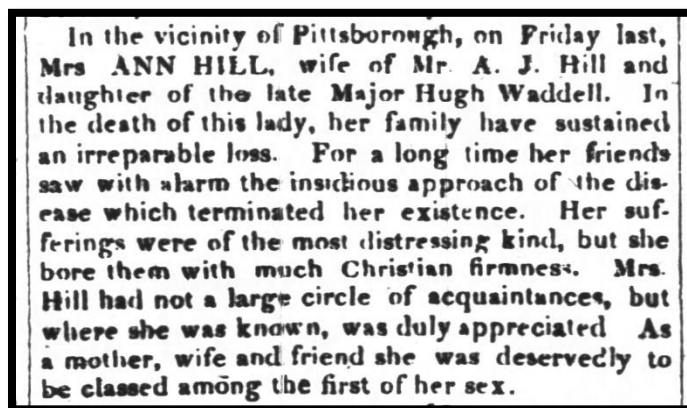
The Hill Family and Hailbron

Shortly after William Alston died, another family came to Chatham County. The four Hill brothers were grandsons of Colonial Carolina Governor, James Moore. Each of the four brothers; John, Thomas, Nathaniel, and William were plantation owners in the coastal area and they all bought property in Chatham County, near Pittsboro, for their summer homes. Colonel Thomas Hill bought the property on Robeson Creek that had belonged to William Alston. He called his plantation home Hailbron.

"Oak Mount" was the home of John Hill and was located at the northwest corner of Pittsboro. "Kentucky" was the home of Dr Frederick Hill, son of John Hill. The new Chatham County Agriculture and Conference Center now stands on the property that once belonged to the family of Frederick Hill, who purchased the property from his mother-in-law Mary Watters. The restored smokehouse, now located behind the Ag and Conference center, was originally built and used on the Hill property. "Chatham Hall" was the home of Dr. Nathaniel Hill to the south, and "Belmont" was William's home to the northeast.

Thomas Hill was married to Susan Mabson. They had many children. Both Susan and Thomas died at Hailbron according to their obituaries and we assume that were buried in the little family cemetery on the Hailbron property. Hailbron is also the likely burial place for several of their sons who died as children, as well as their adult daughter, Maria, who died in Chatham in 1836.

As I have noted, the only marked grave in the cemetery belongs to Ann Waddell Hill. Her husband was Arthur Jones Hill, another child of Colonel Thomas Hill and Susan Mabson Hill. Like her husband, Ann was a relative of Governor James Moore. She was also the granddaughter of US Supreme Court Justice Alfred Moore. (Moorefields in Hillsborough was the summer home for Justice Moore). Arthur J. Hill lived for many years after Ann died and he is buried in Wilmington, NC, in Oakdale cemetery. We know from Ann Hill's obituary that she died in Chatham, near Pittsboro, so it makes sense that Hailbron is her burial place.



In the vicinity of Pittsborough, on Friday last, Mrs ANN HILL, wife of Mr. A. J. Hill and daughter of the late Major Hugh Waddell. In the death of this lady, her family have sustained an irreparable loss. For a long time her friends saw with alarm the insidious approach of the disease which terminated her existence. Her sufferings were of the most distressing kind, but she bore them with much Christian firmness. Mrs. Hill had not a large circle of acquaintances, but where she was known, was duly appreciated. As a mother, wife and friend she was deservedly to be classed among the first of her sex.

*Obituary for Ann S. Hill
from 14 Nov 1838 Fayetteville Weekly Observer*



TO
 THE WIFE AND THE
 MOTHER
 This stone
 is erected by her
 HUSBAND and
 CHILDREN
 ANN S HILL
 DIED
 November 9th 1838
 Aged 40 Years
 May the afflictions of Earth be
 purified in Heaven.
 Love takes the sting from grief
 And faith gives Eternity to Love.

You might wonder why the extremely well-to-do Hill family didn't bury its dead in St. Bartholomew's Church cemetery. Remember, though, that St. Bartholomew's wasn't built until 1832, and many of these deaths took place well before that time, so the family cemetery was well established and perhaps therefore the preferred burial place even for the later deaths.

Hailbron remained in the Hill family for several more generations, passing to Arthur's younger brother, Thomas, and his wife, Eliza. Then to their daughter Louisa and her husband George Griffith. According to a 29 July 1880 newspaper advertisement, when the Griffiths sold the property, Hailbron was 400 acres and included a 12-room house and farm buildings. Other records show that the Hailbron home also included a 300-book library and a piano. The farm produced wheat, corn, oats and tobacco as well as livestock.

Hailbron burned in 1886. At that time the property was owned by HA London, another Hill family relative. According to a *Chatham Record* advertisement from September 1891, the 375-acre Hailbron farm was for sale again. The Tan-yard on the property was to be sold with the farm, or separately.

Like the Alstons, the Hills have many connections with prominent families in Chatham and NC history. In 1837, Thomas and Susan's daughter, Eliza Alice, married Pittsboro lawyer, John Hooker Haughton. One of Eliza's daughters, Maria Caroline, married William Lord London in 1864. He was an officer in the Confederate Army. In 1757 William Hill (of Boston) married Margaret Moore of Brunswick, NC, at Orton Plantation. They became the parents of the four Hill brothers who later came to Pittsboro. Orton Plantation was built by Roger

usual and patriotic appreciation.
 —*Pittsboro Record*: On last Monday night the large dwelling house, near this place, known as "Hailbron," was entirely destroyed by fire. It was the former residence of the late Thomas Hill, Esq., and was one of the largest and most substantial dwellings in this county. This farm is now owned by Mr. W. R. Edgerton, of Wayne county, and at the time of the fire the house was occupied by one of his sons and Mr. James O. Jones and wife. The origin of the fire is unknown. Mr. Jones awoke about 3 o'clock in the night and the flames had then gained such headway as to be beyond control, and they were not able to save more than half of the furniture. The large oak trees near the house were destroyed also. There was no insurance on the house.

From the 8 Feb 1886 Goldsboro Messenger.

Moore, son of Governor James Moore. The plantation was later owned by Dr. Frederick Jones Hill, who also owned "Kentucky" in Pittsboro. Another notable member of this family was Alfred Moore Waddell. It was Alfred Moore Waddell who led the 1898 Wilmington Race Riot. Another member of the extended family, Confederate Navy Captain, James Iredell Waddell, is remembered for firing the last shot of the Civil War.

Locally, the Hills and their descendants are deeply associated with St. Bartholomew's Episcopal church in Pittsboro. In 1831 Dr Frederick Jones Hill and Dr Nathaniel Hill gave the land on which St Bartholomew's was built. According to a 1939 article in *The State*, "The chancel furniture was made from a walnut tree at Hailbron, the up-county home of Thomas Hill, of Wilmington." Graves of many members of the Hill family and their descendants can be found in the cemetery at St Barts, and a stone marker honoring the Hills for their contributions stands near the front door of the church.

Farm for Sale.

THE farm HAILBRON, one mile southwest of Pittsboro, comprising 100 acres; half woodland. Produces wheat, corn, oats and tobacco. Is well watered; several good meadows. House has 12 rooms and two small cellars; large barn and other out-buildings; excellent well and several springs; household and kitchen furniture; piano, farming utensils, cattle, horses, hogs, carriage, wagons, barouche, 200 bushels seed oats, one Buckeye Reaper and Mower and one drill. I will sell any of these now at private sale, and whatever is not sold will be sold at public sale at Hailbron on the 10th of November next for cash. The farm on terms of from one to five years, with interest.

G. R. GRIFFITH.
Pittsboro, N. C.

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From the 19 Aug 1880 Chatham Record.

There are several references to Hailbron in various newspaper articles. A clipping from 1891 refers to a large oak that fell and crushed a dwelling on the old "Hailbron" farm. From January 1861 there's an announcement of the wedding at St Bartholomew's of Maria Rhett Hill, daughter of Thomas Hill, Esq, of Hailbron. In an earlier announcement from *The Raleigh Minerva* in 1802, Thomas Hill of Hailbron offers a reward for the return of three horses that escaped from Hailbron. He describes them in detail and notes that they were raised in Tennessee "where they will probably attempt to return". There is an obituary notice in the *Wilmington Morning Star* from 1910 for John Hill who was born at Hailbron in Chatham County in 1834. A notice in the *Chatham Record* in 1909 announces that "a bridge has been built across Roberson's creek at the old "Hailbron"

ford. Apparently, there had recently been a near drowning when "Mrs. Womble and her son were washed down the creek".

In July 1913 there was an article in the *Fayetteville Weekly Observer* about some historical documents from that newspaper. During the 19th century, EJ Hale was editor of the paper. Hale was the grandson-in-law of Col Thomas Hill of Hailbron. Some of the newspaper archives were saved before General Sherman destroyed the newspaper in 1865. It was later discovered that some of the files were missing. "Upon Sherman's approach (1865) these files were hurried away to Hailbron, in Chatham County, the home of Col Thomas Hill.... Col Hill had the files buried in the garden at Hailbron, whence they were taken back to Fayetteville after peace.... These volumes form one of the most valuable stores of historical data in existence in North Carolina."

I found no direct family connection between the Alstons and the Hills who are buried at Hailbron. They appear to be connected here only because they lived on the same land, and buried their loved ones in the same small family cemetery. But the families had a lot in common. They were both prominent, prosperous, and powerful families. They were involved

in government and business, owned a lot of property, and were enslavers. Their success, prosperity, and privilege were supported by the sacrifices and unpaid labor of other human beings. The Alstons and Hills are significant to the history of Chatham County for many reasons, some of which I have noted in this paper. Many current residents of Chatham, both those of European descent and those of African descent, have ties to these families and to the land where they once lived and died.

Much of the land along both sides of the eastern end of Alston Chapel Road was once part of the Hailbron Plantation. It no longer looks like a plantation with a beautiful mansion. Most of the land has been divided into wooded homesites. There are still gardens and farm animals in the area. There remains 74 acres of woodland around the old cemetery. Robeson Creek forms part of the boundary of the property. Along the creek, remains of old rock walls still exist. Apart from the cemetery, scant remains of an old building, and an old well, there is no other obvious evidence of the homes and farm buildings, fields and crops, or the Alstons and Hills that once defined this landscape

References:

Cemetery Census

Chatham County 1171-1971

Alstons and Allstons of North and South Carolina, by Joseph A Groves

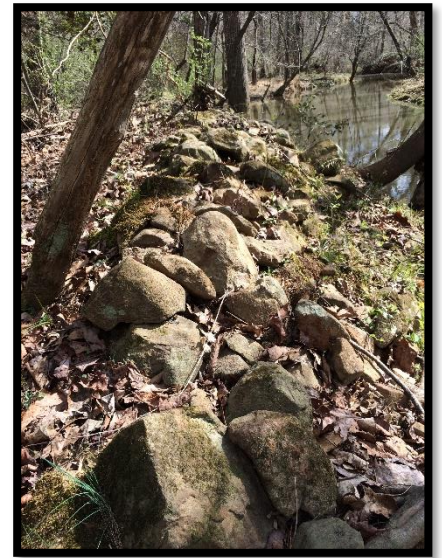
Reliques of the Rives

Various Alston records at Chatham Community Library

Hill family records, Lawrence London

The State, February 25, 1939

Various newspaper clippings



Rock wall along Robeson Creek.



The William Alston Cemetery in 2016, before cleanup by Connie McAdams.

**Connie McAdams lives on property that was once part of Hailbron. A few years ago, she learned about the hidden cemetery, and curiosity inspired her to find out more about Ann S Hill. That opened up a whole network of connections with the Alstons and Hailbron, and the early history of Chatham County.*