

# Who's Who in the Molly Alston Cemetery, Fairfield County, South Carolina

By Charlie Smith

Heading southwest on the Greenbriar/Mossydale Road in Fairfield County just before that historic loop comes back into the southern end of Hinnant Store Road (SC 269), there is a small bridge that spans Crooked Run Creek. If you slow down for a moment and look immediately to the right you will see a very old and interesting little cemetery off in the woods. What is surprising is that even without much attention for the past 200 years, this burial ground still has an amazing number of undamaged headstones dating back to the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. What is surprising is that as disjointed as the collection of graves first appeared, many not even having dates on them at all, for the person willing to dig into the records, the place still tells a great story about an important time in Fairfield County history. It also tells a bit about Pennsylvania, Virginia, North Carolina and South Carolina lowcountry history in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The residents of the Molly Alston Cemetery flowed to Fairfield from all of these places and more.

Winnsborough at this time had become an important place economically and culturally and was drawing families into its midst such as Scot-Irish families like McKinstry and McDill. It also attracted lowcountry planters and their kinsmen who had already experienced life in other places like North Carolina, the Waccamaw Neck near Georgetown and before that the West Indies. These folks brought with them new ideas in architecture, politics and culture. They were dedicated to education and made good use of the local institutions like the Mt. Zion Institute. Charleston families with ties to Fairfield like the Alstons begat generations of descendants who appreciated the ties between their port city and the inland island of civility that was Winnsborough. This coastal relationship also created a market for Winnsboro Blue Granite, as Charleston has absolutely no native stone. Ironworkers like James Madison McConnell, who was a wheelwright, builders like James Samuel Brown who is believed to have built the 1792 Fairfield Courthouse and Samuel Alston, a noted surveyor, also came to Fairfield. These families are all represented in the Molly Alston Cemetery.

If you are researching, Alstons, Logans, Browns, McKinstrys, McConnells, McDills or Tolafero's in Fairfield County this is where you will want to start. There are so many interesting things about the place if you know what you are looking at. For instance, the headstone of Elizabeth Tolafero [sic] is probably one of the first instances of an Italian surname appearing in Fairfield County. The name is known as Tagliaferro, Talifero, Tellifero, Tolliver and Toliver in other parts of the country; but it came from Italy to Virginia in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and means "iron cutter".

There are unfortunately a few individuals in the cemetery who are not easy to research. The first being **Agnes Alston**. There is simple no information on her, but her headstone is the style that was used in this cemetery in the 1840's. We do not know if she was born an Alston or married one. I believe that she was the daughter of John Alston and Mary Molly Boyd Alston. Her birthdate in that case would be about 1783, but again, I have no documentation of this. Several websites say that she is their daughter and

that she died in infancy; but unless her grave went unmarked for many decades, the stone appears to be much later than the 1780's.

Next is James Samuel Thomas Alston b.1813 and d. Apr. 3, 1848. He was the son of David Alston and Susannah Ellen Williams. He died at 35 years old, but we don't know much about him.

John Alston b. 1739 and d. June 5, 1787 is the progenitor of the Alstons in Fairfield County. His grave appears to be the oldest in the cemetery. It is important to note here that this John Alston is NOT the John Alston from North Carolina. This mistake has been replicated over and over... and it's just not correct. He came here directly from Scotland. He married Mary "Mollie" Boyd b.1749 and d. July 14, 1826. Molly's sister was Jennett Jane Boyd b. Dec.6, 1748 and died May 30, 1830, who married James Samuel Brown, b. June 1740 and d. March 14, 1821, and who is believed to be the James Brown who was the builder of the 1792 Fairfield Courthouse. I also believe that Agnes Boyd b. 1758 and d. Nov. 3, 1825 was a third sister of this Boyd family, but I have no documentation on that as of this date. I also have no information on the parents of these known Boyd sisters.

William D. Thompson, s/o Jennett Jane Brown b. 1766 and David Thompson is also here. His maternal grandparents being James Samuel Brown and Jennet Jane Boyd Brown mentioned above.

Mary Alston b. Aug. 24, 1772 and d. Aug.26, 1857, Daughter of John and Mary Molly Boyd Alston, is here and appears to have never married.

Samuel B. Alston b. Dec. 14, 1769 and died Jul 30, 1834 was a noted land surveyor. He was appointed by the SC General Assembly as the County Surveyor for Fairfield in December of 1818. It appears that he also did not marry.

Edward P. Brown b. October 14, 1848 and died Nov. 6, 1857 was the son of George Brown b. 1812 and d. Oct. 13, 1888 and Margaret McDill b. May 28, 1810 and died June 8, 1877. All three are buried at this cemetery. Another of their sons, Thomas McDill Brown, was born Dec. 20, 1842 and died thirteen months later on Jan. 31. 1844.

The person about whom we know the least at the Molly Alston Cemetery is Elizabeth Logan. The 1835 date of manufacture of her headstone by G. Brown Columbia (who was likely also related to this Brown family) is very close to the death date of one Elizabeth Payne Logan who was the wife of David Logan, but there is no apparent connection between her and anyone else in this cemetery, but her presence here makes that doubtful.

Another such case is that of Nancy McConnell. Readers of this essay who haunt cemeteries like I do can tell stories upon stories of the strange incidents that happen in burial grounds. I had known about the Molly Alston Cemetery for several years prior to my first visit, but had never had the opportunity to locate and visit it. One day an older gentleman whom I had met at a general store in the Rion area offered to take me around that section of the county and show me some things of interest. At that time I was searching for the remains of the home of James Madison McConnell, because I had been told by my grandfather decades ago that the house, his great grandfather's, had a family cemetery to the side

and that it had at some point become known as the Robertson Place. He knew that it was near the home of Mr. Camak who had been a noted writer for the Winnsboro paper. We had no luck finding the place, but the gentleman said to me, "there is one old cemetery that you should see while we are over this way. It's called the Molly Alston Cemetery. Well I was thrilled to hear him say that and that he could take me there...even if it was drizzling rain and cold.

I did my usual quick visual scan of the remaining headstones in the cemetery, making mental notes that I could transcribe in the car where it was dry. I was quite surprised at how many of the stones were in excellent condition...all except one. Something drew me to this little grave that had no markings. I poked around to see if there were any stones under the mulch, and I started to find pieces of marble about the size of my hand. There were four pieces in all, not counting the chips. When I assembled them into their original form, I felt a shiver go through me and a tear well up in my eye. The grave was that of Nancy McConnell, daughter of James Madison McConnell and his wife Charlotte. I assumed that Charlotte McConnell must have been a Brown, McDill or a McKinstry just by virtue of the fact that her daughter is in this place with no obvious connection to any of the families; but I know nothing of Charlotte's family. The really beautiful thing is that I immediately recognized Nancy as my great great grandfather's sister. No one in our family had ever known that she existed. She was born and died between the 1850 and 1860 censuses and there is no record of her in any family collections. Her brothers were Stephen Gibson McConnell b. June 9, 1840 and d. Sept. 6, 1909 and Joel McConnell who was born in 1845, but who was not present on the 1870 census and who never appeared on the public record after 1860. He may have died in the war or just simply died during the time frame of the war; but he is not mentioned in his father's 1888 will. So Nancy is the reason that I decided to press on with better documentation of this historic cemetery. It became personal!

It seems funny now to hear someone use the term "Old Maid" when describing a woman who never married; but in 1860 apparently no one objected. Sisters Annie McDill b. Feb. 16, 1807 and d. Oct. 28, 1895 and Mary E. McDill b. Jan. 1, 1822 and d. Oct. 6, 1887 were described this way by the census taker. They had lived together most of their lives and would continue to do so until Mary died in 1887. Their widowed mother Mary Jane Boyd McDill b. 1775 had lived with them until she died in 1856. She was the widow of their father James McDill who was born in 1771 and who died in 1847. Mary and Annie were also sisters of Margaret McDill who had married George Brown.

Jane Alston McKinstry 1779-1844 d/o John Alston and Molly Boyd Alston and Thomas McKinstry 1779-1833 s/o John McKinstry b. 1739 and Jane Alston McKinstry b. 1749 are also buried in this cemetery. The parents of Jane Alston McKinstry b. 1749 are unknown to me at this time. Jane and Thomas McKinstry were known to use three names each in the naming of their children. This was not so common in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century as it became a little later in this area. For this reason I am attributing the graves of two children to Jane and Thomas McKinstry...that of George W. D. McKinstry 1813-Sep. 27, 1848 and that of John W.G. McKinstry Oct. 13, 1838 to Oct. 23, 1840.

There are three Samuel McKinstrys at Molly Alston Cemetery. There is Samuel McKinstry (apparently an infant) whose dates are not marked on his headstone and of whom nothing is known; Then there is Samuel A. McKinstry b. 1860, Son of Thomas B. and Emma F. McKinstry who was the brother of Carrie E.

McKinstry who was also born in 1860. Whether Samuel A. and Carrie McKinstry were fraternal twins or not is unknown, but remains a possibility. Carrie married Ross Gibson. Then we have Samuel McKinstry b. Feb 1, 1769 and died May 26, 1836 and who married Margaret Alston b. 1770 and died Sept. 12, 1832. Margaret Alston McKinstry was another of the daughters of John and Mary "Molly" Boyd Alston.

With all that we now know about this cemetery there are still a few mysteries, like how is Nancy McConnell connected to this family. We know that her father was "kin" to "ol' man Bill McConnell up on Broad River" as my grandfather used to say; but I'm not sure how. If I knew something about his wife, Charlotte, I could probably make the connection between the James Madison McConnells and the McKinstry's.

I did discover one piece of information that will be important to any McKinstry researcher in the future. Thomas B. McKinstry 1837-1908 was thought until recently to have had only two wives. He actually had three. The first was Emma F. (Inu) McKinstry 1838-1867 and the third was Mary Wylie 1849—1914. The problem was that it was a matter of public record that Thomas McKinstry has three other children between the time his first wife died and the time that we know he married his second wife. The children were my grandfather's cousins Ola Bell McKinstry [Russell] 1880-1943, Walter McKinstry b. 1880 and Dick McKinstry b. 1883, but my grandfather could never remember how they were related. I discovered during my research on the Molly Alston Cemetery that Thomas B. McKinstry had in fact been married a third time. His second wife was Jane C. Hinnant, d/o Josiah Hinnant...and sister of my great great grandmother! Mystery solved.

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