

CASS & BERRIEN COUNTY, MICHIGAN PROFILES  
PRESERVING LOCAL HISTORY  
WITH PEOPLE, EVENTS & PLACES  
By Jeannie Watson

## JAMES WATSON

Scotsman James Watson was an original pioneer of Wayne Township, Cass County, Michigan. Escaping the woes of the early Scottish Industrial Revolution, he and his family migrated to Oneida County, New York in 1833, and then made their way to Michigan in 1842. He founded "Watson Settlement," on the east side of the "Dowagiac Swamp." The Dowagiac Swamp was a large wetland between the Village of Dowagiac and the north branch of the Dowagiac River, before much of it was "sluiced." He pioneered the drainage of many Wayne Township peat moss bogs using the knowledge he gained from his native Scotland's lowland wet moors. His methods turned worthless Southwestern quagmires into valuable "bottomland farm fields." He became a land entrepreneur, prosperous farmer, and finally one of the earliest settlers of the rural Glenwood area. As a member of Cass County's first Scottish community, he brought the traditions of his homeland heritage to Wayne Township. James was a colorful character, whose life story provides insight into Cass County's early Scottish community, and how our pioneer ancestors literally changed the area's mosquito infested wet topography into a valuable resource.

The Watson family of Wayne Township, Cass County, Michigan trace their roots to Scotland's MacWatt Clan. The Watson surname has gone through a number of conversions; MacWatt, "son of Watt, or Walter," MacWatty, Watsons, and Watson were the most common. (In Scotland, Watt is, also, a form of the name Walter.) The Watson Clan held allegiance to the Forbes Clan, having merged with that larger group through marriage and for defensive purposes. The Watson Clan came mainly from Aberdeenshire, the Lowlands, and the northeastern part of Scotland before 1700s. They fell out of favor with the King of Scotland at one point, and for that reason a black barsinister (black stripe) was placed across their clan shield, which by tradition, this branch of the clan family retained, despite improved royal aegis. Watson descendents were so numerous in some areas of Scotland that the surname dominated certain hamlets. For instance, in the clan's Village of Banffshire, 225 of the 300 residents were surnamed Watson. Perhaps the most famous of Scotland's Watson Clan is James Watson of Greenock (not our subject) who invented the steam engine. In his honor, scientists named a unit of electric power the "watt," which is universally used today.

James Watson of Wayne Township (our subject) was born in Renfrewshire, Scotland on 8/28/1798 to Walter Samuel Watson (1756-9/4/1843) and Eunice Foster Smith (1765-10/20/1854, widow of Abner Smith who died in Scotland). James siblings who migrated to Michigan were: (1) Alexander (1813-1912) who wed Mary, (2) Charles D. (1814-1913), (3) John (1815-1913), (4) Joseph H. who was a Civil War union soldier taken prisoner on 8/21/1861 by Confederate forces at Robb's Tavern in Pennsylvania, and (5) Robert who married Sarah Hannan (their son John wed Ceretta Powers and they lived in Niles, Michigan).

There were several family stories about James Watson's parents, Walter and Eunice, who migrated with him to Michigan. (1) Walter Samuel Watson (James' father) was killed with an arrow shot through his heart by renegade Indians in Cass County, and buried in Smith Chapel Cemetery. Walter was claimed to be the "best friend" of Jesse Adams, Sr. and his wife Lydia Farrow (same cemetery). (2) Fourteen years after migrating to Southwestern Michigan, James' mother died and

was buried in Smith Chapel Cemetery (Milton Township) as "Eunice Smith." Her son by Abner (her first husband) resented the second marriage to Walter. The only inscription on the tombstone that makes reference to his mother's second marriage is the statement "mother of Watson (and) Smith" referring to the fact that she gave birth to Watson and Smith children.

James Watson was raised and educated in Renfrewshire, Scotland in a rural farming clan environment. His family were agriculturalists who had experience with the draining of lowland moor wetlands. This topography, if claimed correctly, is the very best soil for growing certain crops. After marrying, he farmed for about fourteen years, and then moved to Glasgow, Lanarkshire, Scotland, seeking employment in the city.

"The Scottish Industrial Revolution had started in the 1820s. Manufacturing towns grew to fulfill the demand for goods, and an increase in the population followed that development. The economy of Scotland shifted from being agriculturally based to a combination of more industrial pursuits. Small farms were bought by entrepreneurs intent on creating large agribusinesses. Cotton and wool cloth textile mills sprang up "over night." Iron production, ship building, and coal mining became common industries. "Small factory works" created a variety of supplies destined for national and British Commonwealth markets. Like many of Scotland's farmers in this era, James, and his family, left their farm lands, seeking more prosperity in the city, only to find menial labor on production floors and poor wages. As is always the case in these circumstances, the strong and intelligent find a way to improve their lot in life, and so the Watsons started searching for alternatives.

The Scottish Industrial Revolution had turned Glasgow into a squalid, filthy, overpopulated series of slums. Factories belched noxious fumes, and underpaid workers struggled to put food on the table in rundown tenet buildings. The small elite factory owners grew wealthy. James secured the position of a tailor making the same garments over and over again on an assembly line. The labor forces of Glasgow began to rebel, many started to join together, and the first unions formed to fight for resolution of grievances. As violence erupted, the large extended Watson Family (which now included Smiths and Craigs, and its affiliates, decided that was the time to leave Scotland "for greener pastures." In 1832, James Watson rallied his "family troops," located a ship due to sail from the Port of Greenock (just north of Glasgow), and the group boarded the ship Brig Perseverance for North America in mass, arriving in New York on August 17, 1833.

James, and his group of "emigrants," settled in New York Mills, Oneida County, New York (where the first section of the Erie Canal was dug). It was there that they heard about the "opening of the Great Lakes Territory for settlement," and "Michigan's land rush." Tales of Cass County's wetlands, thick forests, and rich sandy loam soils drew his attention. He knew from experience that drained swampy terrain could be made into the richest of farmland. He, also, had a large extended family that needed extensive property to support their survival. Northern Cass County, Michigan offered the perfect situation; large tracks of available land, deemed initially undesirable by most settlers because of drainage problems, and reasonably priced.

Wayne Township had been first settled around "the spring of 1832." The first known pioneers were Jesse Green, Cornelius Higgins, Jacob Zimmerman, Elijah and Joel C. Wright (whose descendents later married Watson descendents). By 1835, there were 10 families living in the area. "It was originally part of LaGrange Township," and was officially "organized in the winter 1834 and 1835" as a separate township.

Before settlement, Wayne Township was covered with "heavy timberland," and thick

underbrush. It was crossed diagonally by the north branch of the Dowagiac River, and the south branch of the same river in the far southeast corner. "Low swampy" wetlands were prevalent and mosquito infested. There was a "range of steep hills and rough land" that trapped the waters of the drainage basin. Twin Lakes, Holmes Lake, Pitcher Lake, and the Dowagiac Mill Pond were the only open bodies of water, but the area was so wet year round in some areas that it hardly mattered.

The Dowagiac River starts in Van Buren County, crosses Cass County in Wayne, Silver Creek and Pokagon Township before it empties in the St. Joseph River. In Cass County it overflowed its shallow banks creating swamps, and the Dowagiac Swamp was one of the biggest. The property east of the wetland was the perfect "moorish peat moss soil," to be drained and turned into farmable "bottom land."

In 1842, at age 42, James led his clan of able bodied men, women and many children to Cass County, Michigan. They came by horse drawn wagon train, bringing all of their possessions with them. "The journey was long, beset with pitfalls, and took great patience."

Upon arriving in Cass County, they considered their options. Wayne Township's Section 18, 19, 30, and the low flat land east of the actual swamp itself, were similar to the wet moors of Scotland. There on the east edge of the swamp, between the Indian Village of Dowagiac, and the north branch of the Dowagiac River, they built their log cabins and called themselves "Watson Settlement."

James used the Scottish method of "moors ditching" to drain portions of the swamps. Deep channels and furrows were dug along the edges of a desired field. The peat moss soil from the channels was used to raise the level of the farm land desired. Water always flows to the lowest point, because gravity pulls it there. So, through the excavation of these carefully planned deep trenches, the water was led away from the rich top soil land needed for planting. Crops require moisture percolating through ground layers for roots to absorb it but are destroyed by mold and "water logging" if the ground is saturated and "standing" (flooded and never moving). This method of draining moorish wetlands is still used today in Wayne Township, and Southwestern Michigan to keep fields, with high water tables, from being water-logged. There are three drawbacks to this method of claiming fields from nature. First, they have to be periodically re-excavated, because they fill in slowly over time with sediment. Second, they are extremely dangerous to people and animals, especially after a heavy rain. Third, water in those drainage ditches becomes stagnant, absorbs tannic acid from the peat becoming acidic, and are natural breeding grounds for mosquitoes. Wayne Township, and southern Van Buren County just above it, were notorious for their summer mosquitoes.

Today many of those ditches still exist, surrounding rich "bottom land fields, and still draining what would otherwise be wetlands and bogs. Most of those ditches now are choked with weeds, and tall grasses, so one has to look carefully. Cat tails growing in those channels are a sure sign of the high water table. On Decatur Road, between Valley Road and the Village Decatur are perfect examples of these clever designs. With careful examination one will see the north-south, and east-west channels, and the raised fields.

James Mc Ombler was another Scotsman, and he had settled in Section 30 on the southwest quadrant of Wayne Township in 1837. He had surveyed a crude east-west road through the swamp, which later passed by the Watson Settlement once it was established. Without "Swamp Road," passage through the wetland was blocked, and it required hours by horse and wagon to go around the marshland. Since pioneer farmers in Watson Settlement were selling their excess grain and

produce in the town of St. Joseph, Berrien County, Michigan (on the shores of Lake Michigan to the west) that road was vital. The farmers were using the money to pay their land taxes and buy supplies, so a quick efficient way to cross the swamp was necessary.

The problem with Dowagiac Swamp Road was the heavy rains, and wet underlying sections between slightly higher ground, which kept softening the dirt and washing out the road bed foundation. The earth, which had been so laboriously placed with hand shovels and wagons loaded with fill dirt, constantly had to be replaced. James had experience with engineering roads across marshlands in Scotland, and he proposed a solution to the problem for his friend James Mc Ombler. He was not the only one to use the idea, but he was the "wetland engineer" to make it work on Swamp Road. Where there were "washouts" over the low land, logs were cut, at the width of the road and then laid side-by-side forming a wooden foundation upon which dirt was piled for the road bed. Logs were, also, used to border the road, the side-road dirt was seeded, and grasses grew thus preventing the heavy erosion that had been such a frustration. A "red wooden bridge across the creek (that flowed through the swamp) was about 12 feet wide and was built by the Mc Ombles and Watsons. (Before it was constructed wagons had to forage the stream, which was a constant struggle.) With improvements, once the roads dried out, farmers efficiently delivered their extra grain across Swamp Road, into Silver Creek Township, and then on to St. Joseph in Berrien County, Michigan. Loggers transported their lumber along the same route. Today the creek is so hidden by tall grasses it is hard to spot, but still there flowing toward the St. Joseph River. The wooden bridge rotted, was replaced several times, and was finally replaced with conduit tubing.

The cut log foundation became a standard way of bridging soft wet land and some stretches of Southwest Michigan roads. To this day, if you drive the oldest roads of Southwest Michigan, your car might experience the "washboard effect," as it bounces over the ripples of the road. Some of those bumps in the road bed are caused by the underlying logs (some still preserved to this day, because of the acidity of the underlying soil). This effect was especially pronounced on old roads that were finally paved with black top asphalt and were not effectively graded to smooth out the surface before paving. Modern methods today have eliminated most of these effects.

Watson Settlement did not survive long. Reclaimed "bottom land" can result in some of the best farm land that exists. James Watson's swamp land went from being almost worthless to being some of the highest valued land in Wayne Township. The McOmbles and other farmers offered top dollar for the property, and James, and his family, sold their interests. The clan families of Watson Settlement dispersed to other areas of Wayne Township and Cass County, and the little log cabin hamlet was abandoned.

James Watson bought property in Section 12 and 14 of Wayne Township, south of Glenwood. He built his second homestead on Section 14, which was accessed by Glenwood Road and Fosdick Street. Between farming and contracting to engineer the draining of other local wetlands, he prospered. In a few short years, he went from being a poor Scottish factory worker to a well-to-do, respected, and influential member of the Wayne Township Community. The family eventually owned land in Section 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 22, 25, and 36 of Wayne Township, and portions of Berrien and Van Buren County.

Glenwood was very much a part of James Watson's life. It bore three names in its history: "Tietzort's Side Track" (referring to a side train track that went through the settlement), "Model City" (in reference to plat plans for the area), and finally it was named Glenwood (for the Scottish term "glen," meaning "small secluded valley.") In 1939 it was simply a small prairie surrounded by towering trees into which was built a tannery (where leather is made by treating animal hides with

tannin, a smelly astringent). Gradually, others buildings were constructed; a trading post called Tietz's Store, several churches, a blacksmith shop, a grist mill, and a two room school. There was a railroad shipping station (where grain was sent to St. Joseph/Benton Harbor (destined for Chicago) and lumber was shipped to Detroit (destined for eastern state buyers). The Scottish hamlet finally had added to its establishments a tavern, ice house, cider press, steam powered saw mill (in 1855), and small post office. A number of settler's houses surrounded the main street. The hamlet went into a decline, after the local forests were cut.

James had firm opinions on certain economic practices in Wayne Township, and according to family stories, he reacted strongly to those who "thought him fool enough to fall for such "bolderdash." First, when "wildcat money" reached Glenwood, James firmly refused to accept it as change or payment for his farm products. Local chartered banks at this time in history were non-regulated and began the practice of printing their own bank notes (currency), claiming it was as good a gold and silver coins. The wildcat money turned out to be worthless after a time, which a number of local farmers and businesses discovered to their dismay. Second, James disliked bartering (the practice of trading items, with no exchange of money). He favored "mercantilism" (idea that wealth meant the accumulation of gold and silver), and would only accept such coins as payment for his farm products or wetland drainage services. Third, James distrusted the weak banking system of those days. It was rumored that he kept his gold and silver coins in "priests holes" (hiding places for valuables secretly built into the walls of houses in the 1800s and 1900s). His house was broken into several times, but the thieves never did discover his hiding places. Based on family tales, he had a vault built into the hearth of his fireplace, which he did not reveal existed, until a letter was read to his heirs after his death.

On the 1850 U.S. Federal Census, James, wife Grace, daughter-in-law Mary Louise, children Janett, Margaret, William, Mary Ellen, Gracie, John and Alexander are listed as living in Wayne Township. On the 1860 Census, James and Grace with children Jenny (Janet), William, John and Alexander are still residing at home. In 1870, James was age 72, and his wife Grace was age 66. They were living with their son Alexander on the original family homestead on Section 14 of Wayne Township. "Alex" inherited the farm from his parents.

James Watson had a keen pride in his Scottish and British Commonwealth roots. He had a Trafalgar Sword, which he claimed belonged to a relative, "who had no issue" (no children), and so it was given to him. The sword was hung over his fireplace in Wayne Township and taken down whenever he told the story of the Battle of Trafalgar. He was very proud of the family connection to that sword. The family story behind the sword was later recorded: France declared war on Great Britain on February 1, 1793, and many Scottish sons were compelled to help the English defend the British Commonwealth. In doing so, James' relative eventually became a naval officer. During the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815), in the War of the Third Coalition (August-December of 1805), the Battle of Cape Trafalgar (10/21/1805) was fought at sea. Twenty-seven British Royal Navy Battle Ships led by Admiral Lord Nelson defeated 33 French and Spanish ships under Admiral Pierre-Charles Villeneuve. Trafalgar swords and sabers were used in hand-to-hand combats when ships were boarded and captured. His relative performed his duty with honor and the Watson family had great pride in his accomplishments. The Trafalgar Sword was the one family heirloom from Scotland he left to his family. Such an heirloom would be worth a fortune today, but was sold long ago.

James Watson's wife, Grace, passed away at age 70, and he died less than a month later, on April 11, 1874 in Wayne Township, at age 77. He and Grace are buried in the South Wayne Chapel Cemetery, in Wayne Township. In fact, most of James' original family is interned in that burial ground, with other affiliate family members in various cemeteries through the county.

In conclusion, Scotsman James Watson was an original pioneer of Wayne Township, Cass County, Michigan. He founded Watson Settlement (now extinct) on the edge of Dowagiac Swamp and was part of Glenwood's early history. He firmly believed in mercantilism, and had little trust, like many Scots of this era, in the first banking systems or wildcat money. He went from being a Scottish farmer, to a Glasgow factory worker, to a successful Southwest Michigan landowner. James was a Cass County Scottish community leader, agriculturalist, and "wetland drainage engineer." He was innovative in his use of local materials to build and repair roads over marshy ground. Perhaps, he is most remembered for how he helped change Wayne Township's wetland topography to rich farmland, with the use of age old drainage methods. Evidence of his land claiming work is still visible today. James Watson of Wayne Township earned his place in local Southwestern history, and he left his mark on its wetland topography.

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Author's Note #1: The following data is recorded here for the sake of Cass Co., MI Watson descendents, and future genealogy research. The last registered Chief of the Watson Clan in Scotland was James Watson of Saughton (not our subject). He was recorded as such in 1818 by Scotland's Court of the Lord Lyon, and was the "direct male line from Richard Watson of Saughton," Chief of the MacWatt Clan. In Scotland, a clan can only legally exist, at any one time in history, if it has a living male chieftain who can prove his direct lineage back to the last registered chieftain. Otherwise, the clan falls into legal limbo.

Author's Note #2: James Watson of Saughton had two sons who both died the the Boer War. His one daughter, Helen, married the Earl of Morton, carrying the Watson chieftain title to him, because there were no direct Watson male heirs. The Morton's were members of the Douglas Clan, which is currently chiefless, and in the same predicament.

Author's Note #3: There are Douglas and Morton lineages/ancestors in James Watson's extended family, but no research has ever been made to determine if there is a connection to the Saughton chieftains of the Clan MacWatt. Odds are low of finding a provable connection, or even that one exists. The confounding problems, for many clans, is that lineage record keeping during "The Great Migration" was often lax, leaving many gaps. Still good genealogical research requires the leaving of unresolved issues for future generations to explore.

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## RESEARCH

- Watson/Craig/Smith/Page Family Genealogy
- 1979 Jesse May (Page) Huff Fuller (1912-1996) 1973 Interview Notes (great-great grand-daughter of James Watson)
- Oral History of the Page/Deming/Watson Family, recorded by J.M. (Page) Watson
- C.D.P. & A.L.P.D. Interview Notes 1973 (great-great grandchildren of James Watson)
- Alfred Matthews, History of Cass Co., MI, pub. 1882 by Waterman & Watkins & Co., Chicago "prominent men," pg. 319 and 323
- INDEX to History of Cass Co., MI (Waterman & Watkins, June 1, 1882), Debra F. Graden, April 2002

- (identified James, Alexander, Joseph, Robert, and Pastor Watson as original pioneers of Cass Co., MI)
- U.S. Federal Census 1850, 1860, 1870 & 1880
- Renfrewshire & Lanarkshire, Scotland Genealogy & Heritage web site
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- Encyclopedia Britannica, 1970 edition, William Benton pub., Vol. 22, pg.152-153
- July 2011 research expedition to the wetlands & old family farm lands of Wayne Township
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- Author's Local History/Family Lore/Legends Of The Past/Genealogy Files