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## Samuel Stuart Watson: The Unsung Hero of Lindenwood

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### Samuel Stuart Watson: The Unsung Hero of Lindenwood

Samuel Stuart Watson is not a name that will ring any bells for those outside a select few residents of his hometown. He was an accomplished man, chosen as a county judge, ordained an elder of his Presbyterian Church, served as director of two banks, and elected to two college board of directors, one of which he was the president. A prominent philanthropist living in St. Charles, Missouri, he was one of the wealthiest men in the county. This once quaint frontier town is home to Lindenwood University, the second oldest institution of higher education west of the Mississippi River. It was originally founded as a Christian school for girls in 1832 by Mary Easton Sibley and her husband George C. Sibley, who both were members of Watson's church.<sup>1</sup> Watson was an incorporator of Lindenwood, and the first president of its board of directors. Watson stands out as one of Lindenwood's greatest and least recognized contributors with nearly no literature existing on him or his achievements. His contributions are worthy of rivaling the school's most prominent figures, including the Sibley's. Watson deserves to be recognized as responsible for Lindenwood's enduring survival as an academic institution for his

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<sup>1</sup> Johnson Yvonne, *Feminist Frontiers: Women Who Shaped the Midwest*, (Kirksville: Truman State University Press), 14. <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=nlebk&AN=457558&site=ehost-live>. (accessed on April 7, 2024).

financial patronage, strategic lawsuits, and role in elevating Lindenwood to a college level institution.

Watson was born in Erie County, Pennsylvania on February 16, 1804. He joined the Presbyterian Church in 1819 at the age of 15. His family moved to Missouri in 1819 and built a farm near Marais Croche, four miles north St. Charles the following year. His mother died in 1824, his father following in 1826.<sup>2</sup> That year Watson bought out the interest of his many siblings to become the sole owner of the farm at age 22.<sup>3</sup> Before the end of the year he married 15-year-old Mary Ann Lewis.<sup>4</sup> Mary and Samuel were a close couple as can be seen in the instance that upon Watson's death and burial in Lindenwood's Presbyterian graveyard, Mary had his body exhumed and reburied in Oak Grove Cemetery as she did not trust the school to properly maintain the graveyard.<sup>5</sup> In 1859, Watson retired from farming and built a house in St. Charles where he and his wife were closer to Lindenwood.<sup>6</sup>

One of Watson's least recognized feats is his involvement in elevating Lindenwood from an unincorporated school to a college institution. Watson was a devout Presbyterian, being ordained an elder of the First Presbyterian Church of St. Charles in 1832.<sup>7</sup> He was equally as

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<sup>2</sup> William Smith Bryan and Robert Rose, *A History of the Pioneer Families of Missouri: With Numerous Sketches, Anecdotes, Adventures, Etc., Relating to Early Days in Missouri. Also the Lives of Daniel Boone and the Celebrated Indian Chief, Black Hawk, with Numerous Biographies and Histories of Primitive Institutions* (Bryan Brand & Company, 1876).

<sup>3</sup> Watson, Archibald J., Last Will and Testament, *Wills & Letters of Administration & Letters Testamentary St. Charles County 1822-1833*, (St. Charles: 1833), 90-91, St. Charles County Historical Society Archives, Missouri.

<sup>4</sup> Lucinda de Leftwich Templin, Reminiscences Of Lindenwood College Judge and Mrs. S. S. Watson Draft, 1920, Samuel Watson Papers, Mary E. Ambler Archives, St. Charles, MO.

<sup>5</sup> Clara Christy Mellor, "Clara C. Mellor to Lucinda de Leftwich Templin," 1925, Samuel Watson Papers, B.0142 f.6, Mary E. Ambler Archives, Lindenwood University, Missouri.

<sup>6</sup> Unknown, "Historical Sketch of the Life of Samuel S. Watson of St. Charles," 1936, Samuel Watson Papers, B.0142 f.6, Mary E. Ambler Archives, Lindenwood University, Missouri

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

devout to promoting Christian education. In 1852 the Synod of Missouri convened in Fulton, Missouri to choose a city to be the next location for a Presbyterian college. Watson made use of his influence in the church to advocate for St. Charles, presenting Mary Sibley's Linden Wood School for Girls as his candidate. Watson gave the proposal with the assurance that \$20,000 was to be provided up front in establishing the school, with the Sibley's dedicating \$2,000 of land for the school and Watson pledging to raise the remaining \$18,000.<sup>8</sup> Despite his efforts, "32 of the 57 members present voted that the Synod take control of Fulton College."<sup>9</sup> Though St. Charles only received 3 votes, it was recorded that, "The Synod could require no better guarantee than Mr. Watson."<sup>10</sup> This excerpt shows the impression Watson left for the idea of a college in St. Charles. Fulton College was renamed to Westminster College upon its chartering the next year on February 23, 1853.<sup>11</sup> This is, coincidentally, the other school in which Watson served on the Board of Directors for, even being named in the charter.<sup>12</sup> Despite his loss the previous year, Lindenwood was christened and incorporated as a Synodical College the day after Westminster, no doubt in part due to the impression left by Watson on the Presbytery. He was then promptly elected as the first president of the Board of Directors on March 22.<sup>13</sup>

Watson invested a large quantity of his personal wealth into Lindenwood. His first donation giving \$5,000 to the school's first college building, Sibley Hall, receiving the honor of

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<sup>8</sup> Fisher, M. M. and John Rice, *Westminster College 1851-1903* (Columbia: Press of E.W. Stephens, 1903), 4-8. <https://www.loc.gov/resource/gdcmassbookdig.historyofwestmin00fish/?sp=30&st=image> (accessed on April 21, 2024).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Lindenwood College, "Lindenwood College Board of Directors Minutes and Papers, 1853-1914," (1853), 26. [https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/board\\_minutes/26](https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/board_minutes/26) (accessed on February 28, 2024).

laying its corner stone in 1857.<sup>14</sup> The school was no stranger to financial strain in its early years and Watson proved to be a guardian angel of sorts, providing it with much needed funds on various occasions. The Board of Directors minutes note that on May 12, 1858, Watson purchased \$2,000 of land from the school as well as paying the school an extra \$2,000 to cover school expenses. He purchased a further 20-42 more acres of land by the end of 1859 providing the college with anywhere between \$2,000 and \$4,200.<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately, the board did not properly record all their financial transactions so the details are hazy, and many transactions may be lost. These land purchases were notably to the dismay of George Sibley as can be read in a fiery letter to board member John J. Johns on June 3, 1859.<sup>16</sup> On July 8, 1876, Watson cleared the school of debt, allowing it to make a profit. The minutes of the Board of Directors that day stated, "...it appeared that the income of the year would slightly exceed the expenses. And that with the aid of about \$400.00 received from Mr. Watson every dollar of indebtedness would be paid..."<sup>17</sup> Even when Lindenwood wasn't in need of bailing out, Watson donated vast quantities of money to the school. Upon his death in 1878, he gave the school 92 acres of land, nearly all his old farm.<sup>18</sup> He also started the Watson Legacy Fund, which was awarded to pay for student's tuitions.<sup>19</sup> Mary Watson followed this up with another financial donation upon her death in 1900.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Katie Bava, "Conflict and Division within the Presbyterian Church," *The Confluence* (2010): Vol. 2: Iss. 2, Article 4. [https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/confluence\\_2009/vol2/iss2/4](https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/confluence_2009/vol2/iss2/4) (accessed on February 28, 2024).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> George Sibley to John Jay Johns, letter, June 3, 1859, George Sibley Papers, Mary E. Ambler Archives, Lindenwood University, Missouri. <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/george/154> (accessed on April 7, 2024).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Letter of S.S. Watsons Will to Lindenwood Female College Board of Directors, March 2, 1880, Samuel Watson Papers, B.0142 f.6, Mary E. Ambler Archives, Lindenwood University, Missouri.

<sup>19</sup> Watson Legacy Fund Benefactors, November 23, 1920, Samuel Watson Papers, B.0142 f.6, Mary E. Ambler Archives, Lindenwood University, Missouri.

<sup>20</sup> Watson, Mary Ann, Last Will and Testament, *Will Record: St. Charles County 1822-1833*, (St. Charles: 1833), 90-91, St. Charles County Historical Society Archives, Missouri.

His most impressive act of labor was returning Lindenwood to the North Presbyterian Church. Despite being a slaveholder, Watson was staunchly loyal to the Union.<sup>21</sup> While most Old School Presbyterians were proslavery, a sizeable number were dedicated to the preservation of the Union and upon the outbreak of the Civil War, the southern sympathizing Presbyterians split off to create their own Southern Presbyterian church.<sup>22</sup> Due to the schism, Watson was the only remaining Northern Presbyterian present in Lindenwood's administration, with the rest of the board being filled by Southern Presbyterians. In 1865, southern sympathizer French Strother had purchased the lease over Lindenwood and would be elected president of Lindenwood in 1866. He would extend his lease to 1876 with a near unanimous vote from the Board of Directors, with only one member voting against and Watson voicing his dissent.<sup>23</sup>

Tensions boiled over in 1867 when the Board received a letter from Mary Sibley. She explains that the school board was no longer under the control of the correct Presbyterian sect, stating, "...at the time he wrote the deed, we both expressed the intention of conveying the property in such a manner as by no possibility it could be wrestled from the control of the "Old School Presbyterian Church of the United States of America."<sup>24</sup> She demands the school be returned to the exclusive control of the Old School Presbyterian Church of St. Louis.<sup>25</sup> Two months later, Watson filed a lawsuit against the Board of Directors in Samuel Watson vs. Robert Farris. The court ruled in favor of Watson in 1869, handing the school back into the control of

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<sup>21</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, St. Charles County Slave Schedule, St. Charles County, Missouri, 1850. [https://www.sos.mo.gov/CMSImages/Archives/Census/Slave\\_1850/F50\\_1850\\_V3\\_St.%20Charles.pdf](https://www.sos.mo.gov/CMSImages/Archives/Census/Slave_1850/F50_1850_V3_St.%20Charles.pdf) (accessed on April 20, 2024).

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Mary Easton Sibley, "Letter to the Lindenwood Board of Directors from Mary Sibley," September 16, 1867, Mary Easton Sibley Papers, 24. <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/mary/24> (accessed on February 27, 2024).

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

the Northern Presbyterian Church.<sup>26</sup> Watson retained his position as president of the board while all other members were reelected, giving the school a completely Northern Presbyterian board. The new Board of Directors quickly filed a lawsuit against President Strother in *Lindenwood vs. French Strother*. The court ruled in favor of Lindenwood in 1871 and Strother was forced to give up his lease on the school. Due to Watson's efforts, Lindenwood came back under the exclusive control of the Northern Presbyterian Church. This elevated the financial position of the school as the ruling stated that transactions under the Southern Presbyterians were illegitimate, returning all the schools previously sold property and likely saving it once again from financial collapse.<sup>27</sup>

Watson was once a popular school figure. On his "Golden Wedding" he was presented with a gold-mounted cane by the board for his contributions to Lindenwood. After the ceremony, a music class came to join the festivities, singing a custom arrangement of music, as well as an original song written by a teacher.<sup>28</sup> A relative notes that Samuel was very involved in Lindenwood and made frequent visits to the campus where the girls surrounded him, showing he was a popular icon at the school.<sup>29</sup> Despite this, very little of his legacy is remembered today. Watson, through his financial, legal, and religious endeavors, was able to help create and preserve Lindenwood's position as a college institution and deserves greater recognition for his achievements.

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<sup>26</sup>Samuel Watson vs. Robert Farris et al., (1867-1869), December 18, 1869, Lindenwood History Series, B.0010 f.7, Mary E. Ambler Archives, Lindenwood University, Missouri.

<sup>27</sup> *Lindenwood Female College vs. French Strother*, (1869-1870), June 17, 1870, Lindenwood History Series, B.0010 f.7, Mary E. Ambler Archives, Lindenwood University, Missouri.

<sup>28</sup> Unknown. "Golden Wedding." *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, September 30, 1876. <https://shsmo.newspapers.com/image/571056186/?terms=s.%20s.%20watson&match=1> (accessed on April 7, 2024).

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

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