

**JOHN HENRY WATKINS**

**AND HIS WABASH & ERIE CANAL CONNECTIONS**

By Charles Davis

Some of the important businessmen during the Wabash and Erie Canal days were the blacksmiths. They were the backbone of Parke county when it was created in 1821 building mills, making and placing iron wagon wheels for farmers and people on the move as well as making horse and mule shoes for their animals.

John Henry Watkins was born to William and Mary Polly Patterson Watkins on September 8, 1818, within a half mile of Lexington, Virginia. He came west in 1829 with his parents to Indiana and then moved to Montezuma in 1830. Nothing is known about his growing up there or how he became a blacksmith.

The first lot John bought in Montezuma was lot 123 recorded in September 1834. Deed Record 1/548 He married Mildred Hays at Montezuma on November 14, 1839. She was the daughter of Joseph M. Hays.

Joseph Hays had come to Montezuma in 1824 when the town was laid out by Whitlock and Majors and was the first one to open a store. Some of his store ads can be seen in the Rockville *Wabash Herald* of 1831-32. He was the first Post Master of the town and was usually in his place of business.

Joseph Hays wrote a letter that appeared in the *Wabash Herald* on May 10, 1831 that follows:

TO THE CITIZENS OF PARKE COUNTY

Through the medium of the *Wabash Herald*, my name has been announced to you as a candidate for your suffrages at the ensuing August election, for one of the highest, and the most important state offices within your gift. Whether I am qualified to sustain with dignity the senatorial character and discharge with advantage to you, and honor to our State, the multifarious duties attach to that important station, is for you to judge. With many of you I am personally acquainted, to some of you a stranger, though a resident of the county for near six years: during that period I served you one session as your Representative, selected to discharge that duty at a period when our county was distracted by local politics, when prejudices ran higher than they ever did before or have since within our local boundaries surrounded in your Legislative Halls with those perplexing difficulties. How I discharged my duty, whether I met your approbation or fell below your hopes is with a just community to pronounce. Happily those internal tur-

moils no longer exist, and your agent will now enter the portals of you Legislative Halls, free from those perplexities that then prevented me from being as useful to you as I wished. There is now no local wants but those that are common to the county and, your representative, will have the satisfactions of knowing that in advocating your interest and views, that he does not stand at the head of a party, but as the agent of all, he speaks their wishes and makes known their wants. Having always believed that the Representative of the people, was but their agent, sent to express the will of the majority of the political community who sent him, I have believed that his sentiments should at all times be publicly made known to that community, before they select him to express their will. Believing so I consider it my duty to lay before you my opinion at this time on one of the leading important subjects, in which we are at this time deeply interested.

The present most grand important subject to citizens of the Wabash valley, in which we, in common with 'Wabash Citizens,' are vitally interested, is the connection of the Wabash navigation with the navigation of Lake Erie. Two modes of improvement present themselves for our consideration, viz: **a Canal from Lake Erie to the Wabash river, at the head of Steam Boat navigation and a Rail Road.** Both systems of improvement have their special and peculiar advocates, both have their advantages and disadvantages, but with us, whatever system is preferable at present, we have, in my opinion, no choice. Congress donated to the State of Indiana a large body of land estimated by some worth \$750,000., others at \$1,000,000. for the express purpose and under the express stipulations of the part of the State that we should apply the proceeds of the sale of this land to the excavation and finishing of a canal to connect the Wabash with Lake Erie. This canal was to commence within and be finished by a given time, the period for commencing that work expires in 1832. The State of Indiana accepted the donation under the provisions of that act, and by law authorized the sale of a portion of those lands expressly pledging the faith of the State for the faithful application of the funds arising from such sales not only to the purchasers but to the public in general in pursuance of the acceptance of this State, the United States caused these lands to be designated and set apart and the State by virtue of the right vested in them by their acceptance and agreement sold a portion of those lands and under this solemn act have granted certificates of purchase, promising to make the title bonafide and good whenever the purchaser pays the balance of the purchase money, under this view of the case, I cannot fellow citizens, do otherwise, if elected, than support with all my energy, the passage of a law authorizing the immediate commencement of the Canal. I could not consent to

break the faith of the State thus solemnly pledged. I could not consent for my constituents to forfeit the donation worth \$750,000. I could consent to fold my arms and quietly submit to the non-adoption or adoption of measures, calculated to snatch from us a commerce more valuable than the present. I should give my unwavering support to the canal.

Should it be my good fortune to meet your approbation, and be selected to serve you, I shall endeavor to keep a watchful eye over your interests, and repel with energy every attempt to usurp your rights. As a citizen of the same county, I can have no interest but what is yours if, fellow citizens, the free declaration that I have here made, meets your approbations, if my views coincide with yours upon this all important subject, and should I be chosen by your suffrages to represent you in the Senatorial Chamber, I shall consider the tenure of my office, to be coeval, with your approbation of my political course, and at all times ready to return my power into the hands of those from whom it is derived, whenever my public political course shall deviate from their wishes. I shall at all times hold myself ready to give my views upon any public important measure when called upon so to do. Respectfully I am gentlemen your most obedient, JOSEPH M. HAYS."

A letter was sent to the newspaper following Hays letter stating, "Parke County, April 28th, 1831. Sir. Through the medium of your useful paper, permit me, a subscriber, to call upon the Citizens of our County to keep a watchful look out, this year, upon the disposal of their suffrages. To us, as citizens of the western part of the State of Indiana, the ensuing session of the Legislature will be all important. That we should then know the political opinions of each and every Gentleman who aspires to the honor of representing us, appears to me, very important. Should you not deem the following queries impertinent, I wish them to be distinctly propounded, that each one may have a fair opportunity of answering, according to his opinion, relative to the public good. And that we, as voters, may judge of the propriety of entrusting them, as our agents, with the disposal of our public voice and faith. 1st. Should the Legislature proceed at the next session, to a final solution of the Wabash and Erie Canal and to authorize an immediate commencement of the work? 2d. Would it be more for the interest of the inhabitants of this State, to abandon the Canal at this time, with an eye to the future establishment of a Rail Road on the contemplated Erie Canal route? 3d. Would it not be better to abandon both contemplated improvements at present, than involve the Sate in debt to accomplish either? I should be much pleased that the answers of each of the candidates, to these three queries, could be published all at the same time. I have the honor to be, Sir, yours respectfully, A SUB-

SCRIBER."

Hays letter in the paper shows that he did run for the Indiana Senate. Parke county histories say nothing about Mr. Hays other than he opened the first store in town and that he ran for the Senate, but they did not know the outcome. The best information about Hays can be found in Volume 1 of the book *A Biographical Directory of the Indiana General Assembly 1816-1899* published in Indianapolis in 1980. It says, "Joseph M. Hays. House 1826-1827 (Parke-Vermillion); Senate 1831-1832 (Parke Co.) Born 10-19-1790, Rockbridge Co., Virginia. Married. Children. Presbyterian. Indiana Militia: 72nd Reg., Col. 1836. Moved to Ohio; and to Parke county, Ind. in 1824. Merchant, Pork packer, owned a store in Montezuma, Parke county. Pro-Jackson Democrat. Montezuma Post Master 1825-1833; Justice of the peace in Parke county, 1828-31. Died May 11, 1837, Grand Gulf, Mississippi. English; IMH Riker-Executive."

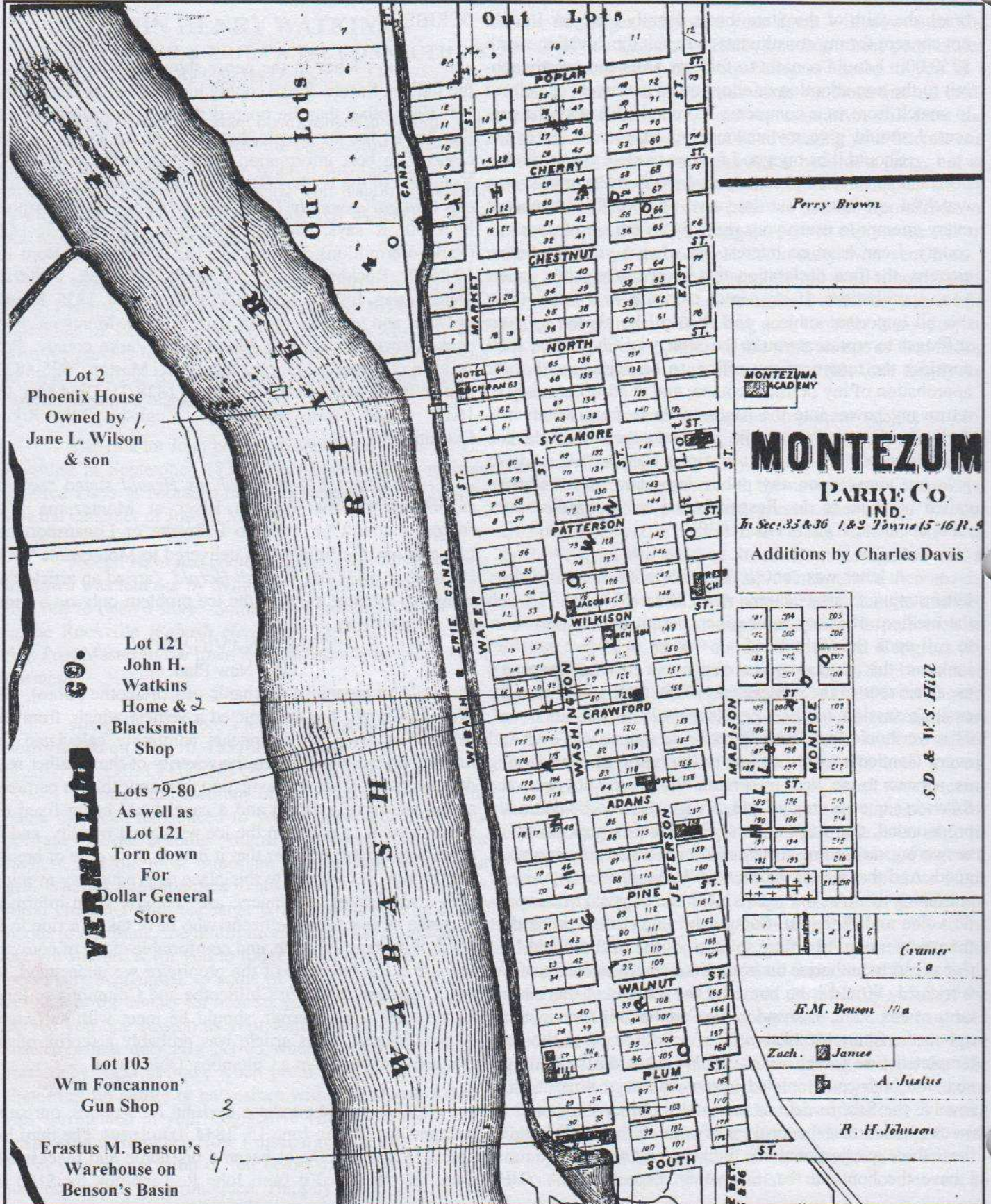
In May 1831 the *Wabash Herald* stated "several steamboats on the Wabash River at Montezuma with freight, couldn't go north to Lafayette or Logansport because of ice, the freight was delivered to Montezuma." On February 4, 1832 the *Wabash Herald* carried an article that shows an attempt to solve the ice problem only on a canal and not the river:

### "CANAL NAVIGATION: On a New Plan.

"An ingenious mechanic of Chillicothe (Ohio), Mr. Wm. M'Carrell, has constructed a vehicle which, from the description given of it, appears admirably calculated for running on the canal, when the severity of the weather renders the usual mode of navigation impracticable. It partakes of the nature of a sleigh and a canal boat; being fixed on runners, so as to move on the ice with great rapidity, and is made water tight, in order that it may float in case of breaking through. It came up to this place of Wednesday evening with a number of passengers; and we have been informed by some of our fellow citizens who have taken a ride in it that it is a very easy, safe, and comfortable mode of conveyance. It is the intention of the proprietor we understand, to run it regularly between Chillicothe and Columbus so long as the season will permit, should he meet with sufficient encouragement." This article was probably a reprint of an article that appeared in a Columbus, Ohio paper.

The second purchase by John H. Watkins, our subject, was lot 155 on June 15, 1844. D.R. 11/504 The third lot (lot 121) that he bought became his home and blacksmith shop. He purchased it from John R. Tenbrook for \$100 in

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Lot 2  
Phoenix House  
Owned by /  
Jane L. Wilson  
& son

**VERMILION CO.**

Lot 121  
John H.  
Watkins  
Home & 2  
Blacksmith  
Shop

Lots 79-80  
As well as  
Lot 121  
Torn down  
For  
Dollar General  
Store

Lot 103  
Wm Foncannon'  
Gun Shop

Erastus M. Benson's  
Warehouse on  
Benson's Basin

MONTEZUMA  
ACADEMY

**MONTEZUMA**  
PARK CO.  
IND.  
In Secs 35 & 36 1 & 2 Towns 15-16 R. 5  
Additions by Charles Davis

S.D. & W.S. Hill

MONROE  
ST.

101 102 103 104  
105 106 107 108  
109 110 111 112  
113 114 115 116  
117 118 119 120  
121 122 123 124  
125 126 127 128  
129 130 131 132  
133 134 135 136  
137 138 139 140  
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209 210 211 212  
213 214 215 216  
217 218 219 220

Cramer

E.M. Benson 171a

Zach. James

A. Justus

R. H. Johnson

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March 1847. D.R. 13/592

The Wabash and Erie Canal opened through Montezuma in 1848 and business was brisk at the blacksmith shop. John's wife, Mildred, died on October 5 of that year and was buried in the Old Montezuma Cemetery. He then married Mary Ann Patterson in 1849. Their marriage produced eleven children from 1850 to 1873.

In the Parke county Tax List of 1851, John is living on lot 121 which is valued at \$500. In the census of 1870 he is listed as a blacksmith with his wife and children. During his lifetime, a great deal of the town's real estate passed through his hands.

At the age of seventy-one, John and P. J. Hunt made a very curious find in the Oakland cemetery as recorded in the *Montezuma Enterprise* of April 5, 1889. It said, "Disturbing Lo. A few Sundays ago, the like of which suggest primitive days scenes. They had taken a walk to the cemetery, and while strolling around noticed a little mound and commenced poking their canes into it. Presently they struck a solid substance and proceeded to dig it up, when it proved to be all that now remains of a once noble red man. The skeleton, or disconnected bones, when unearthed, were not more than four to six inches from the surface and were undoubtedly the remains of an Indian buried many years ago. Mr. Watkins informs us the bones were very large, especially the legs and head, the latter, he said being the largest he ever saw." This burial was probably from the Miami tribe for this was the village site for them for many years.

Until a couple of years before his death, John Watkins was known as a man who had the best health. He died April 5, 1893 at age 74. His second wife, Mary Ann, died in Chicago, Illinois in 1918.

### JOHN H. WATKINS

B. 9-18-1818

D. 4-5-1893

Oakland Cemetery  
Montezuma, Indiana

Photo by Charles Davis

They are both buried in the Oakland cemetery in Montezuma along with three of their children.

Another blacksmith of note in Montezuma was William McIntosh. He occupied part of William N. Foncannon's Gun Shop. Foncannon bought lot 103 on June 17, 1855. D.R. 15/57

William Foncannon was called "Uncle Billie." Old and new guns with sabers of every description hung on the walls of his shop during the Civil War of 1861-1865 and even later. He did a thriving business. His youngest son was drowned in the canal in 1860.

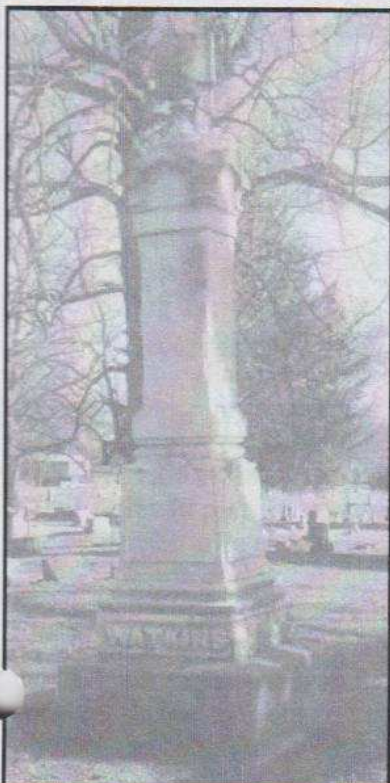
William McIntosh's operation consisted of ironing wagons and shoeing oxen and horses. In the *Montezuma Enterprise* column from November 3, 1927 through November 1, 1928 entitled "*Reminiscences of Montezuma*" by Fred McIntosh (1863-1940) it is reported that "On one occasion John Hendricks drew a Bowie knife and attacked Mr. McIntosh in an attempt to separate his head from his body, much to Hendricks regret for he got the beating of his life, and was near sent home in sections." Fred, the author of the column was William McIntosh's son.

William's brother and Fred's uncle, Thomas McIntosh, was a partner of Charlie Pier. Thomas and Charlie were both captains of the canal boats Aurora and Josephine in 1860. They ran canal boats for Erastus M. Benson, who owned the warehouse on Benson's Basin boat turn-around.

In 2012 John H. Watkins', our subject, home that was built around 1840 was torn down along with other old historical business buildings on lots 79 and 80 in Montezuma to make way for the new Dollar General store. In the last several years, many historical buildings have been raised there for "progress." In the near future the town's visible past will be "history" except for the old canal bed.



John Watkins' blacksmith shop was built in 1851 on lot 121. It had a sandstone foundation and was later covered with stucco. It served as Montezuma's Civic Center until it was torn down in 2012 to make way for the new Dollar General Store. Photo by Charles Davis



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All the buildings on lots 80-79 in Montezuma, Indiana from the IGA store on the far right corner to the tallest building in the block, were torn down to make way for the Dollar General Store in 2012. Also raised was John H. Watkins home and blacksmith shop on lot 121, which was located to the right of the IGA building. The picture was taken on the corner of Washington St. (U. S. 36) and Main St. looking north.  
Photo taken in 2012 by Charles Davis

### John Henry Watkins' Family

Name	Birth	Place	Death	Place	Marriage	Place
William Watkins	1795		1840			
m. Mary Polly Patterson	1797		1868			
<b>John Henry Watkins</b>	9-08-1818	Lexington, VA	4-05-1893	Old Montezuma Cem.		
m1. Mildred Hays*	5-03-1820		10-05-1848	Old Montezuma Cem.	11-14-1839	Parke Co. IN
m2. Mary Ann Patterson	1-06-1828	NC	8-02-1918	Chicago, IL Mont. Cem	7-31-1849	Parke Co. IN
Wm. Henry Watkins	6-??-1850	Montezuma, IN	5-22-1918	Brookfield, Cook Co.IL		
m. Mary E. Miller					4-02-1873	
Infant	2-??-1851		1-06-1852	Old Montezuma Cem.		
Horace Harris Watkins	1852		4-27-1928	Boise, Ada Co., ID		
m. Angelina Cathers	4-??-1850	Paris, IL	7-23-1928	Yakima, WA	9-27-1877	Parke Co. IN
George Watkins	1882		2-??-1887	Brookfield, Cook Co. IL		
John H. Watkins	1857	Montezuma, IN	5-22-1918	Brookfield, Cook Co. IL		
Thomas J. Watkins	1858	Montezuma, IN	7-09-1882	Oakland Cem. Montezuma		
m. Emma M. Thomas					11-27-1879	Delaware Co. IN
Robert Watkins	9-17-1860		1-08-1939	Acacia Park, Chicago IL		
m. Phoebe Lambert	10-17-1860		10-21-1937			
Franklin M. Watkins	11-27-1862		10-20-1912	Caseo, Allegan Co. MI		
m. Carrie E. Walmsley	1866		12-06-1923	MI	10-04-1882	Parke Co. IN
Annie Jones Watkins**	1866					
m. Joseph M. Hixon					8-02-1899	
George Watkins	1866					
Benjamin F. Watkins	1871		4-21-1875	Oakland Cem. Montezuma		
Francis Marion Watkins	11-??-1873		1941	IN		
m. Elizabeth Walmsley Morris		Kinfare Staffordshire, Eng.			6-10-1894	
5 children						

\*Mildred Hays parents were Joseph Hays (b. 10-19-1790 in Rockbridge county, Virginia, d. 5-11-1837 in Grand Gulf, Mississippi) and Margaret ?

\*\* in 1880 Indiana Census at age 14, Occupation housekeeper for Jn. H. Watkins