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**The Agrarian Gentleman: Elkanah Watson and the Birth of the Agricultural Society in
Early National New England**

An honors thesis presented to the
Department of History,
University at Albany, State University of New York
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for graduation with Honors in History

John Ginder

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Research Advisor: Christopher Pastore, Ph.D.

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Abstract

Elkanah Watson is an overlooked figure in the early national period of the United States. A direct descendent of the Mayflower Pilgrims, Watson was a well-connected, well-traveled businessman who was receptive to any idea that he thought would benefit the new nation. This paper argues that Watson played an important role in forging a new American definition of progress, one that built on his experience in the American Revolution, borrowed heavily from Europe, and was inextricably tied to the American landscape. During the age of Enlightenment, he believed that one could improve oneself as well as society. That was evident in most of the work throughout his life including the creation of the Bank of Albany, cosmetic improvements in the cities he lived, advocating for free public schools, early work on the Erie Canal, and a town bearing his name in the Finger Lakes region of New York. His most notable contribution was the creation of the Berkshire Agricultural Society. Watson was able to successfully wed agriculture with industry in a time when the biggest debate was which direction the country was going. In his desire to create an agricultural society that transcended class differences and explicitly sought the inclusion of women, Watson's society was very different from those already in existence in Europe and across the American South. Watson forged a new American definition of progress, one that championed scientific experimentation, embraced social equality, and was inextricably tied to improving the land.

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Introduction

On a “beautiful” Tuesday morning in late-September, 1811, in the shadow of the Berkshire Mountains of western Massachusetts, a throng of “excited and interested spectators” gathered at Park Square in the town of Pittsfield. They were there to witness a spectacle that was unlike anything they’d ever seen before. In the distance the muffled sound of the “Pittsfield Band of Music” was heard by all that gathered as a large procession commenced down the half-mile loop. At the head were “sixty yoke of prime oxen drawing a plough” and carrying the two most “aged farmers” of the town. Behind the oxen were a group of local farmers carrying a flag decorated with a “Sheaf of Wheat on one side, and a Plough on the other” and a stage carrying a “large broad cloth loom” and a spinning Jenny with forty spindles that were being operated as it moved through town. Parading behind them was a group of mechanics brandishing a flag with a “Ram on one side, and a shuttle on the other,” showing symbolically that this was a community that saw agriculture and industry allied. A second stage, which was larger than the first, appeared drawn by horses hauling Berkshire manufactured goods such as rolls of broadcloth, rose blankets, and muskets with the “flag of the United States and this commonwealth” draped pridefully over it. Members of the newly created Berkshire Agricultural Society, the first of its kind to allow men and women of all social status to celebrate their agrarian pride together for the good of promoting farming, marched in unison at the tail end of the parade. Each was decorated with a “badge of wheat in his hat” that signified the differences of rank within the society. Regular members had two heads of wheat “tied with a packed thread” and the officers had three heads of wheat “secured by a green ribbon.”¹ At the conclusion of the parade, many of the

¹ There are many accounts of the first “Cattle Show” that took place in Pittsfield on September 24, 1811. Some of which are more detailed than others with the most specific being in the Pittsfield Sun Newspaper. Phinehas Allen. “Berkshire Cattle Show.” *The Pittsfield Sun*, September 28, 1811. Accessed November 5,

attendees convened at the “town-house” for an address by the event organizer, Elkanah Watson, a well-connected banker and businessman who was determined to improve the new nation. He also advocated for the creation of the Erie Canal and planted the town of Port Watson near the Finger Lakes. However, one of his greatest contributions was the creation of the Berkshire Agricultural Society.

After spending the better part of his life living in cities, Watson, who was fifty years old, sought what he called “rural felicity” on his 250-acre farm in Pittsfield that he had purchased from local gentleman Henry Van Schaick in 1807. Watson’s vision was to “conceive the idea of an Agricultural Society on a plan different from all others.”² In his desire to create an agricultural society that transcended class differences and explicitly sought the inclusion of women, Watson’s society was very different from those in Europe and across the American South. The next half-century saw hundreds of agricultural societies following his plan at both the local and county levels all throughout the country. By the mid nineteenth century families were able to attend large cattle shows that sprang up in the western part of Massachusetts.³ Elkanah Watson was a true believer in progress and internal improvement and much of his life’s work was dedicated to that purpose. Yet historians have largely overlooked his contributions to early nation society. Using his personal papers, his published memoirs, and other secondary sources, I argue that Elkanah Watson played an important role in forging a new American

2019.<https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/531895644>; Elkanah Watson authored his own account of what happened that day detailed in his memoirs; Winslow C. Watson, Elkanah Watson. “Men and Times of the Revolution; or, Memoirs of Elkanah Watson, including journals of travels in Europe and America, from 1777 to 1842, with his correspondence with public men and reminiscences and incidents of the revolution.” New York: Dana and Company, 1856. There are accounts in detail in a pamphlet Watson had printed when addressing the Berkshire Agricultural Society, Elkanah Watson. *History of Agricultural Societies, on the Modern Berkshire System*. Albany: Packard and Van Beathuysen Printers, 1829. Even though some of the details vary, an earlier publication that include the origins of the County Fair is Wayne Caldwell Neely, *The Agricultural Fair*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1935).

² Elkanah Watson. *History of Agricultural Societies, on the Modern Berkshire System*, (Albany, NY: Packard and Van Beathuysen Printers, 1829). 115.

³ Catherine E. Kelly, “The Consummation of Rural Prosperity and Happiness: New England Agricultural Fairs and the Construction of Class and Gender, 1810-1860,” *American Quarterly* 49, no. 3 (September 1997): 579.

definition of progress, one that built on his experience in the American Revolution, borrowed heavily from Europe, and was inextricably tied to the American landscape.

The new United States was going through social and institutional transformation in the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries. With tensions rising with Great Britain in the decades following independence, there was an internal debate on what direction the country was heading. The two most prominent figures in this struggle were Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton who had very different visions of America's future. Thomas Jefferson was a proponent of agriculture which, he attested would, "assure virtue, morality, and independence of its citizenry, the necessary ingredients for a sound democracy."⁴ Jefferson believed that farmers or "those who labor in the earth are chosen people of God" formed the fabric of the country's foundation.⁵ Alexander Hamilton believed industry would take the country into the future. Hamilton claimed, "It is truth as important as it is agreeable, and one to which it is not easy to imagine exceptions, that everything tending to establish substantial and permanent order, in the affairs of a Country, to increase the total mass of industry and opulence, is ultimately beneficial to every part of it."⁶ Somewhere in the middle of the two was Elkanah Watson- for whom agriculture and industry were mutually constitutive. The parade in Pittsfield, married agriculture and industry, demonstrating that the United States could thrive by embracing both the spindle and the plow. The flag that was proudly displayed during the parade with the ram on one side and the shuttle from a loom on the other was symbolic of Watson's plan. Historically, a ram is a symbol of power and virility and as a protector in biblical terms. Not only is it a representation of the two Merino Sheep that Watson brought with him to Pittsfield but it was also a symbol of

⁴ Lisi Krall, "Thomas Jefferson's Agrarian Vision and the Changing Nature of Property," *Journal of Economic Issues* 36, no.1 (March 2002): 131.

⁵ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (Philadelphia: Prichard and Hall, 1788), 175.

⁶ Alexander Hamilton, *The Works of Alexander Hamilton: Vol. IV*, ed. Henry Cabot Lodge (New York: Putnam, 1904), 74.

agriculture. Prior to the invention of the shuttle for a loom, it took several people to work it. Once the shuttle was created in 1733, it not only reduced the number of weavers it took to work the loom, it also made it easier and allowed for creation of a wider fabric. The shuttle was a symbol for industry.

Watson's fever for agricultural improvement began when he introduced two Merino Sheep that he purchased from Chancellor Robert Livingston in 1807. They were the first of their kind in the Berkshires, and quite possibly the first in all of New England. In an attempt to draw interest from the townspeople, Watson brought the sheep that are known for their high quality of wool, and put on an "exhibition under the great elm tree in the public square in Pittsfield." He was shocked and pleased with the number of farmers and "even women" that turned out to see these exotic animals. Watson later wrote, "If two animals are capable of exciting so much attention, what would be the effect on a larger scale, with larger animals?"⁷ In an effort to advance Pittsfield's agricultural prospects, the following winter Watson addressed a group of Berkshire farmers and expressed the importance of establishing an agricultural society. It wasn't just the introduction of animals that was the driving force behind this effort. He also needed the assistance of the local farmers to restore the land, which had become "exhausted" from antiquated techniques and over-farming. In his first speech to the Berkshire Agricultural Society Watson said, "The most certain and direct road to effect this great object ... will be the organization of an Agricultural Society, which will ultimately embrace all the respectable

⁷ Winslow C. Watson and Elkanah Watson, "Men and Times of the Revolution; or, Memoirs of Elkanah Watson, including journals of travels in Europe and America, from 1777 to 1842, with his correspondence with public men and reminiscences and incidents of the revolution," (New York: Dana and Company, 1856), 365.

farmers of the county, who will bring to this common fund, like bees to the hive, their stock of experience, for the good of the whole.”⁸

Prior to the arrival of Europeans, Native Americans worked the land by planting, harvesting, and hunting but moved to different areas based on season. Since the Europeans saw land ownership as a source of wealth, they arrived with their fences staking claim to certain plots and working them to exhaustion. William Cronon takes an in-depth look into this relationship in his book, *Changes in the Land*, one of the most important texts on environmental history.⁹ Brian Donahue’s *The Great Meadow*, explores the “conflicting traditions in the relation between Americans and land,” explaining that historians have tended to examine English land use in one of two ways. Colonists, he explained, either used “the land ruthlessly and efficiently for immediate gain, in spite of long-term consequence” or “cultivate[d] nature with more understanding, skill, and restraint.” Donahue argued that these two ways of interacting with the natural world “coexisted.”¹⁰ If, however, an ethic toward conservation took hold in New England, the settlers were far more acquisitive along the frontier. Alan Taylor explained that early national farmers treated the land and animal inhabitants with reckless abandon. In his close

⁸ Elkanah Watson, *History of Agricultural Societies, on the Modern Berkshire System* (Albany: Packard and Van Beathuysen Printers, 1829), 117.

⁹ William Cronon. *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983).

¹⁰ So much of what has been written after has been drawn from Cronon’s book even after three decades. The relationship between land and people has been and will always be heavily debated. One of the other publications that doesn’t necessarily challenge Cronon but gives a different take is: Brian Donahue, *The Great Meadow: Farmer and the Land in Colonial Concord* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004). Donahue discusses how historiographically land use has been written and that it is true the main view is that land was seen as a status symbol of wealth that and that there was no regard on how it would be treated as long as it provided even more wealth. But he brings up a second and equally important view that is gaining in popularity and that is conservation. There was learned way to preserve the land and be gentle with it so that generations can prosper the same way the early colonist did. One of the main books that talks about the second idea Donahue brings up is: Richard W. Judd, *The Untilled Garden: Natural History and the Spirit of Conservation in America, 1740-1840* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009). Also Jan Golinski, *Science as Public Culture: Chemistry and Enlightenment in Britain, 1760-1820* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992). To also gain more understanding into the farmers of this period is: Richard Lyman Bushman, *The American Farmer in the Eighteenth Century: A Social and Cultural History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

study of Otsego County, New York, Taylor argued that “we do live in an altered nature of diminished diversity and painful dilemmas that derive from the settlement past.”¹¹

By the 1810s farmers were sharing different techniques on how to work the land in a more efficient way. Robert Gross discussed the role of the gentleman farmer, which is a landowner who has a farm on his estate that farms for pleasure instead of for profit, and early agricultural societies in his book *The Minutemen and Their World*. Almost a decade before Elkanah Watson’s time in Pittsfield, gentleman farmer Thomas Hubbard Jr. of Concord, Massachusetts introduced the “latest innovations” to the Massachusetts Society for Promoting Agriculture in hopes of increasing his yield. But when the experiments failed, Hubbard said “it is better to use money so, than to spend it for new rum.”¹² Hubbard also helped teach yeomen, who are small landowners or family farmers, who were “putting more labor into the land and rotating crops more carefully” to get more out of the land they cultivated.¹³ Efforts were being made in order to progress agriculture in a way that was beneficial to everyone.

Before Watson’s society in Pittsfield was formed, agricultural societies existed in Europe although with different ideals. England boasted one of the first but used several names including “Society of Improvers in the Knowledge of Agriculture” around 1723.¹⁴ Scotland had its own version two decades later by the same name. They had produced a pamphlet outlining their objectives. The cover of the publications said “Directing the Husbandry of the different Soils for the most profitable Purposes, and containing other Directions, Receipts, and Descriptions.”¹⁵ It

¹¹ Alan Taylor, “Wasty Ways: Stories of American Settlement,” *Environmental History* 3, no.3 (July 1998): 292. Another publication of Taylor’s that goes more in-depth with the Cooper’s and the subject of land use is: Alan Taylor. *William Cooper’s Town: Power and Persuasion on the Frontier of the Early American Republic* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).

¹² Robert A. Gross, *The Minutemen and Their World* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1976), 172-173.

¹³ *Ibid*, 173.

¹⁴ Wayne Caldwell Neely, *The Agricultural Fair*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1935), 34.

¹⁵ Robert Maxwell, *Select Transaction of the Honorable: The Society of Improvers in the Knowledge of Agriculture in Scotland*. (Edinburgh, Scotland: Sands, Brymer, Murray, and Cochran, 1743). Xiii.

was said that the member list of these earlier societies looked more like a guest list at a Royal Ball. Additional societies were forming all over most of Europe by mid-eighteenth century.

France, Ireland, and Russia had similar societies that all sought to improve farming techniques.

Earlier societies were formed by landlords and “amateur farmers” and met several times during the year. They discussed matters of a technical nature and read various “dignified papers.” It was more of a social event that was open to anyone who wanted to join, but membership fees barred the participation of common farmers. Similar to the exposition Elkanah Watson held in Pittsfield, the European societies held events but on a smaller scale. They offered premiums or awards in several different categories. Some of the premiums were monetary and some were silver plates, but only for “elaborate experiments and projects” that occurred on the farm but were “beyond comprehension of the ordinary farmer.”¹⁶ These events also provided an opportunity to view and purchase livestock and other goods.

If early agricultural societies privileged the wealthy and well-connected, Watson proposed a society built from the bottom up. Watson said that, “In order to teach the common farmer about agricultural improvement, one first had to get his attention; only then was it possible to motivate him to participate in activities of an agricultural society.”¹⁷ The Berkshire Agricultural Society motivated the local farmers with the fairs and parades. Farmers learned from the exhibits and vendors that were at these events. Watson was approached by a local farmer who wanted to bring his sheep to the fair to sell, and he responded with “Should our hopes be illusive, and no further premiums be given, it is contemplated, in that unfortunate event, to establish, on the basis of this institution, regular annual fairs, to be held in this village, for the interchange and sale of animals, and domestic manufactures, from every part of the United

¹⁶ Wayne Caldwell Neely, *The Agricultural Fair*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1935), 38.

¹⁷ Mark A. Mastromarino, “Elkanah Watson and the Early Agricultural Fair,” *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1989): 111.

States,”¹⁸ conceding that if the fair and parade weren’t successful under his version, the community could still gather the following years for the purpose of buying and selling their livestock. The main objective in the early days was to celebrate agriculture within the community while spreading knowledge, not to make it like previous “cattle shows” where people simply bought and sold livestock and other manufactured goods.

Watson’s version of the agricultural society was slightly different compared to the earlier European versions. It also differed in comparison to societies that already existed in Massachusetts and some southern states such as Virginia and South Carolina. Watson decided to include women as well. The point was to encourage and educate the local farmers and their families on new advancements in agriculture already being used in other parts of the world and he knew that in order to achieve his goal the entire community had to be involved. “We all owe to our families, and to our country,” Watson explained, “the use of such talents as our Benefactor has been pleased to bestow upon us; and as life is short, with minds disposed to be useful, we may each in our own respective stations, contribute to the high destinies which evidently await our favored land.”¹⁹ It was seemingly one of the first times in the early days of the new nation, that regardless of the socioeconomic hierarchy or political affiliation, in order to truly gain full independence from foreign assistance, everyone had to work together. Watson believed that the best way to generate excitement in this idea was through competition among the local farmers and their families. He wanted to instill a sense of pride or patriotism in their efforts that might have grown stale in the twenty years after the Revolution, as the political climate and willingness to work together had changed over that time period.

¹⁸ Elkanah Watson, *History of Agricultural Societies, on the Modern Berkshire System* (Albany: Packard and Van Beathuysen Printers, 1829), 131.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 121.

Taking a portion of what he learned from similar agricultural societies, Watson came up with his own idea of premiums or awards that were attainable to anyone who entered into the competition. For the first event, he put up the money himself and awarded prizes to the most “meritorious” of the group.²⁰ Watson found it difficult to secure funds in the coming years but he still found a way to make the premiums grow. It took a lot of work to get the premiums to where Watson wanted and he even had to resort to methods that are unbecoming of a gentleman. He had to go on what he called “begging expeditions” and as he said “found myself pursuing an ignis fatuus” which described his motions from town to town at night trying to secure the funds necessary for progress. “Much humbled and mortified with this abortive begging expedition, I returned to Pittsfield.”²¹ The interesting part was that it wasn’t actual money awarded as the premium. It was a silver plate that was engraved and could be put on display for everyone to see. This annual event that started out as a man showing off his two sheep became the county fair.

The fair has taken on different shapes over the years since that day in Pittsfield in 1811, but the foundation remains the same. The point of the earlier Cattle Shows was to share advancements in the modernization of agriculture to the farmers who were in the middle of it and at times indifferent to change.²² It is an event that common working-class people learned about the latest advancements in agriculture, possibly purchase new livestock, and view newly manufactured goods made by their peers. Elkanah Watson turned his vision into an American institution. In time, the “county fair” became something more for entertainment than an actual

²⁰ Elkanah Watson, *History of Agricultural Societies, on the Modern Berkshire System* (Albany: Packard and Van Beathuysen Printers, 1829), 123-124.

²¹ Winslow C. Watson and Elkanah Watson, “Men and Times of the Revolution; or, Memoirs of Elkanah Watson, including journals of travels in Europe and America, from 1777 to 1842, with his correspondence with public men and reminiscences and incidents of the revolution,” (New York: Dana and Company, 1856), 368.

²² Catherine E. Kelly, “The Consummation of Rural Prosperity and Happiness: New England Agricultural Fairs and the Construction of Class and Gender, 1810-1860,” *American Quarterly* 49, no. 3 (September, 1997): 577.

place to celebrate and educate agriculture. The earlier fairs also had demonstrations and competitions pitting farmer against farmer to show who plowed the area designated for the event the best based on time and accuracy. This was one of the larger draws because those in attendance witnessed the meticulous nature that went into cultivating a field properly. Judges checked the straightness of the plow lines as well as its depth and width and determined a winner.²³

Elkanah Watson forged a new American definition of progress, one that championed scientific experimentation, embraced social equality, and was inextricably tied to improving the land. He was receptive to any idea that he thought would benefit the new nation, which was evident in the work he did throughout his life.

Elkanah Watson: Progressive American Visionary

Elkanah Watson was born in Plymouth, Massachusetts on January 22, 1758. He was a descendent of the Mayflower Pilgrims on his Mother, Patience Marston Watson's side. His five-time Great Grandfather was Edward Winslow a signer of the Mayflower Compact. Winslow along with his wife Elizabeth made the journey on the Mayflower arriving in 1620. Elizabeth succumbed to that first brutal New England winter. Winslow remarried shortly after to Susanna White, who was a widow herself. Their marriage became the first of the new colony. Winslow went on and published important pamphlets that were integral in the beginning of the new settlement. He became one of the most prominent settlers of the Bay Colonies and was the third governor. The Watson's were a prominent family in early New England that had ties with most of the big families in the area. Growing up in the period that he did, Watson was enamored with

²³ Edmund Ruffin, "Agricultural Societies and Cattle Shows," *The Farmers' Register: A Monthly Publication Devoted to the Improvement of the Practice and Support of the Interests of Agriculture* 6 (1838): 523.

the idea of fighting for the cause. When he was seventeen years old, he joined a new company of militia or what was referred to as a “Liberty Company” in which he drilled and donned a uniform.²⁴ He never saw any combat and had just missed out on seeing action in Lexington and Concord, but his adventures placed him directly in the thick of the Revolutionary War.

Watson, at seventeen years old, was apprenticed to prominent John Brown of Providence in 1775. He wanted desperately to join the army, but both his father and John Brown wouldn’t allow him out of his “indentured term of training and employment.” In the spring of that same year, Watson was called into action when Brown was captured, bound, and sent to Boston as a suspect in the “burning of the Gaspee.”²⁵ Watson rode through the streets on horseback shouting “fire” in an effort to assemble a group to rescue Brown before he was hauled off to a Boston jail. They were successful in their endeavor.

At twenty years old and still working for John Brown, Watson was recruited for a risky business venture, that once complete, propelled him to new heights as a trusty patriot. As a partial payment to one of Brown’s business associates in South Carolina, Watson transported a sum of money that was sewn into his pants from Providence, Rhode Island to Charleston, South Carolina. Watson wrote in his memoirs that it was \$50,000 but others reported it was \$26,000, or simply a “large sum of money.” In any event it was large sum for the period to be carrying especially at the height of the conflict. Watson headed out with a “good horse under me, a hangar [sword] at my side, and a pair of pistols in my holster.”²⁶ The journey covered over 1,200 miles and took seventy-seven days. He kept a diary that “record[ed] the character of the

²⁴ Jeremy Bangs, *The Travels of Elkanah Watson: An American Businessman in the Revolutionary War, in 1780’s Europe and in the Formative Decades of the United States*, (North Carolina, McFarland & Co, 2015), 10.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 12.

²⁶ Winslow C. Watson and, Elkanah Watson, “Men and Times of the Revolution; or, Memoirs of Elkanah Watson, including journals of travels in Europe and America, from 1777 to 1842, with his correspondence with public men and reminiscences and incidents of the revolution,” (New York: Dana and Company, 1856), 27.

people and the features of the land amidst the events that made him feel a participant in actions so significant, so revolutionary the whole world would watch.”²⁷ His accounts on what he saw and the people he interacted with were so detailed it provided all that might have read it, when it was finally published a decade and half after his death in 1856, a glimpse of what the country was like through the eyes of a witness. It was essentially a travel guide in its earliest version. Watson’s personal journals included drawings and maps that he crafted when he stopped to rest.

The journey wasn’t without incident. When he reached Pennsylvania and had word passed to him of the British taking over Philadelphia, he had to re-route to cross the Delaware River near Cowles Ferry in Pennsylvania and ended up getting arrested “under suspicion (which resulted in my minute inquiries) of being British spies.”²⁸ Watson’s arrest came shortly after Nathan Hale was hanged for his participation in spy work so the detainers likely had their guard up. In the first case of “name dropping,” Watson gave up all the names of the prominent politicians he knew while protesting his “patriotic innocence” and was released.²⁹ It is interesting that after being apprehended, the money he was travelling with wasn’t located on him. If the guards commandeered Watson’s journal, why didn’t they check him over more thoroughly? What might have happened if the British had come across the money? At the age of twenty, how did Watson keep his composure? In any event he was released and sent on his way again. It wouldn’t be the last time he was arrested under the suspicion of espionage. When in Virginia “we again found ourselves in the hands of civil authorities ... We were compelled to

²⁷ Jeremy Bangs, *The Travels of Elkanah Watson: An American Businessman in the Revolutionary War, in 1780’s Europe and in the Formative Decades of the United States*, (North Carolina, McFarland & Co, 2015), 15.

²⁸ Winslow C. Watson and Elkanah Watson, “Men and Times of the Revolution; or, Memoirs of Elkanah Watson, including journals of travels in Europe and America, from 1777 to 1842, with his correspondence with public men and reminiscences and incidents of the revolution,” (New York: Dana and Company, 1856), 29.

²⁹ Jeremy Bangs, *The Travels of Elkanah Watson: An American Businessman in the Revolutionary War, in 1780’s Europe and in the Formative Decades of the United States*, (North Carolina, McFarland & Co, 2015), 17.

go before a magistrate two miles out of town, exhibit our passports, take the oath of abjuration, and pay fees to the office.”³⁰

As Watson’s travels continued on into the Carolinas, he described in his memoirs the potential danger on the roadway with “royalists and runaway negroes who could not be approached with safety. They often attacked travelers and had recently murdered a Mr. Williams.”³¹ He and his travel companion made it through that area unscathed and obtained a place to stay, which was at the home of a Mr. Granby who was a “wealthy planter and merchant.” Watson learned from Granby about a lake that existed in the middle of the swampy area they had just entered that was “well stored with fish.” In their conversation, Grandy told Watson that “previous to the Revolution, Washington and two other gentlemen had contemplated opening a canal, for the purpose of drawing off the water and reclaiming the land for cultivation.”³² Although not aware at this time, the brief discussion of the canal that Watson had was significant. It proved to be the foundation of an idea he had some years later once the war was over.

Watson continued on his travels for several more days, running into trouble with the weather and animals along the way. It wasn’t until he reached Long Bay, North Carolina, which is halfway through the coastal portion of the state and still a few hundred miles from his destination of Charleston, that he met up with General Lachlan McIntosh, a Brigadier General of the Continental Troops of Georgia, and his men, who were traveling in the opposite direction. General McIntosh shared the news of the current state that the country was in and that British General John Burgoyne and his whole army were prisoners of war. Watson said in his memoirs

³⁰ Winslow C. Watson and Elkanah Watson, “Men and Times of the Revolution; or, Memoirs of Elkanah Watson, including journals of travels in Europe and America, from 1777 to 1842, with his correspondence with public men and reminiscences and incidents of the revolution,” (New York: Dana and Company, 1856), 36.

³¹ *Ibid*, 36.

³² *Ibid*, 37.

that, “We involuntarily took off our hats and gave three hearty cheers in concert with the roaring of the surge.” He continued saying “All considered this glorious event as deciding the question of our eventual Independence.”³³ Watson and his companion reached their destination days later with the money still securely sewn into his coat. Elkanah met with John Brown’s associate Nathaniel Russell who was the consignee and handed the money off to him.

During his ride from Providence to Charleston, Watson kept meticulous and descriptive notes on everything he saw along the way to include in his journal. He documented everything: the amount of buildings, makeup of the population in each city, animals, trees, and plants. He also included drawings of different plants and an indigo plantation as well. Watson continued writing in his journals throughout all of his travels from his earlier years to his adult life up until the final days.

Historian Gordon Wood described Watson as one of a “new breed of hustlers [that were] springing up everywhere.”³⁴ One of his most domineering traits that was evident early in his life was his ability to work hard and find ways to better himself. With the interest of the country close to his heart, most of the moves he made were in her best interest. A majority of those ideas came later in his life but he played an integral role in many areas that helped shape the nation.

Before leaving Charleston, Watson, and the entire city for that matter had to deal with devastating loss. A fire swept through taking everything in its path. “The fire raged with unmitigated fury for seventeen hours,” Watson wrote. While being directly in the middle of the fire he said, “After laboring at the fire for many hours, I returned to my quarters to obtain a brief respite,” which didn’t last long because the home he was staying in was next to go up in

³³ Winslow C. Watson and Elkanah Watson, “Men and Times of the Revolution; or, Memoirs of Elkanah Watson, including journals of travels in Europe and America, from 1777 to 1842, with his correspondence with public men and reminiscences and incidents of the revolution,” (New York: Dana and Company, 1856), 42.

³⁴ Gordon S. Wood, *Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic, 1789-1815*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 325.

flames.³⁵ So much was lost and the possibility of rebuilding afterwards proved to be difficult with so many materials being burned. Gabriel Manigault, a local merchant, said, “I lost every one of my Stores in which was but few Goods, which were mostly saved. My dwelling House was in very great danger. Buildings will be very difficult to have Built, as many of the principal Materials are not to be had ... Abundance of people are in very great distress for want of House room.”³⁶ After collecting his remaining belongings, Watson headed out of Charleston two weeks after the fire. Watson seemed repulsed with slavery in the South. To a point, later in life while seeking his “rural felicity,” he came across maple syrup. He thought that since it was sweet it could be a substitute for sugar. If that was the case the country wouldn’t have to rely so heavily on sugar cane which would result in a fewer number of slaves needed to work on plantations and less reliance of imported goods. Those that were slaves could be emancipated and become regular citizens contributing to the progress of the nation as a whole.

After approximately eight months of traveling from Rhode Island to Georgia and back, Elkanah Watson returned home. What he had learned in his travels was that America had tremendous potential and the possibility of a great future. “What are called mountains in Europe are hills in America; rivers were reduced to brooks; trees to bushes ... In short, the map of the world present to view no country, which combines so many natural advantages, is pleasantly diversified, and offers to agriculture, manufacturers, and commerce so many resources, all of which to conduct America to the first rank among nations.”³⁷ These thoughts fueled him for the

³⁵ Winslow C. Watson and Elkanah Watson, “Men and Times of the Revolution; or, Memoirs of Elkanah Watson, including journals of travels in Europe and America, from 1777 to 1842, with his correspondence with public men and reminiscences and incidents of the revolution,” (New York: Dana and Company, 1856), 44-45.

³⁶ Samuel G. Stoney, “The Great Fire of 1778 Seen Through Contemporary Letters,” *The South Carolina Historical Magazine* 64, no.1 (January 1963): 24-25.

³⁷ Jeremy Bangs, *The Travels of Elkanah Watson: An American Businessman in the Revolutionary War, in 1780’s Europe and in the Formative Decades of the United States*, (North Carolina, McFarland & Co, 2015), 37.

rest of his years and he worked the rest of his life to prove that he was right. The ideas became the foundation of his definition of progress.

Still an associate of John Brown, Watson now at the “age of twenty-one, with the wide world before me ... was induced to embrace proposals ... by Mr. Brown and others, to proceed to France.”³⁸ He was given dispatches that were to be delivered to Dr. Benjamin Franklin, at Passy, France, near Paris. He worked closely with Franklin in the years he stayed in France before returning to America six years later. He gained valuable knowledge of everything from business insight, to road and canal construction that allowed for greater and quick travel. Watson found the travel through the canal system a “novel mode of traveling exceedingly amusing and agreeable.”³⁹ Later in life Watson became a self-appointed canal enthusiast and worked with men like Philip Schuyler on the possible creation of a canal system in New York that connected the waterways all the way to the Great Lakes.⁴⁰ Watson, receptive to any idea learned during his travels overseas, brought them back to aid in his efforts to progress the new nation.

As the war with the British was nearing an end, Watson used the one hundred Guineas he had “won at the insurance office,” to hire the famous painter John Singleton Copley, with whom he had dined, to paint a “splendid portrait of myself.” During his days Copley painted several paintings of the Revolution including John Hancock, Samuel Adams, John Adams, and of course Elkanah Watson. He enjoyed success in his life and was considered the greatest and most influential painter in colonial America. The painting was completed with a background design

³⁸ Winslow C. Watson and Elkanah Watson, “Men and Times of the Revolution; or, Memoirs of Elkanah Watson, including journals of travels in Europe and America, from 1777 to 1842, with his correspondence with public men and reminiscences and incidents of the revolution,” (New York: Dana and Company, 1856), 75.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 127.

⁴⁰ John Lauritz Larson, *Internal Improvement: National Public Works and the Promise of Popular Government in the Early United States*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 26-27.

they both came up with that was going to “represent a ship, bearing to America the intelligence of the acknowledgement of Independence, with a sun just rising upon the stripes of the union, streaming from her gaff.” The painting was completed by Copley, but according to Watson’s memoirs, Copley left out the American Flag because he didn’t think it was “prudent to hoist under present circumstances” since the war was still going on. The flag was added a short time later when at the throne of King George, Watson listened to the King’s speech formally acknowledging the United States of America’s independence. According to Elkanah Watson, the flag that was painted on his portrait was “the first American flag hoisted in old England.”⁴¹ Looking more closely to the painting, Copley with great detail, included a small pile of letters with Watson holding one. It appears that it is correspondence between Watson and John Brown and also a letter from George Washington.

When news hit in Europe that the effort of the colonies was successful, Watson and his business partner at the time Francis Cossoul wanted to show their appreciation to Washington’s efforts. The two “employed ... nuns [from] one of the convents at Nantes to prepare some elegant Masonic ornaments” and Watson provided them with “a plan for combining the American and French flags on the apron designed for [Washington’s] use.”⁴² The items were shipped to Washington with a letter from Watson and Cossoul offering their gifts. The letter started, “In a moment when all Europe admire at the same time feel the effects of your glorious efforts in support of American liberty, we hasten to offer to your acceptance, a small pledge of our homage.” Watson concluded the letter by saying “It is to you, therefore, the Glorious Orb of

⁴¹ Winslow C. Watson and Elkanah Watson, “Men and Times of the Revolution; or, Memoirs of Elkanah Watson, including journals of travels in Europe and America, from 1777 to 1842, with his correspondence with public men and reminiscences and incidents of the revolution,” (New York: Dana and Company, 1856), 176.

⁴² William Maurer, “Elkanah Watson: A Tale of Freemasonry and Revolution, Told Through Art and Artifacts of the Eighteenth Century,” *Philalethes: The Journal of Masonic Research and Letters* 63, no.3 (Summer 2010): 98.

America, we pronounce to offer elegant Masonic ornaments as an emblem of your Virtues.”⁴³

Watson’s membership into the Freemasons has been questioned and researches have been unable to find information about him in their documents. The letters have given the indication that he belongs with the inclusion of “brother,” but with Watson knowing that George Washington was a Mason it might have been what led him into making the apron. Washington responded to the gesture with a letter, which is most likely the letter Watson is holding in his painting, “The Masonick ornaments which accompanied your Brotherly Address . . . elegant in themselves, were rendered more valuable by the flattering sentiments and affectionate manner in which they are presented.”⁴⁴

Before returning to the new United States, Elkanah Watson visited Holland and gained valuable information on their canal system. He wrote a separate document about his travels.⁴⁵ Even though he was considered a gentleman, Watson had a difficult time dealing with the way the Dutch carried themselves in their own country. He felt the people were too class-conscious and weren’t as concerned as he was about progress. By this point in his life, he had traveled extensively and rubbed shoulders with some of the most important men in history. One of the things we learn a little later in his life is how he wanted to incorporate all classes into his Agricultural Society. Perhaps his time in Holland convinced him that everyone needed to be included in the growth of the nation in order to achieve maximum success. “Every family here are wrapt up within themselves, and measure their neighbour’s merit by his purse and equipage

⁴³ To George Washington from Elkanah Watson, 23 January 1782,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, accessed September 29, 2019, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-07727>.

⁴⁴ William Maurer, “Elkanah Watson: A Tale of Freemasonry and Revolution, Told Through Art and Artifacts of the Eighteenth Century,” *Philaethes: The Journal of Masonic Research and Letters* 63, no.3 (Summer 2010): 99.

⁴⁵ Elkanah Watson, *A Tour in Holland: In MDCCLXXXIV*, (Worcester, Massachusetts: Isiah Thomas, 1784), Preface.

... Indeed I find there is no happiness equal to that which results from virtue, temperance and industry.”⁴⁶

Watson was forming comparisons to the European lands to which he had traveled to those of his own country and felt like progress was possible for the newly independent nation. “When we contemplate a young empire, blessed with such singular advantages, unconnected from its situation with the entangled politics of Europe, enjoying the freest local governments on earth, and inhabited by a brave and enterprising people, scattered over a great continent.”⁴⁷

Although he wasn’t impressed with the people of Holland, he admired the beauty of the country on his tour. Watson remarked, when viewing the city from atop a tower at the principal church in Rotterdam, that it, “appeared like a high finished curious picture; and the country beyond, a delightful back ground, cultivated like a continued garden, all the way to our horizon ... I have not yet, in any instance, experienced a more happy hour than in contemplating this wonderful country, which seems like an enchanted fairy land.”⁴⁸ Watson took copious notes of his travels and documented Dutch wealth, noting that cloves, cinnamon, mace, nutmeg, and pepper assist in their main resource for trade.

With all that Elkanah Watson had done in his life, the extensive traveling and writing still “Almost every move he made was in the interest of agriculture.”⁴⁹ As he looked around he inspected the area thoroughly and was figuring out how to use methods he learned in his time in Europe in reference to farming, he could use here on this land. Although Watson believed that the advances he made in agriculture were some of his best, one thing he strived for was overall internal improvement. When he was back in New York on Long Island in the area of “Hampton

⁴⁶ Elkanah Watson, *A Tour in Holland: In MDCCLXXXIV*, (Worcester, Massachusetts: Isiah Thomas, 1784), 11.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 49-50.

⁴⁸ Elkanah Watson, *A Tour in Holland: In MDCCLXXXIV*, (Worcester, Massachusetts: Isiah Thomas, 1784), 38.

⁴⁹ Edward Jones Dies, *Titans of The Soil: Great Builders of Agriculture*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press), 36.

Plains” and “Huntington,” as they were called, he took notice of the soil near the harbor. “The soil of this island is light” Watson said, “requiring, to ensure successful culture, to be constantly replenished with manure.” He felt confident that the “practice prevalent in England of using marine sand, which is transported some distance into the interior, or salt itself, would be highly advantageous upon this land.”⁵⁰ Watson was looking at that area in terms of a place to produce, consume, and sell goods. Watson was realizing how much had changed in the United States during the war while he was in Europe on his business ventures. “Since my return, I noticed, with regret, the general absence of that agricultural science, and high tillage, so characteristic of England.”⁵¹

After getting married and settling down in Albany in 1789, Watson lobbied for change to a city of potential. Based on the location within the state and access to various waterways, Watson believed that Albany could be one of the grandest cities in all of the country. At the time, Albany was inhabited mainly by Dutch immigrants and Watson wasn’t too fond of them. In return, they weren’t fond of Watson either, mainly because they were aware of his publication on his travels to their home country. Even though his name wasn’t exactly attached to the writing because he chose to sign it as “An American,” it didn’t take long for the locals to figure out that Watson was behind the writing. “The Dutch took offense at his failure to praise their country sufficiently and consequently received his proposals for improving their town with no great friendliness.”⁵² Even with their hostilities, within a year of being in Albany, Watson started working towards improving the city even if they weren’t looking for it.

⁵⁰ Winslow C. Watson and Elkanah Watson, “Men and Times of the Revolution; or, Memoirs of Elkanah Watson, including journals of travels in Europe and America, from 1777 to 1842, with his correspondence with public men and reminiscences and incidents of the revolution,” (New York: Dana and Company, 1856), 240.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 241.

⁵² Jeremy Bangs, *The Travels of Elkanah Watson: An American Businessman in the Revolutionary War, in 1780’s Europe and in the Formative Decades of the United States*, (North Carolina, McFarland & Co, 2015), 163.

Watson was working on repairing Albany's roads and installing street lights. He also worked on pitching the roads so that rain water drained off to the sides instead of pooling in the middle. He put in place a gutter system on the buildings that had the water flow "directly into the cellars of the old Dutch homes" keeping it off the newly paved roads. He didn't take into consideration what happened with the water after it collected but seemingly wasn't Watson's problem. It wasn't long after that he sought new adventure and business opportunities.

Watson teamed up with the Hon. Jeremiah Van Rensselaer, Gen. Philip Van Cortlandt, and Stephen N. Bayard Esq. who were all prominent New Yorkers, on an extensive tour of the state. Again, he kept copious notes of his journey with the idea of a canal system at the forefront of his mind. Watson said, "I am induced to believe, should the Western canals be ever made, and the Mohawk river become in one sense a continuation of the Hudson river, by means of canals and locks, that it will most clearly obviate the necessity of sending produce to market in winter by sleighs."⁵³ The benefits of a canal system were more than just the ability to send goods to market more easily and efficiently. It cut down on shipping times and created opportunities for people living farther away from major cities.

Some of Watson's internal improvement ideas might have come from his visit with George Washington years earlier. If they weren't solely from his visit, a seed was planted in his young mind. Watson said of his time at Mount Vernon, "I remained alone in the society of Washington for two days, the richest of my life." The two spent their time talking about the interior of the country and the benefits of a canal system. Washington gave Watson "minutes from his journals on the subject," which inspired him. Watson remembered his last visit with Franklin while standing at his grave Franklin, he believed, was ready to pass the torch to the next

⁵³ Winslow C. Watson and Elkanah Watson, "Men and Times of the Revolution; or, Memoirs of Elkanah Watson, including journals of travels in Europe and America, from 1777 to 1842, with his correspondence with public men and reminiscences and incidents of the revolution," (New York: Dana and Company, 1856), 293.

generation of improvers. Franklin said that “he was in their way, and it was time he were off the stage.”⁵⁴

Watson brought his idea of a canal back to DeWitt Clinton, but it didn’t garner the support he had hoped. Several years later, however, Clinton became one of the first members of the Erie Canal Commission and took eventual credit for the construction of the Erie Canal. Even though the idea was met with resistance when it was presented publicly, it became a huge success after its completion as Watson predicted. Watson said “When the mighty canals shall be formed and locks erected, it will add vastly to the facility of an extended diffusion, and the increase of its intrinsic worth.”⁵⁵ Just like so many things Watson thought up during his days, this too came a bit before everyone was ready for it. The Erie Canal remained one of the premier routes to the west until the railroad took over.

One of Elkanah Watson’s ventures that gets the least attention is the town he planted in the Finger Lakes that bore his name, Port Watson. Purchasing land on the military tract that was set aside for compensation for Revolutionary War veterans, Watson had plans for a mill town taking advantage of the land and waterways in the area. Port Watson was established around 1805 near the two branches of the Tioughnioga River in central New York. He also purchased land in the towns of Cincinnatus, Cuyler, Homer, Marathon, Preble, Scott, Solon, Taylor, and Truxton.⁵⁶ With the parcels of land Watson purchased that were now for sale, advertisements published in the newspapers gave descriptions like “The streets are spacious—intersect each other at right angles on the plan of Philadelphia, and the town and water lots in general half an

⁵⁴ William R. Deane, “A Biographical Sketch of Elkanah Watson, Found of Agricultural Societies in American, and the Projector of Canal Communication in New York State, With a Brief Genealogy of the Watson Family, Early Settled in Plymouth Colony,” (New York: J. Munsell, 1864), 9.

⁵⁵ Winslow C. Watson and Elkanah Watson, “Men and Times of the Revolution; or, Memoirs of Elkanah Watson, including journals of travels in Europe and America, from 1777 to 1842, with his correspondence with public men and reminiscences and incidents of the revolution,” (New York: Dana and Company, 1856), 301.

⁵⁶ Cortland New York. “Elkanah Watson: 1758-1842.” Cortland.org. <http://www.cortland.org/280/Elkanah-Watson> (Accessed February 17, 2020).

acre, and actual settlers will be accommodated with outlots of five acres each.” To entice potential suitors of the land, the ad goes on to read, “In respect to the beauty and healthiness of this situation, and prospects for an extensive and growing trade, it is unrivalled in the western Country, especially as it is at the head of navigation of the Homer branch of the Susquehannah River, where Craft have been built, carry down that river.”⁵⁷

Port Watson thrived for a short period of time and was a major hub of the exchange route from New York into Pennsylvania and Maryland. There were rumors that the large ark-type boats that did the shipping were so large that they couldn’t turn around and make the trip back so they were all dismantled and the wood was used in the local saw mills. Even though the town ceased to exist, there is a historical marker in its place that reads: “Port Watson, Founded by Elkanah Watson About 1805. Mills, Brewery Rope Walk. Sent Arks, Rafts, Cargoes to Penna. Absorbed by Cortland in 1867.”⁵⁸ Even though he never resided in his own town, the purpose of its creation goes hand-in-hand with everything Watson was trying to accomplish in the earlier years of the new nation and that was finding ways to rely less on foreign assistance. Watson had another opportunity to construct a town two decades later in the village of Port Kent that was located on the shores of Lake Champlain that he “chiefly founded by himself, and which became the depot of the vast manufacturing products on the valley of the Au Sable River.”⁵⁹ Watson built his final home there where he spent the remainder of his days.

After living his life in places like Rhode Island, North Carolina, New York, and France, Elkanah Watson’s greatest move came in the beginning years of the nineteenth century. After

⁵⁷ Elkanah Watson Miscellaneous Notices and Broad-sides, Box 56, Folder 2, Elkanah Watson Papers 1773-1884, Archive and Special Collections GB 13294, New York State Library.

⁵⁸ Howard C. Ohlhous, “Port Watson,” The Historical Marker Database: Bite-Size Bits of Local, National, and Global History. <https://www.hmdb.org/m.asp?m=25425> (Accessed February 16, 2020).

⁵⁹ Winslow C. Watson and Elkanah Watson, “Men and Times of the Revolution; or, Memoirs of Elkanah Watson, including journals of travels in Europe and America, from 1777 to 1842, with his correspondence with public men and reminiscences and incidents of the revolution,” (New York: Dana and Company, 1856), 443.

attempting improvements in Albany and successful and failed business attempts such as the Bank of Albany, Watson moved his family once again. The move was to Pittsfield, Massachusetts, and it had the most lasting impression on his life. The journey to Pittsfield wasn't necessarily to seek new opportunities, as much as it was for trying to move away from his current life of living in the city. Throughout his life he had eschewed politics. He straddled party lines, focusing more on what his beloved country could accomplish.

Just as Watson sought compromise in the principal modes of American production, he also sought political compromise. Even though he stayed out of the political spotlight, prior to his move to Pittsfield he became involved in the election for governor in New York. Although he opposed De Witt Clinton, who came to be one of Watson's greatest adversaries, Watson was "committed to anti-partisanship" and developed a loose affiliation with a new faction called the "Quids." The term is short for "Tertium Quid: a third something" which was described as neither federalist or true republican.⁶⁰ Prior to the Quids finding their way to New York, a majority of them were located in Pennsylvania.⁶¹ Watson said, "I found myself the efficient Man in the grand Albany electioneering committee in Support of Gov. Morgan Lewis—against [Daniel] Tompkins. Not that I had any particular attachment to Lewis or his principles—but to oppose the tyranny of de Witt Clinton my Mortal enemy." Regretfully he went on to say, "we were defeated after the most vigorous efforts—and I was fool enough to bet—and loose ab. 500 \$ on the issue—disgusted with the thoughts of living under Such a tyrant—led me to the purchase of a farm in Pittsfield where I removed in June 1807."⁶²

⁶⁰ Gordon S. Wood, *Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic, 1789-1815*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 325

⁶¹ Andrew Shankman, *Crucible of American Democracy: The Struggle to Fuse Egalitarianism & Capitalism in Jeffersonian Pennsylvania*, (Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 2004), 102.

⁶² Hugh M. Flick, "Elkanah Watson: Gentleman Promoter, 1758-1842" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1958), 202.

Watson purchased his farm when he was fifty years old and began a career in agriculture. His lone regret with this move to the country was that it was a bit late in his life. He noticed that the “system of husbandry which prevailed in that district was antiquated and defective, with little science, or the influence of modern progress.”⁶³ However, Watson still saw great promise in the land. Pittsfield was in an exhausted and dilapidated state as far as farming practices were concerned and it took a lot of work. He spent most of the next decade playing the role of gentleman farmer, working on “growing many varieties of fruit, analyzing traditional farming methods, conceiving improvements, and introducing them in the neighborhood by way of exemplary pioneering efforts.”⁶⁴

After meeting Chancellor Robert Livingston a few years earlier, Watson purchased two Merino Sheep from him and brought them to Pittsfield, since the native sheep there were “uniformly coarse, [and] loose-wooled.” Merino wool was of a higher quality. It wasn’t just livestock that Watson was interested in improving. He secured seeds from Livingston and others that were in Europe in hopes of fostering self-sufficiency for his country. He brought his sheep to the public square to show them off to the locals. From that first exhibition, Watson recruited several local farmers and established his most prized accomplishment, the Berkshire Agricultural Society.

The Too Ardent and Overzealous Patriot

Elkanah Watson’s move to Pittsfield might have come too late in his life, as he said, but in terms of his ideas for agriculture the move might have come too early. It was an interesting

⁶³ Winslow C. Watson and Elkanah Watson, “Men and Times of the Revolution; or, Memoirs of Elkanah Watson, including journals of travels in Europe and America, from 1777 to 1842, with his correspondence with public men and reminiscences and incidents of the revolution,” (New York: Dana and Company, 1856), 364.

⁶⁴ Jeremy Bangs, *The Travels of Elkanah Watson: An American Businessman in the Revolutionary War, in 1780’s Europe and in the Formative Decades of the United States*, (North Carolina, McFarland & Co, 2015), 177.

time for the United States in 1807. The land had become “exhausted” by farming and there was political strife between the classes, which many believed affected the potential growth and prosperity of the nation. What the country needed was someone to assist in the progress of his countrymen and countrywomen’s patriotism and desire to become truly independent from foreign assistance. Watson was that man. According to the *History of Pittsfield* written in the mid nineteenth century, “There was a necessity for the country to supply itself with the better class of fabrics (from the newly introduced Merino sheep) from its own looms in the event of a war.” Somehow, Watson had foreshadowed another tense outbreak with Great Britain. “The love of country and the hope of gain this operated reciprocally upon each other, and harmoniously together, in the encouragement of manufactures.”⁶⁵

He started out small when he arrived in Pittsfield. The townspeople were already aware of the two Merino Sheep he brought with him. Within the next year, Watson had introduced a new breed of pig that was shorter and easier to feed than those in existence. Watson said “the old breed gradually disappeared.”⁶⁶ Watson’s farm boasted a large pond that in time he stocked with pickerel that were also newer to the Berkshires. “Their prolific increase in all the ponds, and streams, now affords an essential item of delicious and increasing food for the inhabitants, which cost them nothing but the trouble of catching and eating them” Watson added.⁶⁷ It isn’t totally known if Watson’s claim of introducing the fish first is accurate, but according to *History of Berkshire County*, also written toward the end of the nineteenth century, pickerel were placed in lakes at the beginning of the nineteenth century.⁶⁸ Whether it was his plan to introduce these

⁶⁵ J.E.A. Smith, *History of Pittsfield, Massachusetts, From the Year 1800 to the Year 1876*, (Springfield, Massachusetts: Clark W Bryan & Co. 1876), 197.

⁶⁶ Elkanah Watson, *History of Agricultural Societies, on the Modern Berkshire System*, (Albany, NY: Packard and VanBeathuysen Printers, 1829), 117.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 118.

⁶⁸ F.A. Hosmer, *History of Berkshire County: With Biographical Sketches of its Prominent Men*, (New York: J.B. Beers & Co., 1885), 221.

new breeds to everyone or if it was just something he had done for himself is unknown. The fact is, his experiments sought to reinvigorate the land he thought he'd be spending the rest of his days on as a farmer, and his goal was to garner a following of his new ideas. Watson found a way to incorporate both the "Jeffersonian" ideals with the "Hamiltonian" ideals, which was the big debate of the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century. Watson had a goal for Pittsfield to be one of the major manufacturers of wool.

By Watson's calculations, within a few years of his introduction of Merino Sheep, if bred in the way he had hoped, the number of sheep in the area would grow into a flock of about 1,500. This helped to transform Pittsfield from a "coarse-wool district" to a "fine-wool district" and he envisioned the "beautiful hills were covered with valuable flocks and the population so completely absorbed in growing wool and manufacturing it that other branches of industry were practically abandoned."⁶⁹ Watson wasn't the only one promoting the importance of Merino Wool. There was an article published in the *Berkshire Reporter* explaining how much money each pound of raw wool could produce and how much more could be earned if the wool was manufactured into cloths or hats. "It would be well for every thinking farmer to calculate how much his own interest and the substantial wealth of the country could be advanced in a few years."⁷⁰ Watson's sheep produced eight pounds of wool according to reports and after it was "cleaned and carded" it provided him with six pounds eleven ounces. Laurel Ulrich in *The Age of Homespun*, explains that Watson sent the rolls to a nearby Shaker village clothier and ended up with seven and a half yards. Watson calculated the profit and figured the "cloth that would have cost him \$26.25 in a store was manufactured for only \$7.92. Even if he counted the value

⁶⁹ Dr. D.E. Salmon, *Special Report on the History and Present Condition of the Sheep Industry of the United States*, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1892), 218.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 218.

of the wool at \$1.50 a pound, he had a clear profit of twenty five percent.”⁷¹ These details and discovery of the amount of profit available for using and manufacturing Merino Sheep wool were the basis for Watson’s desire to raise flocks all throughout New England and perhaps beyond.

Some people followed, but Watson’s ideas and methods were also met with skepticism. One of his leading critics was former president John Adams, who was president of the Massachusetts Society of Agriculture from 1805 to 1813. While trying to raise money to assist with the premiums that were awarded at the end of the cattle show, Watson had reached out to Adams asking for state money to assist in this endeavor instead of having to beg the local community for money. Adams replied with, “You will get no aide from Boston, commerce, literature, theology, are all against you” he wrote and “nay, medicine, history, and university, and universal politics might be added. I cannot, I will not be more explicit.”⁷² This came several years after the first cattle show in Pittsfield, but the words were quite harsh and put Watson on the defensive. Adams retracted his statement five years later and the Massachusetts Society eventually “extend[ed] their arms to embrace and patronize the society,” Watson wrote. Unfortunately, the assistance came a year after he moved back to Albany from Pittsfield.

Elkanah Watson was a man of means and the acquaintances he kept afforded him opportunities that not many in his day were able take advantage of. Of course there must have been personal gain, but Watson was overcome by his love of country. There had been societies all over Europe and the southern parts of the United States before Watson’s Berkshire Agricultural Society was founded. However, Watson took his in a different direction from all of

⁷¹ Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *The Age of Homespun: Objects and Stories in the Creation of an American Myth*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), 330.

⁷² Elkanah Watson, *History of Agricultural Societies, on the Modern Berkshire System*, (Albany, NY: Packard and Van Beathuysen Printers, 1829), 133.

the rest. Knowing full well that the older societies were restricted to elites, he opened the Berkshire Society to any and all that could afford the annual dues. But before all of that took place, Watson had to drum up interest amongst the local farmers.

Even after his first display of the Merino Sheep, Watson still felt as if he were being highly criticized by his peers. “I stood alone, the butt of ridicule,” Watson wrote.⁷³ He advertised an event at the Park Square in Pittsfield with the hopes of making it an annual event. Historians have given Watson the title of the “Father of the Agricultural Fair,” even though as Ariel Ron suggests, Watson is known for it but there are “significant precedents.”⁷⁴ Prior to the events in Pittsfield, Ron points out that Europeans were already holding agricultural fairs. Watson’s fair and the society as a whole were different. Ron doesn’t discredit the claims that others have placed on Elkanah Watson, but he does mention that his “Berkshire System of fair holding and agricultural societies was assembled from ready-made parts.”⁷⁵ Others like Glenn Lauzon point out differences between prior societies and that in Pittsfield. It took time, but Watson understood that the societies that had already been created didn’t appeal to the common farmer. He altered his society for a Berkshire audience.⁷⁶

⁷³ *Ibid*, 118.

⁷⁴ Ariel Ron, “Developing the Country: Scientific Agriculture and the Roots of the Republic” (PhD diss., University of California Berkeley, 2012), 31.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 31.

⁷⁶ Glenn Lauzon, “Civic Learning Through Agricultural Improvement: Bringing “The Loom and the Anvil Into Proximity with the Plow” in Nineteenth-Century Indiana” (PhD diss., University of Indiana, 2007). There are many other dissertations the speak of Elkanah Watson as the “Father of the Agricultural Fair” or give brief descriptions of his time in Pittsfield and the beginning of the Berkshire Agricultural Society such as, Julie Ann Avery, “An Exploration of Several Early Michigan County Fairs as Community Arts Organizations of the 1850’s, 1860’s, and 1870’s: Volume 1,” (PhD diss., Michigan State University, 1992). As well as Roger James Wood, “Science, Education, and the Political Economy in Indiana: A History of the School of Agriculture, Agricultural Experiment Station, and Department of Agricultural Extension at Purdue University to 1945,” (PhD diss., Purdue University, 1993). Chris Allen Rasmussen, “State Fair: Culture and Agriculture in Iowa, 1854-1941,” (PhD diss., Rutgers University, 1992), dives into more detail about Elkanah Watson and his creation of the State Fair. In his dissertation, Todd William Spencer, “The Carleton County Agricultural Society, Exhibition, and Harness Racing, 1842, 1939,” (PhD diss., University of Brunswick, 2006), he touches on Watson and the commercial interests and educational interests of his societies.

Even as interest grew and additional things were added to his annual cattle shows, such as more premiums and agricultural balls, Watson still needed to explain to the people how the society under the “Berkshire plan” was going to benefit everyone. In order for everyone to work together, any political affiliation needed to be cast aside. Watson made this very clear in his address to the society. He acknowledged America’s political struggles and resolved to protect “this public object [agriculture]” from the “poison.” He went on to say, “Let us then, one and all, for the honour of happiness of ourselves and our country, cultivate a more liberal spirit of political charity towards each other, and leave every man responsible only to his God, and the laws of the land, for the particular cast of his mind, as well in politics as in religion.” Watson continued, “It is as ridiculous as impertinent, for a man to quarrel with another for not thinking as he thinks, as for not looking as he looks.” Later on in his address he said, “How can Americans boast of our freedom, when we were all combined to enslave each other’s opinions . . . Let us then, with one voice and one heart, join hand in hand, on this auspicious day, like a band of affectionate American brothers, intent only on the welfare and happiness of our common country.”⁷⁷

Understanding Watson’s distaste for politics is difficult unless one looks into his family history. Several of his family members were exiled during the Revolutionary War and Watson saw the difficulties and uncertainty of political division.⁷⁸ Watson believed political differences could be overcome in order to create a union. His ideas about economics underpinned his beliefs. If some thought that agriculture was antithetical to industrial development, Watson believed the two could and should be connected. He understood the role of agriculture well, as it

⁷⁷ Elkanah Watson, *History of Agricultural Societies, on the Modern Berkshire System*, (Albany, NY: Packard and Van Beathuysen Printers, 1829), 121-122.

⁷⁸ Mark A. Mastromarino, “Fair Visions: Elkanah Watson (1758-1842) and the Modern American Agricultural Fair” (PhD diss., College of William & Mary, 2002), 40.

was one of the things he was most interested in from the time he was a boy, but he had thoughts on domestic manufacturing that made too much sense to ignore. Watson wanted to include women into his society and have them play a major role. Giving women recognition for their work when men didn't see as much importance in it was one of Watson's most innovative ideas.⁷⁹ What he was asking of them was simple, stop requiring imported goods as an accent to their dress, and instead rely on their own hands to finish off the ensemble. Watson thought that any dollar that was used to purchase goods from foreign countries was a dollar taken away from his country. One way he was able to get them to understand what he meant was to single the women out and award them premiums for their work. Unfortunately, initially, the women weren't receptive to the idea.

One of the main components of the "Berkshire Plan" was gender equality, which set it apart from earlier agricultural societies. Watson wrote, "The ladies of the county were invited to appear the 12th of January, 1813, with the fruits of their industry, and receive their premiums." When the day finally arrived, none of the women that were going to be rewarded showed up. This made Watson "extremely agitated" because he didn't want this idea to fail. He believed it was their "timidity, and dead of being laughed at" that none of them wanted to be the first to show their support. Watson had to "resort to a maneuver, which, in one hour, succeeded to our wishes." Calling on his wife to take part, other townspeople were sent to the homes of the women to get them to come to the hall to be recognized. Watson was elated and considered this "one of the most grateful moments of my life." He specifically addressed the women and said, "Your worthy example by your attendance here, will not fail to produce the most beneficial, and extensive good effects. The labours of the society, and your efforts, will go hand in hand;

⁷⁹ Lawrence A. Peskin, *Manufacturing Revolution: The Intellectual Origins of Early American Industry*. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 179.

mutually supporting and animating each other.”⁸⁰ In an effort to continue raising the interest level of the women of Pittsfield, Watson added an “Agricultural Ball” to the end of one of the fair days. “The formal ball that concluded fair day was therefore a welcome addition, even though nobody was permitted to attend wearing any imported cloth.” There were few opportunities for “social diversion” in the early nineteenth century Pittsfield.⁸¹

By making the women an important part of the success of the society, it created competition that resonated throughout the town. Women were proud of their handcrafted or homespun manufactured goods and produced them as one of their many duties, but being recognized for their efforts was different. Women of this period and the women that came before them in the earlier years of the nation were responsible for labor intensive and non-stop work in the home. The idea of the Republican Mother came about during this time as well and was described as a life that was “dedicated to the service of civic virtue” and she “educated her sons for it; condemned and corrected her husband’s lapses from it.”⁸² While the men were off fighting, it was expected that the women take over fully in the home on educating the children to become productive humans in their respective roles. Not only were they responsible for the upkeep of the living quarters, “the culture taught women to define their lives by motherhood and domesticity” as Alan Taylor wrote.⁸³ Their roles were expanded during the period of the Revolutionary War when the men were off fighting. The women had to tend to the farms or shops in order to keep home economics afloat. In addition to their household duties, they were called upon to assist with clothing and feeding soldiers. In doing so, women took ownership of

⁸⁰ Elkanah Watson, *History of Agricultural Societies, on the Modern Berkshire System*, (Albany, NY: Packard and Van Beathuysen Printers, 1829), 128-129.

⁸¹ Mark A. Mastromarino, “Elkanah Watson and the Early Agricultural Fair,” *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1989): 110.

⁸² Linda Kerber, “The Republican Mother: Women and the Enlightenment-An American Perspective. *American Quarterly* 28, no.2 (Summer, 1976), 202.

⁸³ Alan Taylor, *American Revolutions: A Continental History, 1750-1804*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2016), 27.

the property they were responsible for until the men returned and “sought to restore traditional limits on women as domestic creatures.”⁸⁴

Even though the times had changed post-revolution, the roles of women stayed largely the same in the rural areas. She was still responsible for preparing meals for large families while keeping up a garden and working on livestock. “Her home was also a small-scale textile manufactory,” explained Robert Gross, “devoted to spinning, dyeing, and weaving the clothes that she would later be continually mending, washing, and ironing, and of course, the responsibilities of bearing, nursing, weaning, and caring for children.”⁸⁵ Gross said that it wasn’t any easier for the women of the period who did not marry. They had few opportunities because most of the non-household professions were usually taken by the men. They became “permanent spinsters” and spent their days “spinning yarn in a tedious, endless round of days.”⁸⁶ So to have an event like Watson’s “Cloth Fair,” as it was known, was welcomed even though it was met with early resistance. As time went on, and homespun goods made way for manufactured goods a decade or so after women were first getting recognition in the Berkshires, some migrated east after being recruited by larger companies to work in factories. “Farm women had long supplemented the family income by weaving woolen yarn and cloth, using spinning wheels and hand looms at home. Now cotton from the South provided raw material much more plentiful than local sheep.”⁸⁷

Home-grown improvements had brought prosperity to the United States in the decades following the Revolutionary War. Laurel Ulrich points out that this progress was being

⁸⁴ Alan Taylor, *American Revolutions: A Continental History, 1750-1804*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2016), 454.

⁸⁵ Robert A. Gross, *The Minutemen and Their World*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1976), 102.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 103.

⁸⁷ Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 133.

measured. “That a wife’s homespun should be a source of family pride is not surprising. That it should be a measure of the progress of American manufacturing shows how determined Americans were to retain their rural republic.”⁸⁸

A leading cause of Watson’s inclusion of women within the Agricultural Society was the acknowledgment of the “women’s contribution to the rural economy.” He fully understood the changing roles women had assumed and he wanted to celebrate it. Women were aware of their production of goods mainly for their home, but as Catherine Kelly points out, “it was their cloth and yarn, their blankets and rugs that cattle shows singled out for recognition between 1812 and the early 1830’s.” Kelly went on to say that the women’s exhibits of home manufactured goods “commanded respect” because of their importance.⁸⁹ Women started working together in sewing circles. Mark Mastromarino points out that “Pittsfield women established two benevolent associations before 1821, whose charity was applied to religious purposes.” He went on to say that, “The eighteen to twenty members of Pittsfield’s Young Ladies’ Benevolent Society met weekly to labor together with their needles, raising over one hundred dollars in one year.”⁹⁰

After spending nearly a decade in Massachusetts, Watson packed up and returned to his previous residence in Albany in February, 1816. “All those rural scenes which had delighted me – all my flocks and herds, which I had reared with infinite care for nearly nine years. In the midst of promoting agricultural improvements and domestic industry, I returned to resume the dull and monotonous scenes of a city life.”⁹¹ But Watson continued to work with agriculture

⁸⁸ Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *The Age of Homespun: Objects and Stories in the Creation of an American Myth*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), 280-281.

⁸⁹ Catherine E. Kelly, “The Consummation of Rural Prosperity and Happiness: New England Agricultural Fairs and the Construction of Class and Gender, 1810-1860,” *American Quarterly* 49, no. 3 (September, 1997): 580-581.

⁹⁰ Mark A. Mastromarino, “Fair Visions: Elkanah Watson (1758-1842) and the Modern American Agricultural Fair,” (PhD diss., College of William & Mary, 2002), 267.

⁹¹ Winslow C. Watson and Elkanah Watson, “Men and Times of the Revolution; or, Memoirs of Elkanah Watson, including journals of travels in Europe and America, from 1777 to 1842, with his correspondence with public men and reminiscences and incidents of the revolution,” (New York: Dana and Company, 1856), 386.

assisting with the starting of societies in New York most notably in Otsego County. He traveled extensively in his former and now current home state promoting his Berkshire Plan. He was invited back to Pittsfield shortly after he left to address the society one more time. Even though he dedicated several years of his life and a sum of his own money to start the venture of the agricultural society, he humbly applauded the efforts that continued after his departure. Watson, seemingly bequeathed all of the work that he had done to get the Berkshire Agricultural Society running to the residents of Pittsfield. In his return address he said, “Your measures, my friends, (with whom I have been so long accustomed to act in this pleasing and useful employment,) are considered by the American nation, not as localized, or identified with the immediate interests of Pittsfield, or Berkshire—or Massachusetts. No, gentlemen I can say with pride, and pleasure, the eyes of America are fixed on your patriotic course.”⁹²

What makes this interesting is Watson refers to the society as “your” society when speaking to the people. For someone who has been accused of having a large ego that has been the driving force behind some of his ideas, he gave credit to the people of Pittsfield for continuing what he started. Word of these new agricultural societies spread westward into New York as groups started to emulate and adopt Watson’s “Berkshire Plan.” In Otsego County, Watson created the first agricultural society. Mirroring the first “Fair” or “Cattle Show” in Pittsfield, the Gentleman of Otsego held their own event in October, 1817. With a society that was “in its infancy—but promises much,” the event had exhibits and premiums like its predecessors, concluding with speeches from General Morris and Elkanah Watson that were

⁹² Elkanah Watson, *History of Agricultural Societies, on the Modern Berkshire System*, (Albany: Packard and Van Beathuysen Printers, 1829), 139.

“patriotic and pertinent” in nature. The hope was to provide an understanding into the “importance” and “usefulness” of agricultural societies, in the form of a yearly event.⁹³

Watson spent the following months lobbying for legislation that promoted agriculture in New York. Although Watson was accused of seeking “salary for himself and family,” the New York legislature nevertheless passed a comprehensive agricultural law that granted a total of ten thousand dollars in annual grants to county societies for fair premiums. The point of the money was to award farmers for their agricultural advancements as well as manufacturing improvements. Whoever was awarded a premium had to make a “full description of the methods that he had employed in producing it and deliver this description to the president of the society.”⁹⁴

While agricultural progress marched west, financial crisis settled over the East. Three “interrelated disasters” precipitated the Panic of 1819 in the wake of the War of 1812. There was a decline in manufactured goods in this country once trading resumed between the United States and Britain forcing competition. Banks increased the amount of “paper money,” and as David Lehman explained, there was a decline in agricultural exports to Europe, which “lowered prices for [these] key exports by one-half to two-thirds between January and July 1819.”⁹⁵ This episode was extremely difficult on the farmers of the country as they relied on their goods to survive. “Each businessman in the commercial chain was trying to save himself. At the end of the chain, the little people, the farmers and workers, the consumers, had less recourse when *their* debts were called in. They lost their mortgaged homes and farms. As their demands for goods and

⁹³ Dover & Harper, “Agriculture and Manufactures,” *The Franklin Repository*. November 11, 1817. Accessed February 28, 2020. <https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/552026685/?terms=otsego%2Bcounty%2Bfair&pqid=WF4MIJSpSv280TJYYPYZfw:393000:657499312>

⁹⁴L.H. Bailey, *Cyclopedia of American Agriculture: A Popular Survey of Agricultural Conditions, Practices and Ideals in the United States and Canada*, (New York: McMillan Company, 1917), 387.

⁹⁵ David Lehman, “The Most Disastrous and Never-to-Be-Forgotten Year: The Panic of 1819 in Philadelphia,” *Pennsylvania Legacies* 11, no. 1 (May, 2011): 7.

services shriveled, those who sold to them went bankrupt.”⁹⁶ This could have been the reason why so many agricultural societies were popping up after Watson’s departure from Pittsfield because farmers were “intrigued by agricultural societies that promised a way out of the abyss.”⁹⁷ Perhaps since they had been established under the Berkshire Plan that focused on self-sufficiency and homegrown goods, the farms wouldn’t need to rely on outside sources.

Watson traveled once again throughout New York and points farther west in Michigan where he was visiting family. When he first arrived in Detroit in 1818, as he did with every new place he had visited, he had “dreams of prosperity the future would bring, especially when suitable harbors and canals had been built. The town was beautifully laid out, but not yet built beyond a beginning.”⁹⁸ Watson was still working tirelessly to start more agricultural societies under his new plan and removing them from the older plans that he deemed “defective.” During the economic crisis in 1819, societies in Maryland had held “Cattle shows and fairs that featured fine animals of every sort, most creditable displays of household fabrics, [and] various useful implements of husbandry.”⁹⁹ Watson believed that Michigan had similar success following the Berkshire Plan as Massachusetts and New York had. Michigan was “blessed with a luxuriant soil and with the highest conveniences of water intercourse ... what may not Michigan aspire to become?” Watson knew that, “Agricultural societies would shed a most powerful and benign influence upon the progress and development of this region. The presence of a new and different

⁹⁶ Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 143.

⁹⁷ Lawrence A. Peskin, *Manufacturing Revolution: The Intellectual Origins of Early American Industry*, (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 178.

⁹⁸ Jeremy Bangs, *The Travels of Elkanah Watson: An American Businessman in the Revolutionary War, in 1780’s Europe and in the Formative Decades of the United States*, (North Carolina, McFarland & Co, 2015), 187.

⁹⁹ Lawrence A. Peskin, *Manufacturing Revolution: The Intellectual Origins of Early American Industry*, (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 178

class of farmers, more enlightened, more industrious and progressive, would at once give to it a new aspect.”¹⁰⁰

Ever sanguine and deeply persistent, Elkanah Watson saw promise in any new place to which he traveled. Most of the cities he visited were in a state of exhaustion, but he saw through it and recognized its potential. So is the case of his travels into Canada for the first time. He ventured into St. John, New Brunswick via the St. Lawrence River and noticed it “to be in a decaying condition, and the country through which I passed in a low state of cultivation, with it is said, a depressed population, although the land seems susceptible of great improvement and productiveness.”¹⁰¹

Heart and Hand Shall Move Together

Whether he was jotting down notes in his journal, writing pamphlets to be published, submitting articles to the local newspapers under a pseudonym, or preaching from a pulpit at the conclusion of a cattle show or an agricultural society meeting, Elkanah Watson talked a great deal about independence. But what did he seek independence from or for? His ideas changed over time but he always sought true and total independence from all foreign assistance, not just independence from the stronghold of the British Empire.

The term “independence” or “independent” has taken on a many meanings between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. From the early seventeenth century, those who arrived to the new land sought independence in the form of land ownership. Even though the condition of the leadership in which the new colonists lived might not have been desirable, they “grudgingly

¹⁰⁰ Winslow C. Watson and Elkanah Watson, “Men and Times of the Revolution; or, Memoirs of Elkanah Watson, including journals of travels in Europe and America, from 1777 to 1842, with his correspondence with public men and reminiscences and incidents of the revolution,” (New York: Dana and Company, 1856), 430.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid*, 438.

accepted such leaders so long as prosperity prevailed ... The ownership of productive land endowed men with the coveted condition of “independence,” free at last from the dictates of a master.”¹⁰² The colonists wanted to be in charge of their own land, and instead of working for someone else, they wanted to have people working for them. They were able to have family members working for them on their land or perhaps a shop if they owned one. Alan Taylor uses the term “independent competency” when talking about New England families, and describes it as, “owning enough property” and a “sufficiency of worldly goods” which meant food, clothing, and shelter with enough to “transmit this standard of living to many children.”¹⁰³ It took time for the earliest definition of independence to change amongst the colonists.

The focus of independence based on land ownership to independence from the grip of British rule changed when tensions started to rise again. Even though the upper echelon had benefitted from the established government in the colonies, they were “compelled to confront issues of sovereignty in ways that imparted new, universalistic meaning to an inherited language of rights and liberties ... Americans who would have been imperialists in any case became Revolutionaries first.”¹⁰⁴

One of the biggest cries for independence came from Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* pamphlet that was published in January of 1776. It was directed mainly to the common people and was written in “direct and forceful prose.” He was looking for “immediate independence, a union of thirteen colonies, and republican governments for those states.”¹⁰⁵ It wasn’t something that everyone was behind and it actually provoked fear based on the fact that lives were going to

¹⁰² Alan Taylor, *American Colonies: The Settling of North America*, (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2001), 139.

¹⁰³ *Ibid*, 172.

¹⁰⁴ Fred Anderson, *Crucible of War: The Seven Years’ War and the Fate of Empire in British North America, 1754-1766*, (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2000), 745.

¹⁰⁵ Alan Taylor, *American Revolutions: A Continental History, 1750-1804*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2016), 155-157.

be lost. They also knew from the position they were in, that they were on their own and wouldn't receive any foreign assistance and "it is not a choice then but a necessity that calls for Independence, as the only means by which foreign alliances can be obtained" Richard Henry Lee of Virginia said.¹⁰⁶ Things moved from the earlier idea of independence to this version of rousing the population into a fight for purpose instead of economic prosperity for the time being. It took this declaration to shift some and their thoughts, like Joseph Barton of Delaware who said "I could hardly own the King and fight against him at the same time, but now these matters are cleared up. Heart and hand shall move together."¹⁰⁷ It seems that Barton understood the importance of America becoming independent and based on that understanding, he had to sever the relationship he had with the crown for the good of the cause. Elkanah Watson's ideas were more about economic independence and the ability for the country to self-sustain rather than rely on foreign assistance.

In 1779, still under the apprenticeship of John Brown, Elkanah Watson was sent by Brown to France to look after their business interests. Those days earlier in his life laid the foundation of most of his beliefs and, "provide[d] an ideological underpinning to all of Watson's future achievements, and brought him into contact with the leaders that would win American Independence from Great Britain, establish a new national republic, and inspire emulation."¹⁰⁸ Once his apprenticeship was over that same year, Watson experienced his own first version of what independence really was. He went into business on his own terms and tried his hand at improving the new nation. Some of his ideas worked and some didn't, but his efforts were fueled by his passion and belief in the new United States.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*, 155-157

¹⁰⁷ Don Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence: Military Attitudes, Policies and Practice, 1763-1789*, (United Kingdom: Indiana University Press, 1977), 116.

¹⁰⁸ Mark A. Mastromarino, "Fair Visions: Elkanah Watson (1758-1842) and the Modern American Agricultural Fair," (PhD diss., College of William & Mary, 2002), 48.

Young men still had a difficult time obtaining their independence from their families even though they had been preparing for it. Robert Gross points out that “this could be a frustrating time in a young man’s life, when he pressed for independence although his family and society said to wait, and it was bound to cause at least occasional friction between fathers and sons,” referring to the promise of land when they married.¹⁰⁹ Although there was no promise of land or ownership of anything, Elkanah Watson’s view on independence for women came from their ability to manufacture their own goods and not have to rely on the foreign “gewgaws” or worthless objects. That was the premise for the inclusion of women into the agricultural societies of the early nineteenth century.¹¹⁰

Before Watson’s address, there was one prominent lady of the times that pleaded to her husband to include women in the Declaration of Independence. In a letter she wrote to John Adams on March 31, 1776, Abigail Adams wrote “I desire you would Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favourable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the Husbands.” She said, “Remember all Men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the Ladies we are determined to foment a Rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice, or Representation.”¹¹¹ Although John Adams allegedly shrugged off her comments, maybe his later-in-life friend Elkanah Watson was aware of how Abigail Adams felt and that’s why he wanted to include women.

¹⁰⁹ Robert A. Gross, *The Minutemen and Their World*. (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1976), 75.

¹¹⁰ Elkanah Watson, *History of Agricultural Societies, on the Modern Berkshire System*. (Albany: Packard and Van Beathuysen Printers, 1829), 196.

¹¹¹ “Abigail Adams to John Adams, 31 March 1776,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, accessed September 29, 2019, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/04-01-02-0241>. [Original source: *The Adams Papers*, Adams Family Correspondence, vol. 1, *December 1761–May 1776*, ed. Lyman H. Butterfield. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963, pp. 369–371.]

Conclusion

Elkanah Watson saw great potential in the land that he loved. He spent most of his life forging a new American definition of progress. It was that vision that led Watson on many adventures that spanned the globe when travel was difficult and the dangers of the unknown were many. Some of his inspiration came during time spent with people like George Washington and Benjamin Franklin, plus his acquaintances with other prominent figures, such as Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and Robert Livingston. All that he learned he used in his various endeavors in an attempt to make where he lived the best possible version of itself. Where he succeeded in his advancements of a canal system, better agricultural practices, town ownership, he failed at getting or keeping recognition for his efforts. His progressive ideas came too early for most people, but that never deterred him from trying. Successes outnumbered failures in his life and he left the country in a better place from the time he entered it, to the time of his death.

Watson has received little attention as an Enlightenment figure. But he deserves a place among his peers including Benjamin Franklin, James Madison, or even John Adams. Blending “Jeffersonian” and “Hamiltonian” ideals, Watson was once an agricultural experimenter and an industrial entrepreneur, a man who sought to grandee status but insisted on social leveling, and gender equality. In turn, Watson embodied many ideas of the Enlightenment.¹¹²

Watson was apolitical and felt that the disputes between the political parties had the potential to halt progress, which is why he spoke to his agricultural societies with the idea for them to leave their affiliations behind and work together for the good of the country. For that he

¹¹² Shane Ralston, “American Enlightenment Thought.” Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: A Peer-Reviewed Academic Resource <https://www.iep.utm.edu/amer-enl/> (Accessed March 11, 2020).

was meshing together the thought of liberalism and republicanism. Watson was a proponent of scientific progress. All of his work with the agricultural societies was keeping with the spirit of the Enlightenment. From the introduction of his Merino Sheep, to the different type of pigs that he brought to Pittsfield, to the higher quality of oxen, to experimenting with different types of seeds from Europe, was all in the name of scientific progress.

Watson's formidable teenage years were full of action and adventure while working as John Brown's apprentice in Providence, Rhode Island. The notes he kept while traveling on the sensitive mission from Providence to Charleston, turned into one of the first travel guidebooks during the Revolutionary War period, even though it was published by his son Winston Cossoul Watson 80 years after it was written.

Watson was called upon for more important duties after his return to Providence. He was trusted to carry dispatches to France and deliver them to Benjamin Franklin during and towards the end of the Revolutionary War. Working alongside Franklin, Watson had an affinity for being around such important people that he tried to emulate them later on in life. As much as Franklin wanted to be remembered and famous, Elkanah Watson wanted the same. Any opportunity Watson had to learn something new he took it. Using his earlier travels as a guide he kept the same types of notes, minus the land renderings, on his travels through Europe including his time spent in Holland. Gaining an understanding into their canal system as well as their roads, Watson took that information back with him when he returned to Albany.

Watson put his newly found improvement ideas into action before the population was ready for them. He was disliked by the Dutch community. At one point he was even chased down the street by two women who were able to figure out that he was the American that wrote

about their country in the unauthorized publishing of his tour of Holland.¹¹³ Watson's writing didn't sit well with those who immigrated to America, based on the class-conscious description in the pamphlet. He, however, loved the land and wrote positively about it. He spent his days in Albany not only trying to improve the condition by adding streetlamps, paving roads, and drainage, but he wanted to make it the grandest city in the country. Watson believed in the city's potential and invested his time and money into it. Even though Albany never lived up to what Watson had hoped, the city has played an important role.

Elkanah Watson wanted to be remembered most for the time he spent in Pittsfield. It was the thing that he wanted people to remember about him the most. That is the reason for the epitaph on his tombstone where he is laid to rest. Out of all of the things he could have had written on there about himself, he chose "The Father of The Berkshire Agricultural Society" and underneath that it reads "May generations yet unborn learn by his example to love their country." Not many people get to choose how they are remembered, but that is one of the things that makes Elkanah Watson interesting. He not only chose what he wanted to be remembered for, he had it carved in stone for everyone to see.

Besides the creation of the agricultural society he is known for being the father of the county fair. That might not have been his intentions when he rounded up the locals that one afternoon at Park Square, but it is what it turned into. Watson inserted his passion for farming and the love of his country and turned it into an American institution. He rallied local farmers to show their animals and handicrafts. The idea of awarding them with premiums for the best livestock or the best farm wasn't original but it is something that still continues to this day. The focus of the fair has changed but the root of its humble beginnings remains.

¹¹³ Winslow C. Watson and Elkanah Watson, "Men and Times of the Revolution; or, Memoirs of Elkanah Watson, including journals of travels in Europe and America, from 1777 to 1842, with his correspondence with public men and reminiscences and incidents of the revolution," (New York: Dana and Company, 1856), 274.

The role of women during Watson's time in Pittsfield changed from their expected role prior to his arrival. Even though they continued doing the same types of things as far as manufacturing home goods, he gave them more of a feeling of importance. His special "Cloth Show" put women and their craft on public display, which was new for that time period. Women weren't particularly fond of the attention for doing things they did every day, but Watson made sure to give them the deserving recognition. One of Watson's greatest frustrations came during one of the first "Cloth Shows" when the women didn't show up to the event that he was holding for them. His agitation led to him having his wife go door to door to round everyone up to bring them to the event. The women who were going to receive the award or premium for their work were made to stand to be recognized and it was a very uncomfortable ordeal for them. Within the first couple of shows, the women accepted this newer role with appreciation.

With the new Berkshire Plan for agricultural societies, cattle and cloth shows, and overall respect for the land they lived in place, Watson headed back to Albany and then to Port Kent on Lake Champlain to live out the remainder of his days. Watson spent his entire life researching ways to improve the quality of life for the people of the United States while continuing to forge his new definition of progress. His goal was to garner and maintain independence from foreign assistance and in doing so led to the work on the canal system, a banking system, turnpikes, and most notably the establishment of a new agricultural society that caught on throughout the country. He was a true believer in the United States did all that he could to prove it.

By no fault of his own, Elkanah Watson's work existed during the wrong time period. He was born too late to be considered a founding father and he was born too early to be considered a progressive like many of his ideas. However Watson forged a new American

definition of progress, one that championed scientific experimentation, embraced social equality, and was inextricably tied to improving the land.

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