

Children of the Patriarch: Freeborn⁴ Watson

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This article is part of a larger family history, **The WATSON Family of West Greenwich, Rhode Island**, which can be found via [this link](#).

A branch of the Watson family of Rhode Island settled in West Greenwich and lived there for nearly one hundred years. The patriarch of this branch was Samuel, designated #7 in *The American Family of John Watson of the Narragansett Country, Rhode Island*. Samuel was the grandson of John Watson, and the son of Samuel² and 1st wife Mercy (Helme) Watson. His line of descent as a 3rd-generation Watson is rendered Samuel³ (Samuel², John¹).

Freeborn⁴ Watson, son of the Patriarch

Freeborn⁴ WATSON (Samuel³, Samuel², John¹) was born most likely in Rhode Island. He died sometime after late July 1818 – the time when his brother Silas⁴ Watson, drawing up his will, mentioned Freeborn. The dates of Freeborn's birth and death are unknown.

Freeborn Watson is first of record in Rhode Island in 1762, the year in which he was mentioned in his brother Hazard's will, along with his parents and siblings. Freeborn's name next appears in 1776 in the records of the town of West Greenwich.

Freeborn⁴ Watson in the Revolutionary War

On February 24, 1776, the following item was entered in the West Greenwich town council records:

In compliance to an act of the General Assembly for equipping the inhabitants of the Colony, it is resolved by this Council that the following persons are unable to equip themselves whose Names are as follows:

... THIRD COMPANY ... Freburn Watson

Every man in the colony was expected to equip himself with at least one good firearm to aid the war effort. Freeborn Watson (whose given name got spelled in a variety of ways) apparently didn't have a gun.

West Greenwich town council records for the last Saturday of January 1777 provide a lengthy list of those "unable to equip themselves with firearms and other acoutrements." Notations for the Third Company include the name Freeborn Watson.

In 1777, Freeborn's brother Samuel Jr. served a month as a substitute for him in the Rhode Island state troops.

Freeborn's name appears in West Greenwich town council records only once after January 1777. We view that final entry, made on September 3, 1808, as likely erroneous, knowing what we do about his later years. The absence of Freeborn's name in the Rhode Island 1777 military census, taken between March and April of that year, suggests that Freeborn left West Greenwich between January and March of 1777, when he probably headed for the New York-Vermont border area where his brother Silas lived.

Was Freeborn⁴ Watson a Tory?

Freeborn Watson married Sarah WILCOX (also spelled *WILLCOX*). Sarah was born circa 1762, possibly in Westerly, Rhode Island, the daughter and firstborn child of Hazard Wilcox Sr. and his wife, who *may have been* Eunice Babcock. Sarah's father was a well-known Tory who settled in New York, very near the town of Bennington, VT. Some of his children later testified, in their petitions for land in Canada, that the Revolutionary War "Battle of Bennington" was fought on land Hazard Wilcox Sr. owned there.

Various Wilcox researchers place the marriage of Sarah Wilcox and Freeborn Watson in the year 1781 or 1782, though no one specifies where this wedding happened. Given that Freeborn disappears from West Greenwich, RI, town records after 1777 and reappears in Pownal, VT, town records in 1785, there is a gap of eight years during which he could have been anywhere.

Did Freeborn himself have Loyalist leanings? Quite likely. His marrying into the family of a Tory who died fighting for King George III against the Patriot rebels points strongly to that possibility. Documents from West Greenwich, RI, record Freeborn's successful avoidance of conscription into the Patriot cause. We wonder if Freeborn's brother offered to do that month of substitute service in the state troops just to keep him out of trouble.

That Freeborn and Sarah (Wilcox) Watson chose to live in post-war Vermont suggests that the victorious Patriot population was willing to let bygones be bygones – especially as returning Tories boosted Vermont's population toward statehood status.

Perhaps most tellingly, Freeborn and Sarah left Vermont after 1809 to live in Upper Canada. Freeborn ended his days among *United Empire Loyalists* – most of them the children of men who fought on the side of the Crown during the American Revolution, including his wife and three of her siblings.

We can't help but think about Freeborn and Silas Watson and their father Samuel³ (the patriarch) all living in Pownal, VT, after the war. Samuel³ Watson served King George II in the Old French and Indian War. Silas served the Patriot cause against King George III. Freeborn avoided military service and married into the family of a flaming Tory. The conversations among these three Watson men must have been interesting. We wish we knew where the patriarch's sympathies lay during the war for independence from Great Britain.

Freeborn⁴ Watson in Pownal, Vermont

On May 30, 1785, Freeborn Watson “of Pownall” purchased from Isaac Danks of Little White Creek, Cambridge District, Albany county, NY, “about twenty acres” of land lying in Pownal, for the sum of £6. This deed tells us not only that Freeborn was already residing in Pownal; he was one of the abutters (Pownal land evidence, 2:334).

Over the next twenty-four years, Freeborn continued to buy and sell land. Pownal land evidence shows that Freeborn Watson's land holdings bordered the town of Bennington to the north; that he lived next door, more or less, to his brother Silas; and that he signed his name by making an X.

In February 1786 Freeborn purchased an unspecified number of acres from Anthony Goff of Little White Creek, NY (2:382). In April 1788 he bought twenty acres from Minajah Bennett (3:55) and, in January 1789, ten acres from Stephen Harrington (3:65). In 1788 he deeded land to John Stanton (3:67) and, in 1789, to Silas Moon (3:66). By 1792 Freeborn was selling land “with appurtenances” to Silas Watson, though it couldn't have been much; the transaction involved £3 (4:159). In September 1802, Freeborn paid \$135 to Jonathan Wentworth of the town of Bennington for forty-five acres *in Bennington* (6:234). This land likely was very close to the Pownal town line.

By the end of 1809, Freeborn was liquidating his Pownal land holdings, likely in anticipation of moving to Canada.

On December 14, 1809, Freeborn Watson sold three acres to his brother Silas for \$30 (7:97). Two days later, on December 16th, Freeborn sold “the farm I now live on” – forty-five acres of land in Pownal, for \$800 – to Lodowick Stanton of Pownal (7:106).

On the day he sold his farm to Lodowick Stanton, Freeborn Watson appeared before Justice of the Peace Jesse Blackinton to acknowledge that deed. This likely was the final time Freeborn was “of record” in Pownal. He and his family do not show up in the US census record for 1810 or in any subsequent census year.

Questionable Sightings

Freeborn Watson’s name appears in two other records that don’t exactly shed light on his whereabouts or doings.

First, a West Greenwich town council record (Vol. 5) for September 3, 1808, mentions Freeborn Watson in the District 10 work crew for town road repairs. We have seen the original record in the West Greenwich Town Hall and can attest to its veracity. We also suspect that the writer may have meant to write Freeborn Letson. Both Ephraim and Freeborn Letson appear on the same page in the 1810 federal census for West Greenwich. Ephraim, who may have been Freeborn Letson’s father, is listed for the District 10 road crew also. We have absolutely no reason to believe that Freeborn Watson returned to West Greenwich to live and work. Therefore we view this town council record with a healthy dose of skepticism.

Second, there is an item in *Nailer Tom’s Diary* for November 17, 1815, mentioning Freeborn Watson. The entry for that date, on page 455 of the published version of this diary, reads thus (**emphasis** is ours):

Joseph Taylor workt here. I workt in the Shop: Lett George ammons have one bushel of Corn on James Wormsley’s account. Finisht Puling Turnips. Samul Wilbur **Freburn Watson** and Daniel R Tiffit all paid me what thay owed me, so we are Eavan. no receipts past.

Thomas B. Hazard (1756-1845), called “Nailer Tom” (he made nails) to distinguish him from numerous other (related) men named Thomas Hazard, lived in Kingstown, Rhode Island. Nailer Tom’s diary entry could be a brief glimpse of the patriarch’s son Freeborn⁴ Watson. Why Freeborn might have been in Rhode Island in 1815, we couldn’t tell you. But if he was, we are pleased to know that he made good on his debts.

Children of Freeborn⁴ and Sarah (Wilcox) Watson

Sarah (Wilcox) Watson’s 1811 petition for a land grant in Upper Canada includes a statement about her offspring (*emphasis* is ours): “Your Petitioner ... has lived to be *the mother of five children.*” (More on Sarah’s petition later.)

The 1790 census for Pownal – which actually was taken on April 4, 1791, a month after Vermont achieved statehood – shows Freeborn’s household as having five people: A male and a female both over the age of 16 (Freeborn and Sarah) and three males under the age of 16.

By 1800 this household had increased to six people: one male aged 45 and over (Freeborn); one female aged 26 to 44 (Sarah); one male aged 16 to 25; one male aged 10 to 15; and two males under age 10.

These census accounts of Freeborn’s household reflect the likelihood that he and Sarah had three or four sons. One of those young males possibly was Sarah’s youngest brother, Hazard Wilcox Jr., born late in 1775. If Sarah and Freeborn had daughters, they didn’t make it into the census records.

Silas Watson’s will mentions a nephew named **William Watson**. We may reasonably assume that William was Freeborn and Sarah’s child. Given that Sarah had a brother named William, likely she named her son after him.

Freeborn and Sarah Watson named one of their sons Hazard, in tribute to Sarah’s younger brother and their late father; and to Freeborn’s long-deceased brother. We find **Hazard Watson**’s name in Canadian land records, associated with William Wilcox, Sarah (Wilcox) Watson’s brother.

William Wilcox was “of Ernest Town in the incorporated Counties of Lenox and Addington in the Midland District and Province of Upper Canada.” For a mere five shillings and “in further consideration of his good will & love & affection to *his nephew the said Hassard Watson*” (also of Ernest Town), William sold to Hazard 100 acres of land in the township of South Crosby in the county of Leeds, district of Johnstown, province of Upper Canada.

A witness to the above land transaction was a man named **Samuel Watson**, also of Ernest Town. What are the odds that Samuel was Hazard’s brother? Pretty good, we’d think, considering how this family seems to have moved en masse to the same place. It’s easy to imagine Freeborn Watson naming one of his sons for his father.

Hazard Watson is mentioned as an abutter to property in the town of Bennington sold by Silas Watson to Stutely M. Watson in 1813 (Pownal, 7:305). Hazard was “of Pownal” when he bought seven acres of land in Bennington from Joseph Burleson in December 1806 (Bennington, 7:106).

Guardianship of Hazard Wilcox Jr.

Freeborn Watson’s name appears in Bennington, VT, district probate records regarding the guardianship of his brother-in-law, Hazard Wilcox Jr. (Vol. 1, pp. 183; 294; and 298), described as follows (**emphasis** is ours):

On **14 June 1787**, Paul Gardner executed a bond of £500 for “his faithful discharge of guardian unto Hazzard Wilcox minor and son of Hazzard Wilcox late of Walloomschoick in the state of New York deceased.” (1:294)

On **5 October 1789**, Thomas Jewet Esqr and **Freeborn Watson** executed a bond of £500 for Jewet’s “faithful discharge of office of guardian to Hazard Wilcox son & minor to Hazard Wilcox late of White Creek in York State deceased.” (1:183)

On **December 15, 1789**, Paul Gardner “as guardian formerly to Hazard Wilcox minor delivered over to Thomas Jewet Esqr. present guardian to said minor two notes the properties of said minor the one being

against Benj. Cole of Shaftsbury of the sum of eighteen pounds fifteen shillings...and one of fourteen shillings against **Freeborn Watson** of (Pownal)...being the whole of the property of said minor.” (1:298)

Wilcox researchers give Hazard Wilcox Jr.’s date of birth as December 25, 1775. We believe this transition from one guardian to another reflects the fact that, as he approached his fourteenth birthday in 1789, Hazard Jr. exercised his right to choose his own guardian. Hence, Paul Gardner transferred young Hazard’s assets, such as they were, to Thomas Jewett, the new guardian. (We hope that Freeborn paid off his note for fourteen shillings to his young brother-in-law.)

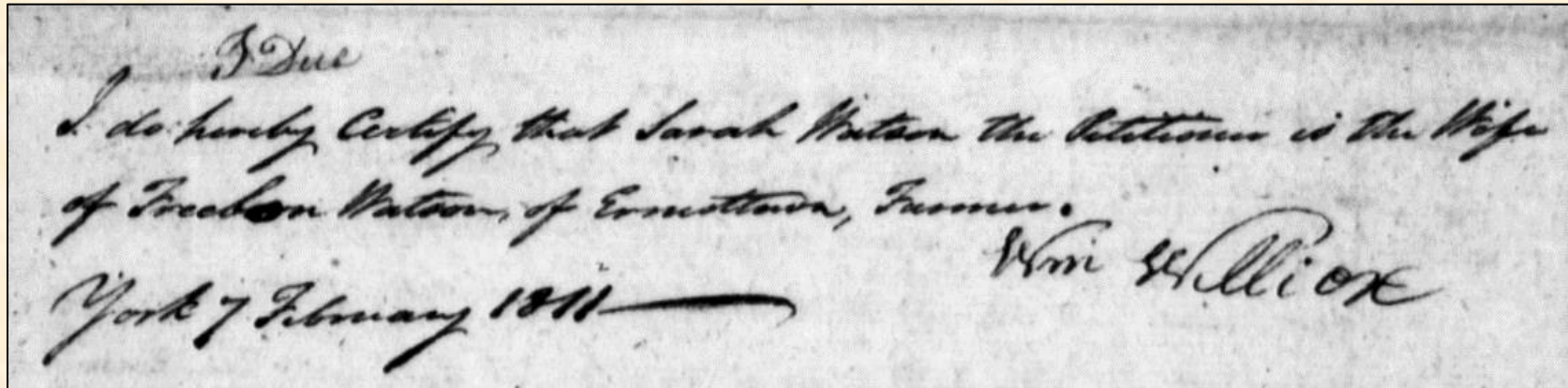
The choice of Thomas Jewett is interesting, in that he is named as an abutter in Freeborn Watson’s 1786 purchase of land from Anthony Goff of Little White Creek. As Justice of the Peace, Thomas Jewett was the official of record on that 1786 deed, too. If Hazard Wilcox Jr. lived with his sister Sarah and brother-in-law Freeborn, Thomas Jewett might have been known to him as a neighbor.

Removal to Canada

In December 1810, Sabrah (Wilcox) (Wright) Purdy – already living in Upper Canada – petitioned for a grant of land there. In Sabrah’s petition (a transcription of which can be found at [this web page](#)), she noted that her sister Sarah Watson and her brother William lived in Ernest Town (in Upper Canada), while her brother Hazard resided in Loughborough (also in Upper Canada).

Freeborn Watson’s wife Sarah submitted her petition for land in Upper Canada on January 30, 1811. At that time she was “of Ernest Town, in the Midland District.” The language of Sarah’s petition echoes the petitions submitted by others in her family – describing herself as the daughter of Captain Hazard Wilcox, deceased” and chronicling her martyred father’s service to the Crown during the American Revolution.

Sarah's brother William attested to Sarah's statements, writing "I do hereby certify that Sarah Watson the Petitioner is the Wife of Freeborn Watson of Ernest Town, farmer."



I Do
I do hereby Certify, that Sarah Watson the Petitioner is the Wife
of Freeborn Watson, of Ernesttown, Farmer.
York 7 February 1811
Wm Wilcox

That witness statement by William Wilcox allows us to know that Freeborn Watson did, indeed, remove to Canada with his wife; and that he was alive as of the date of William's declaration, February 7, 1811.

A web page at Geni.com [containing extensive Wilcox research](#) provides a timeline for the Wilcox siblings (*via the Overview tab, near the bottom of the page*). It includes an item saying that Sarah (Wilcox) Watson was "granted two hundred acres in Cartwright Township, Con 9, Lot 22 (near present-day Lindsay, Ontario)" in October 1816.

We assume that Freeborn and Sarah lived out the remainder of their days in Upper Canada.

Freeborn Watson was mentioned in his brother Silas's will, which was drawn up in 1818. He probably wasn't alive by the time Silas's will was proved in early 1827, since he was not mentioned in subsequent probate documents. (Neither was William Watson.)

Sarah was a widow when she died on July 7, 1832, in Whitby, Ontario, Canada, "in the 70th year of her age." Her obituary notice was printed in the *Christian Guardian* newspaper on August 8th of that year. It read:

“On the 7th of July last, Widow Sarah Watson of Whitby, a member of the Methodist Episcopal Church, in the 70th year of her age: — Sister Watson for many years professed the religion of Christ, she belonged to the Baptist Church about 20 years, after which (about 16 years since) she saw cause to join the Methodist Society in which she remained a faithful member until her death; manifesting by her daily walk that she possessed the religion she professed. A short time before her death she manifested a strong confidence of her acceptance with God, and no doubt she entered into that rest prepared for all that truly love him. — ‘Blessed are the dead that die in the Lord.’”

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Summary

Freeborn⁴ Watson, son of Samuel³ Watson, was born most likely in Rhode Island. He lived in West Greenwich, Kent county, RI, before removing to Pownal, Bennington county, Vermont, probably in the early years of the American Revolution.

Freeborn married Sarah WILCOX, the daughter of Hazard Wilcox Sr. They had five children. We have found names for three men who likely were their sons – William, Hazard, and Samuel.

After December 1809, Freeborn and Sarah removed to Ernest Town, Midland District, Upper Canada, which is where they were living when Sarah petitioned, in 1811, for a land grant on the basis of her Loyalist father’s service during the American Revolution.

Freeborn Watson died sometime after late July 1818, probably in Canada. Sarah (Wilcox) Watson died a widow in Whitby, Ontario, Canada, on July 7, 1832, “in the 70th year of her age.”

Sources for Canadian Records

Sarah (Wilcox) Watson’s petition for a land grant in Upper Canada, dated 30 January 1811:

Upper Canada Land Petitions “W” bundle 10, 1811-1816 (RG 1, L 3, Vol. 526), found at *Library and Archives Canada* website (English language home page: <https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/Pages/home.aspx>)

Land Petitions of Upper Canada, 1763-1865:

<https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/land/land-petitions-upper-canada-1763-1865/Pages/List.aspx?Surname=Wilcox&GivenName=Sarah&Place=Ernestown&>

Page where microfilm series c-2952 begins:

<https://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/microform-digitization/006003-119.01-e.php?&q2=29&q3=2652&interval=50&sk=301&tt=1231&sqn=1&&PHPSESSID=npfo6qij0n1rpue06msk2mqnj1>

Page where Sarah (Willcox) Watson’s petition begins:

<https://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/microform-digitization/006003-119.01-e.php?PHPSESSID=npfo6qij0n1rpue06msk2mqnj1&sqn=1081&q2=29&q3=2652&tt=1231>

William Wilcox’s sale of 100 acres of land (“indenture”) in South Crosby, Leeds County, Johnstown District, Upper Canada, to his nephew Hassard [Hazard] Watson, dated 28 September 1811 and registered 12 September 1812:

Land records of Leeds County/Johnstown District, 1797-1913

Johnstown District (v. D-E) 1807-1812

Leeds County deeds, Book E; **Memorial No. 376** on document pages 368-369

<https://www.familysearch.org/>

Family History Library film # 008129914

Images begin here: <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q9M-CSVG-L9DR-M?i=551&cat=484032>

NOTE: Memorial No. 375, immediately preceding the above, records the sale of 200 acres of land in South Crosby, Leeds County, by William & Delilah Lee of Ernest Town to Hassard Watson of Ernest Town on 19 August 1811 (registered on the same day as the above, 12 September 1812). One of the witnesses to this particular transaction was Samuel Watson, yeoman, of Ernest Town.

The image of Sarah (Wilcox) Watson's obituary was excerpted from the *Christian Guardian* newspaper, York, Ontario, Vol. III, No. 39; Death notices, page 3 of 4.

We wish to express our thanks to researcher and family historian Alan Wilcox. Over a number of years, Alan has generously shared with us his research as it overlapped into Watson family history – much of it involving land evidence. There is nothing like a batch of old deed images to gladden our heart. And Alan's thoughtful and thorough analyses have never failed to impress us. A wonderful "genealogy friend," indeed!

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