

HAMILTON COUNTY PIONEERS - THE WATKINS FAMILY

by John Wilson

posted February 5, 2009

http://www.chattanooga.com/articles/article_144062.asp

Richard Levens Watkins had little schooling and the family had few resources, but by the time of the Civil War he had already proven himself a successful businessman. During the war, he was a gallant soldier as well.

Born in 1836 in Jefferson County, Tenn., he was the youngest in a large family. When he was only nine months old, his father, Richard Watkins, died. They moved to the farm of his mother's father in Knox County. Then, when he was 10, Richard L. Watkins went into Knoxville to clerk at a drug store on Gay Street. In the early 1850s, Watkins made his way to Chattanooga on the steamer Loudon. He did not have the money to pay his passage, but Captain J.L. Doss agreed that he could pay later. Watkins repaid the fare after getting work in Chattanooga. He apprenticed under an older brother, Arthur P. Watkins, as a tinner and coppersmith. They occupied an old brick building at the corner of Fifth and Market. Several years before the war, the Watkins Brothers Hardware opened at this location. Henry Watkins, another older brother, was also involved in this operation. By the start of the war, this hardware was said to be the largest in the state. At the time of the 1860 census, the three Watkins brothers were residing together on the side of Cameron Hill, and their mother was living with them. Martha Watkins was then 55. Also living with them were John M. Armstrong, a clerk, and Henry Hamill, a tinner. By the time the war broke out, Richard Watkins had made "a snug fortune."

When the war started, Richard L. Watkins raised a battalion for the Confederacy. This Lookout Artillery had 153 men and four mounted pieces. They were first stationed on Cameron Hill, and the unit fired the first shot from Chattanooga. Watkins fought in many other battles, including the Spanish Fort opposite Mobile where he suffered five severe wounds and was left for dead. Watkins, who had risen to the rank of adjutant general, surrendered what was left of his command at Meridian, Miss., on May 10, 1865. Then he hobbled back on crutches to Dalton, Ga., a journey that took seven weeks. His leg was so badly damaged that only the skill of physicians saved it from amputation.

Arthur P. Watkins in the midst of the war in February 1863 married Anna Neilson Gillespie, daughter of George Lewis Gillespie and Margaret McEwen. The marriage was performed by T.H. McCallie. Arthur Watkins acquired from Col. Daniel F. Cocke his Oakland plantation. It was on Chattanooga Creek near the Gillespie place. However, Arthur Watkins died in 1866 at the age of 31. Anna Gillespie Watkins was left to rear their two young daughters, Alice M. and Elizabeth S. Elizabeth Watkins died at a young age. Anna resided many years at Oakland, but she later lived in Knoxville with Alice, who had married William S. Shields. Anna Gillespie Watkins died at Knoxville in 1923. She had been born in 1844 when the Gillespies were at Roane County. She was buried at the Citizens Cemetery.

Richard Watkins in 1866 was able to gain permission from Gen. J.B. Steedman to reopen his hardware. The Union Army had stripped the hardware of its \$15,000 inventory, and Watkins was virtually poverty stricken. But he quickly recovered, and by 1870 had a fortune that exceeded \$100,000. He married Helen Whiteside, a daughter of Col. James A. Whiteside, in 1869. At the time of the marriage, Watkins was 32 and Miss Whiteside was 19. Richard Watkins' mother, Martha Watkins, who was from Virginia originally, lived with them at an elaborate home near the county courthouse. The house was also large enough for four hardware clerks, a store laborer, three domestic servants and a dray driver. Later, the family lived at Seventh and High, then near the other members of the Whiteside family at College Hill. Watkins also had a farm just south of town on the Rossville Road. There were 70 head of cattle, 10 mules, and 10-15 farm hands.

Richard Watkins continued to be plagued by his war wounds, and he had to give up his hardware in the early 1870s. It was sold to Vance and Kirby. But Watkins was far from idle. He became president of the

Chattanooga Leather Manufacturing Company and was involved with the Carter-McGill Hardware as well as various banks and railroads. He earlier had been an original stockholder in the Roane Iron Company and joined his brother-in-law, A.M. Johnson, in setting up the City Water Company. At one time he and his three sons were in the leather business on Seventh Street as R.L. Watkins and Sons. He was involved in large shipments of tanbark to St. Louis, Chicago, Evansville and elsewhere. About 150 men were employed in this occupation throughout the year, and as many as 400 would be hired during the peeling season. Captain Watkins would divide the workers into squads and they would go to the woods, cut down trees, and strip off the bark for shipment over the Nashville and Chattanooga Railroad.

One of Watkins' most ambitious undertakings late in his life involved development of Lookout Mountain. He was the leading figure in construction of a railroad up the mountain that went by way of St. Elmo. It was known as the Broad Gauge. This line ran to another of Watkins' projects - the stately 365-room Lookout Inn. Watkins ran unsuccessfully for the state Senate, and he made a race for Chattanooga mayor but lost to John A. Hart by 206 votes. A Democrat, he served on the City Council and the School Board. He was instrumental in having the city charter amended to set up a police commission. When a group of miners was threatening anarchy at Coal Creek, the old Lookout Artillery leader was selected to head a group to quell the disturbance.

Richard L. Watkins died just before Christmas in 1894. His sons were Richard Munsey, Arthur James and Chester Charles. Richard Munsey Watkins, who was born in 1870, spent most of his life on Lookout Mountain. He was deputy clerk for U.S. District Court from 1898-1910, then he was mayor of Lookout Mountain, Tenn., from 1912-1914. He and his wife, Anna Lee, afterwards operated the Chanticleer Lodge near Rock City. Richard M. Watkins died in 1953. His son, Ewing Garner Watkins, was president of First Flight Golf Club, Inc. This firm later became part of Pro Group. Another son, R. Garner Watkins, was born Feb. 7, 1893, at the old Watkins house on College Hill. He studied at Baylor and at Castle Heights. He married Annie May Jones. He was a commercial representative for a film house, then worked at the DuPont powder plant at Nashville. In 1918, he was living at the home of Seth Walker at Lebanon when he became ill with pneumonia and died. Florence Watkins Malone, daughter of Richard M. Watkins, died in 1992. She had resided at Asheville, N.C.

The tracks have long since been taken up on the Broad Gauge, and the Lookout Inn burned in 1908. Lookout Mountain still has a Watkins Street.

*Read more stories by John Wilson at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>