

David Watkinson's Idea

The Opening

At eight o'clock in the evening on Tuesday, August 28, 1866 a gala affair was staged at Allyn House on the corner of Asylum and Trumbull Streets in Hartford, Connecticut. The Watkinson Library was launched with festivities and extensive publicity.

Throughout the day, from ten in the morning to five in the afternoon, its "elegant rooms," recently completed as an addition to the Wadsworth Atheneum building, had been open for inspection by members of the city government and invited guests. In the evening a reception with the ladies in evening dress was held by the city authorities in honor of the trustees of the new library and its friends.

Alfred Smith, president of the Watkinson Library, formally presented the new institution to the city, and Mayor Charles R. Chapman accepted it "in a neat and handsome speech. . . . 'The Mayor and City officers have thought that

the opening of the Watkinson Library to the public was an occasion fit for some public demonstration,'" reported the *Daily Times*. Consequently the evening's program included tributes to David Watkinson by Mr. Smith and the Hon. Mr. Chapman, as well as a "fine collation to which the guests did ample justice . . . [and] after the inner man was fully satisfied," a series of "capital speeches" by such honored guests as Governor Joseph Hawley, Professor Calvin E. Stowe, the Hon. William Hamersley a former mayor, Dr. Robert Turnbull, and Calvin Day, Esq. Governor Hawley by virtue of his office and Mr. Day as president of the Wadsworth Atheneum were both ex officio trustees of the new library. The *Courant* concluded its report of the brilliant evening, "The party broke up at 11 o'clock, all highly pleased with the affair."

The library itself was described in lengthy newspaper reports. "The rooms are very tastefully fitted up, being divided into Gothic alcoves. All the woodwork and furniture . . . are of solid oak, finished in oil," reported the *Daily Post*. "The coup d'oeil on entering . . . is very pleasing. A cheerful light falls on the desk or table for readers, and is reflected from the bright rows of uniform bindings, of which many sets adorn the alcoves. . . . We believe that 'knowledgeable men' will pronounce this a gem of a library every way, and a most admirable execution of the founder's generous intent," noted the *Evening Press*.

Hartford's four local newspapers reported fully both in advance and after the event the grand

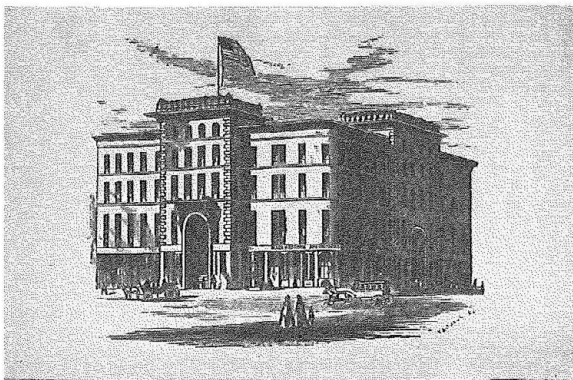


Fig. 2. Allyn House in 1866. Scene of the opening festivities of the Watkinson Library.

DAVID WATKINSON'S LIBRARY

OPENING OF
Watkinson Library.
ADMIT *Geo. F. Bacon* AND LADY,
AT ALLYN HOUSE, TUESDAY EVENING,
AUGUST 28TH, AT 8 O'CLOCK, P. M.
In behalf of Com. of Common Council:
W. Green Chairman.

Fig. 3. Card of invitation to the festivities celebrating the opening of the Watkinson Library in 1866.

The Trustees of the
Watkinson Library of Reference
invite *Rev. William Jarvis,*
and Ladies, to visit the Library Hall, on
Tuesday, the 28th inst., between the hours of
10 A. M. and 5 P. M.
Hartford, Aug. 22, 1866.

Fig. 4. Note of invitation to visit the Watkinson Library during its open house on August 28, 1866.

opening of the unique new institution in Hartford. It had been years in the making.

Its Founder

In 1795, David Watkinson, aged seventeen years, came to New England with his parents and

eleven brothers and sisters from the little village of Lavenham, Suffolk, England. His parents, Samuel and Sarah Blair Watkinson, were prosperous and cultivated people. Samuel was a master woolcomber in Lavenham, a center of the wool industry in eighteenth century England. His wife was from Dalry, Ayrshire, Scotland and



Fig. 5. Home of the Watkinson family in Lavenham, Suffolk.

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she met Samuel when she came to visit her brother, Dr. William Blair, who practiced medicine in Lavenham. They were married on October 6, 1768.

In Lavenham where the Watkinsons occupied one of the best houses in town Samuel's fortune was estimated by his friends, the Taylors, at £30,000 (\$150,000), real wealth two hundred years ago. But they lived a quiet life. They were dissenters and Samuel was said by Henry Barnard to be a direct descendant of one of Cromwell's soldiers. He supported the small nonconformist congregation and its meeting house actively and financially. His son David in his name was later to contribute to the building fund when in 1827 he and his wife paid their second return visit to the old home and found a new chapel being built in Lavenham.

Universal ferment and fear had been produced in England by the French Revolution. Dissenters,

regarded as the friends of liberty, fell under the fury of Toryism. A system of oppression and espionage violated the free privacies of life. The safeguards of Habeas Corpus were removed and America was the land of safety to which all who could emigrate began to cast a longing eye.

Samuel Watkinson "to the inexpressible regret and loss of the circle with which he was connected, announced his intention of transporting his family to that land of liberty," wrote Ann Taylor Gilbert. He never regretted it. Letters written back home for the next twenty years until his death in 1816 reiterated his feeling that "I have no reason of regret here but the absence of my Friends." They had left a prosperous life in England and had come to an equally comfortable one in Middletown, Connecticut, then a gay and fashionable residential community.

Of Samuel's seven sons only one remained in business in Middletown, the eldest, John Revell.

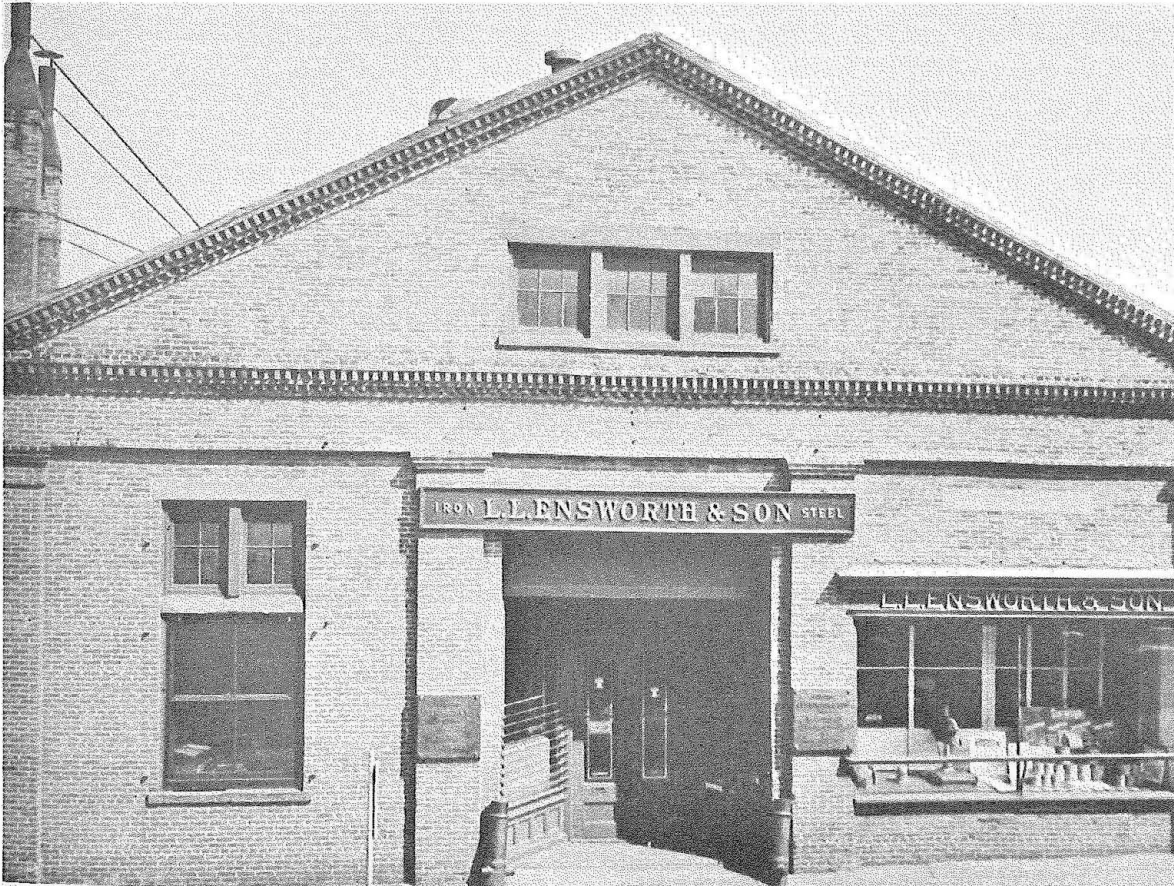


Fig. 6. David Watkinson's store built on Front Street in 1801.

The next three, Samuel, Jr., Richard and David had joined mercantile firms in New York. William at seventeen was in Philadelphia in 1796.

Two years later their father wrote back to England, "I have now four Sons in York. . . . We have had an uncommon Hot Summer but the Climate appears as yet to agree very well with us. . . . The Yellow Fever rages in Philadelphia and most of the Inhabitants have left." A week later the fever broke out in New York and attacked all four Watkinson sons. Samuel died on September 6 and Richard on September 8. John came from Middletown with a doctor to help nurse his brothers and David and William recovered. But David's health was long precarious and he never cared to live in New York again, although William pursued most of his business career there.

David established a general wholesale business in Hartford and in 1801 built a brick store on Front Street. He traded in the West Indies, and supplied goods and groceries to the storekeepers up the Connecticut River. By 1805 his brothers William and Edward had become partners in the business and Robert, then nineteen, was a clerk in his brothers' store. In 1806 David extended his

business to stock naval stores, iron and steel, and in the next few years his brothers left one by one to set up businesses of their own.

In 1819 David took into partnership Ezra Clark, when the firm became David Watkinson & Co. In 1835 his nephew, Alfred Gill, and Ezra Clark, Jr. joined the business, and in 1841 David retired. But the firm continued under successive changes in partnership to become L. L. Ensworth & Son, Inc., and his brick store still stood at 350 Front Street until it was demolished in 1957 for the redevelopment of Constitution Plaza.

From the first, David was active in many other business organizations. Henry Barnard wrote that, "His name is found as original subscriber, and frequently as an office-bearer in almost every association incorporated to open new, or improve old avenues of travel, or increase the facilities of business – the Union Company chartered in 1800 to remove obstructions to the navigation of Connecticut River below Hartford – the Connecticut Steamboat Company in 1818 – the Enfield Canal Improvement Company – the New Haven & Springfield, and the Providence, Hartford & Fishkill Railroad Companies." Even after his retirement, and until his death in 1857 he continued as a director of the Hartford Bank, of the Hartford Fire Insurance Company, and of the Connecticut River Banking Company. He was a petitioner and later a vice-president of the Society for Savings, a director of the New Haven and Hartford Railroad, and for a time its president, and he was owner with his brothers Edward and Robert of the Union Manufacturing Companies in Manchester and Marlborough.

In other fields, David Watkinson was an incorporator in 1823 and a charter trustee of Washington College, renamed Trinity College in 1845. He was one of seven charter members along with his brother-in-law Henry Hudson, of the Hartford Linnaean Botanic Association, incorporated in 1825. It was authorized to establish a botanic garden, nursery, green-houses and hot-houses to foster studies in botanic science. It may have had some connection with the Society of Natural History, but its accomplishments and length of active existence are uncertain. He was a founder

Iron, Steel, Nails, &c.
DAVID WATKINSON,
Offers for sale

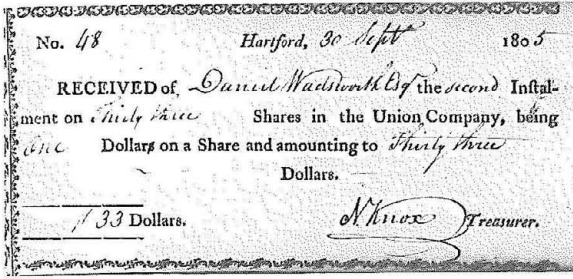
6 Tons horse Nail Rods.
30 tons 3d to 40d hoops, plow plates and band Iron
12 tons nail, spike and deck nail Rods
2 tons treble rolled sheet Iron
300 tons Swedes, Russia and English Iron, a complete assortment of flat, square and round from 1-4 inch to 3 1-2 inches.
12000 lbs. English, German, Swedes and American Steel, warranted of superior quality
200 casks 2d a 40d cut Nails and Brads
Drawing and sheathing Nails
60 dozen steel plated Shovels and Spades
60 bags Juniper Berries
13 hhds Copperas
Sheet Lead, Axletree Drafts, Crow-Bars, Share Molds, Anvils, Vices, cart and waggon Boxes, Weights from 1-2 ounce to 56 lbs.

ALSO

300 bushels ground Plaster, at Hale's mill in Glastenbury.
Hartford, April 7, 1818. 6w76

Fig. 7. Early advertisement in The Courant of David Watkinson's store.

DAVID WATKINSON'S IDEA



Union Company Hartford 21st May 1824
 To David Watkinson Dr.
 1824 May 21 For his services as Director for \$30.
 past year
 For 2 days on the River \$6.
 One payment J. Watkinson

Hartford 13th Sept. 1820 Rec^d from M. Knox
 Tow^{ard} me thirty Dollars for Rent of my Lot of land
 adjoining the Elm-street House for the year ending
 hundred & nineteen David Watkinson
 \$30

Hartford April 4. 1837
 No. 67 N. Corn.
 DAVID WATKINSON & CO.,
 Typesetters and Dealers in Type and Job Printing; The Iron, Stone, and Copper Works, &c.
 90
 2 Bds Common National School
 546 & 15a p 73. 71
 4 ml

Fig. 8. Receipts representing business activities of David Watkinson.

and vice-president of the Wadsworth Atheneum, one of the early members of the Connecticut Historical Society, and one of the founders of the Young Men's Institute in 1839. He was an incorporator and financial benefactor of the Hartford Hospital, a vice-president and director of the American Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb, and treasurer and director of the Connecticut Retreat for the Insane. He also contributed liberally to the Hartford Female Seminary and to the Hartford Orphan Asylum.

In 1803 David had married Olivia Hudson, daughter of Hannah and Barzillai Hudson. William Watkinson wrote on that occasion, "David is very happy, and indeed it would be his own fault if it were otherwise for she possesses every charm that could make Matrimony a state of felicity." Her father was a partner in the publishing firm of Hudson and Goodwin, proprietors of the *Hartford Courant*.

Olivia was as interested in welfare activities as her husband. She was a manager of the Beneficent Society for Orphan Girls from 1811 to 1849, and of the Widow's Society from 1833 to 1836. Of her it was said, in the *Memorial Sketches* published by the Widow's Society, "Mrs. Watkinson was equally kind in purpose, and as wise in executing the duties of her life. With a

judgment cool and accurate, what she designed for the benefit of others, whether in society, in charity, or the Church, was carefully planned and wisely and promptly executed. Her beautiful home, adorned with the accumulations of taste



Fig. 9. Olivia Hudson Watkinson, wife of David Watkinson.