

The Rise and Fall of Ayr's Internationally Famed Factory:

The Story of the Watson Factory Unfolded

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Today, the Watson Foundry stands with a protruding chimney, claiming the remembrance of its former days of greatness. For once this building stood four storeys high and was the rival of the surrounding area.

This factory was not only known in Canada but across the world as far as Russia. Yet today it is forgotten, left to dwell on its past industrious days. Without realizing it, when we step into the building we step into a time in history, a place where fame was built, where workers spent many days smashing and clanging at various items, a place where John Watson had created what was once one of the greatest companies in Canada.

As of John Watson, he was a fascinating man with an adventurous past. He was born in Glasgow, Scotland in 1820. If one could even imagine the circumstances of Glasgow at this time, it can easily be described as a dirty, cramped, industrious city swallowed by the textile industry. Men, women and children worked long days with meagre pay. John was fortunate to be entered into a seven year apprenticeship to the moulding trade at the mere age of 8.

From then on, he became a journeyman and travelled to Scotland, England and Ireland. By the time he was 22, he decided to adventure to the new world for better opportunities. So, in 1842, he landed in New

York and from there on he walked to Buffalo on foot with only a simple kit on his back to take up any opportunity of work when and where he could.

Eventually, three years later he made it to Galt where he remained for two years. It was at this point in his life that he began to prepare his own plans of a business where he hoped to establish in Ayr. In 1847, he had established a foundry producing cast iron pots, stoves and agricultural implements. As the business expanded more workers were employed for about \$1.00 a day and soon additions to the building had to be made.

All the materials and products were transported by wagon or sleigh. Eventually the Credit Valley Railway came through and became a much more efficient means of transportation. Soon, Watson was making pots, stoves, plows, mowers, reapers and threshing machines and added wire-tying binders to his business.

By 1861, he was a proud iron founder and agricultural implement manufacturer producing cast iron, wrought iron, screw nails, Canada plate, zinc, bolts, nuts and more. He was married to his wife at the time Elizabeth with three children. In that year alone, the Watson Foundry had produced 24 threshing machines, 29 reapers, 12 seed drills, 200 stoves, 200 plows and various other agricultural implements. He was soon famous later dubbing him as one of the "most notable pioneers of Waterloo".

The John Watson Manufacturing Company became a booming business winning awards all around the world. In total the Watson Factory had won six gold, one silver and thirteen bronze medals in Europe, Australia, the United States and Canada for his exhibits of farm machinery which were all produced in the little town of Ayr. In 1876, Watson was the first Canadian to win a gold medal at the United States of America Centennial Commission Exhibition, in Philadelphia.

By 1879, John Watson earned orders for shipments to Russia, France, England and Australia. He even received a golden medallion from royalty, by the Princess Louise, daughter of Queen Victoria and Governor General, the Marquis of Lorne. He also received top awards at the great Exposition Universelle Internationale de 1878 in Paris, France and at The Metropolitan Inter-colonial Exhibition in Sydney, Australia, 1879.

As business became widespread Mr. Watson decided to move his foundry into a bigger establishment. Plans were prepared and the town was



Watson Factory Built In 1882

anxious to see his new handsome structure. His original Ayr Agricultural Works was located where Greenwood Park is now situated. In 1882, the building was moved to where it is situated today. It took 1,000,000 bricks, 6000 panes of glass which created a four storey building which encompassed 90,000 square feet of floor space. At the time it was seen as what Andrew Taylor records it as "the largest and best equipped agricultural works in the Dominion".

The factory became a working hub for the locals providing them with good pay. A picture of the Watson employees in the mid 1890's shows a group of stalk men. Reading the names Tom Robson, Cap. Anderson, Jack Reid, Jack Wyllie, they sound familiar to me and I can recall their names etched in the gravestones in Ayr's cemetery.

Most of the faces of the men are stern, as was fashionable in the time, others have a grin. One man to the left of the photograph crosses his arms comfortably with a curling lock on his brow and a smirk on his face. Others in the front are boys in their early youth. A young boy with a round hat sits on the ground among the men sitting on benches or standing in the background. He looks intently into the camera almost nerved by the amount of time the photographer was taking. It is hard to imagine today what it must have been like to work in such a factory, or to be that young and be working alongside the fellow men of the town in such an industry.

It is important to remember that it was these men with black bowler hats, caps, untamed beards, bushy moustaches and tight laced boots and shoes that made Watson factory reach its former glory. And as was noted, "it is to men of the Watson stamp, shrewd, preserving and resourceful, undaunted by temporary defeats, and with faith in themselves and their work, that this country is indebted for its progress and development".

As times changed new changes become an asset as well as a disadvantage. The Canadian Pacific Railway covered the east to the west coast and became a great asset to the company. However, soon competition became apparent and major competitors such as Massey's, Harris and Patterson put Watson's business into an uncomfortable position.

On December 14 1903, on one cold winter's day John Watson went to his office as usual. Feeling a bit under the weather he decided to retire early. So, he climbed into his carriage and headed back to his home on Piper St. As he made it to his room he suddenly had a sharp pain in his chest collapsing on his bed he passed away from heart failure at the age of 83 years old. In his obituaries he is noted as "kindly and generous, shrewd and fearless" and "always a man to be respected and admired". Numerous articles

were written in his honour claiming him as a 'pioneer industrialist' and a "civic-minded philanthropist, industrious, enterprising, and courageous with noble qualities of head and heart".

Watson's three sons continued the business, however a tragic event happened that would change the company forever. On June 3rd, 1920, William Dredge, a discontented former employee, entered the factory at night and started a fire in the paint room after stealing a few tools. Soon the fire was out of control, "large live cinders filled the air, some of them floating half a mile and more afield". By two in the morning it had collapsed, machinery was toppling down. The result was the whole plant except the moulding and blacksmith shops were destroyed by fire.



After Watson Fire In 1920

Pictures of the incident were placed upon charcoal black paper. A brick carcass is what remains, scared by the flames, eerily empty as if to be an abandoned castle of past glorious days. In one photo a woman clad in starch white with a fashionable hat perched on her head leans upon the old Piper Street Bridge. Behind her looms the cadaver of a once industrious monster machine. It towers above the town and rubble. Vacant window slots look out onto a blank sky leaving the viewer lost in an old forgotten photograph.

Following the fire, Alfred E. Watson became president of the company selling agricultural implements to industrial trucks. Wyllie Watson, John Watson's grandson, took presidency in 1942 during WWII. At that time they operated at maximum capacity and ninety percent of the production was based upon war efforts producing push trucks, munitions and other armed service.

Eventually, Mr. R.E. Lovett, great-grandson of John took over and sold equipment in the two storey building built from remains of the Watson Company. The building has undergone changes, offices and retail outlets were built into the factory.

Today it remains an important part of our community. Although it may never accomplish its former glory it will continue being a central aspect of life in Ayr. Thanks to John Watson and his many endeavours he was and continues to be an important man in the history of North Dumfries.



Watson Factory Now A Mall In 2010