

# Elkanah Watson Biography

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# Contents

<a href="#">Elkanah Watson Biography.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Biography.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>



# Biography

Elkanah Watson (1758-1842), American merchant, banker, and promoter, was noted for his efforts in organizing agricultural societies and fairs.

Elkanah Watson was born in Plymouth, Mass., on Jan. 22, 1758. His family was descended from early Pilgrim stock. Other than that his family lived comfortably, little is known about Watson's youth.

Watson went to grammar school until he was 14. Then he began his apprenticeship in Providence, R.I., with John Brown, a prosperous merchant and one of the founders of Brown University. During the American Revolution, Watson joined a local militia unit, but Brown would not release him to serve in the Army. Brown was one of the Army's chief suppliers of gun powder.

Watson completed his apprenticeship in 1779 but, lacking capital, continued to work for Brown. Sent to France for Brown, he remained in Europe for five years, becoming involved in several private commercial ventures and traveling extensively.

Returning to the United States in 1784, Watson established himself in Edenton, N.C. He engaged in the West Indies trade and purchased a plantation. Business failures, however, forced him to sell his estate, and he moved to Albany, N.Y. He organized and helped secure a charter for the State Bank at Albany. He continued to urge the construction of canals and turnpikes and worked actively for a free system of public schools.

At the age of 50 Watson purchased a farm near Pittsfield, Mass. He was particularly interested in wool manufacturing and introduced Merino sheep to improve the quality of raw wool. He also organized a cattle show, which by 1810 had become an annual affair. He next organized the Berkshire Agricultural Society, which became a prototype for organizations throughout the country devoted to improving agriculture. Working through the society, he changed the character of the cattle show. Prizes were awarded for cattle, articles of domestic manufacture, and agricultural products. Gradually, a "county fair" emerged that encompassed social, political, educational, and recreational activities, as well as the desire to improve agriculture.

In his later years Watson returned to New York, continuing, however, to work for agricultural improvement. He traveled extensively and wrote numerous pamphlets on agricultural subjects. He attempted to secure state funds for agricultural societies and urged the formation of a state department of agriculture. As one biographer suggests, Elkanah Watson was a crusader, a reformer, and a dreamer. He made a significant contribution to the improvement of agriculture in the United States.