Experiences of the French Huguenots in America:
The King's Refugees.

Investigations into the Lives and Fortunes of Exiles who Fled to America during the Reign of Louis XIV when he Promulgated the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685.

Persecutions of the Huguenots and Their Experiences in the New Western World.

Exhaustive Historical Researches

by

COLONEL JAMES TOMPKINS WATSON
Clinton, New York

- Member of the American Historical Association
- Member of the New York State Historical Society
- Member of the Oneida Historical Society
- Author of Many Historical Researches

-Prologue-

This document was written in about 1908 and contains information on persecutions of the French Huguenots and their flight to America. It contains information on several of the earliest French Huguenot immigrants including Alexander Resseguie and Sarah Bontecou. It also contains a journal of one of their descendants, Timothy Resseguie, a British soldier in the American Revolution.

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THESE experiences of some of the early Huguenots in New York, as here related, are the result of many years of historical investigation by one of the most thorough antiquarian authorities in this country. Colonel Watson, who is now in his eightieth year, has a fund of knowledge regarding the locality in which he has now long lived, and the destinies of which he has so largely shaped, that is invaluable to American annals. He knows the Huguenot as do few living authorities. His own family connections have brought him into intimacy with them. This chronicle is gleaned from the authentic information which has come to him from Huguenot descendants and valuable private papers and journals in the possession of his family. Among his family heirlooms, Colonel Watson has the portraits of several prominent Huguenots.

In preparing this narrative for record in THE JOURNAL OF AMERICAN HISTORY, Colonel Watson speaks of it as "some gleanings relating to incidents and experiences in the lives and fortunes of two French Huguenot families who fled from France during the reign of Louis XIV when he promulgated the revocation of the edict of Nantes and began a wholesale persecution of his Protestant subjects in 1685."

Colonel Watson is as frank in his convictions as he is honest. In presenting them, he says: "I have, in the course of a long life and diligent study, formed my belief, such as it is, and have no thought of changing at my time of life. I do not find that I can now change
it for better and I do not care to change it for worse. Such as I am and such as I have, I offer it to the readers of THE JOURNAL OF AMERICAN HISTORY."

Colonel Watson belongs to a strong race of men that have been making the last half-century the greatest epoch in the history of the world. It is in the memories of these men that much of the history of the nation is written. These gleanings from narratives that have come to him during a long and active life in the intimacy of Huguenot traditions are valuable and entertaining. –Editor

WE by the grace of God, of these United States, the land of a free people, are living in a truly golden age. We can put our trust in Pope, priest or atheist without fear of the galleys, dungeon, or the stake. Religious intolerance is at a discount; burning witches and hanging Quakers have gone out of fashion in these latter days. We are beginning to make a record for the Twentieth Century that is a credit to advanced civilization.

The name of Huguenot, as applied to the dissenters from the Church of Rome, is supposed to have been derived from Huguen, a word used in Touraine to signify persons who walk at night. Their only safe place of worship for one hundred years had been dark caves and the blue vault of the heavens. The matter of religion with Louis, XIV was merely a pretext. He used the Church as a club for wholesale confiscation. It was a rich field to work in, and the proceeds lined the pockets of the dissolute nobles of his court.

The Huguenots, as a class, were the bone and sinew of France. The nobility were wealthy, the merchants and manufacturers prosperous, and the poorer classes sober and industrious. It is estimated that the loss to France by the Huguenot persecutions, first and last, was about 400,000. Manufactures and the arts were paralyzed, and the whole country suffered from its effects for one hundred years. Louis and his predecessors sowed the vipers' eggs that a century later brought Louis XVI and his court to the guillotine. Thus, in a measure, did time avenge the martyred Huguenots. This name was applied indiscriminately to those who adopted the creeds of Luther or Calvin.

It seems they got an idea that the Bible would be a pretty good book for the people, and this did not suit the priests and monks of those days. They made a general job of burning both books and readers. Mankind is a contrary quantity, and, as is generally the case, their ideas grew and prospered under opposition and persecution. In the course of time, the Huguenots became a prominent factor among all classes, from noble to peasant. The followers of Luther and Calvin were the bone and sinew of the states, and in a general way, represented the best class of inhabitants.

This struggle between advancement and ignorance was at its height about 1450. To quote a French monk of that period: "They have now found out a new language called Greek. We must carefully guard ourselves against it. That language will be the mother of all heresies. I see in the hands of a great number of persons a book written in this language, called the New Testament. It is a book full of brambles with vipers in them. As to the Hebrew, whoever learns that becomes a Jew at once."

One hundred years passed and found the new faith growing, and persecution increasing. Phillip II of Spain devastated Flanders, and changed that rich country to a desert. The massacre of St. Bartholomew followed shortly after. In 1581, the exodus
from France and Flanders began in earnest, but was stayed, in a measure, by Henry of Navarre, who was proclaimed king in 1584, with the title of Henry IV. As a Protestant himself, he promulgated the celebrated Edict of Nantes, but the people were soon deprived of its benefits when the king became a nominal Catholic for political reasons. The persecution recommenced with greater fury and culminated in the revocation of the edict by Louis XIV, in 1685. Then the exodus began in earnest. There was no safety for a Huguenot in France. The galleys, dungeon or the stake was the alternative. All possible avenues of escape were closed by the king and his troops. He did not want to lose the people; he wanted to save their souls, but the poor deluded Huguenots did not see it in that light. The rich sacrificed their wealth, and the poor the little mite that they possessed, for the sake of life and liberty. Now and then some mentally weaker than the rest recanted, or pretended to do so, and outwardly seemed to be converted to the true faith, and were spared, but they were sharply watched. North, South, East and West, they fled for life and liberty; by highways, byways, wild mountain passes, forest trails, by sea, or land, enclosed in casks, or in the foul holds of merchant vessels bound to some foreign port. Any future prospect was preferable to a life in France.

Holland, Germany and England gave them shelter, even benighted Russia gave a home to French exiles, and little Switzerland was full of refugees. Louis XIV sent the citizens of Geneva, a peremptory mandate to expel the Huguenots, under pain of his displeasure. They pretended to escort the exiles, with all due ceremony, outside the city gates, and quietly brought them in again by a gate on the other side. But Holland was crowded in population; the English laborer was jealous of the superior workmanship of the French emigrant; and it remained for America to make a final safe and happy home for the Huguenots of France.

The best blood of France is blended with ours and we are proud of the result as it is today. The great loss of France is our gain. There is no better blood than the American in this year of 1908.

The families of Bontekoe and DeReseguier were among the first refugees from French persecution. They reached New York about 1685, via England. The former were a maritime family. There were two brothers, Pierre, and Paul. The former was a merchant in the Isle of Re, noted for its celebrated fortress, and adjacent to the city of La Rochelle. Paul was in the siege of the city by King Louis and all record of him was lost. He was probably killed in the siege. Pierre, with his family, escaped in a vessel by way of England and reached New York about 1680. He was a son of Admiral William Isbrand Bontekoe of the Dutch navy. In 1615 he was captain of the "Nouvelle Hoorne," a ship of 1,100 tons and a crew of 206 men, on a trading expedition to the East Indies. When near the island of Madagascar his ship caught fire and was lost. After various thrilling adventures, the captain and crew reached Batavia. This voyage of Captain Bontekoe has been related by Alexander Dumas in one of his books called, "Tales of the Sea," or "Les Drames de la Mer".

The captain afterwards commanded a ship of 32 guns, and in company with a fleet of eight vessels, ravaged the coast of China. I find in the archives of the old French church called L'Eglise de St. Esprit, or the Church of the Holy Ghost, on Pine street in New York.
City, viz: "Pierre Bontekoe and Margaret Collinot, his wife, fugitives from the Isle of Re, near the city of LaRochelle, in 1684 fled to England, came to New York in 1689."

Jacob Leisler was at that time governor. Their name originally was Bondecoux, at a later date changed from Bontekoe to Bontecue. Their descendants are quite numerous, and several branches of the family at a later date located in Connecticut. Pierre's wife was known as Madame, and seems to have been a person of some importance in the French colony, as the Church records show a pension was paid her by the Church for several years. This could not have been in the way of charity as the family were in comfortable circumstances. At that date the French population in New York was about 200. They worshiped temporarily in a building on Marketfield street. In 1695 they built their own church of stone, located on Pine street with the burial ground adjoining. It was used as a place of worship for one hundred and thirty years. In 1831 the property was purchased by the United States government, on which was erected the present Sub-Treasury, between Wall and Pine streets. The remains in the cemetery were removed to St. Mark's Churchyard, Stuyvesant place and Second avenue, and placed in vault number 85, where they will probably remain until future needs demand further change. After the lapse of a hundred years there is generally but little left of the human form. In the third chapter of Genesis, the 19th verse, we read: "Dust thou art, and unto dust thou shalt return."

Alexandre De Reseguier [sic] {de Rességuier}, a French Huguenot, native of the city of Toulouse, province of Languedoc {sic}, was a man of property and a descendant of a noble family. He was by occupation a silk manufacturer, and at the date of the revocation was living in the city of Tresleoux, [sic] {Trescleoux} in Dauphine {sic} {Dauphiné}, which is situated in Southeastern France, near the Swiss border. When the storm of persecution struck France, Alexander De Reseguier hastily gathered his available cash and valuable papers, and fled across the border to Switzerland and from there to England. The family records only show that he was accompanied by his son Alexander. There are no records that show what became of his wife and family, only that he arrived in London about 1685. As there is no record of interment of any person of the name of Resseguier in the Huguenot churchyard in New York, it is to be presumed that the refugee died in England.

His son Alexandre, the name now anglicized to Alexander Resseguiue, came to New York about 1689, where he tarried for a short time. Then he went to Connecticut where he purchased a tract of land of the Indians in what is now part of the towns of Ridgefield and Norwalk. In the records of the old Huguenot Church in New York, I find the following: "Sara Bontekoe, Daughter of Pierre Bontekoe and Margaret Collinot, married to Alexander Resseguie of Norwalk, Ct., Oct. 19, 1709." When the son above-mentioned arrived in America, he had in his possession a little hair trunk that contained all that was left of their fortunes in France. He raised a family of seven children and educated Peter, the second son, with the intention of sending him to France to reclaim, if possible, their abandoned estates. This son died young and the project from that time was given up, as in any event it would have been a futile effort prior to 1793. The trunk and a part of its contents is now in the possession of one of his descendants, Colonel George E. Gray of San Francisco. Some of the valuable title deeds and papers, after the American Revolution, were
destroyed by a member of the family who became insane. The trunk still retains its place in tragic history. When the earthquake struck San Francisco, Mr. Gray was owner and resident of a fine house, situated in the best part of the city. The authorities in charge deemed it necessary to blow up several buildings to try and stay the conflagration. His house was one of the number. He was given five minutes to save whatever he could, and the old trunk escaped destruction and is still in its owner’s possession, a noted souvenir of the French Huguenot persecution. Alexander 2nd died in Ridgefield, Connecticut, 1752. His son Alexander was born in 1710. There were six brothers, and one of them, James, was soldier in the Provincial army and lost his life in the French War during the invasion of Canada.

The date of the death of Alexander 3rd is not known, probably previous to 1800. His father left a large estate, estimated at over $50,000; he was the oldest son and received a double portion. The inventory of his real and personal property, in my possession, is quaint and interesting. Alexander Resseguie 3rd had eight children; five sons and three daughters. One son, who bore the name of Alexander, died young, and the son following two years after was given the same name. Three of these sons were soldiers in the Patriot army during the War of the Revolution. The other son, named Timothy, was a soldier in the British army. Thus, are families often divided, in a civil war. When an old man, Timothy Resseguie - at the request of his grandson, George E. Gray - wrote a journal of his experience and adventures, as a British soldier. It is quite lengthy and closely written; some of it is almost illegible. A synopsis of his narrative is as follows:

JOURNAL OF TIMOTHY RESSEGUIE,
A BRITISH SOLDIER DURING THE WAR OF THE REVOLUTION.

This old Col. Rogers was in the French War. He had one Thomson Captain under him, as big a rascal as himself. He sent Captain Thomson from Long Island into Connecticut to let the young men know what a chance there was for men to go on the island and not take up arms during the war, under the protection of Governor Carleton, and what a fine thing it was to have such a privilege. The Governor had employed him to go around and let young men’s fathers know of this chance. They most all came to our place, and he must take all their names so he could show the Governor, so as to know how many boats to send over. They all met at one Stebbins’ late in the night, and he was there without fail. When we came in the windows were all darkened and he pulled a writing book from under his coat and tells us to put our names in columns on such a leaf, and we all put down our names in four columns. Then pitched on the night when to meet at the Waterside, at one Scoville’s. At the Waterside we all met. The men that were to be our pilots did not come that night so we divided our men into companies and hid, some in barns and some in the woods and some under a great pile of flax laid before the barn door till the next night, then we went over, about 70. We had our boat to carry almost half a mile, then hid it in the woods. It was so dry and leaked, we had to bale with our hats. It was 22 miles across to where we landed.
on the island where Lloyd’s Neck lay, from Middlesex. This old scoundrel was very glad to see us and told Mr. Stebbins to march us to Fisher’s Mills, where we could draw our provisions. On we went and that was the last we ever saw of old Thomson. When we arrived we were well received by old Rogers, he called us fine bucks and fine fellows. It was soon whispered round that we were enlisted men. Enlisted men really we were. This old Thomson had taken out this sheet in the writing book and turned it up and wrote listing orders above our names, there were pin holes in the middle of the sheet as plain as day to be seen. We all told Rogers and swore if we could see Thomson we would fill him as full of holes as a riddle. We watched for him, but he no come but we heared he was after more men and was taken and hung. When we heared this news we had a great day of rejoicing and illuminating our windows, but the Officers were all appointed for this regiment. They enlisted 700 men out of jail in Flat Bush on Long Island, that was taken when the British landed on the Island, so you may judge for yourself what a set of men they must be, but those Officers that were appointed took command and journeyed with 8 companies under Rogers, and marched us out of Long Island onto Frog’s Neck and lay there a few days. Then on the main land near King’s Bridge. Then Rogers went on devil like over Frye Narrows and New Rochelle, and so on till he disobeyed orders. Major French took the command, then Major Guines. Major Guines disobeyed orders. Major Warner did no better. Then we petitioned for a new commander and we had a good man: John Graves Simcoe was the man. He was made Governor after the war was over in the Province of Upper Canada. Now we had as good order as could be in our regiment. He formed a company of Grenadiers, a light company, the rest battalion companies, and raised a troop of horse. Then we drew new clothing and had our provisions regular, and all things in good order. Col. Simcoe appointed me sergeant over 12 men to ride express as minute men. One day as I saw the Col. walking by himself, I went to him and told him I wanted to have a talk with him. He said, "Very well, Resseguie, talk on.” I told him I had the grass guard and could not be absent so long as I would like. "Very well,” said he, "come tomorrow and I will hear all you want to say.” So I thanked him and ran to my guard. The next day I went and found him alone, so I began at the foundation and told him my father was a friend to the Government. The Whigs called him Tory. So I went on and told him how Rogers sent out Captain Johnson in his guise under the cloak of Governor Carleton’s proclamation. He took the names of these young men, and of their agreement to come to the Water side, so he could come and take us off and carry us on to Lloyd's Neck on Long Island, and this was a deception under the name of Governor Carleton. I told Col. Simcoe how he took our names down in a small writing book, then turned the page and wrote listing orders above and gave it to Rogers, and took 3 guineas for each man, then cleared out for more men, and was taken and hung, which was just and right. I told Simcoe we were sold like cattle at market. I told him my father was opposed to my going in the American service. He would find a chance for me to go on Long Island, under Governor Carleton’s proclamation, and remain during the war. That there was a man by whose arrangement we must go late on such a night, and this man would be there and take our names down, so as to know how many boats to send for us, all which was completed and we all met at the time. The boat leaked so bad we had to bail with our hats to keep from sinking. It was 22 miles across the sound; the wind was in our favor from the west and we were going to the east from Middlesex to Lloyd’s Neck. We had 67 men in the boat, we got within fifteen rods of the shore. I jumped out and touched bottom. I told John Joram to throw me the rope. I told them good news. I could touch
bottom. The boat sunk, but we all got safe on shore. There was a sand bar in our favor. There was ½ that could not swim. "Now," said I to Simcoe, "when I went over on these conditions by my father's orders, while I was under age, I thought it my duty to be subject to his orders. My father was well acquainted with a soldier's life in the French War, and told me not to enlist on any terms at all. Now, Col. Simcoe, I want your honor should consider my condition. I have got 50 pounds that I have borrowed, and I can have 50 more if that will not do, for I will never leave the regiment unless I can leave it with honor, and walk off boldly and not be afraid to see any man's face that ever belonged to the British service." "Resseguie, you are perfectly right," he replied. "I have heard of Roger's and Johnson's conduct before, to get their regiment together. It appears to me that you were never enlisted. On that account I will give you your discharge; but there is one thing I want you to promise; that is, this: Keep it to yourself." "That I can do sir." "Well," said he, "you are your own man, to go where you please and when you please."

The next day he sent, mount my horse and come to him; so I mounted my horse and went up to the front. He said to me, "There is Capt. McGill, Broadstreet, Dunlap and Wickham, all noblemen's sons in England. They pledge their honor that you will bring this money safe or they will be sponsor for the sum you are sent for." So he gave me a letter to carry to the Paymaster Gen. "7 miles to Cole's Ferry, and 3 miles of woods to go through. He said to me, "Won't you be afraid to go through those woods of being robbed." "No sir," I said. "They won't think of one man being trusted with much money." So on I went and gave the letter to the Paymaster Gen'l. He takes the letter and opens it, and looks at me very stern, and said, "Your Col. puts great confidence in you, it seems." "Yes sir," said I, "and he thinks other people will be honest sometimes as well as himself." He called his servant to take my horse and give him a good mess of oats, and told me to sit down and take some dinner; so down I sat and took a good dinner. There were about 20 officers rising from the table. Roast beef, turkey and tumblers half-full of wine. So I made a good dinner. "Well," said the old General, "when you are ready we will bring out the money for you." "I am ready," I told him. He told his servant to bring my horse. My horse was brought before the door. I took three or four steps, seated myself in the saddle without touching hand or foot to the horse. "Well," said one of the officers, "by G--that's what I never saw before." Then the money was brought out in a valise and placed before me. I buckled my cloak and rolled it round the valise and got ready to start. One of the officers asked me if I could run a good foot race. I told him I could run with any one he could fetch in 3 days, and meet him half way for 50 guineas. "Will you run now?" "No," I told him, "your plan won't work." The old General laughed heartily and all the rest. So on I went to my Col. Simcoe. The officers all gathered round. The Col. said, "Resseguie, you have done well, come take some wine." In a few days I was at the Fort Van Norman, paying off the regiment. Simcoe was present, and a number of officers. The Paymaster said to me "Resseguie, there was your time?" Said I to him, "How much money was there!" "82,000 pounds sterling, in gold," said the Paymaster. "Well," said I, "do you think I would run for that small sum, that all these officers, my best friends, pledged their word that I would bring back safe or they would be sponsors for the same amount. No," said I, "not for twice that sum. When I can go on my own credit without bail, then it would make some difference. Gold is tempting and bright, but a man of honor is brighter than gold". Yes," said Simcoe, "Resseguie, you are right." "Here," said the Paymaster, "is your wages, 3 half-pounds and 10 guineas." Simcoe said to me, "Come tomorrow morning, I have something for
you to do at King's Bridge." This was a proposal to go to King's Bridge and recruit, to stay 8 or 9 months. I told him I would like to go very well, but I should be a poor hand to get recruits, when I should tell them what they would do by going on the island and taking advantage of the proclamation. Colonel Gray says, "My grandfather went to King's Bridge, where he replaced a recruiting sergeant and established himself in a small house close to the big gate, and where you cross the ferry. There he stayed, making friends with the country people who passed with their products to market. He was thrifty, and established quite a trade with five or six regiments that were camped near by, selling for the market people sometimes as much as $100 worth in a day. Prices, as he details them, are interesting. A cock turkey, one guinea; a hen ditto, $3.50; good fat fowls from six shillings to one dollar; eggs, 4 shillings a dozen. He spent what he calls as happy days as he ever saw in his life."

To resume his narrative: "In the meantime that recruiting-sergeant at the ferry, Tilley by name, was doing royal work according to his own ideas. In the course of that season 60 or 70 came in to go to the island. I told them to look out for the sergeant at the ferry. Two out of 15 stayed with me one night that had a mind to enlist, so I gave them their bounty, and the rest went on to New York. Tilley met them and inquired which way they were going. They told him on the island, to take advantage of the proclamation. Said he, "The proclamation has run out. Come enlist with me for the Light Horse. The service is light and the war will soon be over, and you shall be well equipped. If you go to the island you will he pressed on board the man-of-war, or in the land service, for the press gangs are about." He would keep them talking with victuals and drink, and tell them that in the morning he would go with them and pass them by the guard, and so they would have the day to travel, and so get clear of the press gang. By that they would think he was their friend, and would stay all night with the scoundrel. Then he

steps out and notifies the press gang, and is back in the house in time to be round. The poor dupes are carried on board the man-of-war, and released the next day when the sergeant goes on board and says he has orders from the Commander-in-Chief in New York for the release of these men, on condition that they would enlist in the land service. They all spoke as one, and said they would enlist. So the sergeant in this way got 64 men. My 9 months was drawing to a close, and soon Simcoe sent a man and a few lines to come and bring sergeant Tilley with me, and what recruits we had. I told the man I would be there in two days. The next day I went to New York and called on Tilley to make ready to go. A tavern keeper named Morton asked me to carry to Col. Simcoe a charge of misconduct against Tilley, with regard to the press gang and debts. We joined the regiment on Staten Island, where it lay at the Fort. "There," said I to Col. Simcoe, "is my two recruits, and here is Mr. Tilley's 64. He is a letter Mr. Morton desired me to give your honor. Tilley began to look pale. The officers flocked around. Simcoe opened the letter, and told me to take Tilley to the guard house and put him under guard at the fort."

When the spring campaign opened the Queen's Rangers and 3 more regiments went from Staten Island across to Elizabeth or Amboy, where most of these recruits deserted. The last lot of men taking Col. Simcoe's purse, silver mounted saddle, and pistols. When they returned on the island Tilley was tried by Court Marshal, and sentenced on board of a man-of-war for life. So Col. Simcoe wrote a line to Captain Belford, that commanded a 74 gun sloop-of-war and gave it to me, and said, "If you will go and take Tilley there, and give him up to Captain Belford, I will pay you well for your trouble." Then I was clear of
the regiment, but there was not a man in the regiment that knew it but Simcoe. Some of the new recruited officers said, "He will get away from Resseguie." "Well," said Simcoe, "if he gets away he may go for life." "He may jump off and run when he comes to those woods." "If he does jump, Resseguie will have him as quick as a cat.

So I mounted my horse and told Tilley to mount the other, and on we went. My horse could outrun any horse that belonged to the three troops. Mind this, I searched Tilley to see if he had a cudgel or knife. I delivered him to Belford, bringing back to Col. Simcoe his regimentals and a receipt from Captain Belford. Through the winter I stayed on Staten Island, then I went to Philadelphia, where I found work. While there I had a letter from my father, that, after 6 years of absence put me in mind of home, and I determined to go back. This made all of my military service in the British army, and is a roughly told story, but I am a man of over 80 years of age.

Resseguie died at the age of 84, and lies in the village cemetery at Verona, Oneida County, New York, where he spent the last years of his life. He had eleven children. Most of them married and raised families. He spent the greater part of his life in Saratoga County. The British government gave him a grant of land in Canada for his services in the war, which he gave to one of his sons. He was a man of sterling character and robust constitution, and lived and died a man respected by all.

NOTE. The writer is under obligation to John E. Morris, Esquire, of Hartford, Connecticut, for the genealogical records of the Bontekoe and Resseguie families.
FIND-A-GRAVE MEMORIALS & References.

Col. James Tompkins Watson (1830-????) was the husband of Hannah Mary Resseguie (1830-????), daughter of Timothy Resseguie (1798-1865), see [link] (Google Books): http://books.google.com/books?id=XzotAAAAYAAJ&pg=PA48&

Timothy Resseguie, Sr. 1754-1838
http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=12211370

Abigail Lee Resseguie 1760-1834
http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=12211371

Timothy Resseguie, Jr. 1798-1865 [link]:
http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRID=12287166

Eliza Allen-Resseguie 1806-1868 [link]:
http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRID=12287167

Hannah Mary Resseguie-Watson 1830- [link]:
http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRID=12287681

Col. James Tompkins Watson (1830-????)
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