

Collection #  
M 0933,  
OM 0454

## STERLING WATKINS FAMILY PAPERS, 1825–1987

[Collection Information](#)

[Biographical Sketch](#)

[Scope and Content Note](#)

[Contents](#)

[Cataloging Information](#)

Processed by

Kathryn Wilmot  
August 2007

Manuscript and Visual Collections Department  
William Henry Smith Memorial Library  
Indiana Historical Society  
450 West Ohio Street  
Indianapolis, IN 46202-3269

[www.indianahistory.org](http://www.indianahistory.org)

### COLLECTION INFORMATION

VOLUME OF COLLECTION:	1 manuscript box, 2 oversized manuscript folders
COLLECTION DATES:	1825–1987 (bulk 1825–1931)
PROVENANCE:	Reginald Watkins, Indianapolis, IN, February 2006

RESTRICTIONS: None

COPYRIGHT:

REPRODUCTION RIGHTS: Permission to reproduce or publish material in this collection must be obtained from the Indiana Historical Society.

ALTERNATE FORMATS: None

RELATED HOLDINGS: Winslow Family Photographs (P 0353), Elijah Roberts Collection (M 0325), Mount Pleasant Library Records (SC 2440)

ACCESSION NUMBER: 2006.0170

NOTES:

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

As racial intolerance in the southern United States began to increase during the 1820s–1840s, a number of free African Americans migrated to the rural Midwest seeking improved economic and social conditions. Many of the men and women who settled in Indiana were of “mixed Native American, African, and European ancestry” from Northampton and Halifax counties in North Carolina and Greensville County in Virginia.

The Roberts, Jeffries, and Watkins families were among the first of these families to come to Indiana. They settled near Quaker communities, purchased land, and established two African American farming communities: Beech Settlement in Rush County and later, Roberts Settlement in Hamilton County. These early settlers cleared the land, planted crops, and built houses, churches, and schools.

Born ca. 1805, Sterling Watkins [Wadkins] migrated to Beech Settlement from Greensville County, Virginia. The Watkins family became one of the most prosperous of the Beech settlers, owning substantial acreage. Along with Sterling Watkins, other Watkins family landowners in Beech Settlement included Daniel Watkins, James Watkins, David Watkins, and John W. Watkins.

On 26 December 1833 Sterling Watkins married Rebecca Roberts. The couple had at least nine children: Margaret (b. ca. 1836), James (b. ca. 1838), Washington (b. ca. 1839), Louisa (b. ca. 1842), Sarah E. (b. ca. 1844), Mary A. (b. ca. 1846), William H. (b. ca. 1848), Catharine (b. ca. 1856), and John Wesley (b. 10 May 1860).

Sterling and Rebecca’s son John Wesley Watkins married a woman named Ethalinda on 27 August 1884. They had three children: Luther Lee (b. 4 July 1885), Ithamer (b. 24 April 1887), and Goldie May (b. 18 November 1889).

The population of Beech Settlement had declined by the 1900s due to the high cost of agriculture and the exodus of the original settlers’ descendants to more urban areas. However, the 1930 census shows John Wesley Watkins and Ethalinda still maintaining their farm in Ripley Township. John Wesley died on 13 March 1934, followed by Ethalinda on 18 April 1940.

John and Ethalinda’s daughter Goldie May Watkins graduated from Terre Haute State Teacher’s College, and taught in Kokomo, Indiana. She married Harry Blaine Madry in 1917. She died in an automobile accident on 29 March 1961.

-  
Sources:

Information in the collection.

Vincent, Stephen A. *Southern Seed, Northern Soil: African-American Farm Communities in the Midwest, 1765–1900*. Indiana University Press: 1999.

Ancestry Library Edition. Available at: <http://www.ancestrylibrary.com>

## SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE

The collection consists of Watkins family members' papers, although there is one 1825 certificate for Sally Jones and her children "free born of black complexion." Sally Jones owned land in Beech Settlement near the Watkins property.

The correspondence in the collection primarily contains letters written to Sterling Watkins by his family. An 1828 letter written to Sterling from Martha Ann Blanks indicates Sterling still resided in Greensville County, Virginia. Martha Ann provides information on Watkins family members' marriages, and the lack of young men in the neighborhood. She may have been writing from Beech Settlement.

John D. Watkins writes to Sterling from Michigan, claiming Michigan land is superior to that of Indiana and African Americans are treated as well as white men in Michigan. He also provides the prices of wool, potatoes, chickens, and butter.

Two letters in the collection are written by Sterling's son Washington during the Civil War. Washington Watkins [Wadkins] and David R. Watkins [Wadkins] served in Company G of the 11<sup>th</sup> Regiment, United States Colored Heavy Artillery. From May 1864–October 1865 they were assigned to the Defense of New Orleans division, Army and Department of the Gulf. Washington also served in the 54<sup>th</sup> Regiment, United States Colored Infantry and the 111<sup>th</sup> Regiment, United States Colored Infantry. Washington wrote the letters from Camp Shaw, Plaquemine, Louisiana. He mentions they have not yet been attacked by rebels. He also discusses money he sent to Sterling, the impassioned religious revivals in town, and a lieutenant teaching the soldiers how to sing by note.

Documents in the collection include an 1829 paid receipt of Sterling's, an 1836 indenture and sale of land between Sterling and Sarah Jones, a child's school essay on felt hat-making, Goldie Watkins' teaching certificates, some genealogical charts, and a poem. A notebook likely belonging to Ethalinda Watkins includes minutes of the Union Literary Society, plays and hymns, and scripts for mock trials on temperance, ignorance, and the history of the Eastern and Western Hemispheres.

Newspaper clippings provide details on the annual Beech Settlement homecoming dinners, the life and death of Goldie May Watkins Madry, and the death of Harry B. Madry.

## CONTENTS

### CONTENTS

Certificate for Sarah Jones and children, 1825

Correspondence, June 1829–1928

Sterling Watkins' payment of account, 1829

Indenture for sale of land, 2 Sept. 1836

Child's school essay on felt hats, ca. 1890s

### CONTAINER

Box 1, Folder 1

Box 1, Folder 2

Box 1, Folder 3

OM 0454, Folder 1

Box 1, Folder 4

Union Literary Society notebook, ca. 1896–97 (1 of 2)	Box 1, Folder 5
Union Literary Society notebook, ca. 1896–97 (2 of 2)	Box 1, Folder 6
Teaching certificates for Goldie Watkins Madry, 1910–29	Box 1, Folder 7
Newspaper clippings, 1931, n.d.	Box 1, Folder 8
Newspaper clippings about Goldie May Watkins Madry, 1961, 1987	OM 0454, Folder 2
Harry B. Madry obituary, 13 Nov. 1980	Box 1, Folder 9
Copies of 1834 land grant to Sterling Watkins, n.d.	Box 1, Folder 10
Genealogical information, n.d.	Box 1, Folder 11
Poem, "The Fellow That Looks Like Me," n.d.	Box 1, Folder 12

## CATALOGING INFORMATION

For additional information on this collection, including a list of subject headings that may lead you to related materials:

1. Go to the Indiana Historical Society's online catalog: <http://opac.indianahistory.org/>
2. Click on the "Basic Search" icon.
3. Select "Call Number" from the "Search In:" box.
4. Search for the collection by its basic call number (in this case, M 0933).
5. When you find the collection, go to the "Full Record" screen for a list of headings that can be searched for related materials.