

## Searching for Charles: The Untold Legacy of an Immigrant's American Adventure

**Stephen Watts**

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*Drawing on his letters home, Searching for Charles vivifies a nineteenth-century English immigrant's new life on the Illinois prairie.*

Stephen Watts's family biography *Searching for Charles* makes use of an ancestor's correspondence, bringing to life a witness to nineteenth-century American history.

Charles Watts was an immigrant to the United States in the 1830s. He wrote letters to his family members who were still living in England, telling them about his new life as a farmer and his daily work. Within those letters, there's information about the price of wheat and farm animals; and there are opinions on current events, including discussions of the abolition of slavery, the British monarchy, the Great Famine in Ireland, and the Oregon Question. All such issues are personalized and humanized via Charles's lengthy, interesting commentary.

Later, twenty-two of Charles's letters home were added to the archives at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum. Among them are thirteen compelling, informative letters to Charles's brother Edward, dated from 1836 to 1868, which are included herein. Many of these encourage Edward to himself emigrate to the United States, perhaps prompting Edward's later move to Illinois (bringing with him his brother's letters).

An appealing sense of who Charles was as a person comes through. His writing is personable; he expresses admirable values. Embodying the pioneering spirit of early America, he recalls hard work, problem solving, and a penchant for physical labor. Expressions of kindness and tolerance toward others further flesh him out, and his knowledge about social, economic, and political situations in the United States and England results in lively historical context.

Beyond the letters themselves, Stephen Watts, Charles's great-great-grandson, provides a narrative framework and additional context. He does so across the book's three interrelated sections, each of which could stand alone as well. The first includes Charles's correspondence, in order, with some expansions; the second is an extended family history, discussing Charles's descendants and relatives, based on genealogical research; and the third covers the sources of the genealogical research project themselves, with notes about best practices. Taken as a whole, though, the book's three sections overlap; there are instances of repetition as well. And some of the transitions between the letters and Stephen Watts's background work are rough, foregoing sufficient segues. Further, while the book's insights into American history are of general interest, its family history sections are often too esoteric to be of interest beyond Charles Watts's descendants themselves.

The epistolary biography *Searching for Charles* is rich with details from a nineteenth-century immigrant's life.

MARY SILVA WHITTAKER (May 19, 2023)

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