

Biographies of West Virginia statehood leaders were prepared by Marshall University Humanities Program graduate students enrolled in Dr. Billy Joe Peyton's Fall 2010 "Historical Studies" class at Marshall's South Charleston campus.

By Carolyn S. Quinlan

JAMES O. WATSON was born in 1815 to Thomas and Rebecca (Haymond) Watson, near Benton's Ferry, Virginia, which is now Marion County, West Virginia. He was educated at home by teachers and later attended a private school in Morgantown. He was married to Matilda Lamb.

"He was a pioneer in West Virginia coal development and was known as the 'Father of the Coal Industry' of the Upper Monongahela Valley." He had the foresight in 1852, when the first railroad was built through Fairmont, to open the American Coal Company, the first mining company in Fairmont. He played a pivotal role in the construction of a suspension bridge over the Monongahela River to connect Fairmont to Palatine. His competitors from Baltimore, who had much larger operations, asked him how he could do so much and still make a profit. The practical minded Mr. Watson told them, "You have large offices in the east, a salaried president, secretaries, clerks, and a mule boss and mine boss, I am my own president, my own secretary and my own mule boss and mine boss, and carry my office in my hat." He held a firm hand on his coal mining business.

Politically, he was a Democrat who took sincere interest in every level of government within the state. He held various positions within the county, two of which were clerk of the circuit court, and county surveyor.

Source: Comstock, Jim, ed. Hardesty's: *The West Virginia Heritage Encyclopedia*.
Richwood. Jim Comstock. 1974.