

Nomination Papers

“Candidates are busy...Petitions are circulated,” reported the Iowa City Citizen newspaper on January 20, 1908. One of those candidates was 54 year-old James S. Watson, a traveling salesman from Iowa City who had aspirations to become Johnson County Treasurer. “James Watson has announced his candidacy...and his petition is being circulated,” the Iowa City Citizen’s report continues. Pictured here is the petition on which Watson started gathering signatures in January of 1908 in order to get his name on the ballot for the Democratic primary in June. Watson was one of many Iowa candidates and voters who would experience a party primary for the first time in June of that year. Before the Iowa General Assembly passed the direct primary act in 1907, candidates for state and county offices were chosen through caucuses and by delegates at party conventions. Now, candidates would be chosen by popular vote.

According to the law, in order for Watson’s name to be on the Democratic primary ballot, he needed to gather enough supporting signatures to equal two percent of the number of Democrats who voted during the 1906 general election. Signatures on the petition had to be those of electors (voters) which means none of the signatures Watson gathered are of women who couldn’t yet vote in Iowa in 1908. Based on the signature dates, Watson circulated his nomination petition from mid-January until the end of March. By the time he quit, his petition was ten pages long and included about 280 signatures, well-over the 68 that was required for Democratic candidates that year.

The signatures are of people from many sections of the county including the towns of Solon, Iowa City, and Lone Tree. Other supporters hailed from Lincoln, Liberty, Union, East Lucas, and Jefferson Townships. A note by Johnson County Auditor L. J. Baschnagel on the back of the petition shows that Watson filed his completed petition on April 25th several days in advance of the filing deadline which was 30 days before the June 2nd primary.

Watson wasn’t the only candidate for Johnson County Treasurer on his party’s ballot in June. John G. Crow a farmer from Hardin Township and Iowa City merchant Bruce Moore also collected enough signatures to appear on the primary ballot. When the votes were counted, Watson was declared the winner with 700 votes to Moore’s 517 and Crow’s 292. As the Democratic candidate, Watson would run against incumbent

treasurer Republican D.A. Reese in the November election. Watson won against Reese in the general election and went on to serve as Johnson County Treasurer until 1915.

Do you have more information about James Watson or the local election of 1908? If so, contribute to the preservation of local history by dropping a note with what you know to us at JCHS, PO Box 5081, Coralville, Iowa, 52241 or e-mail us at leighann@johnsoncountyhistory.org.