

Watson, Henry Bulls ^[1]

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by William S. Powell, 1996

16 Oct. 1812–25 Jan. 1869

Henry Bulls Watson, professional military officer, was born in [Johnston County](#) ^[2], the son of Willis and Elizabeth (Betsy) Bulls Watson. Nothing is known of his early education, but on 5 Oct. 1836, more than a year after he sought acceptance, he was commissioned a second lieutenant in the Marine Corps. Like other new officers at that time, he was assigned to Marine Corps headquarters in Washington for military and administrative training. While stationed there, he met and on 18 Apr. 1837 married Mary Ann Higdon. Their son, Josiah Ogden Watson, was born on 14 Jan. 1838. In late October of that year the twenty-six-year-old lieutenant, with twenty-eight enlisted men in his charge, departed for New York. Early in December they became a part of the guard aboard the 74-gun ship of the line *Ohio* bound for the Mediterranean.

It was late summer of 1841 before Watson returned to the United States. Following a leave of absence to visit North Carolina, he was assigned to duty in Washington for the winter. At his own request he was stationed in Norfolk in the spring of 1842 and afterwards assigned to the Marine barracks at Gosport, Va., settling his wife and son in Portsmouth. In December 1844 orders came from fellow North Carolinian Brevet Brigadier General Commandant [Archibald Henderson](#) ^[3] to "join one of the Sloops of War to sail from Norfolk on a cruise." Watson elected to sail on the *Jamestown*, headed for the coast of Africa. A more senior lieutenant than Watson took charge of the Marine Guard. Watson, however, on 9 Jan. 1845 was given command of the Marine Guard on the sloop-of-war *Portsmouth*. His orders directed him to pay "careful attention to the Military efficiency of the guard under your command, and to the health and comfort of the soldiers comprising it."

When the *Portsmouth* and the *Jamestown* sailed together on 26 Jan. 1845 it seemed that the United States and Mexico were on the verge of war. The United States had recently annexed Texas; Mexico considered this an act of aggression and was about to take steps to recover its lost territory. North Carolina-born President [James K. Polk](#) ^[4] was unable to stem the tide sweeping the nation to war. In California a general from Mexico arrived to take charge of that region as governor, but Californians promptly drove him out. Fear that a foreign power, including Great Britain, might move in to occupy California led the United States to take steps to prevent such action. A squadron of U.S. ships kept watch over movement along the Pacific coast, and the *Portsmouth* joined them.

Lieutenant Henry Watson kept detailed journals of this cruise, which lasted more than two and a half years. He was in San Francisco Bay aboard the *Portsmouth* when its commodore claimed California for the United States. A small band of Marines and sailors under Watson occupied Yerba Buena (now San Francisco) and displayed the American flag. Soon afterwards he was placed in command of the force that occupied the town and held it from July to November 1846. Watson also participated in the overland march from San Diego to take Los Angeles in January 1847. His journal with its detailed account of these and other events has been described as "a valuable historical document in the American conquest of California," and his comments and critical accounts concerning the more senior leaders of this brief period in the history of California are particularly expressive.

The *Portsmouth* was next engaged in blockade duty along the western coast of Mexico, and Watson described long periods of boring duty with only an occasional excursion ashore. With tours frequently extended, the crew at times appeared to be almost at the point of mutiny. Finally on the morning of 3 Jan. 1848 the *Portsmouth* sailed, and Watson expressed his relief in these words: "I hope for a very long time, I dios, California." During these long months Watson's devotion to duty had not gone unnoticed. He was promoted to first lieutenant on 3 Mar. 1847 and was breveted captain on 29 November.

Having returned to home port in Virginia, Watson was assigned to the Marine barracks at Gosport until July 1852. He next served brief tours in the Mediterranean until 1853, first aboard the *Levant* and then the *Cumberland* (the ship that was rammed and sunk by the Confederate [ironclad](#) ^[5] *Virginia* in March 1862). An extended furlough followed upon his return to the United States and then further shore duty. On 1 Jan. 1855 Henry B. Watson resigned his commission and made plans to return to rural Johnston County.

With the opening phase of the [Civil War](#) ^[6], he seems to have participated in the initial training of neighborhood youths. On 15 Apr. 1862, however, he was assigned to command a camp of instruction at Weldon. Addressed as colonel, he was given instructions for defending the [Roanoke River](#) ^[7] from possible enemy attack. Some weeks later new orders sent him to [Camp Mangum](#) ^[8], located on the [North Carolina Railroad](#) ^[9] four miles west of [Raleigh](#) ^[10], where new recruits were being trained. After these raw troops were equipped and introduced to military life, they were sent off to join the North Carolina regiments. His assignment completed, Watson returned home.

Not for long, however, could this experienced military man remain idle when there was need for his service. Without

delaying to seek a commission, Watson enlisted in the Confederate navy on 8 Oct. 1863 but apparently because of ill health served a mere five months until 16 Mar. 1864. He then finally settled down on his 827-acre farm along the the Neuse River ^[11] south of Smithfield which he had been given by an uncle, Dr. Josiah O. Watson, in 1852. But he had only a few months of family life, as Mary Ann Watson died on 17 Aug. 1864 shortly before her fiftieth birthday. Five years later he, too, died at age fifty-six and was buried in the family cemetery near the front door of his home. With the death in 1912 of Mary Ann's sister, Fannie Higdon, who had made her home with the Watson family for many years, a plot was acquired in Riverside Cemetery, Smithfield, to which those buried in the family cemetery were moved. In addition to their first child, Josiah Ogden, who died in 1847 at age nine, Henry and Mary Ann Watson were the parents of Henry Lyndall (b. 1842), Mary Ferguson (1843) and Aline Elizabeth (1845) both of whom died in infancy, Mary Aline (1849), Elizabeth Bynum (1852), and Agnes Alwyn (1855). Henry L., a lieutenant in the Fifth North Carolina Regiment in the Civil War, was wounded at Gettysburg, captured at Winchester, and imprisoned at Fort Delaware until the end of the war.

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Businesses ^[15]

Military ^[16]

Military personnel ^[17]

War ^[18]

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Origin - location:

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Smithfield ^[21]

Raleigh ^[22]

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