A cross the half century, John Watson has
devoted to engineering pursuits, the forward
rush of science has amazed even the most levelheaded
among us. Engineering grows exponentially more
sophisticated and productive, the microchip
supplying firm footing. Yet Watson believes it is
people, finally, who build a profession. He has striven
to become a generous investor in people, be they
seasoned engineers, would-be students, or hourly
employees.

A mechanical engineer who graduated from
Auburn University in 1960, Watson is known
statewide as a peerless mentor who delights in
colleagues’ and future colleagues’ successes. Our
engineering community today counts on Watson’s
multifaceted efforts to assist where assistance is
requested. He is a long-standing supporter of
engineering education, providing leadership and
scholarships and recruiting meritorious high-school
seniors; AU’s John H. Watson Fieldhouse is an
impressive indoor athletic facility erected by his
design-build firm, Engineered Systems. He is chair-
man of Engineered Systems and of Smith’s Inc., of
Dothan, a company he became owner-president of
in his 20s.

His role at Smith’s began after his college co-op
experiences at Redstone Arsenal and Fort Rucker
and after completing service in the U.S. Army
Corps of Engineers as a second lieutenant in 1962.
He interviewed for an advertised position at the
Wiregrass’s largest contract mechanical engineer-
ing firm. His ambition—expressed as desire to learn
everything possible about the business—clearly en-
gaged James M. Smith, company founder, who
within four years groomed Watson to buy Smith’s,
even extending financing to support the 1970
final sale to Watson and two colleagues. Now enjoy-
ing freer rein, the Watson flair for engineering eco-
nomics led to Smith’s quick and marked diversification.
Simple heating and air-conditioning contracts
yielded to complex industrial ventures that, following
the launch of Engineered Systems, were often com-
pleted in-house. Projects include the nation’s largest
latex glove manufactory; a cutting-edge baker’s yeast
plant representing one-seventh of the U.S. mar-
et; a camper manufactory; a pelletized fuels plant; and a financial products
company. The family of businesses has gener-
atated many jobs for Alabamians, often surpassing
prevailing local wages. Watson’s entrepreneurial
ingineering talents have thus changed lives, one
reason the state’s business hall of fame inducted
him in 2004.

Watson is a foundation board member with the
Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind, recently
helping double its financial endowment. The
institute’s 2002 volunteer of the year, his most
profound contribution there may be the newly
constructed AIDB Wiregrass center for disabled
infants, children, adults, and seniors. He now pas-
sionately supports the city of Dothan’s campaign
for a “Miracle Field,” where disabled children will
play baseball. A graduate of Leadership Alabama,
Watson formerly chaired the Alabama Ethics Com-
mission, served on the Alabama Industrial Relations
Board, and was a board member of the Alabama
Research Institute.

Watson and his wife, Gail Pearson Watson, are
the parents of two and grandparents of six. They
reside in Dothan, not far from the small communi-
ties they grew up in.