

ARTHUR WATTS



2026 HALL OF FAME LEGACY INDUCTEE

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Arthur Watts was born May 1, 1837 on a Randolph County, Missouri plantation, just outside of Kansas City, Missouri. He was enslaved for the first twenty eight years of his life. At the age of six, he was tasked with tending fires on the plantation. As a teenager, Watts was assigned cooking tasks, especially the time-consuming ones like roasting meat over an open pit. With little instruction, he grew more adept through his own trial and error at the technique of open pit cooking and creating flavorful barbecue.

Once he got his freedom, he moved to Kewanee, Illinois to earn a living. In addition to working a number of demanding jobs, Watts resumed his passion for open pit barbecuing. Over time, numerous cities, towns and counties throughout central Illinois hired Watts to make barbecue for major events attended by thousands of people. When Arthur cooked for large-scale barbecues, he preferred to cook pork shoulder. When he cooked for himself, he preferred a young pig or goat.

Watts stayed active and vibrant for more decades, making barbecue well into the 20th Century. Local newspapers carried articles describing him supervising the annual Hog Festival Barbecue in Kewanee when he was 101 years old. Watts was 108 years old when he died, but his legacy lives on today. His direct descendants created the “Old Arthur’s Barbecue Sauce & Dry Rubs” company which remains true to the flavors Arthur Watts created more than one hundred and sixty years ago.