by Ian Nisbet Ross
iross212@gmail.com

Nisbet News

NN Archives: https://nisbetross.com/nisbet-news-archives/

Issue #3
December 2021

Focus of This Series of Newsletters

This is the third in the series of newsletters with the aim of broadly sharing our common family history. The "focal family" is that of James Nisbet and Helen Nicol who resided at Kirkcudbright on the southwest coast of Scotland in the early 1800s, raising 13 children. This story is about that family and their descendants.

Continuing On With The Nisbet Story

Life in Glasgow in the 1840s

The previous Issue #2 ended in early 1844 with Helen Nicol Nisbet reveling in the news that at long last one of her six daughters was finally to be married. Helen Jr. (b. 1811) married James Hamilton that March. Her mother, who had always had issues with her daughter of the same name, described Helen's new husband somewhat bitterly as *"an excellent husband… better indeed than she deserved."* Helen Hamilton never had any children of her own but continued to live close to her mother and sisters in Glasgow.

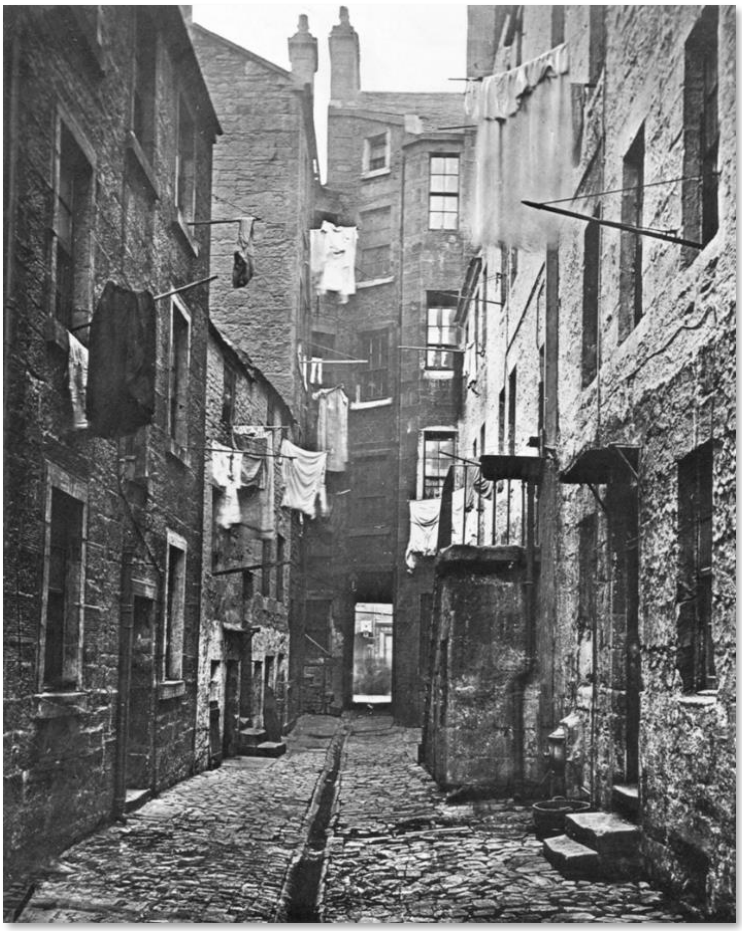
Helen Nisbet Hamilton later in life (circa 1865)

Daughter Helen had lived separately for a long time, so her marriage did not change the dynamics of the Helen Nicol Nisbet household, now at 14 Renfrew Street, Glasgow. She and three of her adult daughters, Margaret, 41, Eliza, 26, and Mary Anna, 21, shared a house with 5 rooms and a kitchen. The place was modern compared to her previous lodgings in the city which were in *"a bad neighbourhood which does not answer where there is young women."* Regarding her new abode, continuing on in an 1844 letter to her son William, Helen wrote,

"the rent is £15 besides water money and taxes. We have gas in the kitchen for which I pay 13[shillings] *per year. We have also a Water Closet which is a great benefit. I suppose you do not know that we have Mr. W. Hope for a lodger as we have five rooms and kitchen just the same as Helen's House - and I thought it better to take a house a little better and in a good situation and try for a lodger as go down some back Lane or in some Court. Mr Hope only pays 5 shillings a week which, is too little for a Parlour and bedroom but he is not able to give much more…"*

The revelation of a water closet in her new home is a bit surprising as it was a very recent innovation. However, Glasgow was a center of heavy industry and the early installation of toilets there may have resulted from the proximity to the factories that produced them.

In spite of the "modern conveniences" of their home, the Nisbets were living in one of the most densely populated and unhealthy cities of the western world. Glasgow would become notorious for tenements and slums as it was flooded with immigrants during the Industrial Revolution.



Victorian-era Glasgow tenements

First came the poor Highlanders from the north of Scotland, driven from their land by crop failures and The

Clearances of the estates there. Then in the late-1840s, a huge number of Irish immigrants came to the city, fleeing famine in their homeland. They provided cheap labor to the rapidly expanding factories in and around Glasgow and their families populated the poorest parts of the city.

Financial worries were top of mind for Helen as the daughters all struggled to find work. Two of the three took in dressmaking and needlework, but it was for very poor pay. Helen said that *"Eliza hardly makes 1:6 per week."* One pound + six shillings equates to about $150 a week in today's dollars (100x inflation factor since 1845).

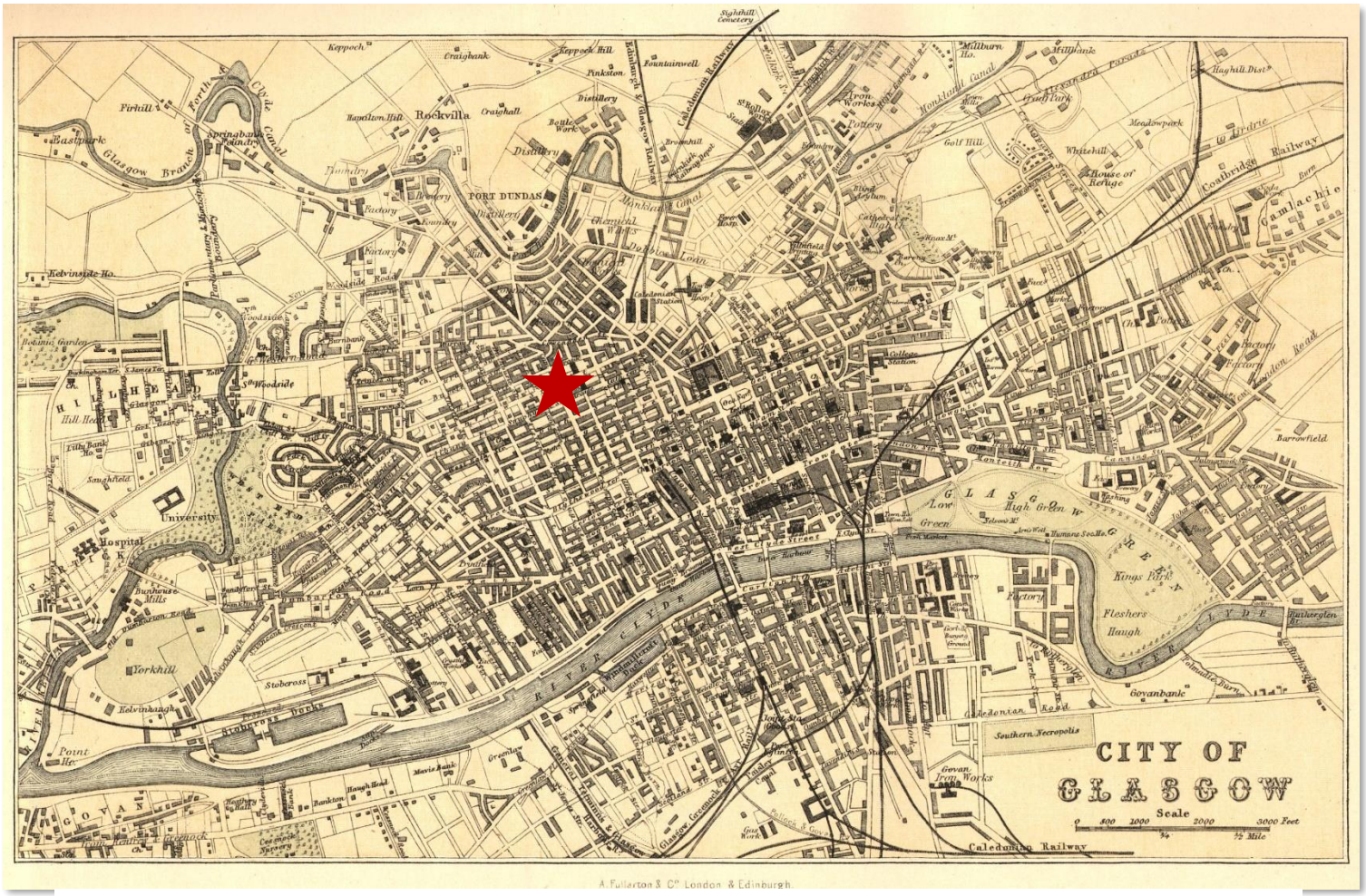
But spiritual matters were also a great concern, and she was overjoyed when she reported in late 1844 that Isabella and Jane in Liverpool had *"become new creatures. They have truly got their carnal hearts changed into spiritual ones... Oh that I could see some of them* [here] *at home in the same happy state."*

Health was yet another worry for Helen. In reference to her daughters she wrote *"...none are in very good health, they are far from strong. Sometimes I think I am the strongest in the house. I do not think Glasgow agrees with any of them."* And her daughters were not the only ones suffering ill health. In 1845, Helen noted that son James, 47, the *de facto* head of the family, was suffering from unknown illnesses and had been advised by doctors to move to a more agreeable section of Edinburgh. James was a lawyer in that city and was raising a family with three surviving children, having lost three others in childhood. Most recently, a daughter of his, named Helen, died at age 15 and *"they mourned much for poor dear Helen – she was a fine girl."* In the end, only the youngest child, John (born 1835), would live to have children of his own. **[more on this line of descendants to come in future issues]**

By the end of 1845, Helen's letters to her son William, now three years in America, are full of concerns about the health of others. Besides the afflictions of James Jr. and her own daughters, she reports that son Henry's daughter, Mary Miles Fletcher Nisbet (b. 1831), *"is not very strong and she is much troubled by her side."* Within five years, Mary Miles would die of tuberculosis.

The eldest of Helen's daughters, Margaret (b. 1803) preferred domestic work to that of the needle and she was serving as a housemaid on nearby Taylor Street. According to Helen, mixing scorn with worry as she was oft to do, Margaret had *"grown a great big woman and is much infirmed."*

The rooms they occupied were on the bottom floor of a tenement and were far from commodious. Heating would have been via coal burning fireplaces, fouling the air, and the water supply was highly contaminated. A cholera epidemic in 1848 that killed over 4,000 Glaswegians would



19th Century map of Glasgow with location of 14 Renfrew Street indicated

lead to public investment in clean, reliable water for the city, but this was years in the future.

During Helen's time in the city, its residents lived under constant threat of infectious diseases, including dysentery, typhoid, smallpox, influenza, and cholera. The study of epidemiology was in its infancy and the preventative and remedial measures that we have today were largely unknown.

Along with of all the other burdens that Helen bore, Glasgow's notoriety for grime and crime cast a pall over her life. In a letter in the winter of 1845-6, Helen had been discussing with James Jr. the possibility of his brother Douglas returning home from South Carolina, where he had been for six years. Although pining to see her youngest son, she had to defer to James' judgement that it would be unwise for Douglas to return to Scotland where few jobs were to be had. She consoled herself with the thought that at least he would not be subjected to the grimness of her surroundings:

> *"One thing that frightened me* [about Douglas' return] *and that is the Awful wickedness which is practiced in Glasgow."*

Editor's Note: In these newsletters, I have applied *italics* to reflect handwritten words extracted from letters and other documents. In places, for clarity, I have added punctuation to the handwritten portions.

1849 - Helen Loses Her Eldest Child

Among Helen Nicol Nisbet's letters which her son William chose to preserve, there is a three-year gap beginning in early 1846 and we have little information on the Nisbet women of Glasgow for that period. With some financial help from her two oldest sons, both lawyers, they were apparently able to muddle along, surviving the cholera epidemic of 1848 and other trials. Then, in late 1849, came the devastating news that James Jr. was dying in Edinburgh at age 51.

As with her son John 18 years earlier, Helen was at James' bedside when he died on the afternoon of October 19. The cause of death is not revealed in Helen's letters, but she had noted he was *"a most severe and long sufferer*" of an undetermined ailment. *"For more than eight days we were looking on him watching for his last breath – But the Lord sent him relief at his own good time… I am left in the vale of tears – I have lost another and second Head,"* she wrote, referring to James's role as patriarch of the Nisbet family.

Helen, now 71, had outlived four of her seven sons and though physically strong was burdened by her "afflictions." As with other personal crises, she turned to her religion for relief and strength. The fact that James had been a Christian and ended his life with prayers and listening to psalms read by his mother was deeply comforting. *"May we all die the death of the righteous. We need not mourn for him but for ourselves… our loss is his unspeakable gain."*

In the same letter of October 1949, Helen also related in great detail the death that month of her son Henry's wife Matilda at age 39. She had died less than four months after being committed to the Edinburgh Lunatic Asylum at Morningside.

COMING ATTRACTION!

A Story of Love, Madness, Loneliness and *Murder*

Recently, I have spent time researching the life of Helen's son Henry Nisbet, lawyer and banker at Tobermory, and his descendants. Although I can find no living descendants of Henry, the tale of his family has all the elements of a bestselling novel. I will continue with Helen Nicol Nisbet's story here but – ***Stay Tuned!*** – an entire future issue will be dedicated to Henry.

1851 - An Ailing Family

The year 1851 brought a ray of sunshine for Helen when she received news that her youngest son Douglas would be returning to Scotland for a visit that summer *"to come and see his Old Mother once more before the dirt covers her."* It had been 12 years since Douglas sailed for America and he had cast about there for years seeking viable employment. Finally, he had settled into a career as a shipping agent, and it was no doubt this line of work that afforded him the opportunity to return to his homeland.

Unfortunately, Douglas' visit was about the only positive thing going on in Helen's life. The average lifespan of someone born in the late 1700s was less than 40 years, so at 73 Helen was a rarity and was feeling her age:

> *"Oh my god when I look on my past life what am I, or how have I spent such a number of years - not as I ought to have done, no surely not – Oh how I am swallowed up with ever much care and anxiety"*

In May of 1851, Helen wrote that three months earlier Eliza, 33, had been *"seized in one moment so very ill just when we were going to breakfast. So bad was she that we had eventually to send for Dr. Cassels who lives opposite… she continued in a dreadful state of pain… it was a stoppage of the Bowels and they had to use very violent measures. … some part of the bowels are too tight and it is agony to behold what she suffers every time she has a movement. It has brought her very low; she has almost lost the haven of her feet… she cannot be left by night and by day and has never been out of the room since the first day she took to it."*

One can only imagine the "violent measures" a doctor of the mid-19th century would have applied to a bowel obstruction. This and other of Helen's writings give insight into the rudimentary and arcane medical practices of the age before anesthetics, antibiotics, and diagnostic technology. The understanding of germs was in its infancy and much of a doctor's focus was on the imbalance or deficiency in the body's "humours." This led to now reviled practices such as bloodletting.

It may be difficult to make out, but in this painting, titled *The Doctor*, a typical Victorian-era doctor is making a house call on a sick child, with the helpless parents in the shadows. The doctor seems perplexed as to how to proceed and this reflects the medical practitioners' "grasping at straws" of the time.

Daughters Jane and Isabella had returned to Scotland after over 20 years working in Liverpool. The flood of Irish labor fleeing the famines of the late 1840s depressed wages and this may have contributed to their decision. Jane in particular was very helpful in tending to her ailing twin sister, providing some relief for her mother. Isabella, 37 was now working in Edinburgh as a "confidential" for two ladies, a trusted assistant whom Helen reported *"has no household work to do at all."* Unlike the other daughters who caused her much worry, Helen described Isabella as *"a good girl who fears the Lord."*

Eliza was not the only infirmed at 14 Renfrew Street. Mary Anna, 27, was stricken with a sudden fever while at church. According to Helen, they thought it was influenza but according to the doctor, who was there at the time treating Eliza, it was *"an inflammation in the chest… she was very alarmingly ill. She was blistered with both fly and mustard."*

Like bloodletting, blistering was another archaic practice for balancing the bodily humours of an ill person. The procedure involved applying a compound derived from beetles called Spanish Fly, or pepper or mustard to the patient's skin and this concoction was left there for several hours. This caused blisters to form and they were then snipped open to drain and dressed with a healing ointment on a linen rag. It was a very painful process and must have at least temporarily diverted the patient's attention from their actual ailment.

In spite of her rough treatment, Mary Anna recovered enough to be sent to "the country" with Margaret for further recuperation. They rented a place at Govan, just across the River Clyde from Glasgow city, for two weeks at 7 shillings per week. Even in that era, it was well known that the clean air and water of the countryside was far more conducive to recovery than the tainted urban environment.

The daughters' ailments brought a halt to their needlework for a time and Helen's financial worries began to mount. Fortunately, son James had left her a small inheritance and Henry sent her a few pounds when he could.

Helen was greatly heartened that summer when her baby boy, Douglas, made the first of what would be several trips from Charleston S.C. to his homeland. While there, he visited Kirkcudbright and the diary of his time there is glowing in its praise for the beauty of St. Mary's Isle. The diary survives to this day, handed down through the generations to Louise Alan Try, Douglas' great-great-grandniece. A copy of the pages relating to his 1851 visit to Kirkcudbright are in the archives of the town's Stewartry Museum and is recommended reading for any descendants who can visit. During his sojourn, Douglas commissioned a headstone for his father and brother that was placed in the churchyard in Kirkcudbright. [photo in Issue #1]

1852 – First Photographs

In May 1852, Helen wrote to William from Tobermory where she was visiting son Henry. She opens the letter advising William that several items he sent had been received in good condition. These items were something that until then had been unavailable in the history of mankind – the earliest commercial photographs.

Helen called the pictures *"likenesses"* and said she was *"most happy to see them."* It had been over 10 years since William had emigrated to the United States and settled near Providence, RI. She wrote, *"I had to look long and many a time before I could realize you in it – but at last I saw it quite plain."*

William Nisbet, 39, from a daguerreotype dated 1855

Photography was a very recent innovation, having been introduced commercially only 10 years earlier in the form of daguerreotypes, images on silver-coated copper plates. It is likely this is the technology in the portraits to which Helen refers, although other early methods such as the calotype may have been available to William in Providence.

In his letter to his mother, William encouraged Helen to send a portrait of herself, and she promised to attend to it when she returned to Glasgow. *"I often thought I would like to leave a likeness of myself of some kind or other to my family but I am now getting so old,"* she wrote.

The same letter of May 1852 bore the news that the youngest of the daughters, Mary Anna, 28, was engaged to be married that summer. She was to wed Peter Ferguson, whom Helen satisfactorily reported earned £100 per annum in the employ of an auctioneering firm called Crooks and Jones. She regarded him as *"a remarkable steady young man about I should think 30 years of age. It has been an attachment of some years."* A great sense of relief felt by Helen comes through in her letters as she set aside her worries for Mary Anna. **[A future issue will follow the life of Mary Anna Nisbet Ferguson and her descendants]**

Towards the end of the year, Helen reported to William that she had *"now got my likeness taken but when you see it you will be greatly disappointed. Indeed, so ill looking is it that I thought once not to send it to you. I think it is partly owing to the bad light as it was a rainy day. I think the people about you will take me for a Black."* Showing surprising vanity for a woman of 74, she continued, *"everyone who as seen it says it is a very bad likeness and the mouth is too wide. I am sorry that I had got it done… should you see me my color is as good as ever and no one would think I am so old."*

The Missing Helen Nicol Nisbet "Likeness"

In 1852, Helen had her photo taken and sent it to her son William in Providence. This is the only known image of her and I expect it was a family treasure, but it has not yet been found. If it still exists, it is likely among artifacts handed down within the Allan, Munro, Ross or Nisbet lines of William's children. Please search old family heirlooms and see if you can find this one-of-a-kind memento!

As 1852 came to a close, Eliza had been bedridden for 16 months, creating a caretaking and financial burden on the Nisbet women. Fortunately, Henry, now the eldest male in the family, paid for Eliza's medical bills (£11) and sent his mother £30 annually to help defray household costs. From his home in Tobermory, Erray Villa, he also sent baskets of vegetables and fresh pork when a pig was slaughtered. Helen remarks that *"Henry has been very kind and a good son to me."*

1853 – Delicate Daughters

Helen turned 75 in May 1853 and a June letter to William indicates she is feeling her age; "*it cannot be very long before the hand that holds the pen must be cold in the dirt… When I reflect to what poor account I have spent these years, confusion of full belongs to me – full of the cares, anxietys and trifling concerns… But it is not for myself I grieve, but for a family of Delicate Daughters."*

Time and again Helen has pronounced herself the "stoutest" in the household and given the continual ailments of her daughters that may very well have been the case. That spring, Jane, 34, came down with typhus. Fortunately, the doctor said it was a mild case, but according to Helen, she *"had a such a slow recovery she was perfectly prostrate and walked like a child – also was much pained in her joints for a long time after the fever left her. I was all the time truly a Nurse as the doctor said it was better to keep the others away… Fever at that time was very prevalent here and many a Death, but it pleased the Almighty to deal mercifully with us as it spread no farther."*

Fortunately, daughter Helen Hamilton's husband had a house in the countryside where Jane, Eliza and Mary Anna (who continued in poor health after her marriage the previous year) all went for recuperation and respite from the city. Isabella and Margaret also visited this country house at Lily Bank at various intervals.

At this time, it appears that only Isabella is employed. Margaret, Eliza, Jane and their mother are dependent on financial support from Henry, and from James Jr.'s estate. With the illnesses in the family, work has come to a standstill.

That summer, Helen and her daughter Helen (Mrs. Hamiliton) traveled to visit Henry on the Isle of Mull. Just prior to their departure in July, Helen was pleased to report that Isabella, 39, had become engaged to marry Mr. David Wilson of Edinburgh, a teacher at the Heriot School there. *"I will tell you that poor Isabella has got an excellent match and she did deserve such as she always struggled to do for herself."* Wilson was a widower with two sons and a daughter, aged 13-19. Helen deemed him *"a most respectable gentleman."*

Isabella and Mr. Wilson, whose wife had died a few years earlier, had known each other for several years and when she was working in Edinburgh *"he took a great fancy."* Helen was happy to see a third daughter married and wrote *"she will be provided for… and this is a burden off my mind."*

Isabella Nisbet, who was 40 years old when she married, never had children – though she apparently played a role in raising her orphaned nieces, the daughters of Mary Anna, in the last years of her life. Her husband David died in 1862 and it appears she continued to live with her stepson George Baillie Wilson until her own death at age 54 of "disease of heart" on May 11, 1868. Both she and her husband are buried at Warriston Cemetery in Edinburgh.

Isabella Nisbet Wilson (1813-1868) circa 1860-65

Earlier that year, in January, Helen's youngest son Douglas married a local woman, Sarah H. Turner, in Cheraw, South Carolina. It was with great satisfaction that she acknowledged receipt of a "*Bride Cake"* that Douglas had sent home to Scotland via a ship's captain.

As 1853 waned, Helen seemed to be feeling somewhat better about life. Following Isabella's wedding in late July, fully half of her daughters – all six of whom seemed destined to spinsterhood a few years earlier – were married to very acceptable gentlemen. The other three still living with their mother were not strong, but Eliza had improved enough to walk short distances. Importantly for Helen, this allowed Eliza to attend church along with her twin sister Jane. She had lost four of her seven sons, but Henry, William and Douglas were still on this earth and visited or corresponded regularly. At 75, she was a grandmother to nine living grandchildren, with the hope for more in the future.

Unfortunately for Helen, any feeling of peace and stability would be short-lived. Storm clouds were gathering on the horizon and the next two – and final – years would be the most traumatic of her life.

END OF ISSUE #3

NEXT ISSUE: The trying and tragic end to the story of Helen Nicol Nisbet.

**** Editorial ****

We Are All Stewards of History

I treasure the original documents and artifacts that have found their way to my keeping through the generations, but I feel less a sense of ownership than *stewardship*. These objects - and the stories they tell - have survived for nearly 200 years and they will survive me. I am just one in a long series of caretakers that hopefully will continue indefinitely.

All of us who are fortunate enough to inherit these items have a duty to preserve and protect them for future generations. That protection can be physical in terms of proper storage and safety from natural disaster, and it can be digital – ensuring digital copies have been made and stored on the cloud or with others.

Here are a couple of stories that reinforce my sense of duty:

1. In 2013 I was conducting research for a book about my maternal grandfather who had an incredible life as a naval officer spanning both world wars. Inquiring among relatives, I learned that "a stack of boxes" containing his personal papers and mementos had been in the possession of a certain cousin, the eldest daughter of the eldest son of my grandfather. Three years earlier, her long running battle with cancer had come to a sudden end. This was during the "Great Recession" and her bereft husband and daughter were being foreclosed upon. In a fog of despair, they abandoned the house to foreclosure and left the irreplaceable records in the garage. Without a doubt, those boxes were thrown in a dumpster by a bank-hired cleaning crew and now lie moldering in the landfill in Chandler, AZ. [Fortunately, I located enough other material to complete my book in 2016, *Such Is Life In the Navy -The Story of Rear Admiral Herbert V. Wiley*]

2. Earlier, in 2009, my wife's sister died suddenly of a heart attack at age 54. A few days later we were in Minnesota and her shell-shocked husband brought a box up from the basement, saying he did not know what was in it, but that my wife should have it. It was a metal box about the size of an old breadbox and inside we found carefully preserved family documents that had been handed down by four generations of women in the family. There were old photos, certificates, and, most incredibly, 19 letters written by ancestors fighting the Civil War. One of these letters was written July 4, 1863, while on the field of battle at Gettysburg. It felt like a miracle that this box had survived basement floods and other hazards and found its way to an appreciative and caring steward.

These experiences have given my wife and I great motivation to ensure these artifacts are protected both physically and digitally. After we are gone, our children will be taking up the mantel of stewardship – or will be finding libraries or museums to preserve these heirlooms.

I encourage everyone who has the privilege of custody of such historical items to take steps to protect them for future generations.

I know it can be confusing to keep track of all the players mentioned in this story. As an aid, here is a "cast of characters." Hope it helps!

James Nisbet (1772-1834)	Married September 9, 1796 Abbotshall, Kirkaldy	**Helen Nicol** (1778-1856)

CHILDREN OF JAMES AND HELEN NICOL NISBET	Born	Died	Spouse	GRANDCHILDREN OF JAMES AND HELEN NICOL NISBET	Born	Died
James Nisbet	1798	1849	Margaret Brown	Mary Bell Nisbet	1824	1824
				Mary Bell Nisbet	1826	1873
				James Nisbet	1830	~1839
				Helen Nisbet	1830	~1845
				William John Nisbet	~1832	1866
				John Nisbett	1835	1919
John Nisbet	1801	1831	Martha McMekin	Joanna G. (Joey) Nisbet	1831	1860
Margaret Nisbet	1803	1854				
Walter Nisbet	1805	1839				
Robert Nisbet	1807	1830				
Henry Nisbet	1809	1867	Matilda Ann Douglas	Mary Miles Fletcher Nisbet	1831	1850
Helen Nisbet	1811	1867	James Hamilton			
Isabella Nisbet	1813	1868	David Wilson			
William Nisbet	1816	1886	Catherine Angus	James Nisbet	1843	1904
				John Angus Nisbet	1844	1908
				Henry Nisbet	1846	1849
				Jessie Gibson Nisbet	1848	1912
				William Douglas Nisbet	1850	1894
				Helen Nicol Nisbet	1852	1922
				Catherine Douglas Nisbet	1854	1925
Jane Wedderburn Nisbet	1818	1855				
Elizabeth Catherine Nisbet	1818	1855				
Douglas Nisbet	1820	1877	Sarah H. Turner			
Mary Anna Nisbet	1823	1863	Peter Ferguson	Infant Ferguson	1854	1854
				Helen Nisbet Ferguson	1855	1934
				Isabella "Belle" Ferguson	1858	1929
				Peter Ferguson	1862	1863