

The Search for the Ancestors of James Nisbet (1772-1834)

James Nisbet (1772-1834) represents the current “brick wall” in tracing the ancestry of the “Nisbets of Kirkcudbright” and their descendants. This document summarizes what I know about the birth family of James, the sources of that information, and some of the research I’ve done.

Summary of What I Know

Taking all the data below into account, we have deduced this picture of the birth family of James (b.1772):

1. Father was named James (referred to as James Sr. hereafter) and very likely served as a schoolteacher in or around Haddington who lived a relatively long life.
2. Father’s family was from the general area of Whittinghame, east of Haddington, in Haddingtonshire.
3. Mother was possibly named Margaret.
4. James (b.1772) (referred to as James Jr. hereafter) may have had brothers named Robert or William, and one of them may have had a son named William.

References to James Jr.’s Early Life

1. The earliest known official record of James Nisbet (b.1772), later gardener and land steward for the Earl of Selkirk at St. Mary’s Isle, Kirkcudbright, is the record of his marriage to Helen Nicol on September 9, 1796, at Abbotshall Parish Church in Kirkcaldy, Fife. Over the next 25 years, he and Helen would have 13 children who lived to maturity, including my gg grandfather William Nisbet (1816-1886).
2. Family bibles and genealogy notes put the date of James Jr.’s birth as December 25, 1772, but no public record confirming this has been found. No precise birthplace has been determined.

During his lifetime, James’ son William wrote an autobiography and made the following mentions of his father:

3. Page 12: “My father was bred to the business of gardening, in which, as well as in a knowledge of botany, he attained great proficiency. In the capacity of gardener, as well as that of forester and land steward in connection with St Mary’s Isle, he was employed

by the proprietors. This respectable and comfortable situation he held at the time of his death, having faithfully fulfilled it during the long period of thirty-three years.”

References to James' Father (James Sr.)

In the autobiography, William makes the following mentions of his paternal grandfather:

4. Page 12: “[My paternal grandfather] was a native of Haddingtonshire and died in the town of Haddington at a very advanced age, in which place he taught a school. He was much respected and bore a very excellent Christian character.”
5. Pages 41-42: “In November [1836] following, I went to Whittingham, in East Lothian or Haddingtonshire, and for the next two years was employed as an assistant in the fine gardens of James Balfour, Esq., near the foot of the Lammermoor Hills, and a few miles from the old seaport town of Dunbar. This is a beautiful and fertile district. My father's family belonged to the same quarter, and I learned some interesting particulars concerning them from people of the same name and race.”
6. Page 57: “He was an old friend of my father's; a school-fellow and fellow-workman in early life.” [Referring to a Mr. Richmond, the forester on the estate Castle Semple where William was working 1831-1842]
7. Another reference to James Sr. is found in the obituary of William's brother Douglas who died at Cheraw, SC on May 5, 1877:

“One of his [Douglas'] ancestors, James Nisbet, of Haddington, long kept a side-school* in that ancient burgh. A curious story is recorded of him. Once a discussion arose in the school regarding the pronunciation of the word “devil.” The dominie decided it by saying, “Ca' him ‘deevil;’ it's guid aneuch for him.”

*Side school refers to small, usually rural, schools within a parish, typically with a single room and instructor, affiliated with a main school.

8. In a travel diary written by Douglas Nisbet in 1851, Douglas notes as he is leaving Edinburgh: *Wednesday 6th August*
Accompanied by my Sister Isabella we left “Auld Reekie” (the name sometimes given to Edinburgh) by Rail Road and Steamboat for Kirkcaldy (my Mother's native place – Edinburgh being my Father's birth place)

In this passage, Douglas may have been referring to the greater Edinburgh area, including Haddington, as his father's birthplace. Or, this could in

fact indicate that James Jr. was indeed born in Edinburgh proper. No record of such a birth is found in either Edinburgh or the surrounding parishes.

9. Another reference confirming that James's father was also named James has been found in one of the bibles of William Nisbet, now in the possession of his gg grandson William Bemis of Tucson, AZ. That bible, inscribed in William's hand, but written in the third person, is as follows: *"William Nisbet son of James Nisbet and Helen Nicol was born at Saint Marys Isle, Kirkcudbrightshire, Scotland 21st July 1816. His paternal grandfather was James Nisbet of Haddington, Scotland."*
10. Another confirmation that the father of James Nisbet Jr. was also named James Nisbet is apparent when one examines the birth names James Jr gave his children. In 1798, they named their first-born son James, which is entirely consistent with Scottish naming conventions of that period. The first-born son was typically named after the father's father. James Jr. and his wife Helen strictly followed the naming convention with their subsequent two children, naming their second son after Helen's father John and their first daughter after Helen's mother, Margaret Welsh, lending further credence to the inference that James Jr.'s father was also named James.

Notes about possible siblings of James (b.1772).

The naming of children at this time in Scotland typically followed this convention:

Male Child:

- 1st son named after father's father.
- 2nd son named after mother's father.
- 3rd son named after father.

Female Child:

- 1st daughter named after mother's mother.
- 2nd daughter named after father's mother.
- 3rd daughter named after mother.

The way in which James Jr. and Helen Nicol Nisbet named their children can shed light on James Jr.'s roots. As noted above, they named their first son James in honor of James Jr.'s father. They appropriately named their second son after Helen's father John Nicol and their first daughter after Helen's mother Margaret Welsh. They should have named their third son after James Jr., but that name had previously been assigned to the first-born son, so the third son was named Walter. The inspiration for the name Walter was probably Helen's older brother Walter who had gained renown as a horticulturist.

At least through the first four children, it appears they were sticking precisely to the naming conventions for children. The fact that their fifth child, a second daughter, born in 1811, was named Helen could indicate that James Jr's mother was named Helen. However, there are a number of other explanations for choosing the name Helen for this daughter. One is that there had been a stillbirth or infant death of a baby girl between Margaret's birth in 1803 and the baby

in 1811, and that infant had been given the name of James' mother. Thus, the baby in 1811 would have been the third daughter and was appropriately given name of the mother. This explanation for naming the baby Helen is tenuous as there is no record of any birth or death of an infant girl in the Nisbet family of Kirkcudbright during this time period – and all other births were dutifully recorded.

Another explanation is that James' mother was named Margaret and since that name had already been assigned to the first daughter, the second daughter was given the name usually assigned to the third daughter. A third possibility is that James' mother was unknown or a ne'er-do-well and her son did not want to propagate her memory, and thus for the 2nd daughter they skipped over the father's mother's name and gave the second daughter the name of the mother.

In summary, based on child naming conventions, the mother of James Jr. may have been named Helen, Margaret, or something altogether different. I think Margaret is a good possibility based on Old Parish Register research noted below.

Another look at the names of the children of James and Helen Nicol Nisbet supports the idea that they used the names of their own siblings for subsequent children.

As mentioned above, they took the name of a brother of Helen's for their 3rd son, Walter. The 4th son (b.1807) was named Robert. Helen Nicol did not have a brother so named, so Robert may have been the name of a brother of James. Their 5th son (b.1809) was named Henry and this is likely a family forename of some sort. As far as we know, Helen had no brother of this name, but there are number of other Henry Nicols in the records and one could be a cherished uncle or other family member of Helen's. Of course the name Henry could be from James Jr.'s family, though there are few Henry Nisbets in the parish records. The 3rd daughter (b.1813) was named Isabella, probably in honor of Helen's closest sister Isabella Nicol (b.1776). The 6th son was named William, a very common name among Nisbets. Helen did have a brother named William but he died as a youth before she was born, so it is doubtful she recycled that name. It is quite likely that William was the name of a brother of James.

One final data point. In June, 1840, Helen Nicol Nisbet writes to her son William that while in Liverpool visiting two of her daughters, "*William Nisbet called three times. he is a fine young man. he has got into a better situation and I dare say is in a fair way of getting forward in the world .*" There is no explanation about who this young man William Nisbet is, but one might assume it is a first cousin of son William's from the Nisbet side, possibly the son of a brother of James Jr.

Possible Picture of James Nisbet (b.1772)



This is a photograph of a small miniature painting in a gilded frame that is currently in the possession of a descendant of Mary Anna Nisbet in South Carolina.

Many years ago, a descendant of William Nisbet (1816-1886), who had been in touch with the South Carolina cousins, made a photographic copy of the miniature and labeled it “James Nisbet 1772-1834)” indicating she believed it represented James Jr. This has merit as the gilded frame is one of a pair – the other showing a middle-aged woman of the era who is likely Helen Nicol Nisbet – and these frames appear to have been the treasures possessions of their son Douglas Nisbet.

The Children and Descendants of James (Jr.) and Helen Nicol

1st GENERATION						
James Nisbet (1772-1834)		Married September 9, 1796 Abbotshall, Kirkaldy		Helen Nicol (1778-1856)		
2nd GENERATION				3rd GENERATION		
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 Nisbet	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

Summary – Thus far

Taking all these data points into account, we have this picture of the birth family of James (b.1772):

1. Father was named James (James Sr.), a schoolteacher in or around Haddington who lived a long life.
2. Mother was possibly named Margaret or Helen.
3. May have had brothers named Robert and William, and one of them may have had a son named William. May also have had a brother or other relative named Henry.
4. James Sr.'s family was from the area of Whittingham in Haddingtonshire

Old Parish Register Search on ScotlandsPeople.com

In this section, I document an extensive search of the OPR of Scotland. Since no direct record of the birth of James Jr in 1772 has been found, and no other references to his birth family can be traced, I focused on trying to find collateral information that might shed light on his roots.

In family records, James's birth is noted as 25 December 1772. Interesting this is Christmas Day, though this may be of no special significance. Christmas Day was not celebrated as a special holiday in Scotland until the mid-1900s.

Only one birth of a James Nisbet is recorded for the years 1772-1773, and that is for parents William Nisbet and Jean Gowan of West Calder Parish on Jan. 16, 1772. This seems very unlikely to be our James due to date (nearly a year early), name of father (not James), and the location of parish being near Glasgow.

It appears our James Jr.'s birth is not in the surviving records. This is not unusual as records can be lost, destroyed in fire, or not even written in the first place. The OPRs that survive today are noted to be quite incomplete and full of gaps in time and location. So it is very possible that the records of the Nisbet birth family of James Jr. simply falls into one of those gaps and the information has been permanently lost.

In searching for information on James Jr.'s birth family, there are a couple of lines of research to explore:

1. Were his parents married and is there a record of such?

- a. One problem with this approach is that if the record of James' birth is lost, then all the records of that parish for that time period (if there were any) could be lost, including his parents' marriage record.
2. Are there other Nisbet families of that time and region for whom other children are recorded with names that would be compatible with the names he chose for his own children?
 - a. This assumes that the births of James' siblings are in the records but his is not, so this is subject to the same uncertainty as in 1.a above.
3. Helen's mention of a William Nisbet in her 1840 letter is an interesting data point. Assuming he is possibly a nephew of James, can an investigation of this William Nisbet shed any light on the birth family of James?

1. Marriage of James' Parents – OPR Marriage and Birth Records

Trying to find the marriage of James (b.1772) parents, the husband being named James Nisbet.

- Assumes the following:
 - His parents were married when he was born, and
 - The marriage was recorded in one of the surviving parish registers
- James (b.1772) would have been the child of a woman married to a father named James. For this exercise I assume the child was from a marriage within 25 years previous to his birth.
- Following are all the James Nisbets recorded in the Old Parish Registers as being married between 1747 and 1772. One of these could be the father of James (b.1772).
- The most likely parishes are in East Lothian and MidLothian/Edinburgh, but all are included as marriages could have taken place some distance from where children were later born to those parents.
- The plan is to look at the children for each marriage and see if there are naming patterns, location, or timing that might point towards or away from each couple.

Marriages 1747 to 1772 of a James Nisbet			Marr. Date			Parish	Children Notes	Match?	Notes
NISBET	JAMES	JANET ALEXANDER/FR598 (FR598)	08/05/1747	773	30 / 43	WEST LINTON	last of five children born 1759	Prob No	Mother's name not used in later generations
NISBET	JAMES	JANET HUNTER/FR1822 (FR1822)	19/07/1747	685 / 1	480 / 78	EDINBURGH	No children found	Prob No	
NISBET	JAMES	AGNES MARSHAL/FR977 (FR977)	27/11/1747	691	40 / 40	LASSWADE	No children found	Prob No	
NISBET	JAMES	MARION MARTINE/FR561 (FR561)	13/11/1748	629	20 / 220	CARLUKE	No children found	Prob No	location not good
NISBET	JAMES	ISOBEL NEIL/FR496 (FR496)	07/08/1753	476	20 / 131	DENNY	1760 Janet	Prob No	location not good
NIZBET	JAMES	ISABELL NIELL/FR1021 (FR1021)	14/08/1753	483	40 / 137	KILSYTH	1757 John		
NISBET	JAMES	MARGARET MURRAY/FR1902 (FR1902)	18/11/1753	685 / 1	480 / 231	EDINBURGH	No children found	Prob No	
NISBET	JAMES	ISOBEL THOMSON/FR677 (FR677)	03/12/1756	626	20 / 320	CADDER	No children found	Prob No	
NISBET	JAMES	ANN WHYTE/FR314 (FR314)	12/07/1758	703	10 / 301	ATHELSTANEFORD	1765 Margaret, 1769 Mary, 2/11/1770 John, 9/2/1771 James,	Maybe	Marriage in Haddington area but children born in Kelso a bit south of East Lothian--maybe two diff couples? Name of mother Ann not used in later generations
NISBAT	JAMES	MAIREN /CULBERTSON FR1768 (FR1768)	29/06/1760	709	60 / 259	HADDINGTON	No children found	Prob No	
NISBET	JAMES	ALISON BROWN/FR472 (FR472)	24/05/1760	737	20 / 162	ECCLES	SAME AS FOGO BELOW	Prob No	Location okay, but mother's name not used in later generations
NISBET	JAMES	ALISON BROWN/FR237 (FR237)	02/07/1760	740	10 / 228	FOGO	9/9/1770 James born to James Nisbet, no mother recorded, other children 1762 Robert, 1764 Patrick, 1765 John, 1768 Patrick. All at Fogo		
NISSBET	JAMES	JANET RICHMOND/FR323 (FR323)	12/02/1762	603	10 / 299	LOUDOUN	1762 James, 1765 Matthew, 1767 James, 1769 John, 1770 Elizabeth, 7/25/1773 Archibald	Prob No	Second James too early, Elizabeth too close, location not right
NISBET	JAMES	ISABEL RUTHERFORD/FR591 (FR591)	19/09/1762	762	30 / 253	INNERLEITHEN	1763 Robert	Prob No	No children after 1763
NIZBET	JAMES	JANET BALLENI/FR293 (FR293)	06/01/1763	687	20 / 136	GLENCORSE	1763 John, 1766 Margaret, 3/3/1771 James, 4/1773 David	Prob No	Their James is early and David is early 1773
NISBIT	JAMES	AGNES GIBSON/FR326 (FR326)	12/11/1763	603	10 / 302	LOUDOUN	No children found	Prob No	
NISBET	JAMES	AGNES GIBSON/FR383 (FR383)	02/12/1763	592	20 / 110	FENWICK	DUPLICATE OF ABOVE		
NISBITT	JAMES	ISOBEL GREIVE/FR419 (FR419)	24/06/1766	839	20 / 55	LANGHOLM OR STAPLEGORTON	No children found	Prob No	
NISBET	JAMES	ELIZABETH WADDEL/FR300 (FR300)	28/06/1767	673	20 / 139	WHITBURN	No children found	Prob No	
NISBET	JAMES	NAME NOT GIVEN//FR448 (FR448)	16/04/1769	727	20 / 184	AYTON	At nearby Eyemouth, James Nisbit with no mother named had 1/1771 Elizabeth and 5/1773 James. Possibly same or another James Nisbet with Margaret Hey (Hay) had 6 children 1775-1793.	Maybe	Location pretty distant from Haddington. James birth could have been recorded 6 months after birth? No mother recorded.
NEISBIT	JAMES	JEAN COUAN/FR1647 (FR1647)	12/05/1769	622	60 / 189	BARONY	Jean Cowan. 2/1772 Margaret, 1774 Jean, 1777 Isobel	Prob No	Daughter in 1772, all children born in Glasgow
NISBET	JAMES	NAME NOT GIVEN//FR491 (FR491)	16/12/1769	745	20 / 193	HUTTON	Hutton births to James Nisbet: 1/1772 William, 1775 Helen, 1775 Anthony, 1777 Marjory, 1777 Elizabeth, 1780 Robert, 1782 George, 1785 Peter, 1787 Elizabeth, 1790 George, 1792 Margaret, 1793 James, 1795 Helen	Prob No	Obviously two James Nisbets having children in Hutton in this time period, both had children not named James in 1772
NISBET	JAMES	ISOBEL WATTERSTON/FR272 (FR272)	17/02/1771	685 / 1	490 / 481	EDINBURGH	10/1772 Isobell, 1774 Marrion, 1776 Agnes, 1778 James, 1781 William	Prob No	Daughter in late 1772
NISBET	JAMES	AGNES BROWN/FR1500 (FR1500)	26/03/1771	663	50 / 63	BO'NESS	2/1772 Mary, 1774 Robert, 1776 James, 1783 James, 1786 William, 1789 Susan, 1792 Andrew,	Prob No	Daughter in 1772 -- Bo'ness then Bathgate after 1786.
NISBET	JAMES	ELIZABETH LAMB/FR196 (FR196)	18/05/1771	717	10 / 333	PRESTONKIRK	8/1772 Agnes, 1775 Margaret, 1779 William, 1782 Mary	Prob No	Daughter in 1772 -- Whittinghame and Prestonkirk - most certainly related, maybe a close cousin named James
NISBET	JAMES	ELIZABETH LAMB/FR155 (FR155)	19/05/1771	712	20 / 54	MORHAM	DUPLICATE OF ABOVE		

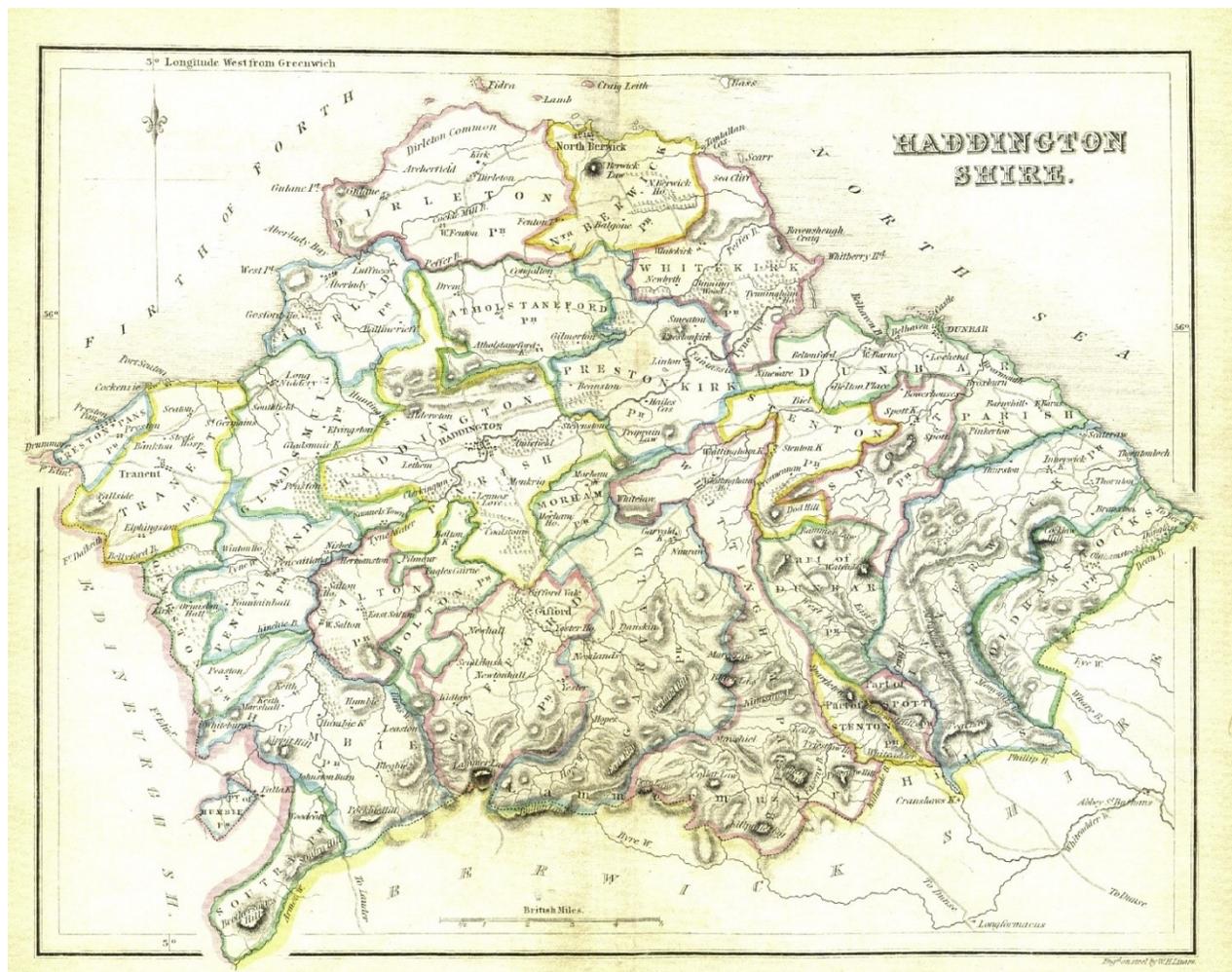
Conclusion: The exercise to search for James Jr.'s parents' marriage does not yield any likely candidates. In most cases the children, or lack thereof, and the location of the parish eliminates these parents. James' parents could indeed be somewhere in this list, but the data to identify them is lacking.

2. Looking for Siblings of James (b.1772) among OPR Birth Records

This line of research assumes that the birth of some of James' siblings may have been recorded whereas his was not recorded or was lost. The following assumptions are also made:

- James' father was in fact named James
- The focus is parishes in East Lothian, Midlothian, Berwick. Less likely, but nearby shires of Roxburgh, Peebles and Selkirk are included. Family records state in multiple places that James' family was from Haddingtonshire, most of which is in East Lothian now.
- To look for siblings, focus on five years +/- of James' reported birth year 1772

Sample parish map – Haddingtonshire



Births to a James Nisbet 1765-1775

Shire	Child	Parents	M/F	Date			Parish	Match?	Notes	
EL	NISBET	ROBERT	JAMES NISBET/AGNES BROWN FR876 (FR876)	M	30/01/1774	663	30 / 334	BO'NESS	No	Family with child too close to James
EL	NISBET	MARY	JAMES NISBET/AGNES BROWN FR854 (FR854)	F	02/02/1772	663	30 / 289	BO'NESS	No	Too close to James
B	NISBET	ANDREW	JAMES NISBET/MARGARET RAMSAY FR774 (FR774)	M	25/08/1767	735	30 / 319	DUNS	Maybe	Name not used in later gens
B	NISBET	JAMES	JAMES NISBET/MARGARET RAMSAY FR788 (FR788)	M	30/05/1770	735	30 / 333	DUNS	Maybe	too early for our James but could have died as infant and next child in 1772 named James
M	NISBET	FRANCES	JAMES NISBET/MARGARET PETRIE FR8860 (FR8860)	F	13/02/1771	685 / 1	330 / 315	EDINBURGH	Prob No	Name not used in later gen. No other births for this couple, no record of marriage.
M	NISBET	ISOBELL	JAMES NISBET/ISOBEL WEATHERSTON FR9006 (FR9006)	F	22/10/1772	685 / 1	340 / 124	EDINBURGH	No	Too close to James
M	NISBET	MARRION	JAMES NISBET/ISOBEL WATERSTON FR9165 (FR9165)	F	27/10/1774	685 / 1	350 / 64	EDINBURGH	No	Family with child too close to James
B	NISBET	MARGARET	JAMES NISBET/MARGARET HEY FR270 (FR270)	F	31/07/1775	739	20 / 25	EYEMOUTH	Prob No	Marriage not recorded, this is first of six children, last in 1793
B	NISBIT	JAMES	JAMES NISBIT/	M	04/05/1773	739	20 / 22	EYEMOUTH	Prob No	Too close to James, unless this is our James
B	NISBIT	ELIZABETH	JAMES NISBIT/	F	01/09/1771	739	20 / 20	EYEMOUTH		Name not used in later gens
B	NISBIT	JANET	JAMES NISBIT/	F	21/01/1770	739	20 / 19	EYEMOUTH		Name not used in later gens
B	NISBET	JAMES	JAMES NISBET/	M	09/09/1770	740	10 / 137	FOGO	Prob No	Could have died young and another James born 1772?
B	NISBET	JOHN	JAMES NISBET/	M	15/12/1765	740	10 / 132	FOGO		Name not used in later gens
B	NISBET	THOMAS	JAMES NISBET/	M	20/10/1775	740	10 / 143	FOGO		Name not used in later gens
B	NISBIT	PATRICK	JAMES NISBIT/	M	20/11/1768	740	10 / 135	FOGO		Name not used in later gens
M	NIZBET	DAVID	JAMES NIZBET/JANET BALLENNIE FR144 (FR144)	M	04/07/1773	687	10 / 220	GLENCORSE	No	Too close to James
M	NIZBET	JAMES	JAMES NIZBET/JANET BALLENNIE FR140 (FR140)	M	03/03/1771	687	10 / 210	GLENCORSE	No	Family with child too close to James
M	NIZBET	MARGARET	JAMES NIZBET/JANET BALENNIE FR134 (FR134)	F	09/03/1766	687	10 / 198	GLENCORSE	No	Family with child too close to James
B	NISBET	ANTHONY	JAMES NISBET/	M	07/05/1775	745	20 / 72	HUTTON	Prob No	Name not used in later gens
B	NISBET	WILLIAM	JAMES NISBET/	M	14/04/1770	745	20 / 64	HUTTON		apparently died young
B	NISBET	WILLIAM	JAMES NISBET/	M	01/03/1772	745	20 / 67	HUTTON		Close to James, but possible, other names good (William/Helen)
B	NISBET	HELEN	JAMES NISBET/	F	20/03/1775	745	20 / 72	HUTTON		
R	NISBET	MARGARET	JAMES NISBET/ANNE WHITE FR843 (FR843)	F	02/12/1765	793	30 / 213	KELSO	Maybe	
R	NISBET	MARY	JAMES NISBET/ANNE WHITE FR863 (FR863)	F	10/01/1769	793	30 / 250	KELSO		name not used in later gens
R	NISBET	JOHN	JAMES NISBET/ANNE WHITE FR869 (FR869)	M	11/02/1770	793	30 / 261	KELSO		
R	NISBET	JAMES	JAMES NISBET/ANN WHITE FR880 (FR880)	M	02/09/1771	793	30 / 282	KELSO		too early for our James but could have died as infant and next child the following year named James
R	NISBET	-----	JAMES NISBET/ANNE WHYTE FR897 (FR897)	M	28/06/1774	793	30 / 315	KELSO		
EL	NISBET	CHARLES	JAMES NISBET/CATHARINE RICHARDSON FR147 (FR147)	M	27/07/1766	714	10 / 268	OLDHAMSTOCKS	Prob No	Name not used in later gens
EL	NISBET	MARGARET	JAMES NISBET/ELIZABETH LAMB FR398 (FR398)	F	29/01/1775	717	20 / 141	PRESTONKIRK	No	Family with child too close to James
EL	NISBET	AGNES	JAMES NISBET/ELISABETH LAMB FR356 (FR356)	F	08/03/1772	724	20 / 7	WHITTINGEHAME		Too close to James, name not used in later gens.

EL=East Lothian

M=Midlothian

B=Berwick

R=Roxburgh

No births in Selkirk and Peebles

No record of marriage. Location pretty far from Haddington but could be they moved there later

Kelso is pretty far from Haddington. Mother's name Ann not used in later generations.

Conclusion: This exercise did not yield any records highly likely to be associated with the birth family of James Jr. A couple of possible matches emerged, but they tend to be in parishes distant from Haddington where the senior James is said to have been a schoolmaster.

3. Search for the William Nisbet referred to in Helen Nicol Nisbet's letter of June 5, 1840

Helen Nicol Nisbet (HNN) was in Liverpool visiting two daughters working there as seamstresses. In writing to her son William (b.1816), she describes another William Nisbet who visited while she was there.

“William Nisbet called three times he is a fine young man he has got into a better situation and I dare say is in a fair way of getting forward in the world.”

Because this young man visited so often during the week Helen was there, it appears he was close to the family. Also, she speaks to her son as if this William were quite familiar to him. From these insights, I make the presumption that the “fine young man” is a nephew, the son of a brother of her husband James – thus a first cousin of Helen's son William.

This line of research looks in the OPRs for all William Nisbets born during a period which would make him appear to be a “young man” to 62-year-old Helen in 1840 – say 19 to 32 years old. This gives a range of birth years from 1808 to 1821.

Conclusion: Results shown in table below yield one strong possible match, potentially identifying a brother of James named Robert. This is a possible match because:

- This Robert Nisbet married Elizabeth Campbell at Riccarton Parish near Kilmarnock on October 27, 1794. Over the next 25 years, they would have 8 children recorded first at Riccarton and then at several nearby parishes. James was the name of their first child, born 9/7/1795 and according to naming traditions this first son was named after the father's father. (our James Jr. (b.1772) did likewise)
- Their second son was named William and this should have been the name of the mother's father. The records show an Elizabeth Campbell with father William born Kilmarnock 4/7/1779. She would have been 15 when she married – not uncommon at the time. No mother is recorded. It is quite possible that a Robert Nisbet, born in or near Haddington, could have been in the Kilmarnock area (Riccarton is nearby) working and married a local girl such as Elizabeth. Our James Jr. did just this when he married Helen Nicol at Kirkcaldy two years after Robert.
- Their third child was Anne, born 7/6/1800, and this should have been the name of Elizabeth's mother.
- Their fourth child was Robert, born 12/29/1803, named after the father, which is fully consistent with the naming convention.
- Number five was another William, presumably replacing the earlier William who may have died young. This William, born 8/2/1810, would have been 29 in June of 1840 and may have been the “fine young man” of which Helen wrote. William could be the name of a brother of Robert (and thus James Jr.).
- The sixth child is Margaret, born 9/25/1812. By naming conventions this should be

the name of the father's (Robert's) mother. His suspected brother in Kirkcudbright named their first daughter Margaret after HNN's mother. But, when the second daughter was born to James Jr/HNN, they named it Helen. If James Jr.'s mother had been a Margaret as well, and they already had a Margaret, then they may have moved on to the next name in the convention, the name of the mother of the child (Helen). So this is entirely consistent with naming conventions and indicates that James' (b.1772), and Robert's, parents could have been James and Margaret Nisbet.

- The seventh child was Thomas, born 11/10/1816 and this could have been a brother of one of the parents – possibly from the mother's side since it was not used in naming the children of James Jr.
- The eighth and final child recorded for this couple was Mary, born 7/19/1819. This could have been a sibling or relative of Robert's as over in Kirkcudbright, James and Helen Nisbet named their last child Mary Anna, in 1823.

In summary, there is a lot of information in the chosen names of the children of Robert Nisbet to support – and nothing to contradict – the presumption that Robert was the brother of James (b.1772). In addition, the possibility that James and Robert's mother was named Margaret is also supported by these facts.

Searching for the family of William Nisbet who may have been a cousin

		Parents	Birth Date	Age in 1840			Parish	Dist from Hadd.	Match?	Notes
NISBET	WILLIAM	CHARLES NISBET/JANET SYME	06/03/1808	32	414	20 / 313	CARNOCK	3	Prob No	Only one child recorded
NISBET	WILLIAM	JOHN NISBET/MARGARET LEITCH FR287 (FR287)	08/05/1808	32	573 / 1	10 / 452	PAISLEY HIGH CHURCH	4	Prob No	Only one child recorded
NISBET	WILLIAM	CHARLES NISBET/MARGARET PEDDIE FR2736 (FR2736)	02/10/1808	32	424	90 / 77	DUNFERMLINE	3	Prob No	Only one child recorded
NISBET	WILLIAM	PETER NISBET/CECIEL ROBERTSON FR308 (FR308)	25/04/1809	31	738	20 / 52	EDROM	2	Prob No	Only one child recorded
NISBET	WILLIAM	WILLIAM NISBET/JANET ROXBURGH FR2107 (FR2107)	22/02/1810	30	644 / 1	200 / 492	GLASGOW	4	Prob No	Only one child recorded
NISBET	WILLIAM	JAMES NISBET/JANET WHYTE FR1358 (FR1358)	02/07/1810	30	483	60 / 139	KILSYTH	4	No	Father named James
NISBET	WILLIAM	FRANCIS NISBET/ELIZABETH GREDON FR1706 (FR1706)	04/08/1810	30	709	50 / 327	HADDINGTON	1	Prob No	Father name not used in later gens.
NISBET	WILLIAM	ROBERT NISBET/ELIZABETH CAMPBELL FR211 (FR211)	20/08/1810	30	612 / 1	10 / 190	ST QUIVOX	4	Definite Maybe!	First son named James in 1795! Second daughter named Margaret! Father name Robert consistent with 4th son in JN/HNNfamily. 1st daughter Anne (after wife's mother, final two named Thomas and Mary) 7 other children spanning 1795-1819. Could be two couples, but only one marriage recorded (1794 at Riccarton). 2nd William born 1810 after 7 year gap (no death of earlier William recorded)
NISBET	WILLIAM	WILLIAM NISBET/MAGDALANE WILSON FR1647 (FR1647)	09/12/1810	30	479	50 / 450	FALKIRK	3	Prob No	First son not James. 7 other children 1805-1819. Father name not used in later gens.
NISBET	WILLIAM	JAMES NISBET/ELIZABETH THOMSON FR1648 (FR1648)	20/01/1811	29	479	50 / 452	FALKIRK	3	No	Father named James
NISBET	WILLIAM	ANDREW NISBET/JEAN AITCHISON FR892 (FR892)	08/03/1811	29	706	40 / 135	DUNBAR	1	Prob No	First son not James. 6 other children 1809-1820 Father name not used in later gens.
NISBET	WILLIAM	ALEX NISBET/MARY LOWDEN	25/08/1811	29	495	20 / 107	CUMBERNAULD	3	Maybe	First son named James in 1804! Then John 1806, Alexander 1813, Elizabeth 1816, Archibald 1818, Mary 1821.
NISBET	WILLIAM	JOHN NISBET/ELISABETH ALLAN FR2598 (FR2598)	30/05/1812	28	692 / 2	80 / 235	LEITH SOUTH	2	Prob No	First son William not James, 3 other children 1812-1816
NISBET	WILLIAM	JAMES NISBET/ISABELLA KIRKPATRICK FR142 (FR142)	21/12/1815	25	879	10 / 135	RERRICK	4	No	Father named James
NISBET	WILLIAM	WILLIAM NISBET/ELISABETH JAMIESON FR409 (FR409)	24/12/1815	25	723	20 / 142	WHITEKIRK AND TYNNINGHAME	1	Prob No	Only one child recorded
NISBET	WILLIAM	JAMES NISBET/HELEN NICOL FR236 (FR236)	21/07/1816	24	871	10 / 447	KIRKCUDBRIGHT	4	No	Our William
NISBET	WILLIAM	PETER NISBET/AGNES DARLING FR254 (FR254)	06/12/1816	22	704	10 / 299	BOLTON	1	Prob No	Father name not used in later gens. Did not name first son James. Had 7 children 1801-1816
NISBET	WILLIAM	ROBERT NISBET/MARGARET FISHER FR583 (FR583)	07/04/1818	22	685 / 1	420 / 192	EDINBURGH	2	Prob No	Earliest child 1816 named Alexander
NISBET	WILLIAM	ALEXANDER NISBET/MARGARET RAE FR1764 (FR1764)	20/02/1819	21	709	50 / 437	HADDINGTON	1	Prob No	5 children 1813-1820, Names not a good match. First son Alexander implying grandfather was not a James
NISBET	WILLIAM	WILLIAM NISBET OR ARCHIBALD MARY THOMSON FR272 (FR272)	14/02/1820	20	807	20 / 6	SPROUSTON	2	Prob No	Only one child recorded
NISBET	WILLIAM	WILLIAM NISBET/AGNES JOHNSTON FR3522 (FR3522)	27/02/1820	20	644 / 1	300 / 34	GLASGOW	4	Prob No	Three children 1813-1820, no James
NISBET	WILLIAM	WILLIAM NISBET/AGNES THOMSON FR701 (FR701)	29/05/1820	20	644 / 2	40 / 11	GORBALS	4	Prob No	Only one child recorded
NISBET	WILLIAM	JOHN NISBET/AGNESS GILRAY FR 353 (FR353)	14/07/1820	20	804	20 / 31	ST BOSWELLS	2	Prob No	First son named William in 1820
NISBET	WILLIAM	JAMES NISBET/AGNES BUCHANAN FR3596 (FR3596)	17/04/1821	19	644 / 1	300 / 181	GLASGOW	4	No	Father named James
NISBET	WILLIAM	JOHN NISBET/CHRISTIAN ROBERTSON FR3585 (FR3585)	16/05/1821	19	424	120 / 102	DUNFERMLINE	3	Prob No	First son named Charles in 1812, 4 other children to 1821
NISBETT	WILLIAM	JOHN NISBETT/ANNE PEN FR284 (FR284)	27/12/1817	23	583	10 / 272	COYLTON	4	Prob No	Only one child recorded
NISBETT	WILLIAM	ARCHIBALD NISBETT/HELEN MURDOCH FR1216 (FR1216)	01/12/1815	25	559	30 / 487	ABBEY	4	Prob No	Only one child recorded
NIESBETT	WILLIAM	WILLIAM NIESBETT/CATHERINE PATTERSON	23/08/1812	28	652	10 / 306	OLD MONKLAND OR COATBRIDGE	4	Prob No	Only one child recorded
NESBET	WILLIAM	WILLIAM NESBET/MARY INGLIS FR1097 (FR1097)	05/11/1815	25	632	10 / 442	CARNWATH	3	Prob No	Only one child recorded

Notes on James Sr. being related to the family of Charles Nisbet (1736-1804)

Some researchers have connected our James Sr. to the birth family of Charles Nisbet (b.1736), minister and first president of Dickinson College in Carlisle, PA, USA. Charles was born to William Nisbet and Alison Hepburn. William was a schoolteacher in Long Yester which is near Haddington. William and Alison had 7 children commencing with Elizabeth in 1726, the last, William, arriving in 1744. The possibility that William and Alison Nisbet are also the parents of our James Jr., born nearly 30 years later in 1772, is far beyond biological realities.

If they are not the parents of James Jr., could they be the grandparents or even great-grandparents of James Jr.? This is a possibility as William and Alison did have a son James born Feb 28, 1731, who would have been 41 in 1772 when James Jr. was born. However, in the extensive public record of Charles Nisbet, who was well known later in life, only two brothers, Andrew and William are noted. A brother James is not mentioned at all. From this we may one interpretation is that brother James (b.1731) died young (as did, apparently a previous child James born 1728) and thus deserved no mention in Charles' biographies. Or, possibly, the brother James, unlike Charles' other two brothers who followed notable professions (ministry, merchant), may have ended up as a laborer in agriculture or gardening and thus was not deserving of mention in official biographies. Possibly he even had some criminal or disreputable history which excluded him from being mentioned alongside the distinguished Charles.

Also, the 41-year difference between William and Alison's son James and our James Jr. could be explained by two generations of James - with the intermediate James being born about 1751. Thus the lineage in this case would be William Nisbet abt 1700 > James 1731 > James abt 1751, our James 1772. This is quite possible given that the first-born son of each James would be named James and therefore born at a relatively early age of the father.

Could Charles Nisbet's brother James have been our James Sr.'s father or grandfather? It is possible, but seems somewhat unlikely for these reasons:

- The schoolteacher in the family history would be James Jr.'s grandfather or great-grandfather, not father as noted. And the school would be in nearby Yester, not Haddington proper. Both of these are distinctly possible, but both would have to be true.
- The famous Charles Nisbet would have been the uncle or great-uncle of our James Jr, gardener at Kirkcudbright. Charles died in 1804, long before two of James Jr.'s sons emigrated to America in 1839-42 where Charles' son Alexander, a well-known judge in Baltimore was living. One would think William and Douglas should have known of their distinguished relatives in America, but no mention is made of this in family documents.

- The lack of mention of a brother James in Charles's writings and biography is troubling – explainable, but troubling to this line of thinking. However, if the brother died young, say soon after fathering a child around 1750, he may not have warranted mention in later writings.

The best way to investigate a possible link to William and Alison Nisbet would be through DNA testing of descendants of this couple. It appears Charles' brothers Andrew and William had no children and there is no information on sisters Elizabeth and Susan. The only known descendants are through Charles's son Alexander and daughter Alison, and there appear to be very few. Tracking down these descendants is a potential area for study in the future.

Further Research Opportunities

I feel at this point I have exhausted the examination of the OPRs that can be done online. Next steps could be:

- Examine the town and church records for Haddington and the surrounding communities, focusing on the supposition that James Sr. was a schoolteacher and ran a side-school there.
 - This is a daunting task and though my wife and I attempted it in June 2022, we only scraped the surface, looking through the town council minutes for that period of time (in which a number of Nisbet families are mentioned).
 - The story that James Sr. was a schoolteacher in Haddington is repeated in several family documents, but since this has never been verified, there is the possibility this story has morphed through the generations. Maybe it was the grandfather who was the schoolteacher, not the father. Maybe it was not in Haddington, but nearby. This would widen the search considerably.
- DNA testing. Follow-up with individuals who match to the Nisbet DNA provided by James Robert Nisbet of San Luis Obispo, CA, a direct male descendant of James Jr. Try to find connections with distant Nisbet cousins identified as DNA matches.
- Track down descendants of William Nisbet and Alison Hepburn, potentially through their son Charles and his children.
- ??? I am at a loss to come up with other avenues at this time and will likely set aside this search for a while.

Ian Nisbet Ross

December 15, 2022