

Notes on the Nicol Family

Ian Ross August 2023

Author's Note: I have spent many hours navigating the online parish records at Scotland's People and dissecting family documentation trying to untangle the ancestry of my ggg-grandmother Helen Nicol. The following is a summary of where this investigation stands.

Gen 1 Helen Nicol (1778-1856)

Parish records indicate Helen Nicol was born on May 5, 1778 at "Niddry." Also spelled "Niddrie," this is an area of Edinburgh on its eastern outskirts at the time. It borders the area of Duddington, which is recorded as the birthplace of Helen in the 1851 Census of Scotland. Both of these neighborhoods are adjacent to, and at the time may have been part of, Lochend, the estate of the Warrender family, where her father may have been employed as a gardener at the time. The record of her birth, and christening five days later on May 10, 1778, are contained in the records of Liberton Parish. Helen was the youngest of at least 9 children born to John Nicol and Margaret Welsh.

Later in her childhood, she lived at Kirkcaldy, after her father was hired there as head gardener at Raith Estate. At the age of 65 she visited Kirkcaldy in 1843 and described trip in great detail in a letter to her son William:

*"I cannot express what I felt when there after
an absence of 35 years my mind was calm and
placid I felt a kind of sad pleasure – I visited my
Fathers and Mothers grave where they and Sisters and
Brothers mingle together The old stone only remains
which my Father placed on my Brother George
I gathered a few leaves which I dried and brought
with me – The meeting with my Sister Mary was
very affecting I would not have known her such a
change had 35 years made in us both – yes
as many more years and where shall we be"*

From this passage we know that Helen's father and mother and some siblings, including a brother George, are buried at Abottshall Churchyard in Kirkcaldy. And that she had a living sister named Mary in 1843.

Helen's youngest son, Douglas, in an 1851 journal, describes Kirkcaldy as his mother's "native place." Although not precisely true, this may be an indication that the Nicol family moved to Raith Estate while Helen was quite young.

Two years after her father's death, 18-year-old Helen Nicol married James Nisbet, a gardener, at Abbottshall in 1796.

Gen -1: Parents and Family of Helen Nicol

John Nicol (1740-1794)

Records show a man who is likely our John Nicol, born May 15, 1740 at Cranshaws Parish to parents William Nicol and Anne Samuel. John Nicol, last name spelled variously, was a relatively common name at the time, but this is likely ours, as the child's father was William, and John named his eldest child William, following the naming convention of the time. Also, according to a story related in two family documents, a woman named Samuel married a Mr. Nicol who was the grandfather of Helen. For these reasons, the birth record of John Nicol appears correct.

On November 21, 1762, John married Margaret Welsh at Edinburgh. Margaret was the daughter of Robert A. Welsh, a farmer at Ladykirk, according to a copy of her marriage certificate in our family archives. The parish record states that at the time John was a gardener in College Kirk Parish.

John Nicol's father, William, died before he was three years old, but he still ended up pursuing the same profession – gardening. John was working at Raith Estate in Kirkcaldy, in Perthshire, at the time of his death in 1794. The church records show he was buried at Abbottshall churchyard. It is unknown how long he had been working at Raith as gardeners did move during their career. In 1763, at the age of 23, when his first child was born, he was working at Warristown [Warriston] estate on the north side of Edinburgh. Two years later, his second child, Margaret, was christened at Inveresk and Musselburgh Parish on the southeast side of Edinburgh. The family was still there in 1767 when son George came along. By 1769, when Walter was born, they were in Niddrie within the Liberton parish on the east edge of the city. This is where they were seven years later when Helen was born, so the move to Perthshire took place after 1778.

John Nicol died in 1794 when Helen was only 16 years old. After his death, she created a small needlework in his memory containing a poem and noting the date of his death “He died, July 17, 1794, in the 54th year of his Age.” This artifact has been handed down through six generations of Nisbets – so far.

Margaret Welsh (1739-1800)

Little is known of Margaret. Her birth year is noted in our records as 1739, but the source of that date only the “61 Years” on her headstone in Kirkcaldy.

A copy of her marriage certificate made by William Nisbet in 1871 indicates she married John Nicol on November 23, 1762 in Edinburgh. It was signed by a minister named Fraser Menzies. It states that she and John were residents of Edinburgh at the time and that Margaret was “*the*

daughter of Robert A. Welsh, farmer at Ladykirk.” Ladykirk is a small village in Berwickshire.

The parish record of the marriage for 11/21/1762 is as follows, “*John Nicoll Gardener in College Kirk parish and Margt Welsh Daught to Robt Welsh farmer at Ladykirk now in Newkirk parish.*” I am not sure if it is just Margaret in Newkirk or whether it refers to her father now being in that parish. No record of a Robert Welsh of Ladykirk has been found.

Margaret’s death is recorded in Abbottshall parish where she was buried Jan. 6, 1800. She is noted simply as “*Mr. Nicoll’s widow.*” She was buried at the same headstone as her husband.

Siblings of Helen Nicol

William Nicol (1763-)

William’s birthdate of September 5, 1763 is confirmed via parish records. He was born at Warristown [Warriston], a suburb of Edinburgh. His death date and details of his life are unknown.

Margaret Nicol (1765-)

Born May 1, 1765, and christened two days later at Inveresk and Musselburgh parish near Edinburgh. Her death date and details of his life are unknown.

George Nicol (1767-1786)

Born May 5, 1767 and christened five days later at Inveresk and Musselburgh parish. Died February 13, 1786, and was buried at Abbottshall, the first interred at the family stone there.

Anne Nicol (1771-1847?)

Born May 23, 1771, at Niddrie and christened June 2nd at Liberton parish. May have emigrated to America and died at Pattonsburg, VA in 1847 (unconfirmed).

John Nicol (1773-1824)

Born May 17, 1773, at Niddrie and christened two days later at Liberton parish. Died September 9, 1824, and buried three days later at the stone in Abbottshall churchyard. Death record says he was gardener at Mount Melville in Cameron parish. According to the William Nisbet book, he had a son named John who was a builder in Edinburgh. Apparently born in 1800, the son died in December 1877, aged 77.

Jean Nicol (1775-1840)

Born December 18, 1775, at Niddrie and christened six days later at Liberton parish. On July 31, 1792, she married Edward Sang at Abbottshall. They had 11 children. She died July 7, 1840, and was buried at the Nicol stone in Abbottshall churchyard.

Mary Nicol (1782-1849)

Mary’s birth record has not been found, but she died January 7, 1849, and was buried beside her husband James Allan in Abbottshall churchyard. Their marriage record of June 22, 1802 confirms she was the daughter of the late John Nicol, gardener at Raith Gardens. They had three

sons, the first died in infancy. The other two were Willam Allan born in 1806 and John Nicol Allan born in 1810.

Gen -2 Parents of Margaret Welsh

Robert A. Welsh

As mentioned above, no information has been found on Robert Welsh or the mother of Margaret Welsh, though one might assume her name was also Margaret as John and Margaret Nicol named their first daughter Margaret.

Some research indicates Margaret was from Haddingtonshire and was of the same family as a Jane Welsh who married Thomas Carlyle (in a later generation as Jane lived 1801-1866).

Gen -2 Parents of John Nicol

William Nicol (died before April 1743)

He is referred to as "in the farming line from the south country" in History of Nisbet Family by John A. Nisbet 3/12/1908, and in the William Nisbet autobiography.

William Nicol married Anne Samuel on November 26, 1731 in St. Cuthbert's parish as recorded in the parish record for October 31, 1731. In the notation, William is described as "Gardner at Hall-years." Hallyards Caslte was an estate on the western edge of Edinburgh.

In the years after their marriage, the family moved often. The first child, Walter, was born in Tranent in 1734, then Margaret, 1735 in Dalkieth, Isabell, 1738, and John, 1740 in Cranshaws, and William, 1743, in Cranston.

In the birth record of son William in April 1743, William is referred to as deceased, so he died late 1742 or early 1743. This is consistent with the family history written by William Nisbet which states that "Mr. Nicol died before his wife, leaving two sons."

The elder son was Walter Nicol, born June 1, 1734. A Walter Nicol is listed as a witness at his christening and this is presumed to be the child's grandfather, his namesake, but it could be a brother of the father. Walter went on to marry Marion Fowler at Humbie in 1768 and they would have at least three children: William in 1770, Marion in 1772, and James in 1774. William Nicol (1770-1851) would go on to become an acclaimed geologist and the inventor of the "Nicol Prism." He and his sister never married or had children – she served as his housekeeper later in life.

The second son, John Nicol (1740-1794), was the father of Helen Nicol Nisbet. There is no mention in the family records of what become of William's two daughters, Margaret and Isabell, nor the youngest son, William.

Anne Samuel

Anne Samuel was born in the early 1700s, apparently to a wealthy Edinburgh baker named John Samuel and his wife, a daughter of Sir George Warrender, Baronet of Lochend. This information is gleaned from narrative contained in William Nisbet's 1886 autobiography which quotes a document written by his elder brother James in 1843. The quotation was also written out in the personal notebook of William's daughter Helen Nicol Nisbet, later Helen Nisbet Ross, in 1878.

In his book, William writes about his mother's ancestry:

"I believe she was related to the Warrender family of Lochend, in Haddingtonshire. I have been told her grandmother, or great-grandmother was a daughter of Sir George Warrender, and that having contracted a marriage with a person of a lower degree, although of good character, she was, in a measure, discarded by her relatives."

The original narrative written by James in 1843 is presented by William in his book:

About the year 1718 a daughter of Sir George Warrender, Baronet of Lochend, became enamored of a baker in Edinburgh, of the name of Samuel, whom she subsequently married against the remonstrances of her friends. Samuel was a remarkably handsome man, of good character, and wealthy, and after some time the Warrenders became reconciled to the marriage. After Mr. Samuel's death, his widow married his foreman, who proved a dissipated spendthrift. This marriage so displeased her friends that they ceased to countenance her.

She had two children by Mr. Samuel, a boy and a girl. The boy took his marriage and he conduct of his stepfather so much to heart that he secretly left home and was never heard from again. The daughter married a Mr. Nicol, said to have been "in the farming line from the South country." Mr. Nicol died before his wife, leaving two sons. The eldest was the father of the late¹ Professor William Nicol and his sister, Miss Nicol, of Edinburgh. The other was my grandfather, John Nicol. The boys may have been educated at the well-known and ancient "Heriot's Hospital" in Edinburgh, thus showing that their father must have been a respected and reputable man. But their mother was too proud of her descent to consent to this, and so educated them at her own expense. They were both of them able and good men, my grandfather being notably so."

William also notes that brother James wrote, "My mother [Helen Nicol Nisbet], who has seen her grandmother [Anne Samuel], says she lived in the Cannongate, Edinburgh, and died at a very advanced age, about the year 1793. She is described as a very lively, high-spirited old lady. Miss Nicol [Marion Nicol] says her father [Walter Nicol] resided upon the property of Lochend, and she and her brother were born there. I think it probable my grandfather [John Nicol] must also have resided upon the property, my mother being born, as she told me, in East Lothian. Whether the Warrenders ever acknowledged the connection, I know not."

William added his own opinion, "From this it would appear the Warrenders did not entirely ignore this branch of their family. Mr. Nicol, being an agriculturist, very probably was employed as some kind of manager on the estate, or may have held a

farm on it. The above-mentioned Miss Nicol and her brother were very intimate with my brother and his wife, as well as acquainted with and on good terms with all or family. She was well acquainted with her grandmother, from whom she learned the above particulars.”

No record of the birth of Anne Samuel, the daughter of the Warrender daughter and the baker, has been found, and this might be due to the marriage not being sanctioned by the Warrenders. The births of her own five children, fathered by William Nicol, are all duly recorded in the parish registers. If the account of her granddaughter Marion Nicol is accurate, it appears William may have been employed as a gardener or farmer on Lochend Estate before his death in 1742/3.

Based on valuation roles for Edinburgh, it appears that sometime after the death of her husband, leaving her with young children, Anne Samuel had a shop in the Cannongate section of Edinburgh.

A death record for an Ann Samuel is found in Cannongate parish on June 1, 1791, which could be consistent with the mention of Helen Nicol Nisbet’s grandmother dying “about the year 1793.” The only inconsistency is that her age at death is recorded as 90 years old, which is certainly a “very advanced age,” but that puts her birth around the year 1701, which would be inconsistent with the story related above – the one with her parents getting together in about 1718. It may be that the woman was actually 70 years old and the 90 is a mistake. This would put Anne’s birth about 1720, which would be consistent with her parents’ approximate marriage date. This, however, does not match up with her first child being born only 14 years later, in 1734. Also, Anne was married in 1731, implying her birth would have been before 1717 if she married at age 14, which was legal but uncommon at the time.

As a member of the upper class, the births of the children of Sir George Warrender are well documented. He married Margaret Lawrie (Laurie) on April 15, 1680 in Edinburgh and they proceed to have at least 6 children over the next 17 years. Only one of the recorded births is a girl, Rebecca in 1691.

The above inconsistencies cast doubt on some of the information recounted by William Nisbet and his brother James. One obvious error could be the year 1718 when the Warrender daughter become “enamored of a baker named Samuel.”

One line of thought focuses on the Warrender daughter named Rebecca, born in 1691. There is a record of her marrying a George Sandilands in 1712, but there is no record of children from this marriage. Could it be that her husband died soon after their marriage, or she left him, having become “enamored” with John Samuel, the baker, around 1718? There is a death record of a Rebecca Warrender in 1743 of the proper age, listed as spouse to Roderick McClellan. Could McClellan be the “dissipated spendthrift” foreman whom the daughter married after the baker died – as told in the James Nisbet narrative? No records for a Roderick McClellan have been found, but this would provide an explanation – though it does not resolve the Anne Samuel age issue as noted in the death record (90 vs 70). If it was 1714-16, instead of 1718, that Anne and John Samuel got together, then it is more logical she was 16 or 17 when she married in 1731. Given that the James Nisbet narrative states “about the year 1718,” this could fit.

At this point, given many hours of searching parish records and analyzing the family narratives, I am going with the assumption that Anne Samuel was born in the latter part of the second decade of the 1700s. Thus she may have been in her late 70's when she died, and the "90" on her death record is just an approximate age given a very old woman.

Gen -3 Parents of William Nicol

Walter Nicol and Isobell Gaitt

The name of William Nicol's father is based on the fact he named his first-born son Walter, and the narrative indicating the William was "in the farming line from the South country" On April 28th, 1706, a William Nicol was born to Walter Nicol and Isobell Gaitt in Cranston parish, which was 25 miles southeast of Edinburgh and might have been considered "the south country" three hundred years ago.

Connecting William to this particular birth record fits well with the timing of his marriage to Anne Samuel in 1731 – he would have been 25 years old.

Another corroborating fact is that William and Anne named their second daughter Isabell and in the custom of the time this should have been the name of William's mother.

Gen -3 Parents of Ann Samuel

John Samuel

Anne's father was likely John and he had died before she married in 1731. The record of Anne's marriage describes her as the "daughter to the deceased John Samuel Baxter Burges of Edinburgh." The word "baxter" is old English for "baker," and the Burgesses of Edinburgh were successful merchants and businessmen of the city. This corroborates the narrative precisely.

No other records concerning John Samuel or his parents have been located at this time.

Rebecca Warrender (1691-1743)

Following four sons, Rebecca was the first daughter born to Sir George Warrender and his first wife Margaret Lawrie [Lowrie]. Her birthdate was July 14, 1691.

On March 20, 1712 she married George Sandilands at Edinburgh. There is no record of any children of Rebecca and George, and a reliable death record for him has not been found. The presumption is that soon after marrying George, or possibly after an untimely death, Rebecca took an interest in the baker John Samuel. If she was still married at the time, this would add to the scandal of the situation outlined in the narrative.

There is no record of the marriage of John Samuel and Rebecca Warrender – or any Warrender for that matter. It could be the marriage was not sanctioned by the church and went unrecorded, as did the births of their son and daughter as described in the Nisbet narrative.

The assumption is that John Samuel died when his two children were fairly young and Rebecca's fall from grace was compounded when she married the notorious foreman at her husband's bakery.

Rebecca's son apparently disappeared due to the shame of his mother and stepfather, while the daughter, assumed to be Anne Samuel, married very young to a William Nicol in 1731. Given the reputation of her stepfather, Anne may have married as early as possible in order to escape the household.

Rebecca was the spouse of a Roderick McClellan when she died of "decay" in 1743. The assumption is that McClellan was the foreman, but no records for him have been located.

Gen -4 Parents of Rebecca Warrender

Sir George Warrender (abt 1658-1722)

George was the son of George Warrender and Margaret Cunninghame. Warrender was a dealer of foreign trade at Edinburgh and its Lord Provost in 1707 and 1714. As a supporter of the House of Hanover, he was created a Baronet, of Lochend, in the County of Haddington by King George I of Great Britain on 2 June 1715. Subsequently he represented Edinburgh as Member of Parliament (MP) until his death in 1722.

Warrender married firstly Margaret Lawrie and after her death, secondly Grizel Blair, daughter of Hugh Blair. He had a son and daughter by his first wife, and three sons and five daughters by his second wife. Warrender died at London and was buried at Bunhill Fields. He was succeeded in the baronetcy by his oldest son John.

Although he had five sons by his first wife, apparently only John survived to maturity. In fact, three of them were named George and all were stillborn or died young. As mentioned above, his daughter Rebecca is suspected to be the daughter in the Nisbet narrative that married a baker.

Margaret Lawrie (1658-1699)

Margaret was born to Thomas Laurie and Rebecca Maxtoun at Edinburgh on November 9, 1658. Margaret died on June 2, 1699. Her husband remarried six months later. The fact that Margaret named her daughter after her mother Rebecca adds credence to this connection. A biography of the 1st Baronet mentions that Thomas Laurie [Lawrie] was a merchant and that is also mentioned in the birth record for Margaret.

Gen -5 Parents of Sir George Warrender

George Warrender (Sr.)

It is difficult to decipher the background of the senior George Warrender. There are two births with that name within the appropriate time frame, both in Haddington parish. One was born October 31, 1624 to Thomas Warrender and Beatrix Bathcat. The other, much more likely one was born April 25, 1635 to James Warrender and Jean Nicolsone. Because he named his first son George, one could assume that the father of George Sr. was also named George, but neither of the recorded births match that assumption.

George Warrender Sr. married Margaret Cunninghame on October 31, 1655 at Lieth South parish. It appears they only had one child, George, who would become the first Baronet of Lochend.

Margaret Cunninghame

As with her husband George, it is difficult to determine the birthdate of Margaret, nor her death date as there are a number of women with her name in that time period. Based on her marriage in 1655, one could assume she was born about 1635, and there are several births registered in her name around that year. Her son's second daughter should have been named after Margaret's mother, and that daughter arrived after he remarried in 1699. She was named Jean, born 1701. The only recorded birth in the appropriate time period with a mother named Jean is in 1634, for William and Jean Cunnynhame of Glasgow.

Gen -5 Parents of Margaret Lowrie

Thomas Lawrie

An Edinburgh merchant, he married Rebecca Maxtoun on October 22, 1657 at Edinburgh parish. Likely birth years are between 1630 and 1639. There is one record which matches in that parish, that of a Thomas Laurie born to Adam Laurie and Jonet Bailyea on November 2, 1638. A second possibility is a Thomas Lowrie born March 21, 1630 to Johnne Lowrie and Margaret Neilsone.

Rebecca Maxtoun

Rebecca and Thomas Lowrie had four children after the first, Margaret: Thomas 4/26/1660, Rebecca 7/4/1661, Sarah 5/7/1663 and Samuell 4/21/1665. Based on naming conventions, the assumption is that Rebecca's mother was named Margaret and her father Samuell. Also, that Thomas Lowrie's father was also named Thomas. But these assumptions are tenuous and no birth records have been found to support them.

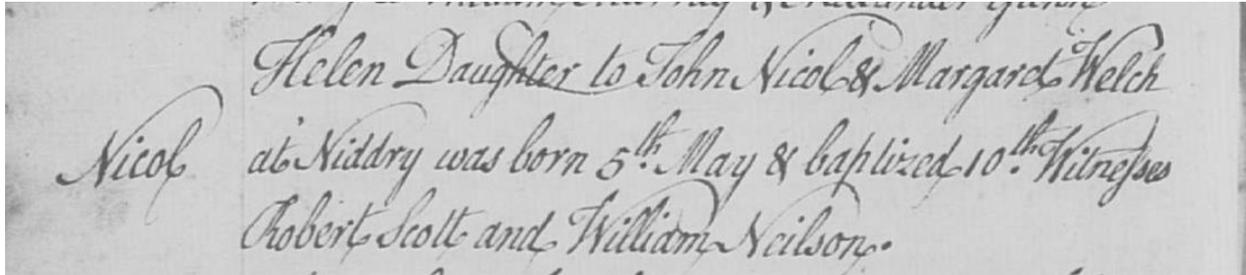
Further work:

- Investigate the siblings of Helen Nicol – some of the data we have is from Mary Schell's work in the 1990s and she did not have the access to records that we have today.
- Try to push back further on the Nicol, Warrender, Lowrie, Maxtoun lines

Records and Sources

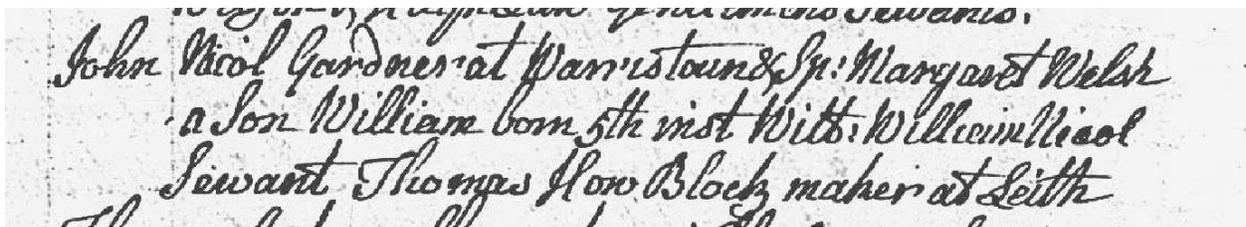
Many records have been found on Scotland's People and downloaded into my files. A few excerpts are here:

1778 Birth of Helen Nicol



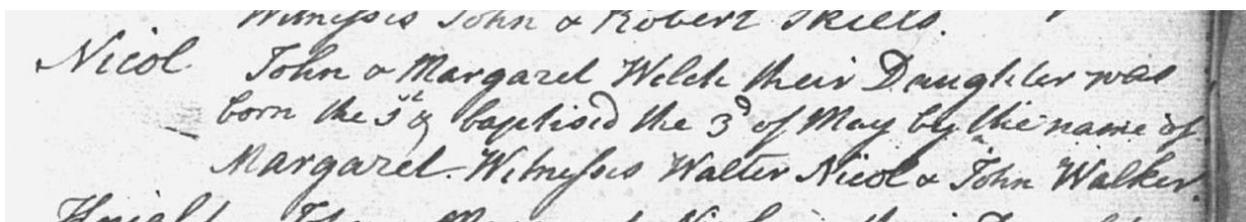
Nicol Helen Daughter to John Nicol & Margaret Welch
at Niddry was born 5th May & baptized 10th Witnesses
Robert Scott and William Neilson.

1763 Birth of brother William



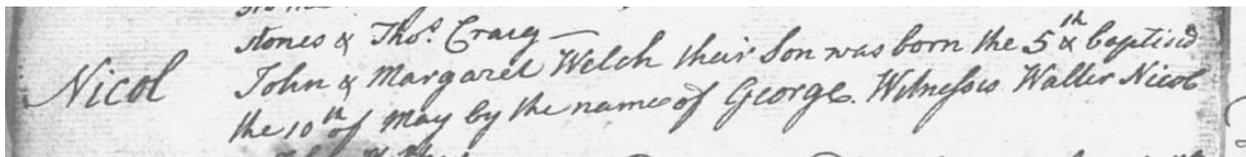
John Nicol Gardener at Warristoun & Margaret Welsh
a Son William born 5th inst. With: William Nicol
Sewant, Thomas How Block maker at Leith

1765 Birth of sister Margaret



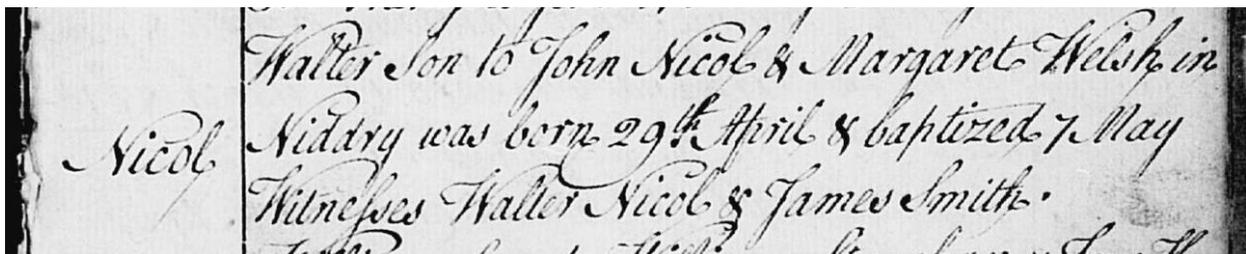
Nicol John & Margaret Welch their Daughter was
born the 5th & baptisid the 3^d of May by the name of
Margaret. Witnesses Walter Nicol & John Walker.

1767 Birth of brother George



Nicol John & Margaret Welch their Son was born the 5th & baptisid
the 10th of May by the name of George. Witnesses Walter Nicol

1769 Birth of brother Walter



Nicol Walter Son to John Nicol & Margaret Welsh in
Niddry was born 29th April & baptized 7 May
Witnesses Walter Nicol & James Smith.

1771 Birth of sister Anne

Anne Daughter to John Nicol & Margaret Welsh
Nicol in Viddry was born 23rd May & baptized 2nd June
Witnesses Walter Nicol & Walter Fullerton.

1773 Birth of brother John

John Son to John Nicol & Margaret Welsh in Vid-
Nicol dry was born 17th May & baptized 19th Witnesses
Walter Nicol and Robert Maul.

1775 Birth of sister Jean

Jean Daughter to John Nicol & Margaret Welsh
Nicol at Viddry was born 18th & baptized 24th Decr
last. Witnesses John Bailley & John Mackfarlane.

1802 Marriage of sister Mary

20 Married the
James Allan, Wright, Parishioner, Son of William Allan, Farmer
in Blutton, Berwickshire, & Mary Nicol, Parishioner, Daughter of the Allan
late John Nicol, Gardener, at Walth Gardend. Married 22nd thereof
21 Robert Bruce, Minister South Leith Son of the late Phoebe



The Nicol headstone in Abbotshall churchyard in Kirkcaldy. It is located just to the left of the entrance doors on the round vestibule.

The stone memorializes Helen's brother George, her parents, and her sister Jean Nicol Sang.

This photo is from Ancestry.com. It does not appear on Find-A-Grave.com

