

About This Series of Newsletters

This is No. 9 in a 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. The previous editions telling the story of this family are available at the website above.

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Message From Ian

Dear Nisbet Cousins and other Readers,

After a long hiatus, I am back with a new edition of *Nisbet News*. The previous eight issues told the story of James and Helen Nicol Nisbet, and their 13 children – three of those children are the common link between over 100 descendants alive today.

In this issue, I will pass along some recently discovered information relating to Helen Nicol Nisbet’s birth, childhood, and ancestry. As more old documents are scanned and made available online, new pieces of the puzzle have become apparent.

Also, I’ll tell you about a major project for me this year – completing the transcription and annotation of a travel diary which records the journey of Helen and James’ son Douglas Nisbet in 1851, from South Carolina to Scotland and back.

Next is an update on the on-going DNA project underway by the Nisbet/Nesbit Society. Finally, I’ll tell you about my visit to Scotland this past May/June which included visits to some of the Nisbet-related sites I missed last year.

I know you all lead busy lives, and this type of genealogical information may be of only passing interest. If you find it a bit boring and mundane, I’m sure you are not alone. In each generation, there are just a few individuals who, like me, are afflicted with “the family

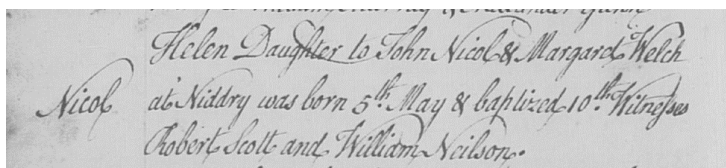
history bug.” My hope is that by spreading this information far and wide, I may be able to reach those with a deeper interest, whether they be of this or future generations. Thank you so much for being part of this effort.

New Information on Helen Nicol [later Nisbet]

It has been nearly two years since I published the first issue of *Nisbet News*. Since then, my research into the lives of our ancestors has continued and I have been able to construct a much more robust history for young Helen Nicol and her ancestors.

This summer, at long last, I discovered Helen’s parish birth record! In 1851, when a surveyor for the Census of Scotland asked Helen her birthplace, she answered “Duddington.” 172 years later, this tiny morsel of insight led me to greatly expand our understanding of Helen’s ancestry.

Duddington is a neighborhood on the eastern edge of Edinburgh, adjacent to Lochend, the estate of the Warrender family. The Warrenders are identified in family histories as having ties to Helen’s Nicol ancestors – these writings can be found in William Nisbet’s 1886 autobiography. After much searching of parish records via the Scotland’s People website, I located the record of Helen’s birth in the parish of Niddrie on May 5th, 1778. Niddrie, also spelled Niddry, is on the edge of Duddington and also borders the Lochend estate.



The parish record for Helen’s birth to John Nicol and Margaret Welch

Once I had Helen’s record, it was an easy matter to find the births of her seven siblings, born prior to her in the years 1763-1775. Helen would later reuse most of her siblings’ names when naming her own children.

Helen’s father John Nicol was a gardener by trade who married Margaret Welch, a farmer’s daughter, at Edinburgh in November 1762. He was 22 and she was 23. At the time, John was employed as a gardener in College Kirk Parish in Edinburgh, but the family apparently

moved every few years, as evidenced by the shifting birth places of their eight children. When Helen was still quite young, he took up the position of head gardener for Raith Estate in Perthshire, across the Firth of Forth from Edinburgh. Here he remained until his death in 1794 at age 53. He was buried in the Abbotshall Churchyard in Kirkcaldy, next to his son George who had died eight years earlier. His wife Margaret Welsh lived until 1800 and is buried by her husband and son in Kirkcaldy.



The Nicol headstone in Abbotshall churchyard in Kirkcaldy. It is located just to the left of the entrance doors. The stone memorializes Helen's brother George, her parents, and her sister Jean Nicol Sang. (Photo from Ancestry.com)

Little is known regarding Helen's mother, Margaret Welsh, other than she was the daughter of Robert A. Welsh, a farmer from Ladykirk in the southeast of Scotland. Helen's paternal ancestry is well understood, however, and contains a hint of scandal.

Helen's grandfather, William Nicol, was also a gardener. In William's marriage record from 1731, he is referred to as "Gardener at Hall-years." Hallyards Castle was an estate on the western edge of Edinburgh – today only a small ruin remains and the land is mostly occupied by the international airport. In the parish record, his wife has the name Anne Samuel, a surname precisely matching the family tale told in William Nisbet's autobiography.

William and Anne Samuel had a son and two daughters before Helen's father, the youngest, John, came along. Sadly, records indicate that William died shortly before John was born in 1743 and Anne was left with a family of young children to raise. According to tax records, she operated a series of shops in the Canongate area of Edinburgh, part of the Royal Mile. Anne Samuel Nicol lived a long life and died "at a very advanced age" in 1791.

I have been unable to decipher with absolute certainty the origins of William Nicol from among the large number of like-named individuals in Scotland at the time. However, a very promising parish record indicates our William was born to Walter Nicoll and Isobell Gaitt in Cranston Parish on April 26, 1706. Corroborating this is the fact that William and Anne later named their first son Walter, indicating it was William's father's name as well. Also, their second daughter was Isabell, traditionally the name of the father's mother. Finally, in William Nisbet's autobiography, William Nicol is not specifically named, but is described as being a man "from the south country," and Cranston Parish is indeed south of Edinburgh. For all the above reasons, I am convinced that William was the son of Walter Nicol and Isobell Gaitt. No other records pertaining to Walter and Isobell, born in the late 1600s, have been found.

Helen's paternal grandmother, Anne Samuel, has a rich history. She was born in the early 1700s to a wealthy Edinburgh baker named John Samuel and his wife, a daughter of Sir George Warrender, Baronet of Lochend. According to family documents, this daughter's marriage to John Samuel was wholly against the wishes of her parents and "she was, in a measure, discarded by her relatives."

Sir George Warrender had married Margaret Laurie (a.k.a. Lawrie) in 1680 and the couple proceeded to have six children over the next 17 years, only one of which was a girl – Rebecca, born in 1791. Rebecca apparently married a George Sandilands in 1712, but that marriage never produced children. Rebecca may in fact have soon left Sandilands for the baker John Samuel, leading to the scandal and disownment documented in our family archives. As a "fallen woman," her given name is never written in the stories, however, so this is conjecture.

The family papers say that the Warrender daughter, presumed to be Rebecca, married the foreman of the bakery after John Samuel died, and that man turned out to be a scoundrel – the "dissipated spendthrift" noted in family records. Rebecca Warrender died "of decay" in

1743, the spouse of a Roderick McClellan, presumed to be the despised foreman and for whom no other records have been found.

Rebecca must have had a deeply tarnished life (in the eyes of her family), first leaving her husband for another man, and then taking up with the bakery foreman after that man died. This may have driven her daughter Anne Samuel to marry William Nicol at an early age – 14 was the minimum in Scotland at the time.

Helen's paternal great-grandparents are now understood to be:

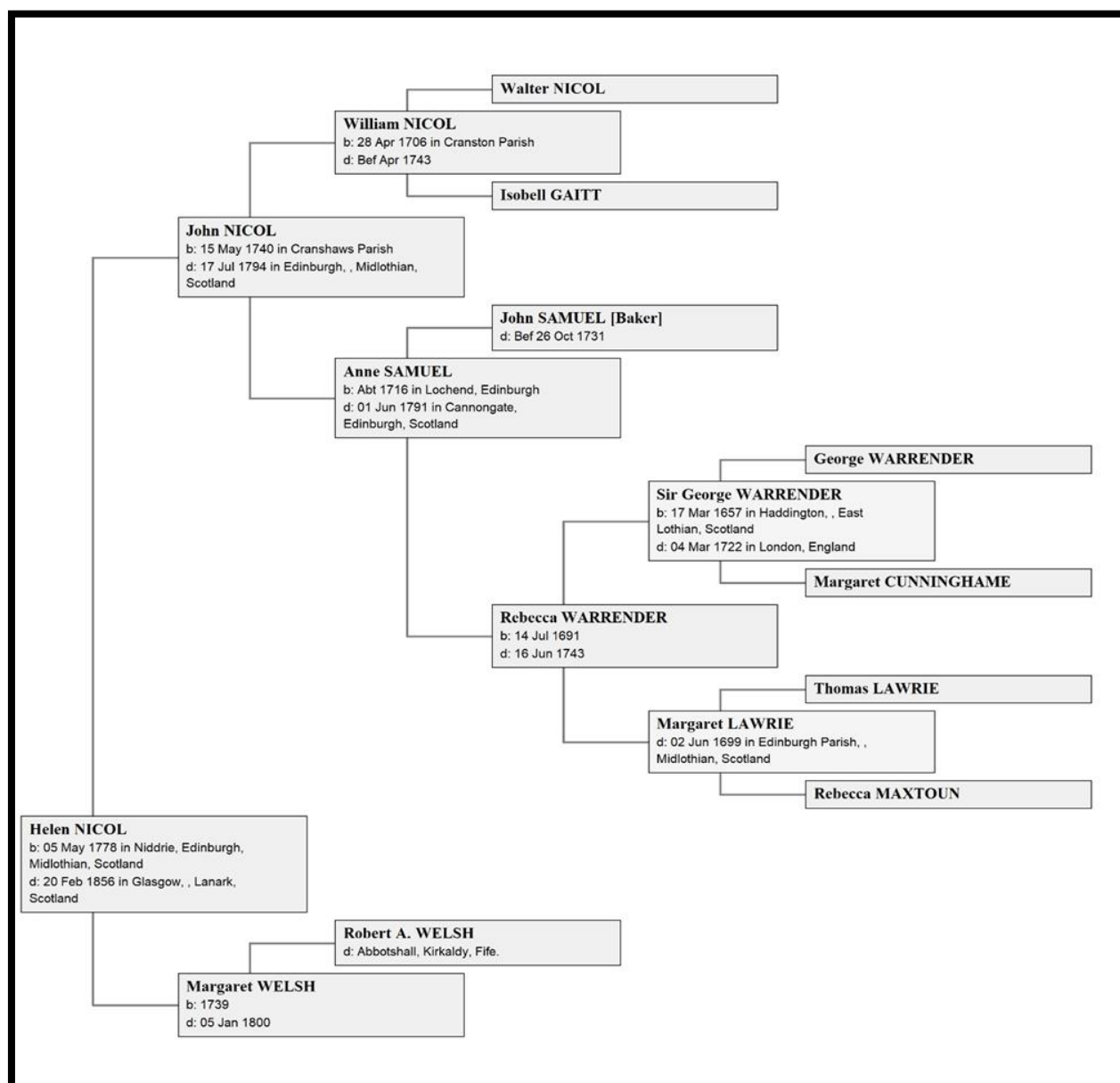
- Walter Nicol
- John Samuel
- Isobell Gaitt
- Rebecca Warrender

The only known members of the next generation are Rebecca's parents, George Warrender (abt 1658-1722),

later Baronet of Lochend, and Margaret Lawrie (1658-1699).

Helen's ggg-grandparents are the earliest confirmed members of her family tree. Sir George Warrender was the son of George Warrender Sr. (born abt 1630+/-) and Margaret Cunningham (born abt 1634). Margaret may be the daughter of William and Jean Cunnyhame of Glasgow, but records from the early 1600s are very scarce and open to interpretation. Helen's gg-grandmother Margaret Lawrie was the daughter of Thomas Lawrie, a well to do Edinburgh merchant, and Rebecca Maxtoun (Maxton). Other than their marriage and subsequent children, no reliable records for Lawrie or Maxtoun have been located.

I realize the above narrative on Helen's ancestors is difficult to follow, so here is her family tree in chart form:

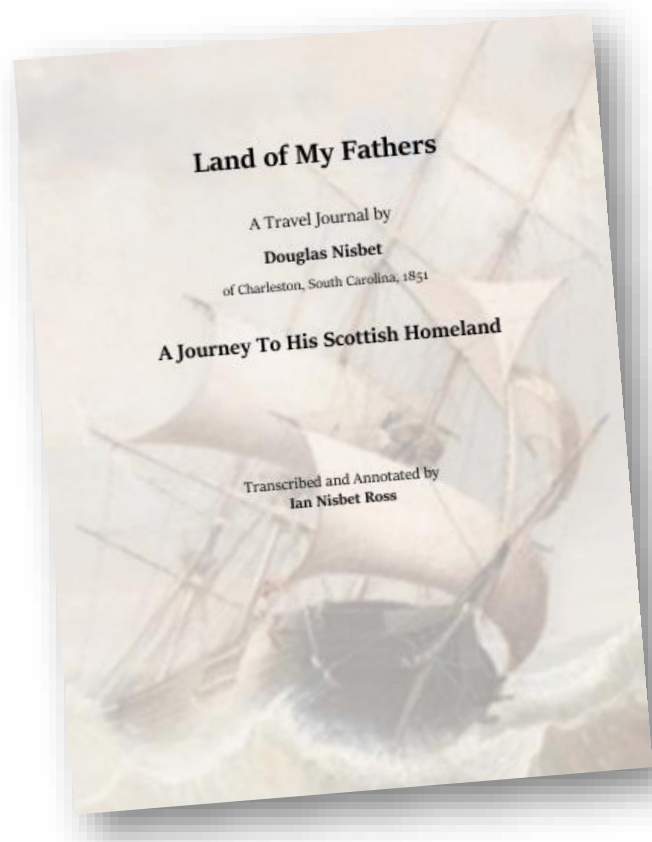


I have created a 14 page document with all the details of my Nicol family history research and posted it on my website at this link: [Notes on Nicol Family](#).

My hope is that future genealogists will modify and expand on it.

New Nisbet Book!

The 1851 Travel Journal of Douglas Nisbet



Land of My Fathers

A Travel Journal by

Douglas Nisbet

of Charleston, South Carolina, 1851

A Journey To His Scottish Homeland

With the help of my friend and 4th cousin Louise Try, I have completed the transcription and annotation of the travel journal of Douglas Nisbet, dated 1851. This nearly 170-page handwritten diary documents the journey of Douglas on his first visit to his Scottish homeland since emigrating to America in 1839.

Douglas' 4-month odyssey was a significant event in his life, and he took the time to carefully document

every aspect of the trip. It begins with a wonderful description of life aboard a sailing ship as he crosses the Atlantic from Charleston, SC to Liverpool. From there he details numerous adventures such as his surprise visit to his mother and sisters in Glasgow, travel with friends to London to see the Crystal Palace at the World's Fair, hiking the mountains above Ben Lomond, and visiting his brother Henry on the Isle of Mull.

As I worked on the book, I felt as though I was traveling right along with Douglas. He writes with a literary flair and quotes famous Scottish writers, creating a rich and entertaining travelogue. It would not surprise me in the least if current and future Nisbet descendants used this narrative as a guide for their own travels.

The book's title, *Land of My Fathers*, is taken from a phrase Douglas used to describe his homeland.

In addition to transcribing Douglas's handwritten lines, I have added explanations and pictures to help provide context. Here is a typical page, with his writing on the left and my annotations on the right:



Sample Page

This book will be available in a few weeks via the Lulu Bookstore (www.lulu.com/shop) and Amazon. When available, links to the book will be posted on my website at <https://nisbetross.com/nisbet/>.

As with all other Nisbet-related activities, I seek no profit from this book and have set the price at the minimum the publisher will allow –just enough to cover their costs and markups. The price at these outlets will be \$35.

If other cousins discover treasures such as this diary, please contact me! I would be thrilled to help preserve these precious artifacts forever via digitizing and backing them up to “the cloud.”

Nisbet DNA Project Update

In the previous issue, I wrote about the DNA project being conducted by the Nesbit/Nisbet Society. The goal of the project is to build a database of DNA results from male-descended Nisbets in order to identify links between various subgroups and individuals.

Those of us descended from James and Helen Nicol Nisbet of Kirkcudbright are represented in this project by Jim Nisbet, formerly of Central California and now residing in Bellingham, WA. Jim is descended from our common ancestors through James and Helen’s son James (1798-1849), his son John (1835-1919), his son Robert (1885-1964), and his son Harry (1914-2014) – creating the unbroken chain of Y-DNA required by the project.

The initial test late last year identified a number of close connections to other Nisbet men, and I have been in touch with some of them to compare notes. At this point, we have not been able to link our “brick wall” (James Nisbet (1772-1834)) to their earliest known ancestors, but it appears there is a very close relationship. For instance, Brian Nisbet, who lives near Edinburgh, took the DNA test and there is a strong correlation with our line. His earliest known ancestor is a Robert Nisbet, born about 1795, and it is likely this man was a close cousin of our James. A resident of nearby Bo’ness, James A. Nisbet, is another close match who traces his ancestry back to another man who may be a close cousin of our James.

This past June, during a visit to Edinburgh, I met Brian and James in a pub near the New Register House

where they have spent much time researching their past. We had a grand time comparing notes and stories of our ancestors. They say a picture is worth a thousand words, however, so see the photo below of me (center) with James and Brian. Can there be any doubt that these three men are related????



James A. Nisbet, Ian Nisbet Ross, Brian Nisbet – June 2023

Recently, our cousin Jim Nisbet agreed to provide another sample which is being used to run an upgraded “Big Y-700” DNA test in hopes of identifying further connections within the broader Nisbet clan.

2023 Visit to Nisbet/Nicol Sites in Scotland

This past June, my wife Jody and I made another visit to our ancestral home. After a long stay in the Highlands, the origin of my Ross ancestors, we returned to Central Scotland to continue research on the Nisbet side.

One of our first stops was Kirkcaldy, where Helen Nicol Nisbet’s father John Nicol was employed as head gardener at the nearby Raith Estate. We spent a morning at the local family history research room looking for references to John and were able to find his burial record from 1794. From there, we walked two blocks to the Abbotshall churchyard where he, his wife and other family members are buried. We searched the graves for over an hour without finding the Nicol stone. We left empty handed, but after the trip I found a picture of the stone on Ancestry.com and it turns out it was located right next to the main entrance to the church (see Page 2). We had walked right by it multiple times!

Although Raith Estate is a private residence, and signs at its long tree-lined drive stated that no unauthorized visitors are allowed, we pulled through the gates and contemplated how to get a glimpse of the great house where my gggg-grandfather worked. As we debated, a gentleman in a top-of-the-line Range Rover pulled in next to us and curtly asked our business. After I explained, he simply said "Follow me to my house."

We followed him up the meandering road and were quite amazed when he pulled to a stop in front of what I immediately recognized as the imposing edifice of Raith House. I had only seen old black and white photos and paintings online, but here it was in real life!

It turned out that our host was none other than Robert Munro-Ferguson, current owner of Raith Estate and a direct descendant of the Fergusons who built the house in the late 1600s. In fact, it was very likely that this man's gggg-grandfather was the employer of mine!

Mr. Munro-Ferguson invited us in for a brief look, but it was apparent he was a private person, so we quickly took our leave. It was a memorable visit in many ways, not the least of which was to stand with certainty where my ancestors had.



Raith House today

From Kirkcaldy, we made our way to Glasgow where we again visited the grave of Helen Nicol Nisbet at Sighthill Cemetery. Last year, when we first visited it, we cleaned the headstone and applied some product that was touted to reduce the growth of moss and lichens. One year later, it appeared the product had worked to a certain extent and the headstone was relatively clean and still in fine shape. Like last year, we left some flowers at the headstone of my ggg-grandmother.

After some golf on the west coast, we spent a couple of days in Edinburgh and there had the aforementioned meeting with Brian and James Nisbet. We also wandered Warriston and Calton Hill cemeteries looking



The memorial for Helen Nicol Nisbet in Sighthill Cemetery. I made this composite using images one year apart.

for graves of the Nisbet children James and Isabella, but had no luck. These are wonderful, peaceful walks, however, and we enjoy reading the stories of people on their headstones.



Strolling through Warriston Cemetery where the grave of Isabella Nisbet Wilson is located somewhere among thousands of others.

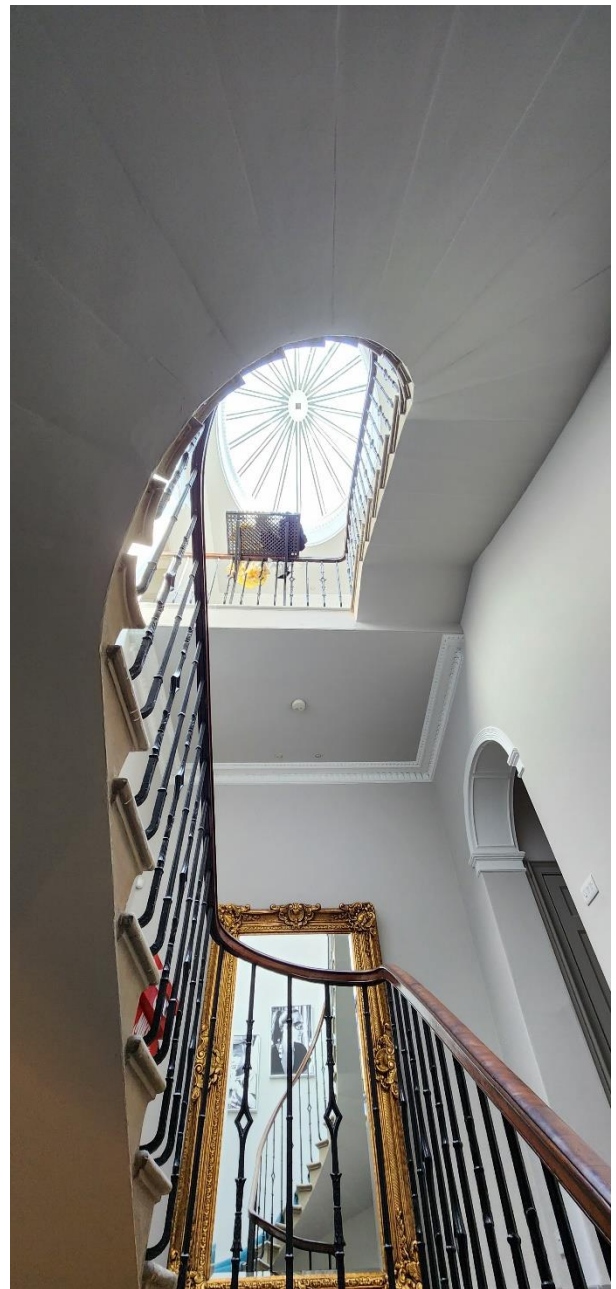
Late one morning, I knocked on the door of a house at 26 Northumberland Street, just a few blocks from our hotel. This elegant row house was where Helen's eldest son James lived and where he died in 1849. He was an attorney and according to her letters, Helen visited him several times in the 1840s. The door was answered by a woman who identified herself as the housekeeper. She said the owner, an attorney, was away in London at the moment. Much to our surprise, after hearing the story of our family history, she invited us in to look

around the house! (I'm not sure the owner would have appreciated this, and I hope the housekeeper did not later get in trouble)



Knocking on the door at 26 Northumberland St.

The interior had been modernized and was decorated professionally, but many vestiges of the old house remained – the central staircase, plaster mouldings, skylight, etc. We felt guilty poking around this private residence, so we made our goodbyes quite quickly. But it was super cool to be able to envision this Nisbet household of nearly 200 years ago. I could see a heavy-set Helen struggling with the steep flights of stairs in her later years.



The interior staircase of the house with original railings, skylight, and plaster work.

END OF THIS ISSUE

Thank you all for your encouragement and participation in this endeavor to preserve our common past.

Find this and all past issues at:
www.nisbetross.com/nisbet/