

## Case Study

# Scottish Case Study: The Nelson Family

**Diane L. Richard chronicles her search for her Scottish ancestors**

MY GRAN WAS ALWAYS very proud of her Scottish ancestry and she always considered us to be part of the Gunn Clan as a sept. Through research, I identified that “lone” Scotsman in our tree, though he appears to be a lowland Scotsman and not a highland one (the group associated with tartans). And, I have suspicions that his heritage might be Irish, but that’s another story for another article.

This Scottish story starts in Lancashire, England, though it could just as easily start anywhere, including the US or Canada. Despite having stories from my gran that her maternal grandfather was Scottish, it was going to take more to convince me. See, Gran was an only child and her mother didn’t have close connections with her parents, siblings or the extended Gunn “Clan” and so what she knew was limited; but this small amount of information was not to be discounted and gave me clues to get started.

### Family Lore

As with many genealogy projects, we often start with some family lore. Please see the box which summarizes the family lore I was told by my gran about her grandfather and his family.

### The Beginning: Census Records

Fortunately, England, like the US, took a decennial census — some differences are:

- England’s started in 1841 versus 1790
- The 1841 census did list the names of all householders and relationships were stated
- The 1891 survives (unlike the mostly missing 1890 US census)
- The census entries typically, except for 1841, included “county” of birth (e.g., Lancashire) or sometimes the exact parish of birth (e.g., Newton-Stewart). In 1841, only



*George Nelson, the author’s Scotsman ancestor!*

born in county or not born in county was documented. This can be very helpful indeed!

After finding George in the Lancashire census records in 1881 and 1891 and eventually 1901 (more recently available), I was then able to jump back to the Scot-

tish records and, essentially, find George with his mother in 1861 and then work backwards through 1851 and 1841 to find the family and learn its composition (e.g., what siblings did George have). Here is a summary of the records found.

*1841: Penningham, 13 Old Bridge End*

*Mary Nelson 24 not born in county  
Jane 2 born in county  
Jefsie 1 born in county*

*1851: Penningham, Gorbals*

*Mary Nelson 34 Sewing Agent  
Kirkcudbright, Minnigaff  
Jane Nelson 12 Sewer Wigtown,  
Newton-Stewart  
Jessie Nelson 11 Sewer Wigtown,  
Newton-Stewart  
Mary Nelson 8 Scholar Wigtown,  
Newton-Stewart*

*Hamilton Nelson 3 At Home  
Wigtown, Newton-Stewart  
Margaret Nelson 3 At Home  
Wigtown, Newton-Stewart  
John Nelson 10 mos At Home Wig-  
town, Newton-Stewart*

*1861: Penningham — Main St -  
Newton-Stewart*

*Mary Neilson 44 Midwife Minnigaff,  
Kirkcudbrightshire  
John Neilson 10 scholar Penning-*

### Family Lore

- Part of the Clan Gunn and entitled to wear the Gunn Tartan.
  - George born in Newton-Stewart or Minnigaff.
- George entered the family trade of saddler. The family shop in Newton-Stewart only changed hands in the 1970s and there are still Nelson’s Saddlers’ shops in other parts of Scotland.
- After serving his apprenticeship in Newton-Stewart, he went as a journeyman to Dublin where he worked for a few years and then went to Hollinwood.
- George had a brother John who married an Irish girl and went to live in Ireland and of whom nothing more is known.
- George had two sisters, Jessie and Maggie (or Margaret) who never married and became cooks at big mansions in the area. George’s mother was a local midwife and was named Hamilton.

hame, Wigtownshire

George Neilson 8 scholar Minnigaff,  
Kirkcudbrightshire

By the time of the 1861 census, two of George's sisters (Margaret and Jessie) are working at local area mansions as servants and by the 1871 census, we only find George still in Newton-Stewart (aka Penninghame), suggesting that his mother has died and his brother has moved or died.

- 1871: Penninghame [living with a Christie family]  
George 18 Saddler Minnigaff,  
Kirkcudbrightshire

A few observations about these Scottish census results:

- They consistently list birthplace
- Penninghame is a "parish" located in Newton-Stewart (notice that both forms are used)
- Kirkcudbrightshire and Wigtownshire are the counties of Kirkcudbright and Wigtown
- NO father is ever found with the family on census night!

### Geography

You probably are wondering where these towns are? These are two towns on either side of the river Cree and were located in two different jurisdictions in Scotland. Newton-Stewart and Penninghame parish were in Wigtownshire and Minnigaff was in the Stewartry of Kirkcudbright (also called Kirkcudbrightshire). Both are now part of Dumfries and Galloway. Nothing like multiple jurisdictions to add some excitement.

Basically, Mary was born on one side of the river and ended up marrying and having her children on the other, as shown by the census records and will be confirmed by found church records. This reminds us that, as in the US, it's important to get a sense of the geography — knowing where people lived and where churches and markets were located, can tell you a lot about their lives and where to look for records.

### Vital Records

Given that George lived much of his life in a country where country-wide civil registration was established in 1837, I easily obtained his death certificate and

also found out that there was a probate file for him. For all the great detail that English birth and marriage records can provide, this is a case where the death certificates are less than informative, compared to Scottish ones. It only lists date of death, name, sex, age, occupation, cause of death, informant and when registered. Note that no information on parents is included on an English death certificate.

So, next was obtaining George's marriage record. It tells us that George Nelson married Sarah Ann Torkington 28 August 1875 at Union St.



Above: Gunn Clan tartan.

Below: 1891 Census —George Nelson & family  
at 409 Manchester Rd., Hollinwood, Lancashire,  
England.

House No.	Occupation	Name	Sex	Age	Mar.	Notes
125 421	Do	Margaret Do	Wife	66		
		Ann Do	Daughter			
		Chas. G. Lewis	Head	70	M	
		Lucy Ann Do	Wife	62		
		William Do	Son	27		
		Leah Do	Daughter	17		
		Allen Do	Daughter	14		
126 409	Do	George Nelson	Head	65	M	
		Sarah Ann Do	Wife	62		
		John Nelson	Son	26		10. 10. 1891
		Mary Do	Daughter	17		
		Sarah Ann Do	Daughter	14		
127 407	Do	Abraham Bell	Head	65	M	
		Ann Do	Wife	62		
		Alfred Do	Son	15		
128 408	Do	Frederic Howard	Head	62	M	
		Lois Do	Wife	60		
Total of House and of Transients with less						
Total of Males and Females						

Chapel, Oldham, according to the rites and ceremonies of the Independents [this would be considered a non-conformist church — see sidebar on Nonconformists on the next page]. At the time, George Nelson was 23 years old, a Bachelor, Saddler, lived at 51 Lee St, Oldham, his father was John Nelson (deceased) who had worked as a Woollen weaver. His wife was Sarah Ann Torkington who was 30 years old, a Spinster, Cotton Weaver, lived at 51 Lee St

Oldham and no father was listed.

This tells us that George's mother and father are deceased by 1875. The former is consistent with the 1871 census entry and we now know that his father had been a weaver (one presumes a journeyman weaver based on the census records!).

Unfortunately, though George was married and died in a country that started civil registration in 1837, Scotland did not start civil

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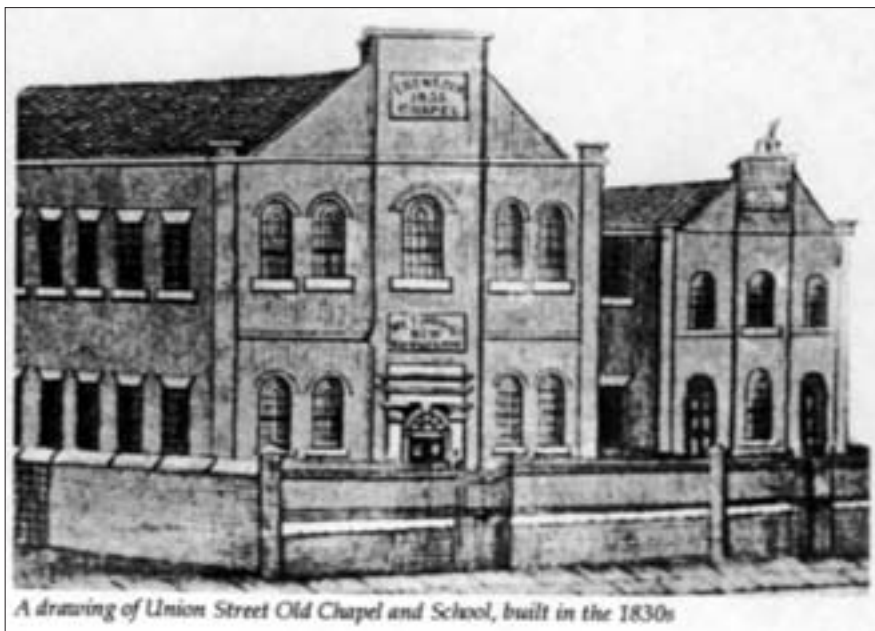
registration (where all births, marriages and deaths had to be registered at the register office in the district where the event took place) until 1855, about three years after George's birth. And, since George was the youngest of the family, this precludes any birth vital record being found for any of his siblings.

### Church Records

Though vital records may not have been required at the time of George's birth in Scotland, most church denominations kept their own records of baptisms, marriages (when applicable) and burial records. Next was to see if we could find any church records for George, his known siblings and his parents.

I knew that the Church of Latter-day Saints had the Old Parish Records (OPR) collection which covered the "established" (or "conformist") churches for England, Scotland and Wales — I could not find George or any of the family listed in these records — searching on Penningham, Minnigaff and the surrounding parishes. What was going on? They are incomplete, were these parishes not covered? Subsequently, I learned that the coverage for these parishes was as complete as the extant records allowed. I did a bit more research into these records and then remembered the mention in the marriage record of "according to the rites and ceremonies of the Independents" versus the "rites and ceremonies of the Established Church." An important clue, almost overlooked, that told me that I would need to look elsewhere for any baptism records for George and his siblings.

Upon learning that the family was non-conformist, I noted in my research notes "The Free Church of Scotland was formed in 1843 as a result of a major schism within the (Established or state church) Church of Scotland. The split was variable, with some parishes having 70 percent of the members becoming Free Church, others in smaller percentages. As the Free Church registers are not covered



*A drawing of what was the old chapel at Union Street, where George and Sarah Ann married in 1875.*

by the IGI Scotland, the OPR Index or the LDS CD, "Scottish Church Records", many people born between 1843 and 1854 are not normally findable, except in the 1851 census. Surviving Free Church registers are mostly held in the Scottish Record Office in Edinburgh, but are not indexed, and not microfilmed ..." (source:

Gordon Johnson, KinHelp Genealogical Services, Aberdeen in a reply dated 4 February 1997 to [soc.genealogy.uk+ireland-news-group](mailto:soc.genealogy.uk+ireland-news-group)).

Corresponding with the National Archives of Scotland, which holds many of the non-conformist church registers, I was able to acquire the entries for George's

### Nonconformists

The situation was a little more complicated than that individuals either "conformed" or were deemed "non-conformist" or a "dissenter" with regards to the Church of England, Scotland or Wales (each a different denomination). These two articles tell you about Scottish non-conformists and also the impact to your research of having non-conformists in your tree.

1. FamilySearch wiki article on Scotland Church Union Lists, [https://wiki.familysearch.org/en/Scotland\\_Church\\_Records\\_Union\\_Lists](https://wiki.familysearch.org/en/Scotland_Church_Records_Union_Lists)
2. Society of Genealogists (UK) publication on English/Welsh non-conformists gives a sense of the complexity of the issue, [www.sog.org.uk/leaflets/nonconformists.pdf](http://www.sog.org.uk/leaflets/nonconformists.pdf)

For example, some 'dissenters' still considered themselves part of the state church and, in many cases they continued to use their parish church for the rites of baptism, marriage, and burial.

Rules about who could perform marriages means that many non-conformists married in the state church.

Non-conformists were influential in the establishment of Civil Registration in 1837 (England and later in Scotland and Ireland) as this allowed Superintendent Registrars to register births and deaths and also to perform marriages in register offices.

This means do not assume that because your ancestor was not a member of the Church of England or Scotland, etc., that they will not be found in parish records — this is definitely not true from 1754-1837 (1855 in Scotland) with regards to marriage records!

three oldest siblings in the Records for the United Presbyterian Church (a secession Church), Newton-Stewart. Unfortunately, the register which would have contained George's baptism does not survive.

The details for his oldest siblings were:

- Jane Cowan — born 28 Dec 1838, lawful daughter of John Neilson and Mary McCartney
- Jessie Aitken — born 21 March 1840, same parents listed
- Mary — born 12 September 1842, same parents listed

This gave us George's mother's maiden name, confirmed the father's name and the middle names of the children suggest family names since Cowan and Aitken were local surnames at the time.

This information was used to look for the marriage for the parents. It was found that John Nelson and Mary McCartney were married 18 February 1838 at Penninghame in the established church. As mentioned in the sidebar on non-conformists on the previous page, it is highly likely during this time period to find non-conformists marrying in the established church, since non-conformist churches were not authorized to marry.

Using this information, it was then possible to find Mary's death certificate since we now had her maiden name. Unlike the English death certificates of the time, hers lists out who her parents were, including the maiden name of her mother. And, it also lists who she was married to. Given that George provided this information and states in 1875 that both his parents were deceased, suggests that his father died between 1870 and 1875.

### Newspaper Articles

At this point, we now knew the names of George's parents, the full names of three siblings, the names of his maternal grandparents, had documented his parents' marriage and his mother's death. I still wanted to document George's birth and the death of his father.

So, next up was research into

the local newspaper — the *Wigtown Free Press*. This particular local newspaper had a reputation for frequently reporting non-conformist items (a little gem shared by a "local" to the area). Several entries were found relevant to the family, though, as you can see, little information is provided! These did confirm the birth of the twins and the marriage of John to an Irish girl (matching family lore). The two entries for 1843 and 1854 are interesting — son born in 1843, not seen in 1851 census and

daughter of Mr James Lillie, late of Glasgow (*Wigtown Free Press*, 17/6/1875)

Unfortunately, no entry for George. Nor any death notice for Mary nor her invisible spouse John Ne(i)lson. And, let me tell you that John Nelson/Neilson was a very, very common name at this time, all over Scotland!

Short of pursuing whether George was officially apprenticed to become a saddler and the same for brother John as a watchmaker, there is little further research that



*A group shot of a Nelson family holiday taken in 1925 — Edith is in the back row, second from the right.*

daughter born in 1854, not seen in the 1861 census.

- At Newton-Stewart, on the 9th inst., Mrs John Neilson, of a son (*Wigtown Free Press*, 14/9/1843)
- At Newton-Stewart, on the 31st ultimo, the wife of Mr John Neilson, of twin daughters (*Wigtown Free Press*, 10/2/1848) [Hamilton & Margaret]
- At Wigtown Row, Newton-Stewart, on the 2d inst., the wife of Mr John Neilson, of a daughter (*Wigtown Free Press*, 6/4/1854)
- At Gloucester Street Presbyterian Church, Dublin, on the 8th inst., by the Rev. Robert Hanns, assisted by the Rev. James Stevenson, John Walker Nelson, later of Newton-Stewart, Wigtownshire to Mary Ann, eldest

could be done in the Scottish records.

### A Cousin's Memories and Memorabilia

The story might have ended with what I had already learned, except I inadvertently learned of an untapped source of information! Remember when I mentioned that Gran's mother didn't have close connections with the Nelson family? Well, several years after I initially did this research, Gran put me in touch with her cousin "Auntie Edith" (another only child). Well, where Gran's family didn't hang out with the Nelson family, Auntie Edith's family did!

And, did she have stories to tell! Here are some excerpts from

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her stories:

“Grandfather George at one time was a bit of a “wroug’un”. When he first came to Oldham and lived at the Lee St. address, it was as a lodger and eventually he married his landlady’s daughter Sarah Ann. He was a very heavy drinker and lost all his money and their home and all their belongings were taken to pay his debts. Their next address was a very small cottage on Manchester Road, Hollinwood where my mother was born. Apparently, he was so ashamed about this, he became converted and a somewhat bigoted “teetotaller”. He joined the Lodge of Good Templars and later, my mother was the Secretary of the Junior branch of the Lodge. He obviously worked very hard to redeem himself and provide a good home and living for the family and finally became a “Master” Saddler with a good business in much larger premises. When he died, the business was sold and grandmother lived on the proceeds for over six years and when she died, she left all three of her children 100 pounds each, which was pretty good in those days.”

“He was very strict, the children all went to Hudson Street Methodist Chapel and Sunday School, but he was a member of the Scottish Presbyterian Church in Oldham and went regularly every Sunday morning, walking the four miles there and four back, because it was “sinful” to ride on a tram on the Sabbath, whatever the weather. No games, books (except the Bible) newspapers or music were allowed in the house on Sunday.

Grandfather would not go to any of the weddings and when asked to “give the Bride away”, refused, saying “he hadn’t done with them yet.”

Seemingly, when a young apprentice completed his years of training, he was sent out into the world for a couple of years to find work with a variety of other employers, so that he had a good all around experience of the different types of work he might be asked to do. Before he went, he



*This photo of a gathering at a Temperance hotel was found in the family files — maybe George spent time here?*

was expected to make his own “chest” to carry all his tools, clothes and personal belongings.” [At her death, Edith was still in possession of this chest, which held his surviving thimbles.]

Besides sending me a photo of George, photos of other various members of the family, the silk shawl that his bride Sarah Ann Torkington wore at their 1875 wedding and the aforementioned thimbles, there was an envelope (with no contents) included.

This envelope was dated 1900 Inverness and sent to George at 199 Manchester Road. This matches the address where George and family lived in the 1901 census and also matches the information learned through a search of local directories.

## Directories

Since you never know what a directory might tell you, I queried the Local Oldham Studies Office about looking at the Oldham directories for how George was listed during the Oldham years. George was always listed as a Saddler at the addresses shown.

- 1880 — 51 Lee Street, Oldham.
- 1884 to 1891 — 409 Manchester Road, Hollinwood.
- 1901 — 199 Manchester Road, Hollinwood.
- 1905 — 215a Manchester Road, Hollinwood.

As mentioned, the entry for 1901 is consistent with the 1901

census and the envelope’s 1901 postmark.

## Revisiting Vital Records

Based on the postmark information from the envelope, it made sense to investigate Inverness, Scotland and its records to see how this locale played into the family ... It did in many and surprising ways!

First, I found the death of George’s brother John who died in 1887 in Inverness. The death certificate lists his parents, both deceased (as expected) and states that his father had been a lace manufacturer (a form of weaver) and that the informant was his brother-in-law, Samuel Alexander.

Who was this Samuel Alexander? The long and the short is that this led me to the 1891 census, where I found his family including a wife named Jessie. Following the trail to their marriage, we finally discover Jessie marrying Samuel Alexander in 1860 in the District of Govan (apparently near Glasgow) in the county of Lanark) and her subsequent death confirmed that she was a sister to George and John Nelson. It will end up that 38 High Street (where John died in 1887) is where Jessie Aitken Nelson Alexander lived in 1891.

Her family has been found in the 1881, 1891 and 1901 census for Scotland. During that time, they moved from Glasgow (Lanark-

shire) to Inverness (Invernesshire) sometime between 1871 and 1875.

I also learned that Jessie died in 1915 while still living in Inverness. By that time, she was a widow and her death was reported by her son Samuel. Interestingly, it is the only time that her name is given as Jessie Aitken Alexander; a middle name not seen since her baptism entry!

### Things We Might Never Know

As with any research project, there is more we would like to know and that we may also never get definitive answers to. Unfortunately, though the father John is consistently listed as a weaver in the found marriage records of his children, and we can possibly assume that he died between 1870 and 1875, he has proven elusive.

1. Further document George's father — can we find a death, learn where he was born and who his parents were?

2. Solve the mystery of brother John Walker Nelson's name ...

George named his first son John Walker, which was also George's brother's name. Walker was George's maternal grandmother's maiden name. And, John Walker happened to be the name of the Minister of the Free Church at Newton-Stewart at this time.

3. George's father was a weaver (and apparently an itinerant one). How did George become a saddler? Is there a connection to the Nelson's Saddlers shops (around until the 1970s)? Distant relatives maybe? On a related note, how did John become a watchmaker?

### Conclusions

Using the various Scottish records available (both offline and online), we were able to learn quite a bit about George, his mother and his siblings.

In the future, when time permits, I hope to revisit the Scottish records and learn what happened to Jane, Mary, Margaret and Hamilton. And, eventually find out where George's family members are buried.

How did what we learn stack up against the family lore? A lot of

### How Good Was the Family Lore?

- Appear to have been lowland Scots and not highland ones — though, until George's father is found — an open issue and some of George's siblings did live in Inverness (a highland location)
  - George was born in Minnigaff Kirkcudbright Scotland
- George entered the trade of Saddlery/Harness Maker (have not found a link to it being a "family" trade)
  - George has not been found as having spent time in Dublin yet
- George did have a brother John that went to Ireland, married and stayed
- George did have sisters, Jessie and Margaret, who appeared to work at local mansions
  - Sister Jessie married, moved away, had a family and remained in contact with at least her brothers
    - George's mother was a midwife at one time
  - George's mother was named Mary, he had a sister and grandmother both named Hamilton

### What Else Did We Learn About George & Family?

- There were Nelson's Saddlers Shops in the Newton-Stewart/Minnigaff area and NO connection to George
  - George's father was a weaver and never lived with the family on census night — probably worked as a journeyman
    - The family were non-conformists (e.g., not Presbyterian)
- George's brother did not stay in Ireland, he returned to Scotland and lived briefly in Inverness before dying (a whole other article can be written on tracking John through Ireland)
  - George had other sisters, named Jane, Mary and Hamilton

the family lore was able to be proven. And, along the way, I learned other things about George's family as well.

Even as I write this article, I know that there are newer resources now available to be consulted. These include:

- Historical Indexes for Dumfries and Galloway, [www.dgcommunity.net/historicalindexes/default.aspx](http://www.dgcommunity.net/historicalindexes/default.aspx), as well as the database for the holdings of the Dumfries and Galloway archive, <http://archives.dumgal.gov.uk:8814/>

- Scotlands People — A partnership between General Register Office for Scotland, the National Archives of Scotland and the Court of the Lord Lyon, [www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk](http://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk)

- Indexes to editions of the *Wigtownshire Free Press*, <http://freepages.history.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~leighann/wfp/intro.html>

- The *Edinburgh Gazette*, the official newspaper of Scotland, [www.edinburgh-gazette.co.uk](http://www.edinburgh-gazette.co.uk) (not that the family would typically

warrant coverage in a national newspaper, but always worth checking)

You now know that Scotland has some wonderful records. If you have any Scottish ancestors, do explore these records. If I could learn what I did about a non-conformist, non-landowning family, imagine what riches await you if your family attended the established church and owned land!

FC

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