

Archives and Special Collections

Dickinson College

Carlisle, PA

**COLLECTION REGISTER**

Name: **Nisbet, Charles (1736-1804)** **MC 2001.7**

Materials: Family Papers (1769-1865)

Volume: 0.25 linear feet (1 Document Box, 1 Oversized Folder, 1 Photograph, and 1 Artifact)

Donation: Gift of Mrs. Louise Chase Sisk, 1969 and 1976

Usage: These materials have been donated without restrictions on usage.

**BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

Charles Nisbet was born in January 21, 1736 to Alison and William Nisbet near Haddington, in the county of East Lothian in Scotland. By 1754, he had completed studies at the high school of the University in Edinburgh and had entered Divinity Hall to prepare for the ministry. Nisbet was licensed by the Presbytery of Edinburgh on September 24, 1760, and began preaching at churches in the Gorbals, near Glasgow. On May 17, 1764, he was ordained in the Presbytery of Brechin and assigned to a church in Montrose. Two years later, he married Anne Tweedie and their first son Thomas was born. The Nisbets would have three more children, Mary (c1770), Alison (1773), and Alexander (1777).

Nisbet developed one of the highest reputations for scholarship in Scotland. He became an important member of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, outspoken in his defense of strict Calvinism. In the decade in which American affairs came to a head, he voiced strong public support for the American colonists. In recognition of this advocacy, he was awarded a Doctor of Divinity Degree from Princeton in 1783. Nisbet's reputation as a scholar and as an American sympathizer also caught the attention of Dr. Benjamin Rush of Philadelphia, who was then struggling to establish a college at Carlisle. Rush began to pursue Nisbet as his choice for the presidency of the new college, calling upon Nisbet's dedication to the principles of freedom and education. After much coaxing, Nisbet finally agreed and sailed from Greenock with his family on April 23, 1785.

The Nisbets would endure many hardships when they arrived in Carlisle a few months later. The family became desperately ill due to the harsh summer climate, and Nisbet's relationship with Dr. Rush became strained when the new president was completely apprised of his situation at the fledgling institution. In October, just months after he had arrived, Nisbet resigned as Principal of the College and proceeded to plan his return to Scotland. For various reasons, his departure was delayed. During that time, the health of his family was recovered and on consideration Nisbet requested his old position and, despite Dr. Rush's misgivings, was unanimously re-elected as Principal on May 9, 1786 by the Board of Trustees. For the following

eighteen years, his efforts to build the new institution were untiring; Nisbet served diligently in his duties as Principal and as Professor.

Under Nisbet, the grammar school and the college were combined under one governing Board of Trustees, and in 1799 seven acres of land were purchased upon which a new college edifice could be constructed. Unfortunately for Nisbet, he would not see the full fruits of his labor. The large college edifice that he had long advocated had been completely destroyed by fire on the night of February 2-3, 1803, just as it was nearing completion. On New Years' Day, 1804, he contracted a cold which progressed rapidly into pneumonia; Charles Nisbet died on January 18, 1804.

The birth date of the eldest Nisbet daughter, Mary, is not known for certain, but she was probably born sometime around 1770. She was described as "amiable" in the announcement of her marriage to William Turnbull of Pittsburgh. Turnbull had been born in Stirling, Scotland to Andrew and Jean Chrystie Turnbull on March 10, 1751. He immigrated to America around 1770 and settled in Philadelphia, where he engaged in business after having been trained as a counting house clerk. By 1772 he had already established the cloth-dealing firm of Lennox and Turnbull. At the outbreak of the Revolutionary War, Turnbull first joined the Philadelphia Associators as a lieutenant and then enlisted in the First City Troop as a private. However, towards the end of the war he followed his business pursuits by acting as an agent for the state and Congress, procuring provisions for the war effort; one of his many tasks was to purchase flour for the army in 1779. Two years earlier he had been elected Auditor of Claims for the Board of the Treasury.

By 1781, Turnbull had founded the firm of William Turnbull and Company, quickly becoming one of Philadelphia's most prominent businessmen. At that time, he joined with Pierre Marmie and several others, including Robert Morris and the French Consul John Holker, in forming Turnbull, Marmie, and Company, dealing in shipping and flour, but eventually expanding into iron foundries and distilleries. Experiencing great success in Philadelphia, the firm scouted for other locations into which it could expand its operations; this search resulted in the purchase of real estate in the growing western town around Fort Pitt. Carlisle being a major stopping point on the journey between Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, Turnbull came into contact with the Nisbet family during his many travels between business locations. He had married Mary Rhea, the daughter of a wealthy Philadelphia merchant, and the couple had three children before Mary's death in 1783. In 1790, Turnbull married Mary Nisbet, who not only became mother to his two remaining daughters, but also gave birth to eleven children of her own, losing only two to childhood disease. The couple relocated to Pittsburgh shortly after their marriage, prompting Charles Nisbet to send many letters full of advice to his eldest daughter.

Unfortunately for Turnbull, his partner Marmie was not as astute a businessman as he himself was, and the firm began to rapidly lose money after several unsuccessful lawsuits filed by Marmie. It was rumored that he had gone mad and as a result had made costly mistakes in judgment; according to popular legend, Marmie set one of the firm's buildings ablaze and ended his life by throwing himself into the fire. Under such severe financial strain, Turnbull relocated his growing family back to Philadelphia. Still his finances suffered, and he was forced to abandon his firm and move in with Mary's brother Alexander at his estate near Baltimore shortly after the War of 1812. William Turnbull died there on July 25, 1822. Mary remained with her brother and his family until her death sometime around 1833. Of their nine surviving children, all but one remained in the Baltimore area.

## COLLECTION DESCRIPTION

The Charles Nisbet Family Papers are comprised of materials relating to the Nisbet and Turnbull families. The collection has been organized into three series: Correspondence, Legal and Financial Materials, and Miscellaneous Materials. These materials were donated by Mrs. Louise Chase Sisk in 1969 and 1976, a Turnbull descendant.

The Correspondence series contains letters primarily written by Charles Nisbet or to him. The various authors of letters to him include his eldest daughter Mary, David Erskine, the Earl of Buchan, and Wilhelmina Nisbet, the Countess of Leven. Erskine and Lady Leven were friends of Nisbet's from Scotland, and all three continued to correspond after Nisbet immigrated to America. The letters in the series have been arranged alphabetically according to author and then chronologically.

The series entitled Legal and Financial Materials contains items relating to Alexander Turnbull's military service and his estate as well as William Turnbull's business dealings. Due to their size, some materials dealing with William Turnbull's service as an agent of the state have been removed and placed in an oversized folder, designated as OC 2001.7.

The Miscellaneous Materials series is comprised of various documents dealing with the Turnbull family. These items include an undated poem by an anonymous author memorializing Charles II of England, as well as genealogical information on the Tweedie family; Charles Nisbet's wife Ann was a member of this family.

One photograph of Nisbet Turnbull has been designated as PC 2001.7 and is separated from the collection in a folder housed with the Dickinson College photograph collection.

In addition, the collection contains one artifact, a wallet belonging to William Turnbull. The wallet is made of red leather with an ornate silver clasp (broken). Turnbull's name and the year, 1769, are embossed in gold lettering under the front flap; the name of Alexander Turnbull has also been stamped onto the inner folds. This item has been designated as AC 2001.7, and is housed separately from the collection within the Dickinson College artifact collection.

## COLLECTION INVENTORY

### BOX 1 – MC 2001.7

#### CORRESPONDENCE

Erskine, David (Earl of Buchan)	
Folder 01)	Letter to Charles Nisbet – undated
Folder 02)	Letter to Charles Nisbet – Feb. 26, 1795
Keith, Charles	
Folder 03)	Letter to Charles Nisbet – Jan. 1, 1804
McKenzie, James	
Folder 04)	Letter to Charles Nisbet – Jan. 30, 1804
Nisbet, Charles	
Folder 05)	Letter to David Erskine – Dec. 25, 1787
Folder 06)	Letter to David Erskine – Sept. 16, 1788
Folder 07)	Letter to David Erskine – Mar. 20, 1790
Folder 08)	Letter to David Erskine – Aug. 18, 1790
Folder 09)	Letter to David Erskine – June 22, 1791
Folder 10)	Letter to unknown – Aug. 10, 1791

## BOX 1 – MC 2001.7 (cont.)

### CORRESPONDENCE (cont.)

#### Nisbet, Charles (cont.)

- Folder 11) Letter to his daughter, Mary Nisbet – Oct. 25, 1791
- Folder 12) Letter to his daughter, Mary Nisbet – Nov. 12, 1791
- Folder 13) Letter to his daughter, Mary Nisbet – Dec. 27, 1791
- Folder 14) Letter to David Erskine – Jan. 10, 1792
- Folder 15) Letter to his daughter, Mary Nisbet – July 30, 1792
- Folder 16) Letter to his daughter, Mary Nisbet – Oct. 20, 1792
- Folder 17) Letter to his daughter, Mary Nisbet – Nov. 10, 1792
- Folder 18) Letter to his daughter, Mary Nisbet – Nov. 15, 1792
- Folder 19) Letter to his daughter, Mary Nisbet – Apr. 16, 1793
- Folder 20) Letter to his daughter, Mary Nisbet – Nov. 8, 1793
- Folder 21) Letter to his daughter, Mary Nisbet – Mar. 7, 1798
- Folder 22) Letter to his daughter, Mary Nisbet – May 13, 1799
- Folder 23) Letter to his daughter, Mary Nisbet – June 1, 1799
- Folder 24) Letter to his daughter, Mary Nisbet – Nov. 16, 1799

#### Nisbet, Mary (Mrs. William Turnbull)

- Folder 25) Letter to her son, Alexander Turnbull – June 24, 1826

#### Nisbet, Wilhelmina (Lady Leven)

- Folder 26) Letter to Charles Nisbet – Sep. 7
- Folder 27) Letter to Charles Nisbet – Nov. 29, 1779
- Folder 28) Letter to Charles Nisbet – Mar. 9, 1780
- Folder 29) Letter to Charles Nisbet – Nov. 4, 1783
- Folder 30) Letter to Charles Nisbet – Nov. 20, 1783
- Folder 31) Letter to Charles Nisbet – July 26, 1784
- Folder 32) Letter to Charles Nisbet – Aug. 19, 1784
- Folder 33) Letter to Charles Nisbet – Jan. 19, 1785
- Folder 34) Letter to Charles Nisbet – Mar. 23, 1785
- Folder 35) Letter to Charles Nisbet – Aug. 8, 1785
- Folder 36) Letter to Charles Nisbet – Aug. 25, 1786
- Folder 37) Letter to Charles Nisbet – Aug. 1, 1788
- Folder 38) Letter to Charles Nisbet – Mar. 2, 1789
- Folder 39) Letter to Charles Nisbet – Nov. 27, 1789
- Folder 40) Letter to Charles Nisbet – 1792

#### Rush, Benjamin

- Folder 41) Letter to Charles Nisbet – Aug. 30, 1784

#### Turnbull, William

- Folder 42) Letter to Alexander Nisbet – Mar. 19, 1806

#### Unknown

- Folder 43) Note to Fanny Nisbet – undated

### LEGAL AND FINANCIAL MATERIALS

#### Turnbull, Marmie, and Company

- Folder 44) Note for \$149 to the order of Messrs. Wister and Aston

#### Turnbull, Alexander

- Folder 45) Printed notice of enrolment in 39<sup>th</sup> Maryland militia – 1825  
Catalogue of paintings and wines from Turnbull estate – Nov. 2, 1870

**BOX 1 – MC 2001.7 (cont.)**

**MISCELLANEOUS MATERIALS**

- Charles II, King of England  
Folder 46) Memorial poem written by “M.C.” – undated
- Lee, T. J.  
Folder 47) Card bearing name and title – undated
- Turnbull, Alexander  
Folder 48) Autograph on card – undated
- Turnbull, Nisbet  
Folder 49) Certificate from Institution Elie Charlier – June 20, 1862
- Tweedie Family  
Folder 50) Genealogical information compiler by unknown author – undated
- Unknown  
Folder 51) Note describing jobs held between 1823 and 1825 - undated

**OVERSIZED – OC 2001.7**

**LEGAL AND FINANCIAL MATERIALS**

- Turnbull, William  
Folder 01) Records of service as agent for purchase of flour under order of  
Supreme Executive Council of Pennsylvania (copies) – 1779

**PHOTOGRAPHS – PC 2001.7**

- Nisbet Turnbull  
Folder 01) As a cadet at the Naval Academy – c1865

**ARTIFACTS – AC 2001.7**

**MISCELLANEOUS**

- Turnbull, William  
Item 01) Leather wallet – 1769