

Biographical Sketches

Walter Hebden Wilson (1782-1867) and Janet Russell (1779-1845)

Walter Hebden Wilson was born on 20 January 1782 in the small village of East Kilbride, at a time when it was still a quiet rural settlement on the edge of the Scottish Lowlands. East Kilbride was not a transient community; families tended to stay put, passing down land, trades, and local standing. Walter grew up in a world shaped by continuity rather than change—a sharp contrast to the path his life would eventually take when he left for Glasgow, just ten miles to the northwest, to seek an apprenticeship.

Apprenticeship and Marriage

It was from this steady, inward-looking environment that Walter Wilson emerged—a young man shaped by rural Scotland yet destined to step into a rapidly modernizing world. Although we do not know what Walter's father did for a living, it is clear he had enough means and social standing to secure an apprenticeship for his son in Glasgow, something not every rural family could manage.

Walter left East Kilbride for the city, and somewhere between settling in, learning his trade, and adjusting to life in bustling Glasgow, he met Janet Russell. Janet was born on 1 June 1779 in Dunipace, Stirlingshire, a small rural parish about twenty miles northeast of Glasgow. It is not known whether Janet moved to Glasgow independently or whether the couple relocated together after marriage. What is clear is that their marriage in Glasgow in 1806 marked the beginning of a long partnership—one that would span continents, economic upheaval, and enormous personal sacrifice.

Early Days in Glasgow

Walter and Janet began their married life at a moment when Glasgow itself was being remade, its old mercantile identity giving way to the forces of industry making it one of Europe's great industrial centers.

At this time, Walter was an apprentice baker. He appears in the records of the Burgess and Guild Brethren of Glasgow in 1807, and like most apprenticeships of the period, his training likely lasted seven years, demanding both endurance and commitment.

By the time Walter completed his apprenticeship, he and Janet were not only husband and wife but also full partners in work and family life. Between 1807 and 1823, their household expanded with the birth of eight children. This period, however, was also marked by loss. Two of their sons died in childhood—one at the age of eleven and another at nine—reminding us of the fragility of family life in the early nineteenth century. After 1823, six of their children remained living.

Walter finished his apprenticeship and from 1806 until 1834, Walter and Janet operated a commercial bakery at 28 Baker Street, a long-term enterprise that anchored the family both economically and socially. The bakery was likely situated in one of Glasgow's urban artisan quarters, where tradespeople lived and worked side by side in close-knit neighborhoods shaped by daily

commerce. Although no surviving map pinpoints the exact location of the address, the broader development of the city suggests the Wilsons lived just beyond the historic core, in one of the emerging districts formed as Glasgow expanded outward—busy, practical neighborhoods well suited to family-run businesses.

Family Beyond Scotland: Jamaica and Loss

During these years, migration began to shape the wider family story. Walter's younger brothers, William and Arthur, left East Kilbride for Jamaica in search of opportunity. William worked as a saddler and lived with a Black woman, with whom he had five children. Arthur was involved in rum production. Family lore holds that both brothers owned enslaved people, were required to free them prior to 1830, and were murdered during the unrest surrounding the Jamaican Slave Revolt of 1831.

Family letters confirm that William left Walter an inheritance of £200—roughly equivalent to \$40,000 today. While the money was undoubtedly welcome, it arrived under tragic circumstances. More importantly, it reinforced the idea that emigration—however risky—could fundamentally alter a family's fortunes.

Cholera and Crisis: The Decision to Leave

By the early 1830s, Glasgow's rapid growth had come at a devastating human cost. In February 1832, the city experienced its first cholera epidemic. Spread through contaminated water—though contemporaries blamed “bad air”—the disease tore through the poorest districts with terrifying speed. Around 3,000 people died.

For the Wilson family, the epidemic likely brought a falling customer base, labor disruption, fear-driven avoidance, supply instability, and intense psychological stress, all while threatening their own health. Even if the bakery continued operating, 1832 appears to have been a turning point: the moment when Glasgow ceased to feel like a viable long-term home.

By the fall of that year, the epidemic had begun to wane, but recovery for small family businesses was slow and uncertain. The following year brought another major shift. In 1833, the Wilsons' eldest daughter, Margaret, married Thomas Barland, a close friend of their son, Thomas Wilson, from the University of Glasgow. Almost immediately after the wedding, Margaret, Thomas Barland, and Thomas Wilson left for the United States to teach at the newly chartered Illinois College, then a center of abolitionist thought in the Midwest. Trained as a minister, Barland also intended to preach among Native American communities.

Margaret soon began writing home, describing the opportunities of Illinois in glowing terms. Kane County had just opened land to settlers, available for homesteading and later purchase from the federal government.

With Barland's assistance, an Edinburgh attorney paid Walter £16 plus £220 sterling to finance the family's passage. Shortly thereafter, Walter, Janet, Helen (our ancestor), and John C. left Liverpool in 1834 aboard the *Louise*, a sailing vessel, beginning a transatlantic journey that typically lasted six to eight weeks. Steerage conditions were cramped and uncomfortable, with limited privacy, rationed

water, and food passengers largely supplied themselves. Seasickness and illness were common, and for a family traveling together—especially after the recent trauma of disease and loss in Glasgow—the voyage would have been physically exhausting and emotionally fraught. For Janet in particular, the confinement, uncertainty, and separation from familiar surroundings likely made the crossing deeply unsettling. Their youngest child, Walter Jr., died in 1834; it remains unclear whether it was on the journey or after they arrived in America.

Arrival in America

The Wilsons arrived in New York in April 1834, only to continue almost immediately inland. Traveling west by the Erie Canal, the family moved slowly toward the interior before continuing on to Chicago, then a small frontier settlement. From there, they made their way by wagon and river routes to central Illinois where their daughter lived.

For Walter and John C., the journey may have represented opportunity and excitement. For Janet, it likely felt like loss layered upon loss: home, comfort, community, and predictability exchanged for hardship and uncertainty. She may have been comforted that she would see her daughter and son, who were already in Illinois, and that she traveled with her 18-year-old daughter, Helen. However, the difficult journey ended in a frontier unlike any Janet had known.

By the time they reached Illinois, the journey itself had already reshaped the Wilsons. What followed on the frontier would demand even more adaptation—something Walter managed with determination, and Janet, as the record shows, struggled to endure.

From City Streets to the Illinois Frontier

After traveling west via the Erie Canal to Chicago, John C. remained in Chicago to work as a baker to add to their savings. Walter, Janet, and Helen continued on to Jacksonville, where they spent the winter with the Barlands.

Walter later purchased a yoke of oxen and met John C. in St. Charles, newly opened to homesteaders. With them was an escaped enslaved man named Harry, who taught them how to build a log cabin and break the land. According to *The Past and Present of Kane County*, John C. and Thomas were sent ahead to “spy out the land” with Harry. During this journey, Harry became lost and spent the night in a Potawatomi camp before finding his way back at dawn, relieved to be back with the Wilsons.

The men lived in their wagon while building a small cabin. Janet and Helen did not join them until it was completed. Even then, the family lived for two years in the dirt-floor cabin before making improvements.

Building Permanence—and the Cost of Adaptation

The Wilsons worked their claim until the land was surveyed in 1841. That year, Walter had improved the property and purchased 160 acres for \$200. John C. purchased 80 acres nearby, and Helen’s husband, Reed Davis, bought the adjoining 100 acres in 1842.

Despite this progress, Janet remained unhappy in the cabin. Here the family story becomes more complex. While later generations often emphasized pioneer resilience and success, documentation makes clear that Janet was not among those who adapted easily to frontier life.

Janet's World Turned Upside Down

For Janet, the move to Illinois represented a profound and personal upheaval. In Glasgow—even amid industrial chaos—she had known paved streets, shops, churches, neighbors close at hand, and the relative comforts of urban life. She lived above or near a business her family controlled, with access to goods, social networks, and medical care, limited though it was.

Illinois offered none of this. Instead, Janet faced raw land recently ceded by the Potawatomi, unfinished roads, few settlements, and a daily existence defined by physical hardship. Winters were harsh, housing primitive, and isolation replaced city crowds. The skills that had sustained her in Glasgow had to be reshaped entirely for frontier survival.

Later family descriptions remembered her as “a delicate woman used to city life.” Read carefully, this does not suggest weakness so much as displacement. Janet was living in a world fundamentally unlike the one she had known, and adapting to that change proved impossible for her.

A Brick House for Janet

After nine years in Illinois, Walter and John C. resolved to build a proper house in hopes of making Janet more comfortable. In 1843, they began constructing a Greek Revival brick home. Starting on August 6, they burned 106,000 bricks—27,000 intended for trade or barter—using clay from Ferson Creek. Walter's experience as a baker allowed him to design and operate the kiln. They paid \$100 for carpentry and compensated masons with bricks, finishing the project with only three bricks left unused.

Walter sold 41 acres at \$8 per acre to finance the construction and repay Thomas Barland for the family's passage to America.

Tragically, the house was completed only shortly before Janet's death on October 28, 1845. The family had not yet moved in, and the home built specifically for her comfort was never truly her own. Janet's funeral was held inside the house itself—a poignant farewell in the space meant to give her rest.

The house still stands today.

Final Years and Legacy

After Janet's death, Walter, aged 63, lived with his son John C., in the brick house built for Janet, surely a bittersweet experience. By 1847, John C. had become one of the most successful farmers in St. Charles and Kane County—a point of pride for the family. John married that same year.

In 1854, the family moved to a new farm, in part to escape the growing disruption caused by a plank road being built along what is now Dean Street. Around this time, John C. also became involved in the Underground Railroad. He assisted enslaved people seeking freedom, moving them from a hotel

in town to the safety of his farm—a quiet but significant commitment that placed the family within a broader network of resistance and reform in the years leading up to the Civil War.

On April 4, 1855, Walter conveyed the original homestead to John, who later sold it to William Burr. Walter spent his final years on the new farm near present-day Highway 38. He suffered from dementia for the last eighteen months of his life and died on June 15, 1867. He is buried in Garfield Cemetery next to Janet, not far from the land that defined the final chapter of their shared journey.