

# Research Reports

## Rapports de recherche

### The Labels of Thomas Nisbet

TIM G. DILWORTH

Thomas Nisbet, a Saint John, New Brunswick, cabinetmaker (w. 1813–48) was unusual in that he labelled many pieces of his furniture, unlike most of his contemporary New Brunswick cabinetmakers. His paper labels not only indicated that the piece of furniture was his shop's work and gave the location of his shop, but also listed what was available



in both the furniture and upholstery lines from his business – his labels were advertising rather than identification labels. Most labels used by contemporary cabinetmakers in the United States were of the identification type while British cabinetmakers tended to use the advertising type of label more extensively.

Published material on Nisbet up to this time has indicated that he used two labels – an early label and a later one after he and his son, Thomas Jr., formed a co-partnership in 1834 known as Thomas Nisbet & Son.<sup>1</sup> As a result of my intensive research on his labelled furniture, it has been determined that there are really three paper labels which he used. In addition, there are three version of the second label. Knowing that a particular sequence of labels existed even though it may not be possible to determine accurately all the dates when they were used allows a person to more accurately date both the labelled furniture as well as the pieces attributed to this cabinetmaker. Based on the present knowledge I have of Nisbet's labels, I will present what appears to be the most logical sequence of use by Nisbet's cabinet shop.

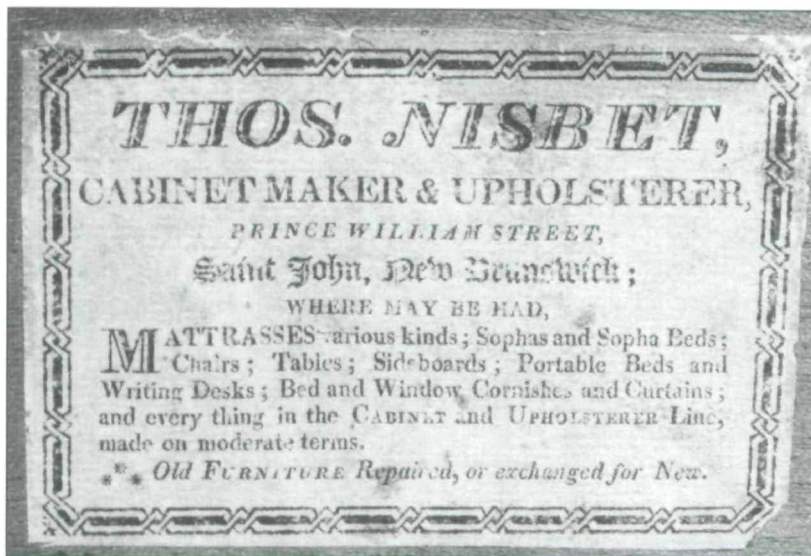
The earliest label (ca 1815) was found on a neoclassical writing table from a Saint Andrew's home and is in the collection of the New Brunswick Museum (Fig. 1). While

**Fig. 1**  
*A neoclassical writing stand (ca 1815) of bird's-eye maple with mahogany moulding, which has Nisbet's earliest label attached. (All photography by Roger Smith)*

**Fig. 2**  
*Thomas Nisbet's earliest label (ca 1815) showing the different border design from all other Nisbet labels known to date.*



Fig. 3  
The second label used by Thomas Nisbet showing the characteristic border design used on all subsequent labels.



the remnants of the label are heavily stained and foxed, the following can still be determined. The border design is different from all other variations of his labels (Fig. 2). Nearly all the wording can be determined by extrapolation from later labels as the wording is similar on all his labels. It reads as follows:

Fig. 4  
The second version of Nisbet's second label.



THOS. NISBET,  
CABINETMAKER & UPHOLSTERER,  
PRINCE WILLIAM STREET,

WHERE may be had: Mattrasses various kinds; Sophas and Sopha Beds; Chairs; Tables; Sideboards; Portable Beds and Writing Desks; Bed and Window Cornishes and Curtains made, and everything in the Cabinet and Upholsterer line, on moderate terms.  
N. B. Old Furniture Repaired.  
Saint John, New-Brunswick

The W in WHERE is two lines in height, being the first letter of lines one and two of the listing of goods and services offered. It could not be determined whether it reads "everything" or "every thing" as on the later labels. The major differences between this label and later labels, besides the border design, is the positioning of "Saint John, New-Brunswick" at the bottom of the label rather than after "PRINCE WILLIAM STREET;" the use of "...on moderate terms" rather than "...made on moderate terms" and "Old Furniture Repaired" rather than "Old FURNITURE Repaired or exchanged for New."

The second label has the characteristic linked border design (Fig. 3) which is used on all labels other than the one described previously. The wording of the first version is as follows:

THOS. NISBET,  
CABINETMAKER & UPHOLSTERER,  
PRINCE WILLIAM STREET,  
Saint John, New Brunswick;

WHERE MAY BE HAD,

MATTRASSES various kinds; Sopha and Sopha Beds; Chairs; Tables; Sideboards; Portable Beds and Writing Desks; Bed and Window Cornishes and Curtains; and every thing in the CABINET and UPHOLSTERER Line, made on moderate terms.

Old FURNITURE Repaired and exchanged for New.

The M in MATTRASSES is two lines in height.

The second version of this label (Fig. 4) consists of a change in how the words are positioned. While they are the same words, they are on different lines as follows:

Writing Desks; Bed and Window Cornishes and Curtains; and every thing in the CABINET and UPHOLSTERER Line, made on moderate terms.



The third version (Fig. 5) consists of a minor change on one line where "...CABINET and UPHOLSTERER" becomes "...CABINET & UPHOLSTERER."

The wording in the third label (1834-48), used after Thomas Jr. joined his father's business, was as follows:

THOMAS NISBET & SON,  
Cabinet Makers & Upholsterers,  
PRINCE WILLIAM STREET,  
SAINT JOHN, NEW-BRUNSWICK,

WHERE MAY BE HAD,

MATTRASSES various kinds; Sofas and Sofa Beds;  
Chairs; Tables; Sideboards; Portable Beds and Writing  
Desks; Bed and Window Cornices and Curtains; and every thing  
in the CABINET & UPHOLSTERY Line, made on moderate terms.  
Mahogany in Boards, Planks and Veneers.

Old FURNITURE Repaired or exchanged for New.

The M in MATTRASSES again is two lines in height.

While the labels have been discussed according to what appears to be the most logical sequence, the versions of the second label could have conceivably been used in a different sequence. Further study is now required whereby the labelled furniture is grouped based on which label or variation of label is attached to them. Based on these groupings, the sequence for the labels and their versions will allow a more accurate dating of Nisbet's labelled and attributed furniture.

## Clothing the Past: Costume Research at the Canadian Parks Service

GAIL CARIOU

The costume section of the Interpretation Branch of the Canadian Parks Service headquarters office in Ottawa was established in 1972 and since then has undergone a number of changes which reflect the changing focus of the branch as a whole.

Originally, the in-house curators and designers undertook not only site-specific costume research and planned costume programmes, but produced the costumes worn by interpreters at some national historic sites. By 1979 the number of sites using cos-



**Fig. 5**  
The third version of  
Nisbet's second label.

### NOTES

1. Charles H. Foss, *Cabinetmakers of the Eastern Seaboard* (Toronto: M. F. Feheley, 1977); Huia G. Ryder, *Antique Furniture by New Brunswick Craftsmen* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1965); Donald Blake Webster, *English-Canadian Furniture of the Georgian Period* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1979); *Antiques* (April 1989): 942-949; T. G. Dilworth, "Thomas Nisbet: A Reappraisal of His Life and Work," *Material History Bulletin* 15 (1982): 77-82; *New Brunswick Courier* (Saint John), 26 April 1834, 7 June 1834.