



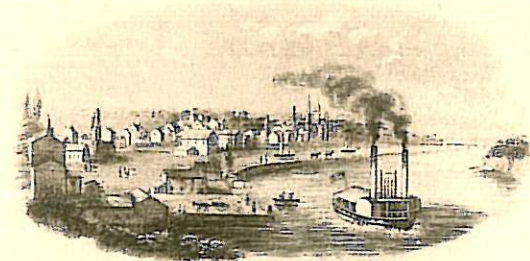
*Colonel James Neilson as a young man*

*Colonel*  
**JAMES NEILSON**

*A BUSINESS MAN OF THE EARLY  
MACHINE AGE IN NEW JERSEY*

*1784-1862*

*by Robert T. Thompson*



New Brunswick

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## BACKGROUND

THE HISTORICAL EVOLUTION of New Brunswick, New Jersey, from its founding in 1680 to the present time, furnishes apt illustrations for the physiographic interpretation of history. The Raritan River, while not comparable to the Delaware, Hudson, and other great streams on the eastern coast of the United States, supplied relatively easy transportation for settlers. Lying at the head of sloop navigation on the Raritan, New Brunswick naturally became a trading and shipping center for the thrifty farmers who in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries flocked into the middle counties of New Jersey. Soil and climate decreed that wheat, oats, rye, flax and pastoral products should loom large in the economy of the area. In the nineteenth century geography made the city the natural terminus of turnpike roads and of the Delaware and Raritan Canal. The water power resources of the Raritan River stimulated early industrial development, even though they did prove to be inadequate for extensive manufacturing plants. Proximity to New York City has also affected, for good and ill, the whole of New Brunswick's economic history. In many other ways, too, the city's life has been conditioned by its geographic setting. The site was known to colonists in New York and New Jersey for some time before it could boast of any permanent residents. William Edmundson, a Quaker missionary, referred in 1675 to a landing on the "Rarington" and a trail that led therefrom to the Delaware River. In traversing this trail, Edmundson failed to find a single settler.<sup>1</sup> Four years later another traveller in New Jersey, Jasper

<sup>1</sup> William Edmundson, *Journal* (Dublin, 1715), p. 93.

Danckaerts, found Cornelius Van Langevelt, an enterprising Dutchman from New York, established on the site of what was later called New Brunswick. Van Langevelt, then busily engaged in working out plans for the establishment of a village on a part of his lands, was actually the founder of the city.<sup>2</sup> However, another New Yorker, John Inian, who acquired a large tract of land on the Raritan for himself and his associates, moved to his holdings and began the operation of the first ferry across the river, with the result that for some years the New Brunswick settlement was known simply as Inian's Ferry. In the half century following 1680 large numbers of land hungry folk followed in the pioneering steps of Langevelt and Inian. The rich, arable soil between the Raritan and Delaware attracted thousands of farmers, and with the spread of tillage, the importance of New Brunswick as a shipping and trading village was greatly enhanced. In 1730, in response to a petition from its citizens, George II granted a borough charter to the ambitious little Raritan River town. The petition urged the grant of the charter on the ground that New Brunswick had become a place of great commercial importance.<sup>3</sup> At that time the population of the newly created borough town did not exceed a few hundred souls, but a sizable agricultural population had been established within travelling radius. When the Reverend George Whitfield visited New Brunswick in 1740, he found between seven and eight thousand people waiting to hear him preach.<sup>4</sup> These early settlers were of diverse origins. New York City supplied the first colonists, but they were soon followed by groups and individuals from Albany, Long Island, and other communities in New York. Families were also attracted to the Raritan region from Pennsylvania and older

<sup>2</sup> *Journal of Jasper Danckaerts* (New York, 1913), p. 160.

<sup>3</sup> John P. Wall, *Chronicles of New Brunswick* (New Brunswick, N. J., 1931), pp. 19-23.

<sup>4</sup> Reverend Robert Davidson, *Historical Sketch of the First Presbyterian Church of New Brunswick* (New Brunswick, N. J., 1852), pp. 8-9.

settlements in New Jersey; Europe likewise sent a few of its sons. The most numerous stocks were Dutch, English and Scotch-Irish, but the names of a few settlers before 1730 were obviously French in origin. Negroes were introduced soon after colonization began. This heterogeneity which characterized colonial New Brunswick grew much more pronounced in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. From the beginning of its history the city has been a melting pot in which the fusion of many peoples into an American stock has been continuously in progress.

Among the Scotch-Irish settlers who established themselves on the Raritan were two brothers, John and James Neilson. These two sons of Ireland arrived in America some time before 1730.<sup>5</sup> James came to Perth Amboy about 1716 and later moved up the Raritan to New Brunswick. He was one of the gentlemen who petitioned for the New Brunswick charter of 1730. That his ability was recognized in the town of his adoption was indicated by the fact that the charter named him clerk of New Brunswick and also of the Court of Quarter Sessions. His career for the next fifty-three years proved the wisdom of the charter appointment.

John Neilson, a doctor of "Phisick," settled at the Upper Landing, a short distance outside New Brunswick. He prospered, and married Johanna Coeyman, a descendant of Barent Coeyman (Coejeman), who in 1673 had secured the enormous tract of land in New York known as the Coeyman's Patent.<sup>6</sup> In 1745, Dr. John Neilson died. He was survived by his wife, one daughter, Gertrude, and a posthumous son who received his

<sup>5</sup> *Collections of the New Jersey Historical Society*, IX, 170. Belfast is given as the place of origin but this may be incorrect.

<sup>6</sup> George R. Howell, Editor, *History of the County of Albany, New York* (New York, 1886), pp. 824-839. After the Revolution the descendants of Doctor John Neilson and Johanna Coeyman successfully revived the family title to the Coeyman's Patent. See Neilson Papers, folders 139, 140, 141, 142.

father's name.<sup>7</sup> This second John (1745-1833) became the foster son of his childless uncle James, who, along with Johanna Neilson, was named executor of the doctor's estate. Among the assets of that estate were a good dwelling house, a store, and a new boat.<sup>8</sup> The two latter items suggest that Doctor Neilson engaged in trade as well as the practice of medicine. Little is known about the personality and character of the first John Neilson; records of his life were not preserved. He was the founder, however, of a long line of Neilsons whose lives and achievements bore witness to the excellence of their heritage from him.

About the first James Neilson, on the other hand, there is no such dearth of knowledge. He was the founder of a family tradition of business integrity and unselfish devotion to the welfare of life in New Jersey. For more than half a century his business methods enhanced the good repute of New Brunswick as a trading center. Sailing craft owned by him and his partner, Richard Gibbs, carried flour, meal, grain, meat products and other commodities to markets both in America and in Europe. Return cargoes contained a great variety of goods for the trade.<sup>9</sup> The extent of James Neilson's business activities was dramatically revealed by a devastating fire in April, 1768. The New York newspaper report stated that "Mr. Neilson's Houses, Stores, and almost all his Effects were consumed. . . . Mr. Neilson himself 'tis said, was abroad, trying to prevent some of the spreading Fire in the Woods from reaching his Mills, so that on his Return he saw the melan-

<sup>7</sup> *Archives of the State of New Jersey*, 1st series, XXX, 353 (will of John Neilson, dated February 28, 1744/45).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, XII, 271-272 (an advertisement from the *New York Weekly Post Boy*, August 26, 1745).

<sup>9</sup> Among the wares imported in New Brunswick by James Neilson were textiles, spices, hardware, paints and books. See his invoice of goods to be bought in London, 1760. This invoice totalled £771-14-6. Neilson Papers, folder 2. The Neilson Papers contain thousands of items classified in folders according to topic. See bibliography for full description.

choly Sight. Above 2,000 Bushels of wheat, many Barrels of Flour, a large parcel of Gammons [hams] with near 1,000 Bushels of Corn was burnt in his Stores. . . ." A later account of the fire listed his loss at £8,000, and added: "In him the Distressed had always a sure Resource, and the country a faithful Merchant. Indeed his Loss will greatly affect the whole Town. . . ." <sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, in spite of this disaster, he was able to continue his mercantile operations on a reduced scale. When the Revolution came a few years later, he espoused the Patriot cause. In July, 1774, he was appointed a member of a committee to receive contributions for the relief of Boston.<sup>11</sup> He was also one of the three New Brunswick men who, at midnight on April 25, 1775, received the dispatch rider bearing news of the battles of Concord and Lexington.<sup>12</sup> Well over seventy years of age, he took a part usually played by younger men in revolutionary movements, and was privileged to live until independence was an accomplished fact. At his death in 1783, his role of faithful merchant and public spirited citizen passed on to his beloved nephew and foster son, Colonel John Neilson, who likewise inherited most of his uncle's estate.<sup>13</sup>

The long span of years (1745-1833) covered by the life of the second John Neilson brought many changes in New Brunswick. At the time of his birth the population of the town did not exceed five or six hundred people; in 1833 the city contained about five thousand residents. When he began his career as a merchant in the 1760's under the guidance of his uncle

<sup>10</sup> *Archives of the State of New Jersey*, 1st series, XXVI, 143-146.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, XXIX, 430-432.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, X, 588.

<sup>13</sup> See *The New Jersey Gazette*, March 19, 1783, for obituary notice. "Few men in publick employment have supported so unblemished a character for such a length of time as he did." The last will and testament of James Neilson was probated March 15, 1783. To his widow he bequeathed £300 in hard money, the best bed, looking-glass, and other household articles. The remainder of his estate, real and personal, was left to his nephew. Neilson Papers, folder 148. Among the doubtful assets of the estate were debts owed by 194 people when the Revolution began. These debts totalled £2,205-3-1 in 1777. Neilson Papers, folder 4.

James, there were no improved roads in the English colonies; at his death the city was a terminus for several turnpikes carrying many travellers and much freight. In addition, there was daily steamboat service to New York, and the Delaware and Raritan Canal was nearing completion. Colonel John Neilson had much to do with these changes in transportation facilities. During the Revolution, he served the Patriot cause with distinction and self-sacrifice in the dual capacity of soldier and merchant. In the unsettled times after the war, he threw the weight of his influence on the side of those who formed the Federal Constitution in 1787.<sup>14</sup> He was an active member of the New Jersey ratifying convention which met in December, 1787. As churchman, merchant, soldier, citizen, and father, Colonel John Neilson symbolized the best in the America of his era. There were few worthy institutions or movements in his community which did not profit from his support or competent leadership. Like his father, the second John married a wife of Dutch extraction. In 1768 he was wedded to the fifteen-year-old Catherine Schuyler Voorhees of New Brunswick. This union was blessed with eleven children, four of whom died in infancy. Of the seven children who grew to maturity one (Samuel Staats) died shortly before his twentieth birthday. Three sons and three daughters lived to ripe old age.<sup>15</sup> Not the least of Colonel Neilson's many contributions to New Brunswick and the nation was his family of God-fearing sons and daughters.

James Neilson, the subject of the following chapters, was born on December 3, 1784. As the namesake of his great-uncle, it was natural that he should be directed toward a mercantile career, while his elder brother John selected the medical profession for his life's work. The life of the second James (1784-1862) contained more than a normal share of personal dis-

<sup>14</sup> He was appointed a delegate to the Federal Convention but did not attend.

<sup>15</sup> Doctor John Neilson, James Neilson, Abraham Schuyler Neilson, Mrs. George S. (Gertrude) Woodhull, Mrs. Augustus R. (Catherine) Taylor, Miss Joanna Neilson.

appointments and heartaches. In 1811 he married Rivine Forman, the attractive young daughter of General David Forman of Monmouth County, New Jersey.<sup>16</sup> This lady lived only five years after her marriage, her death preceding that of an infant daughter by just ten days. One child of this union, Ann Augusta, grew to maturity and married, but she died before her thirtieth birthday. In 1820 James Neilson was married again—to Jane Dunlap of New York. The two children of this marriage both died before they were one year old, and in 1823 their mother died in Savannah, Georgia, where she had been taken by her husband in the hope that the southern climate would restore her health. In the space of eight years James Neilson had lost three children and two wives. Ten years elapsed after the death of his second wife before he again tempted a fate which had been most unkind. Then in 1833 he married Harriette Benedict, who was born the year of his first marriage. Mrs. Harriette Neilson bore her husband one son, who died before he reached the age of two, and in 1840 she also died. In spite of the tragic disappointments of his first three ventures in matrimony, James Neilson, in 1844, married, for the fourth and last time, Catherine, the daughter of John R. and Hester Linn Bleecker of Albany, New York.<sup>17</sup> Their son, the third James, was born in November, 1844, and lived until February, 1937. The lives of the three James Neilsons covered at least two hundred and twenty years of New Jersey history.<sup>18</sup>

New Brunswick had grown into a city of 11,256 by the time of the death of the second James in 1862.<sup>19</sup> Between 1830 and 1860 its population had increased about two and a half times.

<sup>16</sup> General Forman died when Rivine was a small child.

<sup>17</sup> Mrs. Catherine Bleecker Neilson had three sisters. Sarah Bleecker became the wife of George Mortimer Tibbits. Elizabeth Bleecker married Benjamin Tibbits and Mary Bleecker became Mrs. Horatio Seymour.

<sup>18</sup> James I came to New Jersey 1716; died 1783.

James II, 1784-1862.

James III, 1844-1937.

<sup>19</sup> Acts of the 86th Legislature of New Jersey. Census Supplement of 1860.

The cosmopolitan character which had marked the community from its founding was reinforced in the three decades before 1860 by the arrival of large numbers of European immigrants. This foreign population was attracted by the industrial and transportation developments which James Neilson helped to foster. A little more than 2,000 natives of Ireland and 870 other foreign born folk resided in the city in 1860.<sup>20</sup> Its economic transformation between the death of Colonel John Neilson in 1833 and the demise of James Neilson in 1862 was revolutionary. At the former date it was still primarily a commercial city. A survey of New Jersey shortly before 1833 revealed that New Brunswick was second only to Newark as a trading center, although it lagged far behind a number of New Jersey communities in industrial development.<sup>21</sup> By 1860 its relative importance as a commercial emporium had de-

<sup>20</sup> *The Times and Union*, September 18, 1860. Over four hundred aliens settled in New Brunswick between 1855 and 1860. See also the *New Brunswick Fredonian*, July 25, 1855. Population statistics for New Brunswick are a subject of much confusion. The city was a part of North Brunswick Township, a large area in Middlesex County. Population figures for the township and the city were not separated before 1840. In addition, a section of the city was in Franklin Township, Somerset County. This disparity between the real boundaries of the city and the geographical units used in census taking has led some, for example, to give the population of the city in 1840 as 8,204 although the *Fredonian* of October 21, 1840, stated that New Brunswick contained 5,434 people, two-sevenths of whom lived in the Franklin Township section of the city. Barber and Howe, *Historical Collections of New Jersey* (New York, 1844), p. 310, listed New Brunswick as a city of 8,693 in 1844. This was an obvious error caused by their failure to separate township and city population statistics. The residents of the city numbered only 7,893 in 1850. *Fredonian*, December 11, 1850. The gain in the city's population between 1850 and 1860 is given as only 12 per cent in a recent work, "The Industrial History of New Jersey in the Middle Period," by Jeannette Paddock Nichols, in *New Jersey, A History*, (6 vols., New York, 1930-1932), II, 583-615. If the correct statistics are used for 1840, 1850, and 1860, New Brunswick will be found to have grown 142 per cent between 1840 and 1860 and 55 per cent in the one decade 1850-1860.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas F. Gordon, *Gazetteer of the State of New Jersey* (Trenton, 1834). An analysis of Gordon's *Gazetteer* by the author shows that only five or six population centers in New Jersey could be considered as urban in 1830. The 288 hamlets, towns and cities listed by Gordon were classified as follows: (a) 26 towns and cities with more than 100 houses (most of these had populations ranging between 900 and 3,000 people); (b) 23 communities with not more than 100 nor less than 51 houses (average: 80 houses); (c) 76 hamlets with 21 to 50 houses (average: 35 houses); (d) 163 villages with 20 houses or less (average: about 11 houses).

clined greatly. The completion of the Delaware and Raritan Canal in 1834 and the development of a network of railroads in New Jersey between 1830 and 1860 deprived the city of its advantages as a place of transshipment for goods destined for New York. Farm products which formerly came to its merchants were carried directly to New York or were diverted by canal and railroad to Philadelphia. On the other hand, these same transportation changes created new opportunities for employment for many people. The thirty years between 1830 and 1860 brought a quickening of industrial growth throughout New Jersey, and New Brunswick reflected this state trend fairly accurately. The city became one of the pioneers in the manufacture of rubber goods and wall paper. Compared with Paterson or Newark, the growth of its industry did seem slow, but real progress was made in the generation preceding the Civil War. By the latter date there were 150 manufacturing establishments in Middlesex County (including New Brunswick), which gave employment to about 2,600 hands. Average monthly wages of \$10.83 were paid to women workers and \$25.12 to male employees.<sup>22</sup> Economic changes naturally gave added impetus to various schemes for civic improvements. Gas lighting was introduced in 1853. Six years later a company was organized to furnish the city with a pure and plentiful supply of water. Many new streets were laid out, and old ones extended and improved between 1830 and 1860. In the 1850's, for example, James Neilson paid more than \$1,750.00 for grading, curbing, and paving on College Avenue and Neilson Street.<sup>23</sup> Religious and educational institutions also benefited from the growth and spirit of progress which were remaking the city before the Civil War. Rutgers College and its affiliate, the New Brunswick Theological Seminary, secured new build-

<sup>22</sup> Acts of the 86th Legislature of New Jersey. Census Supplement of 1860.

<sup>23</sup> Neilson Papers, folders 101, 104, 126. Ledger of sales of land in Maule's Patent and of Neilson Street grading, June 18, 1858.

ings. No less than eight new church edifices were erected during the era.

The role of James Neilson (1784-1862) in this evolution is the major theme of the succeeding pages. In him were joined most of the major threads which constituted the warp and weft of the city's history. He was a merchant, banker, slaveowner, and farmer. He was a promoter of turnpike, canal, and railroad transportation. He was a pioneer manufacturer. As a land owner his interests extended over a wide area; he held lands in New Jersey, New York, Texas, and Mississippi. He was a patron of education and a generous friend of religious and benevolent societies. His activities and interests formed an interesting microcosm of the history of the nation as well as of his own community during the half century before 1860.

## 2

## MERCHANT

AT THE TIME of James Neilson's birth his father was just beginning to rebuild a prosperous mercantile business which had been almost ruined by the Revolution.<sup>1</sup> In partnership with Cornelius Ten Broeck he had succeeded in developing a fairly extensive trade within a year after peace was concluded. His sloops and schooners ranged far and wide in their search for profitable markets.<sup>2</sup> They carried flaxseed to London, and to Dublin and Newry in Ireland; they transported wheat and corn to Madeira and Portugal and there secured return cargoes of Madeira wine and Saint Ubes salt. Although Colonel Neilson continued trading with the Iberian Peninsula for several years, he soon found certain ports in the West Indies to be more satisfactory as markets for the miscellaneous products of the Raritan Valley. He shipped beef, pork, hams, butter, dried apples, honey, rye and wheat flour, corn meal, and bread to Saint Eustatius and to a few other West Indian ports open to American trade, and exchanged these commodities for products which were in demand in the American market. In the course of their voyages to and from these islands his vessels often did some trading in Savannah and other

<sup>1</sup> Colonel Neilson estimated his losses during the War for Independence at \$9,200, distributed as follows:

Goods and produce confiscated by the British in 1776	\$2,000
Loss due to paper currency	\$2,500
Loss of income occasioned by suspension of normal trade for seven years	\$3,500
Wreck of his trading sloop	\$1,200

Neilson Papers, vol. I of Selected Papers.

<sup>2</sup> Inasmuch as Ten Broeck's name does not appear in the correspondence or other records of the firm—which was called John Neilson and Company—it is probable that he invested capital in the business but took no part in its management.