

# Chebacco

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Judith Somes' sampler. Mount  
Desert Island Historical Society

## *Judith Somes' Sampler: Needlework and Education in Rural Maine before 1820*

By Rachel A. Snell with Lily McNally

Sometime in 1806, Judith Somes, aged ten, oldest daughter of Judith (Richardson) and John Somes, completed the final stitch in her sampler.<sup>1</sup> The stitches are red and yellow or perhaps white on a blue linen background, possibly a piece of scrap fabric. The sampler exhibits a variety of basic stitches essential for running a household. The text and numerals are worked in cross-stitch; however, decorative elements composed of running stitch, feather stitch, straight stitch, and eyelet stitch are also in evidence. When compared to surviving samplers from the same period, Judith's shares some rudimentary characteristics. The spacing between figures is frequently inconsistent and the decorative elements are basic. The faded fabric and the holes at each corner suggest the sampler was once displayed, perhaps in the Somes' Somesville home.

For generations of American women until the mid-nineteenth century, the production of a sampler marked a rite of passage. Needlework was an essential component of the education of women, and any girl who received the slightest education produced a sampler to practice the stitches necessary to mark clothes and linens for her future household. In her survey of American girlhood embroidery, sampler collector and scholar Betsy Ring opined, "the history of women's education cannot be fully understood

without considering what these documents convey about who was teaching girls — where, when, and for how long."<sup>2</sup> Judith Somes' simple sampler has much to say about education and expectations for women on Mount Desert Island in the decades before statehood. Further, as both historians and literary scholars have noted, a woman's sewing, particularly needlework serves an autobiographical function. From Homer's Penelope to Hawthorne's Hester Prynne, needlework, as poet and scholar A. Mary Murphy notes, "has always been a form of self-writing."<sup>3</sup> Therefore, this sampler allows us to explore broader themes in American history in addition to the place of sewing and needlework in Judith's later life and the lives of her peers. Samplers, as defined by former Winterthur Museum curator, Susan Burrows Swan, were "needlework intended to record stitches and designs, to serve either as a sort of reference notebook or as a 'sample' statement of ability."<sup>4</sup> While dates and names are firmly associated with samplers and frequently included, they are not a requirement for the form. The materials used in a sampler varied depending on place, time, and the means of the embroiderer. The fineness of the background cloth varied: linen was the most common backing, but cotton and wool were used occasionally. The thread could be cotton, silk, or wool and represented a rainbow of colors. In America, samplers were a genre of needlework produced by girls. Adult women rarely produced samplers unless they were instructing a sewing class. Scholars contend that the size, shape, and age of the embroiderer, as well as the intention for the piece, changed over time.

Then and now, needlework is divided into two forms: plain and fancy. Plain needlework consisted of the simple stitches essential to the running of a household. Back, whip, cross, and running stitches allowed women to clearly mark household linens and clothing. This sort of needlework rarely survives to the present, as it was "consumed—used and reused, cut down and remodeled, until only the scraps remained to be finally used in quilts."<sup>5</sup> Fancy needlework referred to the non-utilitarian forms of women's needlework. Often produced to decorate special items of clothing or furniture or as art pieces, this category of needlework is more likely to be preserved and passed down as family heirlooms. By the late eighteenth century, most young girls in the United States created a plain work sampler between the ages of five and nine. Judith's Somes' sampler, completed in her tenth year, falls into this category of sampler and demonstrates many of the stitches associated with plain needlework. The simple, loosely woven blue linen background and the limited color palette of red, yellow, and white stitches as well as the inconsistencies in spacing mark Judith's sampler as a first effort.

While intricately stitched samplers or pictorial needlework held the greatest value in terms of preservation, all textiles were precious in the early modern American household. The expense of imported fabrics and the time associated with producing home-woven fabrics meant textiles were high-value items, these items were conserved, reused, and carefully tracked by the housekeeper. This was the purpose of the plain work or marking sampler, to teach young girls the necessary stitches to mark clothes and linens with "cross-stitched initials, numbers, or dates" to keep an accurate count of household linens in their future housekeeping.<sup>6</sup> For most women in early modern America, no matter their station, plain sewing, tasks like hemming, seaming, and constructing simple garments, was

an essential household task. Therefore, nearly all girls began their needlework education with a plain work or marking sampler. For those with the means and opportunity to pursue additional education, this served as the first step to learning fancy sewing, a skill that became more valued and accessible in the decades following the American Revolution.

If plain work samplers exhibited the skills necessary to run a household and served a largely utilitarian purpose, a fancy work sampler or pictorial needlework represented status, class values, and, possibly, republican ideals. In post-revolutionary United States society, the production of fancy work samplers increased as more women had the means and the time to pursue non-utilitarian forms of needlework. These productions were not without purpose, as historian Jennifer Van Horn reminds us in her study of samplers and gentility.

Samplers made by the middling sort generated status and thus formed part of women's household work ... [Samplers] encourage us to consider labor executed with the intent of creating social capital not as peripheral but as a crucial element of household labor that reformulated and maintained the middling family's reputation.<sup>7</sup>

As a decorative piece hung in the parlor of her parents' home, a fancy work sampler attested to a young woman's education and, therefore, her suitability as a wife, mother, and housekeeper.



Ambrotype of Judith Some Babson and  
Emily Some Noyes, late 1850s–early  
1860s. *Mount Desert Island Historical Society*

This association coupled with the status connected to women's needlework productions likely contributed to the great production of samplers identified by Betsy Ring between 1800 and 1835.

Many scholars have argued that samplers were an essential component of female education in colonial and post-revolutionary America. In her memoir of her Massachusetts girlhood at the end of the eighteenth century, Sarah Anne Emery recorded,

Every girl was taught to embroider letters in marking stitch. One was considered very poorly educated who could not exhibit a sampler; some of these were large and elaborate specimens of handiwork, framed and glazed, they often formed the chief ornament of the sitting room or best parlor.<sup>8</sup>

Many American girls attended a dame school to learn the stitches necessary to create a marking sampler; however, these skills could also be gained informally at home or in a small class taught by a neighborhood woman seeking extra funds. In rural areas, through the colonial period and into the Early Republic, most learning occurred at home. In colonial New England, home instruction began at the ages of six and seven with a focus on religious instruction and understanding their role in society as an adult. Whether rich, middling, or poor, instruction focused on furthering their religious understanding.<sup>9</sup> Scholarship has corrected the long-held assumption that there was little distinction between childhood and adulthood in colonial America.<sup>10</sup> The expectations associated with sampler production for different ages is evidence of the different expectations placed on children in an educational setting.

The education of rural children relied heavily on preparation for self-sufficiency later in life. For boys, education focused on raising livestock and produce. Girls' education focused on the household

tasks of preparing and preserving food as well as creating and repairing garments and household textiles.

The creation of a sampler was proof of the ability to both read and write. Before the popularization of samplers in post-revolutionary America household linens were not initialed, but marked with a unique symbol just as livestock were.<sup>11</sup> More elaborate marking of household linens required the ability to read and write and may have aided in the rise of women's literacy. For this reason, a sampler was a significant part of the education of young girls before and after the American Revolution both in formal educational settings and home instruction. Elizabeth Fuller, age seventeen, recorded in her diary in 1792, "I staid [sic] at home began to work me a sampler."<sup>12</sup> In some cases, mothers or grandmothers were especially well-qualified to instruct young relatives, particularly in the case of Betsy Ross's granddaughter, who was instructed at home by her grandmother.

Fancy work samplers and pictorial needlework were almost universally worked in formal schools, some devoted simply to needlework while others offered a range of subjects. The finished products, staggering in their beauty and attention to detail, were frequently framed and displayed in entertaining spaces such as a formal parlor. Embroidery offered the possibility for a young woman to be recognized for her skills. Completed pieces could earn awards as part of school-wide exhibitions that were frequently a popular social activity for town inhabitants.

In Maine, needlework schools and female boarding schools flourished in established settlements during the Federal period. Newspaper advertisements from Portland, Bath, and Hallowell attest to the range of educational opportunities available to female youth in Maine. Contemporary commentaries on female education and feminine accomplishments published in Maine newspapers suggest the ideal education for a woman remained a matter of contention in the Early Republic. While these essays are reprints and not written by Maine authors, they suggest interest in the debate amongst the newspapers' readership. Advertisements related to the education of young ladies published in Maine papers between 1790 and 1820 also indicate that many educators agreed with the essayist who opined, "among the accomplishments necessary to the female character, I think needlework may claim the first place."<sup>13</sup> In 1796, Mrs. I. Coffin advertised in the *Eastern Herald* a school for young ladies focused on "various kinds of needlework and embroidery."<sup>14</sup> Following an entrance fee of one dollar, instruction cost three dollars per quarter and the school offered boarding to "young misses from the country" at two dollars per week. For the more economically minded student, instruction in plain sewing was available for nine shillings. This is one example of many schools devoted to needlework and other feminine arts that thrived along Maine's settled and prosperous southern coast.

As Maine's population expanded inward in the decades following the American Revolution, these offerings

spread into central Maine. Hallowell, Maine's largest interior center possessing a population of around twenty-five hundred in 1820 and seventy-one stores along the commercial center (a metropolis compared to Augusta's population of 1,000 and just twenty merchants), boasted a school for young ladies by the second decade of the nineteenth century. Mrs. Remington's Young Ladies Boarding School offered a curriculum that would have pleased those seeking education beyond domestic skills with reading, writing, arithmetic, grammar, composition, and geography offered for four dollars a term. A supplementary curriculum, offered at the cost of an additional seven dollars, fulfilled the need to balance academics and feminine arts by providing drawing, painting, embroidery, needlework, and filigree.<sup>15</sup> Samplers and other examples of embroidery from students of these schools are the most likely to be preserved in museum collections.

Judith Somes and her peers in less-settled part of the state did not have access to formal education. Most rural girls likely learned plain sewing for household management purposes at home. For Somes, the most likely source of her instruction was her mother, Judith Richardson Somes. A delicate white bonnet with a lace tie under the chin in the collections of the Mount Desert Island Historical Society attests to the older Judith's skills and supports the interpretation that she passed this knowledge down to her three daughters. Extant examples of plain work samplers produced outside of urban centers in early nineteenth-century Maine are a rarity. A sampler in the collections of the Maine Historical Society produced by eleven year-old Jane Wentworth from homespun fabric in Brownfield, Maine in 1828 bears similarities to Judith's earlier sampler. This evidence suggests that young girls throughout Maine learned the stitchery necessary for household management through the production of plain work samplers. Only girls in urban settings





Baby bonnet made by Judith  
Somes (mother) in 1786.  
*Mount Desert Island Historical  
Society, 997-45-534*

with access to formal education created the more recognizable fancy work samplers.

By the time Judith Somes was a wife and mother, the emphasis on ornamental arts or "feminine accomplishments" faded as educational reformers and domestic advisors advocated an increasing practical education for young women. This redirection in the purpose of women's education coincided with reduced instruction in needlework. In most large American cities, the custom of teaching fancy needlework and the production of samplers ceased by 1840. Plain sewing persisted as a necessary skill included in school curriculums through the twentieth century. As hobbies, needlework and sewing enjoyed consistent popularity through the nineteenth century and beyond.

### *Conclusion*

Judith Somes' sampler suggests the purpose and function of needlework and sewing in the lives of rural Maine women. Her experience shows the practical necessity of needlework and sewing skills generally in the lives of rural women. These skills transitioned from a necessary skill to a decorative art and, finally, a means for community engagement. The sampler is the only surviving piece sewn by Judith Somes; however, her descendent Virginia Somes-Sanderson recorded her dedication to the Somesville Sewing Circle, active from its founding in 1855 until the 1970s. At one point, Judith served as both secretary and treasury for the group.<sup>16</sup> From its inception, the ladies of the sewing

circle occupied their time at each meeting, "sewing, knitting, crocheting, and working on various items."<sup>17</sup>

The items produced by the group were then sold at fairs, a combination of a sale and social event, Somes-Sanderson described the objects for sale as mostly practical, "butcher and waist aprons, dish towels, pot holders, mittens, socks, and scarves. Some years there would be a table for children with pea or bean bags, grab bags, hand puppets, a 'fishing pond' and bonnets, bibs, and baby cloths."<sup>18</sup> The ladies used the funds raised for community improvement projects, including a hearse purchased in 1867 but also the installation of sidewalks in Somesville, improvements for the Brookside Cemetery, and securing a bell for the church belfry.<sup>19</sup>

Needlework and women's education were closely linked in early America. Attention to material culture items like samplers and other forms of women's handcrafts can also tell us about the experience of individual women. As needlework expert Susan Burrows Swan argued, "Needlework tells us a good deal about what it was like to be a woman in early America."<sup>20</sup> Existing scholarship suggests that instruction in the utilitarian use of needlework provided a foundation in literacy and basic stitches that young American women in the Early Republic could build upon in various ways. Scholars have commonly approached samplers as educational and status-oriented; Judith Somes' sampler, when placed within the context of her family and later sewing activities, suggests a continued practical purpose for women's needlework skills. Thus, even though needlework no longer held pride of place in the curriculum for women's education and few women carried on the old fashioned practice of painstakingly marking their household linens, as a hobby it provided women with a means to engage with and improve their communities.

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Lily McNally is a fourth-year student at College of the Atlantic. During her internship in the summer of 2019, Lily contributed research on education for the article.

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1. Judith Somes married Eben Babson in 1815. Since this article is concerned with a sampler produced before her marriage, for ease of understanding we've used Judith Somes throughout.
  2. Betsy Ring, *Girlhood Embroidery: American Samplers and Pictorial Needlework, 1650–1850* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), xvii.
  3. A. Mary Murphy, "The Theory and Practice of Counting Stitches as Stories: Material Evidences of Autobiography in Needlework," *Women's Studies* 32 (2003): 646.
  4. Susan Burrows Swan, *A Winterthur Guide to American Needlework* (New York: A Winterthur Book/Rutledge Books, 1976), 10.
  5. *Ibid.*, 12.
  6. *Ibid.*, 9.
  7. Jennifer Van Horn, "Samplers, Gentility, and the Middling Sort," *Winterthur Portfolio* 40, no. 4 (2005): 226. "Middling sort" refers to the ranks of people in-between the nobility and the working class or peasantry. A common descriptor for this group in use during the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, the term "middling sort" avoids the connotations of capitalism associated with the term "middle class."
  8. Sarah Anne Emery, *Reminiscences of a Nonagenarian* (Newburyport, MA: William H. Huse & Co., 1879), 222.
  9. Ross W. Beales, Jr., "In Search of the Historical Child: Miniature Adulthood and Youth in Colonial New England," *American Quarterly* 27, no. 4 (1975): 382.
  10. A number of writers between the Colonial and Revolutionary Periods wrote of the separation of ages including the preacher Gilbert Tennent in his 1741 evening lecture, "The Righteousness of the Scribes," using terminology we still use today to divide his audience into different groups, "old" and "aged persons"; "middle-ag'd People, of thirty Years old and upwards"; "my younger Brethren, of fourteen Years and upwards"; and "little Children of six Years old and upwards." Beales, *In Search of the Historical Child*, 383.
  11. E. Jennifer Monaghan, "Literacy Instruction and Gender in Colonial New England," *American Quarterly* 40, no. 1 (1988): 18–19.
  12. Quoted in Ring, *Girlhood Embroidery*, 18.
  13. "On Female Accomplishments." *Gazette* (Portland, ME), May 14, 1798: 4.
  14. *Eastern Herald* (Portland, ME), May 23, 1796
  15. *American Advocate* (Hallowell, ME), June 2, 1812: 3.
  16. A letter related to the group's purchase of a hearse for the town of Somesville in 1867 attests to Judith's leadership role. Somesville Sewing Circle Notes, Mount Desert Island Historical Society.
  17. Virginia Somes-Sanderson, *The Living Past: Being the Story of Somesville Mount Desert, Maine and Its Relationship with Other Areas of the Island* (Mount Desert, ME: Beech Hill Publishing Company, 1982), 238.
  18. *Ibid.*
  19. *Ibid.*, 238–242.
  20. Susan Burrows Swan, *Plain & Fancy: American Women and their Needlework, 1700–1850* (New York: Rutledge, 1977), 12.