

Menotomy Minutes



NEWSLETTER OF THE ARLINGTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

WINTER 2022

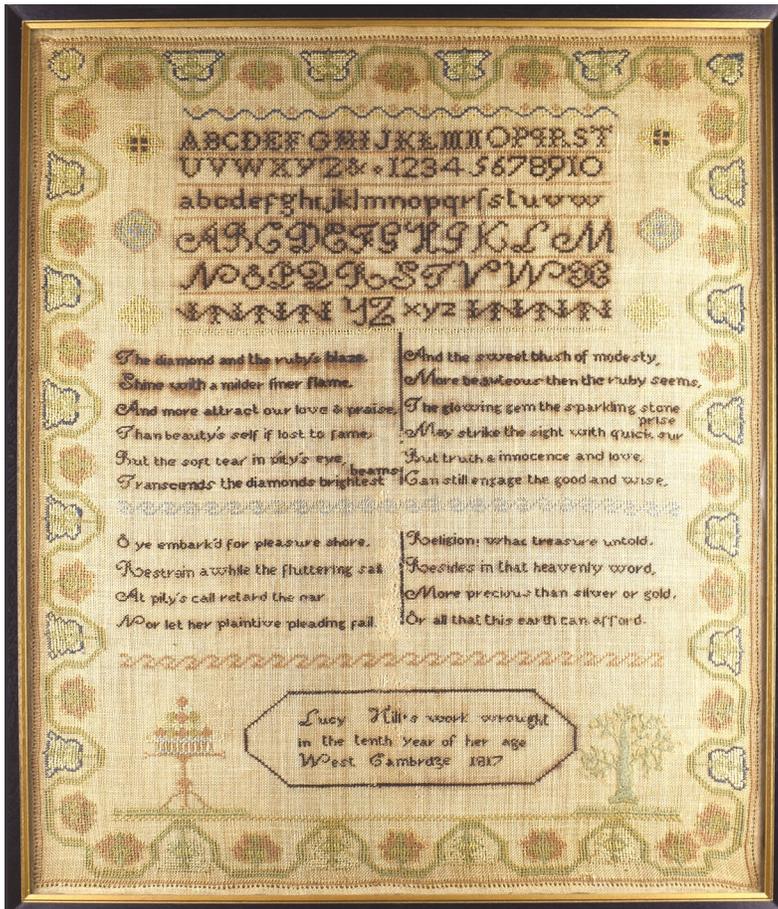


Needlework Samplers of West Cambridge

by Doris Birmingham

Editor's note: This article has been adapted for publication in Menotomy Minutes from a comprehensive monograph and exhibit catalogue of the needlework samplers in the collection of the Arlington Historical Society. The full text is available on the Society's

website. In this article "West Cambridge" refers to the territory of the independent town of West Cambridge, incorporated in 1807, which was previously a section of Cambridge known as Menotomy, and re-named Arlington in 1867.



Needlework samplers, employed as an educational tool and a measure of female accomplishment, first appear in England in the early 16th century. Thus, English colonists in America must have imported the skills to keep the craft alive in their new home. The Society's sampler made by Mary Richardson in 1765 (now on display in the Assembly Room) closely follows English models: tall and narrow in proportion and worked in horizontal bands containing geometric patterns, highly stylized depictions of natural phenomena, and often an alphabet. Generally crafted by young girls, samplers were used to teach practical needlework skills as well as decorative stitchery to enhance clothing and domestic linens. For many girls and their families, a completed sampler was a sign of accomplishment, proof not only of her domestic skills, but also a reflection of her refinement and suitability for marriage.

While the primary goal behind the sampler was to provide instruction in needle-working, at the same time it would have aided in teaching literacy. From the beginning, most samplers included alphabets and numbers, a practice that continued throughout the sampler era. Many samplers were adorned only with letters and numbers arranged in horizontal bands and with no side margins. These are known as "marking

Sampler made in 1817 by Lucy Hill (1807-1861), daughter of James and Ann (Adams) Hill. She married George S. Adams of Charlestown in 1832. Note the looping line border accented with alternating abstract forms, perhaps meant to reference trees and bells.

(Continued on page 4)

President's Corner

Dear Members,

The Arlington Historical Society has survived in 2021 in the very difficult environment caused by the pandemic. We started the year off with a large Community Preservation Act grant to install a geothermal climate control system in the Jason Russell House and the Caretaker's cottage. The four, 400-foot-deep wells were drilled in November, and the heat exchanger equipment has been installed and is undergoing finishing touches on the electrical supply. A supplementary air purification system was added that will help keep the tour guides and visitors safe when we can resume indoor tours. We hope to have the entire system up and running in January.

Several other grants came in as well, swelling our total for this year to about \$400,000. Note that these grants provide for special projects and cannot be used to fund day-to-day operations such as staff salaries, electricity, or heating oil for the Smith Museum. Thankfully, our annual appeal exceeded our previous year's level, and the financial status of the Society remains strong.

Our tour guides did a superb job of hosting outside tours of the Jason Russell House on Sunday afternoons from June to October. We hope to open for inside tours this year. These tours will include the "Road to Revolution" exhibit in the Assembly Room curated by Museum Director Sara Lundberg.

One of the grants we received in 2021 was an earmark from the State Office of Tourism for \$75,000. The funds are being used to complete the renovations to the Smith Museum that was started by a group of volunteers earlier last year. Painting of the entire Smith Museum and office complex has been completed and installation of new, energy-efficient lighting is well underway. New carpeting will be installed next.

The lawn of the Jason Russell House is finding new life as an event space in warmer weather. Several events were held last summer, and we expect that number will increase this year. Please contact the Society if you have an event such as a graduation, birthday party or memorial service that is too large for the average home.

The lawn will also see a return of our wildly successful beer garden that ran on Saturdays in September. Hundreds of people attended each afternoon to superb craft beers from Burke's Alewerks of Hanover, and excellent food by Menotomy Grill. This year's edition of the beer garden will run from June through September on Saturday afternoons, weather permitting. We hope you will come join the fun!

None of what we have done or plan to do would be possible without the volunteers and staff who make things happen. We owe them a big thank you for their efforts. Thanks also go to our donors who provide the funding for our activities via our Annual Appeal. Thank you all!

George Parsons



Donate to the Annual Fund

Our Annual Appeal is underway. With your help, we are able to continue our mission to educate the public about the history of Arlington. If you like and appreciate the work we do, please consider making a tax-deductible donation to the Society today. Donors will be recognized in the next issue of "Menotomy Minutes."

- Jason Russell Circle (\$1,000+)
- Goldsmiths (\$500-\$999)
- Silversmiths (\$200-\$499)
- Pewtersmiths (\$100-\$199)
- Friends (\$50-\$99)
- Other (any amount accepted)

Gifts at the Pewtersmith level or higher will be listed by category in our publications, and in the lobby of the museum. You can donate by mail, securely online at arlingtonhistorical.org/contribute/ or by phone at 781-648-4300 (please call Tuesday through Friday 10 to 6).

The Arlington Historical Society gratefully acknowledges the financial grant support it has received from the following organizations for its needlework sampler restoration project.

FREEDOM'S
—WAY—

National Heritage Area
Nature · Culture · History

Mass
Cultural
Council



ARLINGTON COMMISSION FOR ARTS AND CULTURE

Lost Arlington: 21 Appleton Place

By Richard A. Duffy

The only known view of the “sightly homestead” of James and Marietta Peirce Bailey is a recent gift to the Society by James A. Kingsbury of Yorktown Heights, NY. It captures a moment in the era when fine homes on extensive grounds were part of the streetscape of Massachusetts Avenue. Construction began on the bracketed Italianate-style dwelling for the newlywed Baileys in 1863.

James Alderson Bailey, born in 1836 in Birmingham, England, came to West Cambridge at age two when his father, James A. E. Bailey, immigrated to the U.S. to become a partner in the innovative Welch & Griffiths saw manufactory, located on Mill Brook at Grove Street.

James A. Bailey was a veteran of the Civil War, enlisting as one of “Lincoln’s minute-men” in April 1861 and serving as a sergeant in the 5th Regiment of the Massachusetts Volunteer Militia, which saw action in the earliest major engagement of the war, the First Battle of Bull Run.

Bailey rose in the ranks at Welch & Griffiths and joined the partnership. After selling his shares, he continued as superintendent of the manufacturing works until the firm closed



Marietta P. and James A. Bailey, circa 1865.

in 1885. He was active in Arlington town government, elected as an assessor, member of the school committee, and selectman. James A. Bailey died in 1915.

Marietta Peirce, born in 1841 in West Cambridge (now Arlington), was related to a veritable who’s-who of prominent families of Lexington and Arlington. Her great-grandfather, Capt. Solomon Peirce of Revolutionary War fame, is the namesake of Arlington’s Peirce School. In 1912 she published the *Solomon Peirce Family Genealogy*, an

important reference work in the history of Arlington. Marietta Peirce Bailey died in 1920.

The family home passed to the Baileys’ youngest son, Edward Appleton Bailey, in 1921. The next year he subdivided the sloping front gardens for house lots flanking a new road roughly on the course of the long driveway. This created Burton Street, named for Edward’s wife, Edith J. Burton. After this reconfiguration, the Bailey homestead’s address changed from 1172 Massachusetts Ave. to 21 Appleton Place.

Edward A. Bailey died at age 95 in 1968. By the end of that year the house was sold to St. James Church and was promptly razed to create the parking lot occupying the site today. ❖





Detail from a sampler made in 1813 by Martha Mary Williams Locke (1803-1888). She married James Russell II in 1825. The motif of the house is like others of the era with two trees, one heavily laden with fruit. Two young women in white approach the house from the right, and they are balanced by two large pots of flowers on the left. The deep reddish tone of the end wall may suggest brick (as opposed to painted clapboard) and thus identify the house as a 'brick-ender,' a popular house type of the Georgian period; at the same time, its darker value can be read as shadow, thus hinting at the volume of the building.

samplers” because they contained the stitches and lettering styles needed for crafting the identifying marks on clothing and linens—*aides-memoires* for the needleworker.

By around 1720, pictorial features began to enliven samplers. One can appreciate how this might have provided additional motivation for a young girl striving for perfection as she suffered the tedium of mastering a multitude of intricate stitches.

The samplers in the Arlington Historical Society’s collection were made primarily between 1790-1830, and they played an important role in the education of girls. Before the advent of public education in the 1830s, children were taught in small private schools in large cities and in villages. Most of these schools were ephemeral in nature and in session for only short periods—about six weeks at a time—which children would have attended for a varying number of sessions. While some samplers may have been produced at home under the supervision of a girl’s female relative, many were completed in one of these schools, typically run by a widow or an unmarried woman in the community.

The youngest children in a New England town would have attended a “dame school,” an informal gathering of children maintained by a local woman in her home or in a rented space. Instruction was focused on the acquisition of basic literacy. Older children, around eight years of age or above, would have attended an “academy,” which provided a higher level of education. (In some regions such schools were called seminaries or institutes.) Whether single sex or coeducational, many were presided over by a female instructor and, like the dame schools, were in session for only a few weeks or months at a time. Academy instruction was aimed at building on the basics, and, depending on the teacher’s preparation, might also include a smattering of classics, languages, geography, and science. It would have been mainly at such institutions that children also would have potentially pursued more specialized studies: for boys, surveying, navigation, and architectural drafting; for girls, music, dancing and needlework. Most girls, under the close guidance of the teacher, probably would have at least attempted a sampler while at an academy. The teacher would have been

responsible for the design, which she might have created herself or possibly borrowed from a copybook or engraved print. Given the playfulness and charm of many samplers, it is hard to imagine that the girl did not have a say in the choice of images. Many samplers include pious or inspirational texts, which came from literary sources provided by the teacher but chosen by the girl, who was always responsible for the actual stitching. The Society's collection of samplers indicates that these children applied themselves with varying degrees of commitment. Some reveal loose threads where the project was abandoned; some are a bit crude in execution. The best are true works of art, and one can imagine the pride of the girl and her parents when such a sampler finally was framed and displayed on the parlor wall.

Academy teachers often worked alone, so no matter their gender, they had to be able to teach an array of subjects. This is demonstrated in the case of a Mrs. Gill, who presided over what appears to have been a coeducational academy between 1800 and 1820 in West Cambridge.

In most instances, the teacher was the designer of the sampler—the girl merely followed her markings on the linen, utilizing the various stitches that she had mastered—the more the better, of course. In the case of Mrs. Gill, it is obvious from the examples of which we know that she had a strong preference for classical motifs: giant columns, rondels, swags, putti, and carved inscriptions. These features stand out and may

help to identify other of her students' works. Few teachers seem to have been as comfortable as she with such grand imagery, or with any imagery at all, in fact. Several of the samplers in the Society's upcoming exhibit are mostly text—an alphabet, numbers, or an inspirational poem. Some of these are enlivened by a vase of flowers or a floral border. The most ambitious, pictorially speaking, are samplers displaying the motif of a house flanked by trees and figures. At least 18 versions of this motif, all originating in Cambridge or surrounding communities, have been identified, leading scholars to speculate that all of the makers attended the same boarding school in the area.

The days of creative sampler-making ended largely by 1830 as education developed into a public rather than a private endeavor in New England and as it became possible to purchase commercially produced patterns for many kinds of needlework. The samplers made late in the 18th century and during the first quarter of the 19th century in West Cambridge and its neighbors therefore represent the apogee of sampler-making in New England. At the time they were completed, they were a source of pride for the girl and her family; today they charm us with their naivety and impress us with the remarkable skill of their young makers. Finally, for the historian, they offer a glimpse into the history of women, childhood, and education in the early American Republic. ❖



Detail from a sampler made circa 1793 by Sally Frost (1782-1828), daughter of Seth Frost and Sarah Hill. She married James Winn in 1804. Prominently placed in the picture is a two-and one-half story Federal-style house with its door colored a deep green. Flanked by a pair of figures, the house stands on a grassy lawn: on the left are a woman and a little girl beneath a leafy tree filled with black birds; on the right a couple stands holding hands in front of a leafless tree laden with fruit.

--- Mother and Daughter Samplers ---

The Society is fortunate to have in its collection a sampler created by Letitia Whittemore and two samplers by her second and youngest daughter, Caroline Harris Fiske.

Letitia Whittemore was born in 1799, the daughter of Helen Weston and Amos Whittemore, the celebrated inventor of the process for manufacturing wool and cotton cards used to prepare fibers for spinning. Letitia's childhood home was the Whittemore-Robbins House. Although in poor condition, her 1809 sampler at right attests to her careful craftsmanship. She concentrated on text, enlivening her design with a narrow, precisely rendered border composed of red berries or flowers articulating the spaces around the undulating margin line.

In 1818 Letitia married Horatio Hancock Fiske (b. 1790), son of the Rev. Thaddeus Fiske, pastor of the First Parish Congregational Church of West Cambridge. They had two daughters, Elmira (b. 1823) and Caroline (b. 1825). The sampler shown below is the later of the two by Caroline, done circa 1838. The letters and the text are enclosed in a wide border marked by a fine zigzag line punctuated at regular intervals with flower buds. The lower third of the work contains a poem, transcribed exactly as stitched:

Best use of Riches

When wealth in virtuous hands is given

It Blesses like dews of Heaven

Like Heaven it hears the orphans cries

And wipes the tears from widows eyes

Caroline's poem is especially poignant because she was orphaned of her father in 1829; her mother remained a widow. Caroline married George B. Neal of Charlestown in 1846 and she died, childless, in 1848. George Neal was soon remarried to Caroline's sister Elmira, and the couple named their only child after Caroline. Letitia Whittemore Fiske made her home with the Neals until her death in 1891, at age 92—a remarkably long life in that era. ❖



Top: Vignette of painting of Letitia Whittemore

Above: Letitia stitched these wise words: in the lower portion of her sampler: Constant application leads to excellence/Youth well-instructed maketh age well-disposed.



Left: Detail from the upper portion of Caroline's simple, but beautifully wrought sampler displays the alphabet and numbers surrounded by a minimally decorated border. Caroline completed two samplers, the first when she was eight years old and the second perhaps a year or two later.

Upcoming Lectures

Except where noted, our regular Tuesday 7:30 p.m. programs will be at the Masonic Temple, 19 Academy Street (disabled access is at rear).



Sunday, January 30 at 2:00 p.m.

Program held virtually

OUR SAMPLER CONSERVATION PROJECT

Sara Lundberg, Museum Director



Tuesday, February 22

PLYMOUTH COLONIAL ARCHEOLOGY: NEW INSIGHTS ON COLONIAL & INDIGENEOUS COMMUNITIES

Christa Beranek, Archeologist



Tuesday, March 29

GEORGE Y. WELLINGTON REMEMBERS

A. Michael Ruderman

Enjoying Winter at Stowecroft



by Richard A. Duffy

This delightful snowy scene is a circa 1887 cyanotype image of William Stowe (1816-1892), at the reins of a one-horse open sleigh. His granddaughter, Marjorie Gray (1881-1972) is by his side, and his daughter Susan (Mrs. Thomas Gray, 1849-1941) is seated in the rear. The location is high above the west side of Mystic Street, on the extensive grounds of "Stowecroft," William Stowe's mansion-house, which now bears the address of 8 College Ave., at the northeastern corner of Stowecroft Road. The Mystic Lakes and the hills of the Middlesex Fells in Winchester are in the background of this view.

Stowe was a founder of the American Net & Twine Co., which specialized in nets, seines, and related line products for the fishing industry. The business grew from modest beginnings to become the largest of its kind in the United States. Stowe served as its president for 41 years. In addition, he was an amateur historian and genealogist whose writings were published in New England newspapers.

Cyanotypes were popular in the Victorian era for the interest lent to the images by the Prussian blue toning. The process was most frequently used to produce negative images of drawings, such as architect's and engineer's blueprints, but when a photographic negative was exposed on the treated medium, a positive image resulted. Cyanotypes were most often printed on thin watercolor paper and can fade when exposed to light (although they can be "revived" when returned to dark storage); thus, they were often the work of hobbyists and are much rarer to encounter than other types of photographs in historical collections. ❖



From 1922 comes a remarkable Valentine verse: a Shakespearean quote from the opening act of "Antony and Cleopatra," in which Antony declares that any love that can be measured is nothing more than a poor love. Impassioned speech for such a sweet and dainty greeting card image!

Contact Us

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Closed due to COVID-19
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www.arlingtonhistorical.org



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The Arlington Historical Society is a 501(c) 3 non-profit organization. Contributions are deductible to the extent allowed by law.

PLACE
STAMP
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Silhouette of Letitia Whittemore,
circa 1810.

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