

A Stitch in Time  
Schoolgirl Samplers  
March 8, 2008

In 18th century colonial America, education for young women was limited to skills that would make them good wives. Among those skills were sewing and needlework. Women used their 'plain sewing' skills to make and mend household linens and clothing. For women of wealthy families, plain sewing was the first step to learning embroidery and other fancy needlework - the most important accomplishment of a "stylish" lady.

Samplers were used as references to learn different types of stitches. A young girl's first sampler was usually a very simple design consisting of alphabets and numbers, with a small amount of



decorative stitching. The stitcher's name, age, town and the date of completion were frequently included. Sewing schools for young girls (ranging between 6 and 16 years) became popular during the 18th century. Most girls would work on a simple marking sampler of the alphabet and a fancy sampler or a needlework picture. These projects were often very involved and took months to complete.

Samplers were often kept in a young woman's sewing box as reference material. Mistakes, such as inverted letters or miscounted patterns, make some samplers even more special, an indication of the newness of the craft to the stitcher. The samplers became prized possessions, showing off a girl's accomplishment and skill. The families would have them framed and displayed with great pride.

The Hackettstown Historical Society Museum featured a wonderful display of samplers and vintage sewing items in March 2008, on loan through the generosity of Cindy and Gerard Geiger.