

The Prescott Girls - Study Guide

How Historians Trace Artifacts

The Journey of the Prescott Family Samplers

Much of what we know about the past comes from objects that have survived through time. Letters, diaries, tools, clothing, and works of art can all tell stories about the people who made and used them. The samplers stitched by the Prescott and Canby families are examples of such artifacts.

This guide explains how historians and researchers can trace the history of an object and reconstruct the lives connected to it.



Step 1: Start with the Object

Every historical investigation begins with careful observation.

The six samplers discovered in California were stitched on **linen using silk thread**, and each contained clues about its maker. These clues included:

- names
- ages
- dates
- locations
- verses and alphabets

For example, Beckie's sampler reads:

“Rebecca G. J. Prescott aged eight years”



“Dresden Maine 1835.”



Even a simple inscription like this provides several important clues: a person’s name, their age, a place, and a year.

These details allow researchers to begin searching historical records.

Step 2: Identify the People

Once a name appears on an artifact, researchers can begin looking for that person in historical records such as:

- birth and death records
- church records
- census records
- family genealogies

In this case, the name **Rebecca Goodwin Johnson Prescott** appeared on one of the samplers.

Genealogical research revealed that she was born in **1827 in New Sharon, Maine**, the daughter of schoolteacher **Warren Prescott** and **Rebecca Johnson Prescott**.

By connecting records together, historians can begin to reconstruct the lives of the people who made the objects.

Step 3: Look for Family Connections

Many artifacts were preserved by families and passed down through generations.

When researchers examined the names on the six samplers, they noticed that several makers shared **family surnames** such as:

- Prescott
- Johnson
- Canby

This suggested that the samplers had originally belonged to a single extended family.

Tracing these relationships revealed that the girls who made the samplers were connected through the **Johnson and Canby families**, and that one of them later married **William Jackson Canby**, the grandson of **Betsy Ross**.

This discovery linked the samplers to a much larger story in American history.



Rebecca Prescott "Beckie" 1850± by Sarah Pratt

Step 4: Follow the Artifact's Journey

Artifacts often travel far from where they were created.

The Prescott samplers were stitched in **Maine and Philadelphia in the early 1800s**, yet they were discovered at an auction in **California** nearly two centuries later.

To understand how they arrived there, researchers traced the descendants of the original families. One branch of the family eventually moved west to California during the nineteenth century, where the samplers remained with their descendants.

By following these family migrations, historians can explain how historical objects move across time and place.

Step 5: Work with Museums and Historians

Historical artifacts are often preserved and studied by museums and historical organizations.

After learning about the samplers' connection to the **Pownalborough Courthouse in Dresden, Maine**, researchers contacted the **Lincoln County Historical Association**, which manages the courthouse museum.

Working together with the museum, the samplers were conserved and returned to Maine, where they are now preserved as part of the museum's collection.

Museums help ensure that important artifacts are protected and that their stories can be shared with the public.

This photograph shows Beckie's sampler on the day it returned to the Court House. This was after a 200-year journey that carried it from Maine to California



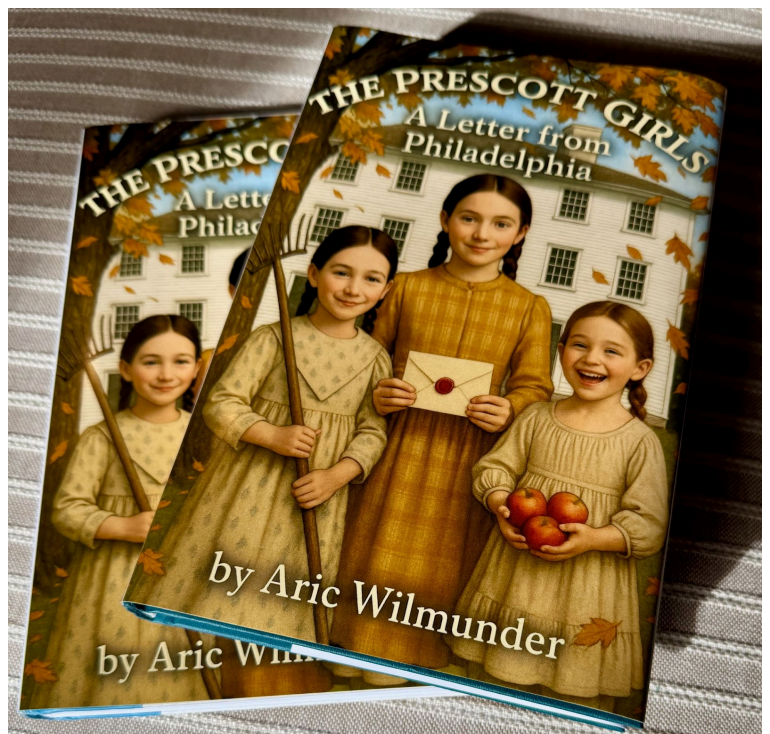
Step 6: Preserve and Share the Story

Artifacts are valuable not only because they are old, but because they connect us to real people and real lives.

The Prescott family samplers show:

- how girls were educated in early America
- how families preserved their history
- how objects can travel across centuries and continents

By studying these objects and sharing their stories, historians help ensure that the voices of the past are not forgotten.



Questions for Discussion

1. What kinds of clues can historians learn from objects like samplers?
 2. Why are names and dates important when studying historical artifacts?
 3. Why might families preserve objects like samplers for many generations?
 4. How can museums help protect and share historical artifacts?
 5. What other everyday objects today might help historians understand our lives in the future?
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Activity

Choose an object in your home that has been in your family for many years.

Write down:

- who owned it
- where it came from
- how it has been passed down
- what it might tell historians about your family

Like the Prescott samplers, many objects carry stories that connect the past and the present.