

The Prescott Girls – Study Guide

Needlework and Girls' Education in Early America



During the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, girls were expected to learn skills that prepared them for both daily life and participation in their communities. Needlework was one of the most important skills girls were expected to learn.

Embroidery, sewing, and sampler making were not simply decorative activities. They were part of a child's education—teaching discipline, literacy, and careful attention to detail.

The samplers stitched by the Prescott and Canby families in the early 1800s are real historical objects. They offer a direct connection to the lives of young girls like Beckie Prescott and allow us to see how children learned, practiced, and recorded their knowledge.

What Is a Sampler?

A sampler is a piece of embroidery created to practice stitches and record patterns. The word comes from the Latin *exemplar*, meaning a model or example.

Early samplers served as personal reference pieces. A girl could return to her sampler to recall how to form letters, stitch a border, or repeat a pattern.

By the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in America, samplers had become a regular part of girls' schooling.

Many school samplers included:

- rows of alphabets
- numbers
- decorative borders
- moral or religious verses
- the maker's name and age

Each of these elements served a purpose. Together, they showed that a student had learned both needlework and basic literacy.



Why Did Girls Stitch Samplers?

Sampler making was not a single skill. It brought together several parts of a girl's education.

Learning Practical Skills

Needlework was essential to daily life. Girls were expected to sew clothing, repair garments, and mark household linens.

Samplers allowed them to practice stitches such as:

- cross stitch
- eyelet stitch
- satin stitch
- stem stitch

These were not exercises that would be set aside. The same stitches would later be used in clothing and household textiles.



Practicing Literacy

Many samplers include full alphabets and numbers. Stitching letters required careful attention to form, spacing, and consistency.

In a time when books were limited and writing materials were not always available, stitching letters was another way to practice reading and writing.

Household linens were often marked with initials. A girl needed to know how to form letters clearly and correctly. Her sampler became both practice and reference.

On Louisa Prescott's sampler, the alphabet shows how carefully each letter was formed.



Teaching Moral Lessons

Samplers often include short verses about patience, kindness, and virtue.

These were not chosen at random. Families believed that education should shape both character and behavior.

One commonly stitched idea appears in many forms:

“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

When a girl stitched these words, she was not only practicing lettering. She was repeating a lesson her family believed mattered.



Practicing Arithmetic

Samplers also required careful counting.

Most were stitched on evenly woven fabric, where each stitch had to be placed by counting threads. Patterns had to remain balanced. Borders had to repeat correctly.

A mistake in counting could shift an entire design.

In this way, sampler making required the same kind of careful thinking used in arithmetic: counting, spacing, and checking work for accuracy.



Samplers as Personal Records

A sampler is more than practice. It is also a record.

Most include:

- the maker's name
- her age
- the year the sampler was completed
- sometimes the place where it was made

Because of this, samplers give historians direct evidence about real people.



For example, Beckie Prescott's sampler reads:

"Rebecca G. J. Prescott aged eight years" and on another line, "Dresden Maine 1835."

From this information, we can learn several things:

- her full name
- her age
- where she lived
- when she made the sampler

From her age and the date, we can estimate the year she was born. This raises an important question:

What else can we learn from what is *not* written? Historians often begin with this question.

A sampler may also show:

- how carefully the letters were formed
- whether mistakes were corrected or left in place
- which patterns were chosen
- how much space was used or left empty

Each of these details provides clues about the student, her teacher, and the expectations placed on her.



Rebecca Prescott "Beckie" 1850± by Sarah Pratt

Schools and Needlework

Girls learned needlework in different settings.

Some were taught at home. Others attended small local schools. Some traveled away to academies or boarding schools.

Certain schools became known for their distinctive styles.

Quaker schools, such as Westtown School near Philadelphia, were especially recognized for their balanced designs and geometric patterns.

Even girls who did not attend these schools were influenced by them. Teachers in smaller communities often adapted popular styles for their own students.

The Prescott family samplers reflect this mix of local instruction and broader traditions.



What Samplers Teach Us Today

Samplers are not only decorative objects. They are historical evidence.

They help us understand:

- how girls were educated
- what skills families considered important
- how literacy and needlework were connected
- how children recorded their identity and progress

They also remind us that children in the past were active learners. Through their work, they left behind records that can still be read today.

Questions for Discussion

1. Why might families have considered needlework an important part of a girl's education?
2. How does stitching an alphabet differ from writing one with pen and ink?
3. What do moral verses on samplers suggest about what families valued?
4. What can a sampler tell us about a person, even if we know nothing else about her?

5. What kinds of work do students create today that might serve as a record for future historians?

Activity

Use Beckie Prescott's sampler on the following page as your primary example.

Instead of only identifying its parts, examine it as a piece of evidence.

Identify:

- alphabets
- numbers
- decorative borders
- a verse or saying (This is hard to see on the lower left of her sampler)
- the maker's name and age
- where it was made (Maine)
- can you spot in the top-center where the sampler had been damaged and restitched?
- can you see which letters from the alphabet are now missing?

Then consider:

- Are the letters evenly spaced?
- Are there mistakes or corrections?
- Which parts seem most carefully done?
- What might this tell you about the student's skill or experience?

Finally, imagine creating your own sampler.

What would you include to represent your life, your learning, and what matters to you?

Beckie's sampler

Use this sampler to answer the activity questions.

Made in Dresden Maine in 1835 when she was eight years old.

On display at the Pownalborough Court House.



