

The Prescott Family Samplers

Seven Generations of Family Stewardship

Abstract

In 2021, a group of six early nineteenth-century needlework samplers appeared together at auction in California. At first glance, the pieces seemed to be an attractive but otherwise ordinary collection of schoolgirl needlework. Closer examination revealed something far more remarkable. The samplers represented multiple generations of a single extended family whose roots stretched from Dresden and New Sharon, Maine, to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Through genealogical research, historical records, and surviving family connections, the collection was linked to the Prescott, Johnson, and Canby families, including descendants of William Jackson Canby, the grandson of Betsy Ross.

The collection provides a rare opportunity to examine the educational experiences, family relationships, and preservation of women's material culture across more than a century of American history. Even more unusual is the survival of several related samplers together, allowing the lives of the girls who created them to be reconstructed through historical records.

Introduction

Schoolgirl samplers are among the most common surviving artifacts created by young women in early America. Millions were stitched during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, yet most have become separated from the stories of their makers. Names remain, but families disappear. Dates survive, but lives are forgotten.

The Prescott family samplers present a different case.

Rather than a single surviving sampler, this collection preserves the work of multiple related girls and women whose lives can be traced through census records, family histories, cemetery records, portraits, photographs, and local historical collections. Together, the samplers document multiple generations of a family whose story spans rural Maine, maritime commerce, nineteenth-century Philadelphia, and eventually the westward migration of descendants to California.

The collection also illustrates how seemingly ordinary artifacts can serve as entry points into larger historical narratives involving education, family networks, women's lives, and the preservation of cultural memory.

The Discovery

The six samplers surfaced together at auction in California, having remained in the possession of descendants of Caroline Louisa Prescott Canby for generations. Their survival as a group immediately suggested that the pieces had been intentionally preserved rather than assembled by collectors.

Research soon revealed connections among the makers. Two samplers were created by members of the Johnson family of Dresden, Maine. Two were stitched by daughters of Rebecca Johnson Prescott. One belonged to Ann Harlan Canby of Philadelphia. A sixth sampler remains unattributed but likely originated within the same family circle.

The presence of these related pieces in a single collection provided a rare opportunity to reconstruct not only the lives of individual makers but also the movement of family artifacts across more than two centuries.

The Women Behind the Samplers

Ann Harlan Canby



Ann Harlan Canby completed her sampler in Philadelphia in 1806. Unlike the Prescott and Johnson samplers, Ann's work reflects the Philadelphia Quaker needlework tradition and includes motifs associated with Westtown School sampler patterns.

Ann's place within the collection is significant because she represents the Philadelphia branch of the extended family. Her brother, Caleb Canby, married Jane Claypoole, daughter of Betsy Ross. Quaker records document the marriage and record the attendance of family members, including Betsy Ross herself. Through this union, the Canby and Ross families became closely connected.

Decades later, Ann's nephew, William Jackson Canby, would marry Caroline Louisa Prescott, linking the Canby and Prescott families and ultimately bringing the samplers together through family descent.

Ann's sampler therefore serves as more than the earliest piece in the collection. It represents the Philadelphia origins of a family network that would eventually connect the Johnsons and Prescotts of Maine with the descendants of Betsy Ross, helping explain both the preservation of the collection and its journey across generations.

Rebecca Johnson



The earliest Maine sampler in the collection was stitched in 1808 by nine-year-old Rebecca Johnson of Dresden, then part of the District of Maine within the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. The sampler records her name, age, and hometown, preserving a glimpse of her childhood nearly two centuries before the collection resurfaced at auction.

Rebecca was the daughter of John Johnson and Rebecca Goodwin and grew up in a family deeply rooted in the history of Dresden and the surrounding region. As a young woman she completed her education in Massachusetts before returning to Maine, where she married Warren Prescott in 1824. The couple settled in New Sharon and became the parents of three daughters: Rebecca Goodwin Johnson Prescott, Caroline Louisa Prescott, and Sarah Augusta Prescott.

Rebecca's life changed dramatically in 1833 when Warren Prescott drowned after falling through the ice on the Kennebec River. Widowed with three young daughters, she returned to her childhood home at the Old Pownalborough Court House in Dresden. There she lived with her brothers Thomas and William Johnson, maintained the household, and raised her daughters within the extended Johnson family. During this period, another brother, Captain Rowland Johnson, and his wife Nancy were also closely connected to the household, creating a family environment that linked Dresden and Philadelphia through frequent travel and correspondence.

Rebecca remained associated with the Old Court House for the rest of her life. Census records place her there with members of her family, and she lived long enough to witness her daughters establish their own lives while maintaining close ties to both Maine and Philadelphia. When she died in 1897 at the age of ninety-nine, she was buried in the cemetery beside the Court House, where her gravestone remains today.

Within the collection, Rebecca's sampler serves as a vital link between generations. It survives alongside those stitched decades later by her daughters, providing a direct connection between the educational experiences of a young girl in 1808 and those of her children in the 1830s. Together, the samplers document not only the continuity of needlework instruction within a single family, but also the lives of the women who preserved that tradition across much of the nineteenth century.

Rebecca Goodwin Johnson



Father of life and life: thou Good Supreme;

O teach me what is good; teach me of thyself;

Save me from folly, vanity, and vice;

From every low pursuit, and feed my soul

With knowledge, conscious peace, and virtue pure;

Sacred substantial, never fading bliss!

Rebecca Goodwin Johnson aged 8 yrs 1813.

Education forms the common mind.

Just as the twig is bent, the tree's inclin'd.

A second Johnson-family sampler was completed in 1813 by eight-year-old Rebecca Goodwin Johnson. Born in 1805, she was the daughter of John Quincy Adams Johnson and Eliza Rand and belonged to the same extended Johnson family. Her life overlapped with those of Rebecca Johnson Prescott and her daughters, linking another branch of the family represented within the collection.

Rebecca's sampler preserves verses emphasizing education, virtue, and moral development, themes commonly taught to young women during the early nineteenth century. One verse, adapted from James Thomson's poetry, encourages the pursuit of knowledge and virtue, while another quotes Alexander Pope's observation that, "'Tis education forms the common mind." Together, these inscriptions reflect the educational ideals valued by families who viewed needlework as both practical instruction and moral training.

Within the collection, Rebecca's sampler occupies an important chronological position. Created five years after Rebecca Johnson's 1808 sampler and more than two decades before the Prescott sisters completed their own work, it demonstrates the continuity of schoolgirl needlework traditions within the broader Johnson family. The sampler provides evidence that these educational practices extended beyond a single household and were shared among related families in the region.

In 1825, Rebecca married Thomas Hooper and later resided in Massachusetts. Historical records document both the growth of her family and the hardships she experienced, including the loss of two young children. Her sister Sarah married the artist Henry Cheever Pratt, whose surviving portraits would later provide valuable visual documentation of members of the Johnson and Prescott families. Through census records, family histories, cemetery records, and related artifacts, Rebecca's life can still be partially reconstructed more than two centuries after her sampler was completed.

The significance of Rebecca's sampler extends beyond the piece itself. The auction lot that brought the collection to light also included a paisley shawl associated with Rebecca. While the precise path by which these objects were preserved cannot be fully documented, their survival together suggests

that family heirlooms were intentionally retained and passed between generations. The presence of both textile objects within the collection offers a rare glimpse into the material culture preserved by descendants.

Rebecca's sampler is particularly important because it survived alongside those of Rebecca Johnson and the Prescott sisters. Rather than appearing as an isolated artifact, it remained part of a larger family group whose members can be connected through genealogy, historical records, and shared family history. Its preservation strengthens the evidence that the collection survived through generations of family stewardship rather than chance, helping to explain how these related artifacts remained together for more than two centuries before reemerging at auction in California.

Rebecca 'Beckie' Goodwin Johnson Prescott



Known within the family as Beckie, Rebecca Goodwin Johnson Prescott completed her sampler in Dresden, Maine, in 1835 at the age of eight. Created only two years after the death of her father, Warren Prescott, the sampler reflects the educational traditions maintained within the extended

Johnson family at the Old Pownalborough Court House. Like the samplers stitched by her mother before her and her sisters after her, Beckie's work demonstrates the importance placed on literacy, numeracy, and needlework as part of a young woman's education.

Beckie's sampler occupies a central position within the collection. It survives alongside the earlier sampler of her mother, Rebecca Johnson, and the later work of her sister Caroline Louisa Prescott, providing a rare opportunity to observe continuity in family needlework traditions across multiple generations. The similarities among the pieces suggest that the educational practices valued by the Johnson family remained remarkably consistent across nearly three decades.

As the eldest Prescott daughter, Beckie experienced both the stability of her family's early years in New Sharon and the upheaval that followed her father's death. Returning to Dresden with her mother and sisters, she grew up within a household that combined the support of an extended family with the responsibilities that accompanied life at the Old Pownalborough Court House. Family connections later took her to Philadelphia, where she spent periods of her youth and maintained relationships with relatives connected to the Johnson and Canby families.

Unlike her sisters, Beckie never married. Instead, she pursued a career as a teacher, a profession that reflected the value her family placed on education and one of the few respectable occupations available to educated women during the nineteenth century. Census records and family histories document her movements between Maine and Philadelphia, illustrating the close ties that connected the two communities throughout the Prescott family's history.

Beckie remained closely connected to her mother and sisters throughout her life. Although the details of how the samplers passed from one generation to the next cannot always be documented, the survival of Beckie's sampler alongside those of her relatives suggests that these objects were preserved as family heirlooms rather than valued solely as examples of needlework. Through

successive generations, they remained connected not only to their makers but also to the shared family history they represented.

Today, Beckie's sampler serves as a link between the childhood work of Rebecca Johnson and the later generation of Prescott family samplers. Together, the pieces document the experiences of multiple generations of women whose lives were shaped by education, family relationships, and the preservation of a common heritage.

Caroline 'Louisa' Prescott



Caroline Louisa Prescott completed her sampler in 1838 at the age of nine. Born in New Sharon, Maine, in 1829, she was the second daughter of Warren Prescott and Rebecca Johnson Prescott. Her early childhood was shaped by tragedy when her father drowned in the Kennebec River in 1833. Following his death, Caroline Louisa, her sisters, and their mother returned to Rebecca's childhood

home at the Old Pownalborough Court House in Dresden, Maine, where they lived among a large network of Johnson relatives.

Caroline Louisa's life illustrates the close ties that connected Maine and Philadelphia during the nineteenth century. Her uncle, Captain Rowland Johnson, and his wife Nancy settled in Philadelphia and frequently hosted members of the Prescott family. Caroline Louisa and her sisters spent portions of their youth with their aunt and uncle, and Louisa finished much of her later schooling in Philadelphia, and maintained relationships with relatives there throughout her life. These experiences exposed Caroline Louisa to a world far larger than the rural communities in which she had been born.

It was through these Philadelphia connections that Caroline Louisa met William Jackson Canby. The couple married in 1852 and established their home in Philadelphia, where they raised five children. William Jackson Canby would later become known for preserving and promoting the story of his grandmother, Betsy Ross, and for helping establish the narrative that linked Ross to the creation of the first American flag. Through this marriage, the Prescott family's history became intertwined with one of the most enduring stories of the American Revolution.

Caroline Louisa's importance within the collection extends far beyond her own sampler. Her marriage to William Jackson Canby joined the Prescott and Canby families and created the path by which the collection was preserved. The samplers remained with descendants of Caroline Louisa and William for generations, eventually traveling west as members of the family settled in California. More than a century later, the collection resurfaced at auction still largely intact, a testament to the care with which successive generations had preserved these family heirlooms.

Although Caroline Louisa spent much of her adult life in Philadelphia, her ties to Maine remained strong. Following her death in 1919, she was buried at the Old Courthouse Cemetery in Dresden, near the place where she had stitched her sampler more than eighty years earlier. Her life bridged two worlds—Maine and Philadelphia, the Johnson and Canby families, local history and national

memory—and her descendants became the stewards through whom the collection ultimately survived.

The Unknown Sampler



One sampler within the collection remains unattributed. Based on similarities in lettering, construction, chronology, and family provenance, it is possible that the piece was created by Sarah Augusta Prescott, known throughout her life as Sallie, the youngest daughter of Warren and Rebecca Johnson Prescott. While definitive evidence has not been found, the attribution remains consistent with the broader history of the family and the collection.

Born in New Sharon, Maine, in 1830, Sallie was the youngest of the three Prescott sisters represented in this study. Following the death of her father, Warren Prescott, in 1833, she returned with her mother and sisters to the Old Pownalborough Court House in Dresden, where the family became part of a large network of Johnson relatives. Like her sisters, Sallie maintained connections to both Maine and Philadelphia through family relationships that extended beyond New England.

Unlike her sister Caroline Louisa, whose marriage eventually carried part of the family's story to Philadelphia and later California, Sallie remained closely associated with Dresden throughout her life. She married Samuel Randolph Goodwin and continued to live near the Old Court House, where she also shared a household with her mother during Rebecca Johnson Prescott's later years.

Sallie is particularly important to the historical record because she left behind a diary documenting family life, travel, community events, and daily experiences during the nineteenth century. The diary provides valuable context for understanding the world in which the Prescott family lived and offers a perspective rarely preserved in such detail. Together with surviving photographs, family records, and the samplers themselves, it helps transform the family's history from a collection of names and dates into a more complete picture of everyday life.

Whether the unidentified sampler can ultimately be attributed to Sallie remains uncertain.

Nevertheless, her place within the story of the collection is well documented. Through her diary, her long association with the Old Pownalborough Court House, and her connections to the broader Prescott and Johnson families, Sallie helps illuminate the historical setting from which the samplers emerged and the family traditions that contributed to their preservation.

Why the Collection Matters

The significance of the Prescott family samplers does not rest upon any single artifact. Schoolgirl samplers survive in museums, historical societies, private collections, and family homes throughout the United States. What makes the Prescott collection unusual is not the survival of one sampler, but the survival of multiple related samplers whose makers can be identified and whose family relationships can be reconstructed through historical records.

Together, the six samplers document the lives of women connected through the Johnson, Prescott, and Canby families. Created between 1806 and 1838 in both Philadelphia and Maine, the pieces provide a rare opportunity to examine educational traditions, family connections, and the movement of artifacts across multiple generations. Viewed individually, each sampler preserves a small fragment of a life. Viewed together, they reveal a broader family story that spans more than a century of American history.

The collection also demonstrates the importance of family stewardship in the preservation of historical artifacts. The samplers were not assembled by collectors or institutions. Instead, they remained connected through descendants who preserved them as family heirlooms. Alongside the samplers survive portraits, photographs, diaries, family records, gravestones, and other artifacts that provide context rarely available to researchers. These connections allow the makers to be understood not simply as names stitched into cloth, but as daughters, sisters, wives, mothers, teachers, travelers, and participants in the communities in which they lived.

Perhaps most remarkable is the continuity of provenance. Through marriage, migration, and inheritance, the collection traveled from Maine to Philadelphia and eventually to California while remaining associated with the descendants of the families who created it. More than two centuries after the earliest sampler was stitched, the collection resurfaced still largely intact. Its survival offers a

rare example of how ordinary family objects can preserve relationships, memories, and historical context across seven generations of family stewardship.

From Maine to California and Home Again

Following Caroline Louisa Prescott's marriage to William Jackson Canby, the family line gradually migrated westward. Descendants eventually settled in California, carrying the samplers with them.

The collection remained intact for generations before resurfacing at auction. Following their identification and study, several of the samplers were returned to Maine, where they once again became part of the historical narrative of the communities in which they were created.

Conclusion

The Prescott family samplers demonstrate the power of ordinary objects to preserve extraordinary stories.

Created by young girls learning letters, numbers, and needlework, the samplers survived long after the lives of their makers had faded from public memory. Through historical research, these artifacts have become windows into education, family life, migration, and cultural preservation in nineteenth-century America.

Their recovery reminds us that history often survives not through famous events or celebrated individuals, but through the careful preservation of everyday objects and the willingness of later generations to ask the questions those objects inspire. In the case of the Prescott family samplers, those questions were answered not only through historical research, but through the care of generations of descendants who chose to preserve the artifacts long enough for their stories to be rediscovered.

About This Research

The Prescott Girls Historical Research Series

The Prescott Family Samplers: Seven Generations of Family Stewardship is part of an ongoing effort to document the people, artifacts, family connections, and historical discoveries that inspired *The Prescott Girls: A Letter from Philadelphia*.

For additional research articles, historical images, schoolgirl samplers, family records, and educational resources, visit:

www.theprescottgirls.com

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