The Schoolgirl Samplers in the Ziploc Bag

How Six Forgotten Schoolgirl Samplers Reconnected a Family, a Museum, and a Piece of American History

Chapter 1

A Sampler for Christmas

In November 2020, during the isolation of the COVID-19 pandemic, my wife Lori and I found ourselves spending more time than usual pursuing the hobbies we loved. For Lori, that meant needlework.

Needlework had been part of her life since childhood. Over the years she had become an accomplished embroiderer, earning recognition at the California State Fair and developing friendships with textile historians, museum curators, and collectors across the country. Her collection included a small number of historic samplers, most of them European, each representing the work of a young girl whose stitches had survived centuries.

As Christmas approached, I decided to find her an American sampler.

At the time, I knew very little about what distinguished one sampler from another. I understood enough to recognize that these pieces were more than decorative objects. They were records of education, family, and memory. The names stitched into them belonged to real girls. The verses they

copied reflected the values they were taught. The fabric and thread preserved traces of lives that might otherwise have disappeared from history.

What I did not know was that a simple search for a Christmas gift would lead us into a story stretching across two centuries and connecting Maine, Philadelphia, California, and one of the most famous women in American history.

While browsing online auction listings, I came across a photograph from Clars Auction Gallery in Oakland, California. The featured item immediately caught my attention. Across the top of one sampler was a single word: *Philadelphia*.

That was exactly the sort of piece I had hoped to find.

Looking more closely, however, I realized that the sampler was not being offered by itself. It was part of a larger group. Behind it, partially visible in the auction photograph, were five additional samplers. Together they formed a collection of six early nineteenth-century examples of American schoolgirl needlework.

The listing provided almost no history.

There was no explanation of how the samplers had been acquired, no family provenance, and no indication that they were connected to one another. They were simply grouped together as a single auction lot.

Still, a few details stood out.

Several of the samplers appeared to contain similar surnames. One was clearly associated with Philadelphia. Others referenced places unfamiliar to us. The dates ranged across several decades. At first glance, the collection looked less like the work of unrelated girls and more like the remnants of a family archive.

Lori was intrigued by different clues than I was.

As soon as she saw the Philadelphia sampler, her attention went to the design itself. The central medallion, geometric motifs, and restrained decoration suggested Quaker influences. To an experienced needleworker, these visual elements hinted at traditions associated with schools such as Westtown, the historic Quaker boarding school outside Philadelphia.

I was looking at names.

She was looking at stitches.

Neither of us yet understood that those two lines of investigation would eventually converge.

Because pandemic restrictions were still in place, viewing the collection required an appointment. A few days later, we crossed the Bay and traveled to the auction house.

The experience was not what we expected.

After searching through rows of auction items, we eventually located the samplers. They were not framed, mounted, or displayed. Instead, all six had been carefully folded and placed inside a single gallon-sized Ziploc bag.

For objects that had survived more than two hundred years, it seemed an oddly humble resting place.

One by one, we removed and examined them.

The Philadelphia sampler was every bit as appealing as it had appeared online. The others revealed names, dates, verses, and decorative motifs stitched by young girls between the opening years of the nineteenth century and the late 1830s.

At that moment, however, they were still strangers.

We did not know who the girls were.

We did not know how the samplers had traveled across the continent.

We did not know why they had remained together for more than two hundred years.

And we certainly did not know that one branch of the family would eventually lead us to Betsy Ross.

All we knew was that six pieces of needlework had somehow survived the passage of time together.

That fact alone seemed important.

As we left the auction house, carrying photographs and notes but no answers, we found ourselves asking a simple question:

Who were these girls?

The search for that answer would become the beginning of a journey neither of us could have imagined.

Chapter 2

The Auction

The drive home from Oakland was filled with speculation.

Were the samplers related? Had they belonged to a single family? Or were we simply seeing connections because we wanted there to be a story?

Lori was particularly drawn to two of the pieces. As a needleworker, she could immediately appreciate their quality and historical significance. Yet neither of us had expected to encounter six samplers offered together. Purchasing a single sampler as a Christmas gift was one thing. Acquiring an entire collection—and properly conserving it—was something else entirely.

By the time we arrived home, we were still undecided.

The more I examined the photographs we had taken, however, the more intriguing the collection became.

Several of the names appeared more than once. Dates stretched across decades rather than centuries. Instead of representing unrelated examples of schoolgirl needlework, the group increasingly looked like the work of successive generations of the same family.

If that was true, separating the collection would mean losing part of its story.

I began researching immediately.

One name led to another. Census records connected to probate records. Family trees revealed parents, siblings, and marriages. Within hours, a pattern began to emerge.

The samplers were not random.

The girls were related.

What I still did not know was whether anyone else recognized their significance.

As the research continued, I repeatedly encountered references to a place I had never visited: the Pownalborough Court House in Dresden, Maine.

Again and again, family members appeared connected to the historic building.

The courthouse itself had an extraordinary history. Built in 1761, it had served as a center of government before later becoming a private residence. For generations, members of the same extended family associated with the samplers had lived there.

The more I learned, the more convinced I became that the collection belonged not merely to descendants, but to a place.

At that point I reached out to the Lincoln County Historical Association, the organization responsible for preserving the courthouse.

My message was simple.

I believed a group of schoolgirl samplers connected to families associated with the courthouse was about to be sold at auction in California.

Would they be interested?

The timing could not have been worse.

The auction was only days away.

There was little time for extensive research, fundraising, or deliberation. Yet the response was immediate and enthusiastic. Staff and supporters quickly recognized the importance of the opportunity.

The challenge, of course, was money.

Historic textiles are fragile objects. Acquiring them is only the beginning. Proper conservation, mounting, storage, and exhibition all require significant resources. Even if the museum wanted the collection, there remained the question of whether it could be saved.

Then something remarkable happened.

One supporter stepped forward with a donation.

Then another.

And another.

Within days, enough support had emerged to make participation in the auction possible.

The collection suddenly had a chance.

Because pandemic restrictions were still in effect, Lori would bid by telephone.

As the auction began, we listened from home.

The bidding opened.

Another bidder responded.

Then another.

The numbers climbed.

For several tense minutes the collection moved back and forth between competing bidders. Each increase raised the possibility that the samplers might disappear into private collections, separated from one another and from the history that was only beginning to emerge.

Then the bidding paused.

Lori made another bid.

One competitor answered.

She bid again.

Silence.

The auctioneer called once.

Twice.

Three times.

The samplers were ours.

Only afterward did the full weight of what had happened begin to sink in.

The collection had survived together for more than two centuries.

Against considerable odds, it would remain together a little longer.

That evening we informed the Lincoln County Historical Association that the auction had been successful.

The next step seemed obvious.

If the girls were truly related, we needed to understand how.

So before the night was over, I began drawing the first family tree.

By morning, that simple sketch would lead us to an even larger discovery.

Chapter 3

The First Family Tree

That evening, after the auction ended, the samplers occupied every available space on our dining room table.

For the first time, we could study them without a deadline looming overhead.

Each represented the work of a young girl. Each carried a name, a date, and a fragment of a life. What we did not yet understand was how those lives connected to one another.

Lori had a simple request.

"Can you draw me a family tree?"

As a genealogist, I had built countless family trees over the years. Most began with a single individual and slowly expanded outward. This one would begin with six pieces of needlework.

I spread out my notes and started connecting names.

The first clues came easily.

Rebecca Johnson and Rebecca Goodwin Johnson were clearly connected. The shared surname suggested a family relationship, perhaps grandmother and granddaughter, aunt and niece, or cousins carrying a family name forward into the next generation.

Then came Rebecca G. J. Prescott.

The initials immediately caught my attention.

Goodwin.

Johnson.

The same names were appearing again.

The further I traced, the more the relationships emerged.

Rebecca Johnson had married Warren Prescott.

Their daughter was Rebecca Goodwin Johnson Prescott.

Another daughter was Caroline Louisa Prescott.

The samplers represented not merely a family, but successive generations of the same family.

What had initially appeared to be six unrelated examples of schoolgirl needlework now looked like a collection that had been assembled naturally through inheritance.

For more than two hundred years, daughters, mothers, sisters, and descendants had preserved these pieces together.

The realization changed everything.

If the collection had remained intact through multiple generations, then its survival was not an accident. The family itself had recognized its importance.

As I continued adding names, a larger pattern emerged.

The Prescotts connected to the Johnsons.

The Johnsons connected to the Goodwins.

The Goodwins connected to the history of Dresden, Maine, and the Pownalborough Court House.

Suddenly the repeated references I had encountered during my research made sense.

These were not isolated individuals.

They were members of a family deeply woven into the history of a single place.

By late evening, the first rough family tree was complete.

It wasn't elegant.

Boxes and lines covered the page. Notes crowded the margins. Several relationships remained uncertain.

But the central mystery had been solved.

The girls were related.

Satisfied, I left the tree on the dining room table and headed to bed.

Lori stayed behind.

While I had been focused on the girls who created the samplers, she had become interested in something else.

She wanted to know what happened after them.

Where had the samplers gone?

How had a collection connected to Maine found its way into an auction house in California?

If the family had preserved the samplers for generations, perhaps the answer could be found by tracing the descendants forward rather than tracing the ancestors backward.

Long after I went to sleep, she continued working.

Names led to census records.

Census records led to obituaries.

Obituaries led to descendants.

One generation became another.

And then another.

The family tree that had begun in early nineteenth-century Maine slowly stretched westward across the continent.

By the time I awoke the following morning, Lori was still sitting at the table.

Papers surrounded her.

The family tree had expanded dramatically.

Most importantly, she had solved the question that had puzzled us since the auction.

One branch of the family had moved west.

Eventually, descendants settled in California.

The samplers had traveled with them.

After more than two centuries, the mystery of how the collection reached Oakland had finally been answered.

But Lori had found something else.

Among the records she discovered was a recent obituary.

The individual described in the obituary lived only a short distance from our home.

That alone was surprising.

What truly caught our attention, however, was a single statement identifying the family as descendants of Betsy Ross.

At first, the claim seemed impossible.

I had spent the previous evening constructing the family tree. Surely I would have noticed a connection to one of the most famous figures in American history.

Yet there it was.

The obituary was clear.

The family line descended from Betsy Ross.

As Lori finally headed off to get some sleep, I remained at the table staring at the family tree.

Somewhere among the names and lines was an explanation.

I just hadn't found it yet.

So I began again.

Slowly.

Carefully.

Name by name.

Generation by generation.

Then my eyes stopped on a woman near the center of the chart.

Jane Claypoole.

I had seen the name before.

The previous night it had seemed like just another branch on the tree.

This time I looked more closely.

In her records, her mother was listed as Elizabeth Griscom.

I typed the name into a search box.

A moment later the answer appeared on my screen.

Elizabeth Griscom was the birth name of Betsy Ross.

I leaned back from the computer.

The samplers on the table suddenly looked very different.

What had begun as a Christmas gift had become something else entirely.

The girls who stitched these samplers were connected to the family of the most famous needleworker in American history.

And the story was only beginning.

Chapter 4

Following the Threads to Maine

The discovery of the Betsy Ross connection was exhilarating.

It was also distracting.

Like many Americans, I knew Betsy Ross immediately. Her name required no explanation. Yet as I continued researching the sampler makers, I realized that the most important story was not unfolding in Philadelphia.

It was unfolding in Maine.

The names that appeared repeatedly throughout the family tree—Goodwin, Johnson, and Prescott—were tied to a place I had never visited before beginning this research.

Dresden.

Located along the Kennebec River, Dresden occupies a landscape shaped by forests, shipbuilding, farming, and the river traffic that connected inland communities to the Atlantic world. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, it was a place where families built lives that often spanned generations.

Again and again, my research led me back to a single landmark.

The Pownalborough Court House.

Constructed in 1761, the building originally served as the courthouse for a vast region of what was then Massachusetts. Maine would not become a state until 1820. At the time of its construction, the courthouse stood at the center of legal and political life for a large portion of the district.

Its walls witnessed lawsuits, property disputes, criminal proceedings, and the ordinary business of colonial government.

Few buildings from that period survive.

Fewer still remained continuously connected to the same extended family for more than a century.

As I dug deeper into the family history, one figure repeatedly emerged.

Major Samuel Goodwin.

Goodwin was a veteran of colonial conflicts and one of the early settlers of the region. Historical records credit him with constructing Fort Shirley and later building the courthouse itself.

To residents of Dresden, his name was familiar.

To me, he initially appeared as just another ancestor in a growing family tree.

That quickly changed.

The sampler makers were not merely descendants of Samuel Goodwin.

They were part of a family whose history was inseparable from the courthouse he built.

One of those descendants was Rebecca Johnson.

In 1808, at the age of nine, she stitched one of the samplers now sitting on our dining room table.

At the time, she could not possibly have known that two centuries later strangers would study her work and reconstruct her life from the stitches she left behind.

Yet her sampler became one of the keys that unlocked the story.

Historical records revealed that Rebecca was the daughter of John Johnson and Rebecca Goodwin, linking her directly to the Goodwin family.

As an adult, she married Warren Prescott and moved to New Sharon, a growing community farther inland.

For a time, the story seemed straightforward.

Then tragedy intervened.

In 1833, Warren Prescott died while crossing the Kennebec River during the spring thaw. Accounts describe him falling through the ice, leaving Rebecca a widow with three young daughters.

Those daughters would become familiar names.

Rebecca Goodwin Johnson Prescott.

Caroline Louisa Prescott.

And Sarah, known within the family as Sallie.

The same girls whose lives were preserved in the samplers.

Suddenly the collection was no longer a set of disconnected artifacts.

It was the story of a family confronting loss, adaptation, and perseverance.

After Warren's death, Rebecca eventually returned to Dresden and the courthouse.

There, surrounded by relatives, she helped maintain a household that included multiple generations of the family.

The courthouse had become something remarkable.

It was no longer simply a public building.

It had become a home.

As I studied photographs of the structure, I found myself imagining the sampler makers moving through its rooms.

The girls would have climbed its staircases.

Looked from its windows toward the river.

Read books beside its fireplaces.

Practiced needlework under the supervision of mothers, aunts, and teachers.

The building that had once administered justice now sheltered the descendants of its builder.

The connection became even more tangible when I discovered that visitors to the courthouse today can still see Rebecca Johnson Prescott.

Her portrait hangs inside the building.

Painted later in life by her relative Henry Cheever Pratt, Rebecca appears composed and confident.

What caught my attention was not her clothing or her expression.

It was what she held in her hand.

An envelope.

Portraits of the period were rarely accidental. Objects included by artists often conveyed something important about the sitter.

Jewelry suggested status.

Books suggested education.

Tools suggested occupation.

Rebecca's envelope suggested communication.

Letters mattered to her.

Connections mattered to her.

Family mattered to her.

The more I learned about Rebecca, the more I began to understand the samplers themselves.

They were not simply exercises completed by schoolgirls.

They were family records.

Not intentionally, perhaps.

Yet that is what they had become.

Each generation had preserved the work of the generation before it.

Parents saved them.

Children inherited them.

Grandchildren carried them westward.

And somehow, despite wars, migrations, deaths, and changing times, six samplers remained together.

The more I reflected on that fact, the more extraordinary it seemed.

Most family heirlooms disappear.

Some are damaged.

Others are discarded by descendants who no longer know their significance.

Yet these survived.

Not because they were valuable.

Not because they were famous.

But because generation after generation recognized that they mattered.

Long before I understood their connection to Betsy Ross, I had become fascinated by something else.

The samplers told the story of an American family.

A family rooted in a courthouse beside the Kennebec River.

A family that endured loss and change.

A family that quietly preserved its history in thread.

And increasingly, I realized that if the story was to be told properly, it would need to begin here.

In Maine.

Chapter 5

The Girls Behind the Stitches

For months, I knew the sampler makers only through fragments.

A stitched name.

A date.

A place.

A census record.

A marriage.

A gravestone.

Like many historical researchers, I was attempting to reconstruct lives from the traces left behind.

The challenge is familiar to anyone who studies ordinary people from the nineteenth century. Most did not leave memoirs. Few appeared in newspapers. Many passed through history with little documentation beyond official records.

Women are especially difficult to recover.

Their names often changed through marriage. Their accomplishments were rarely recorded. The details of daily life—the things that mattered most to them—were often considered too ordinary to preserve.

Yet the more I researched the Prescott family, the more clearly the girls behind the samplers began to emerge.

At the center of the story stood their mother.

Rebecca Johnson Prescott.

When Rebecca stitched her own sampler in Dresden in 1808, she was nine years old.

Like countless girls before and after her, she carefully copied alphabets and verses while learning skills that would be valued throughout her life. She could not have imagined that more than two centuries later, her sampler would survive alongside those of her daughters.

As an adult, Rebecca married Warren Prescott and moved to New Sharon, Maine.

There they established a household and began raising a family.

The years that followed were undoubtedly busy. Farming communities demanded hard work. Children required constant attention. Letters connected relatives scattered across Maine and beyond.

Then, in 1833, tragedy struck.

Warren Prescott died after falling through the spring ice while crossing the Kennebec River.

Rebecca was left a widow with young daughters to raise.

For modern readers, it is difficult to appreciate how precarious such a situation could be. A widow in rural Maine faced not only emotional loss but financial uncertainty. Survival depended upon family, community, and perseverance.

Rebecca possessed all three.

The surviving records reveal a woman who continued moving forward despite profound hardship.

Eventually she returned to Dresden and the Pownalborough Court House, where she lived among relatives and helped maintain the extended family household.

It was there that her daughters' stories became intertwined with the building that still stands today.

The eldest daughter represented in the sampler collection was Rebecca Goodwin Johnson Prescott.

Family naming traditions often preserved the memory of earlier generations, and her name carried both the Goodwin and Johnson families forward. Her sampler reflects a girl being prepared for adulthood through education, discipline, and accomplishment.

But it was the next daughter who increasingly captured Lori's attention.

Caroline Louisa Prescott.

Louisa’s sampler was completed in 1838.

Like her mother's work three decades earlier, it reflected the educational traditions of its time. Yet as Lori studied Louisa’s stitching, she found herself wondering about the person behind the needle.

Who was Louisa?

What were her ambitions?

What did she think about while stitching those carefully formed letters?

Historical records gradually supplied some answers.

Loisa would later marry William Jackson Canby, a Philadelphia Quaker and grandson of Betsy Ross.

At the time she created her sampler, however, that future lay far beyond the horizon.

She was simply a young girl learning her lessons.

The sampler preserves a moment before adulthood reshaped her life.

Before marriage.

Before children.

Before responsibilities.

Before history connected her name to one of America's most famous families.

Of all the sampler makers, Loisa often feels closest to the point where the Maine and Philadelphia stories intersect.

She serves as a bridge between two families, two regions, and eventually two centuries of preserved history.

Then there was the youngest sister.

Sarah Prescott.

Known throughout her life as Sallie.

Unlike her sisters, Sallie presents a special challenge.

One unfinished sampler in the collection bears no name.

Because samplers created by both of her sisters survived together with it, Lori and I strongly suspect that the unnamed piece may have been Sallie's work.

Yet suspicion is not proof.

As historians, we must distinguish between evidence and possibility.

The unfinished sampler remains one of the enduring mysteries of the collection.

Even without a sampler firmly attributed to her, however, Sallie would eventually become one of the most important figures in our research.

At the time, we did not yet know that.

To us, she was merely the youngest daughter in a family tree.

Another name.

Another branch.

Another life only partially visible through surviving records.

Yet something about the Prescott sisters lingered in our thoughts.

Perhaps it was because we encountered them first as children.

Most historical figures are introduced to us as adults.

Politicians sign laws.

Soldiers fight battles.

Authors publish books.

The Prescott girls entered history differently.

We met them at eight.

At nine.

At ten.

Their samplers preserved moments of childhood.

The careful formation of letters.

The occasional mistake.

The decorative flourishes added with pride.

These were not the works of famous people.

They were the works of children.

And because they survived together, they preserved something remarkably rare.

A glimpse of one family's daughters across multiple generations.

The more we learned about them, the harder it became to think of the samplers as museum objects.

They had become personal.

Rebecca.

Louisa.

Sallie.

The names no longer belonged to stitched inscriptions.

They belonged to people.

People whose stories we were only beginning to understand.

Then, while searching for additional information about the family, I discovered something extraordinary.

One of the girls had left behind more than stitches.

She had left behind her voice.

Chapter 6

Sallie's Diary

Historians are accustomed to working with fragments.

A census record confirms that a person existed.

A probate document reveals property and relationships.

A marriage record identifies a spouse.

A gravestone provides dates.

Piece by piece, a life is reconstructed from scattered evidence.

For most of the Prescott family, that was exactly the process we followed.

Then Sallie changed everything.

During our research, Lori obtained a copy of a small volume titled *Sallie and Captain Sam*. The book drew heavily upon the surviving diary of Sarah Prescott, known throughout her life as Sallie.

At first, I expected another source of facts.

Dates.

Names.

Places.

Instead, I encountered something far more valuable.

A voice.

For the first time, one of the Prescott girls stepped out from behind the sampler frame and spoke directly.

No longer was she merely a name stitched into linen.

She became a person.

The transformation was immediate.

The Sallie who emerged from the diary was observant, curious, and deeply connected to the people around her. Her writings captured the rhythms of everyday life in nineteenth-century Maine with a level of detail that official records could never preserve.

Suddenly, the Prescott family ceased to be genealogical entries.

They became a household.

Brothers and sisters teased one another.

Relatives visited.

Neighbors stopped by.

Letters arrived.

Journeys were undertaken.

Celebrations were held.

Losses were mourned.

The ordinary moments of life—usually invisible to history—became visible again.

What struck Lori most strongly was how familiar the family began to feel.

As she read, nicknames emerged.

Family stories emerged.

Personalities emerged.

The people who had previously existed only through samplers and records became recognizable individuals.

It was easy to imagine them gathered around a table.

Easy to imagine conversations.

Easy to imagine laughter.

The diary accomplished what no family tree ever could.

It restored humanity.

As researchers, we often become attached to the people we study. Spending months or years following individuals through historical records inevitably creates a sense of connection.

Yet Sallie's diary produced something different.

It created recognition.

We no longer wondered who the Prescott girls had been.

We began to feel as though we knew them.

That realization carried an unexpected consequence.

The samplers themselves changed.

Before discovering the diary, I had viewed the samplers primarily as historical artifacts.

Important artifacts, certainly.

But artifacts nonetheless.

After reading Sallie's words, I found myself looking at them differently.

Rebecca's sampler was no longer simply Rebecca Johnson Prescott's sampler.

It was Beckie’s sampler, the name she went by

Caroline's sampler was Louisa’s, her family name

The distinction may seem subtle.

It was not.

The objects had become personal.

The girls who stitched them were no longer distant figures separated from us by two centuries.

They had become individuals with recognizable hopes, relationships, and concerns.

Individuals who once occupied rooms in the courthouse.

Individuals who walked roads we could still follow.

Individuals whose descendants would unknowingly preserve their work for more than two hundred years.

One question, however, continued to linger.

How had the family managed to keep these pieces together for so long?

Generation after generation had protected them.

Someone had carried them from Maine.

Someone had carried them to Philadelphia.

Someone had eventually carried them west to California.

And despite all the opportunities for loss, separation, or neglect, they remained together.

The answer, I increasingly suspected, had less to do with the samplers themselves than with the family that preserved them.

To understand that story, I would need to look beyond Maine.

The next clues lay in Philadelphia.

And they began with Caroline Louisa Prescott.

Chapter 7

Louisa’s Journey

Of all the sampler makers in the collection, Caroline Louisa Prescott may have traveled the farthest.

Not in miles.

In worlds.

When Louisa completed her sampler in 1838, she was a young girl growing up in rural Maine. The Kennebec River shaped daily life. The old courthouse in Dresden remained at the center of family history. Relatives were nearby. Family stories stretched back generations.

Her future must have seemed firmly rooted there.

Yet history has a way of surprising us.

Just as the samplers themselves would eventually travel across the continent, Louisa's own life would carry her far beyond the world she knew as a child.

By the time we encountered her through the sampler collection, we knew only a few facts.

She was the daughter of Rebecca Johnson Prescott.

She had stitched a sampler in 1838.

And she would eventually marry William Jackson Canby.

At first glance, that final detail appeared little different from any other genealogical record.

People marry.

Families connect.

Names change.

The significance was not immediately obvious.

As I continued researching, however, William Jackson Canby emerged as a fascinating figure in his own right.

Born in Philadelphia in 1825, William grew up in a family deeply rooted in Quaker traditions. Education, public service, and historical memory were valued within the household. Like many members of the extended Canby family, he received an education that emphasized both learning and civic responsibility.

More importantly for our story, he grew up surrounded by family history.

Stories were remembered.

Letters were preserved.

Relationships mattered.

Those traditions would eventually prove just as important as the samplers themselves.

But none of that was visible when Louisa first entered his life.

To understand their marriage, it helps to remember how different nineteenth-century America was from our own.

Travel was difficult.

Communication was slow.

Communities often remained geographically isolated.

A marriage between a woman whose roots stretched back through rural Maine and a man from one of Philadelphia's prominent Quaker families represented more than a personal union.

It connected two distinct branches of American history.

One branch traced through the Goodwins, Johnsons, and Prescotts of Maine.

The other traced through the Canbys and Claypools of Philadelphia.

Neither Louisa nor William could have known that future historians would one day find their families connected through six surviving samplers.

To them, it was simply marriage.

Life.

Family.

The ordinary events that become history only in retrospect.

As Lori and I studied Louisa’s life, we found ourselves returning repeatedly to her sampler.

Of all the pieces in the collection, it seemed to occupy a unique position.

Rebecca Johnson's sampler represented the generation before.

The younger Prescott girls represented the generation after.

Louisa stood between them.

The daughter of one family.

The future mother of another.

The bridge between Maine and Philadelphia.

That role would become increasingly important as the research progressed.

Because Louisa’s marriage placed the Prescott family directly within a network of relationships that extended far beyond Maine.

The Canby family was already well known to students of American history.

Among its members were educators, reformers, military officers, physicians, and civic leaders.

One family member in particular would eventually become central to the story we were uncovering.

William Jackson Canby himself.

Decades after Louisa completed her sampler, William would become the principal source for one of the most famous family traditions in American history.

It was William who recorded and shared the story passed down through his mother and aunts that their grandmother, Betsy Ross, had sewn the first American flag.

Today, historians continue to debate portions of that story.

Yet regardless of where one stands in that discussion, William's role is undeniable.

Without him, the tradition might never have survived.

As I realized this connection, I found myself pausing.

The implications were remarkable.

The young girl whose sampler sat on our table had married the man who preserved the most famous needlework tradition in American history.

For a moment, the coincidence seemed almost impossible.

Yet there it was.

Documented.

Traceable.

Real.

And still, the story was not finished.

Because William's connection to Betsy Ross came through his mother.

A woman whose name had already appeared on our family tree.

Jane Claypoole.

The same Jane Claypoole whose records had first led us to Elizabeth Griscom.

The same Elizabeth Griscom better known to history as Betsy Ross.

Until this point, Betsy Ross had existed only at the edge of our story.

A surprising discovery.

An unexpected connection.

Now, for the first time, she stood at its center.

The next chapter would reveal how a family memory preserved by the Canbys transformed a Philadelphia upholsterer into an American icon.

Chapter 8

The Canbys and the First Flag Story

Most Americans know the name Betsy Ross.

Few know the family that remembered her.

By the time I reached this stage of the research, I had already spent months studying the Prescott family. Beckie, Louisa, and Sallie had become familiar companions in the journey. The samplers had introduced me to their world, and Sallie's diary had allowed me to hear one of their voices directly.

Yet another branch of the family tree remained to be explored.

That branch began with Caroline Louisa Prescott's marriage to William Jackson Canby.

William occupied a unique place in American history. Unlike many descendants of famous individuals, he did not seek recognition for himself. Instead, he became a steward of family memory.

In 1870, nearly a century after the American Revolution, William presented a paper before the Historical Society of Pennsylvania describing a family tradition that had been passed down through his mother, Jane Claypoole, and her sisters. According to that tradition, their grandmother, Betsy Ross, had sewn the first American flag at the request of George Washington and members of a congressional committee.

Whether every detail of the account can be verified remains a subject of historical debate.

What cannot be debated is William's role in preserving the story.

Without him, the tradition might have disappeared.

For generations, historians have focused on the question of whether Betsy Ross made the first flag.

As I studied William and his family, I found myself asking a different question.

Why did the story survive at all?

The answer seemed surprisingly familiar.

The Canby family valued preservation.

They preserved memories.

They preserved stories.

They preserved letters.

They preserved documents.

And, whether intentionally or not, they helped preserve the samplers as well.

The same family that carried the first-flag tradition across generations had also carried six schoolgirl samplers across generations.

Both survived because descendants believed they mattered.

That realization transformed the way I viewed the collection.

The samplers were not isolated artifacts that happened to endure.

They survived because they were part of a larger culture of remembrance within the family.

Stories were saved.

Documents were saved.

Needlework was saved.

History was saved.

As I continued corresponding with researchers, museums, and descendants, I learned that the Canby family had preserved something else.

Something historians had searched for unsuccessfully for more than a century.

A diary.

One that had not been publicly documented since the nineteenth century.

A diary written by John Claypoole.

Chapter 9

The Diary Thought Lost

Historians occasionally dream about lost documents.

Letters mentioned in footnotes.

Journals quoted in nineteenth-century books.

Manuscripts that appear briefly in the historical record before vanishing again.

Most remain lost.

A few survive in archives.

Almost none suddenly reappear.

Yet that is exactly what happened.

My introduction to John Claypoole's diary came indirectly.

While researching the Canby family and their connection to Betsy Ross, I encountered references to a journal kept by John Claypoole during the American Revolution. Claypoole, Betsy's third husband, had been imprisoned in England during the war and maintained a diary describing life among American prisoners.

The diary was significant.

Not only did it document Claypoole's experiences, but it also contained references to Joseph Ashburn, Betsy Ross's second husband.

The story is one of the most remarkable episodes in the Ross family history.

After the death of her first husband, John Ross, Betsy married Joseph Ashburn in 1777. Ashburn was a merchant mariner and privateer serving the American cause during the Revolution. In 1781 he was captured by the British and confined in Mill Prison at Plymouth, England.

Among the prisoners was another American sailor.

John Claypoole.

The two men became friends.

Their shared experiences were recorded in Claypoole's diary.

Then tragedy intervened once again.

In March of 1782, Ashburn died in prison.

Claypoole recorded the event in his journal.

Years later, after the war ended and the surviving prisoners were released, Claypoole returned to Philadelphia carrying news that Betsy Ross had never expected to receive.

Her husband was dead.

Over time, friendship developed between the messenger and the widow.

In 1783, John Claypoole and Betsy Ross married.

For historians, the diary represented a direct connection to these events.

It was a firsthand account.

A witness to history.

And yet, despite its significance, the diary had effectively vanished.

Researchers knew it had existed.

Nineteenth-century historians had consulted it.

References appeared in books and articles.

Then the trail went cold.

For more than a century, its whereabouts remained unknown.

Among those aware of the diary's importance was historian Marla Miller, author of *Betsy Ross and the Making of America*. In her work, Miller noted the possibility that additional documents connected to Betsy Ross might someday emerge from private family collections.

It was a reasonable hope.

Many important historical materials remain outside museums and archives.

Families preserve them quietly, often unaware of their broader significance.

Still, few expected a document as important as the Claypoole diary to surface.

Then it did.

The discovery occurred not in an archive, not in a university collection, and not during an archaeological excavation.

It emerged from family records preserved by descendants.

A simple statement.

Almost casual in its delivery.

Yet extraordinary in its implications.

The diary still existed.

I remember sharing the news with Marla.

Having spent years studying Betsy Ross and the documentary record surrounding her family, she immediately understood the significance.

Her response was enthusiastic.

The possibility she had discussed in her scholarship had become reality.

New material had emerged.

The historical record had expanded.

What fascinated me most was not simply that the diary survived.

It was how it survived.

Generation after generation had chosen to keep it.

Just as descendants preserved the samplers.

Just as they preserved family stories.

Just as they preserved letters and other artifacts.

The same instinct that carried six schoolgirl samplers across two centuries had carried John Claypoole's diary as well.

Preservation was not an isolated act.

It was a family tradition.

As remarkable as the rediscovery itself was, an even more surprising moment awaited.

The descendants planned to bring the diary to Maine.

And there, in the very courthouse connected to another branch of the family story, I would have the opportunity to hold it in my hands.

Until then, the diary had existed for me only in photographs, references, and descriptions.

Soon it would become something else.

Something tangible.

A link not merely to history, but to the people who lived it.

Chapter 10

Coming Home

Research is usually a quiet activity.

Most discoveries occur alone.

A name found in a census record.

A forgotten reference in an old newspaper.

A relationship uncovered in a probate file.

Months of work can pass with little visible reward beyond a growing collection of notes and documents.

For that reason, historians rarely experience the ending they imagine while conducting research.

The stories they reconstruct belong to the past.

The people they study are gone.

The artifacts are scattered.

The work itself is often solitary.

Our journey with the samplers proved to be an exception.

While we were still researching the collection and documenting its history, we received an invitation from the Lincoln County Historical Association.

The samplers were coming home.

A celebration had been organized to mark their return to the Pownalborough Court House, along with other artifacts donated by descendants of the family.

Despite lingering concerns related to the pandemic, Lori and I decided we needed to be there.

Some opportunities come only once.

This was one of them.

When we arrived in Maine, we found ourselves surrounded by people who had become part of the story.

Museum staff.

Volunteers.

Conservators.

Researchers.

Descendants.

People who cared deeply about preserving the history of the courthouse and the families connected to it.

Until that moment, much of our work had existed on computer screens and in documents.

Now it had become real.

The celebration was unlike anything I had expected.

Historic reenactors moved about the grounds in period clothing.

Guests gathered to view the returning artifacts.

Conversations flowed easily between people meeting for the first time and people who felt as though they already knew one another through months of correspondence.

The atmosphere was both scholarly and deeply personal.

History was not being displayed.

It was being welcomed home.

One of the most meaningful moments came when we visited the cemetery.

By then, the sampler makers no longer felt like names in a family tree.

We knew their stories.

We knew their relationships.

We knew the paths their lives had taken.

Standing beside their graves created a connection unlike anything available through documents.

We visited Rebecca.

We visited Sallie.

Other members of the family whose lives had become familiar through the research.

Then we arrived at Louisa’s grave.

Lori quietly reached out and placed her hand upon the stone.

For months she had studied Louisa’s sampler.

Followed her family.

Learned her story.

This was a moment of reflection.

A chance to acknowledge the person behind the stitches.

And then a cannon fired.

The report echoed across the cemetery without warning.

For a brief moment we both jumped.

Then we laughed, realizing it was the Colonial reenactors celebrating the event.

The timing was so unexpected and so perfectly theatrical that it felt almost scripted.

It was as though history itself had decided to announce the occasion.

The memory remains one of my favorites from the entire journey.

Back at the courthouse, another surprise awaited.

The building itself had already become familiar through photographs and research.

Yet walking through its rooms was different.

The structure was no longer merely a historical site.

It was part of the family's story.

The tavern.

The court chamber.

The attic.

The rooms where generations had lived, worked, and preserved the objects that had survived into the present.

One room held particular significance.

There, once again, hung the portrait of Rebecca Johnson Prescott.

For decades the painting had been separated from the samplers created by Rebecca and her daughters.

Now they were together once more.

Mother and children reunited within the building that connected their lives.

The symbolism was impossible to miss.

As the festivities continued, descendants arrived carrying additional family artifacts.

Documents.

Photographs.

Objects preserved across generations.

Then someone handed me a small volume.

For a moment I simply stared.

It was John Claypoole's diary.

For years I had known it only through references in books and articles.

Now I was holding it.

Carefully turning its pages.

Examining the handwriting of a man who had lived through the American Revolution.

A man imprisoned for the American cause.

A man who had known Joseph Ashburn.

A man who would later marry Betsy Ross.

The experience is difficult to describe.

Historians spend much of their lives working through reproductions.

Photographs.

Transcriptions.

Microfilm.

Digital scans.

Holding the original creates a different kind of understanding.

The object ceases to be abstract.

It becomes tangible.

Human.

Real.

One of the first things I did was turn to the back.

For years I had read references to several names written there—individuals Claypoole may have intended to contact should an opportunity for escape arise.

There they were.

Exactly where history said they would be.

Ink on paper.

Two centuries old.

Yet still present.

Still speaking.

The diary was not the only artifact shared that day.

I was also handed a receipt signed by Samuel Griscom, Betsy Ross's father.

A small piece of paper.

Ordinary in appearance.

Extraordinary in its survival.

Again and again throughout the celebration, I found myself reflecting on the same thought.

These objects had endured because people cared enough to preserve them.

Not institutions.

Not historians.

Families.

Generation after generation had acted as stewards.

The descendants understood this better than anyone.

Late in the day, one of them quietly reflected on what had been accomplished.

Looking around the courthouse, at the portrait, the samplers, the artifacts, and the people gathered to celebrate them, they said:

"My relatives and my ancestors would be so proud of how it is now."

The words lingered.

Because they captured something larger than the return of six samplers.

This was not merely an acquisition.

It was not merely a museum event.

It was the restoration of connections.

Between generations.

Between places.

Between people and their history.

As evening settled over the Kennebec River, friends old and new gathered together in celebration.

Stories were exchanged.

Glasses were raised.

The samplers had finally come home.

And with them came something even more valuable.

The stories of the girls who made them.

Epilogue

Carrying the Thread Forward

The story did not end when the samplers returned to Maine.

In some ways, it was only beginning.

For more than two centuries, the six samplers traveled quietly through American history.

They survived wars, economic hardships, migrations, changing fashions, and the countless disruptions that accompany the passage of time. Generation after generation preserved them, often with little expectation that anyone outside the family would ever know their story.

The women who stitched them could not have imagined the world that would follow.

They could not have imagined railroads crossing the continent.

Automobiles.

Airplanes.

Television.

Computers.

The internet.

Nor could they have imagined that descendants would eventually carry their work from Maine to California, where it would sit unnoticed among family possessions until a chance discovery at an auction house brought it back into the light.

And yet, despite all that change, their stitches endured.

The longer I reflected upon the journey, the more I realized that the true subject of this story was not the samplers themselves.

It was preservation.

Again and again, people chose not to discard these objects.

Again and again, someone recognized that they mattered.

A mother saved a daughter's sampler.

A granddaughter saved her grandmother's.

A descendant packed them carefully before moving west.

Another preserved family documents.

Another protected a diary.

Another shared photographs.

Each generation added a link to a chain stretching across more than two centuries.

Without any one of those decisions, the story would have been lost.

The same is true of the Pownalborough Court House.

The building survives because generations of individuals believed it was worth saving.

Volunteers.

Donors.

Researchers.

Curators.

Community members.

Each inherited a responsibility and passed it forward.

The return of the samplers was therefore not an ending.

It was the continuation of a process that began long before Lori and I entered the story.

We were not the first caretakers.

We will not be the last.

That realization changed the way I think about historical artifacts.

Collectors often speak of ownership.

Museums speak of collections.

Historians speak of preservation.

Increasingly, I find myself thinking in different terms.

Stewardship.

The samplers were never truly ours.

Neither was the diary.

Neither was the portrait.

For a brief period, we became part of their journey.

We helped identify them.

Research them.

Document them.

And ultimately return them to a place where their story could be shared with others.

Then it became someone else's turn.

Since the return of the samplers, the story has continued to unfold.

New research has emerged.

Additional connections have been identified.

Presentations have introduced the collection to new audiences.

Articles have been written.

Books have been inspired.

The girls whose names were once known only to their families are now known to students, researchers, museum visitors, and readers.

Rebecca..

Louisa.

Sallie.

Their voices are still quiet.

But they are no longer silent.

Perhaps that is the greatest reward of historical research.

Not the thrill of discovery.

Not the satisfaction of solving a mystery.

But the opportunity to restore a human story to the historical record.

The six samplers began as a Christmas gift.

They became a family history.

They became a museum project.

They became a journey through American history.

Most of all, they became a reminder that the past is never truly gone.

It survives in letters.

In diaries.

In photographs.

In buildings.

In stories.

And sometimes, if we are very fortunate, in a few careful stitches made by the hands of young girls more than two hundred years ago.

The thread continues.

We are simply its current custodians.

About This Research

The Prescott Girls Historical Research Series

The Schoolgirl Samplers in the Ziploc Bag 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

Author

Aric Wilmunder
Author, researcher, and presenter

A Well-Regulated Press

Version 1.0

May 2026

Suggested Citation

Wilmunder, Aric. *The Schoolgirl Samplers in the Ziploc Bag. How Six Forgotten Schoolgirl Samplers Reconnected a Family, a Museum, and a Piece of American History.* The Prescott Girls Historical Research Series. Novato, California: A Well-Regulated Press, 2026.