

The Prescott Girls – Study Guide

Beckie Prescott's Sampler (1835)



Artifact Overview

Maker: Rebecca Goodwin Johnson Prescott

Age at completion: Eight years old

Date: 1835

Location: Dresden, Maine

Materials: Silk thread on linen

Dimensions: 16½ inches wide × 17 inches high

This sampler was stitched by Rebecca Goodwin Johnson Prescott, known in her family as Beckie, when she was eight years old. Today it survives as both a piece of needlework and a historical record of a young girl's education, family, and beliefs in early nineteenth-century Maine.

When the sampler was rediscovered at auction in California, it had been stitched together along a deteriorated vertical fold line, which had partially obscured some of the embroidery. Through careful study, the design elements and inscriptions could be reconstructed and interpreted, though some details remain uncertain.

What Is a Sampler?

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, girls often stitched samplers as part of their education. A sampler served several purposes:

- It was a practice piece for learning embroidery stitches.
- It demonstrated a girl's literacy and numeracy, often including alphabets and numbers.
- It reflected moral or religious instruction, frequently featuring Bible verses or sayings.
- It served as a record of identity, including the maker's name, age, and date.

Samplers were often displayed in the home and preserved by families for generations.

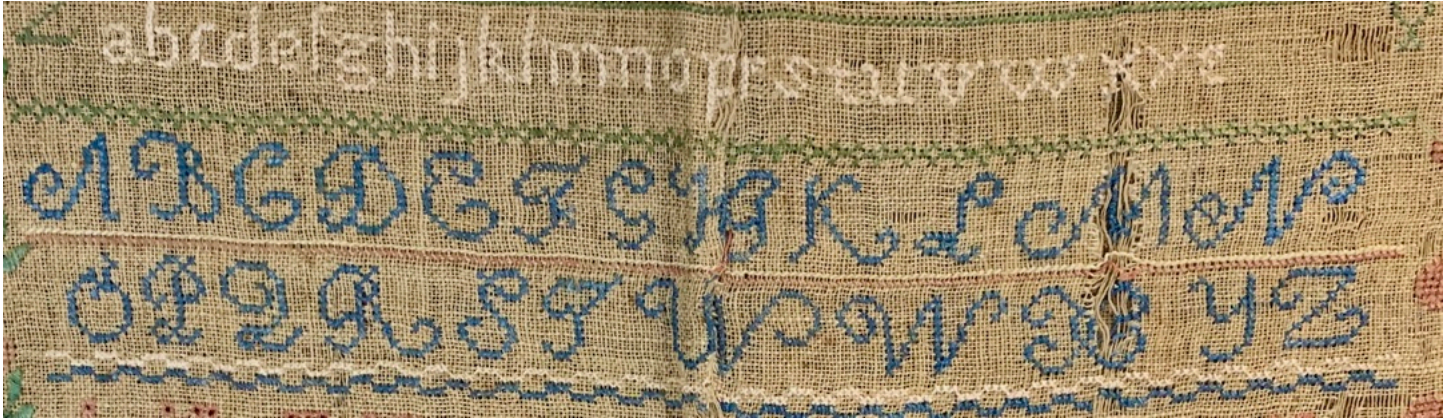
Design Elements of Beckie's Sampler

Border



The sampler includes a decorative stitched border framing the work. Borders were common in school samplers and helped demonstrate control and precision in stitching.

Alphabets



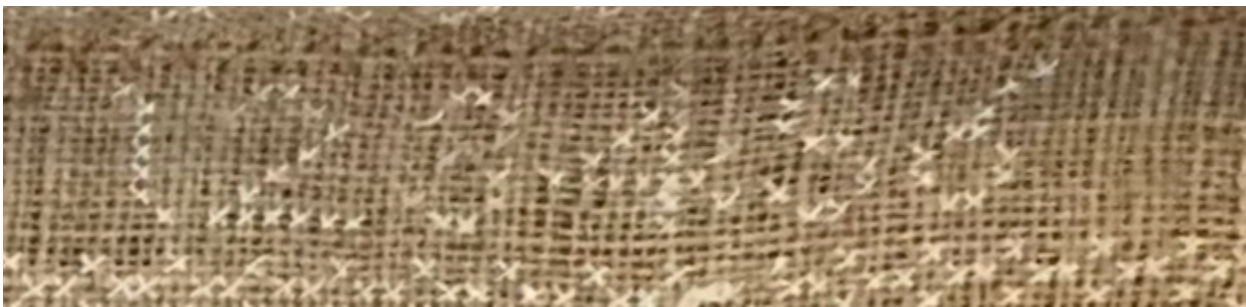
Alphabet rows appear on the sampler. These were important exercises for girls learning needlework because they practiced:

- letter formation
- spacing
- consistency in stitching

Because samplers were worked using counted-thread techniques, girls had to carefully count the threads of the linen to keep each letter properly aligned. This practice reinforced patience, attention to detail, and basic arithmetic skills.

Alphabet samplers also allowed girls to later mark household linens and clothing with initials.

Numerals

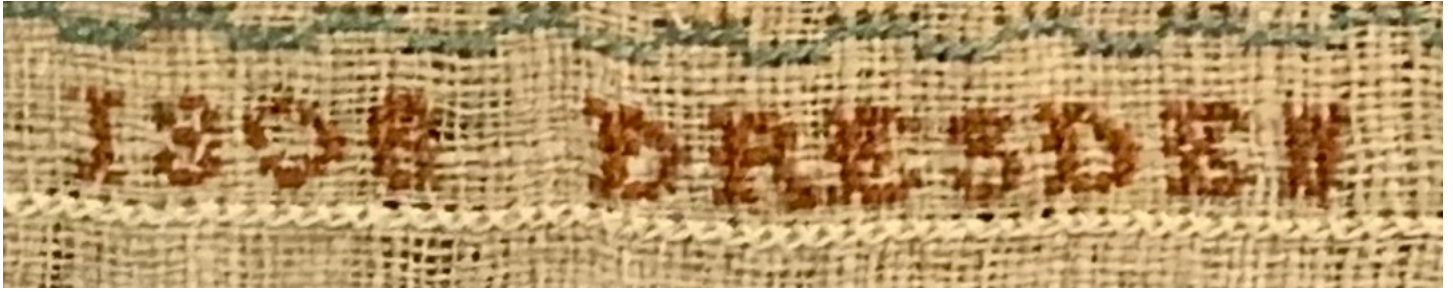


A row of numerals appears on the sampler, though the stitching is faint and partially obscured.

Some features suggest that this section may come from a different sampler, possibly one worked by Beckie's younger sister Sallie. This interpretation is based on differences in stitching style and fading, but it cannot be confirmed with certainty.

Numbers were often included in samplers as a way to practice counting as well as repetition in stitching.

Location and Date



This is Mother's sampler and includes the inscription:

"1808 Dresden"

Including the location was somewhat less common than including the date, and it provides a valuable historical clue about where Beckie was living when the sampler was completed.

Maker's Inscription



The sampler identifies the maker:

"Rebecca G J Prescott aged eight years"

It was common for girls to include their name and age to mark the accomplishment of finishing the piece.

Moral Verse

Faded by time, the lower left corner of Beckie's sampler includes a version of the well-known moral teaching often called the Golden Rule:

"Do unto others as you would that others unto you should do."

This principle appears in many religious traditions and was frequently taught to children as a guiding rule for behavior.

The Girl Who Made the Sampler

Rebecca Goodwin Johnson Prescott was born March 24, 1827, in New Sharon, Maine. She was the oldest daughter of Warren Prescott, a schoolteacher, and Rebecca Johnson Prescott, who also made a sampler preserved from this same family.

Beckie had two younger sisters:

- Caroline Louisa Prescott (“Louisa”)
- Sarah Augusta Prescott (“Sallie”)

In 1833, when Beckie was six years old, her father drowned in the upper Kennebec River after falling through the ice.

Following his death, Beckie’s mother moved the family back to her childhood home, the Old Court House in Dresden, Maine. There they lived with Rebecca’s brothers, including Thomas Johnson, the Dresden postmaster, and William Johnson, who managed the family property.

The courthouse had become a family home, and several branches of the family lived there together.



Rebecca Prescott “Beckie” 1850± by Sarah Pratt

Connections to a Larger American Story

The Prescott family had connections reaching far beyond rural Maine.

Rebecca Johnson Prescott’s brother, Captain Rowland Johnson, later moved to Philadelphia, where he worked as a grocer. Because yellow fever outbreaks were common in Philadelphia during the summer, Beckie and her sisters traveled between Maine and Philadelphia during their childhood.

Through these family connections, the Prescott sisters became linked to the family of Betsy Ross. Beckie’s sister Caroline Louisa Prescott later married William Jackson Canby, Betsy Ross’s grandson. In 1870, William Canby’s lecture about his grandmother helped shape the well-known story of Betsy Ross sewing the first American flag.

Connections to *The Prescott Girls*

In *The Prescott Girls*, Beckie’s sampler is part of her daily life and reflects the skills she is learning and the values being taught within her family.

The sampler itself, including its inscriptions, design, and materials, is drawn from a real historical artifact. The way Beckie works on it, the meaning she attaches to it, and the conversations surrounding it are part of the story.

What is Known from Historical Evidence

Historical evidence shows that:

- the sampler exists and can be examined today
- it was made by Rebecca G. J. Prescott at age eight in 1835
- it was stitched using silk thread on linen
- it includes alphabets, decorative elements, and a moral verse
- it records the maker's name, age, and location

These details come directly from the physical artifact.

What Has Been Reconstructed or Interpreted

Careful study of the sampler suggests that:

- some portions of the design were obscured by damage and later reconstructed
- faded or incomplete stitching requires interpretation to read fully
- certain elements, such as the alphabets are identical to other pieces

These interpretations are based on close examination of the object, but some details cannot be confirmed with certainty.

What Has Been Imagined in the Story

The story imagines:

- Beckie's thoughts and feelings as she worked on the sampler
- the role the sampler played in her daily routine
- conversations between Beckie, her sisters, and the adults around her
- the personal meaning the work held for her



These elements are not recorded in historical documents, but they are grounded in what is known about children's education and family life during the period.

Why This Sampler Matters

Beckie's sampler is valuable for several reasons.

It records the work of an eight-year-old girl in 1835. It connects multiple generations of women in the same family. It reflects how girls were educated, combining needlework, literacy, and moral teaching.

It also links the Prescott family to a wider American story through their connections to Philadelphia and the Betsy Ross family.

Most importantly, the sampler preserves the voice of a child from nearly two centuries ago. In the careful stitches of silk on linen, Beckie left behind a record of her learning, her family, and the values that shaped her life.



Questions for Discussion

1. What skills was Beckie practicing as she created this sampler?
2. What clues in the sampler help us understand what she was learning?
3. Why might it have been important to include a name, age, and date?
4. What can this object tell us about daily life for children in the 1800s?
5. How do historians use objects like this to learn about the past?