

STITCHING INDIVIDUALITY THROUGH CONFORMITY: READING SAMPLERS
FROM THE SARAH STIVOIRS EMBROIDERY SCHOOL

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Antonia Michelle Bowden, daughter of Harold Bowden and Linda York Bowden, was raised in Burlington, North Carolina. She graduated from Walter M. Williams High School in 2000. She attended Catawba College in Salisbury, North Carolina and graduated magna cum laude with a Bachelor of Arts in Honors and English in May, 2004. After working as a copy editor and page designer at the Burlington Times News in Burlington, North Carolina for a year, she entered the Graduate School at Auburn University in August, 2005.

THESIS ABSTRACT

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From the years 1778 to 1794 Sarah Stivours taught Salem, Massachusetts girls the art of sampler-making. Sent to the school to hone their embroidery skills, these affluent young women created needleworks that are wholly unique compared to other designs being used at the time. Using an Adam and Eve scene that is synonymous with the school, and forcing gaze to the center of their works with the famous Stivour Stitch, girls like Ruthey Putnam and Polly Phippen let their views of changes brought on by the American Revolution show through their stitches. In order to begin see through these girls' eyes, scholars must read their embroideries as texts the same way we do a journal or poem. Samplers from the Stivours school have been compared with other samplers made in Salem during the Revolutionary period and the diary of Anna Green Winslow.

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In 1783, 14-year-old Polly Phippen adorned her embroidery sampler with the verse “No tis in vain to seek for/ blis can neer be/ found till we arrive where/ Jesus is and tread on heavnly/ ground. Theres nothing/ round these painted skie nor/ round the dusty clod nothing/ my soul that worth thy joy/ or lovely as thy God.”¹ A pupil at the prestigious Sarah Stivours embroidery school, Phippen’s verse is especially interesting because it is surrounded by a beautiful blue “painted skie.” The sky shines down on flowers that grow around modernized Adam and Eve figures standing on a bed of green grass with sheep, dogs, and birds; the biblical figures are dressed in colonial American styles. As we shall see, Phippen has taken familiar images and reworked them to define not only her religion, but her views on the rising emphasis on genteel activity as well.² Phippen may not know what God’s Eden is like, but she does know what it is like to be a girl in the quickly-growing city of Salem, Massachusetts in Post-Revolutionary America.

¹ I have copied spelling and capitalization exactly as it appears in each girl’s text. These spellings will be used throughout.

² See Appendix 1. Picture from Edmonds, page 31.

Several of Phippen's classmates, like Ruthey Putnam, created strikingly similar scene in their samplers.³ These girls' embroideries are interesting for reasons beyond the identical patterns sewn into them: the Stivours girls were using religious imagery that is wholly absent from other samplers that were being created in Salem at the time. The girls created a community within the school that becomes apparent when the Stivours samplers are compared with needlework done by other Salem girls during the Revolution. Other Salem girls were not focusing on the religious imagery that is central to the surviving Stivours samplers.⁴ The eighteen samplers from the Stivours School are alluring because of their distinct pattern and the stitches used to create them. We will see that while other girls their age, such as Mary Richardson, were stitching wedding scenes into their works, the Stivours girls focus on Adam and Eve figures. Regardless of whether they were sewing during the war (like Putnam) or after (such as Phippen), religion remained a constant and unwavering presence that they could always turn to. Stivours' pupils also differentiated themselves from their contemporaries with subtle changes in the color of their threads and the focus of their linen. Despite having common Biblical themes other aspects of their samplers also allow for individualized readings—the flowers that surround them, the number of dogs and sheep that run around their feet, the verse sewn into the linen, and the depth of the sky and grass are a little different for each girl.

³ See Appendix 2. Picture from Kruger, page 27.

⁴ Samplers were being created in all provinces in the northeast during the Revolution. For this study, however, I have chosen to look solely at samplers from Salem, Massachusetts. To find out more about popular themes worked in other areas Glee Krueger's *New England Samplers to 1840*, Mary Jaene Edmonds' *Samplers and Samplermakers: An American Schoolgirl Art 1700-1850*, and Betty Ring's *Girlhood Embroidery: American Samplers & Pictorial Needlework, 1650-1850* offer great overviews.

Before we can read the samplers as texts, we need to place the girls and their work into historical and cultural context. From the minute they were able to thread a needle, girls of Revolutionary Era America were taught to sew. All women learned how to do stitching essential to household upkeep, but girls who were lucky enough to come from affluent families were able to put their talents to less practical and more artistic uses. Embroidery schools were used as a finishing school for these elite members of society.⁵ These affluent girls would have had the same education as youths of lower social classes first, though. Jennifer Monaghan explains that primary education in Colonial America followed a set curriculum. Students learned to read first from a hornbook, then a primer, and finally a Psalter.⁶ By the time they were pupils in Stivours' school, Putnam and Phippen would have mastered the entire Bible. Monaghan points out that "the use of the Scriptures as the climax of the reading curriculum is well known" (Literacy Instruction 56). The mastery of the Bible would mark the end of formal education for most students. From this point, boys would go on to learn subjects such as writing and Latin. For most girls, education was over, but lucky young ladies who had families that could afford it would be sent to women like Sara Stivours to hone their

⁵ For basic information on needlework in the Colonial and Revolutionary America see Krueger, Edmonds, and Ring and also Georgiana Brown Haberson's *American Needlework: The History of Decorative Stitchery and Embroidery From the Late 16th to the 20th Century*, Ring's *Needlework: An Historical Survey*, and Susan Burrows Swan's *Plain and Fancy: American Women and Their Needlework, 1700-1850*.

⁶ Monaghan explains the difference in these three types of texts in *Learning to Read and Write in Colonial America* and how they were used in a Biblical education: "The hornbook was a little paddle of wood with a single page tacked onto it that consisted of the alphabet, four lines of syllables, the invocation ('In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost') and the Lord's Prayer. The original meaning of a primer was a book of prayer. The instructional content of primers—the letters of the alphabet, the syllabry...and a few tables of words—was brief in relation to the religion content. The Psalter was the Book of Psalms, printed as a separate book" (13).

embroidery skills.⁷ Embroidery scholar Glee Kruger explores the idea of sewing as part of a girl's formal education in detail:

Ornamental sewing or embroidery...seems to have become a part of a young lady's formal education, whether at home, in a boarding school, a young ladies' seminary, or some other select school. She may well have completed her first sampler of simple marking stitches at a dame school or under her mother's tutition. The sampler of ornamental stitches or the embroidered picture would have been completed at a more advanced institution. In today's parlance, we might say that the ornamental sampler was a status symbol, evidence that a girl whose parents had some claim to social standing had completed or was acquiring her finishing school education (2).

It is important to take these facts into consideration when thinking about what Putnam and Phippen would have understood and how they would have allowed their world view to show through their stitches. They were not "young" girls just beginning their schooling. They had a complete education when they created their samplers.⁸

⁷ Large cities like Salem were usually more advanced in their ideas of female education. Joel Perlmann, Silvana R. Siddali, and Keith Whitescarver's explore the idea of women and public education in their article "Literacy, Schooling, and Teaching among New England Women, 1730-1820." History of Education Quarterly. 37.2 (1997) 117-139.

⁸ Idleness was discouraged in colonial children. State laws made it mandatory for them to be almost always busy with study or work. Play was not considered productive and children were valuable commodities to the work force of the home, so parents began to teach them to work as soon as they were old enough. Alice Morse Earle gives a helpful summary of children's lives and many crafts colonial girls used to occupy their time and where they would pick up their embroidery skills in her book Child Life in Colonial Days. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1946.

The embroideries served as a ‘coming out’ of sorts that could be used as public displays of their values—they cemented their place in society.

Ruthey Putnam and Polly Phippen were young, but they had much more responsibility than girls their age today. They were counted on to help run the household, and their educations were geared to prepare them for this. It makes sense that they would have had an understanding of town matters that affected their daily lives. The political shift that occurred in the five years between the creation of Putnam and Phippen’s samplers would have been felt by all American citizens, not just the adults, and it makes sense that this shift would be recorded in material objects that were being created at the time. This is exactly what we have within the Stivours samplers.

Eighteen samplers are known to exist from the prestigious Sara Stivours embroidery school in Salem, Massachusetts. Surprisingly, even with so many existing pieces from the girls who studied there, very little is known about the school itself.⁹ Embroidery scholar Betty Ring gives the most up-to-date information on the institution. Sara Fiske Stivours was “the first American schoolmistress to have her name worked on a distinctive group of samplers” (Ring 105). Samplers that name her school and that are in the distinctive pattern that emerged from it show that Stivours taught from at least 1778

⁹ To trace the information gathered on Sara Fiske Stivours’s life and her embroidery school see Ethel Stanwood Bolton and Eva Johnston Coe’s 1921 anthology of samplers, American Samplers. Boston, Mass.: Thomas Todd Company, 1921. Bolton and Coe’s book is the first anthology of its kind and has been used by most all other embroidery scholars since its publication. See also Mary Jaene Edmonds’ 1991 work, Samplers & Samplermakers: An American Schoolgirl Art 1700-1850 (30-33). See also Krueger, and Ring.

It must be noted that because we do not have any background on the school itself, we cannot determine whether or not these girls were fine-tuning other skills such as penmanship and/or other types of embroidery while they attended Stivours’s school.

through 1794. Almost all of the eighteen known samplers from the Salem academy are worked in the same pattern; Stivours's students stitched an Adam and Eve figure standing with an apple tree between them at the bottom of their embroideries.¹⁰ Sheep, dogs, and birds are always present in the samplers along with vines of flowers growing along both sides. All have a box in the middle of the linen where the girls sewed their alphabets, inscriptions with their names, age, and the year their samplers were finished, and a Bible verse or prayer of their choice. The girls from Stivours' school focused on more than Bible verses in with their sewing, though. Religion is an integral part of each of the works remaining from her school. This religion must have come, in part, from their standard education, but it is more prevalent in the Stivours samplers than any others made in Salem during the period. Looking into the importance of this religion can help us understand more about the community these girls were creating within their school.

In *Good Wives*, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich reminds us that "it is difficult for us to approach a world in which neither innovation nor individuality was celebrated, in which the rich particulars of daily life were willingly reduced to formulaic abstraction" (Ulrich 3).¹¹ In order to understand how these young ladies were redefining themselves as Americans during and after the Revolutionary war, we have to look beyond written texts and remember that "significant evidence of female life lay buried in...embroideries" (5). To begin to grasp how these young girls defined themselves it is important to compare

¹⁰ There are only two samplers attributed to the Stivours' school that are not in the pattern of the rest. Susannah Saunders created a pastoral sampler using the Stivour stitch in 1766 and Ruth Briggs finished a domestic scene in 1788. Neither samplers name Stivours' academy, so there is some debate as to their origins. For pictures of both see Betty Ring's *American Needlework Treasures* (11-12).

¹¹ See also Ulrich's "Of Pens and Needles: Sources in Early American Women's History." *Journal of American History*. 77.1 (1990). 200-207. Ulrich stresses the importance of looking to "unwritten" texts for colonial American women's history.

their samplers with work from other girls sewing at the same time as well as at both the similarities and differences in stitches created at Stivours' school. For the girls under Stivours' guidance, the way to define their identities was to take the classic religious figures of Adam and Eve that were standard to sew into samplers and put them into American landscapes. For example, Ruthey Putnam's Adam and Eve live in a world of chaos and uncertainty while Polly Phippen's figures are in the beautiful and orderly new Eden that was the emerging post-war America. While young girls such as Polly Phippen and Ruthey Putnam were following a pre-set pattern in their samplers, they were able to take the standard form and still put touches of individuality into them. Other Salem girls at the time were not using this religious imagery in their samplers. As we will see in Elizabeth Derby and Mary Richardson's works, religion was almost completely ignored.

In order to gain a greater understanding of the every day lives of women in Revolutionary America, we as scholars must expand our notion of a text and read these samplers the same as we would a diary or poem. While print culture was an avenue of expression for only a handful of women, sewing was an activity practiced by all. Fancier embroidery was produced by members of the upper classes who had the time and money to spend on intricate stitches. Needlework was not only acceptable, it was expected of women, so they gave their needles the voices they did not have and "wrote" their words into their stitches. It would not always have been appropriate for these girls to publicly voice their opinions about the Revolution openly, so in order to get an understanding of how they were dealing with the changing world around them we have to examine what they have left behind.

Material culturists have just begun to read samplers and other types of needlework in this way in order to gain a greater understanding of the every day lives of women in Colonial and Revolutionary America.¹² Sarah Stivours' students were using her guidance and preset pattern to create samplers that were nevertheless subtly individual. Because the sampler patterns allowed for individualization, the pieces had the potential to become sites of self-expression. The young ladies of Stivours' school used them as visual representations of their personal world views. Phippen, Putnam, and their classmates were able to choose their own verses and colors to put into Stivours' design. By sticking to the same general pattern and using the same distinctive stitches, the girls were able to form a community with their fellow schoolmates while using their samplers as sites to work out their own identities within this community; this was achieved by directing gaze to the center of the work with the Stivour Stitch, varying the colors of thread, and frequency of items stitched into the linen.¹³

Needlework is not the only tool that we can use to read these girls' samplers as texts; they should also be compared to written texts at the time. From 1771-1773 Anna Green Winslow composed a diary of letters to her family in Nova Scotia that discussed her daily life in Boston. Sent to the city for finishing school (for the same type of education the girls of the Stivours school would be receiving) Winslow's main focus throughout the diary is split between religion and fashion. While it is a diary, her words

¹²Interest in American needlework is quickly growing. Many recent studies have been done on the literal process of creating needlework, and its useful role in society. Mary C. Beaudry's *Findings: The Material Culture of Needlework and Sewing* traces the importance of sewing instruments (pins, needles, thimbles, ect.) and their contribution to the establishment of gender roles. Marla Miller's *The Needle's Eye: Women and Work in the Age of Revolution* examines the significance of women's work in the clothing trade.

¹³ For an excellent reading of a New York Biblical sampler as a text, see Margaret K. Hofer's article "Cross-Stitched History: Artistry and ambition in Christina Arcularius's *Tree of Knowledge* sampler" (www.common-place.org. 4.4 (2004)).

are not private—they are meant for her family, so it would not be proper for her to write about unladylike concerns. As we shall see, she, like Polly Phippen and Ruthey Putnam, is using her creation to indicate what aspects of her society are the most important.. The Stivours girls do the same thing with their stitches—Phippen and Putnam are able to use the words of their verses along with the direction and length of their stitches to voice their concern (or joy) at the changes the Revolution is bringing.

Not only are Phippen and Putnam’s samplers important texts for accessing the ideals and anxieties of young women their age, they are also important for being truly American. The Philadelphia Museum of Art’s publication on samplers discusses the emergence of wholly American samplers. Most seventeenth and early eighteenth century samplers were made to look like English and German models: “in fact, the seventeenth-century sampler in America was so much influenced by English embroidery that it can hardly be called ‘American’ ... it was only by the end of the eighteenth century that the true American sampler had developed” (14). The linen for each girl’s sampler would have been made locally.¹⁴

Ultimately, we must come to understand that Colonial samplers are not simply pieces of art—they are works of literacy and self-expression. Just as we can read between the lines of Anna Green Winslow’s diary to see that she was just as concerned with the frivolity of fashion as with her Christian faith, we must read beyond the stitches of embroideries to see into the worlds of the young women who created them. The girls

¹⁴ In the early 1700’s sampler makers began to make their own linen instead of importing it from England. Samplers started to move from the long, thin English versions to wider, squarer works. The change in size occurred because American looms were wider than English ones. For more on the history of samplers see Edmonds’ Samplers and Samplermakers: An American School Girl Art 1700-1850 along with Glee Krueger’s A Gallery of American Samplers.

that made these samplers were not just following the directions of their teachers. The needlework from the Sara Stivours Embroidery School are all beautiful, and they are indeed pieces of art, but they are much more than pieces of linen used to fill girls' time. Each one can be read as a narration that tells a story specific to the girl who created it.

Using both other samplers from Salem girls of the same age and Winslow's diary, I will discuss the importance of the "writing" of the Stivour stitch and the way each girl has sewn her alphabet into her sampler. It is the combination of the Stivour stitch and religious imagery that make the Stivours samplers unique sites where the emerging feelings of these young women who were working during a transitional period can be seen. With the Revolution coming to an end, class and gender roles were being defined and challenged. Ruthey Putnam, Polly Phippen, and other students of Stivours' school created samplers that have become sites to demonstrate their views on what was most important during the time. Regardless of which parts of her sampler each girl treats as the most important, an emphasis on the importance of religion is found in both. These girls were using their roles as elite members of society in order to create works that served as guidelines for what other young women should have been focusing on; they have created embroideries that are negotiating what should be valued by the affluent members of society.

The Stivour Stitch

Before reading beyond the images in these embroideries, perhaps one way to understand the Stivours samplers in relation to other work being done by young women during the Revolution is to investigate the stitches themselves. The stitch that has

become synonymous with the schools is now known as the Stivour stitch. In her compilation of American samplers, Anne Sebba describes it as a long stitch “placed diagonally in parallel lines ... at least 5cm long and sometimes more, the stitches in green at the bottom represented grass; those in blue and white overhead indicated the sky” (Sebba 88). For the most part, it was used almost exclusively by girls taught by Stivours. The crinkled silk floss used in the Stivours embroideries is prevalent in samplers from Essex county starting in the 1740’s, but Putnam, Phippen and their classmates used it to make a stitch of their own that would serve as a tool for them to manipulate the gaze of their works’ admirers. The stitch is made to grab attention. The long, diagonal lines are unlike any other type of stitch used in sampler embroidery. Because the girls only used the stitch to represent sky and grass, its long jagged lines stand out. Only the stitches used to make the sky were executed to direct gaze. These lines stand out from the grass because they are often longer, and not as uniform. We will see that Phippen and Putnam use these sky lines to draw attention to the religious imagery of their work. Because they were working within a medium deemed appropriate for women, their manipulation of the gaze is very subtle. This way, they were able to create wholly unique samplers without challenging the general attitudes toward individuality.

The power given to Phippen and Putnam through even so small a thing as an individual stitch becomes apparent when compared to twelve-year-old Elizabeth Derby’s 15 1/2 x 10 3/4 in. sampler. Though beautiful, Derby’s sampler (completed in 1774) is quite plain and lacks the striking stitches that are so noticeable in the Stivours works. She has sewn a green band to form a border around the band of flowers that has been stitched around the entire work. A white box created out of triangles holds her verses and

alphabet inside of the flowers. The alphabet has been repeated four times and is broken up by a row of strawberry plants and flowers, and the verses “Idleness is The Root of all Evil,” and “Modesty adorns the Fair Sex thro Life.”¹⁵ The colors of Derby’s needlework are the only similarities it has with embroideries created under Stivours’ instruction; the focal points are very different from those stitched by her students like Phippen and Putnam.

The stitches of a sampler are not simply aesthetic—they can be used to manipulate the focus of the viewer’s gaze. Rudolph Arnheim discusses the importance of the focal center in works of art. The center can also “be exploited to create a teasing contradiction between an element kept deliberately small and its crucial importance for the story being presented” (Arnheim 113). Just as in a painting, the center of a sampler indicates what is most important about it. Derby’s sampler stands out because it is so plain—because it ostensibly has no center. The border of flowers stitched around the work is perfectly symmetrical. Clusters of two flowers found in the middle of each side shift the gaze toward the center, but do not give further indication of where a reader is to look. Because she has chosen two very short verses that each fit one line, the text of Elizabeth Derby’s sampler does not break up the four alphabets she has stitched, nor do they stand out. The reader’s gaze is likely to stop on the brightest spot of the work: the letters EF (stitched in red), LM (in blue), NO (in orange) and PQ (in green).¹⁶ Because she has no other indicators of what the center should be, the alphabet becomes the focus

¹⁵ See Appendix 3. Photo located in Betty Ring’s *Needlework: An Historical Survey*, page 34.

¹⁶ See appendix 4.

of the work and ends up serving the “deliberately small” and “crucial importance” Arnheim discusses.

The large alphabet that makes up the bottom half of Derby’s sampler is important because it holds her two verses. Because she has stitched such a generic piece, the verses are the only indication we get of her values. Instead of a favorite Bible verse or prayer, she has included two very generic sayings. “Idleness is the Root of all Evil” and “Modesty Adorns the Fair Sex Thro Life” can be seen as sentiments as to how women should conduct themselves in 1774. Derby has avoided idleness by creating the sampler, and her work is indeed modest. Even the stitches that have been used to write these verses are modest—they are smaller than the other letters on the work, and are noticed only after the large alphabet. She wants to share her sentiments with the viewers of her embroidery, but she does not use her stitches to manipulate gaze as effectively as the Stivours girls.

The uniqueness of the Stivour stitch is further emphasized when the works are compared to another Salem sampler, completed years after Derby’s. Worked in a completely different style, Mary Richardson’s 1783 embroidery (the same year as Phippen’s), also shows a lack of concern for the center of the piece.¹⁷ Richardson is actually using a stitch very similar to the Stivour stitch, but instead of using it sparingly, to direct the viewer’s gaze, she uses it to cover all of the white space on her linen.¹⁸ The stitches used to create her sky and grass are sewn in long, diagonal directions that mirror

¹⁷ See appendix 5. Photo located in Ring’s *Needlework: An Historical Survey*, page 37.

¹⁸ Ring explains that Richardson’s work was actually long contributed to the Stivour School, but this has since been discredited because she uses the stitch to cover the entirety of her linen. See *Needlework: An Historical Survey*, page 37.

the Stivour stitch, but because they cover the entirety of the sampler, they fade into the background of the work. Gaze is directed to the text box because it is the only area of the linen that is left with white space.¹⁹ Richardson's liberal use of the stitch makes it fade into the background of her embroidery. Like Derby's, Richardson's text box becomes the center of the work by default. Once there, the dark color of the verse makes it the most noticeable. Her verse is even more generic than Derby's: Mary Richardson Is My Name and With My Needle I Did The Same And If My Skill Had Been Better I Would Have Mended Every Letter This Needle Work Of Mine Can Tell When A Child Is Learned Well By My Parants I Was Tought Not To Spend My Time For Nought. As we shall see below, this verse is devoid of the religious sentiments key to Putnam and Phippen's embroideries. She stresses Puritan values with her center, but not religious ones. First, though, we muse examine the centers of the Stivours works for comparison.

The centers of Phippen and Putnam's works are much more apparent because of the way they use the famous Stivour Stitch; they are not created by default. Because the Stitch is used only to create the sky and grass in each sampler, their stitches do not cover the entirety of the linen, and the emphasis on their centers is very deliberate. The white space around the jagged lines makes them stand out, and therefore allows the stitches to divert gaze to the center of the needlework; Derby and Richardson have failed to do this. Their use of the stitch is further complicated when Phippen and Putnam's samplers are compared to each other. All of the Sarah Stivours' students use the Stivour stitch in their works to represent the grass and sky, but the way each girl uses it is not the same.²⁰

¹⁹ See appendix 6.

²⁰ See appendix 7 for close-ups of Putnam's work and appendix 8 for close-ups of Phippen's.

Although Phippen and Putnam both have a rich, blue “painted skie” pointing down toward their Adam and Eve figures, the colors and order of the colors of each girl’s is different. Completed in 1778, Putnam’s sky at the top of her sampler consists mostly of white and brown diagonal stitches. She has only two of the bright blue patches that are prevalent in Phippen’s sampler. Putnam’s “bottom layer” of sky is much the same as the top. She uses much shorter stitches and alternates white thread with a light shade of blue. In 1783 Phippen used more blue for the sky on her sampler. She starts with white the same way as Ruthey Putnam, but then alternates it with nine bursts of blue. The stitches on the left and right all slant toward the middle where she has added two bands of red in the middle of the blue and white. As we shall see, both the direction of the stitches and the colors that each girl used to create her sky may serve as indicators as to how she felt about the emerging America around her and help to emphasize the importance of religion in the works.

Because they are using the same distinctive stitch, at first glance it is easy to miss the differences in Ruthey Putnam and Polly Phippen’s samplers. The changes in sky are important, though. The jagged diagonal stitches that make up the sky of each girl’s needlework demand attention and force a viewer’s gaze to the “centers” of their work. Phippen’s stitches are a lot more ordered than Putnam’s. Ruthey Putnam’s sky points in many different directions and forces the viewer to choose for herself where to look first. Polly Phippen’s sky carefully directs focus to the middle of her sampler; her stitches make the viewer notice the bold red bands in the middle of the blue and white sky. The red bands in the middle then point toward the center of the sampler and bring the

viewer's eyes to the second sky. The stitches in this sky point away from the middle and direct gaze to the Adam and Eve figures. What becomes apparent when the centers of the Phippen and Putnam samplers are investigated is their unique relationship the Revolution and religion.

Samples and the Revolution

Phippen and Putnam are using the Stivour stitch to indicate what is most important in their embroideries and also to show how they felt about the changing world around them. Adam and Eve are placed in contemporary, Revolutionary Era clothing. In juxtaposing them with the current period, it seems not unreasonable to then argue that the status of their Eden warrants a similar juxtaposition. Wanting to be a part of the patriotism that was sweeping the nation before and after the war, mothers began to raise their children with the idea that everything they did was for the good of the nation. The idea of the Republican Mother, coined by Linda Kerber, is tied to the belief that women were the moral centers of society.²¹ They were responsible for teaching their children the principals of republicanism and democracy in order to ensure continued success of the nation in future generations. Kerber explains that “the ideology of female education

²¹ In her work *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America*, Kerber explains that the Revolutionary Mother is the notion that “a mother can perform a political function.” It “represents the recognition that a citizen’s political socialization takes place at an early age, that the family is a basic part of the system of political communication, and that patterns of family authority influence the general political culture” (283).

Before Kerber’s work, Mary Beth Norton published *Liberty’s Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800*. The first work of its kind, Norton’s work is one of the key texts about women’s experience during the Revolutionary period. Unlike those before her, Norton does not argue that women and men were seen as equals in the home until the years after the war, but instead that eighteenth-century Americans had very set definitions of what was acceptable feminine activity and what was not. Both sexes believed that women were inferior to men, and ideology of the time was geared to uphold this belief.

came to be tied to ideas about the sort of women who would be of greatest service to the Republic” (10). As we will see, both Phippen and Putnam were using their samplers as sites for this ideology. Phippen and Putnam were working during a transition period and their samplers become sites for the transition.

Gunderson elaborates on Kerber’s theories and posits that “the Revolutionary era considered childhood a time of transition and learning about adult roles” (91). In order to do this, the young women of the Revolutionary period had to work out what it meant for them to be women—and what it meant to live in their changing world. The Stivours girls took their roles to be that of teachers. They used their needlework as examples of what other young women at the time should strive for. Though they were not mothers yet, part of Phippen and Putnam’s home education would have involved teaching them their proper roles within society. If being a Republican Mother meant raising children who would carry the morals of the nation to future generations, this also meant reinforcing the dominant feelings about gender roles at the time. Women were to be the teachers—the carriers of morals and piety. Phippen and Putnam were growing into these roles, and their samplers become one of the media available to them in it.

The types of samplers created by the Stivours girls, Derby, and Richardson were reserved for young women of wealthy families. Middle and lower-class families could not afford to send their daughters to expensive finishing schools like Stivours’, and they also would have needed the money that would have been spent on expensive imported silk thread for other things. Views dealing with what type of leisure activities were acceptable were changing during the Revolutionary Era. Along with Republican Motherhood came the idea that leisure and gentility needed to be curbed for more

productive activities: “The increasing political tensions surrounding the war years but a damper on this genteel social life. As the political crisis grew deeper, criticism of the genteel style became sharper. The critique was both political and religious. The genteel style appeared indulgent, extravagant, or decadent. Republican virtue stressed values of diligence, frugality, and restraint” (Gunderson 156). The adherence to and then shift of these ideals can be seen within the Stivours girls’ works. They are willing to use the expensive thread and attend the school, but they do not create products that celebrate idleness. Phippen and Putnam are participating in a genteel activity, but they have chosen to not make their samplers idle products; as we will see shortly, their works have a religious purpose. Each sampler serves the purpose of teaching the girls to better their stitches, but are examples of religious piety. Putnam and Phippen are showing that it is okay to use expensive thread to create a beautiful piece as long as the piece is used to express views that are good for the entire community.

Gunderson stresses that “although women claimed virtue as a special female gift, the Revolution provided them with no distinctive versions of public virtue to use in demonstrating patriotism” (170). As accepted outlets of creativity for women, samplers could be used to work out what this public virtue should have been. The Stivours girls have taken it upon themselves to do this with their religious needlework, though the way each girl does it is a little different. While she still partakes in the genteel craft of sampler making, Putnam’s work is a lot less extravagant than others of the time (even when compared to Phippen’s). Her focus is on religion and not leisure (as in the pastoral scenes created by girls like Richardson). She has completed a work of art, but she has done so sparingly. By the time Phippen created her sampler, the restrictive views against

gentility had begun to decrease; the war was almost over and Americans could go back to rebuilding a nation in which upper-class Americans could have leisurely lifestyles without compromising the survival of the nation. Putnam does not give herself to frivolity completely, though. Her sampler is still a work of religious art. She has simply chosen to use more extravagant colors, and “extras” (more animals and flowers) in her work.

Ruthey Putnam and Polly Phippen’s works are examples of truly American samplers, and we can speculate that their views about their country can be seen within their stitches. Phippen created her embroidery at a time when Americans were sure they had won their independence. By the time Phippen sewed her embroidery the British had already begun to evacuate and a preliminary peace treaty had been signed. It was a time for order to be restored.²² This type of order is seen in Phippen’s sampler. Her sky is neat and the diagonal lines have a purpose. She has even added red so that her sky reflects the patriotic attitude of the nation.

Ruthey Putnam does not have this order in the world of her linen. In 1778 the war could still go either way. British and American forces both were facing setbacks. To a 10-year-old girl it must have been a terrifying time. A ten year old may not understand exactly what is going on in the world around her, but she can pick up on the anxieties of her family. The sharp, jagged edges and chaotic directions of the diagonals that create Putnam’s skies represent could be read as reflecting a sense of the chaos and uncertainty of 1778 America from a ten-year-old’s point of view. The Stivour stitch is just one small

²² The Web site <http://www.historyplace.com/unitedstates/revolution/> gives a very detailed timeline of major events in the Revolutionary War.

element of the text of the Stivour samplers, but we can see that it certainly see that it provides a site for reading the samplers as a text. It also provides an emphasis for the major focus of both embroideries—religion.

Samplers and Religion

As we saw in the discussion of education, Christianity infiltrated almost every aspect of Revolutionary life. Colleen McDannell posits that “American Christians want to see, hear, and touch God. It is not enough for Christians to go to church, lead a righteous life, and hope for an eventual place in heaven. People build religion into the landscape, they make and buy pious images” (1). Though her study focuses mostly on material Catholicism in the nineteenth century forward, McDannell’s sentiments are echoed in the samplers from Stivours’ school. Joan R. Gunderson reminds us that “religion was not limited to acts of public worship on Sunday. The practice of religion was deeply embedded in everyday life” (122). With this in mind, one might expect to find a profusion of religious imagery throughout the embroidery school projects. Nonetheless, many young ladies chose to leave religious imagery out of their samplers and focus on generic pastoral scenes like Mary Richardson or, as in the case of Elizabeth Derby, the embroiderer would choose to sew only bands of flowers. This is not the case for the students of Sarah Stivours’ school.

Derby and Richardson’s samplers reveal a reluctance to put their piety on display publicly. Joan Gunderson describes the growing separation between private and public spheres during the Revolution. She writes that public spheres were oftentimes seen as places for men while women were to maintain order in the private, domestic spheres.

Religion “uncomfortably straddled the fence between private and public, with piety and faith firmly tied to the private sphere while the institutional church was defined as public” (Gunderson 168). Religious expression in samplers must similarly have straddled that uncomfortable fence as they also existed in the liminal space between public and private. Though Derby completed her sampler in 1774, one year before the war officially started, the beginnings of this division of spaces would have already started. She, then, can be seen as reversing her displays of piety for other outlets. The Stivours girls begin to blur the line between public and private spheres by making items that are meant to be seen in public places with images that represent their piety. Phippen, Putnam, and their classmates have made a conscious, public decision to express their religious views in their needlework.

The verses stitched into their works are further indication of this decision. Paula Richter posits that Derby’s verses of “Idleness is The Root of all Evil” and “Modesty adorns the Fair Sex tho Life” “express values that were held up as models for young women in the eighteenth century” (12). Derby’s sampler itself embodies her adherence to these maxims. As we saw above, she has done her duty to avoid idleness in the creation of the sampler and has done so with appropriate modesty. There are no obvious religious images in Derby’s sampler. In Sampler Motifs and Symbolism, Patricia Andrieu writes that strawberries were viewed as perfect “fruit because it has no pits, or thorns, or rinds” (64). Because of this they were symbols of righteousness and “associated with Christ” (64). The lack of other religious images in Derby’s sampler makes it unfeasible to link her strawberries to Andrieu’s definition. Instead, the strawberries are simply secular pastoral images. They add aesthetic value to her sampler. The girls of the

Stivours school, however, were using blatant religious symbols to comment on their world.

Samplers and the Issue of Religion in the Revolution

Later samplers still maintain a guarded privacy about piety. In fact, nine years later Richardson displays even less piety than Derby. This becomes clear when we reference the “verse” stitched into her sampler. Instead of a favorite Bible passage or prayer she chose to stitch a very generic saying into her work: “Mary Richardson is my name and with my/ needle I did the same and if my Skil Had Been/ Better I Would Have Mended Every Letter/ This Needle Work of Mine Can Tell When a/ Child is Learned Well By my Parents I Was/ Tought Not To Spend My Time for Nought.” This repeats the sense of rejection of idleness found in Derby’s verses, but is cast as necessary for parental obedience, and not explicit in terms of morality.²³ Richardson is expressing her views, but she is not doing so with religion.²⁴

Though I have stressed the importance of the religious figures (or lack of) found in these samplers, they only attain their true significance when placed within the historical context of the Revolutionary War—an experience which must have affected all

²³ Richardson’s sampler borrows heavily from a group of 1750’s chimney pieces created by girls in Boston. Called the “fishing lady pictures,” these embroideries are rich with color and feature scenes with a couple enjoying a picturesque landscape. For more on these works see Ring’s *Girlhood Embroideries* pages 45-53.

²⁴ It is important to point out that Richardson’s couple are not Adam and Eve figures. In *Samplers Motifs and Symbolism* Patricia Andrie points out that Adam and Eve figures are “depicted by a man and woman standing on either side of the tree of knowledge” (12). The lack of a tree is proof that Richardson has stitched regular people and not Biblical figures into her sampler.

of the Stivours girls.²⁵ Their samplers served as a way to express their anxiety in an acceptable manner. The Stivours girls are setting examples with their embroideries. The first noticeable figures on Putnam and Phippen's samplers are the modernized Adam and Eve figures that stand at the bottom of each piece.²⁶ Both girls have stitched the figures into their embroideries, but they mean something different for each one.²⁷ Because they have used the Stivour stitch to indicate different centers we can speculate a bit about what the figures meant for each girl. Putnam's figures can be read as symbols of hope and comfort for her to look toward during the unrest of 1778. They are dressed very plainly. Eve is wearing a brown dress with a white bonnet and apron. Adam has on a dark brown coat with lighter pants. Her chaotic sky that points in no general direction at the top of her sampler is more focused at the bottom layer. Almost all of the diagonal Stivour stitches of the second sky point to Eve. Three diagonals that are directly above Adam point to him, but all the rest lead the viewer's eyes to the female figure. It is interesting that Ruthey Putnam would have the only directed lines force a viewer's gaze to Eve. For Putnam, Eve, as a woman, would have been a stable figure to focus on. In 1778 men were constantly leaving for war, and the women were often left alone for long periods of

²⁵ While I am not arguing that Richardson and Derby were not affected, as they would have been, their work reveals none of the tensions I note here.

²⁶ While there are American samplers with men and women that do not represent Biblical figures, most all samplers that have a man and a woman with a fruit tree in the middle are to represent an Eden scene. Averil Colby explains how the difference between family figures and representations of Adam and Eve are often ambiguous. Family figures, though, are "shown either standing or sitting surrounded by a pattern of flowers or fruit in the form of an arbour" (69). The arbor and the family are "given a place of importance at the bottom of the work" (69). Because Putnam and Phippen's figures are not surrounded by an arbor (though Phippen does have one at the top of her sampler that will be discussed shortly) and they are separated by an apple tree, they are Americanized versions of Adam and Eve. See Colby's "Flowers, Fruit, and Trees" 39 for a description of apple trees in samplers.

²⁷ See Appendix 7 for close-ups of Putnam's sampler and Appendix 8 for Phippen's.

time.²⁸ Women are the constant figures in Putnam's life, so Eve, being a woman, is a spiritual character she can admire in her sampler. It makes sense that a girl who is learning how to be a Republican Mother would emphasize the mother of humanity within her work.

Polly Phippen's Adam and Eve figures are given equal attention in the stitches of her bottom. Her Eve is wearing an elegant white dress with lace along the bottom. Adam has on the same style jacket as the Adam in Putnam's sampler, but Phippen's is wearing a white jacket with a light blue undershirt and light blue pants. Because America was regaining a sense of order, and life was once again becoming balanced, it is fitting that Phippen has directed equal focus to her figures. In the five years after Putnam's sampler was completed, men were beginning to return home. Phippen would have had a more balanced community of men and women in her life than Putnam. This balance is shown in the carefully placed diagonals of her sky.

As tensions with the British began to cool, the girls of Stivours school turned to another popular Biblical figure to understand the world around them. Across the top of Polly Phippen's sampler, under the first sky, many birds fly around an arbor overgrown with fruit. Underneath the arbor is a plant with beautiful white flowers. Putnam has no such image on her sampler. In fact, the top of her embroidery has only a few cherry trees and yellow flowers. The arch is obviously important to Phippen. The two red angles she has sewn into her sampler are directly over it draw attention to it, and the arch itself is

²⁸ During the Revolutionary War, women were often left wondering for weeks, and sometimes months, if their husbands, fathers, and sons were still alive. Battles left homes in ruin and families destroyed. These essentially abandoned women used each other as support groups of sorts. Carol Berkin discusses what life was like for these women in her book *Revolutionary Mothers*.

almost directly above the apple tree that stands between Adam and Eve. The red, white, and blue angles of the top part of the sky draws attention to the arch at the same time that it directs gaze to the Adam and Eve figures. She has created a second center using the Stivour stitch.

Arches are Biblical references just like Adam and Eve. In Genesis, after the flood, God promises Noah that he will never flood the earth again. He tells him, “I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind” (New Revised Standard Version, Gen 9.13-15). The arbor that Phippen has sewn into her sampler is in the shape of a rainbow. It became popular around the time Americans were sure they were going to win the Revolutionary War. At least five other pupils of the Sara Stivours’ school sewed this type of arch at the top of their embroidery starting in 1780.²⁹ None of Putnam’s classmates before 1780 have this arch in their samplers.³⁰ Perhaps, the arch on the girl’s samplers represents the covenant they must have felt God made with the Americans when it was clear they were going to win the war. When the “clouds” that had been over America during the uncertain periods of the war parted and showed God was on their side, Phippen and her classmates probably related to Noah (since they were all masters of the Bible) and the relief and feelings of hope that his survival represents.

²⁹ The first arch to appear in samplers from the Stivours school is found in Hannah Batchelder’s completed in 1780. Betsey Gill (1781), Sally Witt (1786), Sally Rust (1788), and Nabby Dane (1789) all include the arch in the years following. For pictures of Batchelder, Gill, and Rust’s samplers see Ring 105-07. For Witt see Bolton and Coe plate XCI, and for Dane see Edmonds 32.

³⁰ Nabby Mason Peele’s sampler finished in 1778 is not only missing the arch that Putnam’s is, but her sky is sewn in the same chaotic manner too. Peele’s sampler is proof that Putnam was not alone in her feelings of uneasiness about the world around her. For a picture of Peele’s sampler see Bolton and Coe plate XC.

Though this is speculation, it is possible that Putnam and her classmates do not have the arch because the feeling of hope that it symbolizes was not prevalent when they were sewing their samplers.

My speculation seems to be correct when we notice that Putnam's pictorialized anxiety does not stop with the angles of her sky, her Adam and Eve figures or the lack of an arbor on her sampler. Her tension is also felt in the verse she has chosen to sew into her work. Girls in embroidery schools were given basic patterns to sew into their samplers by their teachers, but the verse they chose was usually up to them.³¹ A girl would often pick a Bible verse or particular prayer that meant a lot to her. Under her alphabet Ruthy Putnam has sewn the words "Lord address thy heavenly throne call/ me a child of thine send down the spi/rit of thy son to form my heart divine/ In thy fair book of life di/vine my God inscribe my n/ame and let it fill some/ humble place beneath/ the slaughtered lamb." Putnam's prayer is a bit desolate. With the outcome of the war still up in the air, Americans must have felt confused as to how to define themselves. If they lost the war they would not be citizens of their own country, but they would no longer be British either. In her embroidery, Putnam appeals to the one supposedly stable figure in her life—God. Everything may change around her, but she will always have her religion. Assuming that the prayer she sewed into her verse was meant to comfort her, it is interesting to read it with the juxtaposition of the chaos of her top sky and the emphasis on Eve at the bottom of her sampler. In the midst of the uncertainty of her life, Putnam seems to be calling to God for comfort.

³¹ Bolton and Coe talk about the emergence of themes within samplers and how girls would often use the patterns of their instructors while putting their own personal touches into them. The verse they chose was one of the ways to personalize a popular style.

Polly Phippen's verse is similar to Putnam's. Her verse reads, "No tis in vain to seek for/ blis can neer be/ found till we arrive where/ Jesus is and tread on heavnly/ ground. Theres nothing/ round these painted skie nor/ round the dusty clod nothing/ my soul that worth thy joy/ or lovely as thy God." When read out of the context of her sampler, Phippen's prayer seems almost more desolate than Ruthey Putnam's. If she were writing five years earlier there would have been no bliss in her world because of the uncertainty of the outcome of the Revolutionary War. Phippen, like Putnam, would have had no choice but to look toward Heaven and the day that she would be united with her maker. These verses cannot be taken out of context though. In her sampler Phippen has created an Eden. An apple tree stands between the Adam and Eve figures at the bottom of the embroidery. Intricate flowers and cherry clusters are growing around the sides of the box that hold Phippen's alphabet and verse. Numerous birds are flying around the sampler and there are many sheep and dogs in the grass with Adam and Eve. Cherry were considered a fruit of heaven and cherry trees represented "prosperity, health, and happiness" (Andrle 22). The whole scene is rich with color. Everything sewn into Phippen's sampler suggests happiness. There is almost no "white space" left on her linen. All of the animals and the two Adam and Eve figures have every worldly necessity they could need. Nothing on Earth is as magnificent as it is in Heaven, and Phippen's verse indicates that she has not forgotten this. She has an earthly life she has to live, though. The rest of her sampler indicates that in the years after the war, life in Salem for an upper-class Salem young woman was as close to Eden as one could get.

Ruthey Putnam does not have this Eden, which why Phippen's is so interesting. There is a lot of white space on Putnam's sampler. An apple tree is growing between

Adam and Eve and there are beautiful flowers growing along the sides of the box containing her alphabet and verse like in Polly Phippen's, but Putnam has only sewn two sheep, two birds, and one dog into her work. Her flowers have a lot of space between them when Phippen's are almost growing into each other. The world of Putnam's sampler is not desolate in any way, but it is definitely not the lush and bountiful Eden of Phippen's. So, taken in the context of each girl's sampler, their verses take on different meanings. Putnam appears to be for God to send down his son to take her from a world that is certainly not all together unpleasant (as the flowers of her sampler prove) but still chaotic (as shown in the lack of direction in her sky). Phippen says that nothing on earth can be as lovely as it will be in Heaven (something every good Christian girl knows) but the world she has created certainly is not lacking beauty—it is a Heaven on Earth of sorts. In a time span of five years the world has changed from simply livable for one girl to colorful and bountiful—an Eden—for another.

Though they were working within the community of Stivours' school, Putnam and Phippen were still making themselves individuals. They all stressed the importance of religion within their works, but this religion had a different meaning for each girl. This working of individual identity within an established ideology mirrors Kerber's sentiments that women worked as individuals during the war: "They did not change their domestic identity (though they put it to a broader service), and they did not seriously challenge the traditional definition of the woman's domestic domain" (74). Embroidery and religion were part of Puritan domestic ideology. With their works, Phippen and Putnam were working to maintain the status quo. Perhaps they were disturbed by the lack of religious imagery in embroideries being created by their neighbors. Obviously,

we cannot ultimately know why the Stivours girls were different from other Salem embroideries. If we are to understand that these samplers were an outgrowth of the school they came from (and we are since they all have nearly identical patterns) we can assume that those values were ostensibly different from others stitching at the time. In a period when women's roles in society were being negotiated, it appears that the Stivours girls have shown that religion is definitely something that should be emphasized. This emphasis becomes even more apparent when these samplers are compared to text written at the time.

The ABCs of Samplers

Journals provide an interesting foil to the Stivours' samplers for two reasons: first, they are actual print sources (like a book) that were used by girls to record their thoughts on sermons and schools, and to literally practice the art of writing. Second, even though today we think of journals as private places to write our most intimate thoughts, the diaries of young women written during the Revolution were often read by their entire families. The diary was in actuality more like a commonplace book than the diaries of today. Like a sampler, diaries were used by young girls to hone the skills they learned in basic academies. They showcased their skills that the girls learned in their upper-class societies. Anna Greene Winslow's diary, titled *Diary of a Boston School Girl* by editor Alice Morse Earle, is a great example of both of these.

In eighteenth century America, penmanship was a status symbol. Tamara Plankins Thornton points out that

For members of the Anglo-American world, men and women were social beings, whose places in the social order were determined by their gender, status, and occupation and whose social identity was defined accordingly. Proper presentation of one's public self therefore consisted in the faithful representation of one's place in society. That means donning the visible signs of one's gender and rank: in clothing, speaking, and carrying oneself in ways appropriate to one's station in life. Included among the arts of self-presentation, and sharing in aspects of its major elements—dress, speech, and deportments—was handwriting. (35)

Clearly, handwriting in the late eighteenth century was a marker of class (the same as a decorative sampler). Monaghan comments that “since calligraphy rather than composition was the focus of writing instruction, Anna's attendance at school can be explained only by the importance that genteel families attached to fine penmanship as one of the attributes of a gentlewoman” (338). This attainment of status is similar to the motives for attending embroidery school—in this way both diaries and samplers serve the same function.

Ruthey Putnam and Polly Phippen's verse are not the only “writing” on their samplers that hold significance. The size of each girl's alphabet box, the type of letters she sewed into them, and the colors she used for her lettering all say something about what parts of her sampler she saw as most important. In the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, most women did not write. Though almost all learned to read,

penmanship was a skill usually preserved for boys.³² Girls began sewing first the alphabet, and then verses into their samplers as a way to learn writing that would not have been improper. The study of each girl's "penmanship" and text box shows a lot about how she viewed the world around her, especially when looked at in conjunction with actual text written by a girl during the same period.

Written text was supposed to be uniform. The "writing" inside of samplers is interesting because it can be manipulated in ways text written on a page cannot. Girls of the Stivours School could use different colors and sizes to emphasize the most important aspects of their works. Ruthey Putnam's alphabet box takes up the majority of her sampler. In it she has cross stitched her alphabet and verse in fairly large letters. The thread that was used to stitch her alphabet alternates colors of brown, white, blue, and yellow. Her inscription and verse are in a very dark shade of brown. Putnam's letters have been very carefully sewn into the linen. Unlike her sky, they are very neat and orderly. The large letters make her inscriptions easy to read and she was careful to use dyes that would not fade easily. Polly Phippen did not take such care with her lettering. Her alphabet box is significantly smaller than Putnam's and her lettering is tiny. The thread she used for her alphabet is almost too faded to read, and the dark brown silk used in her inscription and is not any more legible because her letters are so small.

Putnam has taken the status worth of penmanship to heart. Even though she had to show her penmanship through her stitches, she has painstakingly made her letters almost perfect. Putnam's status in society has already been established with her

³² Monaghan discusses the idea of Colonial and women in great detail in "Literacy Instruction and Gender in Colonial New England."

enrollment in Sara Stivours' school. She is careful to "donn the visible signs" of her "gender and rank" by putting so much effort into stitching such precise letters. In sewing her alphabet and verse so neatly, Putnam indicates that these are the most important aspects of her sampler. The large text box has order that the rest of her sampler does not. Her alphabet is just as colorful, if not more so, than the Eden scene that surrounds it. This is interesting because as Kruger points out, "usually the focus of the design was the lower part of the sampler" (13). The alternating colors of brown, white, green, and blue used for the alphabet call more attention to her lettering though. The white space that is so prevalent around her flowers and Adam and Eve figures is not present within her words. Her verse stands out more than all other stitches on her embroidery. The large, dark brown letters demand attention before any other figure on the linen. The words of Putnam's prayer are calling to God for comfort and the actual stitches and dark color she used to create her prayer emphasize this.

Phippen's lack of care for her lettering further emphasizes that her Adam and Eve figures and the Eden they are living in are the focus of her sampler. The alphabet box for her is a significant element of the sampler that had to be included, but we can gather from it that Phippen found her images more important.³³ She chose to use the more expensive and longer-lasting dyes on the embroideries of her figures, not of her letters. For her, happiness is available in the world around her. She has spent all her effort in creating the colorful world for her Adam and Eve figures. We can speculate that unlike Putnam's, Phippen's America was a place of beauty—a new Eden. This is why Phippen chose to

³³ Certain items are sewn into almost all colonial samplers. Most consisted of the alphabet in basic stitches and a verse surrounded by intricate designs made with more difficult stitches. See Krueger's [A Gallery of American Sampler: The Theodore H. Kapnek Collection](#). New York : E. P. Dutton, 1978. 6-9.

make the most important aspect of her sampler. Her verse, though meaningful, is tiny because she sees the beautiful “painted skie” of Heaven in emerging 1783 America.

The fact that these samplers were made to be displayed must be stressed again when we think about why each girl “wrote” her sampler the way she did and compare their stitches to Winslow’s writing. Winslow’s diary is composed of letters she wrote to her family in Nova Scotia while she lived in Boston at her aunt’s while attending school. Her letters were shared with her entire family. Like Phippen and Putnam’s samplers, Winslow’s diary was written to be displayed. In fact, Richard Bushman explains that writing was a very public activity. As Americans were working to refine the art of gentility, many activities, such as cooking, were pushed to the private parts of the house, but writing was to be displayed. Writing utensils and paper were left on desks in parlors so that home owners could subtly display the fact that they were capable of the status-marking skill. The Stivours girls were essentially doing the same thing. Instead of being left on a desk, the “writing” of their samplers were hung on a wall—a type of display that was the equivalent of framing and hanging a letter.

Literacy scholar Jennifer Monaghan points out that “the best single characterization of the journal is perhaps that it was an open site for family communication. Its most important public function was to provide a place where the family members could draw closer and exchange news” (Monaghan 335). Just because her diary was used as a means of communication does not mean that she left out intimate expressions of herself, though. Monaghan goes on to say “Anna’s entries in her diary shed much light on how a highly literate twelve-year old used and improved her literacy for her own ends. One of the journal’s most striking features is that Anna had remarkable

control of biblical material and put both her writing and her reading to work in the service of her religion” (335). I disagree with Monaghan slightly. Winslow’s ability to repeat the sermons she has heard is very impressive, but there is little to no discussion of her views on what she has repeated. Knowing full well that her writings were going to be shared with her family and visitors of her aunt’s house, Winslow let her pages become a site for what she deemed most important for gentility. Religion is definitely something the genteel class should emphasize, but according to the content of Winslow’s journal, fashion is just as, if not more important. Descriptions of important sermons are broken up by discussions on the importance of fashion.³⁴

In the introduction to the diary, Alice Morse Earle jokes “it is an even chance which ruling thought in the clever little writer, a love of religion or a love of dress, shows most plainly its influence on this diary” (iii-iv). She goes on to posit that “on the whole...youthful vanity, albeit of a very natural and innocent sort, is more pervasive of the pages” (iv). Throughout her journal, Winslow discusses both religion and fashion twelve times. She does not give both equal attention, though. There are almost no discussions of the religious material she includes in her journal. Winslow recounts numerous sermons, but she rarely reflects upon them. On November 18, 1771, Anna gives a lengthy description of the sermon she has just heard by Mr. Beacon. After reciting a rather disturbing section, the entry ends.³⁵ She never mentions it again. The

³⁴ Marla Miller mentions Winslow’s concern with fashion in her work *The Needle’s Eye: Women and Work in the Age of Revolution*. Miller posits that Winslow’s need to fit in with the fashion of the city “marked the advent of dramatic new relationships between people and material goods and the exigencies associated with them, and the centrality of appearance as a means and an end in that effort” (35). For more on importance of clothing in New England the chapter “Clothing and Consumers in Rural New England, 1760-1810” (25).

³⁵ The text of Winslow’s diary reads as follows: “You think me very unpolite no doubt to address you in this manner, but I must go a little further and tell you, how course soever it may sound to your delicacy,

next entry mentions a visit with Mr. Beacon and how much she likes him because of the “much notice” that was taken of her. She is commenting on the attention he gives her (he is apparently flattered that she is able to recite his sermons), but not what he preaches. This is not the case with fashion.

Winslow has much to say about her clothing and that of her friends. On November 30, 1771, Winslow begs her mother for more fashionable clothing: “Dear mamma, you dont know the fation here—I beg to look like other folk. You dont know what a stir would be made in Sudbury street, were I to make my appearance there in my red Dominie & black Hatt” (7-8). All of this goes to show that Earle is not incorrect in her assumption that fashion was more of a concern for Winslow than religion. Winslow is clearly concerned with her faith, but it is not as pressing a matter as the clothing styles of her time. She not only wants, but *needs* to fit in with the fashions of Boston.³⁶ Knowing that her journal was going to be shared, Winslow has placed such emphasis on clothing in order to show her peers that she finds it as important as they. Her detailed descriptions of hats, gloves, and coats are her ways of defining what upper-class citizens of 1771 Boston should be wearing.

As the genteel class grew in America so did their tastes. Houses were getting larger and more elaborate, especially in seaports like Salem.³⁷ With the addition of new

that while you are without hiliness, your beauty is deformity—you are all over black & defil’d, ugly and loathsome to all holy beings, the wrath of th’ great God lie’s upon you, & if you die in this condition, you will be turn’d into hell, with ugly devils, to eternity” (2-3).

³⁶ Bushman examines the importance of clothing, fashionable colors and cuts, and which classes would have worn certain types of clothing during the emergence of the upper-class society in America. See pages 69-74.

³⁷ Bushman discusses the expansion of houses and the addition of parlors in great detail in The Refinement of America. See pages 100-138.

space, new frivolous items were introduced to the home. It seems as though Putnam and Phippen did not completely embrace these changes while Winslow was more accepting of them. The Stivours girls have accepted their place as members of elite society by attending a prestigious school like Stivours' and have gone through the ritual required to keep their places within it by completing their samplers, but they keep an emphasis on what was most important—faith. There was fear within society that refinement had the power to “enfeeble” the republic (Bushman 193). It was seen as almost dangerous in some facets. Unlike Winslow, though, Putnam and Phippen’s displays are not marred with frivolous matters such as a concern for fashion. They have created works that would add to the aesthetic value of these houses, and would be expensive show pieces, but the works celebrate religion. While Putnam and Phippen may have had different emphasis, or centers, in each of their works, religion is the central element in both. The Stivours girls are defining which aspects they may have seen as acceptable. It was productive to create a sampler because they honed their sewing skills while doing so, but it was not productive to sew frivolous scenes into them. There was only so much room for stitches on a piece of linen, so the girls working with it had to choose what was most important to them. Stivours’ students have created items that serve as place markers in the genteel realm, but they use them to emphasize religion. Of course, the actual materials that make up the Stivours samplers are just as important as what has been stitched into them. The thread and dyes used to color them are used to convey the girls’ messages, so we must examine them, too.

Reading the Materials of Stitchery

Glee Krueger explains that “more often New England samplers were made of home-grown, home-manufactured linen, not surprising when one recalls that both Massachusetts and Connecticut colonies in the 1640’s required that every family plant and raise flax or hemp” (5). By the time Putnam and Phippen created their samplers, this would have been commonplace practice. Also, trade to and from England had almost come to a standstill when they were students at Stivours’ school. Using American-made products could have been a way the girls could show pride for their emerging country.³⁸

If nothing was known about the samplers from the Stivours School, they could still be linked to Salem. Silk thread was usually used in samplers made by girls from affluent families. This silk thread became more accessible after the Revolutionary War because America began to trade directly with China and Japan. Salem played a big part in the trade industry. The seaport quickly became very successful with vessels shipping out and coming in from Asia all the time.³⁹ The crinkled silk used in the Stivours school samplers is found mostly in needle work from the Salem area. Kreuger posits that the silks used “either floss or twist, appear individually or together and are by far the most frequently found threads. They were often unraveled, imparting an additional sheen and variation” (6). Fancy silk from Asia wasn’t cheap. Imported fabrics and thread became

³⁸Gunderson discusses how many affluent women who had been importing their linen before the war returned to making it themselves when the Stamp Act boycotts cut off imports to England. Most continued to do this even when trade was restored as a sign of their patriotism. Gunderson, Joan. “Mistress and Servant.” *To Be Useful to the World: Women in Revolutionary America, 1740-1790*. Revised Ed. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006. 58-76. Similarly, T.H. Breen outlines the importance of non-importation within the colonies during the Revolution. See *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

³⁹ Morrison, Dane A. “Salem as Citizen of the World.” *Salem: Place, Myth, and Memory*. Ed. Dane A. Morrison and Nancy Lusignan Schultz. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004. 107-127.

further indicators of social status. Also, the thread is imported from China and Japan, *not* England. They may not be American products like the linen they are sewn onto, but purchasing thread from Chinese merchants puts no money into the pockets of the Englishmen.

The shine of the unraveled thread gives Putnam and Phippen's samplers an added glow that girls of poorer families would not have been able to add to their embroideries. It also helps to emphasize what each girl felt about her America. The glow of Ruthey Putnam's sampler gives it an almost eerie feeling when placed next to Polly Phippen's. The colorful silk floss lights up her sampler, but it also makes the bareness of the landscape stand out even more; the bare patches of linen look desolate next to the shiny bursts of colors. The sheen of her sky is beautiful, but it draws attention to the fact that her diagonals have no direction. The shine of Phippen's thread is just as bright and beautiful as Putnam's, but, as was discussed earlier, her Eden is bursting with life. There is so little white space that the left over linen just fades into the background. The shine of the crinkled floss only adds to the jubilation of her scene. Phippen has used the imported floss to emphasize the new found order and joy that was going through America in 1783.

The colors of the silk that each girl uses are important to emphasize what they felt about their America too. Almost all thread used in the eighteenth century was dyed at home. Women were constantly looking for new sources of color.⁴⁰ Sebba explains that popular dyes made at home were "made from onions for yellows, black walnut bark for

⁴⁰ Jack Kramer's Natural Dyes Plants & Processes, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972. Kramer lists many different items that can be used to dye threads and cloth. He explains in detail what each plant or insect looks like (there are many pictures to help identify plants that can be found locally) and gives recipes for the reader to try at home. Rita Androsko also has a very informative book that lists dyestuff used in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by color and importance. Natural Dyes and Home Dyeing. New York, Dover Publications, Inc., 1971.

browns and elderberries for a lavender color” (88). Many of these colors are used in Phippen’s and Putnam’s samplers. Ruthey Putnam uses white and brown for the majority of her sky. Her Adam and Eve figures, the apple tree growing between them, and many of the flowers growing along the sides of the sampler are all made of yellow and brown threads. Phippen has yellow flowers, birds, and apples. She has used brown in her grass, for the trunk of her apple tree, and to stitch her alphabet, inscription, and verse. Silk thread that is dyed with American flowers and berries serve the same purpose as the American-made linen it is sewn into. The “home-found” colors help keep money in American society and away from the British. The colors are just another small way Phippen and Putnam are able to create strictly American samplers that speak of their society.

Usually, the more colorful the dye the more expensive it was because it (like the silk thread) had to be imported. The girls both use blue thread to represent the sky and also in some of their flowers. Most blue thread would have been colored from indigo. Indigo was very costly, but many well-to-do families would have had an indigo tub in the kitchen.⁴¹ Green thread would usually have been a mix of yellow dye made at home and indigo, so it too would have been costly.⁴² Cochineal, made from the dried bodies of the

⁴¹ Indigo dying was a fairly difficult, time consuming, and unpleasant task. Ulrich explains in detail how cakes of indigo would be steeped in stale urine and fermented for about two weeks. A covered pot would be used to try and control the smell which was hard because “indigo smelled like putrefying flesh or feces even before it was added to urine” (222). The mixture was ready when it turned yellow or tan and “in a process that must have seemed magical, yarn immersed in the pot became blue when exposed to the air” (223). Ulrich, Laura Thatcher. *The Age of Homespun*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001. 222-223.

⁴² Androsko explains that green dye could also be obtained from a plant called Dyer’s Broom (also known as dyer’s weed, greenweed, woodwax, and woodwaxen) When mixed with indigo, the dye created from Dyer’s Broom, turns a dark green color, much like the one found on Putnam and Phippen’s samplers. The plant was not native to America, but was probably cultivated locally and would have been readily available by the late eighteenth century (35).

insect *Dactylopius coccus*, probably would have been used to dye the silk red, which was also very expensive.⁴³ In fact, Krueger points out that “A pound of cochineal required seventy thousand dried female scale insects” (7). These expensive threads are used alongside the inexpensive ones in both Phippen and Putnam’s samplers.

To understand what the colors mean in Putnam and Phippen’s samplers, the way each girl chooses to use the home-found colors must be compared to the way she uses the more expensive imported dyes. Most of the colors throughout Ruthey Putnam’s sampler come from dyes that did not have to be imported. She has four flowers, and a few diagonals of her sky made from the expensive indigo dye. Green is used for her grass, the leaves and stems of her flowers, and three lines of saw-tooth patterning. The rest of her embroidery is done in modest yellows, browns, and whites. Putnam has used no red thread in her sampler at all. Polly Phippen uses the more expensive colors freely throughout her work. She uses the indigo-dyed thread for her sky and flowers as well as for many of the birds flying around the sampler. Red thread stands out in the sky, on four of her flowers, the apple tree, and for many of her cherries. Phippen also uses more green than Putnam; she has four rows of the saw tooth pattern, green in almost all of her flowers’ leaves and stems. There is also a green bird sitting on the arbor at the top of the alphabet box.

Why would Phippen have used more of the bright, expensive colors in her sampler? Could it be that Putnam’s family could not afford the imported dyes? Most evidence says this was not the case. In her brief description of Phippen’s life, Mary Jaene Edmonds notes that the year before she completed her sampler, her father, Joshua

⁴³ See Kramer pgs 75-76.

Phippen, “became a successful merchant [and] built a three-story mansion ... He was considered a kind, generous man who ‘daily had seated at his table between twenty and twenty-five persons’” (31). Phippen’s “generous” wealthy father would have been the one funding her schooling. He also would have been the person to buy her the expensive threads she uses so freely throughout her sampler. This does not mean that her family is any wealthier than Putnam’s though. Ostensibly, there is no information on Ruthey Putnam’s life but, because she was a pupil at Sara Stivours’ school, it can be assumed that her family had money. Also, though she has not used as much of the blue and green colored thread as Phippen, she has used enough of it to prove that her family could afford to buy it for her if she had wanted it. Clearly, there is another reason why Putnam’s sampler is not as colorful as her classmate’s.

A fairly simple reason for why Putnam would have chosen to leave out the bright colors for the same reason she has chaotic diagonal lines for her sky and she has left a lot of white space on her sampler. The blue, green, and red thread adds a note of happiness to Phippen’s sampler. Putnam’s does not have this brightness. Her sampler does not depict a sad scene, but it does not depict an overly happy one either. The lack of color only emphasizes the feelings she has over the unknown fate of America she has sewn into her sampler. Phippen on the other hand, uses the imported thread to emphasize the brightness and order of her Eden. She has directed all of her energy into these colorful images so that they truly represent the feelings of hope and joy were so prevalent in 1783 America.

The Final Stitch

When looking at Ruthey Putnam and Polly Phippen's samplers side by side and thinking about them in context with the changing world they lived in, fascinating comparisons can be made between the two. While both girls have used the same basic pattern for their needle works, and the distinctive Stivour stitch to create their skies, there are subtle differences that tell a story about the particular time each girl's work was finished. Though her sampler is every bit as beautiful as Phippen's, Putnam's chaotic sky along with the verse she picked to sew into it show the uncertainty she was facing at the time. Just five years later, Phippen "writes" about not having bliss in this life, but she has created an Eden-like world for her Adam and Eve figures to live in. Phippen seems to ask for earthly deliverance, whereas Putnam seems less concerned with her everyday existences and looks forward to deliverance in heaven. The diagonal stitches that create her sky are carefully positioned to draw the viewers' gaze in specific directions. She shows through her sampler that compared to Ruthey Putnam's world, girls in 1783 Salem, Mass. had a stronger feeling of order and stability in their lives. The chaos and uncertainty of Salem five years earlier left Ruthey Putnam calling to God through her sampler. In fact, God and only God is the focus of her work.

Through their patterns taken from the Sara Stivours Embroidery School, Ruthey Putnam and Polly Phippen have created wholly American samplers. Adam and Eve scenes that were popular in England have been taken and modernized. Putnam and Phippen used what few resources they had as young girls in colonial America to express what they felt about the changing world around them.

Different eyes see the stitches of each girl's sky pointing in different ways. What is important, though, is that embroideries made by girls in colonial America not be ignored or put off. They are not simply pieces of art—they are works of basic literacy and incipient self-expression. The girls that made them were not just following the directions of their teachers. The samplers from the Sara Stivours Embroidery School are all beautiful, and they are indeed pieces of art, but they are much more than decorated pieces of linen used to fill girls' time. Each one hints at a story specific to the girl who created it.

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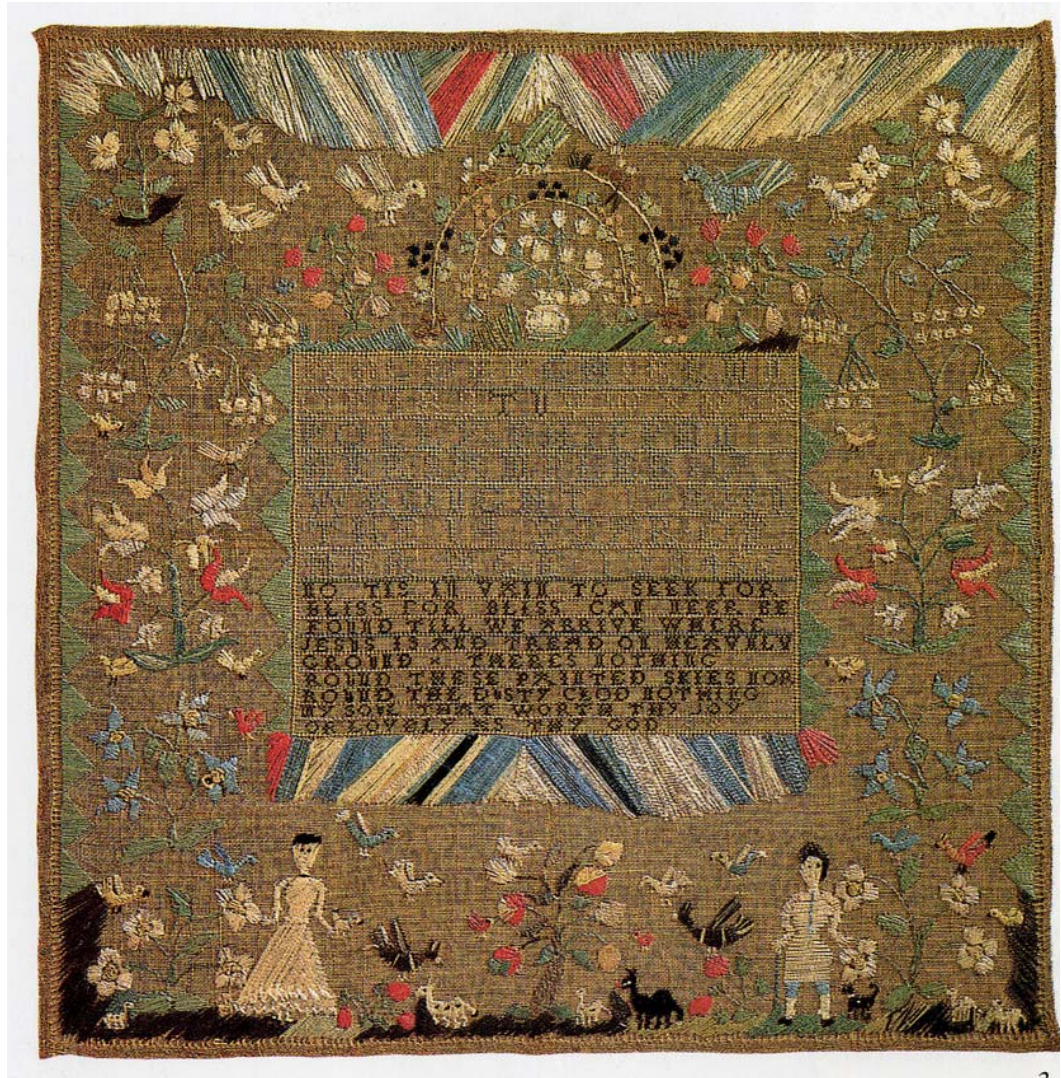
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Appendix 1:



Polly Phippen (1783)
Salem, Massachusetts
Silk and Linen; 21 x 21 in.

Appendix 2:



Ruthey Putnam (1778)
Salem, Massachusetts
Silk and Linen; 17 ¼ x 14 ¾ in.

Appendix 3:



Elizabeth Derby (1774)
Salem, Massachusetts
Silk and Linen; 15 ½ x 10 ¾ in.

Appendix 4:



Elizabeth Derby's alphabet and strawberry line



Close up of Elizabeth Derby's "letter pyramid."

Appendix 5:



Mary Richardson (1783)
Silk and Linen; 24 ¼ x 23 ½ in.
Salem, Massachusetts

Appendix 6:



Top of Mary Richardson's sampler.



Mary Richardson's text box. Verse: Mary Richardson Is My Name and With My Needle I Did The Same And If My Skill Had Been Better I Would Have Mended Every Letter This Needle Work Of Mine Can Tell When A Child Is Learned Well By My Parents I Was Tought Not To Spend My Time For Nought.



Bottom of Mary Richardson's sampler.

Appendix 7:



Top of Ruthey Putnam's sampler.

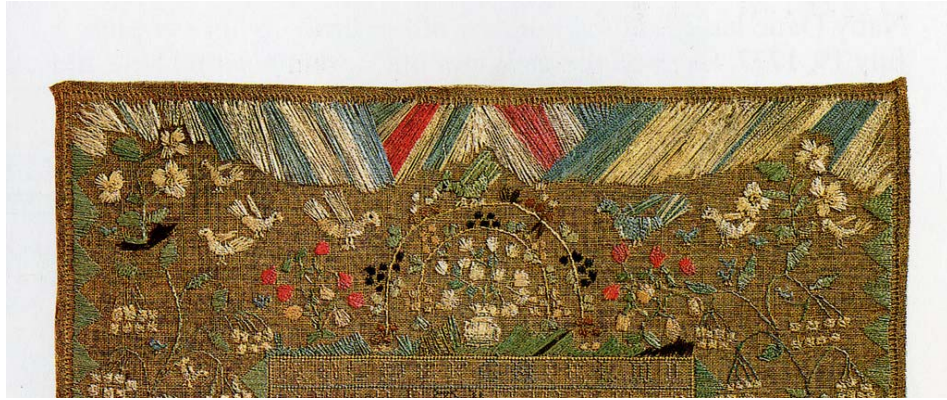


Ruthey Putnam's text box. Verse: Ruthey Putnam her/ sampler wrought Nov/ember the 27 1778 in/ the 10 year of her age/ Lord I address thy heavenly throne call/ me a child of thine. Send down the spi/rit of they god to form my heart divine/ In they fair book of life di/vine my god inscribe my n/ame and let it fill some/ humble place/ beneath the slaughtered lamb.

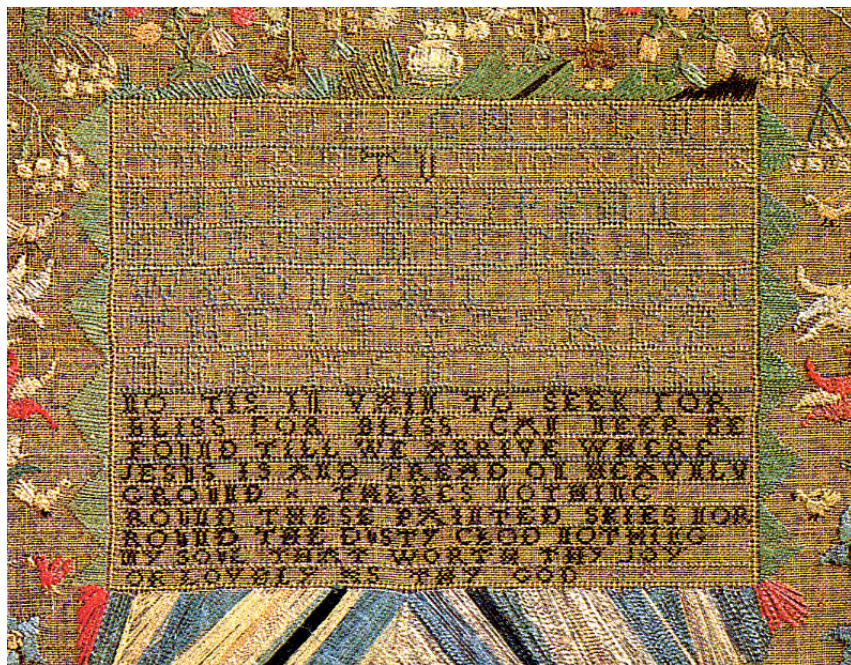


Ruthey Putnam's Adam and Eve figures.

Appendix 8:



Top of Polly Phippen's sampler.



Polly Phippen's text box.



Polly Phippen's Adam and Eve figures.