

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Sampling, A Lost Art

We recently received through inheritance an old sampler and the marriage certificate of the maker, Anni Cheetiam Duckworth, dated Sept. 18, 1850.

She was married to William Booth of the City of Newark, N.J. The certificate is truly a work of art, 6 x 9 inches, with an engraved border of flowers of all varieties and many butterflies. A tiny steel Engraving at the top shows a bridal couple and attendants with the clergyman in the foreground. The sampler was wrapped around the certificate. The sampler is dated June 28, 1839.

A motto cross-stitched in navy blue thread at the bottom of the linen, which appears to be handwoven, reads thusly: "Our needful knowledge like our needful food, unhedged, lies open in life's' common field; and bids all welcome to the vital feast."

Receiving this small piece of handiwork which for the present generation appears to be a lost art, sent us searching for the history and reason for samplers. We found this brief story written by Ralph Richmond, in which he says: "The other day a little girl we know asked her mother: 'Mommy, what's a sampler?' 'Well,' said her mother, thinking fast, 'a sampler is a . . . piece of sewing with the alphabet and a motto and design and things worked in it.'"

Webster defines a sampler, derived from a Latin root meaning "example," as "a piece of needlework, originally one made to preserve a pattern or patterns; later, one made as a sample of skill, especially one showing embroidered letters or verses." It should be added: . . . "usually on a background of linen or canvas."

So far so good, though it's doubtful if those 28 grudging words of Mr. Webster's will really square him with the ghosts of all those eye-and finger-weary little girls - not nameless but for the most part unknown - who sewed so much of their youth and heart's blood into this charming feminine folk art.

In England and in France, Germany and Italy, and European countries, samplers were "worked by ladies" as early as Chaucer's time - the 14th Century. Shakespeare has two of his young heroines working ". . . working with one needle . . . both on one sampler,

sitting on one cushion." And again, ". . . in a tedious sampler she sew'd her mind."

Tedious indeed was the labor that has given us these quaintly eloquent mementos of a time long past. As for the early importance of the sampler, some authorities even state that both the needle and the thimble were invented expressly for sampler work. That was in the 16th Century.

The earliest American sampler to come down to us was the handiwork of a pilgrim maid, Loara Standish, who was the daughter of the gallant Miles Standish immortalized in Longfellow's poem.

Although many fine examples of samplers are dated earlier, it is about the year 1790, onward to 1840, that we look for the best American ones.