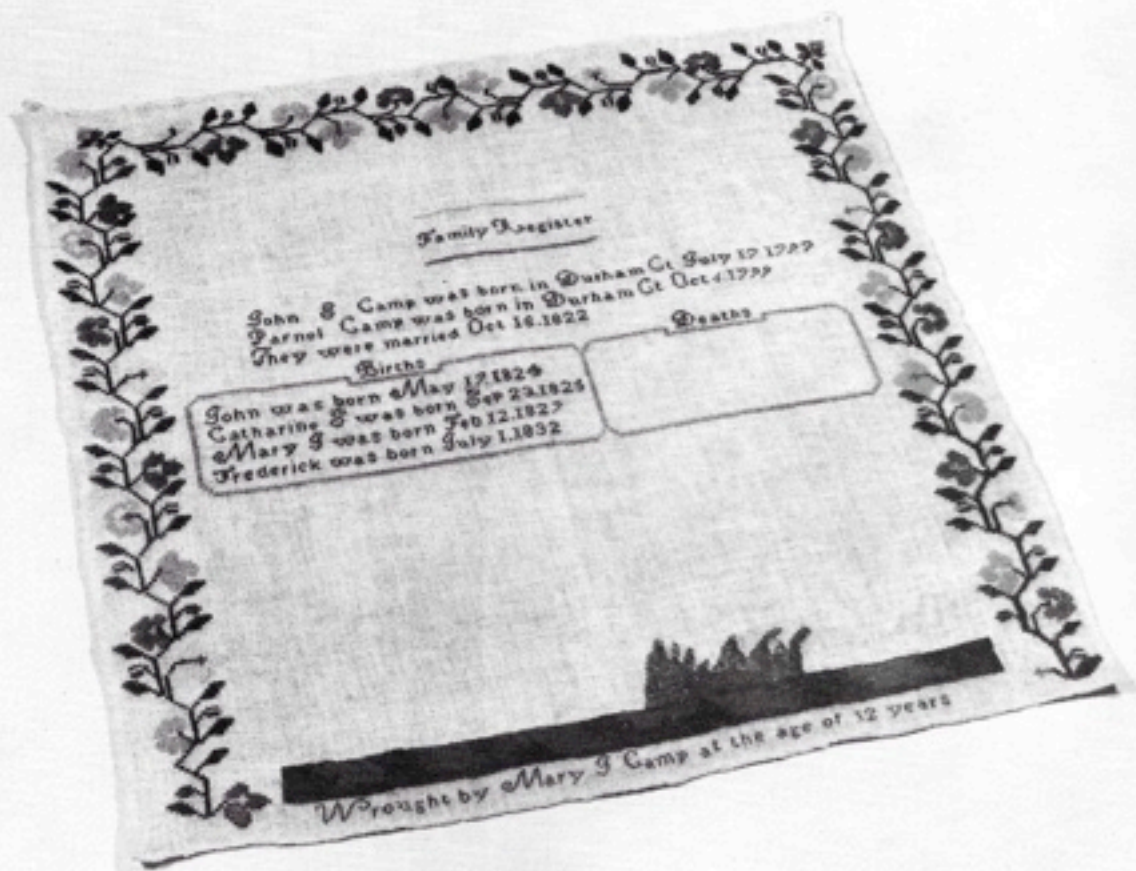


The Young Miss and Her Needle

BY GLEE KRAEGER



For the young woman privately schooled in America during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the attainment of needlework skills was a basic requirement and virtually a universal necessity. The primary knitting, hemming, marking and other sewing skills often began at a dame school, a local school not too dissimilar from our present kindergartens. At home these methods could be introduced by a maiden aunt or possibly an experienced mother or grandmother. They could be reinforced or augmented by further private schooling at one of the local or distant boarding and day schools, seminaries, or academies.

In Connecticut, a state known for its various handsome bed-rugs and exquisitely worked and distinctively designed crewel embroidery, private

school teachers did not neglect the many steps preliminary to the working of these significant large adult-embroidered textiles. "Plain Work, Tambour, Embroidery, Cotton and Dresden work," and "working of Pocket Books and Samplers, Embroidery on Canvas and Muslin" are listed among the advertisements of Lydia Bull Royce, revered Hartford teacher and Elizabeth Hern of New London.

Designs for these embroideries and others came from many sources. Teachers, professional painters and embroiderers, pupils themselves, framers, engravers, reissues of old pattern books, books with etchings or engravings, and tradesman's instruction manuals were all sources of design. Imported patterns were copied when available in both the

eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and were in use for long periods of time.

In *The New Hampshire Gazette* of Friday, February 9, 1759, John Nelson of Portsmouth noted that he had just imported stock from London including "... cruels . . . needlework and silk patterns . . ."

Importing needlework patterns was still practiced in sophisticated Boston in 1810 where a local teacher, Mrs. Davis, stated in the *Columbian Centinel* that she had received from England, "Patterns of the most fashionable and elegant Needle Work of all kinds."

But many teachers and pupils relied not on the latest design from England, but on their own resources. Such a teacher was Mrs. Mary Mansfield of New Haven who advertised

in *The Connecticut Journal* of April 18, 1793:

She teaches . . . plain sewing, knitting, embroidery, lace making, drawing, &c. And if any Ladies should think it too much trouble to draw their own patterns, if they will take the trouble to call on her, she will endeavour to suit them. She draws patterns of any kind, either for muslin, upon sattin, screens, pocket books, spreads, &c.

Still other schools and teachers and their pupils depended on painting or graphics to supplement their imaginations, and many schools used the same designs and pictorial matter with fascinating variations. Mount Vernon proved one design motif to have lasting popularity, pursued by painter, etcher, and embroideress alike.

In Hartford, Emily Barker Noyes was a pupil at the school of Ruth Patten in 1812 where she worked a silk-embroidered version of a view of Mount Vernon derived from an aquatint of Francis Jukes. He based his aquatint on a painting by Scottish-born miniaturist, landscape painter and teacher, Alexander Robertson who taught in New York after 1792 with his older brother Archibald. The same painting and the Jukes aquatint were used by Caroline Stebbins as her inspiration while she was a student at the Deerfield Academy in 1804.

In contrast, Catherine Schrack, a tavernkeeper's daughter of Philadelphia, copied the line engraving of Samuel Seymour to achieve her dramatic, large pictorial sampler of Mount Vernon worked in 1815. Seymour's version had been copied from the etching of William Russell Birch. And there are other versions for researchers to discover, and still other versions already known.

Many schools attracted pupils from far and near to their doors to

pursue the accomplishments of needlework, painting and drawing. Connecticut children from prominent families of Wethersfield, Middletown, New Haven, New London, Norwich, Litchfield, Greenwich, and Fairfield were sent to school at the Moravian Seminary for Young Ladies at Bethlehem, Pennsylvania from 1789 on, though Hartford and Litchfield attracted many students from out of state and abroad. Fairfield County had its share of schools and embroiderers. Miss Maria Allen of Fairfield was the superintendent of the Fairfield Female Seminary in 1825. Though many pupils were local (as evidenced by the surnames on the samplers in the Fairfield Historical Society Collections), her school encouraged students from neighbouring towns.

An example of this is the choice of Elizabeth Lockwood (1813-1880), daughter of prominent Norwalk merchant, Colonel Buckingham Lockwood, not to attend a local private school, but to go to Miss Allen in Fairfield. Elizabeth was a pupil there

between December 1825 and the spring of 1827. Letters in the collection of the Lockwood House Museum reveal her homesickness though she was a scant number of miles from home. Other letters indicate that she was being introduced to some needlework skills, such as the making of a veil. On December 15, 1825, Col. Lockwood mailed a letter to his daughter at school commenting, *You say Miss Allen will charge an extra price if you work a veil. You can write what it will be. I can get the material here in town.*

Today, when one can make selections from a vast number of stores and designers of textiles, it is refreshing to look to our embroidered past to catch a glimpse of even the most utilitarian articles having some stamp of individuality and charm created by its owner with her ability, needle and thread. That specific schools as well as families were responsible for these appealing additions is evidenced by the many handsome examples remaining, and the numerous local pieces in this present exhibit.

