



Chicago Historical Society



WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN?

Grade level: Late elementary and middle school

Estimated time: Four class periods

Specific topic: Samplers and their meanings

Subtopic: Domestic arts and women's education

Teacher background information

In the United States, samplers experienced their greatest popularity from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. Examining samplers reveals a lot about the creator and the society in which she lived. Samplers are also a great reflection of changes and ideas in American society.

The first samplers were long, narrow pieces of material used to practice stitching and embroidery. True to their purpose, they included “sample” rows of intricate needlework and various designs, which could be used for reference.

Over time, samplers became wider and shorter (resembling a picture), and began to have a new purpose. As Puritans arrived on the North American shores in the seventeenth century, they brought their ideas about education and their strict religious principles with them. As a result, people began to focus on educating their children, with a desire for them to read the Bible. This had a direct effect upon samplers. Needlework became less complex as repetition was thought to be the best way to learn and the alphabet was added as a way of reinforcing letter recognition. Additionally, in accordance with their religious values, many samplers began to include biblical verses, which expressed sentiment of high spiritual and moral purpose.

By the eighteenth century, samplers became a record of achievement in their own right. Girls took great pride in their samplers, and families even displayed them in their homes. Many samplers had begun to resemble pictures, depicting landscapes or displaying symmetrical motifs. As more girls sought formal education in the nineteenth century, samplers were used in classrooms to teach geography, math, and other subjects.

A close inspection of samplers reveals that the girl who made the sampler was not only practicing needlework, but she was also sending a message. Samplers were a way for a woman to make her voice heard. The colors represented feelings. The scenes represented places that meant something to her, while the animals and objects all had a meaning related to the theme of the sampler. (A lion, for example, represented strength and courage.)

Though samplers were used for practice, research reveals that most of them were created for one of several other reasons, including keeping track of information, commemorating a special or historical event, reflecting a message of morality, mourning a loved one, or decorating one's home.

When studying samplers, is important to keep this multi-faceted use in mind. Remember that samplers not only gave their creators a great sense of pride and accomplishment but also provide us with a real sense of history.



Key concepts

From the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries, girls created samplers for many different reasons. A careful study of samplers can reveal a lot about the creator and provide insight into her society.

Key questions

Who created samplers? Why were they created? Are all samplers the same? Do samplers have any meaning? What themes or images were embroidered on samplers? Why? What valuable information can we learn about American history from a sampler?

Goal of this lesson

This lesson will teach students to examine a sampler and evaluate the hidden meanings behind its symbols and sayings, leading students to an understanding about the sampler itself and what it reveals about its creator.

Objectives

1. Students will examine various samplers, using analysis and discussion to determine possible meanings and draw conclusions about any possible historical significance.
2. Students will create their own samplers, as primary sources about their lives, and present them to other members of the class.
3. Students will write a journal entry as a girl from the past, who is reflecting upon samplers and their importance in her life.

Materials

Master copies of all sampler images and student handouts are provided.

1. "Sampler Facts Review" worksheet (one overhead)
2. Samplers (one copy and one overhead of each)
 - A. Rhoda Norton Sampler, 1779
 - B. Mary Bartlett Sampler, 1810
 - C. Mary Newhall Sampler, 1812
 - D. Harriet Rich Sampler, 1822
 - E. Hannah Neill Sampler, date unknown
3. "Sampler Interpretation" worksheet (five copies, one for each student group)
4. "Sampler Motifs" handout (three pages, one overhead and one per student)

5. "Sampler Transcriptions and Background Information" (for teacher use)
6. "Sampler Creation Guidelines" (one master and one per student)
7. Pens or pencils
8. Basic art supplies (white drawing paper, markers, colored pencils, crayons, and rulers)
9. Overhead projector and markers (for teacher use)

Procedures

Educator note: Before beginning this lesson, students should know some basic information about samplers, such as who created them, how they were created, and their basic function. The Teacher Background Information from both this lesson and the lesson, titled, "A Sample of What?" provide introductory information to share with your students.

Day 1

Before beginning the lesson, set up the overhead projector.

1. As an introduction, complete the "Sampler Facts Review" worksheet as a class using the overhead projector. Display only one clue at a time. After a student gives the correct answer, write it on the sheet for the entire class to see. Continue from clue to clue until the entire worksheet is complete. Answer key: 1. wealthy 2. England 3. pride 4. pattern books 5. Bible 6. school 7. Latin 8. geography 9. by hand
2. Ask your class to brainstorm: Why did girls create samplers? As students respond, write their answers on the board. View the entire list and eliminate responses that do not apply. Rewrite the list to include only the correct answers and explain in detail the specific reasons girls created samplers. Leave the list on the board for student reference.
3. Divide students into five groups. Give each group one sampler and a copy of the "Sampler Interpretation" worksheet. Ask each group to study their sampler. Do they notice any differences between these samplers and the sampler used in "A Sample of What?" (if you completed that lesson)? (They should notice that these all have some sort of quote

or poem on them.) Explain that they will work together to determine the meaning of the sampler by completing part A of the worksheet. Give each group sufficient time to work on the sheet. Circulate and answer questions, but do not assist with interpretation.

4. When sufficient time has passed, direct the students' attention to the overhead projector. Explain that not only do the words on the samplers have meaning; the pictures and symbols do also. Place one of the "Sampler Motifs" handouts (three pages) on the overhead projector. Point out a few of the pictures and meanings. Explain that, using this new information, now they will reexamine the same sampler and complete part B of the worksheet. Distribute the "Sampler Motifs" handouts. Let students know that they will have to present their findings to the rest of the class the next day. At the conclusion of class, collect all the papers from each group and hold them for the next day.

Day 2

1. Redistribute the samplers and interpretation worksheets. Allow each group a few minutes to finalize their presentations while you prepare the overhead projector.
2. Begin the presentations. Place the appropriate sampler on the overhead projector for all to view. During presentations, guide the students in comparing and contrasting how their interpretations changed, if they did. If you need to correct interpretations or if there are more questions, use the "Sampler Transcriptions and Background Information" as a resource. Encourage students to draw conclusions about society or its views of women at that time. After each presentation, allow other members of the class to ask questions or add observations.
3. Debrief the experience by asking the following questions: What specific kinds of information do samplers give us? Are all samplers the same? What things do the samplers have in common? What would help us better understand samplers?
4. Explain to students that they will create their own samplers and share them with their classmates. Remind students that their "samplers" will be

primary sources that may one day help someone in the future understand their lives. Distribute copies of the "Sampler Creation Guidelines" and "Sampler Motifs" handouts to each student. Review the directions at the top of the "Sampler Creation Guidelines" and answer any questions. Ask students to design their samplers on the bottom half of the handout and look to the "Sampler Motifs" for inspiration. Emphasize that before they begin work on a full-size version of their sampler, students will need to show you their preliminary designs for approval. Students may continue their preliminary design work as homework or you may collect all sheets and provide additional classroom time to complete design plans the next day.

Day 3

Devote the entire class period to sampler creation. Review the assignment requirements with your students, and, if necessary, allow time to complete preliminary planning. Approve all student plans with your signature. Distribute drawing paper and the other art supplies. Students who have not finished their samplers should complete the assignment as homework. Remind students that they will share their samplers during the next class.

Day 4

1. Allow students to choose a partner. Have them exchange samplers and attempt to decipher the meaning of the other's work. Partners should share their guesses and the true meanings of the samplers with each other. After a few minutes, ask students to rotate partners and repeat the exercise. Complete the exercise two or three times.
2. When this activity is complete, come back together as a class. Hold a discussion. Ask students how they felt about the activity. Inquire about the difficulty (i.e. Was it easier to interpret a classmate's sampler than the historic ones?). Discuss what the challenges someone in the future, who finds the samplers, might have interpreting them. What conclusions might a person of the future make about our society based on students' work? Compare this possibility to the exercise of interpreting samplers from the past.

3. Discuss the idea that the creators of historic samplers each conveyed a particular message to their viewer. The creators included objects and words to communicate information that they wanted others to believe or know about them; their design choices were deliberate and purposeful. Explain that the images embroidered in the sampler may or may not have been true. Discuss how this might affect our interpretation of history.
4. Assign a journal writing activity as homework. Ask students to take on the role of a preteen girl who lived in the eighteenth or nineteenth century and write a journal entry. In this journal entry, the girl will reveal a little about her identity as well as her likes and dislikes of samplers. What is her real opinion of this embroidery? Is it useful? Does she enjoy it? Is she proud of her work? Does she find it easy to sew or is it a difficult skill to master? Encourage students to be creative and imagine what these girls really thought about and wanted to do in life. Remind them to keep the journal entry realistic for the time period and to avoid modern references. Journal entries should be neatly written and at least one page in length.

Suggestions for student assessment

The completed samplers and the journal entry should be used for assessment, as well as participation in class discussions, group work, and oral presentations. Develop rubrics for each activity you choose to assess and share the requirements with your students in advance.

Extension activities

1. Post the completed samplers on a bulletin board. Conceal the creators' names and give each sampler a number. Instruct students to write the same numbers on blank paper and view the sampler display. Next to each number, ask them to make an educated guess about who created the sampler. Award a small prize to the student who gets the most correct matches.
2. Ask each student to write two or three brief lines explaining his or her sampler. Collect the samplers, mix them up, and place them on different desks around the room. Shuffle the descriptions and have students pick one at random. Each student should attempt to find the sampler that matches the description they selected.

3. Have students write a letter to the girl who created the historic sampler they examined. In the letter, students should ask questions about the girl and the design of her sampler. They should also explain the conclusions they came to after examining the sampler and give an opinion about the sampler. Require students to use the proper format for a friendly letter.

Additional resources

Baumgarten, Linda. *What Clothes Reveal: the Language of Clothing in Colonial and Federal America*. Williamsburg, Virginia: The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 2002.

Button, H. Warren, and Eugene F. Provenzo Jr. *History of Education and Culture in America*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1989.

Web resource

Sampler Motifs: The Meaning Behind the Symbols, www.needleworksamplers.com/Simply_Samplers/sampler_motifs.shtml

This lesson fulfills the following Illinois Learning Standards:

English Language Arts

Goal 4: Listen and speak effectively in a variety of situations.

Social Science

Goal 16: Understand events, trends, individuals, and movements shaping the history of Illinois, the United States, and other nations.

Goal 18: Understand social systems with an emphasis on the United States.

Fine Arts

Goal 26: Through creating and performing, understand how works of art are produced.

Goal 27: Understand the role of the arts in civilizations, past and present.

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SAMPLER FACTS REVIEW

Read the clue to figure out the answer. Each letter in the answer is marked by one blank space.

Clue #1

The message was clear which embroidery sent. They were better than the common gent.

The _ _ _ _ _

Clue #2

Not France or Spain, but from here to America is where most samplers came.

_ _ _ _ _

Clue #3

When the job was complete, they felt a lot of this, having worked on a sampler stitch by stitch.

_ _ _ _ _

Clue #4

Samplers served as these, when it all began, because prior to Gutenberg, designs were shared hand to hand.

_ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _

Clue #5

Girls made up quotes and often used this, to give their samplers a sense of seriousness.

The _ _ _ _ _

Clue #6

This was the place where samplers were used, for domestic arts and as an educational tool.

_ _ _ _ _

Clue #7

Originally *exemplum*, a model or example, can you tell me the language the word sampler comes from?

_ _ _ _ _

Clue #8

Name a subject where samplers were used to help girls learn more and excel in school.

_ _ _ _ _

Clue #9

Though cloth and needles were tools of the trade, this is how samplers were usually made.

_ _ _ _ _



Sampler by Rhoda Norton, 1779. Chicago Historical Society.



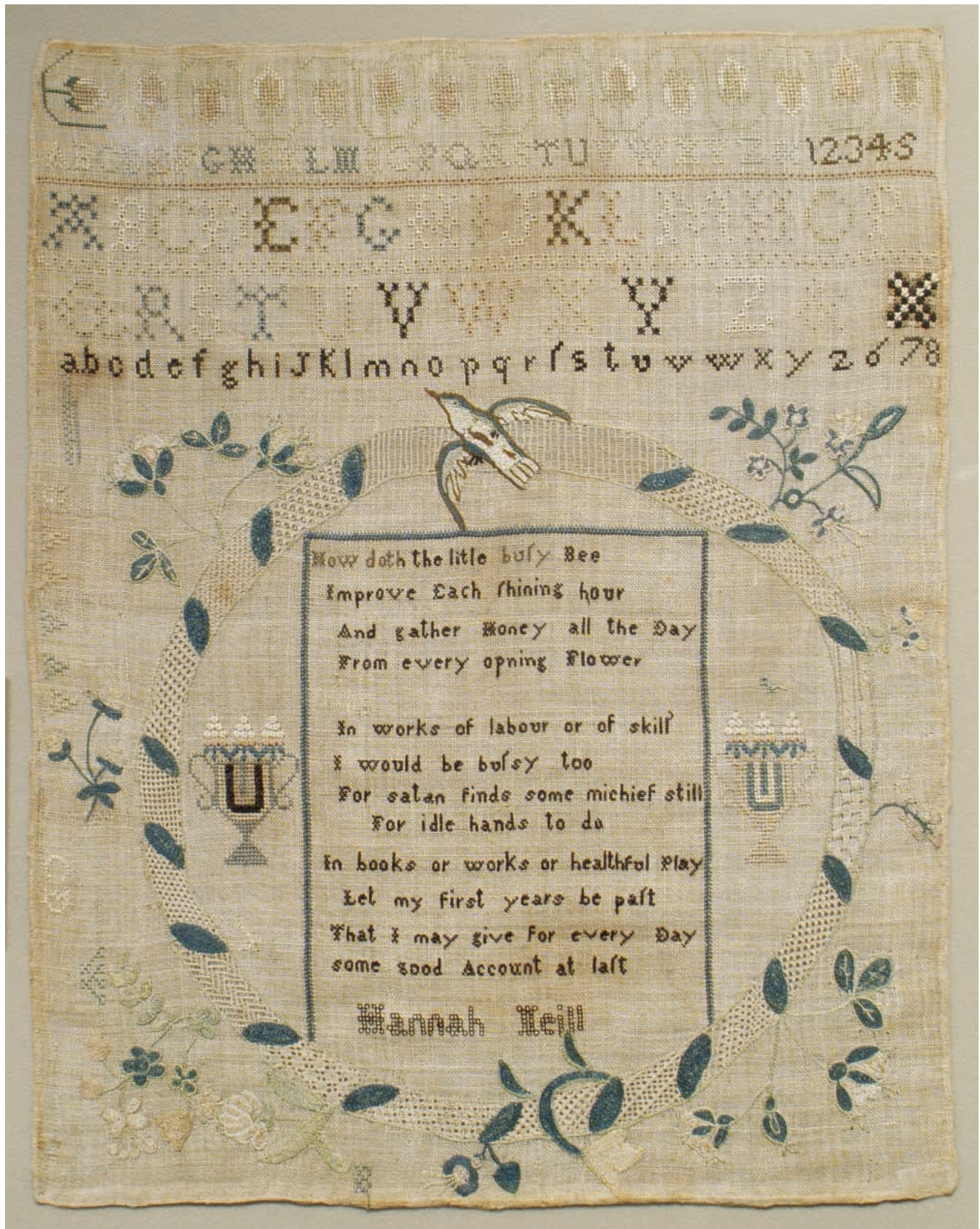
Sampler by Mary Bartlett, age 11, 1810. Chicago Historical Society.



Sampler by Mary Newhall, age 14, 1812. Chicago Historical Society.



Sampler by Harriet Rich, age 11, 1822. Chicago Historical Society.



Sampler by Hannah Neill. Chicago Historical Society.

SAMPLER INTERPRETATION

Complete only part A. When you are finished with part A, stop and wait for more directions from your teacher.

Part A

Carefully study the sampler you have been given and answer the following questions.

1. Who made the sampler? _____
2. In what year was it made? _____
3. Identify two objects used on this sampler. In your opinion, what is their meaning?
Object: _____ Meaning: _____
Object: _____ Meaning: _____
4. Read the quote or saying on the sampler. Discuss what it means and rewrite it in your own words (use the back of the paper, if necessary). You may use a dictionary, thesaurus, or any other resource to help you.

5. Review the information you have gathered. Analyze the design and the quote. In your own words, summarize the message the creator was trying to convey. Why do you think this sampler was made?

Part B

You have just received valuable information to help you better understand this sampler. Take time to study the sampler again and answer the following questions.

1. Now that you have reviewed the “Sampler Motifs and Meanings” handout, do you need to change any of your responses in part A?
Circle one: Yes No (If yes, make the necessary corrections.)
2. What new information do you know about your sampler?

3. How has your opinion about the message of the sampler changed? How can you add to it?

4. Use the space below to write a summary of what your group has learned about this sampler. Remember to highlight the key points and prepare to present your observations to the class.







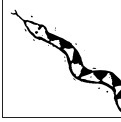

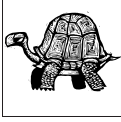

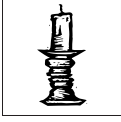

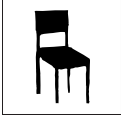
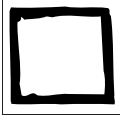






SEW WHAT! | WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN?

SAMPLER MOTIFS AND MEANINGS (page 1)

Motif	Meaning	Motif	Meaning
	Bell Music or joyous occasion		Ship Hope and marriage
	Bows/ Ribbon A secret love		Table and Chairs The Jewish Sabbath
	Cat Idleness, love of ease, freedom		Carnation True, passionate love
	Dog Fidelity, watchfulness, also envy or wrath		Daisy Humility
	Church God on earth		Lily Purity and innocence
	Horse High spiritedness, pride, speed		Rose Love, beauty, joy
	Lamb Charity		Tulip Perfect love (Dutch)
	Lion Strength, courage		Acorns Fertility and life
	Rabbit Gentleness		Apple Love and fertility. Seven apples represent the seven deadly sins of Christianity.
	Dove Mercy, love, simplicity, eternal life (drinking in fountain), peace (olive branch in beak)		Cherry Fruit of heaven

SEW WHAT! | WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN?

SAMPLER MOTIFS AND MEANINGS (page 2)

Motif	Meaning	Motif	Meaning
	Eagle Strength, faith, keen eyesight		Goose Stupidity
	Strawberries Perfect righteousness		Owl Wisdom and learning, also the devil
	Butterfly or Moth Inconsistency and playfulness		Peacock Vanity, luxury, immortality
	Snake Wickedness		Swan Bird of love (19th century)
	Tortoise (Turtle) Strength and slowness		Man and Woman Marriage
	Candlestick Devotion, watchfulness, prayer		Crown Eternity, fidelity (to a king)
	Chair Diligence, domesticity, hospitality		Square Nature
	Heart Divine love		Fan Romance or flirtation
	Fruit Tree Temptation or evil		Parrot Talkativeness or gossip
	Weeping Willow Tree Sorrow or mourning		Hourglass Time passing

SAMPLER BACKGROUND INFORMATION AND TRANSCRIPTIONS (for Teacher Reference)



1. Rhoda Norton sampler

This sampler is made of linen and is dated 1779.

It is embroidered in cross stitch with muted colors and says:

*"Give gift to God the flower of they youth,
Take for thy guide the blessed Word of truth,
Let Grace adorn thee, and prize Wisdom more
Than all the Pearls upon the Indian Shore.
Let not thy winged Days be spent in vain,
When gone no Gold will call 'em back again.
keep Death and Judgement always in thine Eye,
For all mankind is surely Born to Die.*

*Not Indian Pearls, or Gold, adorn the Fair,
Nor aught unto a Virtuous Maid compare;
Whate'er she does, where'er her steps she bends,
Grace on each action, silently attends."*

"Rhoda Norton Ended August 13, 1779"



2. Mary Bartlett sampler

This sampler is made of linen and dated 1810. Mary was born in Newburyport, Massachusetts, in 1799 and died in 1866.

The sampler is framed and embroidered in colors. The sampler includes the alphabet in several styles as well as numerals. The sampler border has a floral design, which includes an unknown flower. There is also a floral wreath (possibly made of roses or tulips) around the motto, which reads:

*"Now bless the maid whom circling years improve
Her god the object of her warmest love
Whose useful hours successive as they glide
The book the needle and the pen divide"*

"Mary Bartlett. A[ge] 11. June. 29. 1810."



3. Mary Newhall sampler

This sampler is made of linen, embroidered in silk, and dated 1812. It is a family register (family tree) completed in cross-stitch. Cornucopias and flowers encircle it in yellow, blue, and green. Under the register is the following verse:

*"This needle work of mine can tell
When i a child was learned well
And by my parents [I] was taught
Not to spend my time for naught"*

*"Wrought by Mary Newhall
Aged 14 1812"*

SAMPLER BACKGROUND INFORMATION AND TRANSCRIPTIONS (for Teacher Reference)



4. Harriet Rich sampler

This sampler is made of linen, done with colored needlework, and dated 1822. It appears to be an English sampler and remains unfinished. It shows Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden with animals, birds, potted plants, trees, and an unidentified building (possibly a house or school). The border depicts a blossoming vine. The verse in the middle says:

*"Sweet pair who still from morn to night
The moments pass in kind delight
And fondly bill and gently coo
May I be [as] innocent as you"*

"Harriet Rich A[ged] 11 1822"



5. Hannah Neill sampler

This sampler is also made of linen. Though it has no exact date, it was completed sometime before 1817. It has the alphabet in several styles embroidered at the top. The motto is encircled with a bird and flowers. The sampler also contains some potted plants. The motto says:

*"Now doth the little busy bee
Improve each shining hour
And gather honey all the day
From every op[e]ning flower"*

*In works of labour or of skill
I would be busy too
For satan finds some mischief still
For idle hands to do"*

*In books or works or healthful play
Let my first years be past
That I may give for every day
some good Account at last"*

"Hannah Neill"

SAMPLER CREATION GUIDELINES

Design your own sampler! Your sampler should reflect something about you, something you have accomplished, or an important event. Use the “Sampler Motifs and Meanings” handouts for ideas.

Your sampler must meet the following requirements:

1. You must design a **border** that is accented by at least one type of flower.
2. At the top, write the **alphabet** in uppercase letters. You may use any script style, but it should be the same for all of the letters.
3. In the center, underneath the alphabet, **write your own original quote**. It should be a minimum of four lines in length. Rhyming is preferred, but not required, and the quote may be about your beliefs, our society, an event, or anything else that is important to you.
4. Beneath the quote, **draw a scene**. The scene may include buildings, animals, people, or even objects.
5. Finally, at the bottom, **write your name, age, and the date**.
6. Remember that the sampler should be in color, so plan your colors also.

Use the space below to work on your design. When you have finished, show it to the teacher and get a signature for approval.

Preliminary Design Plan

Name: _____ Approved: _____

Now use this plan and the art supplies provided to construct your full-size sampler.

HISTORY LAB | FEEDBACK FORM

Please give us your feedback! After reviewing and using this *History Lab* lesson, please send us your feedback. Your ideas and honest assessment will ensure that these lessons keep improving and will provide us with useful insight for future teacher fellows. To fill out this form online or discover additional *History Lab* activities, visit the educators section of the Chicago Historical Society's website at www.chicagohistory.org.

Name: _____ E-mail: _____

School: _____ Grade you teach: _____

Are you a CHS member? (circle one): yes no

Name of unit you are evaluating _____

Name of lesson you are evaluating: _____

1. On a scale of one to five (with five being the best) rate this lesson in terms of the quality of the student learning experience it provides (circle one):

5 4 3 2 1

2. What were the strengths of this lesson? _____

3. What aspects of this lesson needed additional fine-tuning? _____

4. What advice, tips, or suggestions would you give to future users of this lesson? _____

5. Where does this lesson fit in your course of study (scope, sequence, unit)? _____

6. If applicable, how did the use of primary sources impact student learning? _____



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Thank you for your time. Please send the completed form to:

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Attn: History Programs **Fax: 312-266-2077**

