

From Samplers to Social Justice: Quaker Female Education in Rhode Island, 1750–1850

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Needlework instruction was an important component of the educational curriculum for girls in early America, a fact that is well documented by the thousands of surviving schoolgirl samplers and pictorial embroideries found in public and private collections across the country. Almost all needlework samplers were made under the supervision of a teacher and represent collaborations between the teacher's instructional expectations and the student's needlework skill and perseverance. Samplers are important as educational artifacts as they help to document a school's existence, a teacher's instructional expertise, social norms and values, and the ways in which needlework instruction was integrated into the educational curriculum for girls and young women. The type and number of samplers stitched by any given student was influenced by where her parents sent her to school, how long she was able to stay there, and the emphasis the school placed on learning decorative needlework. Teachers and schools developed distinctive sampler styles—styles that reflected the social expectations and religious orientations of the community and often changed over time.¹

This paper looks at the changing educational expectations for girls and young women in Rhode Island whose families were members of the Religious Society of Friends. Quakers were greatly concerned with the education of their children, and church records include frequent reports enumerating the schools within the “verge” that were either financially supported by a specific Quaker meeting or under the control of a Quaker teacher in good standing. Quakers wanted their children to receive a “guarded education,” one not contaminated by “the world,” and preferred a curriculum that focused on what was useful and aligned with Quaker teachings of honesty, concern for others, and using one's gifts in the service of God. They promoted withdrawing children from local schools when a school with Quaker leadership could be provided. Quakers believed that education should be accessible to all, including the impoverished and the enslaved, without bias to gender. With respect to secondary education, opinions seem to have been mixed, with some Quakers advocating a focus on what is useful for securing employment and others embracing a more

¹ For a more detailed understanding of the role of samplers in American female education, as well as specific sampler styles associated with known schools and teachers, see Betty Ring, *Girlhood Embroidery: American Samplers and Pictorial Needlework, 1650–1850*, 2 vols. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993).



Figure 1. Sampler stitched in Newport, Rhode Island, by a non-Quaker girl, Mary Sisson, in 1789. Leslie B. Durst Collection.

academically rich curriculum so that Quaker students would be prepared to assume roles as teachers or seek admission to college.²

² For more information on the educational practices of the Religious Society of Friends in New England, see Zora Klain, *Educational Activities of New England Quakers* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Westbrook Publishing Co., 1928), and Joan M. Jensen, “Not Only Ours but Others: The Quaker Teaching Daughters of the Mid-Atlantic, 1790–1850,” *History of Education Quarterly* 24, no. 1 (1984): 3–19.

In spite of the number and prominence of Rhode Island Quakers, relatively little has been published about the provisions they made for educating their female children, and almost nothing is known about the schoolgirl samplers stitched under the instruction of Rhode Island's Quaker teachers.³ This is in sharp contrast to the needlework samplers associated with well-known Quaker teachers in Philadelphia and the samplers associated with successful Quaker boarding schools in Pennsylvania (Westtown School), New York (Nine Partners School), and Delaware (Southern Boarding School).⁴ This study presents an overview of Quaker needlework instruction for girls and young women in three Rhode Island locations across a period of 100 years, from 1750 to 1850: the bustling city of Newport (1750–1790), the rural villages that comprised the Town of Hopkinton (1790–1830), and the state capital of Providence (1819–1850).

Newport, 1750–1790

Settled in 1638, Newport quickly became the governmental, cultural, and mercantile center of colonial Rhode Island and a haven for Quaker families fleeing religious persecution elsewhere. Eighteenth-century Newport had many private schools that instructed girls and young women in the “accomplishments” required to marry well, manage a home, and take their place in the city’s cultured society. Most surviving samplers stitched by Newport girls are showy affairs populated by well-dressed people and large houses (*Figure 1*).

In contrast, samplers stitched by Newport girls from known Quaker families are smaller, less colorful, and devoid of extravagance and ostentation with no representations of people, animals, houses, or luxury goods. *Figure 2* illustrates the 1771 sampler wrought by Mary Collins (1763–1806) when she was eight years old. Mary was born in Newport on 6 January 1763 to Mary Avery (1735–1789) and John Collins (1717–1795), a successful and wealthy Quaker merchant who became the third governor of Rhode Island. A very similar sampler was stitched by Welthe Barker in 1781 when she was about ten. Welthe was born on 14 August 1771 to Quakers Sarah Lawton (1747–1845) and Benjamin Barker (1747–

³ On the paucity of information on the education of Quaker children in Rhode Island, see Klain, *Educational Activities*. In 1983 Betty Ring documented the major schools and sampler styles in Rhode Island, but there is no mention of Quaker schools or samplers and no discussion of Quaker motifs and features that might identify the teacher or student as a member of the Religious Society of Friends. Betty Ring, *Let Virtue be a Guide to Thee: Needlework in the Education of Rhode Island Women* (Providence: Rhode Island Historical Society, 1983).

⁴ For information on the samplers stitched at Quaker boarding schools in other states, see Mary Uhl Brooks, *Threads of Useful Learning: Westtown School Samplers* (West Chester, Pa.: Westtown School, 2015), and Lynne Anderson and Gloria Seaman Allen, “Quakers at Duck Creek: Southern Boarding School Samplers (1800–1806),” in “*Wrought with Careful Hand*”: *Ties of Kinship on Delaware Samplers* (Dover Del.: Biggs Museum of American Art, 2014), 16–30.



Figure 2. Sampler stitched in Newport, Rhode Island, by a Quaker girl, Mary Collins, in 1771. Lynne Anderson Collection.

1817).⁵ Although originally adherents of the Baptist faith, seventeenth-century members of the Barker family were some of the earliest Newport residents to embrace the new Quaker principles.⁶

⁵ In 1766 Benjamin Barker’s sister, Eunice Barker (1754–1820), stitched a sampler that has the same border as that made fifteen years later by her niece Welthe Barker. Eunice Barker’s sampler is in a private collection but was recently brought to the University of Rhode Island for conservation. Personal communication from Dr. Blaire Gagnon to author, 25 February 2016.

⁶ Genealogical information on Welthe/Weltham Barker and her family appears in James Newell Arnold, *Rhode Island Vital Extracts, 1636–1850*, 21 vols. (Providence, R.I.: Narragansett Historical Publishing Company, 1891–1912).

Stitched by girls of the same social class, age range, and skill as other Newport students, these two samplers are visual representations of the Quaker preference for “plain,” with an emphasis on literacy instead of luxury. They also represent the Quaker philosophy of education: that instruction should focus on what is useful, not what is ornamental. In these samplers “useful” translates into an emphasis on sewing alphabets for marking clothes and domestic linens and stitching texts on virtuous behavior and dedication to God and country.

Genealogical details and family credentials confirm that both Mary Collins and Welthe Barker were born into prominent Quaker families who could have sent their daughters to any school they chose. And they selected one that, from the perspective of needlework instruction at least, was consistent with their religious beliefs and resulted in needlework that was aligned with Quaker principles of simplicity and utility. Although the teacher herself may not have been a Quaker, she provided needlework instruction that was conservative in approach and well suited to her Quaker clients.

One possible Newport woman who may have instructed both girls is Mary Gardner. She advertised her services as a teacher in the *Newport Mercury*—first in 1767 and then again in 1786, thus spanning the years in which Mary and Welthe stitched their samplers.⁷ Like many teachers of the period, she made arrangements with wealthy patrons and previous clients to use their homes as a venue for her school. In 1767 Gardner indicated she had recently “removed to the house of the Widow King, in the Church Lane” where she proposed to continue her school, teaching “Reading, Writing, and all Sorts of Needlework.” Church Lane is two blocks south of Newport’s historic main square, called the Parade in the eighteenth century.

It is not known how long Mary Gardner taught at this address, and her second advertisement suggests she may have taken a break from teaching before resuming it in 1786. On 4 March 1786 Miss Gardner again posted an announcement in the *Newport Mercury* to recruit students, indicating she would be opening a school on the thirteenth of the month where she would teach “Reading, Sewing, Marking, and Knitting.” What connects her with Mary Collins and Welthe Barker is the location of this new school “in the house of John Collins, Esq., in Duke street, near the Parade.” The home of John Collins, Mary’s father, was about two blocks from that of the Widow King, suggesting Mary Collins could easily have walked to the house on Church Lane to receive instruction from Mary Gardner in 1771. It is also entirely plausible that Mary Gardner, upon deciding to reopen her school in

⁷ Not all teachers felt the need to advertise, relying more on reputation and referrals. For example, Mrs. Sarah Osborne (1714–1796) was a well-known religious activist in Newport and a teacher for more than forty years, beginning in 1734. There is, however, only one known advertisement in the *Newport Mercury* for her school, printed twice in the last half of December 1758 and once in the first week of January 1759. Ring, *Girlhood Embroidery*, 1:177.

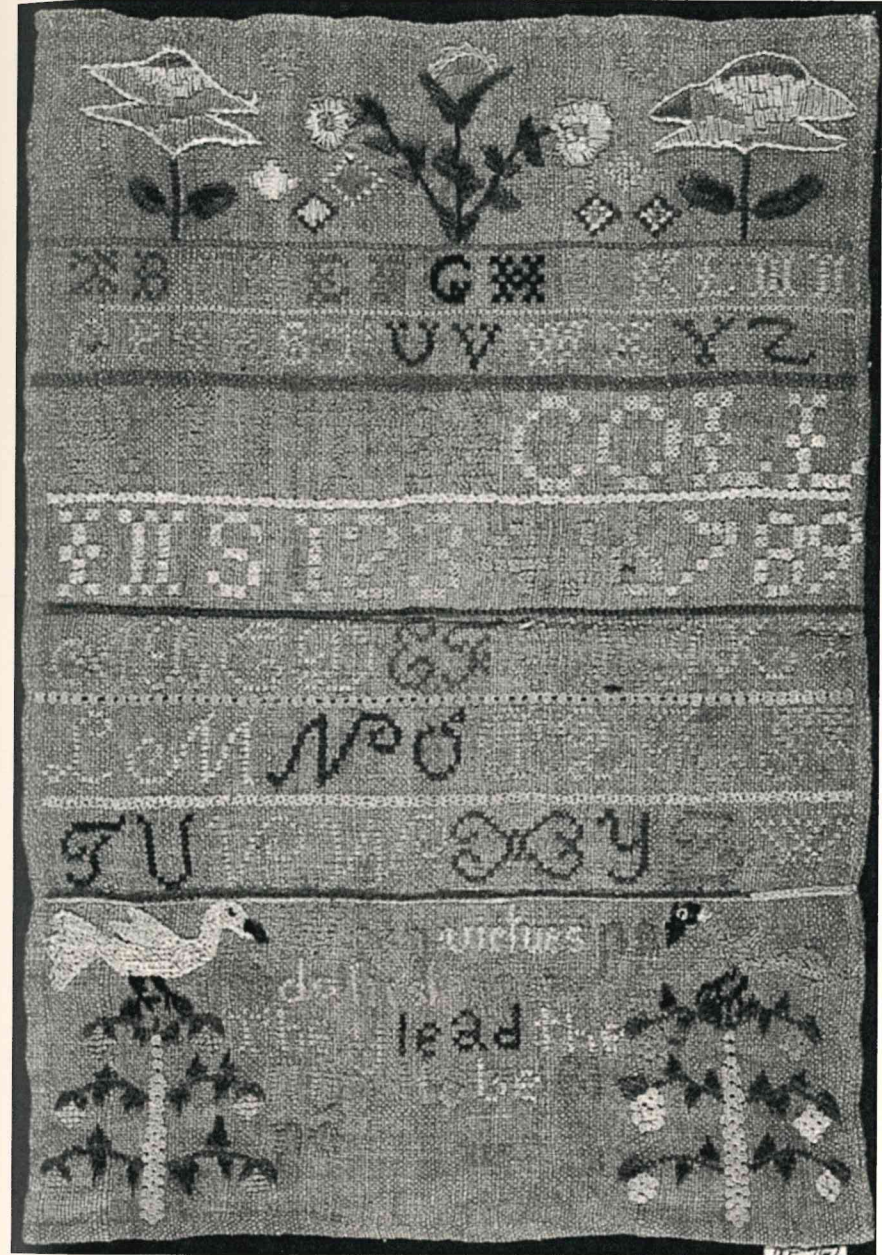


Figure 3. Sampler stitched in Hopkinton, Rhode Island, by Ruth Collins, circa 1795. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

1786, sought support from the family of a previous student—and a prominent one at that.

Hopkinton, 1790–1830

The Town of Hopkinton, Rhode Island, was incorporated in 1757 and named in honor of Stephen Hopkins, then governor of the colony. At the time of its incorporation seventy Freemen were entered into the town records as eligible voters, and among them the heads of many Quaker families, including Hezekiah Collins, Peter Crandall, Peter Kinyon, and Christopher Wilbur. In spite of its relatively small size, Hopkinton Meeting gave rise to a number of important Quaker “recorded ministers,” members of a meeting who are acknowledged (and therefore “recorded”) to have a gift for spoken ministry and authorized to address Quakers at meetings other than their own. Two of these were John Collins (1716–1778) and John Wilbur (1774–1856).

Known samplers stitched by Quaker girls going to school within the bounds of Hopkinton Meeting appear to reflect the area’s social and religious ties as well as changing attitudes within Quaker “discipline”—the gradually evolving tenets of what it means to be a Quaker. Three more or less distinct phases are visible, although observations are based on a relatively small number of needlework objects (eight) and may change as more examples emerge.⁸ The girls who stitched these samplers were related through a complex web of marriages and all had kinship ties to the region’s most prominent Quaker thinkers and preachers, John Collins and John Wilbur.

The first known Quaker samplers from Hopkinton were stitched between 1790 and 1810. All are conservative in size and appearance and emphasize letters and literacy as opposed to ostentatious displays of wealth and high society. In keeping with Quaker dating patterns, days of the week and months of the year are referred to by number, not name.⁹ The samplers are not, however, devoid of decorative elements, and some of the motifs mimic those on eighteenth-century Newport samplers, suggesting a teacher who may have lived or gone to school in Newport. For example, a sampler worked in 1806 by Mary Wilbur Collins (1796–1861), great-granddaughter to the preacher John Collins, has floral and bird motifs similar to those on the top of Mary Sisson’s Newport sampler (*Figure 1*). More typical is the sampler stitched eleven years earlier by Ruth Collins (1784–1865), the much younger sister to Mary’s father (*Figure 3*). Ruth filled her sampler almost entirely with alphabets and numerals and individualized it by stitching flow-

⁸ The eight known samplers are: (1) Mary Wilbur, 1792, Glee Krueger Collection; (2) Lydia Hoxie, 1798, sold 11 March 2006 at Brunk Auctions, Ashville, N.C.; (3) Ruth Collins, 1795, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; (4) Mary Wilbur Collins, 1806, Collection of Lynne Anderson; (5) Mary Wilbur, ca. 1816, Rhode Island Historical Society; (6) Dinah Collins, 1818, Rhode Island Historical Society; (7) Mary Ann Kinyon, 1826, Leslie Durst Collection; and (8) Eliza N. Collins, 1828, private collection.

⁹ This convention was adopted by the Quakers in the seventeenth century to avoid using names for days and months that had non-Christian origins.

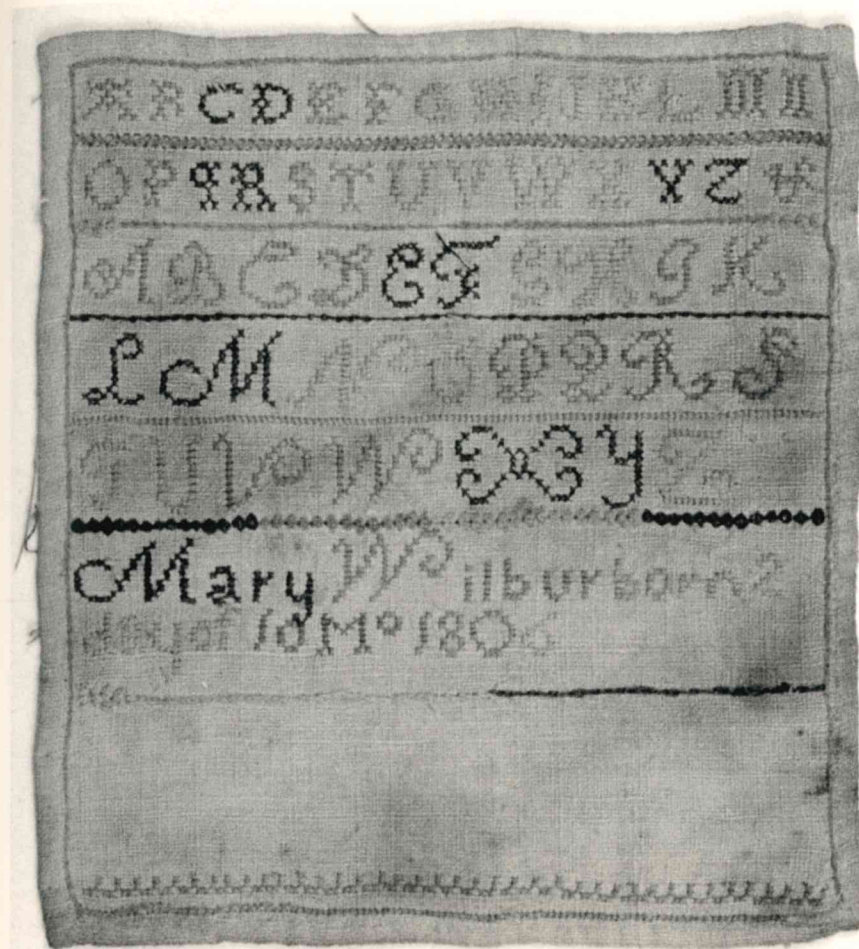


Figure 4. Sampler stitched in Hopkinton, Rhode Island, by Mary Wilbur, circa 1816. Rhode Island Historical Society.

ers at the top and adding two awkward fruit trees at the bottom with large birds perched on them. The combined awkward tree and large bird motif was a distinguishing feature of Hopkinton Quaker samplers and continued to reappear for more than twenty years.

The only known Hopkinton samplers from the second phase, about 1810 to 1820, are “marking samplers,” needlework exercises designed primarily to prepare girls to mark linens and clothing with the owner’s initials. Although similar to marking samplers stitched by young girls everywhere, it is clear that Mary Wilbur’s circa 1816 sampler (*Figure 4*) was stitched under the instruction of a Quaker teacher because of the way in which her date of birth is written: “Mary Wilbur born 2 day of 10 M° 1806.” Including birth dates is common on Quaker samplers, and



Figure 5. Sampler stitched in Hopkinton, Rhode Island, by Mary Ann Kinyon in 1826. Leslie B. Durst Collection.

in this case it was instrumental in identifying this Mary Wilbur (1806–1888) as the seventh of thirteen children born to Lydia Collins and John Wilbur, the Quaker teacher and leading thinker of his day. A very similar sampler was stitched by Dinah Collins (1777–1849) in 1818. Interestingly, Dinah created her sampler as a forty-year-old adult.¹⁰ It may be that Dinah undertook this in preparation for opening a school, and the neatness of her stitches on both front and back support this conclusion.¹¹

It is possible that the simplicity and complete lack of adornment on

¹⁰ There are precedents for creating a “schoolgirl” sampler as an adult and diverse reasons that women cited for doing so, the most common of which was creating a model for their students to copy. For a more complete discussion on those reasons, see Aimee E. Newell, *A Stitch in Time: The Needlework of Aging Women in Antebellum America* (Columbus: Ohio University Press, 2014).

¹¹ Dinah Collins (1777–1849) married Asa Sisson (1770–1852) as his third wife in July of the same year she completed her sampler; they had one daughter in 1819.

these samplers reflects a certain retrenchment that occurred at Quaker schools in response to concerns that the church was actively sponsoring educational endeavors that were not well aligned with Quaker principles. Teachers in some Quaker schools, including Westtown School in Pennsylvania, were chastised for teaching samplers designed to be framed and displayed—in other words, ornamental as opposed to useful.¹² Similar issues may have led Quaker teachers in Rhode Island to reject sampler making that involved decorative motifs and to focus instead on what they felt was useful for girls to know—alphabets intended for marking their initials on clothes and linens.

Quaker samplers wrought in Hopkinton during the 1820s constitute the third phase. The two known samplers from this period are large and delightfully colorful and full of decorative motifs. The first was stitched by Mary Ann Kinyon/Kenyon in 1826 (Figure 5). According to South Kingston Quaker records, Mary Ann was born in 1810 (the nineteenth day of the ninth month) to sampler maker Ruth Collins (1784–1865) and John Hoxie Kenyon (1780–1843). Mary Ann was fifteen in 1826 when she used her skills to create an attractive, well-balanced sampler with alphabets, two white houses, a religious verse, and a floral wreath around her signature, naming Hopkinton as its place of origin. Unfortunately, this was probably Mary Ann’s last major endeavor as she died on 27 July 1826, just shy of her sixteenth birthday. Two years later her eleven-year-old first cousin Eliza N. Collins (1817–1840) also stitched an elaborate sampler decorated with two houses, dozens of floral motifs, alphabets, and a religious verse (Figure 6). A quick glance would not detect its Quaker origins, but Eliza included her date of birth in Quaker style, suggesting she was receiving instruction from a Quaker teacher. In addition, some of Eliza’s motifs are idiosyncratic to the region’s Quaker samplers. In particular, the large birds perched on awkward fruit trees in the top border relate directly to motifs found on Hopkinton Quaker samplers twenty years earlier (see, for example, the sampler by Ruth Collins in Figure 3).

Both of these later samplers are more elaborate and decorative than earlier Quaker examples from this geographical area. The change may reflect the presence of new teachers, the availability of better materials, and emerging expectations for embroideries in general. Nonetheless, they present something of a conundrum because the samplers are both Quaker in origin and “of the world” in appearance and purpose, as they were clearly meant to be framed and displayed.

What social, religious, or historical factors impacted the samplers that

¹² Illustrative of this retrenchment are the events following an 1804 visit to Westtown school by the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting’s Acting Committee on Schools. See the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, *Minutes of the Acting Committee*, 11 May 1804. According to Brooks, *Threads of Useful Learning*, the committee did not forbid embroidering samplers that featured the school, but the practice of doing so ended in response to this criticism.



Figure 6. Sampler stitched in Hopkinton, Rhode Island, by Eliza N. Collins in 1828. Private Collection.

Quaker needlework teachers designed and taught in this rural enclave of southern Rhode Island? A possible explanation lies within the Quaker faith itself. The 1820s were a time of enormous change for the Religious Society of Friends. Prompted in part by an increase in Christian evangelical outreach by other denominations, the Quakers found themselves grappling with divergent views within their own membership. To many, Quakerism had become rigid and overly controlled by the Elders, who were perceived as more interested in maintaining Quaker discipline than promoting spiritual growth and closeness to God. This upheaval reverberated throughout the New England Yearly Meeting, and Hopkinton's John Wilbur was appointed to a committee of New England Friends to investigate the movement.¹³

¹³ John Wilbur, *Journal of the Life of John Wilbur, a Minister of the Gospel in the Society of Friends; with Selections from his Correspondence* (Providence, R.I.: George H. Whitney, 1859).

About the same time, a tension arose between two groups vying for leadership as the true Quaker faith. The first group emphasized the Christian roots of their faith and placed high value on biblical scripture as a source of truth. The second group accentuated the Inward Light and continuing revelation from God as the primary basis for religious faith and practice. The first group (Orthodox Quakers) saw commonalities between Quaker practice and other religious doctrines and increasingly adopted theological positions that accepted aspects of the non-Quaker worldview. Members of the second group (Hicksite Quakers), led by their charismatic leader Elias Hicks (1748–1830), were urged to live apart from the world, oppose education, reject anything made through slave labor, “be obedient to the light within,” and see all manifestations of the external world as obstructions to divine revelation. Members of the Hopkinton Meeting followed the leadership of John Wilbur and other Orthodox ministers.

Tensions within the Quaker church continued—with another significant split occurring in the 1840s—now prompted by the more liberal teachings and social activism of Joseph John Gurney (1788–1847), a traveling Quaker minister from England. Hopkinton's John Wilbur was the opposition leader, a position he held so tenaciously that the New England Yearly Meeting disowned him in 1843.¹⁴ The Hopkinton Meeting eventually split between the “Guerneyites” and the “Wilburites,” with the majority following the teachings of Joseph Gurney.

Did these movements influence the samplers made by Rhode Island Quaker girls in rural Hopkinton? The well-planned formats, decorative motifs, and visual diversity of later samplers suggest outside influences, the presence, perhaps, of teachers from more liberal Quaker communities and a willingness to break the bonds of previously conservative needlework instruction. Whether these changes were tied to the disruptions and new ways of thinking that permeated Quaker families and communities in the 1820s and 1830s is hard to tell, but the timing seems propitious.

Providence, 1819–1850

By the early nineteenth century the cultural and business center of Rhode Island had shifted from Newport to Providence, as had many of the state's leading Quaker families. In 1819 the New England Yearly Meeting opened a boarding school in Providence, the New England Yearly Meeting Boarding School (commonly referred to as the Friends Boarding School or just the Friends School, now known as Moses Brown School). The school's purpose was to “provide a guarded education free

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

from the contaminating influence of the vain fashionable world.”¹⁵ In large part due to the efforts of Moses Brown (1738–1836) and his son Obadiah (1771–1822), Providence was selected as the site, and the school opened 1 January 1819 with 5 students, all girls. This number increased to 41 by the end of the first month and 99 students by the end of 1819. Within a few years the number of students stabilized at about 125 and remained so for the next decade.¹⁶ Most students ranged in age from ten to fifteen, but some were as young as seven or eight and a few were over twenty.

During the school’s first decade, the curriculum emphasized those elementary subjects believed to be most useful to Quaker youth: reading, writing, arithmetic, grammar, and geography.¹⁷ In the 1830s the school added an upper level, where more advanced subjects were taught, including philosophy, natural history, chemistry, botany, geology, geometry, trigonometry, calculus, astronomy, mensuration, surveying, and navigation.¹⁸ In the foreign languages, courses were provided in Latin, Greek, and French, with German and Hebrew as additional options. All subjects were open to the girls as well as the boys; there was no standard curriculum and no specified requirements for graduation until 1855.¹⁹ The school experience was enriched by an extensive library, debates on issues of social reform (particularly antislavery), and frequent visits from “Publick Friends,” leading Quaker thinkers and speakers of the day.²⁰

The Friends Boarding School in Providence was, in many ways, modeled after the successful Nine Partners School in Dutchess County, New York (founded 1796) and the Westtown Boarding School in Chester County, Pennsylvania (founded 1799). Both Quaker institutions offered “sewing schools” where female students learned to sew and stitched samplers, hundreds of which are still in existence today, many emblazoned with the school’s name.²¹ The school committee within the New England Yearly Meeting seems to have decided on a different course of

¹⁵ This was the New England Yearly Meeting’s second effort to provide the children of New England Quaker families with opportunities for a secondary education following the principles and beliefs of the Religious Society of Friends. The first was short lived, a school on the second floor of the Portsmouth (Rhode Island) Meeting House that operated from 1784 until June of 1788.

¹⁶ Rayner W. Kelsey, *Centennial History of Moses Brown School, 1819–1919* (Providence, R.I.: Moses Brown School, 1919), 59.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 78.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 89.

²⁰ For a discussion on the role of “Publick Friends” in spreading and interpreting Quaker religious principles, see Barbara K. Wittman, “Mary Borden Rodman’s Register of Publick Friends, 1656–1804,” *Quaker History* 104, no. 1 (2015): 20–49.

²¹ See, for example, Brooks, *Threads of Useful Learning*. She discusses seventy-five samplers and other needlework objects stitched by girls attending the Westtown Boarding School.

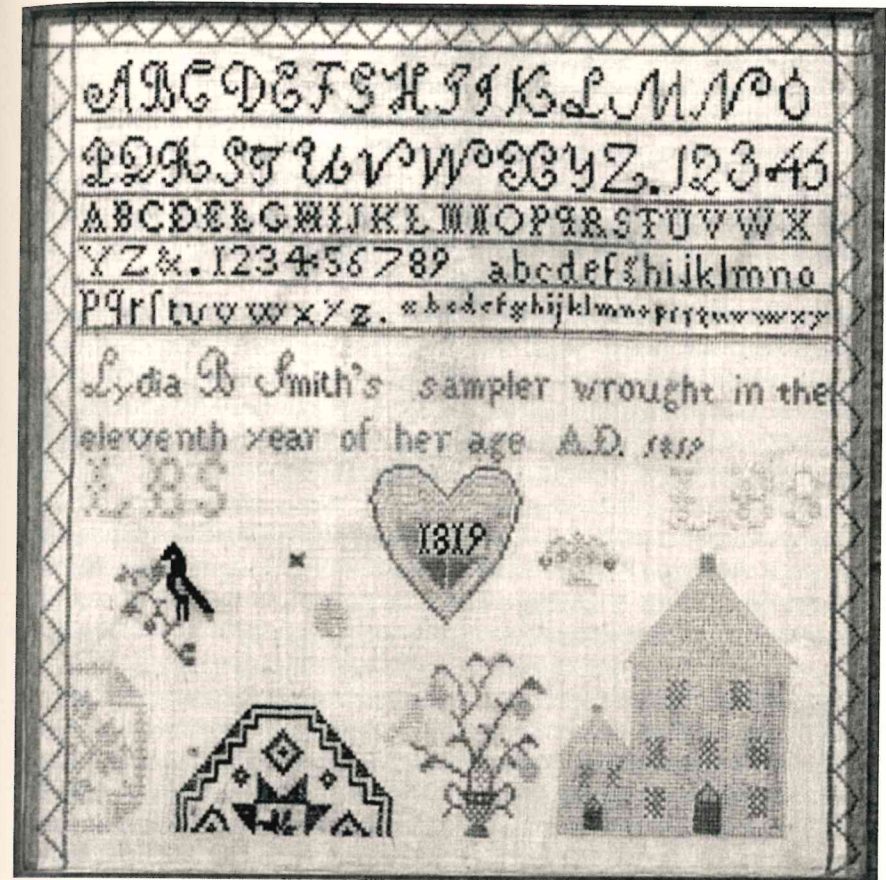


Figure 7. Sampler stitched by Lydia B. Smith in 1819, possibly at the Friends Boarding School in Providence, Rhode Island. Courtesy, M. Finkel and Daughter.

action for the school’s “female department.” At present there are no known samplers that name the Friends Boarding School in Providence as their place of origin and only two samplers that may be attributed with any degree of confidence to students attending the school. These samplers, plus a small amount of additional evidence, suggest that sewing was taught, at least to the younger students, but was not an important part of the curriculum.

The first of the two known samplers is a small piece stitched by Lydia B. Smith in 1819, the same year that the school opened. It contains motifs traditionally associated with Quaker school instruction—most obvious are the two half medallions in the lower left corner (*Figure 7*). Lydia Boyce Smith was born 23 July 1809 in Cumberland, Rhode Island, a village twelve miles north of Providence. She was the last child of Lydia Boyce (1764–1824) and Arca Smith (1764–1825), members of the Prov-

idence Monthly Meeting. Lydia attended the Friends Boarding School from 1819 to 1821,²² where she may have stitched this sampler shortly after her arrival “in the eleventh year of her age.”²³

The second example was made by Sarah Austin in 1822. A small marking sampler with three versions of a Roman-style alphabet generally seen only on embroideries made at Quaker schools, it is in the collection of the Rhode Island Historical Society with a known donor but not attributed to a specific maker. Research suggests its maker may be the Sarah Austin from Nantucket Island in Massachusetts who attended the Friends Boarding School in the 1820s, leaving it in 1827 at the age of fifteen. She, and many other Quaker girls from Nantucket, traveled to Providence for their education due to limited opportunities on the island. If this is the same Sarah Austin, and if she made it while attending the Friends Boarding School, then Sarah had entered the school by the age of ten and also worked her simple alphabet sampler in her first year as a student.²⁴

The second line of evidence is more unusual. Teachers and students at Westtown Boarding School evidently believed that their colleagues and peers at the Friends Boarding School in Providence would be teaching and learning needlework skills. In the spring of 1819 seven Westtown students created a darning sampler as a gift to the Friends Boarding School, which had just opened. Inscribed “A semblance of darning from West-Town to Providence School,” this unusual piece contains seven squares of cream-colored thread on natural linen, each square demonstrating a different darning pattern. Most likely the project was directed by a Westtown teacher and meant to serve as a model for the new school’s sewing classes. Details of the sampler’s journey to Providence are not

²² Personal communication to the author by King O’Dell, archivist at Moses Brown School, 10 June 2015.

²³ When a girl is “in the eleventh year of her age” she is actually ten years old; one is “in the first year” at the moment of birth and “in the second year” at his/her first birthday—and so on. Lydia Boyce Smith had turned ten by the time she stitched her sampler, which means she signed and dated her needlework sometime after 23 July 1819. On 6 December 1827 Lydia married Charles Metcalf (1803–1877), also from Cumberland and a fellow student at the Friends Boarding School. Lydia and Charles had six children, and they lived in Cumberland. Lydia died 10 December 1886 and is buried in the Quaker Cemetery there.

²⁴ Sarah Austin was born 18 June 1812 to Rachel Hussey (1783–1857) and Joseph Austin (1786–1817) on Nantucket Island. In 1834 Sarah married Charles Gorman Stubbs (1792–1839) of Nantucket, who died five years later. In 1841 she became the second wife of John Paddock (1792–1873), also of Nantucket. There are no known children of either marriage. Sarah Austin Stubbs Paddock died on 6 April 1887.

known, and it may never have arrived at its intended destination.²⁵

Recent research contributes yet a third line of evidence: references to sewing instruction in materials printed by the Friends Boarding School. Catalogues listing teachers, schools, students, and curricula were published beginning in 1832 and some of these refer to sewing. For example, the catalogue for 1836 contains the following statement: “Also, in the female department, instruction will be given in sewing.”²⁶ There is no indication what this instruction might entail or whether it encompassed embroidery, a prerequisite for making samplers. It may be that sewing instruction was optional and designed to fit the needs or interests of individual students. It was not integrated into other parts of the curriculum as it was at Westtown School. This conclusion is supported by the lone reference to sewing in Rayner W. Kelsey’s *Centennial History of Moses Brown School*. Listed under forms of recreation in the early years of the school is the following: “The girls had less play and of a quieter sort. Stephen and Hannah Gould assisted in superintending the school household and the latter sometimes invited girls to her home where they sewed little articles for themselves or their friends.”²⁷ It is possible that these “little articles” included small samplers such as the ones described earlier. If so, this puts sewing in the category of recreation, something done for pleasure when the girls socialized in the evenings.

This evidence suggests that some form of needlework instruction existed at the Friends Boarding School in Providence but that it was not a particularly important part of the curriculum for female students, unlike at other Quaker boarding schools known for their emphasis on needlework in addition to academics. We have to assume this was a conscious decision on the part of the school’s leaders. If so, was the decision tied to some philosophical position about the appropriateness of needlework instruction in a school focused on providing a guarded, but also academically rich secondary school education? If the emphasis on education for domesticity was less than usual for the era in which they lived, what lessons *did* female students at the school absorb about possible roles in society and personal agency to use their gifts and talents in the service of others?

A look at some of the school’s more high-profile students is helpful in answering some of these questions. One of the prime goals for the Friends Boarding School during the 1820s and 1830s was to prepare teachers for

²⁵ According to Mary Uhl Brooks, archivist at Westtown School, the darning sampler intended for Providence Friends School was donated to Westtown School in 1924 by two sisters who lived in Philadelphia but were originally from Massachusetts. One had attended Westtown School in the 1850s. There is no known connection between these women and the Friends Boarding School in Providence. Personal communication to the author by Mary Uhl Brooks, 8 June 2015.

²⁶ Kelsey, *Centennial History*, 19.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 68.

other Quaker schools in New England and elsewhere. Three well-known women who left the Providence Friends School for teaching positions are Prudence Crandall (1803–1890), Abby Kelly (1811–1887), and Harriet Peck (1815–1840). In this endeavor they joined the increasing number of Quaker “teaching daughters” who assumed major teaching responsibilities in the post-Revolutionary movement to increase American literacy and improve access to education to the country’s children regardless of gender, religion, or race.²⁸ The legacy for all three women, however, was not their teaching but their activism on behalf of the most important social causes of the day: education for students of color, the abolition of slavery, women’s suffrage, and world peace.²⁹ All three women exemplified George Fox’s seventeenth-century recommendation for living one’s life in a way that makes the world a better place: “live adventurously... let your life speak.”³⁰ It is the position of this paper that the Friends Boarding School in Providence made room in the curriculum for young Quaker women to learn the skills needed to become change agents in their world. In short, they learned to “stand and speak,”³¹ rather than sit and sew.

Conclusion

From studying these examples of Quaker education in Rhode Island for girls and young women, we can draw the following conclusions. First, needlework in general, and the making of samplers specifically, was integral to the education of female children in families belonging to the Religious Society of Friends. This is documented by the samplers found in each of the three regions studied and the use of needlework as a space for embodying religious conventions and society’s expectations.

²⁸ For a detailed look at the role of Quaker schools in training teachers, see Joan M. Jensen, “Not Only Ours but Others: The Quaker Teaching Daughters of the Mid-Atlantic, 1790–1850,” *History of Education Quarterly* 24, no. 1 (1984): 3–19.

²⁹ Prudence Crandall (1803–1890) became infamous in Connecticut for opening a school for young women of color in Canterbury in 1833, one of the first experiments in advanced education for African American females in New England. Abby Kelly (1811–1887) spent decades on the lecture circuit speaking against the evils of slavery, advocating for full civil equality for blacks, and raising funds for abolitionist newspapers. Her public speaking skills and dedication to the abolition of slavery were so influential that activist women became known as Abby Kellyites and her form of radical abolitionism as Abby Kellyism. Harriet Peck (1815–1840) joined two other graduates from the Providence Friends School to become the first teachers at the Quaker New Garden Boarding School in Greensboro, North Carolina. She spent Sundays teaching the children of enslaved workers and was proactive in advocating for abolition among local slave owners. Interestingly, she did not teach needlework at the New Garden Boarding School—a sewing teacher was employed specifically for that subject in the curriculum.

³⁰ George Fox, *Advices and Queries* (London, 1656).

³¹ For an in-depth examination of how American women reshaped their lives and social identities through education, see Mary Kelley, *Learning to Stand and Speak: Women, Education, and Public Life in America’s Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

Second, there was no persistent or coherent Quaker format or identifiable motifs used throughout the colony or state of Rhode Island. Instead, the content and format of samplers stitched under the instruction of Quaker teachers seem to have been influenced by the tenets of the Quaker faith, as interpreted within the context of the time, probably aligned with local parental expectations and family tradition. Although the number of samplers comprising the data for this investigation is relatively small, it is intriguing to consider the possible ways in which samplers worked by Quaker girls may have reflected the religious tensions and social dynamics of their communities.

Third, and related to the above, is the apparent decision by the New England Yearly Meeting to move away from the tradition of emphasizing needlework within the curriculum of the boarding school they established in Providence. This was in stark contrast to other known Quaker boarding schools founded earlier in New York, Pennsylvania, and Delaware. This decision, too, is most likely a reflection of the times, perhaps a growing awareness of women’s potential to assume roles outside the “domestic sphere.” Certainly the school’s emphasis on equipping older students, female as well as male, with the skills to become teachers is in keeping with this interpretation. Combined with school-wide attention to the social injustices of the time, it should not be a surprise that some of the school’s strongest female students became nationally recognized for their social activist positions and leadership. And last, there is a need to uncover and study more samplers stitched by Quaker girls living in the colony and state of Rhode Island. What has been discussed in this paper is merely suggestive of what might be learned if we had a larger body of examples to study.³²

³² Toward this end the recently launched Sampler Archive Project (and its Rhode Island Sampler Initiative) may yield many more samplers stitched under the instruction of Quaker teachers in the colony and state of Rhode Island for scholars to study.