



## Needle, Pen, and the Social Geography of Taste in Early National Providence

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IN the spring of 1786, eleven-year-old Abigail Martin began to work a sampler at Mary Balch's school in Providence, Rhode Island. Like other students of Mary Balch, she adorned her work with prominent civic buildings and frolicking people alongside the floral motifs and aphoristic phrases common in late-eighteenth-century embroidery (fig. 1). The finished product, which she marked "Nabby Martin's Work. 1786," was a 15-by-10¾-inch piece of linen covered in delicate stitches of silk thread. "To Colleges and School ye Youths repair," the navy letters on a sky-blue banner across the top of the piece advised, "Improve each precious Moment while youre [*sic*] there."<sup>1</sup> To illustrate this point, she centered a clear rendering of the College of Rhode Island's edifice—complete with stitches to create the appearance of brickwork—underneath and surrounded it with a background of lush green satin stitches and figures of animals, ladies, and trees.<sup>2</sup> The true centerpiece of Abigail's sampler, however, was the image of the State House that she placed

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<sup>1</sup>Abigail (Nabby) Martin sampler, 1786, 17.361, Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, RI (hereafter RISD).

<sup>2</sup>Satin stitches are set closely together to cover solidly an area with thread. For depictions and descriptions of different stitches, see the glossary of Susan Burrows Swan, *Plain & Fancy, American Women and Their Needlework, 1700–1850* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1977), 221–32.

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FIG. 1.—Abigail Martin Sampler. Courtesy of the Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design.

under the even larger declaration, “Let Virtue be a Guide to thee.” Architectural intricacies and moral directives aside, Abigail exhibited sophisticated stitchwork in the blending of color she executed in the two columns of floral designs framing the

central image as well as in the details—striped fabrics, shoe buckles, and facial features—adorning the ten human figures spread across the sampler. Color and texture, text and image, allusions to nature, and symbols of republican virtue combined to create an elegant representation of Abigail’s dexterity with the needle and emerging sense of taste.<sup>3</sup>

A little over a decade later in 1799, nineteen-year-old Julia Bowen—who would go on to marry Abigail Martin’s younger brother Joseph in 1803—recorded in her journal the flurry of literary and social activity that crowded her days in Providence. On April 1, having arisen “as usual” at half past eight, Julia and her friend Rebecca Power “spent the morning in writing a little Geograph[y] & reading the History of England.” Despite their scholarly intentions, they “pass’d the remainder of the morning and afternoon in riotous laughter,” before taking tea and going out with several other female friends to have their fortunes told. Unfortunately, after their “long, fatiguing walk,” they were disappointed “to find the Old Lady gone into the Country.” Julia and her companions then returned to town by way of a married friend’s house, where she stopped to pick up her pocketbook. There, the young ladies found two male acquaintances “seated in close conference with each his paper, which we endeavour’d to wrest from them, but in vain.” Next, they called on Julia’s cousin Caleb, who joined them for a walk and to accompany home one of her friends, whom the diarist playfully referred to as “the Major.” After this “mighty pleasant walk,” she and Rebecca finally retired at half-past ten.<sup>4</sup>

Works of pen and needle intermingled in the reading and writing habits of these young women and contributed to their social interactions. As another sampler verse of the era delineated, “how blest the maid” who let her time “the book, the

<sup>3</sup>Betty Ring, *Let Virtue Be a Guide to Thee: Needlework in the Education of Rhode Island Women, 1730–1830* (Providence: Rhode Island Historical Society, 1983), 112–17, 120; Martin sampler.

<sup>4</sup>Julia Bowen (Martin) diary, April 1, 1799, Box 1, Folder 6, Martin Family Papers, Mss. 999, Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence, RI (hereafter RIHS). I am grateful to the Rhode Island Historical Society for permission to quote from their manuscript collections.

needle, and the pen divide.”<sup>5</sup> These were readers on the move, engaging in a dynamic process of crossing between: texts crossing between ink and stitch, readers crossing between genres, sociability crossing between intimate and public settings, and most critically, young women sampling among these practices and spaces.

These eighteenth-century acts of crossing between stand at odds with the disciplinary conventions professional historians and literary scholars have forged and passed down across the twentieth century. Assumptions embedded in those conventions included a preference for written documents over material objects, a focus on the production of specialized knowledge geared towards other experts and published through specified channels, and a suspicion of, if not outright disdain for, amateurs.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, scholars in the academy traditionally have viewed pieces of needlework as decorative, rather than dynamic, sources.<sup>7</sup> Even as waves of new approaches—whether women’s history, material culture studies, or public history scholarship, to name those particularly salient to this

<sup>5</sup>Rebekah S. Munro sampler (c. 1792), depicted in Ring, *Let Virtue Be a Guide to Thee*, 146. I encourage readers to visit the websites of the Rhode Island Historical Society ([www.rihhs.org](http://www.rihhs.org)) and Rhode Island School of Design Museum of Art (<https://risdmuseum.org>), both of which feature searchable collections pages, to explore the breadth of Rhode Island needlework pieces held by these institutions and to view color photographs of most of the objects referenced in this essay.

<sup>6</sup>On the emergence of these proscriptions in the discipline of history and their particular impact for women as subjects and practitioners of history, see Bonnie G. Smith, *The Gender of History: Men, Women, and Historical Practice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), esp. 103–29, and Julie Des Jardines, *Women and the Historical Enterprise in America: Gender, Race, and the Politics of Memory, 1880–1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 13–51; for parallels within literary criticism, see Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790–1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), esp. 186–202, and Paul Lauter, “Caste, Class, and Canon,” in *Feminisms Redux: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, ed. Robyn Warhol-Down and Diane Price Herndl (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 70–91.

<sup>7</sup>Exceptions to this tendency that have informed my understanding of the intersection of material culture and gender are Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *The Age of Homespun: Objects and Stories in the Creation of an American Myth* (New York: Verso, 2002); Susan Stabile, *Memory’s Daughters: The Material Culture of Remembrance in Eighteenth-Century America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004); and Marla R. Miller, *The Needle’s Eye: Women and Work in the Age of Revolution* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006).

essay—have eroded elements of these assumptions, they by and large remain, as Cathy Davidson compellingly has argued, the stubborn bedrock of the academic profession and higher education.<sup>8</sup>

While overlooked or dismissed by most academic historians, samplers made in eighteenth-century Providence, like Abigail Martin's, have been omnipresent in museum collections, decorative arts scholarship, popular depictions of the colonial era, and on the antiques market since the late nineteenth century. An exhibition at the Rhode Island Historical Society in 1920, for instance, brought together nearly three hundred samplers, some local and others from elsewhere in North America, which were then documented and prominently referenced within the first large-scale survey of early American needlework, the 1922 publication *American Samplers*.<sup>9</sup> Hundreds of needlework pieces made in Providence and other towns in Rhode Island now belong in institutions as close to the place of their making as the Rhode Island School of Design's museum and as far away as Milwaukee, Wisconsin and Houston, Texas.<sup>10</sup> From the late 1970s until the end of her prolific career, the late collector and decorative arts specialist Betty Ring tracked down, documented, and analyzed samplers across the country. Her work demonstrated the technical and aesthetic complexity of these artifacts and did much to recuperate the instructors and schools responsible for them.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup>Cathy N. Davidson, *The New Education: How to Revolutionize the University to Prepare Students for a World in Flux* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), 36–46.

<sup>9</sup>Ethel Stanwood Bolton and Eva Johnston Coe, *American Samplers* (Boston: Massachusetts Society of Colonial Dames in America, 1921), v–vi.

<sup>10</sup>For an illustrative, though not exhaustive, selection of institutions that hold Rhode Island needlework, see Betty Ring, *Girlhood Embroidery: American Samplers and Pictorial Needlework, 1650–1850*, 2 vols. (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1993), 1:172–93.

<sup>11</sup>The citations in this essay indicate the debt owed to Ring's scholarship, particularly the meticulous research she conducted in the 1980s on Mary Balch, her students, and the needlework pieces created there for an exhibit of Rhode Island needlework sponsored by the Rhode Island Historical Society (RIHS). *Let Virtue Be a Guide to Thee* (1983) is the still-invaluable catalogue from that exhibit. Ring's two-volume work *Girlhood Embroidery* (1993) documents needlework pieces and schools from across eastern North America and is a touchstone reference for collectors, curators, and academic scholars. In 2012 shortly after Ring's death, her personal collection went up for



The first goal of this essay, then, is to mark what scholarly distinctions between works of pen and those of needle—the former a favored source for academic study, the latter an afterthought or left for decorative arts specialists to explore and antiques enthusiasts to pursue—have obscured about literary practices, women’s mobility, and social belonging in the early republic. This framing is meant to invite readers to reflect on their own predilections about samplers and other household artifacts and to hold in mind the contours and consequences of professionalization. More than addressing the impact of our scholarly blinders, however, reuniting pen and needle opens up new interpretive possibilities regarding the material and spatial complexities of cultural life in the early United States.

In their acts of sampling, whether with needle or pen, Abigail Martin, Julia Bowen, and other elite young women recorded their cultivation of taste in early national Providence. The era was one of transition in terms economic, institutional, and cultural. As Rhode Island’s other chief port, Newport, struggled to recover from physical and financial ruin in the wake of the three-year British occupation during the Revolution, profit and prestige shifted north to Providence’s merchant families. New institutions, including the College of Rhode Island (renamed Brown University in 1804), and expanded infrastructure demonstrated this prosperity in material terms. With 6,380 inhabitants in 1790, Providence remained a large town rather than a full-fledged city, but it was one of the ten most populous communities in the new republic.<sup>12</sup>

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auction at Sotheby’s. Rhode Island samplers made up seventeen of the two hundred pieces offered, and one elaborate piece stitched in Mary Balch’s school in the 1790s sold for \$122,500. *Important American Schoolgirl Embroideries: The Landmark Collection of Betty Ring, 22 January 2012, Sotheby’s* (New York: Sotheby’s, 2012), lots 581–88 and 590–99. Both the catalogue and auction results are available on the Sotheby’s website ([www.sothebys.com](http://www.sothebys.com)).

<sup>12</sup>Jane Lancaster, “‘By the Pens of Females’: Girls’ Diaries from Rhode Island, 1788–1821,” *Rhode Island History* 57 (1999), 60; Peter J. Coleman, *The Transformation of Rhode Island 1790–1860* (Providence, RI: Brown University Press, 1963), 20; John Hutchins Cady, *The Civic and Architectural Development of Providence, 1636–1950* (Providence, RI: The Book Shop, 1957), 43–44, 57–58.

As Catherine Kelly eloquently has shown, the exercise of taste entailed a flow of texts, objects, and practices: one's reading on the beauties of nature in an elegantly-bound printed volume might inform how one viewed a vista encountered on a walk, which, in turn, one might sensitively interpret and record in graceful script in a letter to a friend.<sup>13</sup> The manners, character, and knowledge that elite young women of Providence developed in stitching a sampler or in reading with a friend might then be enacted at the tea table, during promenades around town, or in a contest of wits with male counterparts. Taste—this way of looking, consuming, reading, and recording—created affinities and distributed cultural capital among women and men whose literary practices, social interactions, and material lives upheld the political and aesthetic values of the new Republic.<sup>14</sup>

As with physical samplers, in which a variety of stitches of different lengths, shapes, and colors conveys a legible overall picture, the variety of practices in which young women engaged—in needlework, at the tea table, or in a commonplace book—made up the “single, integrated project” of producing and projecting a discernible figure of polite femininity.<sup>15</sup> Young women demonstrated their attainment of those qualities not only within the social conventions and expectations of each setting but also in their ability to transition seamlessly among them. Scholars already have characterized the cultural practice of taste, and civility before it, as fluid and diverse in terms of genres, social activities, and, to a lesser degree, participants.<sup>16</sup> The experiences captured in the needlework of Mary Balch's students and Providence's diarists suggest that we should also

<sup>13</sup>Catherine E. Kelly, *Republic of Taste: Art, Politics, and Everyday Life in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 10–11.

<sup>14</sup>Kelly, *Republic of Taste*, 4–7; David Shields, *Civil Tongues and Polite Letters* (Chapel Hill: Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1997).

<sup>15</sup>Catherine E. Kelly, “Reading and The Problem of Accomplishment,” in *Reading Women: Literacy, Authorship, and Culture in the Atlantic World, 1500–1800*, ed. Heidi Brayman Hackel and Catherine E. Kelly (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 130.

<sup>16</sup>Kelly, *Republic of Taste*, 4–7; Shields, *Civil Tongues and Polite Letters*, 12–13.

consider the variety brought to the world of polite letters by movement through the material spaces of city streets.

This essay traces the exercise of taste within a particular geography and argues that for elite young women, physical mobility defined engagement with this emerging cultural practice. The intricate, purposeful movement across material forms and genres that these young women enacted as readers and writers matched their movement through physical space. Through their diaries, invitations, and needlework, they mapped and moved through a diverse terrain of intimate, institutional, and racialized spaces.<sup>17</sup> As these young women navigated the social intricacies of life, labor, and the literary among their city's physical terrain and built environments, they inflected the republic of taste with place-based forms of civic belonging and cultural affinity.

### *The Providence Landscape of Samplers and Sampling*

The places noted by Abigail Martin's sampler and Julia Bowen's diary entry together reveal the social geography of early national Providence. The daily life illuminated in these artifacts is one defined by mobility through different spaces around Providence, ranging from formal institutions to lowly dwellings. Only indisposition, unpleasant weather, or the monumental task of quilting seemed to keep Julia Bowen tethered to her home.

For these elite young women and their friends, daily life in Providence revolved around "the Neck," a hilly strip of land situated between the Great Salt Cove and the Seekonk River, in what is now the East Side of the city (fig. 2).

It was here that Providence's key commercial and civic leaders clustered their businesses and residences in the eighteenth century. Many of the prominent merchant families in

<sup>17</sup>Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995); Bernard Herman, *Town House: Architecture and Material Life in the Early American City* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); and Marla R. Miller, "Labor and Liberty in the Age of Refinement: Gender, Class, and the Built Environment," *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture* 10 (2005): 15–31.



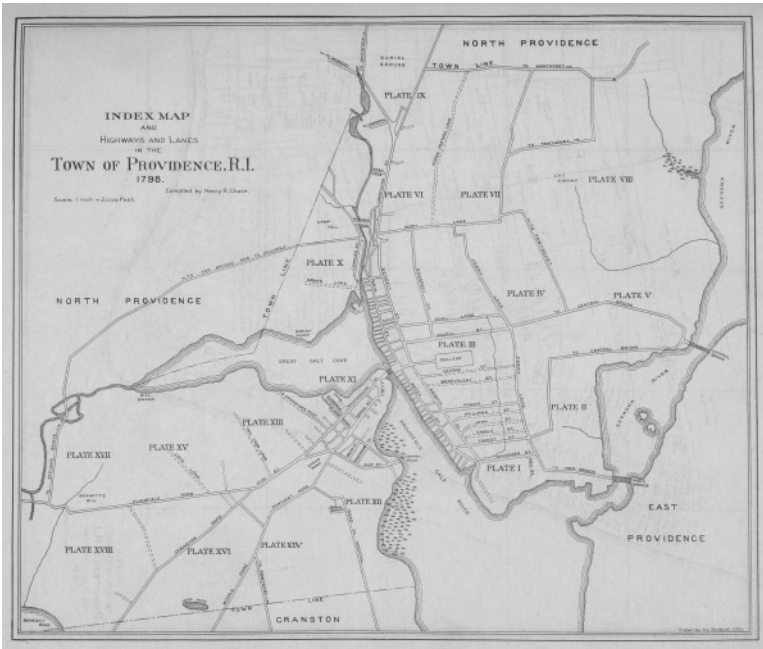


FIG. 2.—Index Map of Providence, from Henry R. Chace, *Owners and Occupants of the Lots, Houses, and Shops in the Town of Providence, Rhode Island in 1798* (Providence, RI: Livermore & Knight, 1914). Courtesy of the William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan.

Providence increased their prosperity in the final decades of the eighteenth century, first with privateering during the Revolution and afterwards by reviving commercial exchanges—mostly in connection to the slave trade—with the Caribbean and down the Atlantic seaboard. The most enterprising among them also forged new trade relationships as far away as China.<sup>18</sup>

In tandem with this expanding trade, the city acquired new institutions and infrastructure that reflected the growing prestige of its commercial leaders. These developments included

<sup>18</sup>For a more analytical study of women and society in New England ports, though not specifically in reference to Providence, see Elaine Forman Crane, *Ebb Tide in New England: Women, Seaports, and Social Change 1630–1800* (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 1998). Cady, *Civic and Architectural Development*, 47–51, 57–58.

new bridges to facilitate movement in and out of the city's traditional center, additional wharves to accommodate burgeoning shipping interests, and the state's first factories. Over the course of the 1790s, the city gained its first customs house, bank, and insurance company.<sup>19</sup> Farmland on the outskirts of town gradually developed into neighborhood plots, as enterprising merchants transformed formerly residential areas closer to the waterfront into more strictly commercial districts. Property values in the city tripled between the end of the Revolutionary War and the beginning of the nineteenth century while the population grew by twenty percent between 1790 and 1800.<sup>20</sup>

In the spring of 1799, Julia Bowen, her stepmother, and her younger siblings were residing close to the Power family towards the south end of the Neck, near today's Transit Street.<sup>21</sup> When she ventured from home in the afternoon with friends,

<sup>19</sup>Before the Revolution, all trade vessels coming to Rhode Island had to go through the customs house in Newport; the establishment of a customs house in Providence in 1791 marked its ascendancy in the state's maritime trade. Cady, *Civic and Architectural Development*, 57, 62.

<sup>20</sup>John Hutchins Cady, "The Development of the Neck: A Chronicle of the East Side of Providence (concluded)," *RI Hist.* 4 (1945): 37; Coleman, *Transformation of Rhode Island*, 225.

<sup>21</sup>Bowen's diary makes clear that the family's normal residence was being leased while Julia's father, Ephraim Bowen Jr., and brother William engaged in a commercial maritime expedition. Frequent references to members of the Power family in conjunction with mentions of locking up the house for the night, receiving visitors, or domestic chores, have shaped my sense of where Julia and her family were living. See entries of April 3, 1799, April 24, 1799, April 30, 1799, May 9, 1799, and July 4, 1799. Reconstructing the movements of Julia Bowen and her compatriots through the city required extensive triangulating between genealogies, local histories, and the diary. Deciphering locations affiliated with male heads of households—"Uncle Billy's" refers to the residence of William Bowen on Market Square—has been easier than those associated with the diarist's female friends, to whom she frequently referred either by first name alone or by cognomen. To figure out where "The Major's" home was, for instance, one must decipher from the diary's context clues that the Major was most likely Mary B. Howell, then consult a genealogy to connect Mary B. Howell to her father David, and finally locate David Howell's residence on Benefit Street. I remain uncertain about some identities and locations, but I have identified enough of Bowen's close companions and their residences to be confident in providing a characteristic description of her circuits. Invaluable sources in this endeavor have been Henry R. Chace, *Owners and Occupants of the Lots, Houses and Shops in the Town of Providence Rhode Island in 1798* (Providence: Livermore & Knight Co., 1914); Henry R. Chace, "A Descriptive List of all the Houses in the Compact Part of the Town of Providence, RI, 1779," Box 1, Folder 22, Henry R. Chace Papers, Mss. 338, RIHS; Clarkson A. Collins 3rd, ed., "Pictures of Providence in the Past, 1790–1890: The Reminiscences of Walter R. Danforth," *RI Hist.* 10 (1951): 1–13, 45–60, 85–96, 119–129, and 11 (1952): 17–29, 50–63;

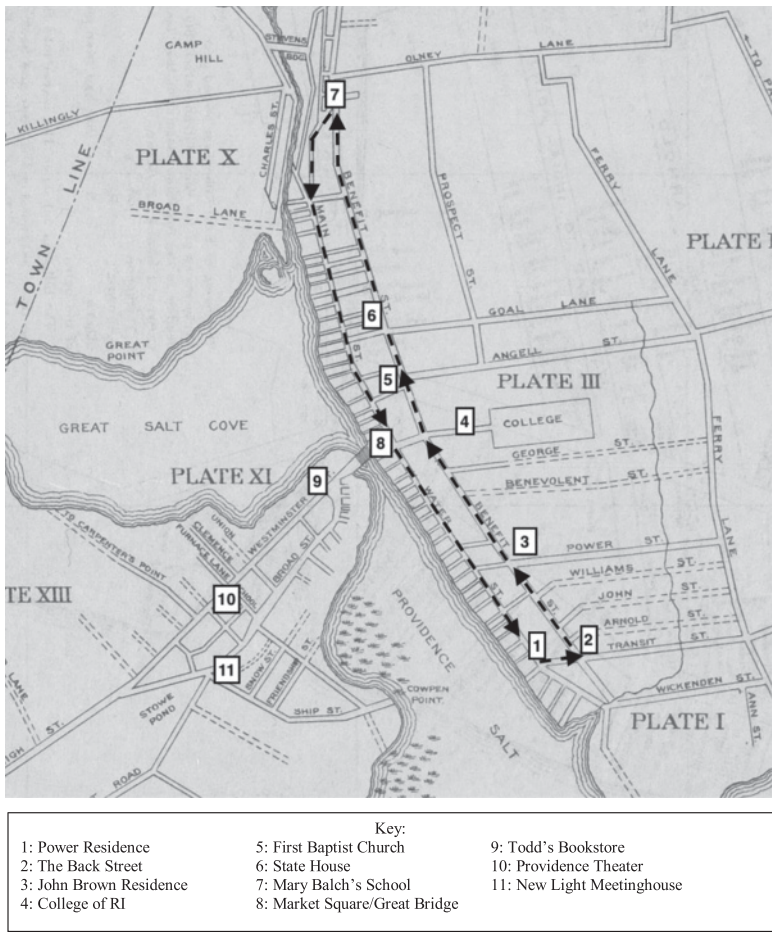


FIG. 3.—Julia Bowen’s circuit around Providence, 1799. Base image from Chace, *Owners and Occupants*, Index map, courtesy of the William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan.

they walked up the hill to Benefit Street, also known at the time as “the back street,” gathered more friends and made their way to the fortuneteller’s (fig. 3). Proceeding along the back

and *Representative Men and Old Families of Rhode Island*, 3 vols. (Chicago: J.H. Beers & Co., 1908).

street, the young women first would have passed the elaborate residences of a number of the city's wealthiest merchants: Julia's uncle, John Innes Clark; his partner in business, Joseph Nightingale; and perhaps most famously, John Brown. All three men had constructed lavish three-story homes on Benefit with their China trade profits; when George Washington visited the city as part of his inaugural tour in 1790, both the Clarks and the Browns entertained him in their mansions.<sup>22</sup>

Continuing north, Julia and her friends next would have passed the College of Rhode Island and several of the city's largest churches. The college had relocated to Providence in 1770 after several years of aggressive bidding by other towns to host the colony's premier site of higher education.<sup>23</sup> The construction of a brick edifice began soon after with the labor of at least four enslaved African Americans contributing to the project.<sup>24</sup> Standing atop a hill that soon bore its name, the completed college building commanded a sweeping view of the harbor and central market district and was, with seventeen windows on each of the façade's four stories, an impressive sight to behold (fig. 4).<sup>25</sup> When Abigail Martin and other students of Mary Balch reproduced the edifice on their samplers in the decade that followed, their precision with these architectural details made the building as unmistakable on linen as it was prominent in the landscape (fig. 5). Though they did not stop at the college that day, Julia and her companions occasionally attended prayers and orations there. The institution's formal exhibitions and commencement ceremonies served as important gatherings of the city's elite men and women.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>22</sup>Thomas Michie, "'Lavish Expenditure, Defeated Purpose': Providence's China Trade Mansions," in *Global Trade and Visual Arts in Federal New England*, ed. Patricia Johnson and Caroline Frank (Lebanon: University of New Hampshire Press, 2014), 172–74.

<sup>23</sup>Reuben Aldridge Guild, *Early History of Brown University* (1897; repr., New York: Arno Press, 1980).

<sup>24</sup>Robert P. Emlen, "Slave Labor at the College Edifice: Building Brown University's University Hall in 1770," *RI Hist.* 66 (2008): 36–45.

<sup>25</sup>Cady, *Civic and Architectural Development*, 44.

<sup>26</sup>Bowen diary, April 21, 1799; Rebecca Carter diary, August 20, 1794, December 31, 1794, Box 7, Carter-Danforth Papers, Mss. 336, RIHS; James Tallmadge to



FIG. 4.—University Hall, Brown University. Photograph by Kate Silbert.

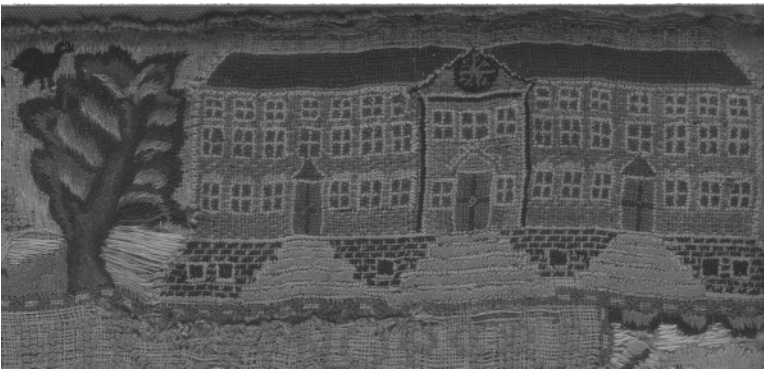


FIG. 5.—Detail of the College of Rhode Island on Loann Smith's sampler, 1785. Courtesy of the Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design.

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Rebecca Carter, April 19, [1797], Box 2, Folder 21, Carter-Danforth Papers; College of Rhode Island exhibition ticket for Miss R. Carter, 1794, Box 1, Folder 16, Carter Family Papers, John Carter Brown Library, Brown University, Providence, RI.



Another female diarist of the era, who visited from Philadelphia, recorded her pleasure in seeing the college's library—where, she wrote, “we were suffered to tumble over the books till we were tired”—as well as in witnessing a demonstration of some of the institution's scientific instruments.<sup>27</sup>

Prominent churches along the back street included the First Congregational Church, and, still standing between Waterman and Thomas Streets, the Baptist Meeting House. These towering structures, completed in 1795 and 1775 respectively, supplanted earlier, less elaborate gathering spaces and echoed church designs in Boston and London.<sup>28</sup> As emblems of the community's piety and cosmopolitanism both, these structures, too, appeared in detailed form on Providence needlework in the 1790s. A year after the Congregationalists dedicated their new meetinghouse on Benevolent Street, Polly Spurr captured its impressive double spires and clock face on a substantial 17-<sup>3</sup>/<sub>16</sub>-by-16-<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>-inch sampler that was one of the first visual records of the building (fig. 6).<sup>29</sup> Repeating a pattern fellow Mary Balch student Susan Smith had used for her depiction of the Baptist church a few years prior, Spurr set her name in large letters at the foot of the building's front steps.<sup>30</sup> Though most frequently in attendance at St. John's Chapel, the Episcopal church, Julia Bowen moved among various houses of worship in town and knew, inside and out, the religious edifices her peers stitched on linen. Over a three month period in 1799, for instance, she attended a wedding at the Quaker meetinghouse, services at the Episcopal, Baptist, and New Light churches,

<sup>27</sup>June 4, 1788, Susan Lear diary quoted in Lancaster, “By the Pens of Females,” 66–67.

<sup>28</sup>Local planners adapted Englishman John Gibbs's *Book of Architecture* to construct the Baptist church's façade while the layout of First Congregational Church drew from Wren's St. Paul's Cathedral in London as well as Bulfinch's Hollis Street Church in Boston. Cady, *Civic and Architectural Development*, 50, 67–68.

<sup>29</sup>Polly Spurr sampler, 1796, 49.368, RISD.

<sup>30</sup>Susan Smith sampler (1794), depicted in Ring, *Let Virtue Be a Guide to Thee*, 128. Other examples incorporating these buildings include work by Amey Randall (1793), Mary Tillinghast (1796), Abby Bishop (1796), and a generation later, Sarah F. Sweet (c. 1818). Ring, *Let Virtue Be a Guide to Thee*, 128–33.





FIG. 6.—Polly Spurr Sampler. Courtesy of the Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design.

and an Independence Day oration at the First Congregational Church.<sup>31</sup> As houses of worship and sites of community

<sup>31</sup>Bowen diary, May 2, 1799, May 19, 1799, May 26, 1799, June 2, 1799, June 16, 1799, July 4, 1799. Providence's New Light church, now Beneficent Congregational Church, was formed by disaffected members of First Congregational Church in 1743; Bowen often referred to the church by its ministers, Joseph Snow, its founder, and John Wilson. She referred to the First Congregational Church, also known as the Benevolent Congregational society, as the Presbyterian Meeting House. Compare her record of

gathering, these spaces—depicted or visited—reflected social bonds as well as religious devotion.

At the corner of Benefit and Powder House Lane (now Court Street), the back entrance of the State House awaited the passing party of young women. This brick structure, with its impressive central tower, was completed in 1762, four years after the previous building burned down.<sup>32</sup> Abigail Martin was among the first of Mary Balch's students to depict the reconstructed building on her sampler, though a string of others would do so between 1786 and 1799. A close friend of Julia Bowen, Rebecca Carter, went so far as to label the rendition of the building that she stitched in 1788 (fig. 7). Though she narrowed the building from five bays to three, local viewers readily would have recognized the hipped roof, balustrade, and central tower.<sup>33</sup> As of 1764, the books of the city's library company collection, established in 1753, could be found in the State House's council chamber. Indeed, most libraries of the era found room to operate within other spaces, including churches, schools, or, as in this case, a civic building.<sup>34</sup> Original subscribers to this circulating library included both of Julia Bowen's grandfathers, as well as the male relatives of a number of her friends. The initial collection chiefly consisted of works in theology, history, philosophy, and poetry but also

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hearing Jonathan Maxcy speak at the Presbyterian Meeting House on July 4, 1799, with the published title of his oration from that day. Jonathan Maxcy, *An Oration Delivered in the First Congregational Meeting-House, in Providence, on the Fourth of July, 1799* (Providence, RI: John Carter Jr., 1799).

<sup>32</sup>Cady, *Civic and Architectural Development*, 37–39.

<sup>33</sup>Rebecca Carter sampler, 2013.1.47, American Folk Art Museum, New York. Cady, *Civic and Architectural Development*, 38.

<sup>34</sup>Joseph Le Roy Harrison, *The Providence Athenaeum, 1753–1911* (Providence: n.p., 1911), 14; Thomas Augst and Kenneth Carpenter, eds., *Institutions of Reading: The Social Life of Libraries in the United States* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), 7. Libraries in private homes made up another important subset of these institutions in the colonial period and early Republic. In Providence, John and Abigail Francis and Samuel Arnold kept records specifically to track the circulation of their personal book collections in the 1790s and between 1803 and 1823, respectively. See "Catalogue of Books Belonging to A. & J. Francis," [photocopy of original owned by Henry A. Brown], Box 1, Folder 5, Francis Family Papers, Mss. 426, RHHS; "Samuel Arnold's library," Samuel Arnold Papers, Mss. 913, RHHS.

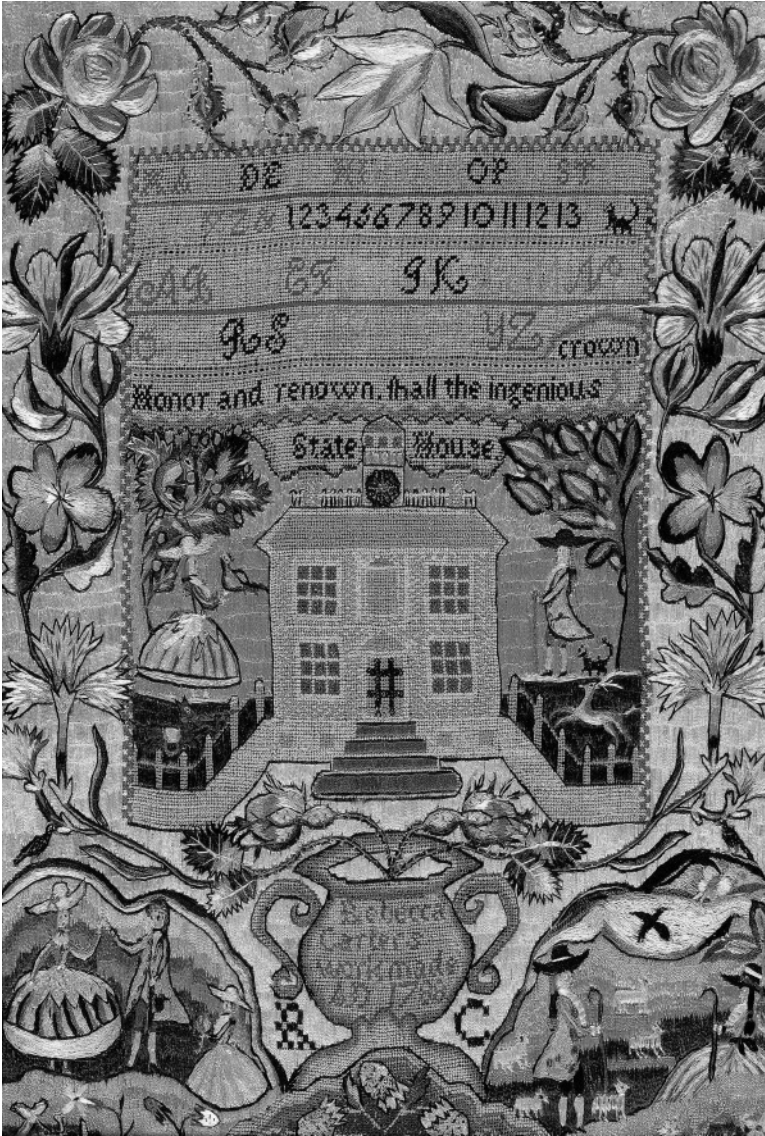


FIG. 7.—Rebecca Carter Sampler. Courtesy of the American Folk Art Museum / Art Resource, NY.

included anthologies, such as *The Ladies' Library*, and periodicals, such as *The Tatler*.<sup>35</sup>

Abigail Martin's sampler (fig. 1) featured images of both the college and state house, as well as distinct human figures, male and female, peopling the rich greens of the natural backdrop. The juxtaposition of people and institutions in her sampler demonstrates the complexity and contradictions embedded in young women's sociability in the early republic. "To Colleges and Schools ye Youths repair / Improve each precious Moment while youre there," the far top of the sampler declares over the meticulous depiction of University Hall. Yet the closest approximation to "youths" represented here are the two solitary female figures mirroring each other on either side of the top third of the piece; the young male scholars for whom the edifice existed and to whom Martin presumably directed her moral statement remain absent. The remaining eight figures in the piece, by contrast, all are paired male-female couples. Figuratively and literally, as sampler characters and sampler producers, the young women remain outside this institution of higher education but present and close enough to know its features and extol its virtues.

In a similar fashion, text, human figures, and architecture combine in the center of the sampler to mark the complex nature of gendered relationships to civic institutions. As with the college's edifice above it, a detailed reproduction of the State House sits under a large banner of stitched text: "Let Virtue be A Guide to thee." A distinguished-looking man and an elaborately-dressed lady stand flanking the structure and practically matching it in height. This visual array evokes no distinct recipient of Abigail Martin's reminder to abide by the moral wisdom of virtue: the address could be intended for this couple, the elected representatives of the State House, the wider body politic, or Martin herself, the maker.

The ambiguity created by the sampler's colliding visuals and text reflects the precarious political position of middle-class

<sup>35</sup>Harrison, *Providence Athenaeum*, 9; *Catalogue of all the Books belonging to the Providence Library* (Providence, RI: Waterman and Russell, 1768).



and elite white women in the early republic: barred from the ballot, women still proved visibly central to the first decades of the American republican experiment. In public spaces, they marched in parades celebrating the constitution's ratification, engaged with political topics in periodicals as readers and writers, or expressed republican simplicity in their modes of dress.<sup>36</sup> By the same token, male politicians and public thinkers—both male and female—embued women's existing domestic roles as wives and mothers with new civic significance.<sup>37</sup> Private and public virtue, and their importance to both family and national life, blurred both in Nabby Martin's sampler and in public discourse. Together, the social relationships, textual moral directives, and built structures featured in this and similar embroidered pieces recorded the maker's sociability: through it, she asserted her authority about and belonging in an idealized, harmonious community united by shared virtue and feeling.

In their unsuccessful venture to find the fortuneteller, Julia and her companions likely proceeded to the end of the back street, where it rejoined Constitution Street, and there reached a cluster of businesses at the far northern end of the city. Walter Danforth, the writer of a mid-nineteenth-century reminiscence of early national Providence, associated this part of town specifically with young women's commercial consumption.<sup>38</sup> In this neighborhood could be found John Whipple's dry goods shop where Julia purchased shoes and ribbon; Samuel Thurber's

<sup>36</sup>Susan Branson, *These Fiery Frenchified Dames: Women and Political Culture in Early National Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001); Rosemarie Zagari, *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007); David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776–1820* (Chapel Hill, NC: Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American Culture, 1997); and Kate Haulman, *The Politics of Fashion in Eighteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

<sup>37</sup>Ruth H. Bloch, "The Gendered Meanings of Virtue in the Early Republic," *Signs* 13 (1987), 47–53; Linda Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (1980; repr., New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), 13–32, and Sheila Skemp, *First Lady of Letters: Judith Sargent Murray and the Struggle for Female Independence*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).

<sup>38</sup>Collins, ed., "Pictures of Providence in the Past," 12–13.

paper goods store where she found materials for decorating a bonnet; and Mary Balch's school where a number of her peers had completed samplers.<sup>39</sup>

Educator Mary Balch's family had moved to Providence from Newport at the same time that the College of Rhode Island and the colony's economic prowess were swaying north in the 1770s. Mary and her mother, Sarah Rogers Balch, brought with them needlework expertise acquired in Newport where girls had stitched samplers since the 1720s and opened a school together.<sup>40</sup> Two of the distinctive needlework styles that came to be associated with Rhode Island, and which appear in samplers that Providence girls stitched in the final decades of the eighteenth century, emerged in Newport in the 1760s and 1770s: the "frolicking people" and the "elegant house" motifs.<sup>41</sup> Consistent with other academies for young ladies in the early national period, the Balches provided instruction in "Reading, Orthography, Grammar, Writing, Arithmetick, Geography, with the Use of the Globes, [and] History and Composition, especially the Epistolary Style" alongside the ornamental skills of "Drawing, Painting, Embroidery, with all the Varieties of plain, fancy and elegant Needle Work" and music.<sup>42</sup> At its peak enrollment in the first two decades of the nineteenth century, Mary Balch's academy attracted sixty to eighty students a year, including fifteen to twenty pupils who boarded at the school.<sup>43</sup>

One of Providence's emerging black neighborhoods, later known as Hard Scrabble, bordered this part of town. Parallel to the state's era of gradual emancipation, Providence transformed from a town "vertically zoned," in which enslaved and free

<sup>39</sup>Bowen diary, 13 April 13, 1799, May 29, 1799, June 15, 1799; Chace, *Owners and Occupants*, 8, 23; W.R. Staples, "Sketch of the Rise of Straw Braiding, for Ladies' Hats and Bonnets," in *Transactions of the Rhode Island Society for the Encouragement of Domestic Industry in the Year 1858* (Providence: n.p., 1859), 158.

<sup>40</sup>Newport girls likely completed samplers under the direction of teachers who received their training in Boston or in England. The earliest group of samplers produced in Newport predate the ones completed in Boston and Philadelphia. Ring, *Girlhood Embroidery*, 1:173–78.

<sup>41</sup>Ring, *Let Virtue Be a Guide to Thee*, 61.

<sup>42</sup>"Boarding and Day School," *The American* (Providence, RI), April 7, 1809.

<sup>43</sup>Ring, *Let Virtue Be a Guide to Thee*, 101.



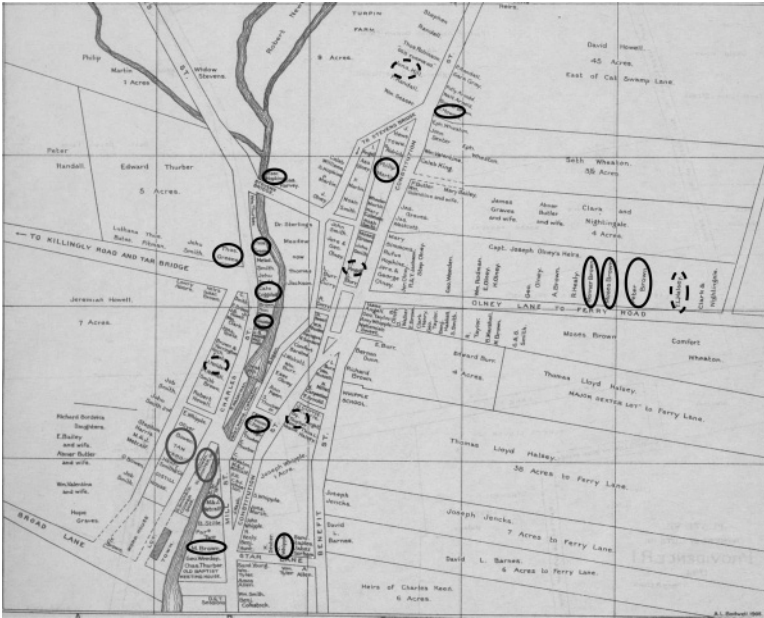


FIG. 8.—Distribution of free black households (black), houses in poor repair (dotted black), and tanyards and slaughterhouses (gray) in northern Providence, c. 1800. Base image from Chace, *Owners and Occupants* (1914), Plate 6, courtesy of the William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan.

laborers lived in the cellars, attics, or outbuilding spaces of their white owners, to one “horizontally zoned,” in which laboring people, black and white, resided at an increasing distance from those who employed them.<sup>44</sup> As early as 1798, a number of free black households could be found on small lots hugging the west side of the Mossashuck River, near the slaughterhouses, tanyards, and city work house on Charles Street. On the east side of the river, close to the junction of the back street with Constitution Street, another cluster of free black residences stood along Olney Lane (fig. 8).<sup>45</sup> When white mobs attacked

<sup>44</sup>John Wood Sweet, *Bodies Politic: Negotiating Race in the American North, 1730–1830* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 359.

<sup>45</sup>Reconstructing a spatial picture of Providence’s free black community in the early Republic is difficult because sources from the era effaced black households. Those who prepared the city’s first directory in 1824, for instance, summarily excluded black

Providence's black community later in the antebellum era, it was here that they targeted their destruction.<sup>46</sup>

Julia Bowen's quest for fortunetelling brought her into this increasingly racialized section of Providence with some frequency. In the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, African Americans and Native Americans dominated the profession of fortunetelling while unmarried white women and men, as well as sailors, made up most of the customers.<sup>47</sup> As Peter Benes has noted, most of those trading in the magical arts carried on a transient existence, moving among marginal residential enclaves located in the outer reaches of established communities: areas, in other words, like the emerging Hard Scrabble.<sup>48</sup> Bowen's diary offers fleeting glimpses of the racial and class politics that operated within these spaces. First, she and her peers sought this form of entertainment frequently and with a sense of entitlement. On this particular occasion, Bowen stressed frustration to have ventured so far to find "the old Lady" absent, rather than at hand to entertain her party. When the diarist and a friend "trudged" back a few days later, they found a handful of other young women already there, and several more "came bouncing in" shortly after.<sup>49</sup> Bowen and her companions also manifested their sense of privilege over these

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residences; as John Wood Sweet writes, such an erasure made people of color "absent from the conceptual townscape." To identify and locate black households in the northern section of the city from the era of Julia Bowen's diary, I compared data from the 1800 federal census with the 1798 tax list information compiled in Chace's *Owners and Occupants*. Sweet, *Bodies Politic*, 356–57.

<sup>46</sup>Joanne Pope Melish underlines, in addition, that free black residents in Providence had suffered property destruction at the hands of white mobs since at least the 1780s. Sweet, *Bodies Politic*, 353–56; Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 204–5, 128.

<sup>47</sup>Benes notes that nearly one-half of the eighty people he has identified as trading in magical arts in New England before 1850 were of African American, Native American, or mixed descent. For the period after 1800, the proportion of fortunetellers with these social backgrounds jumped to eighty percent. "Fortunetellers, Wise-Men, and Magical Healers in New England, 1644–1850," in *Wonders of the Invisible World: 1600–1900, Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife Annual Proceedings* ed. Peter Benes (Boston, MA: Boston University Press, 1995), 127–28.

<sup>48</sup>Benes, "Fortunetellers," 128; Sweet, *Bodies Politic*, 360.

<sup>49</sup>Bowen diary, April 1, 5, 1799.

transactions in terms of pay. On an evening outing to a fortuneteller's, she reported one friend "came away without paying the old Hag"; when the two returned for the friend to "pay her debt," they were confronted by a man who "came out of another room and commanded we depart immediately."<sup>50</sup> In contrast to the freedom with which Bowen and her friends typically moved in and out of these spaces, the activities and behavior of black residents within their own residences and neighborhoods attracted intense, and sometimes hostile, scrutiny from Providence's white civic leaders.<sup>51</sup>

The diary is vague on the route Julia Bowen and her friends used for their return trip to the southern end of the Neck, but since a few male companions joined them, they may have followed the main street down past the Great Bridge and through the city's Market Square. This thoroughfare, older and more congested than the back street above, would have taken them past a number of the city's other booksellers, printers, and news agents, not to mention a coffeehouse, several taverns, and wharves.<sup>52</sup> One of the most successful book trade firms here was the printing, binding, and bookselling venture owned and operated by John Carter, whose daughter Rebecca recorded her experience of the city with a diary and a plethora of social notes in addition to her sampler of the State House. After fifteen years of running the business on the ground floor of their family home on Meeting Street, John Carter, in partnership with William Wilkinson, relocated to the more commercial Market Square.<sup>53</sup> In the 1790s, Carter and Wilkinson advertised for sale children's books, medical texts, bibles, and songbooks, as well as paper goods, writing materials, and blank

<sup>50</sup>Bowen diary, April 13, 1799, April 22, 1799.

<sup>51</sup>Melish, *Disowning Slavery*, 126–30.

<sup>52</sup>Collins, ed., "Pictures of Providence in the Past," 88–96.

<sup>53</sup>*The Atlas of the Rhode Island Book Trade in the Eighteenth Century* (hereafter *Atlas of RI Book Trade*), a digital humanities project sponsored by the Rhode Island Historical Society and Brown University, maps the rise and decline of those businesses that catered to the literary taste of Providence's residents in the second half of the eighteenth century. Ring, *Let Virtue Be a Guide to Thee*, 122; Entries for "John Carter, 1772–1793," and "Carter and Wilkinson, 1793–1799," *Atlas of the RI Book Trade*, [www.rihs.org/atlas](http://www.rihs.org/atlas) (accessed May 7, 2015).

diplomas for students graduating from the local college.<sup>54</sup> In addition, Carter published the *Providence Gazette*, one of five newspapers printed in the city during that decade.<sup>55</sup>

Across the Great Bridge could be found more shops, the city's theater, and the New Light church, each of which Julia Bowen patronized on other occasions. At Todd's bookstore on Westminster Street, she bought schoolbooks and at another store, ribbon for the "uniforms" she and her friends designed to wear for Independence Day.<sup>56</sup> The Providence Theater had opened on the corner of Westminster and Mathewson (then School) Streets in 1795, the colonial ban on theatrical performances having been overturned.<sup>57</sup> Even when she did not attend the theater, Julia recorded in her diary what performances were given. Having read one morning Matthew Lewis's play *The Castle Spectre* which was to be performed the same evening, she declared in her journal, "I must go."<sup>58</sup> Beginning in the early nineteenth century, the city's downtown began to shift west across the Providence River to this area.<sup>59</sup>

Having relieved themselves of their attending beaux upon arriving home, Julia Bowen and Rebecca Power "retired at half-past 10," their circuit of Providence complete for the day. Although the Neck served as a social anchor for Providence elites, they also took advantage of the surrounding farmland and seascape for country retreats and afternoon jaunts. Family and trade connections gave many merchants—and, on occasion, their female relatives—reason to travel regularly to other large port cities on the Atlantic seaboard.<sup>60</sup> Although young women from these families traveled less frequently and widely than did their fathers, brothers, and husbands, their movement within and across Providence was constant. Julia Bowen and

<sup>54</sup>*Providence Gazette*, March 15, 1794, and September 6, 1794.

<sup>55</sup>*Atlas of the RI Book Trade*.

<sup>56</sup>Bowen diary, June 3, 1799, July 2, 1799.

<sup>57</sup>Cady, *Civic and Architectural Development*, 60.

<sup>58</sup>Bowen diary, July 12, 1799.

<sup>59</sup>Cady, *Civic and Architectural Development*, 71–72.

<sup>60</sup>Several of the largest merchant families built country houses near Providence, usually along Narragansett Bay. Lancaster, "By the Pens of Females," 65.

her peers traversed the civic, financial, and intellectual heart of the city as they traveled among each other's homes, schools, and commercial establishments. For these elite young women sentiment and sociability wound through the very streets of Providence, in and out of parlors and pews, bookstores and fortunetelling tables, schoolroom and theater. Their movements illuminate the gendered, racial, and class geography of this early national port city and suggest that for these young women, the ability to navigate these varied spaces was an important marker of their taste.

Marks on samplers likewise linked the individual female makers to a larger community: in addition to inscribing their names in the canvas, many young women also included their place of residence or birth.<sup>61</sup> Among Providence samplers, this textual statement of place connected the maker of the sampler to the natural and built landscape she depicted. In most Balch school samplers, for instance, floral motifs, human frolickers, and built structures combined to project a locally-grounded sense of place that encompassed Providence's civic, educational, and religious institutions, domestic spaces and relationships, and a pastoral landscape.

Embroidery produced by Balch school students provided some of the earliest visual depictions of Providence's most important buildings including the city court house, the State House, the College of Rhode Island's edifice and president's house, the First Baptist Meeting House, and the First Congregational Church.<sup>62</sup> Rather than merely depicting civic and educational structures from which women were excluded, the daily movements of Julia Bowen and her peers indicate that as educated white women, they had reason to be among and within those spaces on a regular basis. The sites depicted on

<sup>61</sup>One of the most popular verses to place on samplers before 1830 was a variation of "Hannah Weeks is my name / New England is my nation / Greenland is my dwelling-place / And Christ is my salvation." Bolton and Coe, *American Samplers*, 248.

<sup>62</sup>In the case of the Congregational church, destroyed by arson in 1814, exquisitely worked samplers like Polly Spurr's provides some of the most detailed documentation of the former structure. Ring, *Let Virtue Be a Guide to Thee*, 113–15; 130.

Balch school samplers were concentrated at the heart of the Neck between the main street and back street that formed the backbone of Julia Bowen's circuits. When girls stitched these structures into linen at age nine or ten, they not only were emulating the pleasing aesthetics of the buildings but also mapping the spatial and social anchors among which they would circulate as they entered adolescence and adulthood.<sup>63</sup>

### *Everyday Acts of Crossing Between*

Within this spatial terrain, young women's exercise of taste moved across genres and material forms. Samplers and manuscript materials that young women in Providence produced in the early national period typically integrated different texts, genres, and symbols into a single material object. In this environment bits of text moved between printed, manuscript, and stitched form. Texts and textiles, like their makers, circulated around the city, often in the hands of domestic laborers. These acts of crossing between, then, illuminate not only the varied activities and artifacts reflective of the republic of taste, but also the unmarked labor that facilitated those practices.

Julia Bowen's taste for books and manner of reading varied widely. Some of the pieces she explored, such as Plutarch's *Lives* or David Hume's multi-volume *History of England*, could be found in the collections of the Providence Library Company or the College of Rhode Island.<sup>64</sup> To these types of scholarly books, she usually devoted steady attention over the course of

<sup>63</sup>On samplers as acts of emulation, see Kelly, *Republic of Taste*, 44–45; William Hunting Howell, *Against Self-Reliance: The Arts of Dependence in the Early United States* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 133–39, 155. I concur with Howell's point that pieces of ornamental needlework are artifacts that indicate "individuality [was] less at a premium than membership" in a broader community of taste (139).

<sup>64</sup>Some of these volumes Bowen acquired from family members and friends through the same informal exchange that Rebecca Carter used and Abigail Francis recorded in the manuscript library catalogue she shared with her husband. Others, like the *Gazetteer* presented to her by one of her aunts, she noted as "a valuable acquisition to my little library." *Catalogue of the Providence Library* (1768); *Catalogue of Books Belonging to the Library of Rhode-Island College* (Providence, RI: J. Carter, 1793); Bowen diary, April 10, 1799.



several weeks or months.<sup>65</sup> Through these efforts, Julia continued in the intellectual practices she likely had undertaken during her years of formal education.<sup>66</sup> To a critical observer at the time, some of Julia's other reading would have merited disdain, but she resourcefully employed even this less respectable literature for her own ends. On the occasion of not being able to attend an evening party, a gothic novel like Regina Maria Roche's *Clermont* provided solace, as a means "to forget myself" and to calm her "uneasiness of mind."<sup>67</sup> Even though her friend Rebecca Power attended the party in question, when she returned at nine, the two girls sat rapt "till 12 finishing *Clermont*."<sup>68</sup> As she devoured the three volumes of the novel over two days, Julia had turned to it for both solitary and social enjoyment.

In similar fashion, Rebecca Carter's reading choices provided, by turns, entree into and escape from social engagements. The day after procuring a British epistolary novel, *The Cottage*, Carter went about her regular social calls until arriving at a friend's where a "strange gentleman" was expected. "I did not chuse to stay," she recorded succinctly. Instead, she "return'd to sisters & read all the Eve."<sup>69</sup> Several months later, as some of the first performances on the Providence stage took place, Carter could be found attending the theater and reading plays at home. After "reading in a little play book" for an evening and a morning, she found her friend Abigail Dexter, and together they sought out one of the young gentleman in

<sup>65</sup>Bowen mentioned reading Hume on several occasions between April and August; she appears to have taken up *Plutarch's Lives* after finishing *The History of England* in August. Bowen diary, April 1–2, July 31, August 5–7, 20, 1799.

<sup>66</sup>Julia's education likely began in Providence, but she eventually attended Mr. Woodbridge's school in Medford, Massachusetts with a number of other young ladies from her hometown. Bowen diary, August 1, 1799; Julia Bowen to Rebecca Carter, June 12, 1792, vol. 8, Shepley Papers, Mss. 9006, RIHS.

<sup>67</sup>*Clermont* is one of the "horrid" gothic novels that the vapid character, Isabella Thorpe, recommends to her innocent friend, Catherine Morland, in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*. Julia Bowen diary, April 2, 1799. On *Clermont* and Austen, see Robert K. Black, "The Sadleir-Black Gothic Collection" *Address before the Bibliographical Society of the University of Virginia, May 12, 1949* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Library, 1949).

<sup>68</sup>Bowen diary, April 2, 1799.

<sup>69</sup>Carter diary, April 19–20, 1794.

their acquaintance who had attended the theater the previous evening.<sup>70</sup>

The writing of these young women also alternated between playfulness and solemnity. On one occasion, Julia Bowen parodied the tendency of sentimental writers to exaggerate average circumstances. "What a subject for a Poet!" she exclaimed, in regard to the simple act of a friend leaving the house to step into the garden. "O that some famous one had been present, to hand the important event down to futurity." In the same entry, however, she herself fell into exaggerated language as she reported the insult of being harangued in the street earlier that day by a woman she perceived to be a prostitute.<sup>71</sup> This close juxtaposition of contrasts arose again when she took to transcribing poetry, instead of composing full entries of her own in late May. The first excerpt she included in her journal came from another gothic novel, Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*. In addition to inscribing the piece into her diary, she endeavored over the next several days to memorize a few verses of the poem. In her very next entry, however, she drew on more respectable fare, quoting at length from the "Spring" section of the Scottish poet James Thomson's *The Seasons*. As she explained, "by quoting the Beautiful Thompson [*sic*] I can best express myself."<sup>72</sup> Here, as in samplers, reproducing the familiar lines of an established author simultaneously marked Julia's personal character, her sense of feeling, and her participation in the republic of taste.

<sup>70</sup>Carter diary, September 8, 1794, September 10, 1794, October 9–10, 1794.

<sup>71</sup>"Such an insult from our own sex is too dreadfull, from the other it is as bad as it can be," Bowen penned furiously, before reasoning that "a Female must be inspired by something Infernal to degrade herself" and inquiring whether "God [will] permit such a sickness to reside in his Earth." On a different occasion later in the summer, she drew together a verse from the book of Job with a famous line from Voltaire's novel *Candide* to forge through the heartache she was suffering. Bowen diary, April 6, 1799, August 1, 1799.

<sup>72</sup>Thomson's work was ubiquitous in early American cultural artifacts. A different excerpt of "Spring" appeared in June 1, 1799 edition of *The Providence Gazette* and the poet's words, as well as depictions of images from the illustrated edition of the text, also ended up on early national samplers. Bowen diary, May 22–23, 1799; Bolton and Coe, *American Samplers*, 270; Ring, *Let Virtue Be a Guide to Thee*, 238–39.

Rebecca and Julia also shared books through their social network. Abigail Chace solicited from Rebecca “a book that will help pass away the Evening,” before naming her friend’s copy of *Elegant Extracts*, a popular compilation of British belles lettres pieces, as her preferred loan.<sup>73</sup> On another occasion Hannah Burrough wrote that the books sent by Carter had made another friend “so wondrously Interested” that “she hardly allows herself time to eat or Sleep.”<sup>74</sup> Having run into Julia Bowen at a mutual friend’s one afternoon, Sarah Cooke walked home with her to gather books Julia had promised to loan her; from there, the two made their way to a shop where Julia paid for the hair of a beau to be set into a ring, and Sarah had her teeth filed. Even Rebecca’s brief diary entries reflected this social element of literary engagement: “Carried a book to up to A. Dexter. Alice + Mary there,” she wrote on one occasion.<sup>75</sup> Sharing books became the grounds for spontaneous social engagement.

Even after their formal needlework training concluded, Rebecca Carter and Julia Bowen undertook sewing projects with social objectives in mind. The small tokens of friendship, usually handkerchiefs, that they produced were far less elaborate than samplers but all the more easily dispersed. Rebecca kept track of the handkerchiefs she had sewn and distributed among her social circle almost as diligently as she recorded her engagements for teas and private parties. Julia was busy at the end of June 1799 preparing cockades for her female friends to wear for the procession planned for the city’s Independence Day festivities.<sup>76</sup> In this instance, Julia’s needle skills signaled a relationship between her local social circle and her involvement in the new nation’s emerging civic identity.

Samplers moved through the city too, but on a limited circuit among home, school, and, when a family could afford it,

<sup>73</sup>Abigail Chace to Rebecka Carter, n.d., Box 2, Folder 21, Carter-Danforth Papers.

<sup>74</sup>Hannah [Burrough] to Rebecca Carter, n.d., Box 6, Folder 5, Carter-Danforth Papers (emphasis in original).

<sup>75</sup>Bowen diary, May 3, 1799; Carter diary, May 27, 1794.

<sup>76</sup>Carter diary, April 14–16, 1794, July 18–19, 1794; Bowen diary, July 3, 1799.

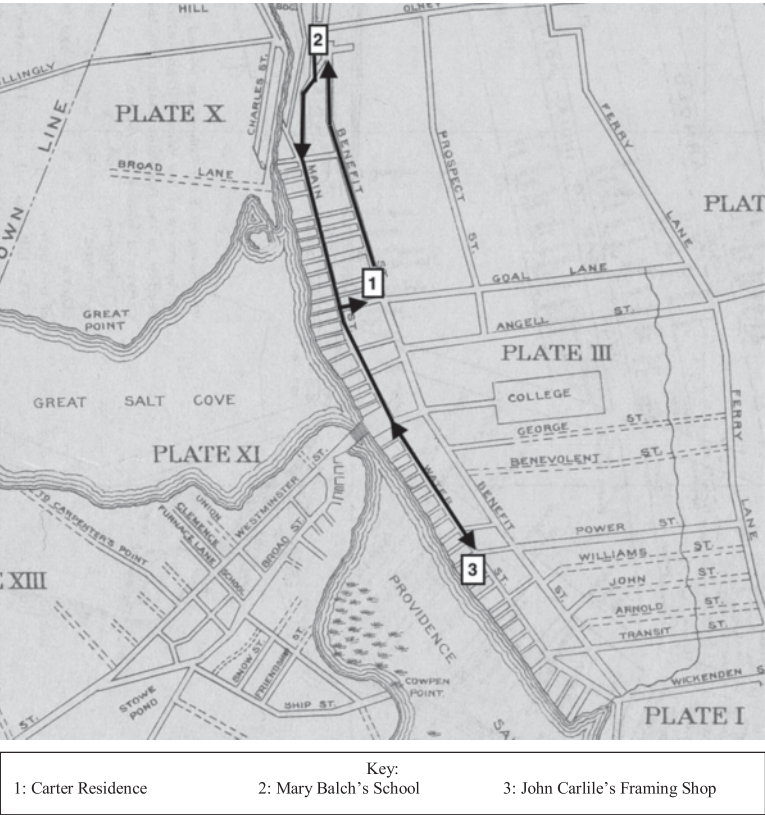


FIG. 9.—Rebecca Carter's sampler on the move, c. 1788. Base image from Chace, *Owners and Occupants* (1914), Index map, courtesy of William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan.

framer. Rebecca Carter's older sister Ann brought an unfinished sampler home from school in Newport in the late 1770s. Nearly a decade later, Rebecca took the piece from their home to Mary Balch's first school building at the foot of Constitution Hill. Upon its completion, her father arranged for local craftsman John Carlile to frame it; his workshop was located on one of the large wharves on the southeast side of the city. Finally, the finished product returned to the Carter residence (fig. 9).<sup>77</sup>

<sup>77</sup>Rebecca Carter Jenckes inscription, 1825, on reverse of Rebecca Carter sampler, 2013.1.47; Chace, *Owners and Occupants*, 8, 11. My thanks to Ann-Marie Reilly, Chief

As with other framed needlework, Rebecca Carter's work likely hung prominently in her family's parlor where visitors might admire it. "Whatever they depicted," comments Catherine Kelly, "these images were created explicitly for display."<sup>78</sup> The practices surrounding the production of needlework prompted interactions between family members, teacher, and student, and with the merchants and craftsmen who provided the materials at the outset or the skills to mount and frame the finished product, respectively.

In Providence, elite young women's exercise of taste rested not only on their own expansive movement around the city but also on the movement they could command from others. The notes, invitations, and other records they exchanged are brief but provide striking glimpses of how servants—some of whom may have still been enslaved—facilitated those exchanges.<sup>79</sup> When friends of Rebecca Carter wrote to inquire about upcoming social engagements, for instance, they might request her to reply "by the return of the boy" or to "give me an answer by the Bearer."<sup>80</sup> Although Julia Bowen regularly traversed Providence on foot, she also could depend on her friends to send a chaise driven by a servant when such transportation was desirable.<sup>81</sup> So embedded were household laborers in these everyday exchanges that a letter recipient might know who it was from by the identity of the bearer: when Rebecca Carter Jenckes—by then married—sent Baptist minister Stephen Gano a book in 1806, he apologized for his delay in sending thanks because "not seeing the servant myself, my family were not able to acquaint me with the friend who so

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Registrar and Director of Exhibition Production at the American Folk Art Museum, for photographing the Carter sampler inscription for me.

<sup>78</sup>Kelly, *Republic of Taste*, 45.

<sup>79</sup>Rhode Island's Gradual Emancipation Act of 1784 declared that children born to enslaved people after March 1 of that year would become free upon reaching adulthood (18 for boys and 23 for girls, raised to 22 and 25, respectively, in 1785). Melish, *Disowning Slavery*, 68–73; Sweet, *Bodies Politics*, 252–53, 363, 371–73.

<sup>80</sup>Ann Eliza Clark to Rebecca Carter, n.d., [Hannah Burrough] to Rebecca Carter, n.d., Box 2, Folder 21, Carter-Danforth Papers.

<sup>81</sup>Bowen diary, June 27, 1799.



obligingly loaned them.”<sup>82</sup> These unnamed servants, while left out of the written record, were known to the elite men and women who relied on them. Their labor enabled the flow of practices, objects, and people at the heart of the republic of taste, either by freeing young women from household responsibilities or by physically conveying invitations, parcels, and people through a city’s streets.

Fluidity characterized the make-up of texts and of objects in this context, too. In the 1780s and 90s, Providence’s newspapers featured a poetry corner in the back pages of most editions. Typically surrounded by advertisements and public notices, these pieces ranged in content from patriotic hymns and solemn religious verses to sentimental poetry and bawdier fare extracted from theater pieces.<sup>83</sup> Sometimes the editors of the paper specifically addressed these pieces to female readers, as the sponsors of the *United States Chronicle* did in their June 4, 1789 edition. The six-line piece was titled “Lines for a young Lady’s Sampler”:

How blest 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;  
Who sees her parents’ heart exult with joy,  
And the fond tear stand sparkling in their eye.<sup>84</sup>

Sometime over the next few years, Rebekah Munro stitched the same lines onto her sampler.<sup>85</sup> However, in the act of moving from printed form in the newspaper into the threadwork on Rebekah’s composition, the poem acquired new contextual

<sup>82</sup>Stephen Gano to Rebecca Carter Jenckes, October 14, 1806, Box 6, Folder 4, Carter-Danforth Papers.

<sup>83</sup>A good sampling of the variety of pieces can be found in the eight editions of the *Providence Gazette* issued in May and June, 1799.

<sup>84</sup>Not surprisingly, since many eighteenth-century newspaper editors readily reprinted material from other papers and periodicals, these verses also appeared in the spring of 1789 in the *Massachusetts Magazine* (Boston, MA) 1, no. 3 (March 1789). Betty Ring’s work alerted me to this earlier printing, *United States Chronicle* (Providence, RI), June 4, 1789; Ring, *Let Virtue Be a Guide to Thee*, 252.

<sup>85</sup>Munro sampler (c. 1792), in Ring, *Let Virtue Be a Guide to Thee*, 146.

surroundings and meaning. Instead of heading a column of advertisements, the lines form the centerpiece of Rebekah's sampler. A floral border frames the piece as a whole, while two landscapes featuring a couple surrounded by animals and flowers split the two pieces of text on the canvas. Moreover, the poem that had appeared in the newspaper was not the only text Rebekah included on the sampler. She headed the piece with a shorter phrase that appeared on other Providence samplers from the 1780s and 1790s: "With Sheba's queen ye American fair, / To adorn your mind bend all your care."<sup>86</sup>

In the printed version, the lines dictating how young women should improve are nested between those conveying the admiration of heavenly and earthly parents. By incorporating the additional directive to devote one's care to improving the mind, Rebekah's sampler established greater balance between the active work young women might pursue in shaping their character and the praises they would receive in return. Including both of these pieces of text, moreover, altered the visual content of the piece by leaving less room on the canvas for visual symbols; Rebekah's sampler featured only couples and landscape unlike other pieces completed around the same time that contained houses or public buildings.

Although not every set of text that appeared on eighteenth-century samplers originated in an existing piece of writing, scholars have noted a cadre of predominantly English authors whose words frequently ended up embroidered on canvas.<sup>87</sup> As Catherine Kelly has remarked, the maxims and proverbs that appeared on samplers drew from the same pool of authors—Isaac Watts, Alexander Pope, Thomas Cowper, John Bunyan, and James Thomson—whom young women were encouraged to read and whose sayings often filled their journals or commonplace books. By incorporating lines from these common texts, sampler makers publically marked their affiliation with a larger transatlantic community of letters, not unlike a young

<sup>86</sup>See Munro sampler; For similar pieces, see Abija Hall and Nabby (Abigail) Dexter's samplers, all depicted in Ring, *Let Virtue Be a Guide to Thee*, 146, 138–39.

<sup>87</sup>Ring, *Let Virtue be a Guide to Thee*, 248–54.



FIG. 10.—Ann Barton Samplermourning embroidery, 1800. Courtesy of the Rhode Island Historical Society.

man at the College of Rhode Island might have done in employing an extract from his commonplace book in a debate.<sup>88</sup> Also, by using texts already in circulation for their samplers, young women invited the viewers of their embroidery to recognize these unattributed sayings and thereby to demonstrate their fluency in taste.

In other instances, stitch-work took on the appearance of ink, as the lines of dedication on Ann Barton's embroidery did in 1800 (fig. 10). Pieces of mourning embroidery tended

<sup>88</sup>Kelly, *Republic of Taste*, 45.

to be completed on silk, rather than linen, and were usually strictly pictorial. Both mourning and pictorial embroidery became more common in the late 1790s. Changing materials and forms contributed to the changing look of text, and these impressions on silk increasingly mirrored those in print. Typically the pieces depicted a gravestone and weeping willow, and sometimes female mourners dressed and veiled in black. If any text appeared, it was stitched to mimic the appearance of pen ink or engraved stone, rather than in the bulkier letters typical of samplers. The silk satin of the canvas, which was more expensive than one of linen, also provided a pristine background for thin lines and fine detailing. Likewise, the satin stitches used to fill in large areas of pictorial embroideries required more sophistication than the simple tent stitches used for linen embroideries.<sup>89</sup> The stitches making the words on Barton's piece are so fine that unless one notes the small indentations where the needle pricked the silk, the text looks like the work of a pen (fig. 11). This nimble writing with stitches became a hallmark of Mary Balch's school in the turn to mourning and pictorial embroidery. Whereas those in other schools *did* mark the monuments and urns of their pieces with ink, Balch's students instead made them with fine black silk.<sup>90</sup>

At first glance, it may seem as though the shift to mourning embroidery represented a move away from the communal and civic ties conveyed by images of the State House, college, and churches in the samplers. Although scholars have argued that pieces of mourning embroidery chiefly served as decorative commemorations rather than as aids to the grieving process, the pieces memorialized relationships with a blend of text and image.<sup>91</sup> The visual style of mourning embroidery produced in Rhode Island and elsewhere across the new nation, moreover, owed much to the circulation of popular prints

<sup>89</sup>Ann Barton mourning embroidery, 1800, 1840.1.14, RIHS; Ring, *Girlhood Embroidery*, 1:20–22; Pamela A. Parmal, *Women's Work: Embroidery in Colonial Boston* (Boston: MFA Publications, 2012), 83.

<sup>90</sup>Ring, *Let Virtue Be a Guide to Thee*, 158.

<sup>91</sup>Ring, *Girlhood Embroidery*, 1:21.



FIG. 11.—Detail of Ann Barton mourning embroidery, 1800. Photograph by Kate Silbert, used with permission of the Rhode Island Historical Society.

memorializing the recently deceased George Washington.<sup>92</sup> In these pieces, then, nationally-circulating neoclassical imagery blended with a local instructor's direction and the individual maker's personalized memorial to a deceased friend or family member. Another early nineteenth-century shift in samplers, towards making family registers the primary subject matter, furthered the links between acts of needlework and acts of commemoration.<sup>93</sup>

Social ties mediated and influenced the needlework and the literary practices of young women. Such mediation might involve the physical sharing of books and embroidery patterns or

<sup>92</sup>Ring, *Let Virtue Be a Guide to Thee*, 158–59; Ring, *Girlhood Embroidery*, 1:20–21.

<sup>93</sup>Peter Benes, “Decorated New England Family Registers, 1770 to 1850,” in *The Art of Family: Genealogical Artifacts in New England*, ed. D. Brenton Simons and Peter Benes (Boston: New England Historic Genealogical Society, 2002), 13–16; François Weil, *Family Trees: A History of Genealogy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 52–53.



the symbolic guidance of governing taste and access to particular texts, spaces, and practices. The work of needle and pen that young women produced signified and further cultivated their membership in a community of elites within and beyond Providence. Thus, although scholars have read needlework pieces like other written texts as markers of self, the selves that these young women were crafting relied upon and remained animated by these relational processes and circulating practices of sociability.

### *Samplers Crossed into Memory:*

Providence samplers retained this relational function even as their makers aged. Much of what we know about Rebecca Carter's sampler, for instance, comes from a written history she commenced in the 1820s. Although samplers and embroidery continued to feature prominently in women's education well into the antebellum period, they would enter a long state of dormancy by the middle of the nineteenth century.<sup>94</sup> In Rebecca Carter Jenckes's hands, a sampler was both an object to be memorialized and one *through* which to memorialize. With her memories and the line of inheritance she intended attached to it, the piece would encapsulate a broader history of familial, intellectual, and social status.

On a warm June morning in 1825, Jenckes composed a lengthy memorandum about the work she had completed thirty-seven years earlier. We know from her annotations that she made the record in at least two sittings, elaborating in the second bit of text information she had referenced only briefly or omitted in the first. She attached the paper of memories directly to the back of her sampler's frame, taking steps to ensure that the information she recorded would remain connected to the work. In so doing, she fused a stitched record with a scribal one, producing a complex artifact of mixed materials and of memory.

<sup>94</sup>Ring, *Girlhood Embroidery*, 1:14, 24–25.

Jenckes memorialized first and foremost the assemblage of people involved in the sampler's making: her sister Ann, who had commenced the piece in Newport under the direction of Abigail Wilkinson in the late 1770s; "the Honorable Nicholas Brown," whom her sister later had married; teacher Mary Balch, under whose instruction she herself had completed the work; her father, John Carter, who was "much pleased" with the piece; and John Carlile, the man whom her father commissioned to frame it.<sup>95</sup> Rebecca Carter Jenckes entwined family, education, and consumption in her inscription. Though her name and initials marked the front, her memories on the back situated the needlework within a wider circle of respectability. It was work from the hands of two young women, to be sure. But the additional family members, educators, and craftspeople she recalled and named on the back demonstrated that she and her sister came from the right sort of family, learned from the right sort of teachers, performed the right kind of consumption, and married the right sort of men. The needlework represented more than a refined education—it marked as well lineage, taste, and marriageability.

As much as the piece was about the Carter family's legacy, it also captured a broader local history. The timing of the inscription corresponded with the conclusion of needlework instructor Mary Balch's forty-year career. Circumstances at Mary Balch's academy, like those in the lives of her former students, had evolved since the final decade of the eighteenth century. Notably, Balch relocated her school to the Neck's George Street in 1801. The change moved the school away from the racially and economically mixed northern end of town and resituated it in close proximity to the College of Rhode Island and to the elaborate residences of the city's elites. Balch also encountered increasing competition from other instructors in the first decades of the nineteenth century as enthusiasm for female academies, and educational opportunities in

<sup>95</sup>Jenckes inscription, 1825, Rebecca Carter sampler, 2013.1.47.

general, grew.<sup>96</sup> Concurrent with these changes, the style of samplers shifted to make mourning and other pictorial embroidery, typically stitched painted on silk and more popular than the mélange of civic buildings, verse, flowers, and frolickers common on the pieces girls such as Abigail Martin and Rebecca Carter had produced in the previous decades. “Miss Balch is still living,” Jenckes remarked in an addendum to the inscription, “but infirm and in a poor state of health.”<sup>97</sup> Around this time, Balch likely turned over the direction of her school to her adopted daughter, Eliza Walker, who would continue to run the academy on George Street for about a decade after Balch’s death in 1831.<sup>98</sup>

Appropriately, Jenckes inserted a line of eighteenth-century poetry among her memories. In so doing, she sustained the practice of sampling among different forms of literary engagement within the space of a single page. The brief text, from Edward Young’s *Night Thoughts*, might just as readily have found a place on the front of the sampler or in the pages of the diary she had kept in the 1790s. Indeed, the line appeared in *Elegant Extracts*, the prized volume of British prose and verse that circulated among Rebecca Carter and her friends in that decade.<sup>99</sup> Her personal recollections co-mingled with her readerly memory of Young’s verse as she committed both to paper. In Jencke’s hands, Young’s century-old text—“That life if long, which answers lifes [*sic*] great end”—signified a set of specific

<sup>96</sup>Ring, *Let Virtue Be a Guide to Thee*, 97–112. Mary Kelley, *Learning to Stand and Speak: Women, Education, and Public Life in America’s Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 66–111.

<sup>97</sup>Jenckes inscription, 1825, Rebecca Carter sampler, 2013.1.47.

<sup>98</sup>Ring, *Let Virtue Be a Guide to Thee*, 111–12.

<sup>99</sup>*Elegant Extracts*, compiled by Vicesimus Knox, went through many editions in prose and in verse in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, so it is difficult to know precisely which version Rebecca Carter owned. Her father John Carter advertised the work for sale in three volumes in 1795. Young’s writing was available to American readers in many forms in the late eighteenth century, so Rebecca Carter turned Rebecca Jenckes may also have encountered the phrase in a newspaper, another anthology, or an independent volume of Young’s verse. The reference to “Night Thoughts” she added to the sampler inscription appears in *Elegant Extracts: or, Useful and Entertaining Pieces of Poetry, Selected for the Improvement of Young Persons* (London, 1801), 139; Abigail Chace to Rebecca Carter, n.d., Box 2, Folder 21, Carter-Danforth Papers; *Providence Gazette*, August 1, 1795.

lives. The words also imbued anew those people she memorialized with the markers of eighteenth-century sensibility.

Jenckes addressed the memorandum to her two absent sons, her only surviving children. At the time, one was in Marietta, Ohio, and the other was completing his education in New York City. She specified that she intended for her younger son, who carried his deceased father's name, to inherit the sampler and its history. In addition, she wished him "to preserve it in remembrance of his Aunt, and of his affectionate Mother."<sup>100</sup> Without a daughter to whom to entrust the piece, Rebecca Carter Jenckes could have selected a niece or other distant family relative to inherit the artifact of her education. Instead, she charged her sons with preserving the memory and material objects of their female relatives. With her combination of narrative and directives, Jenckes marked her sampler as both a distinctly female artifact and as one meant to descend through a traditional patrilineal line; preserving the piece in a direct family line mattered more than having it preserved by someone of the same gender as its makers. Though household textiles were among the family articles most typical for a female descendant to inherit in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, samplers and other forms of ornamental needlework were textiles apart. As Jenckes's memorandum reflected, samplers signified qualities that were not singularly feminine, but including family legacies of education, taste, and belonging to a broader community.<sup>101</sup>

### *Reuniting Pen, Needle, and Place:*

Beginning in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, descendants of sampler makers, members of lineal organizations, and decorative arts enthusiasts increasingly attached needlework to a narrative of national development that emphasized simple origins, cultural progress, and democratic

<sup>100</sup>Jenckes inscription, 1825, Rebecca Carter sampler, 2013.1.47. Francis Carter Jenckes (b. 1803) was living in Marietta, Ohio, while Amos Throop Jenckes Jr. (1809–1882), the namesake of his deceased father, was residing in New York City.

<sup>101</sup>Miller, *The Needle's Eye*, 96–101.

respectability.<sup>102</sup> Accordingly, the features of note in these artifacts changed, as did the material and discursive settings of their display. The spaces into which white women and men set samplers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, whether it was in the primitive surroundings of the reimagined “New England log house” or among the diminutive language of “Marms” and “little workers,” stripped away the particularities of their making and their makers.<sup>103</sup> The timing of this shift coalesced with the professionalization of the academy and the rise of those scholarly standards that had no place for what were by then perceived as fanciful decorations smattered with derivative verse.

The new rhetoric of “Rhode Island samplers” flattened the specificity and clouded the privilege—spatial, social, and literary—on which Providence’s ornamental needlework long had rested. The fact of this rhetorical and physical remove between samplers and their original contexts of circulation underscores the necessity of reuniting pen and needle—and place. Resituating diaries and samplers in the place of early national Providence and tracing the circuits taken by the young women who created them shows the physical mobility on which the exercise of taste relied for full expression. The reading and writing practices of Abigail Martin, Julia Bowen, and their peers moved among genres, material forms, and the very streets of the city. In addition to the cultural capital to be gained as a participant in the republic of taste, these practices shaped one’s

<sup>102</sup>On the efforts of lineal societies to contort the American past to late nineteenth-century racial politics in Rhode Island, see Robert Emlen, “Colonial Relics, Nativism, and the DAR Loan Exhibition of 1892,” in *New England Collectors and Collections: Annual Proceedings of the Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife*, ed. Peter Benes (Boston: Boston University Press, 2006), 171–87.

<sup>103</sup>These references come from descriptions of eighteenth-century samplers included in the “New England log house” display at the 1876 Centennial exhibition in Philadelphia, Bolton and Coe’s 1922 survey of American needlework, and the Rhode Island Historical Society’s 1920 exhibition of samplers, respectively. S.L.M., “The New England Log House,” *The New Century for Woman* (Philadelphia: Published by the Women’s Centennial Committee, 1876), 67–68; Bolton and Coe, *American Samplers*, 141; George L. Miner, “Rhode Island Samplers,” *Rhode Island Historical Society Collections* 8 (1920): 48. As Marla Miller writes, the Progressive era’s current of commemoration “celebrated the ornamental aspects of needlework, romanticized the tedious, and effaced the remunerative.” Miller, *The Needle’s Eye*, 212.



bearings within a particular social geography, and the markings of needle and pen alike recorded one's belonging within it.

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