

*Ohio Is My Dwelling Place: Schoolgirl Embroideries, 1800-1850.* By Sue Studebaker. With a foreword by Kimberly Smith Ivey. (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2002. xxvi, 310 pp. Cloth, \$70.00, ISBN 0-8214-1452-6. Paper, \$34.95, ISBN 0-8214-1453-4.)

In 1777, a Continental Army officer complimented Philadelphian Sarah Wister on her “needle wisdom.” The young Miss Wister’s sampler, hanging in the parlor of the family’s Germantown home, served as the sole evidence of this trait. One necessarily wonders how much *wisdom*, a term so often applied to the learned, the experienced, or the elderly, may have been possessed by a sixteen-year-old Quaker girl. We do know that Sally (as she was called by family and friends) attended Anthony Benezet’s school, British America’s first public school for women. There Sally learned the basics of education, but also learned the “higher branches” of French and Latin. In the last quarter of the eighteenth century American girls’ school curricula did approach that of boys; the differences, though, charted gender roles and class expectations. Sally Wister still learned needlework as she parsed French, as did other young girls of the time. In 1777, Alice Lee Shippen wrote to her daughter Nancy (who attended a Trenton, New Jersey, boarding school) of her expectations of these “ornamental branches” of a young lady’s education:

Tell me how you improve in your work. Needle work is a most important branch of a female education, & tell me how you have improved in holding your head & sholders, in making a curtsy, in going out or coming into a room, in giving & receiving, holding your knife & fork, walking and seting. These things contribute so much to a good appearance that they are of great consequence.

From the mid eighteenth century through the Civil War, *wisdom* meant to Americans the ability to judge rightly in matters relating to life and conduct. *Wisdom* could also define learning or erudition, or a type of knowledge, as well as the spiritual life attained through biblical study. Young ladies’ use of needle, thread, and other tools with which to create alphabets, verses, images, and symbols, was not the necessary skill of a tailor. A genteel girl’s needlework signaled to all the acquisition of an education and a specific set of social graces. In Sally Wister’s case, as in those of many other American girls in this era, “needle wisdom” embodied in a sampler symbolized the pursuit of refinement, the acquisition of a specific skill and, especially after the

American Revolution, more cosmopolitan knowledge, and even a spiritual nature deemed peculiar to women.<sup>1</sup>

However rude their surroundings may have been, young white women in early Ohio were not exempt from the social necessity of these “ornamental” accomplishments. As Sue Studebaker documents in *Ohio Is My Dwelling Place: Schoolgirl Embroideries, 1800-1850*, some 290 samplers representing fifty-seven counties (of the state’s current eighty-eight) attest to the aspirations of Ohio’s “first” families. Amongst the samplers she has painstakingly uncovered and reproduced (many in color) in this volume is evidence of “needle wisdom.” Following the lead of indefatigable curators and collectors who, beginning in the 1970s, connected individual samplers to (often anonymous) needlework teachers, Studebaker seeks to “weave together” for each sampler “a brief story of the stitcher, her family, and the circumstances that surrounded her life” [xi].<sup>2</sup> This she does through diaries, letters, newspapers, censuses, maps, and county, city, and town histories, especially those published at the end of the nineteenth century.

After a brief introduction recounting the historic geopolitical organization of Ohio, Studebaker orders her work in three parts by region (Southern Ohio, Central Ohio, and Northern Ohio) following, roughly chronologically, the state’s settlement. Within each part she further divides her discussion into chapters correlating (again chronologically) to counties. Each chapter offers a brief synopsis of the county’s founding and establishment of schools before providing a catalogue of extant samplers found there. A final section (“Victorian Impulses: Selected Needlework after 1850”) and an epilogue (“Everything Old Is New Again”) relate briefly the decline of school instruction in needlework, the introduction of the sewing machine, and the concomitant interest in collecting historic girls’ needlework. A list of documented Ohio samplers and of Ohio pioneer teachers and schools provide useful information for further research.

In this bicentennial year of Ohio’s statehood, this compilation, the tireless work of travel to, and research in, public and private collections is to be commended. Studebaker has taken on a difficult task of reconstructing the individual lives and the social life of these makers and their samplers. One often delights in reading the specifics of a given family’s experiences in their new homes in the “Ohio Country.” Although certainly useful for local historians and curators seeking to augment existing chronicles, *Ohio Is My Dwelling Place* may confound scholars of American social, cultural, and women’s history. The reader finds a descriptive, if uneven, compilation rather than an analysis of the social, political, and cultural meanings of these historic samplers. In part this is due to the author’s penchant for characterizing these artifacts with ahistorical aesthetic terms—Anna Cumming Schenck’s needlework is “perhaps the prettiest” of the samplers related to a Franklin County school [49], for example, and Mary Wing Dodge’s sampler displays elements that “seem to be drawn by an unschooled hand” [5]. The very decorative nature of samplers has often led to their dismissal as useful historical evidence. The employment of terms such as “charming” and “quaint” serve generally to dismiss rather than represent serious study. Such terms are also part of the lexicon created by the connoisseur in relation to the antiques trade, in which an object’s value is more often based on the fluctuations of the market and collectors’ interests rather than a

consideration of what professional historians would deem important. The elements of connoisseurship evident in Studebaker's work—the attention to detail, the implicit comparison of styles, the level of expertise of the maker, and the like—are necessary in any study of artifacts. Without an explanation of the bases of connoisseurship employed, the evaluation of these samplers appears speculative rather than definitive.<sup>3</sup>

Many historians interested in American women's experience would be troubled with Studebaker's strategy, if only because women's agency—what women may present through their needlework—takes second place to the wilderness-busting of their fathers and brothers. The imaginative play of text and image within these young women's works should compel scholars to seek various theoretical strategies with which to comprehend this rich body of evidence. For instance, Studebaker's choice of chronicling the samplers by county, even as the boundaries of Ohio's counties changed over time, does not necessarily interrogate the needle workers' understanding of place. It's one thing to relate how a young girl and her family came to the Ohio frontier and to chart the family's establishment of a new home, quite another to reconstruct how that young girl conceptualized her "place" in the new country. Literary historian Annette Kolodny and women's historian Lillian Schlissel have found that women's westering experiences and related attitudes differed from those of their male counterparts. How may scholars understand the choices of image and text within nineteenth-century American schoolgirls' notions of the ever-shifting West, of place, of time?<sup>4</sup>

Given that many of these samplers were schoolwork directed by teachers and parents in an era in which American geography and history textbooks were constantly revised and pedagogy debated, how may scholars chart through girls' embroidery the spread and acceptance of such political knowledge into the territories and newly formed states? Here, the research of Martin Brückner on American geography and Nina Baym, on women writers of American history, would be useful to Studebaker's research on teachers and schools in the state.<sup>5</sup> Studebaker's inclusion of a colorful map of the Western Reserve, engraved by William Savery and published by William Sumner (not, as Studebaker states, drawn by Sumner), includes seven vignettes culled from popular imagery, among which are local flora (what girls would draw from life and study through botany), a portrait head displaying expression (from Le Brun), and an image displaying six women as Roman goddesses often seen in Early Republican iconology. Itinerant artists were rendering with brush and paint family trees and maps and mourning pictures of Washington, as much as schoolgirls were producing the same with thread and needle. Such "curatorial" practices in keeping and disseminating this political knowledge, especially in an era in which Americans were seeking to preserve Revolutionary ideals through family history and westward expansion, implicate a materialization of a larger nationalist ideology.<sup>6</sup>

In short, it may be possible, through girls' needlework, to "map" an alternative history, and a national one at that. We may be able to learn how a region or a state becomes culturally part of the nation. Yet we may learn something more. Rather than read these samplers, taken together, as reflecting the larger story of (male) western settlement, may we also consider how these samplers, offering place names, images of

public and private buildings, and other historical information, created a chronicle of women's experiences, through the selection of certain motifs?

The selection of verses found on these samplers provides a fascinating index of larger cultural changes in the "Ohio Country." Studebaker astutely points out in her discussion of Quaker girls' needlework the tenets of that faith reflected in the verses as well as the imagery that decorates those sentiments. A cursory chronological review of the samplers in this volume reveals that the choice of verses may reflect the uneven religious fervor sweeping the state with the Second Great Awakening. Verses about virtue are replaced by verses of Christian belief. When a young schoolgirl stitched "Ohio is My Dwelling Place" what did she mean? The answer is found in the context of such verses. Quaker Anna Garwood's sampler, wrought in 1832, reads: "Anna Garwood is my name/in Ohio is my station/in Warren is my dwelling place/and Christ is my salvation" [45]. Lucretia Kirtland's earlier sampler of 1808 carries similar verses:

Lucretia Kirtland—November 2<sup>nd</sup> 1807 Aged 10  
Wallingford [Connecticut] is my native place  
And English is my nation,  
Poland is my dwelling place  
And Christ is my salvation. [232]

The Kirtland family, living in what was then Trumbull County, was also living amidst a religious revival. Yet, we learn that several verses were "common" to samplers or are "popular" amongst collectors, but we are at a loss to understand when and why.

In the early nineteenth century, when pedagogical practice was exhaustively debated by the likes of Cincinnati Catharine Beecher, Antioch College's Horace Mann, and others, how may scholars apprehend, through a comparison of textbooks and samplers, the application of pedagogical theory and community standards and practices in girls' education? As needlework specialists Susan Swan and Betty Ring have found, penmanship manuals contained both writing "hands" and embroidery "hands" in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. At the same time, however, what was considered a proper education for girls and for boys became a topic of national discussion—especially as industrialization organized anew American society. The novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne joined in the discussion as well, when he contrasted the courtly Hepzibah Pyncheon and her country cousin Phoebe in his 1851 work about the effects of the new industrial ordering of economy and society, *The House of the Seven Gables*.

To find the born and educated lady, ... we need look no farther than  
Hepzibah, our forlorn old maid, in her rustling and rusty silks, with her  
deeply cherished and ridiculous consciousness of long descent, her  
shadowy claims to princely territory, and, in the way of accomplishment,  
her recollections, it may be, of having formerly thrummed on a  
harpsichord, and walked a minuet, and worked an antique tapestry-stitch

on her sampler. It was a fair parallel between new Plebeianism and old Gentility.<sup>7</sup>

May we consider more fully women's domestic practices as reflecting larger shifts in American political, economic, and cultural history? What was needlework's worth to household economy when industrialized manufacture of textiles and an expansion of a cash culture rendered home production less necessary? By the Civil War, Americans of the new middle class were rejecting "aristocratic" practices, and raising a new generation of children whose educational needs were adapted more to the marketplace and consumerism. Berlinwork replaced what was once taught in school: the time-consuming task of custom drawing patterns, and the perfection of many different stitches. Berlinwork reduced sewing to one or two stitch types color-coded by number on point paper rather than linen. As Studebaker observes, girls "could 'stitch by number' as people sometimes paint by number today" [258]. The "factory system" of the Market Revolution had "come home," but as several historians have pointed out, the middle-class dwelling was where the Market Revolution began.<sup>8</sup>

What Sue Studebaker has produced in this handsome volume is an important addition to extant surveys of girls' and women's needlework. Studebaker's painstaking work provides a necessary extension of, and counterpart to, well-documented collections in New England and the East Coast generally. Nevertheless, whether a plain marking sampler or a needlework picture requiring skillful and nimble fingers, these artifacts tell more than decorative arts scholars have yet fully to engage.

Shirley Teresa Wajda  
Kent State University

Notes

<sup>1</sup> Sally Wister's "needle wisdom" found in Kathryn Zabelle Derounian, ed. and intro., *The Journal and Occasional Writings of Sarah Wister* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press; London and Toronto: Associated Universities Press, 1987), 61; [Anne Home Shippen Livingston], *Nancy Shippen Her Journal Book*, ed. Ethel Armes (Philadelphia, 1935; rpt. New York, 1968), 39-40, quoted in Davida Tenenbaum Deutsch, "The polite lady: portraits of American schoolgirls and their accomplishments, 1725-1830," *The Magazine Antiques* 135 (March 1989): 742-753, at 744-45.

<sup>2</sup> These works include: Susan Burrows Swan, *Plain and Fancy: American Women and Their Needlework, 1700-1850* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1977); Glee F. Krueger, *New England Samplers to 1840* (Sturbridge, MA: Old Sturbridge Village, 1978); 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); idem, *Girlhood Embroidery: American Samplers and Pictorial Needlework, 1650-1850*, 2 vols. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), Kimberly Smith Ivey, *In the Neatest Manner: The Making of the Virginia Sampler Tradition* (Williamsburg: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation and Austin, TX: Curious Works Press, 1997). These studies build on the monumental compilation undertaken by Ethel Stanwood Bolton and Eva Johnston Coe, *American Samplers* (Boston: Massachusetts Society of Colonial Dames of America, 1921).

<sup>3</sup> See Jules David Prown, "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method," *Winterthur Portfolio* 17:1 (Spring 1982): 1-19; idem, "Style as Evidence," *Winterthur Portfolio* 15:3 (Fall 1980): 197-210.

<sup>4</sup> On gendered attitudes towards the West, see Annette Kolodny, *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630-1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), and Lillian Schlissel, *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey* (New York: Schocken, 1982).

<sup>5</sup> Martin Brückner, "Lessons in Geography: Maps, Spellers, and Other Grammars of Nationalism in the Early Republic," *American Quarterly* 51:2 (Summer 1999): 311-43; Nina Baym, *American Women Writers and the Work of History, 1790-1860* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995).

<sup>6</sup> On the cultural work of artists and schoolgirls in the Early Republic, see Shirley Teresa Wajda, "'Social Currency': Portrait Photography and the Fashioning of the American Middle Class, 1839-1889," Chapter One (manuscript).

<sup>7</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The House of the Seven Gables* (New York: New American Library, 1981), 76. On Beecher and Mann, see, respectively, Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Catharine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), and

Lawrence A. Cremin, ed. *The Republic and the School: Horace Mann on the Education of Free Men* (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1957).

<sup>8</sup> On the shifts in household technology and what those shifts meant for women's roles, see Priscilla Brewer, *From Fireplace to Cookstove: Technology and the Domestic Ideal in America* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), and Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *More Work For Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), and Jeanne Boydston, *Home and Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990). Nancy Dunlap Bercaw explores this shift towards middle-class domesticity via women's craftwork in "Solid Objects/Mutable Meanings: Fancywork and the Construction of Bourgeois Culture, 1840-1880," *Winterthur Portfolio* 26 (Winter 1991): 231-48.