Preface

Many years ago, I was given a book on needlework history. In the book were four tiny black and white photos of embroidered maps. As a cartographer who does needlework as an avocation, I was intrigued and I had many questions. Were these the only examples? The book included them in a short chapter called “Embroidered Maps and Needlework Rugs,” and only three pages of the chapter were devoted to maps. Where were they made? The examples were all American-made; were they made in other countries? Who made them? They weren’t included in the chapter on samplers; were they schoolgirl products or a fad of adult women? How were they made? Carbon paper and transfer paper didn’t exist; how were maps transferred to the fabric for stitching? When were they made? Most importantly, to my mind, why were they made?

Because I was involved in other research projects, these maps became a “back-burner” project, worked on sporadically. I found that maps were scattered in many collections in Great Britain and the United States, with most having only one or two maps. Many of the maps are in private hands, so I often had to make do with photographs. I combined vacations with trips to museums in England and the United States, eventually viewing hundreds of maps and photographs of maps. I was able to find some diaries and letters that mentioned making the maps, and more of these will probably come to light in the future. Five articles and several papers came out of the research as I learned more about these artifacts, slowly answering my questions. Those questions led me down various research paths—needlework history, women’s education, globes, map printing and publishing, textile histories and even jigsaw puzzles.

Goals

This book is not a study of needlework and stitches, nor does it, except in rare cases, contain genealogies of the sampler makers as is common in needlework histories, nor is it a catalog of maps. I look at these maps as a cartographer/geographer, but I bring to it knowledge of needlework and an understanding of what is involved in making maps in this medium.

I hope in this book to shed some light on the history of women’s geographic education.
Organization

Chapter 1 provides an introduction that sets the scene of the time and place and discusses the various “threads” of the story—the context and the concepts—needlework, education, geography, and cartography. Chapter 2 discusses samplers in general and their study, and specifically the nature and origins of map samplers. Chapter 3 focuses on map samplers in the British Isles and their role in women’s geographic education. In Chapter 4, I examine the diffusion of map samplers from the British Isles to America and their role in geographic education in the United States. In Chapter 5, I look at a unique artifact—embroidered silk terrestrial and celestial globes made at Westtown School in Pennsylvania. In the final chapter, I examine the demise of map samplers (and samplers in general) and suggest possible reasons for that decline.

Limitations

In any study of historical objects, there are a number of inherent difficulties or obstacles. As Carol Humphrey noted in Quaker School Girl Samplers from Ackworth:

Researching any aspect of women’s history is more like detective work than the pursuit of knowledge via a methodical plan. Breakthroughs are frequently the result of random reading and acquisition of snippets of seemingly unconnected information rather than uninterrupted scholarly acquisition.1

In the case of map samplers, some of the obstacles relate to accessibility of the objects. They are widely scattered, with no museum or collection having more than 16. The Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Cooper Hewitt Museum and Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London have the largest collections that I have found, and with the exception of the Cooper Hewitt, the collections focus on British works. Westtown School has the largest number of needlework globes, with nine. Most collections have only one or two globes. As a result, many catalogers at museums and other collections have not seen many, and write descriptions based on supposition or conjecture.

Because the materials used in the artifacts—silk, wool, linen—are fragile, many are in poor condition. A silk sampler in a wooden frame with a wooden backing deteriorates and discolors owing to the reaction of the acids in the wood, maps that were made in bright colors 200 years ago have now faded to pastels. Some of the maps and globes are so fragile that conservators have forbidden even research scholars access to them, and I could only see photographs, often black

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and white, that do not show all sides of a globe or the detail of a map. Most of the maps are in frames, either original or of later date, so the backs and margins are not viewable. On those that are unframed, one can sometimes see “trial stitches” or letters.

The record is, of course, incomplete. Some maps and globes have been discarded by heirs because they were tattered and seen as having no value. Others, undoubtedly, are still collecting dust and deteriorating in attics and basements. Yet others are in private collections and not cataloged or recorded anywhere. Even most museum collections are not well known, and rarely are the maps on view; not all of the map samplers, even in museum collections, have been photographed, thus even the online “exhibits” have gaps. Museum descriptions are usually brief and give only the barest of information—the title of the map, the name of the maker, and the date if known. A common description is “England and Wales, anonymous, late eighteenth-early nineteenth-century, silk thread on satin”; a listing of the stitches used is often included. This describes the majority of samplers found from the British Isles, and while it is useful for statistical analysis of sampler types, it is not much help in analyzing the pieces themselves.

Supplemental resources, such as diaries and letters, are even more difficult to find and are often found fortuitously. Some have been collected in edited volumes, such as the diaries and letters of Hester Thrale Piozzi² or the Litchfield Academy diaries and letters collected in Chronicles of a Pioneer School and More Chronicles of a Pioneer School,³ where one or two nuggets might be found. Larger schools, such as Westtown and Ackworth, which are still in operation, have made attempts to preserve their history and maintain archives and museums. For the most part, these are Quaker schools. Westtown School in Pennsylvania, for example, has the Esther Duke Archives, in which letters and other materials donated by “old Westonians” are maintained, as well as the nine globes. For smaller schools, such as dame schools or schools that only existed for a few years, no such resources exist. Of course, many letters and diaries were discarded by heirs in the course of moving, or cleaning attics, and some were undoubtedly destroyed by their authors.

Even more problematic are the pattern sources for the maps. Many were hand-drawn, copied from contemporary maps, others were from printed patterns from magazines, some were probably drawn by professionals or the teacher, and others were printed on fabric specifically for needlework. These will be discussed more fully in the following chapters, but few patterns have survived.

³ Emily Noyes Vanderpoel (1903) Chronicles of a Pioneer School from 1792 to 1833: Being the history of Miss Sarah Pierce and her Litchfield School. Cambridge, MA: The University Press; Emily Noyes Vanderpoel (1927) More Chronicles of a Pioneer School, from 1792 to 1833: Being added history on the Litchfield Female Academy kept by Miss Sarah Pierce and her nephew, John Pierce Brace, New York: Cadmus Book Shop.