



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

The needlework sampler in women's history

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The Alexandria History Museum at the Lyceum's collection includes a sampler by Mary Muir, dated 1818. Mary Muir was born on Nov. 2, 1805 to Scottish-born parents, John Muir, an Alexandria cabinetmaker, and Mary Lang Muir. They were married in Alexandria's Presbyterian Church by the Rev. James Muir.

Mary Muir's sampler is one of six schoolgirl samplers Gloria Seaman Allen, Ph.D., has documented that have similar decorative elements. The samplers in this group have a distinctive arched border of strawberries worked in queen stitch. Within this strawberry border, each girl chose from similar motifs and embroidery techniques to create a unique sampler composition. An imposing house with blue columns flanked by quivering trees, extravagant cornucopias, a verse entitled "Religion" and a signature executed in a four-sided stitch are characteristic elements of the samplers in this group.

Allen featured Muir's sampler in her 2013 book "Columbia's Daughters: Girlhood Embroidery from the District of Columbia." Allen's research found that the needlework teacher for this group probably belonged to one of two Muir families who operated schools for girls in Alexandria. While the families do not appear to have been related, they did know each other.

Mary Muir's family were members of the Rev. Muir's congregation and lived near the Presbyterian Church parsonage. Beginning in 1790 and into the 1840s, Rev. Muir, his wife Elizabeth Welman Muir and their three daughters were involved in the operation of different schools that included "ornamental" subjects, like needlework, in their curriculums.



1 Sampler by Alexandrian Mary Muir, dated 1818.



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

During this period, the unrelated Mary Lang Muir was a needlework teacher. In 1820 and 1821, she advertised as a needlework instructor for boarding students. It is possible she began to teach before the date of her ad and continued for many years. Four of the six samplers in the design group, including the piece by her daughter Mary Muir, were dated 1818 or 1819. The other two were dated 1828 and 1830.

The Mary Muir who made the sampler married English-born Stephen Shinn, an Alexandria merchant, in 1826. They raised five children. The Alexandria Gazette noted Mary's death on Aug. 6, 1881, describing her as "an old and esteemed lady. . . an invalid for twenty years having been confined to the house a major part of that time."

Artifacts like the Mary Muir sampler give us a glimpse into education for women in the early 19th century. While containing unique details, the existence of the other samplers shows us that other young women of Mary's generation were also expected to participate in the decorative arts, either as a pastime or, like for Mary's mother, as a means of income.

Historic Alexandria celebrates Women's History Month throughout the month of March. For a listing of virtual events and celebrations, please visit alexandriava.gov/historic.

"Out of the Attic" is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as "Marking Time" and explored Alexandria's history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into "Out of the Attic" and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria and invited guests.