

News Release: June 2004 Harriet Smith Sampler

Sampler stitched by Harriet Lucinda (Lee) Smith in 1825

*By Carolyn Beacroft*



A sampler stitched in 1825 by a Black woman was part of the recent bequest of Dorothy Binga Taylor to The Chatham-Kent Black Historical Society. When news of the sampler reached the members of the local chapter of the embroiderers' association of Canada, the group gave the C-K Black History Society a grant to have the sampler professionally conserved and framed. A reproduction of the sampler is underway by the local EAC stitchers and will be presented to the museum early next year.

Harriet Smith, the woman who stitched the sampler, was married in 1816 and lived in Columbia, Pennsylvania with her husband, Stephen Smith, who was a businessman and prominent in the abolitionist movement. With his partner, William Whipper, Stephen Smith assisted many fugitive slaves to escape to Canada and settle in Dresden, Ontario where both Smith and Whipper owned land.

Since Harriet Smith had been a servant in a Quaker household prior to her marriage she would have been familiar with samplers as a method of teaching young women the alphabet and fine sewing skills. As well, she live in a region in which the Quakers had a substantial commitment to education for Blacks with day and night school classes for both children and adults.

Nine years after her marriage, as the wife of a prominent man in the community and becoming active in the abolitionist movement herself, she may have seen the necessity for literacy and in the tradition of women of the day she did a sampler.

In the lower case letters she has done what many students who are learning the alphabet do and mixed up the 'b' and 'd' so that there is no 'd' but a repeat of the letter 'b'. No correction was made here. The fact that she misspelled her own name the first time supports the idea that she was learning to spell. The second time that she worked her name, she spelled Harriet correctly.

The charm of this sampler lies in the naïve format. The stitcher is precise in her count but does not appear to be trying to design or lay out the work artistically. The mistakes in the sampler confirm the premise that the stitcher was learning her alphabet and provide a rare glimpse of the learning curve for an adult woman working her way to literacy in the early 19th century.

Harriet later became a member of the North Star Association, which had been formed by Frederick Douglass' newspaper the North Star to promote emancipation. In 1848, she was elected president of the Women's Association of Philadelphia, a group organized to raise funds for the betterment of Blacks. These were enormous accomplishments for a Black woman who had signed her marriage certificate with an X.

The Chatham-Kent Black Historical Society is very pleased to have been given the sampler and other family documents by Dorothy Binga Taylor who is a descendant of the family and has so faithfully preserved the family's long history in the Chatham-Kent area.