

Samplers and Family Ties

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For many years samplers have been recognized by researchers as primary sources of information for genealogical as well as historical data.

In the United States, one of the most accurate places to trace a family history is through the military files; however, in the 1970s researchers at the National Archives in Washington discovered a collection of samplers associated with the Revolutionary War period in the veterans' files.

The story of the samplers on file with the US military was pieced together using the information in the pension files which contain genealogy information on the men who were in the military at the time. It seems that after the US Revolutionary War, pensions for widows and dependant children began. The problem that the women encountered was that proving marriage and family ties was difficult in a pioneer environment when records were not centralized and frequently lost. When accurate records were not available the US government chose to accept supporting data such as family bibles and samplers showing the couple's names and dates and children. Today, the US National Archives has a significant collection of samplers due largely to the fact that in the 1800s the US government kept the proof (the samplers) submitted to qualify for a pension.

Today in Canada genealogy has become a popular hobby but in the colonial past it was an important indicator of the status and respectability of the family. The sentimental era of the 19th century had begun a change in the function of the sampler. Society placed an increased importance on family status and the sampler moved from being stitch samples on rough linen to being a social indicator often done in silks and framed for display.

The women who stitched samplers were documenting the family and recording connections. In a patrilineal society it was necessary to document not just the family but the connections through the female line. For families that were prominent, socially and politically, the sampler was a statement of the position in the community.

Samplers are survivors. They have been treasured and passed down through generations. Many wills record the disposition of a family sampler. A will probated in Chatham, Ontario as recently as 1970 listed the names of the women in the family and who was to get the Sterling silver flatware, the Crown Derby china and who was to get the sampler.

Samplers and fine linens have traditionally been handed down from mother to daughter thus preserving the attachment to the woman's family.

The McKiechan sampler is a good example of the story that can be pieced together from a sampler.

Janet Simons married Robert McKiechan on December 9, 1851 and began her sampler adding the children's names and dates of birth as they arrived:

R & J McKiechan Married 9 Dec 1851

Margaret A	b 1852
Helen	b 1854
Peter S	b 1855
Robert	b 1857
Jane E	b 1863
Alexandra	b 1864
Helen	b 11 Jan 1854

Records in Quebec show that Robert A H McKiechan was born in 1830 and died 28 Jun 1864 three months before his daughter Alexandra was born.

For Janet McKiechan the record shows that the following two years must have been one of great heartbreak with Alexandra's death the next June and Peter Simons at age 11 in February 1866.

Robert A H McKiechan was born in Scotland and was a cabinetmaker by trade. He lived in the St Pierre Ward of Quebec City. Janet Simons was born in Quebec, the daughter of Archibald Simons who was a farmer at Lake Beaufort, Quebec.

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