

## Girl's Education in early New England: School Girl Art

By CAM Docent, Trudi Olivetti

During the 1640s, Massachusetts enacted a law that all towns with 50 households or more would support a public school. As was the case with several jurisdictions fitting that criterion, Gloucester's households were too far apart for one school. There was likely some private instruction with paid tutors. By 1696 the selectmen voted to hire a school master, and one was found in 1698. The schools did not operate during the Revolutionary War, but were reopened afterward.

Educating girls was not considered as important as educating boys. Gloucester did not intentionally admit girls into the public school until 1707, when a new schoolhouse was built. There they learned reading, knitting and sewing.



[Abigail Somes Davis](#) (1784-1842), *Ruin by a Stream*, c. 1798. Watercolor on paper. Collection of the Cape Ann Museum, Gloucester, MA. Gift of the estate of Alfred Mansfield Brooks, 1963 [acc. # 2027].

Traditionally, girls learned practical household skills from their mothers and other female relatives. The more well-to-do families could send their girls to so-called dame schools or female academies—several of them existed on Cape Ann. Some were boarding schools, where the students engaged in various types of artistic projects as well as reading, writing and arithmetic. The artistic instruction included pictorial needlework, weaving, rug hooking, painting, drawing and decorative “fancy” work. The artwork produced was a distinguishing element in American history from the late 17th century onward—it is actually felt to have had a significant impact on American culture. The endeavors of women educators—such as Judith Sargent Murray, Judith Saunders, and Clementine Beach and their female academy—contributed significantly to the education of girls and young women up to the Civil War.

The sewing that girls learned was regarded primarily as a utilitarian activity, an essential skill needed for making clothes and household linens. Girls worked from English pattern books and reproductions of needlework pieces. The girls also copied prints or other works of art, often from books, which had become more widely available by the late 18th century. There were standard designs and some of these elements became conventional, such as floral borders which set off the central image. In the early 19th century, some pieces combined needlework with watercolor, which was becoming fashionable.

At a very young age, the girls learned to make “marking samplers” that included letters, numbers, and even inscriptions. This practice was a learning tool for literacy, arithmetic, and sewing. As they progressed, they would learn fancier stitches and designs. The pictorial sampler was a common type. These samplers were sewn in various ways, making use of conventional forms, such as houses or other buildings (often the girls’ schoolhouse), animals and baskets of flowers.

These needlework pieces became treasured works of art and were often framed for display in the girls’ homes.

The Cape Ann Museum has four examples of this work on display in the Captain Elias Davis House at 27 Pleasant Street:

### Mary Davis (1805-1838)

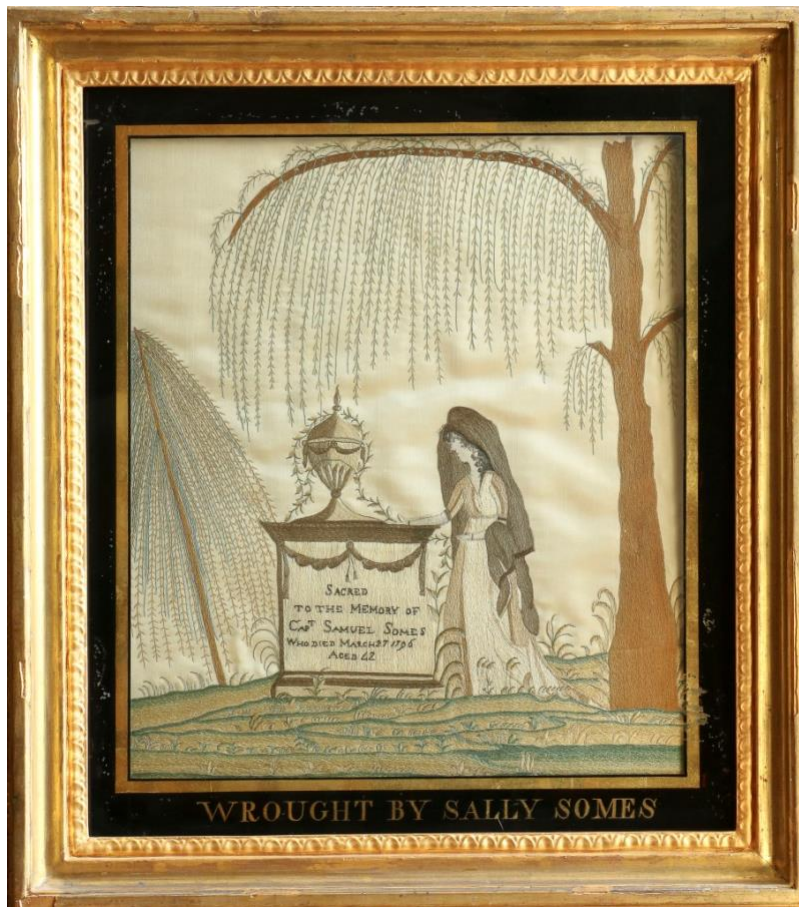


**Mary Davis sampler, 1818.** Wool on linen (in kitchen of Davis House). Collection of the Cape Ann Museum, Gloucester, MA.

Mary Davis was the youngest daughter in the Elias Davis family. She created this sampler at age 13. It is quite a complicated piece, with different shades of thread and many different stitches; the fancier ones were more accomplished as her skill increased.

It is a perfect example of a pictorial sampler with alphabet and floral motifs. She has also sewn in the names of all her family, with their dates, including the names of siblings who had died. Solomon Davis, one of her brothers, mentioned this sampler in his journal.

**Sally Somes (later Mackay) (1789-1888)**



**Memorial to Capt. Samuel Somes (1754-1796), c. 1798.** (in parlor of Davis House). Collection of the Cape Ann Museum, Gloucester, MA. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Alfred Mansfield Brooks, 1971.

Sally Somes (Soames) was the great-great aunt of Alfred Mansfield Brooks, to whom he called Aunt Mackay in his memoir, *Gloucester Recollected*. She married Harvey Coffin Mackay (1787-1869) in 1816.

The piece is an example of a memorial or mourning sampler, which was created to honor family members as well as famous people. In this case, Sally sewed it at the age of 9 to memorialize her father Captain Samuel Somes, who died at sea in 1796. It was donated to the museum in 1971 by Mr. and Mrs. Alfred Mansfield Brooks.

**Sarah Fuller (later Appleton) (1787 -1872)**



*Sacred to the the Memory of the Immortal George Washington, 1800.* Silk on linen (in parlor of Davis House). Collection of the Cape Ann Museum, Gloucester, MA. Gift of E. Hyde Cox, 1998.

Sarah Fuller was the daughter of Rev. Daniel Fuller of the West Parish Church of Gloucester. She married General James Appleton in 1807, with whom she had 10 children. James was son of Samuel Appleton, of England, who had been awarded a land grant in 1637 and established Appleton Farm in 1638 – the oldest continuously operated farm in America. Sarah and James' son Daniel became heir to the farm in 1862.

There were many memorial pieces to George Washington after his death, rendered in a number of different forms. This one includes two allegorical figures.

**Amanda Maria Nash (c. 1809-1825)**



***Rural Innocence*, c. 1820.** (silk on linen) (in parlor of Davis House). Collection of the Cape Ann Museum, Gloucester, MA. Gift of the estate of Emma Nash, 1967.

Amanda was the daughter of Lonson Nash, from Great Barrington MA, and Nabby Lowe Nash, from Gloucester. She is buried, with her family, at Oak Grove Cemetery. Her father was an attorney and promoted education for all his children. Amanda had two unmarried sisters who left detailed wills. Her sister Elizabeth referenced her niece, Emma (1855-1949), who was the daughter of her brother Lonson. Emma inherited some of family heirlooms, including this needlepoint (and one other in CAM's collection).

## **Bibliography, resources, and further reading:**

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