

A ROWLES SAMPLER EAC- 2003-8



Description: There is some evidence to suggest that this small, basic alphabet sampler may well have been the first embroidery endeavour of Alice Rowles. At any rate, its elements, that include a border, full uppercase alphabet, some lowercase letters, plus the embroiderer's name and various cross stitch patterns underlining the bands, all allude to an early classroom project. Worked on loosely-woven light ecru or cream- coloured linen that is 20 threads to the inch, this sampler measures 18 centimetres by 11.5 cm. It is stitched in an ecru, non-stranded cotton that closely matches the linen. In all probability, this would have hindered—or at least challenged—the little embroiderer as she struggled to see and count the threads.

The entire border is worked in cross stitch over two threads. Upon looking closely at the embroidery, several discrepancies may be noted: various stitches are fashioned with the right stitch crossing over the left; others are worked in the reverse with the left stitch crossing over the right. As well, some cross stitches are over three threads rather than the established two threads.

For the most part, the letters on each band begin two fabric threads beyond the border. The first band displays the uppercase letters A to F, which are primarily seven cross stitches high. The E begins one fabric thread higher than the previous letters and accordingly finishes one thread above the others. Various differences in the F resulted in it being stitched on the same line as the letter E but being only six cross stitches in height. This band is underlined with a basic row of cross stitch with right stitches over left.

The uppercase letters G to L, including J, are embroidered in the second band. All of the letters begin and end on the same fabric threads and are seven cross stitches high. This band is underlined with two rows of cross stitch, with each cross stitch placed two threads apart from the previous and alternating so that a cross stitch on the second row falls in between two cross stitches in the first row.

The third band features uppercase letters M to R. The Q, unlike earlier styles that are reminiscent of a reverse P, is shaped like an O with a tail across the bottom. There are a couple of discrepancies where the embroiderer has stitched over a third fabric thread, and as well, not all cross stitches are worked in the same direction. However, all letters are seven cross stitches high. This band is underlined with the two rows of alternating cross stitch, as described in band two.

Uppercase letters S to W are stitched in the fourth band. Again, all letters are seven cross stitches in height and, as is the case throughout this little embroidery exercise, letters are two fabric threads apart. This band is underlined with a V-shaped zigzag row of cross stitches, with one cross stitch on the bottom, another on the top and each side sharing the bottom cross stitch.

The letters X, Y and Z fill the first portion of the fifth band, which is then completed with six vertical bars, all of which are seven cross stitches high and over two threads. A scallop underlining this band is composed of four cross stitches on top and one on both the side and bottom, with each side sharing the bottom cross stitch.

The sixth band is a little more spacious, with six fabric threads above the top of the letters rather than two, as is the case in the previous bands. The letter A is followed by a cross stitch for a period and then the name "Rowles" is stitched in upper and lowercase letters. The uppercase A and R maintain the height of seven cross stitches; the lowercase letters have six, except the l which rises to a record 10 cross stitches. However, as it happens, the towering "l" is not hindered in that it is reaching into the scallop above, where there is sufficient space. This band is also underlined with a scallop having two cross stitches on the bottom, two on the same fabric thread on the side and two once more on the top, with each side sharing the bottom cross stitches.

The seventh and last band, with lowercase letters a to h, appears somewhat crowded. There are some variations in the letters, such as a, which is only five cross stitches high in comparison to c and e, which are six cross stitches. However the lower portion of the h is only four cross stitches in height, while the cross on the f is six cross stitches high. Perhaps the most noticeable discrepancy is the fact that the stem of the d was not stitched, possibly because there simply was not room. Nevertheless, because the embroiderer is using an ecru or cream coloured thread that closely matches the linen, the above differences are not readily discernible.

History: Although the embroiderer stitched only the initial A rather than her first name, the family history clearly records Alice Rowles as the maker of this little

sampler. Unfortunately the dates of Alice's birth are not known. Information on the Rowles/Caldwell family of Saskatoon can be found in the Bibliography.

Due to its diminutive size and simplicity in design and stitching, it would be reasonable to surmise that this sampler might have been Alice's first project. Further evidence might be the fact that the Heritage Collection includes another sampler known as the "Alice Rowles' Red Sampler". It is a little more involved and might well have served to show off the skills learned in this very basic sampler, which is not unlike the first project of a child. At any rate, the A. Rowles sampler is a monochromatic sampler that certainly compares to hundreds that were created in the late Victorian years when samplers were on the decline. And, while family records do not include the birth date of Alice Rowles, it would be reasonable, as discussed above, to believe she may have stitched this sampler in the late 1800s (*Sampler & Antique Needlework*, Vol. 2, p 5; Vol.12, p. 18-19; Vol. 20, p. 30-33). While it might appear to be less than inspiring, this small embroidery speaks of a child being disciplined in the ways of needlework and, more specifically, marking linens, as well as learning the appropriate behaviour of young women during a period now barely imaginable. Samplers big and small, grand and simple, are among the embroideries that provide insight into the past; all are important reminders of from whence we have come.

Materials: Loosely woven linen, 20 threads to the inch, non-stranded ecru/cream cotton thread.

Condition: This sampler is in amazingly good condition, considering its age. Nevertheless, it appears that the embroidery thread in at least three areas has broken, although no actual stitches have been lost. The sampler was dirty when it was donated but was carefully unlaced from its mat board, washed with Orvus and rinsed with a final rinse of distilled water. It was then float mounted onto linen and then laced onto an acid free mat board. The outer frayed edges have also been caught in large tacking stitches (that match the linen so are barely noticeable), to prevent further fraying.