

# Stitching History Together: Using Artifacts as Primary Sources

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Images may differ from those in the original article.

Part of my job as a curator at the North Carolina Museum of History involves looking closely at the thousands of objects that the museum owns. These objects, called *artifacts*, are primary sources for studying history. What we learn from examining them helps us tell the stories of those individuals who used them. When we combine the knowledge we gain from studying artifacts with the information we find in related primary and secondary sources, we can discover hidden facts. We can better understand the past and the people who lived in North Carolina.

Analyzing samplers to learn more about the girls who made them offers a good example of history detection. A *sampler* is a piece of fabric decorated with a variety of needlework stitches. Samplers typically feature alphabets, verses, pictures, and decorative borders. In the 1700s and 1800s, learning to sew was an important part of a girl's education. But usually only girls whose parents had enough wealth to send them to private schools learned all the fancy stitches used to craft formal samplers. These girls took lessons in needleworking, drawing, and music, in addition to studying more academic subjects like reading and math.

It can be tricky to find out much about the girls who made samplers, because few primary documents from the time mention girls' names. (For instance, before 1850 the United States census listed only the names of heads of households, usually fathers.) But the more information a sampler contains, the more easily we can discover more about its maker. Some girls stitched their full name and the date they finished their sampler. Others were even nicer to future historians. They included the name of the town or county where they did their work. Occasionally, sampler makers added their parents' names or the names or initials of other family members. All of that extra information can help narrow down the search for the right girl in other primary sources (such as census records, family Bibles, and newspaper articles from the time) and secondary sources (such as books and family histories).

Sometimes, curators can find out even more by comparing two or more samplers. Since girls usually created samplers while they were in school, they often followed patterns drawn or shown to them by their needlework teachers. So, samplers made around the same time at the same school often look quite similar. If curators locate two samplers that look a lot alike, they can perform research to try and connect them to a school or teacher.

To show you how this process can work, let's look at two samplers in the Museum of History's collection. The first one, donated to the museum in 1940, has the name Eliza L. Taylor and the date 1831 stitched on it. The second, donated in 1965, includes the name Sarah J. W. Hughes and the date 1833. Museum records don't contain much information on either sampler. Curators had



her own sampler by examining Eliza’s.

Unfortunately, we have not yet been able to learn anything more about Sarah. We cannot say for sure who her family was or what she went on to do in life after finishing school. Research has revealed much more about Eliza, however.

At her husband’s death, Eliza was left with four children to raise—six-year-old James, four-year-old Louisa, two-year-old Anne Eliza, and baby Julia Rowan. Knowing that Eliza was mourning the loss of her husband and facing financial difficulties that led her to start teaching to support her family, we can better understand why she chose a sad line from an English poem to stitch onto her sampler: “The spider’s thread is cable to man’s tie on earthly bliss, it breaks at every breeze.”

Eliza taught school for more than forty years. In her day, she had become a well-known figure in Raleigh. She also had ties to several important North Carolinians. Her guardians were her deceased father’s two best friends—John Louis Taylor, the first chief justice of the North Carolina Supreme Court, and William Gaston, a North Carolina Supreme Court judge and author of the state song, “The Old North State.” Her husband served as North Carolina’s attorney general, her son became the first state librarian, and her daughter Louisa proved instrumental in helping Gaston write “The Old North State.” Eliza also was the great-grandmother of Jacques Busbee, who founded the famous Jugtown Pottery in Seagrove in 1921.

Without her sampler serving as a primary source to jump-start a historical investigation, we would not have known to look for Eliza in other sources. She simply would have remained a forgotten footnote to North Carolina history. But by studying an artifact, her sampler, curators have been able to return another woman from the shadows of the past.

\*At the time of this article’s publication, RaeLana Poteat was working as the curator of political and social history at the North Carolina Museum of History.

A *curator* is someone who works with and studies the objects in a museum. To learn more about history careers, access [http://ncmuseumofhistory.org/THJHA\\_THJHACareers.html](http://ncmuseumofhistory.org/THJHA_THJHACareers.html).

When analyzing an artifact, consider the following questions:

- What is this artifact?
- How would you describe it (size, shape, color, texture, materials, and so forth)?
- Who invented, made, or used it?
- When was it used?
- How was it used?
- What does this artifact tell you about the people who owned it or made it?
- How does this artifact relate to North Carolina history? What is its significance?