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Transnational Influences on Louisiana Samplers: Traditions, Teachers, Techniques, and Text
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Louisiana: An Ethnic Melting Pot

Louisiana’s early history is colored with multinational interests and domination by a succession of nations speaking diverse languages. Although “discovered” by the Spanish in the 1600s, the French were the first to colonize the area, founding New Orleans in 1718 with financial support (and administrative control) from the Company of the Indies. New Orleans became Louisiana’s colonial capital in 1721. Most of the earliest immigrants to Louisiana were either French military personnel or French Canadian adventurers and traders. Their number was augmented by the forced immigration of criminals, prostitutes, and those incarcerated in French workhouses. By all accounts this made for a rowdy citizenry, and one not terribly prone to productive labor. By 1721, in an effort to increase agricultural production and provide a stable supply of food for New Orleans, Germans were actively recruited to farm land north of the city along the Mississippi River. This area became known as the Cote des Allemands or “German Coast,” and attracted a large number of early immigrants.

By the middle of the 18th century Louisiana, with New Orleans as its primary port city, was a thoroughly French colonial entity whose Francophone population assimilated newcomers and embodied the cultural, economic, and political attitudes of its European mother country France. However, at the conclusion of the Seven Years War in 1763, and following the collapse of France’s North American empire, France ceded Louisiana to Spain. This began a 40-year period in which Louisiana was a Spanish colony in name, but French in spirit. Much of the French colonial administrative structure remained in place, but the Spanish language was used for official documents, and Hispanic policies (supporting, for example, female ownership of property and flexible manumission of slaves) became the cultural norm. Spain ceded Louisiana back to France in 1803, at which point France sold it to the United States for $15,000,000 – the Louisiana Purchase. With American ownership of Louisiana came an influx of adventurers and entrepreneurs from the new republican nation to the north, seeking their fortunes. Governmental officials sought to organize the colony along American protestant principles but met resistance from a populace that was largely Catholic and non-English speaking.

Between 1791 and 1804 there was a slave rebellion on the French-speaking Caribbean island of St. Dominque (now Haiti) that ended with defeat for both the British and the French. More than 40,000 people fled the island for ports along the Atlantic seaboard and Cuba, and by 1810 more than 10,000 of them had found their way to Louisiana, nearly doubling the population of New Orleans with French-speaking white, black, and mixed race families and their enslaved workers. From the 1830s to 1860s, however, Louisiana became a destination of choice for thousands of immigrants from Ireland and Germany, further expanding the linguistic and cultural mix, and significantly diluting the French foundation on which the colony and state originated.
But the largest ethnic population in Louisiana were black, and mixed race, free and enslaved workers with African heritage. Louisiana imported slaves directly from Africa from 1719 to 1731, with the vast majority of them being from Senegal. The Senegalese were largely an artisan people, and this influenced the roles they assumed and their impact on Louisiana society prior to the rise of the sugar plantations. Once it was profitable to grow sugar, there was a need for a much larger workforce, and slaves from all parts of Africa were brought in from other states and sold to Louisiana’s many planters. The result of all this forced and voluntary immigration to Louisiana is that by the outbreak of American Civil War, the state had a three-tiered caste society with approximately 40% white citizens, 20% free-black citizens (most of mixed European and African heritage), and 40% enslaved workers of color - black, Native American, and mixed race. The Civil War brought additional changes to Louisiana’s ethnic melting pot, with American military occupation of the state (which had sided with the confederacy) and the emancipation of black and mixed-race enslaved workers.

Much of the resulting population in Louisiana now identifies as “Creole” – which originally meant “born in Louisiana” (as opposed to Europe, Africa, or even other parts of the American continent). Although descendants of early French families once tried to restrict use of the term for individuals with undiluted white European ancestry, today “Creole” is predominantly used by individuals of mixed European, African, and/or Native American heritage who are descendants of any of Louisiana’s early families and/or identify with the Louisiana’s Creole culture. Although Creoles have diverse racial and ethnic ancestry, they share many cultural, linguistic, and religious ties.

From this ethnic melting pot emerged schoolgirl samplers that reflect the diverse needlework traditions of the state’s many different immigrant populations. The remainder of this article focuses on an interesting handful of samplers and related schoolgirl embroideries stitched by Louisiana’s girls and young women over a period of slightly more than 70 years – from 1815 to 1887.

**Pauline Fortier, 1815**

Pauline Fortier was born in 1805 to French and German Creole parents at “Homestead,” the family’s plantation in St. Charles Parish. The house was built in 1801 by Pauline’s father on land granted to him by the Spanish government during the time Louisiana was a Spanish colony. When Pauline was 10 years old she attended the Ursuline Convent’s school in New Orleans, where she stitched what may be Louisiana’s oldest sampler with known provenance.

Pauline was the daughter of Louis Edmond Fortier (1784-1849) and Félicité LaBranche (1785-1860) who were married in 1801. Pauline’s father was the son of Colonel Michael Fortier Jr. (1750-1819), a wealthy French merchant and ship owner who had fought in the American War of Independence against the British and then settled in Louisiana. Pauline’s mother was Félicité LaBranche who was born on Louisiana’s “German Coast” to ethnic German parents with roots in Bavaria. The family name was originally Zweig (which means twig in German) but was changed to LaBranche (meaning branch) by Pauline’s great grandfather Johann Zweig after emigrating to Louisiana in 1721. This name change was not uncommon and illustrates one of the ways that immigrants from diverse ethnic groups integrated into French Creole society and culture.
Louisiana’s Convent of the Ursulines was founded in 1727 by seven teaching nuns from central France who traveled to New Orleans to provide educational opportunities to the daughters of Louisiana’s French colonial families. The nuns were under contract to the Company of the Indies and reflected the Company’s hope that a literate and religious female population would have a civilizing effect on the colony’s citizens, leading to stable, moral, hard-working families who stayed in Louisiana and helped the colony prosper. The Ursulines accepted boarders without regard to race, and provided the girls with a strong academic, religious, and domestic education. Taught separately from the boarders were the day students, children from more impoverished local families as well as children of the city’s enslaved workers. The nuns also took in 25 - 30 female orphans, most supported financially by the city. In 1749 the French Ursulines accepted their first Creole nun and by 1780 more than half of the convent’s nuns had been born in Louisiana. During the forty-year period of Spanish colonial control, there was also an influx of Ursuline nuns from Spanish speaking Havana, which led to constant tension between the two ethnic groups. By 1815, when Pauline stitched her sampler, the convent was experiencing an array of political hassles with the English-speaking, protestant-leaning, Americans who now controlled the city and newly admitted state.

Pauline’s sampler (Figure 1) reflects the convent’s religious instruction, seen in the many Catholic motifs (e.g., ladder, key, cross, lamp, sensor, birds, heart, IHS with cross, and an altar scene). The random nature of the motifs is typical of French samplers, as are alphabets with missing Ws. Pauline’s use of the French language for her signature grounds the needlework in the convent’s French origins. The overall format of the sampler, however, is Spanish colonial – as evidence by the concentric squares and the insertion of text between them, marching clockwise. Hence, this one sampler reflects the diverse ethnic roots of the New Orleans community and the convent’s female leaders.
On February 12, 1825 Pauline Fortier married Lestang Sarpy (1796-1862) in New Orleans’ St Louis Cathedral. Lestang was the son of French immigrants who had arrived in Louisiana a few years before he was born. Pauline and Lestang had at least four children (two girls and two boys) between 1825 and 1842 and shared their time between the DeLord Sarpy Plantation in St. Charles Parish and the Sarpy House on Howard Street in New Orleans. Pauline Fortier Sarpy died September 3, 1877 at the age of 72. She and her husband are buried in the St. Louis Cathedral cemetery in the Lestang Sarpy tomb. Pauline’s sampler descended in the Sarpy family and was donated to the Historic New Orleans Collection in 2004. Interestingly – her husband’s two older sisters, Marguerite Susanne Sarpy (born 1787) and Louise DeLord Sarpy (1789-1848) also attended the Ursuline Convent school (about 10 years before Pauline) but the location of their samplers is unknown.

Mary Laverty, 1828

Mary Farrar Laverty was born in New Orleans in 1816, the oldest of six children born to Henry (Kenny) Laverty (1776-1829) from Kilkenny, Ireland and Mary Alice Bryant who he married in 1814. During the War of 1812 Kenny Laverty volunteered as a rifleman in the Louisiana militia and in December of 1814 was one of 22 “Rifles” captured by the British and held prisoner in a British ship offshore. Kenny Laverty was a lawyer and so found it hard to sustain containment without comment. In a book about Andrew Jackson’s role in the Battle of New Orleans the author wrote that Laverty, “on account of his alarmingly treacherous broque” became a frequent butt of the British officers’ jokes on ship. Laverty, however, was also quick witted and apparently gave as good as he got. Mary’s father died in 1829 and divided his estate among his four surviving children, listing them in order of birth, with Mary Farrar’s name first.

The origins of Mary Laverty’s sampler (Figure 2) are difficult to unravel, as it is unsigned and undated. There is a note written by Mary’s sister Alice pasted to the back of the original frame that says Mary stitched the sampler in the winter of 1828 and that she had been “taught by the sisters of the Ursuline convent.” Although Mary may have attended the Ursuline Convent, it is unlikely her sampler has its origins at the convent school. The sampler’s format and contents, including a four-line verse in English, reflect English needlework traditions. The decorative bands were popular in Britain in previous generations, suggesting the instructor may have been an older American, English, or Irish woman known to the family or their extended Irish American community. There is no history of convent nuns teaching a sampler with this format; there are no motifs suggesting a Catholic religious instruction; and there were no nuns in the convent who would have taught her students in English. As we shall see in a sampler dating from 1875 that WAS stitched at the Ursuline Convent, the French language was still being used for instruction even at that late date.

Although the origins of Mary’s sampler are murky, its provenance is not. As indicated in the note pasted on the back of her sampler, Mary died November 20, 1838 at the age of 22. This note was written by her sister who received the sampler at Mary’s death. Also on the back of the sampler is a clear line of descent for Mary’s needlework – her sister Alice Bryant Laverty (1825-1909) married Joseph Butler (1823-1873) and passed the sampler to her daughter Ursa Butler Langmuir (1861-1952) who passed it to her daughter Helen Langmuir Wuel. Helen Wuel then passed Mary’s sampler to her niece, Alice Helen Sweet, who completed the record of previous owners.
Julia VanWickle, 1846

Julia VanWickle was born in Pointe Coupee, Louisiana (north of Baton Rouge) on December 5, 1837 and, according to her needlework, completed her sampler there in 1846 at the age of nine. Her father was Jacob Charles VanWickle, a wealthy sugar plantation owner from New Jersey who, according to the 1860 census, was one of the largest slaveholders in the area. Jacob was born in 1805 in Old Bridge, Middlesex County, New Jersey and was a member of town’s St. Peter’s Episcopal Church. Jacob emigrated to Louisiana in 1827 where he settled in Pointe Coupee and served as the town’s sheriff for nine years. On January 12, 1836 he married Marguerite Elise (Eliza) LeDoux, daughter of Valerin LeDoux and Julie DeCuir, both from well-established French Creole families in the area. Julia was the first of their two daughters. In 1841, four years after Julia’s birth, her mother died; and four years after her death Jacob married Virginia Clothilde LeDoux, a widowed cousin of his first wife. In 1845 Jacob was elected to the state legislature from Pointe Coupee. Although the VanWickle family spent most of their time in Louisiana, in the summers they traveled to Old Bridge, New Jersey where Jacob also maintained a homestead. Jacob’s obituary states that he was “Modest and retiring in his manner, quiet and gentle in his ways, of strong domestic tastes [and] commanded the esteem, respect and confidence of all who knew him.” Another obituary states that “through economy, industry and fair dealing he had amassed quite a fortune.”

Julia VanWickle’s needlework (Figure 3) is a straightforward alphabet sampler with an inscribed “signature” and the first line from a much longer Bible verse. Although Pointe Coupee is in the heart of French Creole country, Julia’s needlework follows American traditions for a girl’s first sampler, providing practice in the stitching of multiple alphabets (5) and two number series, stretched over eight rows of text with decorative dividing lines between each row.

The linear format and the appearance of a “w” in each of Julia’s alphabets suggest a teacher with American or British heritage (as the “w” does not appear in most French or Spanish samplers.) The inclusion of one line from a well-known Biblical verse in English suggests a teacher who is probably protestant, rather than Catholic. These details suggest the sampler was not stitched at the well-known St. Michael’s Convent, which provided education for the daughters of wealthy sugar planters with homes between Baton Rouge and New Orleans. And these features also rule out relatives on Julia’s mother’s side, or other women of the French Creole community in which Julia lived, as possible instructresses. One possible teacher is Julia’s paternal aunt, Mrs. Woods, who lived with the family for a time after her husband’s death. She was owner of Woods Cotton Press on Canal Street in New Orleans, a business later managed by Julia’s father.

According to her father’s obituary, Julia died in 1850 at the Sisters of Charity Convent and Academy in Nazareth, Kentucky (three miles from Bardstown, Kentucky). She died at the age of 13, only 4 years after she completed the sampler listing her home as Point Coupee. The Nazareth Academy was founded in 1814 by the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, and is one of the oldest educational institutions west of the Allegheny Mountains. Although Catholic, the school accepted students of all faiths. Today the school is known as Spalding College, in honor of Mother Catherine Spaulding, one of the founders of the Sisters of Charity order.
Lydia Anderson, 1860

Lydia Fredericka Anderson was born November 23, 1849 in New Orleans. Her parents were Ole Anderson, an immigrant from Norway (born 1820), and Charlotte Schneider (born 1828), an immigrant from Hamburg, Germany. Lydia’s parents were part of the surge of young immigrants arriving in Louisiana from Germany, Ireland, and other northern European countries during the 1840s and 1850s. Although many of the immigrants were seeking agricultural opportunities, and thousands passed through New Orleans on their way to points farther west, Ole and Charlotte both stayed in New Orleans where they married in 1848 in St. Paul’s Church – the first German Evangelical Lutheran church in New Orleans (1843-1860). On the 1850 census Ole lists his occupation as laborer.

Lydia’s sampler (Figure 4) reflects samplers stitched in Germany at the time, and suggests an instructor with recent German heritage – possibly her mother. Lydia’s sampler displays three versions of the German alphabet (the German alphabet includes “ws” but does not include Js) and an inscription in German honoring her parents. The use of embroidered corners to frame her inscription is also typical of German samplers – practice for decorating domestic linens such as tablecloths and napkins. The 1850 census indicates that Lydia’s mother, Charlotte Schneider Anderson, could read and write (although Lydia’s father could not) and so she had the literacy skills needed to provide Lydia with instruction on stitching her alphabets and short dedication. Lydia’s teacher could also have been another woman in the city’s large German American community or the teacher in a German run school. The city’s German population was so large that in the mid 1800s there was a strong push by the German American community to have instruction in the German language supplant instruction in French in the schools.
In 1863 Lydia married another German immigrant from Hamburg, Gustav Güel, whose occupation on the 1870 census was proprietor of a “variety store,” probably one of the many fashionable stores found on Canal Street. Between 1864 and 1892 they had at least four children, three boys and one girl. After the death of her husband Lydia went to live with her middle son Theodore in Greensboro North Carolina, where he worked as a piano tuner – probably for the Frazier Piano Company on Market Street. Lydia Anderson Güel died January 23, 1934 at the age of 84 in Greensboro. Lydia’s sampler, however, remained in New Orleans (possibly with one of her other children) and is now in the collection of the Louisiana State Museum.

**Félicité LaForest, 1864**

Félicité LaForest was born May 19, 1853, named for paternal grandmother Felicity Helene Mazange. Félicité’s father was Antoine Aubin LaForest (1810-1887), born in New Orleans to parents with a mix of French, German, and Spanish heritage. Her mother, Louise Telside Cazeaux (1819-1902), was of French Haitian origin, the granddaughter of Jean Pierre Cazeaux (1746-1801) who had immigrated to Haiti from France and died there in 1801 during the Haitian slave rebellion. Thus Felicite’s ethnic make-up included French, German, and Spanish on her father’s side, and French and Haitian on her mother’s side.

Félicité grew up in southern Louisiana’s La Fourche parish where a large number of Acadian families had settled in the mid 18th century, spawning a community whose culture was predominantly Cajun. Félicité’s family owned a small plantation but did not use enslaved workers. Instead, the plantation was run with a mix of white, black, and mixed race individuals, all listed as “farmers” on the census records. This egalitarian approach to farming also characterized Antoine LaForest’s approach to education. He ran a racially integrated school on his plantation for the benefit of his workers’ children and was himself the teacher. Interviewed by Louisiana’s superintendent of education in 1875, LaForest said there was “not the slightest problem with this arrangement and instruction proceeded smoothly for all.”

Félicité’s needlework (Figure 5) is an alphabet sampler intermixed with attractive dividing bands. Although Félicité signed her name in French (with accents over the two “e”s), the many alphabets suggest an English speaking instructress. It is not known if Félicité stitched this sampler in her father’s school (which quite likely was not in operation in 1864) or in another school under the instruction of a member of their ethnically diverse community. Either way, her teacher was most likely literate in both English and French.

**Grace Story, 1875**

Grace Story was born in 1865 in St. Bernard Parish in her parents’ home known as “Chateau des Fleurs.” In 1875, at the age of 10, Grace stitched a sampler at the “Couvent des Ursulines” entirely with red thread on a bleached white ground (Figure 6) – a popular color scheme for samplers in France from the mid 19th century until the mid 20th century. Use of the French name for the school suggests that French was still the language of instruction at the convent. In 1824 the Ursulines had built a new and larger convent several miles down-river from New Orleans and it is in this building that Grace grew up and was educated.
Grace’s father was Henry Clement Story (1820-1868), born in New Orleans to Benjamin Story (1783-1847), a businessman from New Jersey, and Anne Elizabeth Clement (1802-1843) from Long Island, New York. They met and married in Louisiana in 1819. Henry was educated at West Point Military Academy and graduated from there in 1836 at the age of 16, a classmate of Ulysses S. Grant. On October 24, 1848 Henry, by then a very wealthy farmer and landowner in New Orleans married Marie Amelia de Lesseps (1832-1866), member of a prominent French Creole family. Grace was the last of 11 children born to her parents between 1849 and 1865. Her mother died a year after Grace’s birth and her father died two years later. On the 1870 census, Grace (age 5) was still living in Chateau des Fleurs along with seven of her older siblings, under the supervision of the oldest, Hempden Story, aged 18. By the time she was ten, however, the Story siblings had been dispersed and Grace was attending school at the Ursuline Convent. Although 14-year old Grace is still listed as a boarder at the school in the 1880 census (along with more than 50 other students), she was also recorded as living with her maternal uncle, Alexan Lesseps, and his family in St. Bernard Parish. Grace Story never married, living her life with various members of her large extended family including her widowed sister Augusta Marie (Story) de Lesseps in New Orleans where she worked as a seamstress. Grace Story died on July 20, 1952 at the age of 87.
Marie LaPorte, 1887

The most recent piece of schoolgirl needlework was stitched by Mary LaPorte in 1887 at St. Mary’s Academy, the first secondary school specifically for African American girls in New Orleans. The school was started in 1867 by the Sisters of the Holy Family, a Catholic order of free black women that provided social assistance to poor and elderly people of color, both free and enslaved - first in New Orleans and then later in other Louisiana communities.

![Image of St. Patrick's embroidery](image.png)

*Figure 7. Pictorial embroidery made by Mary LaPorte in 1887 at St. Mary’s School in New Orleans. Image courtesy of Historic New Orleans Museum.*

The Sisters of the Holy Order was founded by Henriette DeLille – a free woman of color with French, Spanish, and African heritage, born in 1813. Her father was the wealthy Jean-Baptiste Lille Sarpy who – by coincidence – was the paternal uncle to Pauline Fortier’s husband, Lestang Sarpy. Henriette’s mother was Marie Josephe “Pouponne” Diaz (1785-1848), a free woman of color whose relationship with Jean Baptiste Sarpy was part of the New Orleans system known as plaçage – a socially accepted and fairly regulated system in which young women of color agreed to became common-law wives of rich white men of European heritage. There were benefits - the women lived well (often luxuriously), accumulated wealth, and their children had access to the best education the city had to offer. This system meant rich white men with European heritage often had more than one family – a legitimate family (usually residing on a plantation outside of town) and a second family of mixed racial heritage living in New Orleans.
Although Henriette DeLille was educated to follow the pattern set by her mother, she refused to go along with the system. Instead, she decided to dedicate her life to God and help those of African heritage less fortunate than herself. After her father’s death she liquidated her assets, persuaded a few other free women of color to join her, and started the Sisters of the Holy Order. During the time that Mary LaPorte stitched her embroidery, the person responsible for needlework instruction at St. Mary’s Academy was Sister Suzanne Navarre, known as “Queen of the Needle”. Although Sister Navarre died the year Mary completed her needlework, she had been responsible for the school’s sewing department and had undoubtedly trained those who provided instruction to the school’s students.

Mary’s embroidery (Figure 7) covers every inch of her canvas and reflects the popularity of needlepoint in the late 19th century. It is unknown why St. Patrick was selected as the central figure for Mary’s needlework, although it may have something to do with his boyhood capture and years of enslaved labor in Ireland. Perhaps St. Patrick adorns this young African American girl’s needlework because of a sympathetic connection between his story and that of her people. Unfortunately, we have not been able to identify Mary LaPorte with certainty.

**Selected Bibliography**


