Cease then not other imperfection fame,
Or proper bliss depends on what we blame
Knew by own joint this kind this due declare
Or blindness weakness heaven bestows on thee
Submit in this or any other sphere
Secure to be as blest as thou canst bear
Safe in the hand of one dispos categorized power
Or in the natal or the mortals house

Pope

L. & A. Fisher
Auckimae April 14
1620
Elizabeth Fisher Baird

This needlework sampler from the collection of the Villa Louis is one of the earliest objects in the Wisconsin Decorative Arts Database. The inscription at the center, framed by a garland supported by two angels, reads “E T Fisher / Mackinac April 24/ 1820”. That information, combined with a note that the maker, Elizabeth Therese Fisher, was the half-sister of Jane Fisher Rolette Dousman, led me on a “Google safari” to discover the fascinating story of this important artifact.

Ten-year-old Elizabeth Fisher made this sampler in 1820 while living on Mackinac Island, one of the major fur trade posts in the Michigan Territory. While Elizabeth’s delicate, intricate stitchery would probably be beyond the patience of any modern ten-year-old, this kind of handiwork was a significant part of a young girl’s education in the early 1800s. In the eastern United States, middle- and upper-class families sent their daughters to formal schools where they learned appropriately feminine skills including sewing, music and comportment. Elizabeth probably stitched her sampler under the supervision of her mother, Marianne Schindler Fisher, who started a school where the daughters of fur traders in Mackinac could learn the same ladylike accomplishments as their counterparts in the east.

While some samplers featured only alphabets, numbers, and simple decorative motifs, more elaborate examples like Elizabeth’s work included landscapes, figures, and inscriptions. Quotations from the Bible were typical, but a common secular source was the eighteenth-century British poet Alexander Pope. The verse on Fisher’s sampler is Epistle I, Verse X from Pope’s “An Essay on Man” (1732-34).

Fisher’s family history typifies the intermarriage and cultural blending among American Indian, Anglo and European peoples that took place in the Great Lakes region during the fur trade era. Fisher was born in Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin in 1810 and came to Mackinac Island with her mother Marianne Schindler Fisher in 1812. Fisher’s grandmother Therese Lasalier Schindler was a woman of French Canadian and Odawa (Ottawa) descent who worked as a fur trader at Mackinac. Fisher’s father was Henry Monroe Fisher, a Scottish fur trader. His marriage to Marianne Schindler in 1809 was his second—his first wife was madeline Gauthier, another woman of French Canadian and American Indian heritage. His only daughter from his first marriage was Jane Fisher, who was raised in Prairie du Chien and went on to marry two prominent Wisconsin fur traders—Joseph Rolette and Hercules Dousman. Jane Fisher Dousman lived at the “House on the Mound” and its later reincarnation, the Villa Louis, until her death in 1882.

Four years after completing her sampler, Elizabeth Fisher married Henry Baird, a Scots-Irish immigrant working as a teacher in Mackinac. In 1824, the young couple moved to Green Bay, then a sparsely settled trading post and United States military outpost in Michigan Territory. Henry Baird became the first practicing attorney in Wisconsin, and Elizabeth Baird’s multicultural background and knowledge of French, Ojibwe and Odawa made her an invaluable translator and negotiator for her husband’s law practice. Elizabeth Therese Fisher Baird remained in Green Bay until her death in 1890.

A feature article from the Wisconsin Historical Society nicely summarizes the Bairds’ role in Wisconsin’s transition from frontier territory to settled state:

“Connected to the key leaders of the territorial period by family ties, marriage, business interests and politics, the Bairds helped create nearly all the social institutions that gave Wisconsin its identity before the Civil War. They helped shift millions of acres of land from Indian to government ownership. They watched its towns grow from frontier backwaters to major cities teeming with new immigrants. They saw its landscape transformed from unbroken miles of prairie to thousands of bustling farms.”
Portrait photograph of Elizabeth Baird ca. 1879. Wisconsin Historical Society image archives WHi-5210.

Sources