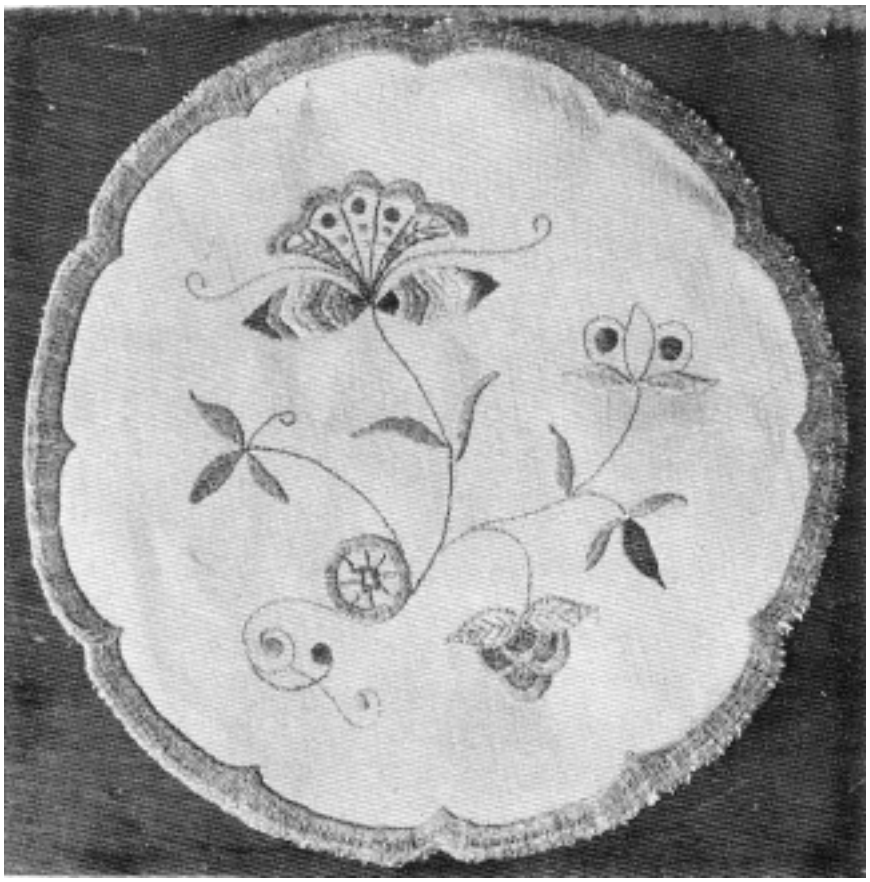

Plate I The first pieces were small doilies done in indigo linen threads. Roumanian stitch was used for the edge and is combined in this pattern with stem and feather stitch. (Property of Miss Elizabeth Childs)

DEERFIELD BLUE AND WHITE NEEDLEWORK

By
Margery B. Howe

In 1896, almost seventy-five years before the present extraordinary interest in early American embroidery, two young women living in the little western Massachusetts town of Deerfield organized the Society of Blue and White Needlework in order to revive a craft that they realized had been lost. They trained women in the village to do the fine embroidery and for thirty years they carried on what is thought to be one of the earliest successful village industries in the country. Because their work was so much a part of the village life, and in a way was an outgrowth of that life, it is interesting to see just what went on in a small New England town at the end of the 19th century. There are still older people in Deerfield with keen memories of that time and the early town reports are mines of information. Seventy-five years is not a long period in history but it covers an astonishing change in our way of living. Someone has said that in a time of anxiety women turn to fine needlework for solace. That may have been true of Mary Queen of Scots sewing her way drearily through years of imprisonment. It most decidedly was not true of the women who did the fine embroidery in Deerfield under the direction of Miss Margaret Whiting and Miss Ellen Miller.

In 1890 Deerfield was a prosperous and beautiful small town. The houses looked very much as they do to-day along the mile of street, although there were barns behind more of them. In the spring the wide strip of grass between the sidewalk and the road was blue with violets and in the fall it was tall with golden rod and asters. The street was deep in mud in the spring, dusty in summer, and in the winter the snow lay unbroken after a storm until the men could get out their teams and break a way through. If the snow was light, they fastened bundles of corn stalks to the runners of their pungs and used them as brooms, but for a heavy snow they chained on their iron plowshares and prepared for battle. At dusk in winter the kerosene lamps were lit in the houses and the yellow glow of lanterns shone from open barn doors as the last chores of the day were done. The lamplighter made his rounds to light the few street lamps and that was a signal for children to go home from coasting. It was ten years before the Town Meeting voted $350 to bring electric power to the village. A few families were beginning to think about hot

air furnaces, but most houses were heated by stoves. Bedrooms had no heat except what might rise through a hole in the floor from the room below. Children who slept in the room over the kitchen waked to the smell of a wood fire being kindled, the sound of coffee being ground, and all the bustle of a new day. If the family had no well in the yard, they joined neighbors in sharing one of the springs on the mountain. Water came down in lead pipes to the houses and the pump in the kitchen was the only plumbing.

Deerfield men, almost all hereditary Republicans, have always been interested in politics, but in 1890 there was little cause for concern beyond local affairs which, with care, could always be stirred up to result in pleasantly fiery Town Meetings. Aside from chronic British colonial border disputes, there was no war anywhere on earth, and in Washington things were safe in the hands of Benjamin Harrison. In the Town Reports of that time the names of families paying a dog tax are listed and also the names of the dogs. Along with the Rovers and Skips and Sheps a dog appeared in 1889 named Benjamin Harrison, so even the dogs in Deerfield were comfortably Republican. A few years later Grover Cleveland appeared in the lists, but he was short lived, while Benjamin trotted on through the years until the custom of naming the dogs was discontinued.

The nearest shopping center was three miles away and had to be reached by driving the family horse. If that was difficult, one could always hang a tag of red cloth outside the door and "Express" Williams, like his father before him, would stop with his wagon for shopping instructions or to pick up a passenger on his daily trip to Greenfield.

A woman's life in 1890 was bounded by her family, her neighbors, and the church. The routine of her days was well-established; she washed on Monday, ironed on Tuesday, baked on Wednesday, and swept on Friday. Sometimes a hired girl helped her. There may have been a few slack-twisted women who failed to get their washing out until Thursday but they were to be pitied. They had probably not been brought up in Deerfield. However, boundaries and routines brought contentment and something else that we have almost lost – leisure. When the noon dinner was cleared away and the kitchen floor swept, the housewife changed her dress, put on a white apron instead of the checked gingham of the morning, tidied her hair, and was free to sit down with her sewing,

her braided rug, or her knitting for the afternoon. Amusement was home-grown, and choir practice, prayer meetings, and church sociables drew the village together, while in the house reading out loud was the favorite entertainment. There was never a time when minds were more active. People remember a joke of that day about the ladies of a neighboring town, "who were stylish and loved pretty hats, but the ladies of Deerfield cared more for what was under the hats." In those days a college education was not a prerequisite of culture. There were lyceums in the summer and many distinguished people came from Boston, Springfield, and New York to talk at the meetings.

It was into this atmosphere of lively tranquility that two families moved about 1890, the Whitings from Holyoke and the Millers from Hatfield, both nearby towns. In each family there was a widowed mother and two unmarried daughters. In each family, also, one daughter had received formal and excellent training in art. Ellen Miller had studied in Springfield and Margaret Whiting at the New York Academy of Design. They were both about thirty years old, highly intelligent, eager, humorous, and already friends of long standing. They could hardly, however, have been more different in temperament. Ellen was shy, gentle, and not easily articulate. Margaret had an astringent wit, an amused understanding, if not always tolerance, for her fellow man, and no one who spent five minutes with her could accuse her of being inarticulate. The Miller and Whiting houses faced each other across the street near the center of town. The kitchen and great chimney of the Miller house had survived the fire during the Deerfield massacre of 1704 and the rest of the house was rebuilt in 1710 with low rooms and many fireplaces. The Whiting house came later when ceilings were high and rooms spacious.

Just how the two young women became interested in 18th-century needlework is a question, but a newspaper clipping of the time suggests that as they drove around the countryside making their excellent landscape sketches in pencil or watercolor, they came to know the people up and down the valley and were invited into the old houses, perhaps for a drink of spring water, and were shown old family pieces of needlework that had been put away in chests or in an attic. They soon realized that they had stumbled on an art that had been lost for a hundred years. 18th-century American embroideries were part of the social inheritance brought from England by the colonists, and like all healthy seedlings,

had increased in vigor with transplanting. However, as Miss Margaret once said, "The early needlewomen later sold their birthright for a mess of sewing machines", and the beautiful work was forgotten. A desire to study the designs and stitchery grew, and Margaret and Ellen began a collection of the old patterns, sometimes buying early pieces, but more often paying for the privilege of tracing the patterns from family coverlets, bed hangings, fragments of embroidered petticoat bands, or pockets. In the local museum which had recently been opened by the village antiquarian, George Sheldon, there were also fine pieces that they were allowed to study. Slowly a portfolio of drawings grew and its value as a record became important. A need to study the origins of the designs and the varied stitchery increased with the collection. It is simple now to go to the nearest library and in a few minutes find the history of crewel embroidery, as well as directions for the old stitches. How Margaret and Ellen accomplished their research seventy-five years ago is a mystery, but we have Margaret's manuscript notes. She made mistakes in a very few instances, and always on points that have been clarified since her time. She thought, for instance, that all the linen used for embroideries was woven in this country, not knowing that much of it was imported from England very early, nor did she know that all patterns were not drawn by the needlewoman herself, but could be purchased from shops if one lived near a city like Boston. In a small frontier town like Deerfield she was probably right in thinking that designs were original. She understood the transition from the heavy, robust embroideries of England to the thread- and time-saving methods of the colonial woman, and she carefully listed the stitches commonly found in New England work. "There were many variants in feather stitches and herringbone stitches, in square and diagonal lattices, in knots and crosses, in buttonhole, outline and chain stitches, but the early craftswoman placed her main dependence upon a 'laid stitch'[1] which was both durable and economical of thread, two excellent qualities for use in work that must bear frequent washings and when the thread was all self-produced".

Margaret and Ellen also painstakingly worked out the method of making the various stitches, sometimes carefully ripping a bit of hope-

[1] Now usually called Roumanian stitch, but always known as New England laid stitch in Deerfield.

lessly worn fragment to find what they needed. In a talk given at Flushing, New York, in 1898, Margaret said "At first it was our intention simply to make one replica of each of the pieces of embroidery in the collection of the Deerfield Museum. The wools had been badly moth-eaten and many of the pieces were threadbare but the designs showed true New England directness, often with a vigor and perception of decorative need which were remarkable. Rub Oriental art through a Puritan sieve and how odd is the result; how charming, and how individual. Presently the idea came that it might be possible to adapt Ruskin's theory to the Deerfield effort and establish a village industry which should be at once unique and in entire sympathy with its environment". The two young artists were quite familiar with the cherished schemes of Mr. Ruskin, but they viewed him with typical caution. To quote Margaret again: "Village industries are menaced by the danger of confusing social reform with craftsmanship. In 'industries' Benevolence sees her chance to benefit others. Well-intentioned social reformers and philanthropists defeat their own ends. It is not charity but art which founds and maintains a craft. If art is served, honesty remembered, and utility not forgotten, a craft needs no more help nor encouragement than it ought to find in the open market where it may squarely meet and demand public recognition for its inborn merits". Otherwise Ruskin's cart might end up before his horse.

As it happened, the right setting for a revival of handwork was provided. The "pre-Raphaelite movement" in England with William Morris and his Merton Abbey establishment had little effect on American taste beyond the introduction of a few fabrics and wall-papers, but by 1890 there was a growing distaste for the poor design of machine-made materials. The pendulum was swinging back from the "mess of sewing machines" and a strong interest in handcrafts was developing. So the time was ripe for the founding of the Deerfield Society of Blue and White Needlework, a rather clumsy name chosen because linen threads were used instead of the perishable crewels, and blue was a favored color in old work. For five years Margaret and Ellen had studied 18th-century embroideries and during that period they had also found time to write, illustrate, and publish a botany[1] of wildflowers of the region. In 1896

[2] Ellen Miller and Margaret C. Whiting, *Wild Flowers of the Northeastern States*, G. P. Putnam Sons, 1895.

they began to train a few skilled needlewomen of the village in the old stitches. A very small amount of money was invested in materials, but the start was made almost without capital. Yet from that day the enterprise grew steadily, although it is difficult to tell exactly how the impetus was gained. From the beginning the Society had a definite plan "to avoid the doubtful value of advertising beyond the intrinsic worth or its output; to demand and get a return which should make the effort profitable; to produce the best possible work, and to spare neither time nor labor nor study to realize that standard".[1]

The necessary time, labor, and study involved Margaret and Ellen in unexpected problems at once. It was impossible to find good linen material made in this country, although for a short period a hand-woven product of Berea College was used. Probably through McCutcheon's in New York, linen finally came from Russia and white linen threads from Scotland. Vegetable dyes were hard to find even in those days, but sample lots of the best Bengal indigo might still be obtained from dealers in synthetic dyes, who, not so long before, had supplied indigo for army and navy uniforms during the Civil War. These three and four inch lumps of indigo were put through something like a large meat grinder and then pounded to a fine powder. "Old rules of thumb used in their kitchens by great-grandmothers were too vague and irregular to be helpful in learning the difficult and laborious art of vegetable dyeing, especially as applied to flax. This fibre was described by an old chemist as of 'a cold and deadly nature', a trait which made it fight against absorbing color, but had its compensations in the quality of tone when it finally capitulated to the dye vats. Several chemists in the early days wrote little treatises on the art, with formulas for domestic dyeing, and from these books, a century old or older, help was gratefully received, constantly corrected or reinforced by the monumental English work on the subject by Sir William Crookes.[2] That eminent chemist took the trouble to gather the formulas for vegetable dyeing used by the large factories of the Continent and England just before the coal-tar products were adopted, and his comprehensive book became a foundation of absolute knowledge, though to reduce his huge proportions to ounces and quarts

[1] Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations are from Margaret Whiting's notes.

[2] Sir William Crookes, 1832-1919, English chemist and physicist, author of *A practical handbook of dyeing and calico printing*, 1874.

was an arithmetical excursion in itself." This is a dramatic understatement when one remembers that neither Margaret nor Ellen were trained in arithmetic or chemistry. Years later Margaret made a characteristic remark when she said, "Not for nothing was I born on the 4th of July". After long and patient experimenting, she produced the beautiful soft shades of blue of colonial days. She also acquired almost permanently blue hands.

In those days it was necessary to keep the Whiting house free of confusion because of an older invalid sister, but such restrictions seem to have been unnecessary in the smaller Miller home, where most of the work was done in the summer, as the dye crocks were kept on the vine-sheltered side porch. A young relative remembers that "anything which required boiling had to be done on the old kitchen range with a coal fire. When dyeing was going on, it sometimes made cooking for the family around it a bit complicated. Water was pumped from the well south of the house but a rain barrel was also used to collect softer water."

Meanwhile the work of gathering and adapting designs went on in the Whiting house. "This intimate, working acquaintance with the designs invented and wrought by the women of long ago brought to the student an increased admiration and respect for the innate sense of the art of textile decoration they revealed, a promising and clearly defined style, the first that may be claimed for the history of American decorative art. Because it might lead to a closer understanding of the society which produced it, as much information as possible about the individual designers was collected". They read the diaries of "Aunt Bek" Dickinson, born in Hatfield in 1738, who later embroidered the beautiful coverlet and bed hangings in indigo wools, still owned by her descendants, and included in her design of vines, flowers, and ship, the carefully arranged but apparently meaningless letters, a puzzle no one has yet solved. In Dorset, Vermont, they found Keturah Baldwin's full set of bed furnishings. "Keturah had imagination instead of culture and her craftsmanship was worthy of a place among the best examples of colonial work". Margaret and Ellen were allowed to copy the design exactly, which was fortunate, since the original pieces were burned the following year. They were quite familiar with the beautiful Coleman coverlets, now in the Metropolitan Museum, which they found in Sag Harbor, Long Island, and photographed. Valuable finds came about in unexpected ways. A wonderful

bedspread executed by a New England woman, Betsy Clark, was found in a junk shop. Her descendants had cared little for it, and it had finally been sold with some rags. It became one of the chief treasures of the Blue and White Society and is now in the Dwight-Barnard House in Deerfield.

The first embroideries made by the Society were small doilies, but with practice Margaret and Ellen moved on to coverlets, bed-hangings, curtains, and all sorts of table linens. As outside interest and demand grew, more needlewomen were trained until by the turn of the century thirty people were working for the young "manager-designers". A satisfactory method had been developed for payment of labor. "The full price of each piece is divided into ten parts; five parts go to the embroiderer; two parts to the designer; two parts to the 'fund' which is used to pay running expenses of the Society; and the one remaining part covers the expense of materials used. It will be seen that the proportion of the payment for the work and the design is reckoned on the common basis of the labor involved. This proportion is founded on a belief that the hand and brain work are interdependent and should receive equal money returns. We asked prices that would allow us to pay twenty cents an hour for skilled labor and we produced only pieces that our foremothers would have approved". Out of the 'fund' very small salaries were paid to Margaret and Ellen for executive work and to a younger sister, Margaret Miller, who acted as secretary, and who also did a great deal of the tedious work of preparing finished pieces for sale, "ironing them wet". Time studies were methodically kept and there is a notebook in which rough sketches of patterns are drawn with the note "Mrs. Cadwell's time, 2 hrs. 50 minutes", or "E.M. snail trail, 56 inches, 25 minutes". Mrs. Cadwell and Ellen apparently worked at what was considered to be an average speed. There is a financial statement for 1901, scribbled in pencil, which lists the thirty-one workers and gives the receipts of the Society for that year, $2,126.76. The highest amount paid a single worker was $139.

Patterns were drawn on linen, the number of necessary dyed threads counted out, colors and stitches indicated on a small working drawing, and the bundle delivered to the worker. Patterns were never duplicated, although the same outlines were sometimes developed in different filling stitches, resulting in completely different effects. Often several women worked at once on a coverlet, sitting under the elms in the beautiful

Whiting garden, and, if someone proved more skillful in a certain stitch, she was given that part to do. A trade mark had been designed, a small flax wheel enclosing the letter D, and it was always the last thing embroidered on a piece to indicate that the work met the strict requirements of Ellen and Margaret, who later said, "The New England conscience is a valuable substratum on which to build".

Indigo dyes remained Margaret's province, but it was not long before Ellen began to experiment with other colors, madder from Mesopotamia, the tawny shades of cutch (the bark of the South American acacia), fustic, which gave such a beautiful yellow, and finally all the warm grays and browns of local tree barks, walnut, butternut, maple, and sumac. There are notebooks with small swatches of linens and all the notes on mordants, mixtures, time of exposure to sun, and so on. Embroideries were no longer done in indigo alone, but in all the subtle and rich colors finally available. Margaret and Ellen proved to their own satisfaction that the 18th century embroideries, which had faded with many years of use, could have been done originally in colors that were strong, clear, and very beautiful in their infinite variety.

A small front parlor in the Miller house was made into a permanent show room. The Blue and White Needlework, as it was still called, had acquired astonishing fame. There are favorable notices from papers in Boston, New York, and Chicago. Art Institutes were being organized all over the country and the Society was invited to exhibit work. A silver medal was won at the Paris Exposition for design and color. Collectors were beginning to be interested in the work and more orders came in than could be comfortably filled. A set of table linen was made for a Washington hostess, who wanted it to match heirloom china. Bed furnishings for another customer are listed as selling for $1,250, and when we remember that the Society was still operating on its original plan, this gives some idea of the hours of labor involved. In the summer of 1899 the first of many annual exhibits and sales took place in Deerfield. Lasting less than a week, it brought many visitors to the Millers' side door where an old flax wheel had been hung.

Looking back now it is interesting to see how the work of two young women changed the life of a village. Not long after the founding of the Blue and White Society, neighbors became interested in reviving other early skills. Hand-looms that had been relegated to the attic for two

generations were brought down and strung. A woman, who remembered how palmleaf hats had been made in the Deerfield of her childhood, practiced until she could do the intricate braiding again, and trained a group to make palmleaf baskets. Another group made raffia baskets, using vegetable dyes to color strands in the designs. The blacksmith found that he could make hinges, lamps, and fire tools. Rugs were braided, but were planned more carefully than the earlier hit-and-miss variety. The quality of all the work was excellent, and Margaret helped matters by giving a series of talks on simple theories of good design and color as applied to the making of baskets, rugs, and so on. Fine copper and silver work was added to the growing list of industries and there were always the exquisite camera studies by Mary and Frances Allen, artists themselves, and warm friends of Margaret and Ellen. The summer exhibit was enlarged to include work by all the craftsmen and it was shown in eight houses, which were opened to the public, as well as in the Village Room. The coming of the trolley helped to swell the number of summer visitors, as groups from nearby towns would charter a trolley car as a bus is chartered to-day. Carriages lined the street and there were a sufficient number of automobiles to merit notice in the local press. One newspaper reports in 1907 that "six thousand people registered at the Museum during the summer and many more than that have visited Deerfield". It was estimated in that year that the combined industries brought between ten and fifteen thousand dollars to the village, a substantial amount for a town that was just one mile of street long. Mortgages were paid off and Mr. Ruskin would have been pleased. As usual, fame had its drawbacks and a reporter for the *New York Sun* wrote "Living in a tourist center is not entirely joyous, and for the sweep of Goths and Vandals the crafts, quite as much as the quaint old Colonial houses and the Indian massacre traditions are responsible. Visitors flatten their noses on living room windows; they even enter and prowl about . . .[One householder] remarking upon a bevy of craft-hunters, observed that all Deerfield needs is one more good massacre. Upon a tree in front of an historic home was erected at the time of the July exhibit this sign:

Nothing on exhibition.
Nothing on sale.
This is not a commercial house.

Touched at the vital point by this imputation of commercialism, an avenging craftswoman tore down the notice, only to see it erected out of reach by aid of a ladder where it remained all summer".

In 1910 Margaret and Ellen, perhaps thinking of Browning's line, "I often am much wearier than you think", went to England and Scotland. Each filled a sketch book with fine small watercolors and it is as easy to follow their tour with the little labeled landscapes as it would be with a Baedecker. Everywhere they looked at old embroideries and they brought back legends and designs for cross-stitched samplers, which became another product of the group, but never an important one.

The Society continued all through World War I, although Red Cross work absorbed a good deal of time in the village. But national taste was changing; Art Nouveau was rampant and interest in 18th century design and house furnishings was waning. Orders for large wall hangings replaced the earlier ones for coverlets and table linens. For a time Margaret and Ellen tried to meet the demand. Although the stitchery on the large pieces was still excellent, it became of necessity coarser, and the design lost the beauty of the colonial inheritance. Many years earlier Margaret had been interested in the work of a Belgian decorative artist, Mme. de Rudder, wife of a sculptor, whose great embroidered panels were commissioned for the Municipal Building in Brussels and the Province House of Ghent. Mme. de Rudder had experimented with appliqué of one fabric on another, embroidering over the whole panel, and producing a richly covered pattern reminiscent of early Flemish tapestries. Margaret began her own experiments with appliqué on large curtains, but her espaliered rose trees and an allegorical unicorn by a forest pool lacked conviction. Long after the Society ended, on the rare occasions when she showed the embroideries that she had stored in the old highboy, it was the earlier pieces that she looked at with delight.

In 1926 the Society was disbanded after thirty years, and there were several reasons for its ending. Margaret experimented with different forms of the paragraph announcing that ending before she was satisfied. "For reasons strictly personal to Ellen Miller and the writer, they set away their dye pots and shut the old portfolio. Having weathered the Great War and outlasted most of its early contemporaries, this revival of a distinctive form of art with its long pedigree came to a close, quite as complete, it would seem, as that which befell it a hundred years before."

The "personal reasons" were the failing health of Ellen, who died soon after, and Margaret's own dimming eyesight, two griefs which she resolutely failed to acknowledge. For nearly twenty years she went on "waving the flag of freedom" and her zest for living and interest in the village never failed. She stood firmly behind the Academy in the first years of its own revival and, as a neighbor once said, "I never made any important decision without talking it over with Miss Margaret. I didn't always agree with her, but I always came away knowing exactly what I thought myself". When she could no longer see to read, friends did it for her, and everything from the reports of the Royal Archaeological Society to national politics was grist for her mill.

Now Margaret and Ellen are both gone, but one may still see their work in the Deerfield Museum, where the integrity of their designs and the richness of their colors have taken their own place as part of the New England heritage.

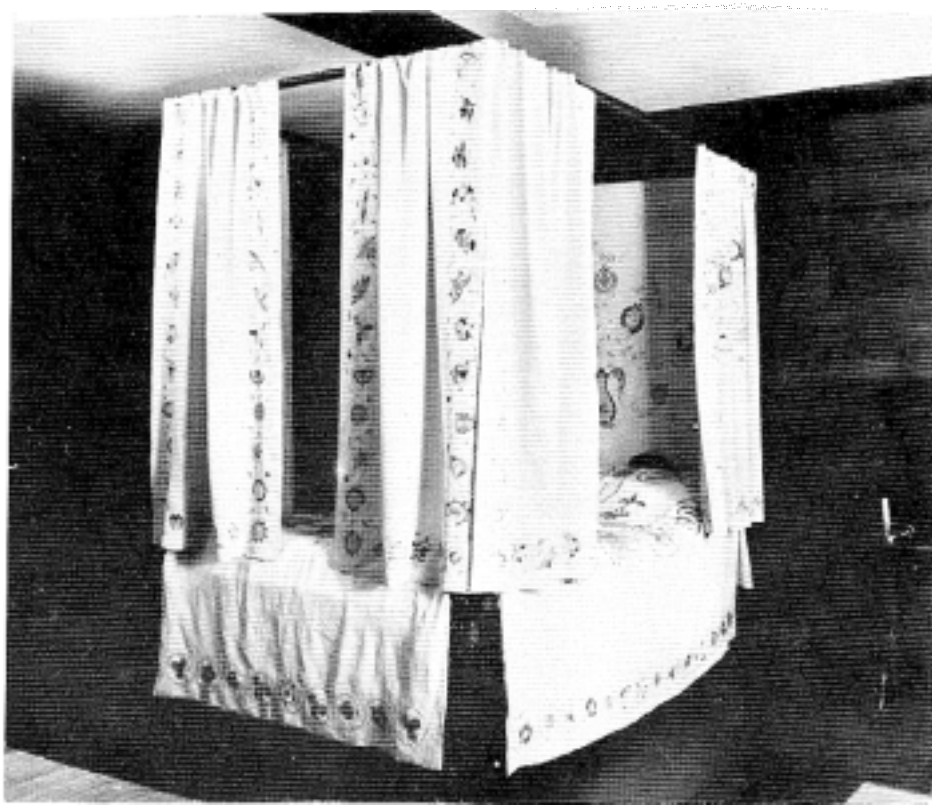

Plate II Later the Society embroidered many sets of bed furnishings. This one, done in shades of indigo, is an exact reproduction of an 18th century design, but was interpreted with a more imaginative use of stitches. The original was felt to be monotonous. (Property of Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association and shown in the Frary House, Deerfield.)

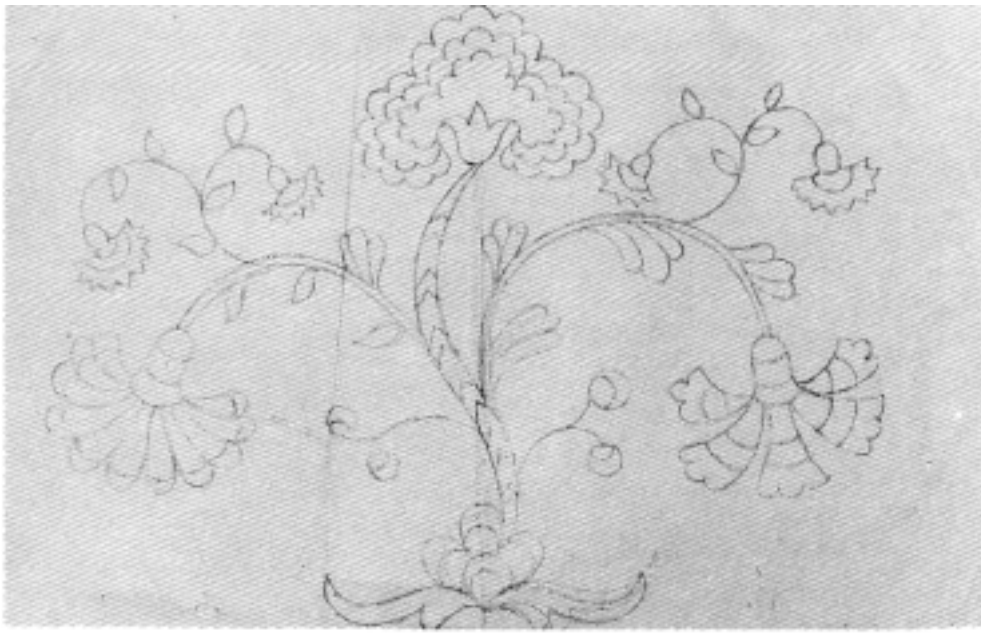

Plate III The patterns were drawn carefully on heavy brown paper. Often paper bags were cut open and used.

Plate IV A pattern on white paper was given out with each piece of work. Colors, stitches, and weight of thread were indicated. This piece was planned for three shades of indigo and was to be done in Roumanian (N.E.), stem, feather, cross stitch, and couched herring bone. "Rope" was a heavier thread used for contrast with the finer ones.

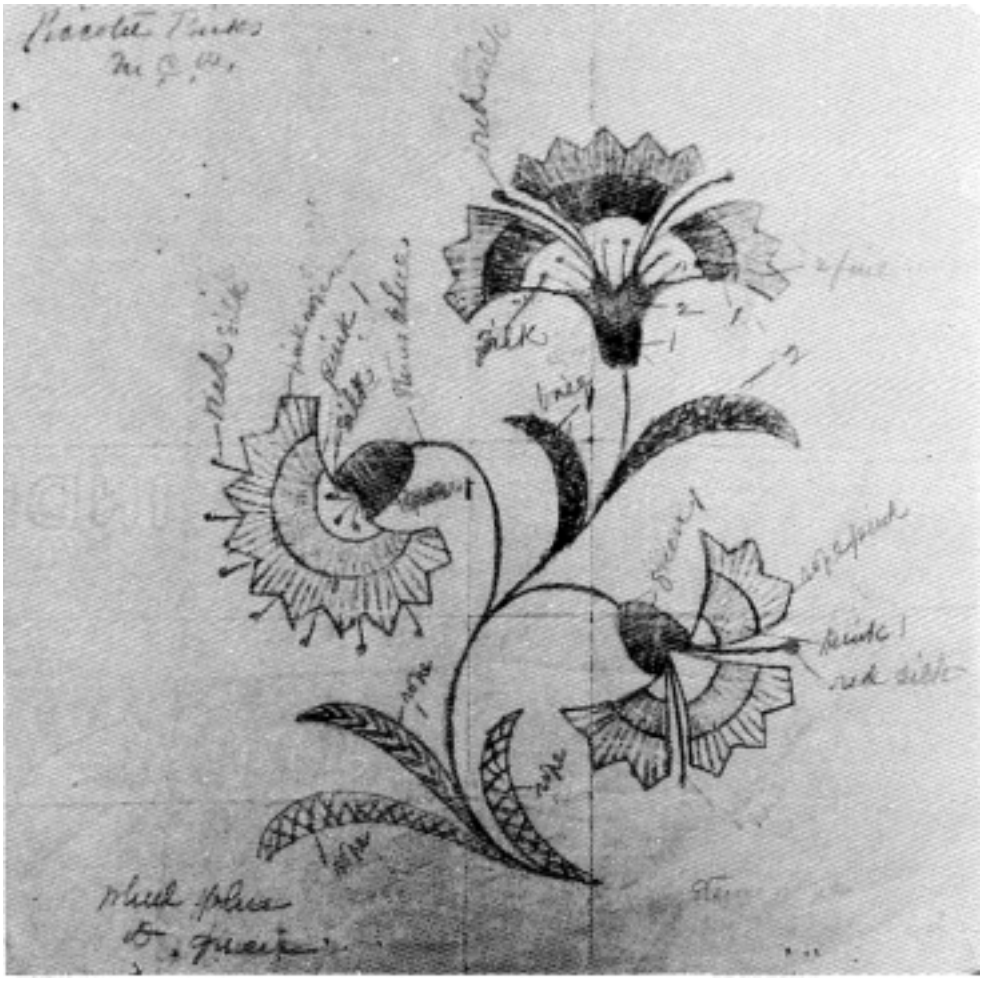

Plate V To be done in several shades of pink, blue, and green, this design called for an unusual accent of red silk on the stamens. The stitches are open and closed Roumanian, stem, herring bone, and French knots.