

# A Collector's History of Perforated Paper Needlework

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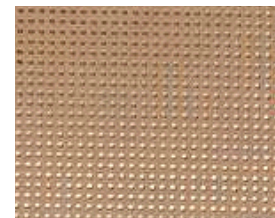
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I have been collecting perforated paper needlework for 20 years. When I wrote my first published article about perforated paper needlework it was mostly a forgotten pastime. Since that first article, written in 1999, there has been a renewed interest in perforated paper needlework. I continue to collect additional paper pieces, and I keep learning new things about this style of needlework that still fascinates me. This updated article is still my history of perforated paper needlework - as learned through what I have collected and what I have seen.

Perforated paper needlework was most popular between 1860 - 1900. The first piece of perforated paper I ever saw was a bookmark stitched by my great grandmother and received by me when I was twelve. I bought my first motto piece from a local antique shop. I became obsessed with this little known type of needlework. This "fabric" was neither material or canvas, materials which any modern stitcher is more familiar with. What was used was something different, and I wanted to know more about what perforated paper actually was and how it was used. There were things one could stitch on "paper" that were and are still unique.

### What Is Perforated Paper Needlework

Let me explain what perforated paper needlework actually is. Perforated paper, often called punched paper or punched cardboard, is a heavy weight paper with evenly spaced holes punched in it. This type of material came in different counts (holes punched per inch) and was used for cross stitch and needlepoint, just like fabric and canvas is used for stitching today. The original paper was made from a durable very pliable paper stock that in most cases can last just as long as fabric *if you don't get it wet*. Some of my earliest samples of stitched paper (circa 1840's) have enough rag content in them such that they feel more like fabric than cardboard. This stitching "paper" had holes punched in it by specially cut dyes at an even spacing per inch. Throughout Victorian times the sizes of paper available were as fine as 20-24 holes per inch to as large as 8-10 holes per inch. Paper with a count of 14-16 holes per inch was the most used, and is the most seen today, because this size of paper was used primarily for the motto pieces. Of all the things punched paper was used for, the motto designs, consisting of biblical sayings, greetings, popular song titles etc. were the most popular. The mottoes were intended to be stitched on punched paper, and the paper was manufactured and pre printed for that specific purpose.



14 holes per inch  
paper made today

Higher count paper, which gave the stitcher a similar stitch size per inch as fabric, was typically used for traditional style samplers and small bookmarks. Bookmark patterns were offered in ladies magazines beginning in the 1850's. The higher count paper allowed more stitching detail in a smaller space. Paper samplers were never pre printed. Each perforated paper sampler is a one-of-a-kind piece, and when you can find one it is rarer than any fabric sampler stitched during the same time period.



**The Old Arm Chair** motto circa 1880  
a popular 1840's song title



**Rules Sampler** 1864

## The Motto Designs

You have all seen at least one original punched paper piece. The most recognizable type of these pieces, again, were the motto samplers. These were typically rectangular, most framed in 8.5 - 10' x 21' Eastlake frames, that stated sentiments or biblical scriptures. Many a Home Sweet Home, God Bless Our Home, to name only a few, hung in a parlors all over this country at the turn of the last century. You may not have known that these were stitched on paper. You certainly knew they were some form of needlework, perhaps some form of needlepoint on canvas. That "canvas" was most likely punched paper AKA perforated paper.



**Home Sweet Home** motto  
the most traditional version

### Printing On Paper and the Mottoes

In the 1870's a process for printing on paper was developed. A design could now be engraved, lithographed, and later stamped directly on the perforated paper. This ability to print the design on the paper made stitching on paper more appealing. Even in Victorian times stitchers did not like to count from a chart on to blank ground fabric.



**Charity** motto  
from 1 Corinthians 13

Paper with a count of 14 - 16 holes punched per inch was the preferred count for printed designs. This size paper must have worked well for the printer. Since this size paper was manufactured for the mottoes, it must have been easy to print on, while providing enough design detail for the stitcher as well as being an friendly hole count to stitch on. By the late 1870's, when the motto craze was at it's height, this popular size of punched paper was being manufactured in sheets that were at least 21 inches wide. The most often seen sizes of paper used for the printed motto designs were sheets cut to approximately 8.5" x 21" and 17" x 21" sizes. The availability of printed and blank paper, in these larger sheets, gave the stitcher more stitching possibilities.

The mottoes were mass produced. Most of them are not unique. Pre-printed paper with a saying ready to stitch was sold through magazines and in stores. From the number that still survive I imagine that this was a popular and easy way to add needlework to your home. The only thing that made a mass produced motto different was the ability of the stitcher and the supplies they had to work with. In the 1870's and 1880's there were several different companies producing motto needlework. Some companies may have sold their designs complete with a color guide, or even as a complete kit. No original stitching guide has yet to be found, however I have seen one too many of the same slogan stitched with similar colors and threads to rule out a kit possibility. The mottoes produced in the mid 1870's that are labeled "Parker's Patent" use different symbols for different parts of the picture just as we use symbols for counted cross stitch today. Motto finishing frames were made and marketed with the motto designs.

Special stitching frames were manufactured for the stitcher working on the large sheets of paper that could not be held in hand. A picture of one type of stitching frame can be seen on the back of most Dutch Treat motto charts.



**Parker's Patent**  
unstitched paper

## Motto Designs cont.

The motto designs that were printed on paper were at first simple and then became more varied. As the printing techniques evolved, so did the type, size, and style of designs. Many pieces were stamped with complex patterns, almost filling the entire paper. These patterns were stitched over, as best you could, or left unstitched with only the lettering completed.

Originally off white was the first color of punched paper to be printed on. Next came black painted paper, and then came several colors including several metallic colors.

When you see an original 1870's motto that looks like it was stitched on brown paper, the actual original color may have been

off white - many a motto background paper has turned darker with age. During this period you will find that many pieces were framed with foil behind them. The foil gave a unique sparkle to the finished piece, and offered a unique appearance that could not be duplicated by stitching on fabric.



**Rock Of Ages** motto  
with elaborately printed background

However popular it was, stitching on paper was considered the poor stitcher's pastime. It was easy to stitch on, fun to do, and the paper was readily available and not overly expensive. Since many mottoes are not signed or dated we know little about who actually did the stitching. Most of the stitchers of these pieces are thought to be children or invalids. Stitching then, as it is today, as and still is good therapy.

Perforated paper needlework is sometime called Berlin Work, because the same German wools, used for stitching on more expensive needlepoint canvas designs popular during this same time period, were also promoted for stitching the motto pieces. In the original motto pieces that survive today, we see many more pieces that were worked with variegated wools than in silks or cottons. Most of the original motto pieces words were stitched using a Half cross stitch or a Tent stitch. A full Cross stitch was sometimes used for adding details.

By 1900 the popularity of stitching on paper was essentially over. From 1900 to 1910 Sunday School motto pieces were still being printed and produced. The type and theme of this last gasp in paper design was limited. The preciseness and the placement of the stamping itself was a little more haphazard and the designs were simpler than their counterparts of twenty years earlier. And then punched paper disappeared.



Sunday School motto

## Stitching On Paper Today

Wichelt Imports carries the perforated paper we stitch on today. They offer a great variety of colors in 14 count paper. They sell the popular Mill Hill kits - counted thread designs stitched on 14 count paper. The large custom cut size of paper we use in our motto adaptations comes from them.

Dutch Treat Designs has adapted original motto designs for today's stitcher by charting the design for working on paper (as the original was) and as counted cross stitch on fabric. All of the paper designs we sell come from original pieces in Claudia's collection.

On this website you can find three more articles about the history about perforated paper:

**1840's - 1880's Smalls and Samplers; 1870's - 1900 The Mottoes; Canvas Lacework**