BITHIAH'S BIRTHDAY

MARCH 05, 2026



I began to look into the life of Georgian miniaturist William Wood (1769-1810) when I realised how little recorded biography there existed about him, other than a rather unconvincing entry in G.C. Williamson's 1921 book, *The Miniature Collector*.

Since then, and with the help of London's remarkable archives (and archivists), I have located William Wood's grave in Bunhill Fields and written about his parents and siblings. When time permits, I continue to explore aspects of the artist's life, along with those of his sitters and immediate family. I approach this as a writer and genealogist, but primarily as an admirer of Wood's work.

The article below looks at the childhood of the artist's mother, Bithiah. Her name floats between variant spellings of Bethiah, Bethia and Bithia in the historical record, but she was Bithiah on the occasion of her marriage to William Wood Sr in 1761, a moment of civil and religious importance.





William Wood's mother, Bithiah Wood (nee Townsend), aged 66.

Miniature by William Wood, 1798

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An artist's parentage is always worthy of investigation, never more so than with William Wood, who lived with his mother and father during his working life, unmarried and childless, much of it in Cork Street, St James's, save for a short spell in Golden Square in the year before his death.

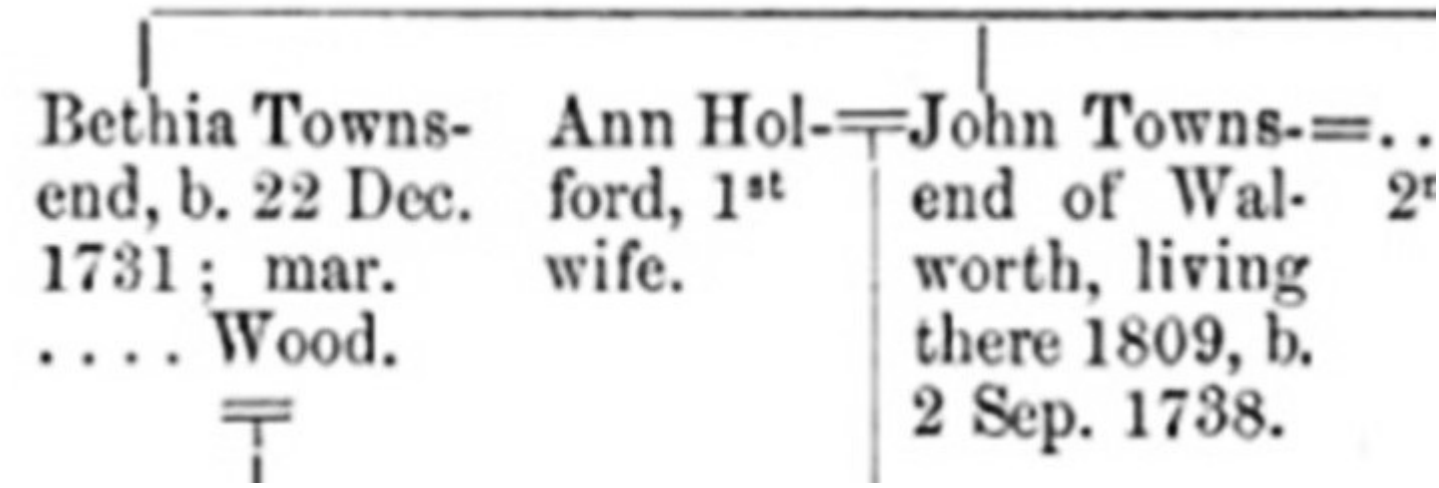
I have written before about the strong ties between Bithiah's family and London's congregations of Protestant dissenters. Her father, John Townsend (1685-1766), was a Baptist minister in Southwark at the Dissenters' Meeting House in Maze Pond. Her brother, Meredith (1715-1901), had also entered into the ministry, before breaking with the Baptist faith and preaching at meeting houses in St Mary Axe and Stoke Newington. Documents relating to Bithiah's origins typically centre around these

two men, while she, like many women in the historical record, sits silently in the shadow, the course of her life to be inferred from the actions of the men around her.

Finding a record of Bithiah's birth proved a challenge in itself. Attempts to confirm the date of a birth, marriage or death earlier than 1837 can often be hit or miss. Before the rise of Victorian civil record-keeping, much comes down to chance and to any personal documents which have survived the centuries. Bithiah's marriage license and burial record suggest she was born somewhere between 1732 and 1735, but they offer nothing more precise than that. That we have the actual date of Bithiah's birth is thanks to an inquisitive preacher and to the nine-year-old Bithiah herself.

The preacher was Joseph Hunter, by turns also a historian and author. By way of relaxation, Joseph liked to transcribe whatever genealogical details local families could provide, whether from family bibles or other records. He gathered it all together into a large manuscript volume, his Familiae Minorum Gentium (FMG), which was discovered upon his death and put into print by the Harleian Society in 1894. At some point on his travels, Joseph met Bithiah's nephew, the Reverend Josiah Townsend, who contributed FMG manuscript 163, "Townsend".[1]

Josiah was able to take Joseph Hunter right back to Bithiah's grandfather, John Townson (the 'd' arrived a generation later). Bithiah's father John had married twice. His first marriage, to Mary Whitroe, produced five children, including a son, Meredith. His second marriage, to Bethia Mallory, produced six more, the eldest being Bithiah.



Bethia Townsend, b. 22 Dec. 1731 ; mar. ... Wood. (Extract from FMG 163, "Townsend") © Image: The Harleian Society

Confirming Bithiah's date of birth allows us to look at a more colourful record with more confidence. The Bristol Museum and Art Gallery has a tapestry sampler from 1740 on display in its Georgian House collection. Its young creator has helpfully stitched the same date of birth across the bottom:[2]



Bithiah Townfend Born December The 22 1731. ©Image: Bristol Museum & Art Gallery)

Samplers can vary greatly in their composition, depending on the creator's skill and sensibility. Some are highly decorative, with elaborate borders, depictions of people, houses or flowers, while others are more sparse. Many share common elements, though, such as a recital of the alphabet or numerals 0 to 9, and a great many include a passage of text, typically an instructional proverb.

Bithiah's sampler is an attractive and well-composed example, with a meandering border and a colourful band of flowers above the words of a hymn by Isaac Watts. The earnest solemnity of Watts's many compositions made them a universally popular selection for young girls' and their parents on both sides of the Atlantic.[3]

The message of Bithiah's chosen hymn is suitably stern for the daughter of a Protestant minister: Dreadful plagues and a heavy guilt await the child who disobeys its father or mocks its mother. Ravens will pick out their eyes, and eagles will eat them.[4]

Let Children that would fear ye lord

hear what their teachers say

with Reverence meet their parents word

And with delight obey

Have we not heard what dreadfull plagues

Are threatned by the lord

To them that breaks their fathers laws

And mocks their mothers word

What heavy guilt upon them lies

how cursed is their name

The ravens shall pick out their eyes

Eagles shall eat the same

But them that worship God and give

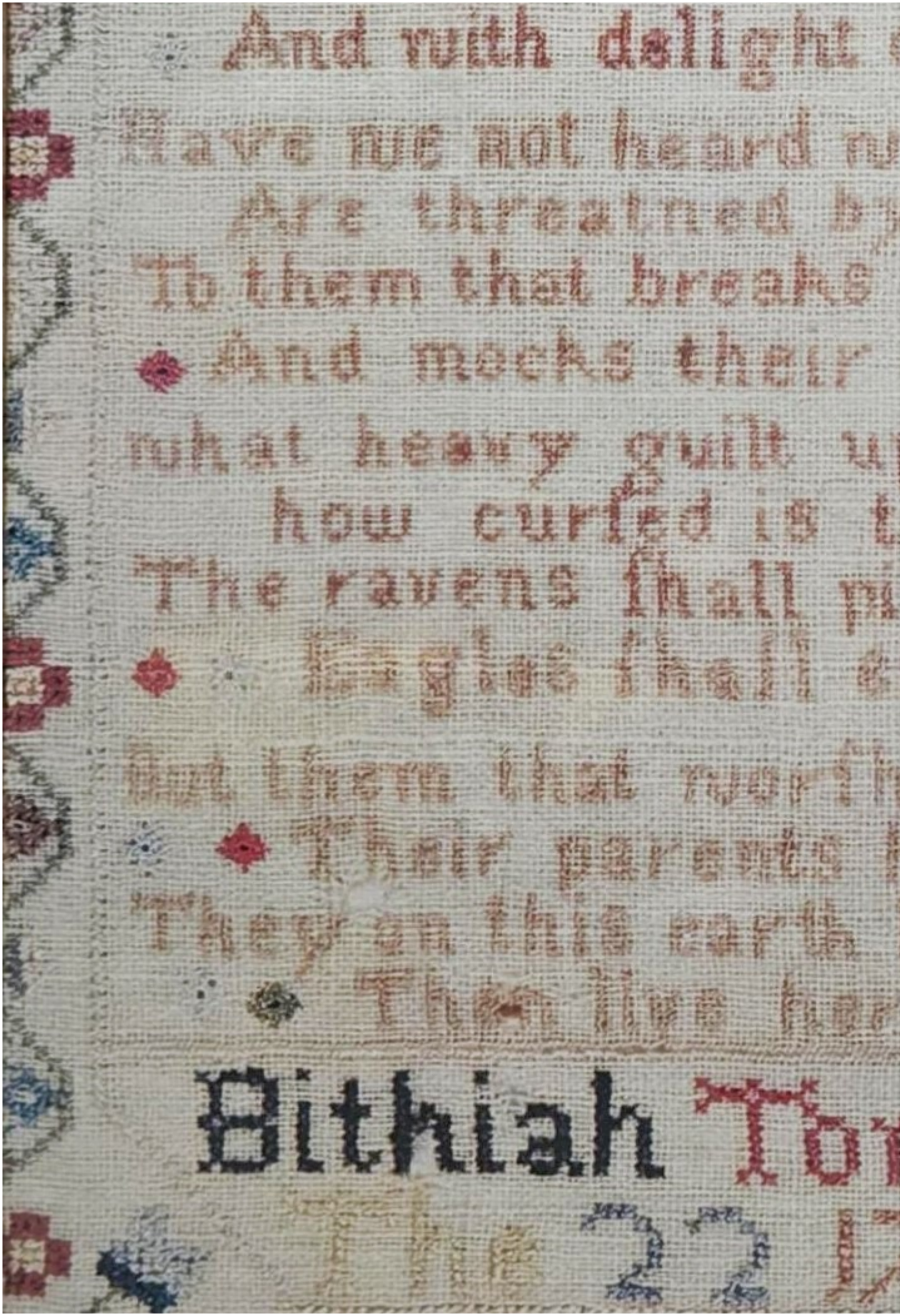
Their parents honour due

They on this earth long time shall live

Then live hereafter too




Lots
Not Riches
Let Children that nuo
hear nuhat their tea
with Reuerence mael


And with delight
Have we not heard
Are threatened by
To them that breaks
And mocks their
What heavy guilt
How curled is
The ravens shall
Begin with
And these that
Their parents
They on the earth
Than the
Bithiah



Bithiah Townsend. 1740. Image reproduced with thanks to Bristol Museum & Art Gallery

Bithiah had a family connection to the passage she selected, through her older brother, the Reverend Meredith Townsend (1715-1801). Meredith served as an assistant minister to the hymn's creator Isaac Watts between 1742 and 1746 at the Bury Street Meeting House in the City of London. The two men were close, and Meredith was later described as being Isaac Watts' 'intimate friend and co-pastor'. Bithiah may have heard Watts preach when attending her brother's services in the years after completing her tapestry.[5]

There is a second sampler by a Bithiah Townsend, this one in a collection on Rhode Island. Its creator adds her name twice as she works on it, first in 1738 aged seven and then again at the bottom in 1739. The dates align with the later sampler in Bristol, which follows on from this, with dates of 1739 and finally 1740.[6]

Bithiah's Rhode Island sampler is rougher and less ornate than her later effort. The top section consists of cross bands of simple stitches, one after the other in different faded colours, while the young Bithiah learns how to work her needle and thread. There is no border or floral decoration, but visual elements are common to both. The crown motif is identical, as is the design of the capitalised alphabet.

There is a proverb of course, but not Watts this time. This one extolls the virtues of listening above talking. 'Refrain much talk. You seldom hear of any undone by hearing, but by speaking, many.' It is safer, more standard fare for a seven-year-old's first sampler. Bithiah needed to turn eight before she would be ready for sharp-beaked ravens or eagles hungry for the meat of children.

It is interesting to weigh the influence of Bithiah's religious upbringing on her artist son, William. The best of his miniatures capture the humanity of their subjects with a quiet subtlety, a layering of complex emotion. They rarely carry the lightness of a Richard Cosway or the flush-cheeked sensuality of John Smart's young ladies. They are stripped back, with no catholic flourishes or superfluous ornamentation. The men of Wood's miniatures typically wear brown, black or the darkest blue, and his women wear simple white dresses.

There may be more there to explore. For now, though, I am treating this as a post about Bithiah. Just Bithiah.

End notes:

1. *The Publications of the Harleian Society, Volume 37* (1894), p375 (tree reproduced in full below)

2. *Sampler. Catalogue of the Collection of Samplers in the City of Bristol Museum & Art Gallery.* By City of Bristol Museum and Art Gallery, Karin-M. Walton · 1983.

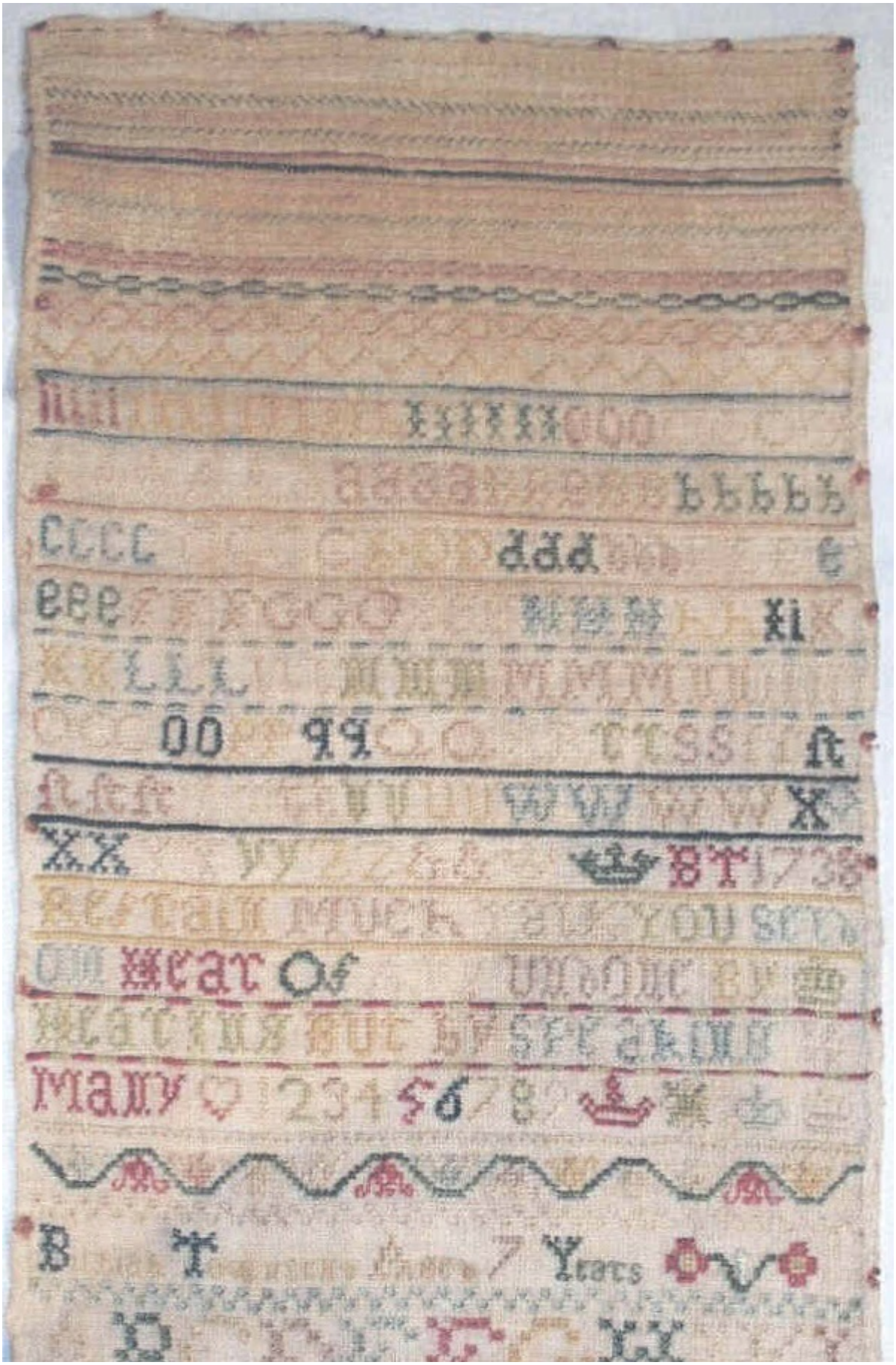
3. Bethiah's 1740 sampler may have found its way to Bristol via her niece, Mary Townsend, who lived in Bath. She shared her

home with her father Meredith, before his death.

4. Watts is leaning on the words of Proverbs 30:17 for this.

5. The Christian reformer; or, Unitarian magazine and review, Volume 12 (1856) p510

6. Sampler by Bithiah Townsend. 1739. Owner: Little Compton Historical Society, Rhode Island. Catalogue number: 1990328.





Bithiah Townsend. 1739. © Image: Little Compton Historical Society, Rhode Island Catalogue number: 1996.0328

Tow

Meredith To

Mary Whitroe, = John Townsend, V.D.M., ...
1st wife, mar. 4 May 1709. | tist Congregation in Mazo... Nov. 1685; d. 3 June 17...

A

Bethia Towns- | Ann Hol- = John Towns...

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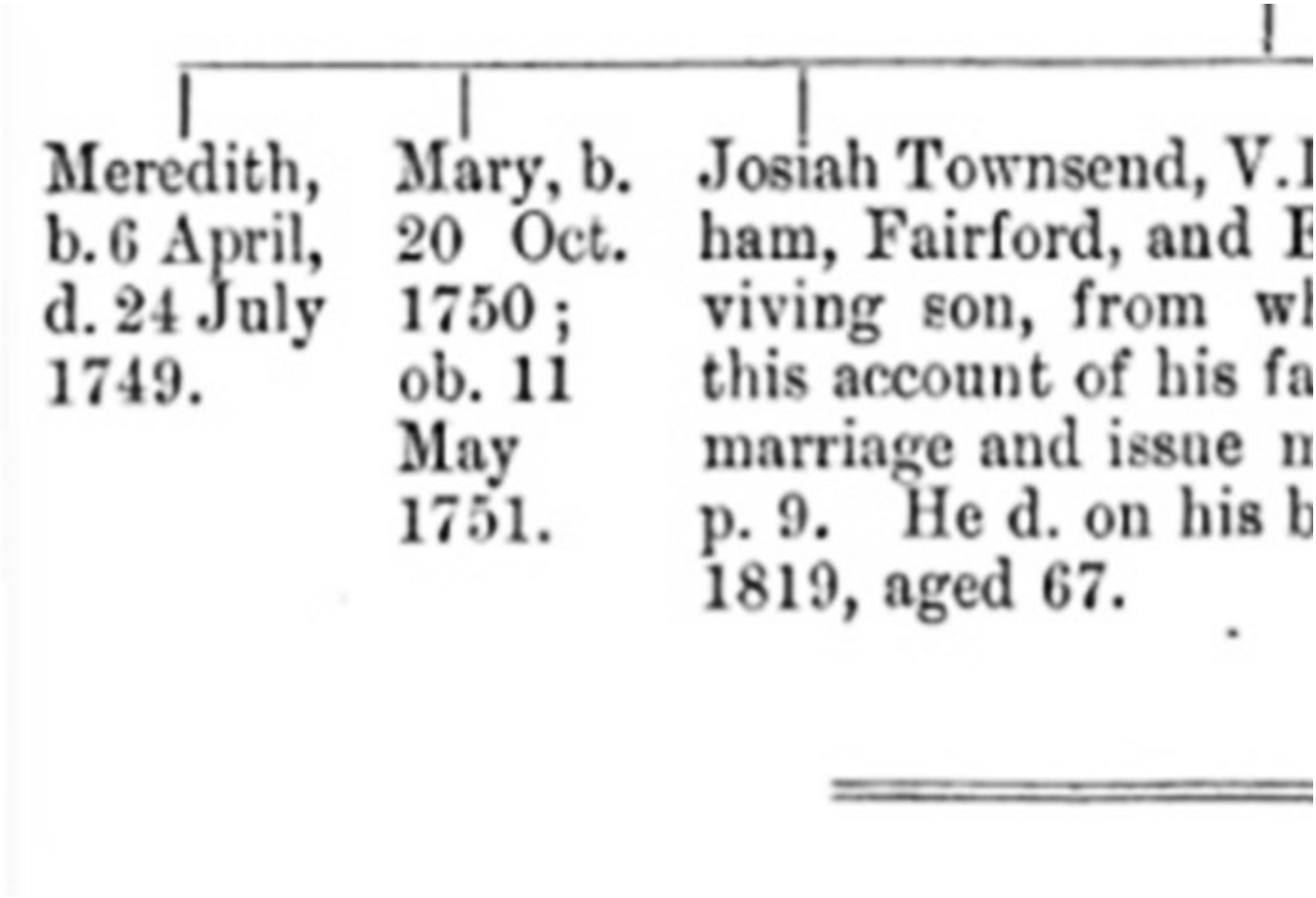
Elizab. Townsend, b. 24 March 1709-10; living in 1803 the widow of Patrick Flanagan, who d. in 1784.

Mary Townse in Jan. 1717-8 . . . . Clifton, 27 March 178

Elizabeth & Margaret.

Mary, wife of . . . . Wilkinson, & had a dau. Mary.

Meredith Townsend of Stoke Newington, V.D.M., b. 23 Aug. 1715; d. at Bath 13 Dec. 1801, & was bur. at Weston.



The Publications of the Harleian Society, Volume 37 (1894), p375-376 combined. FMG 163, "Townsend".

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