

Redwork Embroidery and the Suffragist Tea Cozy Project

Why Redwork?

BY TISHA DOLTON

*M*y favorite color is, and always has been, red. Being one of four siblings, we each had an assigned color to tell our stuff apart, whether it was Tupperware dishes, toys, or snow pants. My color was red. To this day, it is still my favorite color.

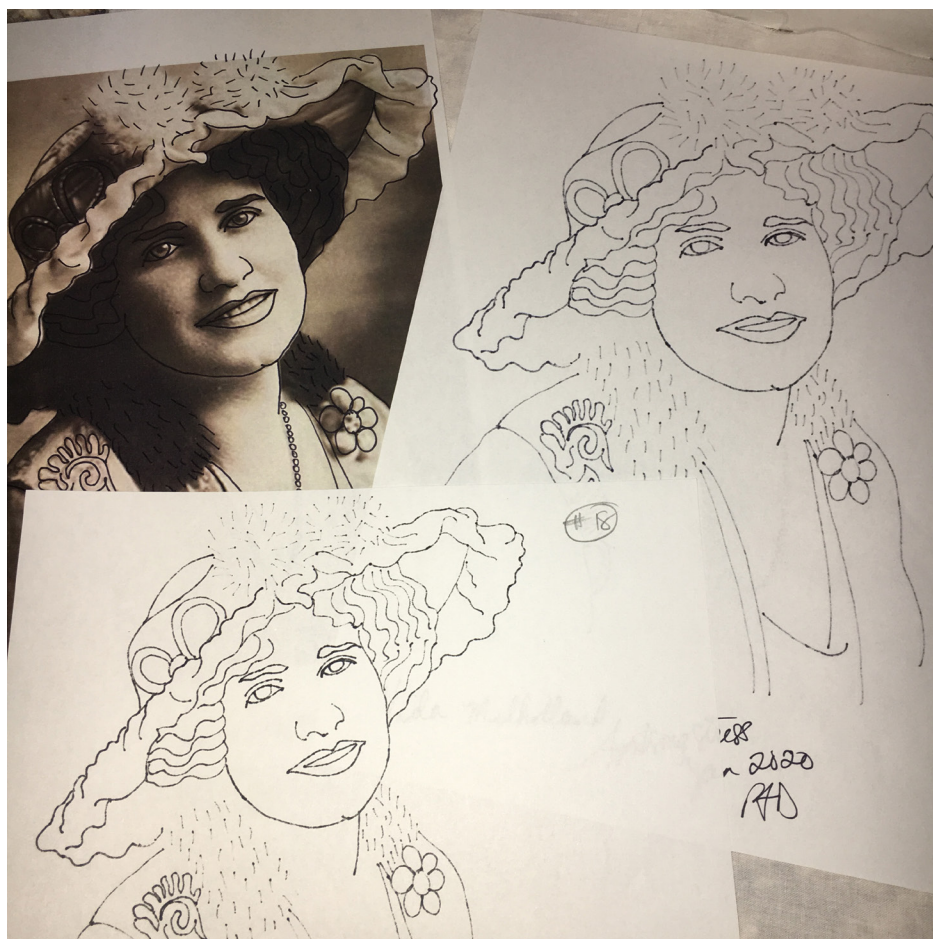
In 1998, I taught myself to embroider while working at Saratoga National

Historical Park in Stillwater, New York. I was a seasonal park ranger for the summer, and it was my first history job after graduating from SUNY–New Paltz. I needed an 18th-century activity to keep myself occupied while sitting at the Neilson House, waiting for visitors to chat with about the battles and rural life in upstate New York,

during pre- and post-Revolutionary War times. I was young and green, and embroidery gave me a way to connect with visitors, especially women.

In 2001, I discovered redwork embroidery. Redwork quilts were experiencing a renaissance at the time, with quilter Alex Anderson publishing *Shadow Redwork with Alex Anderson*, and various fabric companies creating reproduction fabric lines to complement the embroidery. Initially, I was drawn to it simply because red is my favorite color, but redwork is more than just embroidery rendered in red floss. Sometimes called Turkey redwork after the red dye that came from Turkey and India in the mid-18th century, redwork developed as a specific style of surface embroidery after a colorfast red dye in the late 19th-century became widely available.

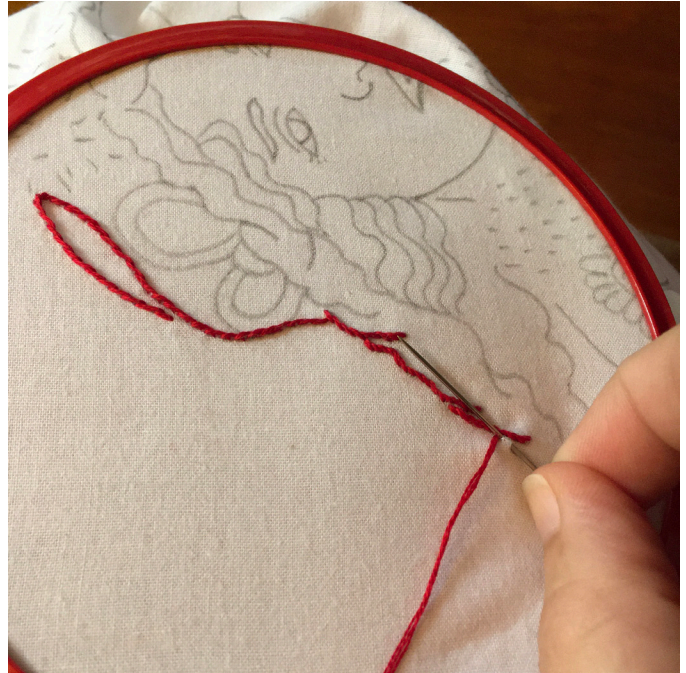
According to Deborah Harding in her book, *Red and White: American Redwork Quilts*, “[d]uring the last quarter of the nineteenth century, decorative surface embroidery on practical household linens came into vogue in America. Influenced by exhibitions at the 1876 Centennial in Philadelphia, this form of needlework replaced... stitchery on canvas. The term *art needlework* was used to describe this trend and to distinguish it from plain sewing” (Harding, 2000, 10). Redwork quickly became one of the most popular forms of art needlework, because it only required some red thread, a bit of white cotton or linen fabric, and knowledge of a few basic stitches—stem or outline stitch, lazy daisy, and French knot—to create something lovely



Locating an image to use to create the pattern was a deciding factor in which suffragists are represented in my tea cozy project. This image of Vida Milholland by Ira L. Hill Studio is part of the National Woman's Party records at the Library of Congress. All photos courtesy of the author, except as otherwise noted.



Using a lightbox and pencil, the pattern is transferred onto white cotton muslin.



Using a stem stitch to begin embroidering Vida Milholland's hat.



Tools of the trade—I use a 4 inch spring hoop, size 9 embroidery needle, cotton muslin, and DMC cotton floss #321.



Close up of stem stitches from the underside of a portrait.

for your home. Redwork patterns were readily available from all the fashionable ladies' magazines and were easy to transfer onto hand towels, aprons, napkins, pillowcases, quilts, and more. Classic imagery included farm animals, plants and flowers, buildings, letters, and portraits of famous people.

Looking for a more creative outlet than just embroidering the sampling of classic designs readily available, I searched the Internet for inspiration. When I saw the embroidered portraits being created by an artist named Jenny Hart, I decided to combine the fine art portrait with redwork and

produce my own patterns. The first portrait I designed was based on a photograph of me at 13 months old. Not a natural or skilled sketch artist, the technique I developed to make my portraits was fairly straightforward: scan an image, print it out on paper, draw over the copy with a thin



Finished embroidered portrait of Vida Milholland. The Milhollands owned an estate called Meadowmount in Lewis where they spent summers. She and her more famous sister Inez Milholland Boissevain both worked with Alice Paul and the National Woman's Party. Vida, a trained opera singer, sang at meetings and picketed the White House as a "Silent Sentinel." After the passage of the 19th Amendment, Vida worked for the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom with her partner Margaret "Peg" Hamilton. She and Peg are buried in the family plot in Lewis Cemetery, Essex County, New York.

Traditional Arts in Upstate New York in Canton hosted the exhibition for Women's History Month in March 2023, and featured three additional suffragists from Long Island and St. Lawrence County. I have completed three more embroidered portraits of New York State suffragists and have at least 12 more patterns ready to go. I am continually looking for new suffragists to feature.

Why Tea Cozies?

The Suffrage Movement also had strong ties to tea. The planning of the 1848 Seneca Falls Women's Rights Convention began over tea. The women used the Boston Tea Party as a model, using "no taxation without representation" as a rallying cry. The Woman's Suffrage Party of California even sold Equality Tea as a fundraiser, charging 75 cents for one pound of tea.

Because the Suffrage and Abolition Movements were confronting long held societal views, concerning which people are citizens and which citizens have the right to vote in our government, there was backlash and opposition. One of the many arguments against women voting was the idea that a woman's place was in the domestic or private sphere, while the public sphere belonged to men. Just look at a popular suffrage song of the day...

Sharpie to create my pattern, trace it on fabric using a pencil, then stitch away.

Why Suffragists?

I began studying the Women's Suffrage Movement and the songs of that movement over 20 years ago. Over the last decade, my research led me to the many local women who were active in this cause of "Votes for Women!" The year 2020 marked the centennial anniversary of the ratification of the 19th Amendment that granted women the right to vote. What better year to celebrate these (mostly) unsung heroines?

I applied for and received a grant from my local arts council, Lower Adirondack Regional Arts Council (LARAC), which administers artist grants for New York State

Council on the Arts (NYSACA) in Warren and Washington Counties.

The focus on suffragists from upstate New York was a conscious decision that I made, based on my own research and desire to highlight lesser known people within the movement. I was inspired to put faces to the over 70 names I had uncovered in meeting notices and articles in Warren County newspapers by creating embroidered portraits of suffragists throughout New York State. So far, I have embroidered six Warren County women. The centennial 2020 exhibition at the Folklife Center at Crandall Public Library in Glens Falls, *Equality-tea: Suffragists Tea Cozies in Redwork*, included 42 suffragists from around the state.

This is far from an exhaustive representation and is still an active project.



The batting inside the tea cozies is Warm & Natural 87.5% natural cotton, 12.5% polypropylene scrim.



Interfacing is added to the back of the embroidery to give the quilted tea cozy more structure.



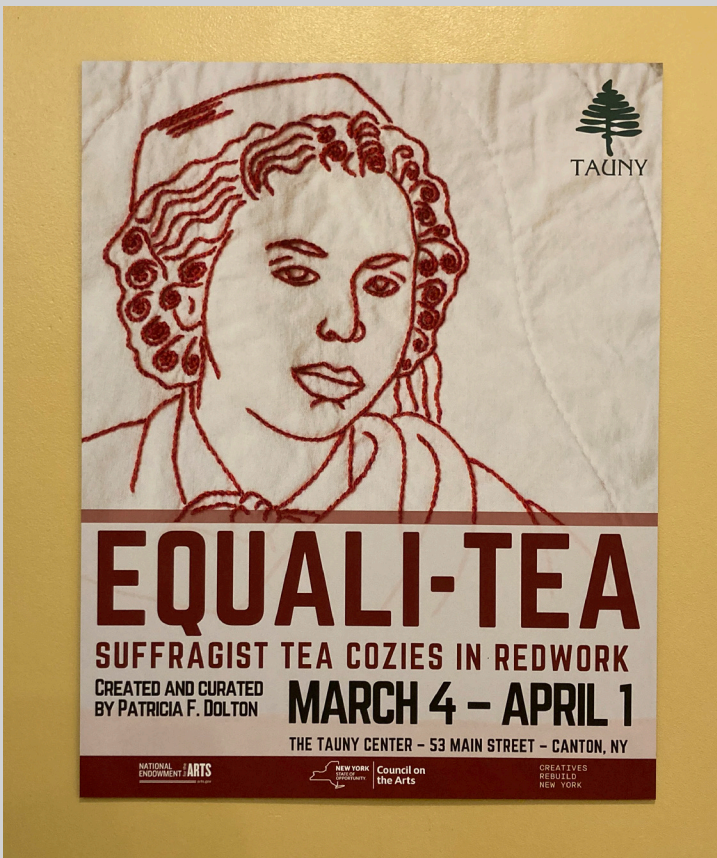
The backing fabric for the first batch of tea cozies is this vintage bicentennial fabric that my sister found at a shop in California. It quotes the US Constitution and the Declaration of Independence.



I enlisted the help of my mother, Tamaris, to construct the tea cozies once the embroidered portrait was complete. She has been sewing since she was a little girl in 4-H.

Equali-tea: Suffragists Tea Cozies in Redwork, a Suffrage Centennial Exhibition by Tisha Dolton opened in October 2020. Since Crandall Public Library was still closed to visitors due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the exhibit was extended through August 2021, and an online exhibit was created. <https://www.crandalllibrary.org/folklife-center/folklife-gallery/past-folklife-exhibits/equali-tea-suffragist-tea-cozies-in-redwork/>





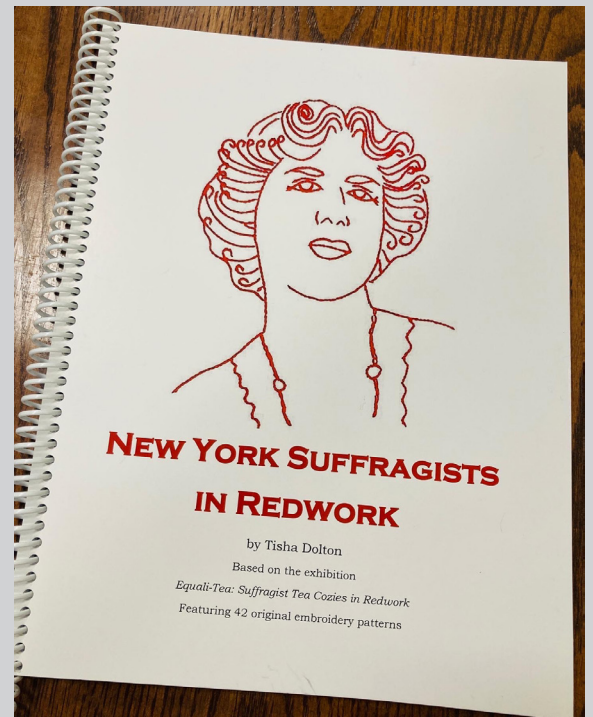
Exhibition poster from Traditional Arts in Upstate New York from March 2023, featuring M. Edmonia Lewis, a sculptor of African, Haitian, and Ojibwe descent, born in Rensselaer County, recently featured as the 45th stamp in the Black Heritage series by the United States Postal Service.



Suffragists of color on display at TAUNY. *Back row (left to right):* Susan Frank Douge, Julia A. J. Foote, Hester C. Whitehurst Jeffrey, Mabel Ping-Hua Lee, M. Edmonia Lewis. *Front row (left to right):* Sarah Sandford Smith, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, C. Mary Douge Williams, Helen Appo Cook.



Showing off the two newest tea cozies featured in the TAUNY exhibit: St. Lawrence County suffragists Helen Rich of Richville and Marion Sanger Frank of Ogdensburg. Photo by Mathilde Lind for TAUNY.



My book, *New York Suffragists in Redwork*, published by Warren County Historical Society, 2022. It's a combination exhibit catalog and embroidery guide with patterns and biographies of the 42 suffragists featured in the centennial exhibition.



Completed embroidered portrait of Elizabeth "Betty" Wakeman Mitchell. This Washington County suffragist ran for the New York State Assembly in 1918, with her two children campaigning at her side. Unfortunately, she lost in the primary election.



Trunk show style presentation of redwork tea cozies with reproduction "Votes for Women" tea pot originally designed by J. Maddock & Sons for suffragist Alva Vanderbilt Belmont in 1914, and Oliver Pluff & Co. commemorative Suffrage Centennial tin from 2020.

Keep Woman in Her Sphere (1882)

[Lyrics: Experience Estabrook, Tune: *Auld Lang Syne*]

I have a neighbor, one of those

Not very hard to find,
Who know it all without debate,
And never change their mind.
I asked him "What of women's rights,"
He said in tones severe—
"My mind on that is all made up,
Keep woman in her sphere."

The Temperance Movement was also popular among suffragists, who believed that drunkenness was a major cause of abuse against women and children. Susan B. Anthony was active in the cause before devoting herself to suffrage in the 1850s. Many Glens Falls suffragists were active in the Warren County Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). Teetotalers like Anna Murray and Celia Shippey Murray

might prefer tea to alcohol, but the word teetotaler is derived from an emphasis on being totally abstinent.

Works of art such as "The Dinner Party" (1979) by Judy Chicago, and "Famous Women Dinner Set" (1932–34) by Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant have used this idea of the domestic sphere to create provocative art to rewrite women back into history. By using the domestic art of hand embroidery to feature mostly unknown suffragists on covers used to keep tea pots warm, I am following in the footsteps of those artists before me. ▼

References

Harding, D. 2000. *Red & White: American Redwork Quilts*. New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc.
Ira L. Hill Studio, N.Y.C. *Vida Milbolland*. United States New York, ca. 1916. [to 1920] Photograph. <https://www.loc.gov/item/mmm000129/>.

Tisha Dolton was born in 1974, and raised in Washington County, New York. She studied Vocal Performance at Adirondack Community College (later SUNY Adirondack), earned a BA in American History from SUNY New Paltz and an MS in Information Science from the University at Albany, SUNY. Dolton served as the appointed Public Historian for the Town of Greenwich, New York, from 2003 to 2019, and is currently Librarian/Historian at the Folklife Center at Crandall Public Library in Glens Falls, New York. She serves as a Trustee of the Warren County Historical Society and is co-founder and chair of the Celebrating Suffrage in Greater Glens Falls Committee, which creates and promotes suffrage and women's history events in the region. Photo by Jude Dolton.

