

Traditions Continue . . . What Is Chicken Scratch Embroidery?

Janice Heavner, WVU Extension Agent, Pendleton County

JoAnn Dever, Craftsperson and 4-H Leader, Roane County

Educational Objectives

1. Understand how chicken scratch embroidery is being passed down from generation to generation
2. Learn the art of chicken scratch embroidery

History

The origin of chicken scratch embroidery is uncertain, but the craft does date to early America. As the early settlers traveled across the seas and land to settle in their new homes, the craft came with them. Thus, it's known by different names: Amish embroidery, cross-stitch on gingham, depression lace, gingham lace, gingham tracks, lace stitch, and snowflake embroidery.

What Is Chicken Scratch Embroidery?

Chicken scratch is an easy type of embroidery done on gingham (checkered) fabric, which gives the impression of appliquéd lace. With certain stitches, the thread or floss creates a lacelike design on the gingham fabric.

Gingham fabric usually comes in 4, 8, or 16 squares to the square inch. If possible, you want to use gingham fabric with a true square check. Fabric with 1/8-inch or 1/4-inch checks is most often used for chicken scratch. The 1/8-inch gingham is used mainly for small projects – pincushions, jar lids, bookmarks, and sachets. The 1/4-inch is used for larger projects – pillows, quilts, clothing, place mats, and tablecloths.



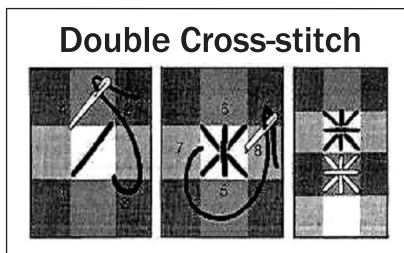
Styles of Stitching

Three simple stitches are used in chicken scratch embroidery – the double cross-stitch, the straight running stitch, and the woven circle stitch.

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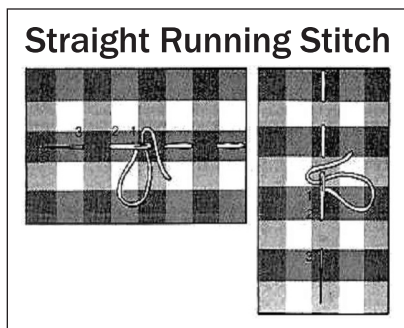
Double Cross-stitch

Work a cross-stitch as shown; then work an upright cross-stitch over this. It is important that the last upper stitch of double cross-stitch lies in the same direction.



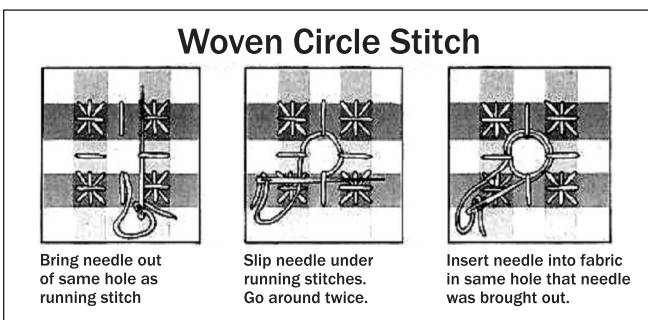
Running Stitch

Pass the needle in and out of the fabric, making the surface stitches of equal length. The stitches on the underside should be of equal length, but only half the size (or less) than the upper stitches.



Woven Circle Stitch

1. Bring needle out of the same hole as the running stitch.
2. Slip needle under running stitches. Go around twice.
3. Insert needle into fabric in the same hole that needle came out of in step 1.



These three stitches can create a variety of looks, depending upon the color of gingham fabric and the color and number of strands of embroidery floss used in the design. You can design chicken scratch embroidery to use one, two, or many colors of floss. When only one

color of embroidery floss is used, it is common to use a light color on dark fabric and vice versa. When two colors of embroidery floss are used, one is usually white and the other a darker version of the fabric's darkest gingham check. Use two, three, or four strands of a six-strand embroidery floss when embroidering on 1/8-inch or 1/4-inch check fabric.

Note: Do not knot floss. Leave a small amount of loose floss on the back of the fabric and secure it with first few stitches. To finish off, run the needle under several stitches, and then cut with scissors.

Keep the tension of the working thread/floss even, making smooth continual stitches. Be sure to cross all stitches in the same direction. Do the double-cross stitch in the same sequence each time. You want to complete stitches in a design order, starting with your double cross-stitches, continuing with the running stitches, and then finishing with woven circle stitches.

Getting Started

Chicken Scratch Pattern and Gingham Fabric:

To determine the fabric size needed (1/8- or 1/4-inch checks), count the number of squares on the pattern; divide that number by the square count of your fabric. Allow a border for mounting or stitching and leave enough fabric to stretch fabric in a hoop. Usually, 4 to 8 inches on each side will be sufficient.

Find the center of fabric – fold the fabric in half vertically and horizontally to find the center. Follow the arrows on the pattern to determine the center of the pattern. Each square on the pattern represents one square or check on the gingham fabric.

From the center of the pattern you have two choices: (1) start at the center of the pattern; or (2) count out on both fabric and pattern to the upper left corner and start with the outline.

Needle

Use an embroidery needle with a sharp point and a long eye. Use the needle size you prefer.



Individuals may wish to use a 16-gauge needle or even an embroidery crewel (size 6 or 7). Use a sharp-point needle for double cross stitch and running stitches; however, use a blunt-point needle for the woven stitches.

Embroidery Thread

When selecting embroidery floss/thread, you may use any of the many brands. You will find the DMC® brand to be in most local craft stores and super centers. You may like one brand over another, but embroidery floss is embroidery floss. Traditionally, for 1/8-inch fabric, use 2-ply embroidery floss and for 1/4-inch fabric, use 3-ply embroidery floss. The 2- or 3-ply refers to the number of individual strands of embroidery floss being used at one time.

Hoop

Hoops are made of several materials, including plastic, wood, and metal. When it comes to choosing a hoop, once again personal preference is the main focus. The size of the hoop is determined by the size of the project and the size of the workable area. Average hoop size would be approximately 8 to 10 inches.

Note of caution: If using a metal hoop, be careful not to leave the hoop assembled on the fabric because rust may form on both hoop and fabric.

Scissors

When you are crafting, sewing, or embroidering, you want to keep a pair of scissors for special projects. Keep your scissors clean and clear of any foreign substances that may harm your fabric or other craft projects.

Reading the Pattern

Chicken scratch is completed by following a pattern and/or chart. The pattern includes the design layout and a key explaining the different symbols, color of embroidery thread, or stitch style to be used. Each square on the pattern represents a square or check on the gingham fabric. Certain patterns also have shaded squares to represent the darker squares of the gingham fabric. Symbols in the squares represent the stitch's style and/or color of embroidery thread to be used.

When reading a chicken scratch key, you will notice five common symbols:

X	Double Cross-stitch Using Darker Thread
*	Double Cross-stitch Using Lighter Thread
1	Straight Running Stitch (running top to bottom of pattern)
-	Straight Running Stitch (running left to right of pattern)
o	Woven Circle Stitch

Please refer to the enclosed pattern and key for further examples.

Note: You will need to make additional copies of the pattern for participants.

Finished Project

You may use the finished chicken scratch to create a potholder, a pillow top, or a canning jar topper. Curtains and tablecloths may be adorned with chicken scratch embroidery.

Follow-up Activities:

Ask participants if they would like a follow-up to the lesson, such as one of the following activities.

- A beginners' class taught by a local embroiderer
- A group session, led by those with embroidery skills, to make items to donate to a local service organization
- A public craft show, exhibiting old and new chicken scratch items

References:

Books and Magazines

The Berry Patch: Snowflaking One by Claire Bryant Designs, Pinehurst, NC, 1983.

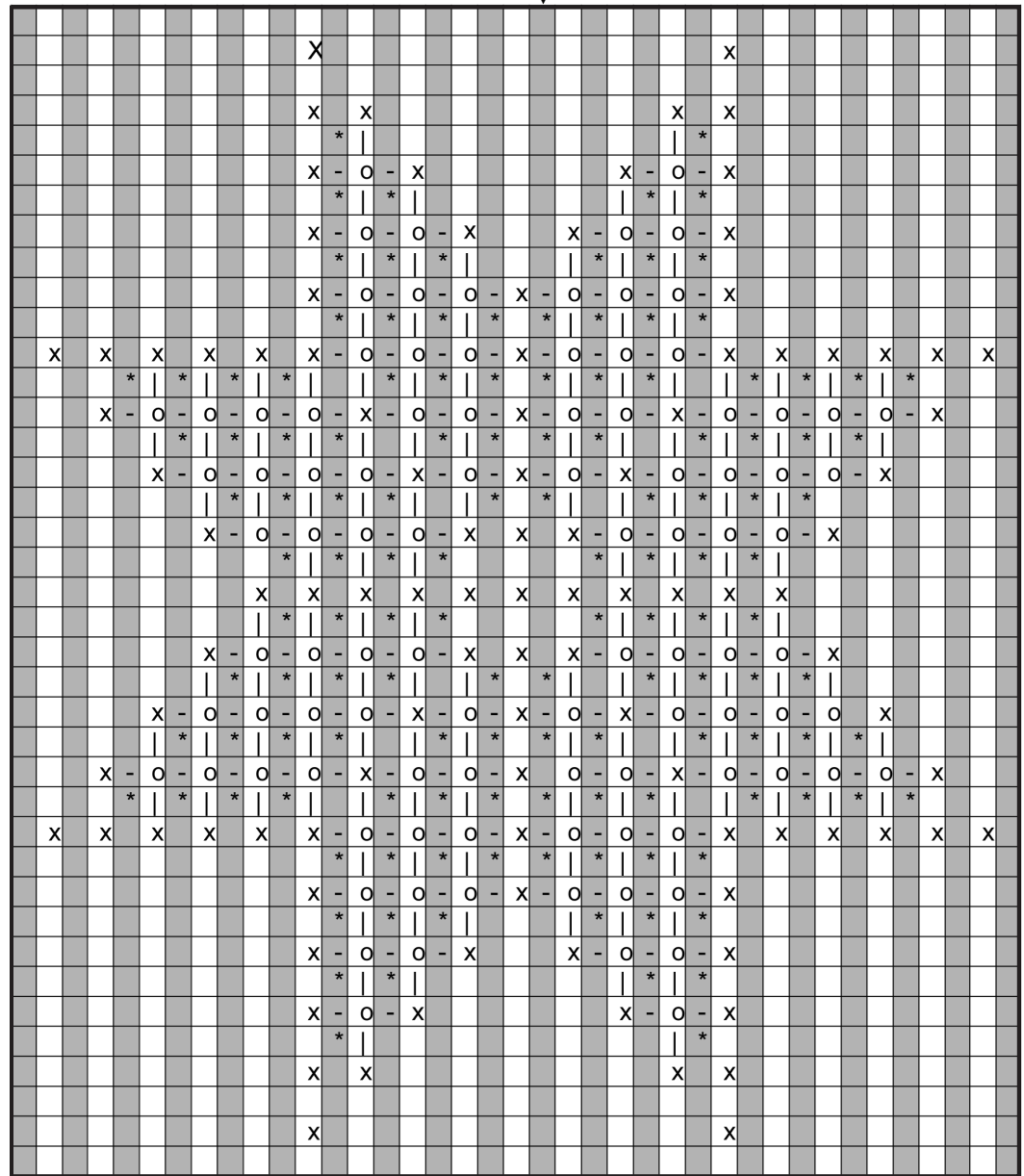
Colorful Stitchery by Kristin Nicholas, Storey Publishing, October 2005.

Gingham Tracks by Carolyn Brown & Berniece Martin, Mats Etc., 1983.

"Needle Pointers: Chicken Scratch," *The Workbasket*. November-December, 1983. pp. 22-24; pp 41-42.

Eight Pointed Star Pattern

Center



Key

- x Double Cross-stitch (darker thread)
- * Double Cross-stitch (lighter thread)
- I Straight Running Stitch (top to bottom) (lighter thread)
- Straight Running Stitch (left to right) (lighter thread)
- o Woven Circle Stitch (lighter thread)

References Continued:

Internet Sites

Future Christian Homemakers, PO Box 50674, Jacksonville, Beach, FL 32240. www.futureschristianhomemakers.com, 2006.
 STITCH with the Embroiderers' Guild. www.embroiderersguild.com/stitch/stitches/index.html

Extension Publication

Mary Hixson, *Chicken Scratch Embroidery*, Cooperative Extension Service University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY, October 2004. Revised by Marjorie M. Baker, M.S., Extension Associate for Textiles and Clothing, April 2005.

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