



Toys and Games



Overview

Among the many objects held in the collections of Longfellow National Historic Site is a small but remarkable collection of 19th century toys, owned and played with by members of the Longfellow family. These toys are excellent examples of what privileged children in mid-to-late 19th century America played with, and how they entertained themselves. The collection also reflects some of the social, technological, and political changes the world at large underwent during the 19th century. This document provides a glance at some of the highlights of the toy collection.

Toy manufacturing underwent a transformation during the 19th century. New materials and technology combined to create new types of toys and methods of production. Increased industrialization of the United States and Western Europe played a large role in the proliferation of toys and games during this period. For some, primarily the upper classes, the new methods afforded increased leisure time. Concurrently, industrial advancements enabled manufacturers to produce toys affordable to a wider segment of society than previously.

A notable aspect of the Longfellow NHS toy collection is its international character. The collection includes French puzzles, German games, English cards, and toys and artwork influenced by increased contact with China and Japan. The toys are indicative of both the increase in international commerce in the mid-late 19th century, and the Longfellow family's general interest in the wider world.

Puzzles



Puzzles of varying sorts have a long history of being popular ways to pass leisure time. Included in the Longfellow NHS collection is a box of three-dimensional puzzles from France and dating to the mid 19th century. Four separate puzzles are included, each with its own name; Le Jeu Arabe (The Arab's Game,) Les Olives (The Olives,) Le Baguenaudier, also known as a Chinese Ring Puzzle, and Le Noeud Gordien (The Gordian Knot.)

These toys are also known as Tavern Puzzles, wherein the usual goal is to remove a piece from the main body through an intricate series of manipulations.

This type of puzzle dates back to at least the 18th century, and many were originally created by blacksmiths as a way to amuse tavern patrons. Often made of metal and wood today, these 19th century puzzles also incorporate ivory, cardboard, paper, and string. The illustration on the box lid depicts two girls and a boy playing with the puzzles in a pastoral setting. The delicate nature of the puzzles and the attire of the figures in the picture on the box lid imply a set designed to appeal to families with the wherewithal to spend money and time in the pursuit of such activities.

Puppets

A type of string-operated doll known as a Jumping Jack enjoyed popularity in the mid-19th century. Consisting of a wooden figure with jointed limbs, the toy was operated by suspending it from an attached loop, or holding it at the top with one hand, and pulling down on a string attached to the limbs, resulting in a comical flailing or dancing motion.

This doll (pictured right) is painted as a Harlequin and constructed of wood with limbs joined to the body by wire. A small loop attached at the head is used for hanging the figure from a hook or nail.

Originally, there would have been a string hanging down from the body extending to below the feet.



Strategy Games

Glocke und Hammer, or The Bell and Hammer, was a game using specially designed cards and dice (often referred to as “cubes”). The game seems to have first appeared in Germany in the early 19th century, possibly introduced by a Viennese art dealer named H.F. Mueller. The game incorporated elements of commerce, strategy, and chance. Cards were auctioned off to the various players. When all cards were distributed, players would roll the cubes and receive or pay game chits dependent upon the result of their rolls and the cards in their possession.



This example has eight dice or cubes made of white stone, some of which are numbered on the sides with numbers 1 through 6 and others with a picture of a bell or hammer.

Also included are five illustrated cards depicting a bell, a hammer, a bell and hammer, a man on a gray horse, and a merchant's hall. The whole is contained in a wooden box with a sliding lid.

Solitaire Games

Solitaire was a game played in the Victorian period that is still popular today. Boards and pieces come in many different shapes and colors and materials. Whereas today's games may have plastic pegs, 19th century games often used marbles of clay, stone, or glass. Physical differences notwithstanding, game play is often the same, jump pieces over neighboring pieces until you can no longer make any jumps, with the goal of leaving the fewest number of pieces on the board at the end. A true master of the game will end up with only one remaining piece neatly located in the center of the playing board. Solitaire is a game that had appeal to both children and adults, and might have been played by all members of the Longfellow family.

The board pictured below is solid mahogany, with a beaded and molded edge. There are 33 depressions carved into the board's top surface, laid out in a symmetrical cross pattern. Accompanying the board are clay marbles, of which 27 are still extant. The marbles may not be original to the piece.



Magic and Spiritualism



From the mid-19th century onwards, Victorians held a remarkable interest and fascination with the spiritual world. Mediums, séances and other methods of “communicating” with the world beyond became popular, and toy makers were quick to cash in on the craze.

The firm of Kirby and Company was among the earlier ones to do so with their production of “Kirby's Planchette” in the 1860s.

Kirby and Company in New York produced a simply designed planchette of mahogany in the popular heart-shaped design. Like its descendant the ouija board, the planchette was intended to allow users to communicate with spirits. Users would pose questions for the spirits, to be answered through messages written out with a pencil attached to the planchette. The board would then move across the surface of a sheet of paper on two legs fitted with ivory wheels and a pencil while being touched by the living, corporeal questioners, but guided by the spirits. Kirby's design had the directions attached to the underside of the planchette, as seen in the image to the left.

Card Games



Card games of many varieties were popular in the Victorian era. Starting in the mid-19th century, the production of cards specifically for children's games began. Featuring colorful designs, the cards often had a great deal of visual appeal.

This set of cards depicts two figures, one male and one female, dressed in possibly Chinese fashion. Their design may reflect the intense interest American and European Victorians had in all things Oriental, a result of the opening of Chinese and Japanese markets in the late 19th century. The cards are numbered 1 through 20, with odd numbered cards displaying a female figure, and even numbered cards a male figure. What game the cards were intended for is unknown.



Mechanical and Clockwork Toys

Clockwork or mechanical toys were some of the most wondrous and expensive playthings for children in the late 19th century. In the United States, the Ives Manufacturing Company in Bridgeport, Connecticut was known for the finest examples of these intricate toys. Among Ives' offerings were mechanical figures that, when wound with a key, "walked" on small rollers under the feet.



General Benjamin Butler

One of these figures was reportedly modeled after Benjamin F. Butler, a Civil War general, congressman, and later Governor of Massachusetts. The example in the Longfellow NHS collection bears a strong resemblance to Butler. The toy still has its original box, with a notation on the label indicating a price of "3.50," roughly equivalent to \$62.00 today. Also printed on the box is the name of the toy's designer, Arthur E. Hotchkiss, and the patent date, 1875.

Word Games

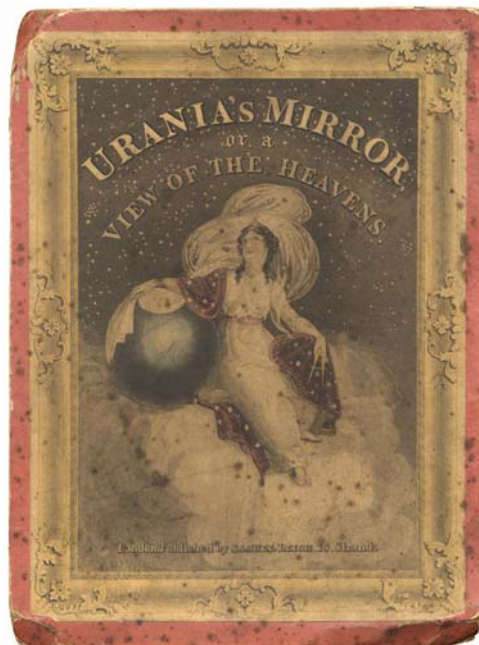
Word games were a popular entertainment in Victorian homes. Not only did they serve to amuse players, but they were also regarded as a way to develop mental skills. Some games used tiles marked with letters, drawn at random and used to form words. Many variations existed but one of the best known was called "Anagram", which was based on an even earlier game often referred to as "Making Words, Taking Words". Players attempted to amass as many words as possible by using letter tiles as they were revealed, or by stealing those previously used by their opponents. These word games are in many ways precursors to today's popular word game "Scrabble"®.

The set from the Longfellow NHS collection shown here consists of a mahogany box with a sliding lid

and 27 compartments holding 190 ivory tiles marked with upper and lower case letters, or left blank. Unfortunately, the box has no labels or markings, and no accompanying rule booklet or instructions.



Educational Toys



During the 19th century, many toys and games were intended to possess educational value for children. A popular design centered around the use of a deck of cards that taught geography, mathematics or other subjects through gameplay. One of these products was a set of constellation cards titled "Urania's Mirror," pictured to the left.

Produced c. 1825, this set of cards had a companion book which explained the cards had been created in order to make stargazing and astronomy "familiar and amusing". The set consisted of 32 large cards, each with holes punched into them in the shape of a particular constellation from the northern sky. The cards were highly decorated with colorful figures and scenes relating of the constellation represented by the pattern of punched holes. By holding cards up to a light, a user could see the shapes of the different constellations and thereby learn to identify them in the night sky.