


Toys and play in eighteenth-century America

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Historical interpreters demonstrate some common children's toys and games from colonial America.

Video:  Alamance Battleground
Toys

Duration: 10:02

Transcript:

Video Transcript

Historical interpreter (00:00)

Children in the colonial times did not have a whole lot of time to play. They worked on the farm. If you were old enough, or big enough to bend over, pick up rocks, you picked up rocks out in the garden, picked up sticks out of the yard, everyone had jobs. But everyone has time for downtime, rainy days, cold days, so they had some toys. Now no one family would have had this many toys in their family. You had one or two, and you only had new toys if you were the oldest child. If you were the youngest, they were hand-me-downs, from everyone else, but that's okay because they were made to last. They were handmade. No Toys-R-Us, no Walmart, they had to make their own toys.

(00:43)

And a lot of the toys were very gender specific, they were getting you ready for older life. Girls would have a lot of things about handwork, sewing, cooking, serving, things like that. Boys had more of the hands-on skills to get them ready for a trade. Girls would learn things like weaving, this is just a little hand loom, more of a practice thing, you would come out with something looking about like this, and it would, you know, you could sew some of them together, but it was mainly practice. You'd have what we call a "Knitting Nancy," but you would wrap the string around, pull the bottom loop over, and you end up with a cord like this. You can take that cord, sew it together, make a little mat, whatever you'd like.

(01:38)

Girls also needed to learn to serve tea, that was a very society conscious thing. You served tea well, you were high in society. Like I said, things were handmade, dolls were made out of whatever they had. We had yarn dolls, we had corn husk dolls, we had spoon dolls, we had rag dolls, we even had a church baby. They didn't have children's church or things back, children of all ages went to church just like everyone else, and the babies would get restless. Mom or dad would take their handkerchief out of their pocket, kind of move it around, and make a little church baby so the little baby would have something to play with.

(02:20)

We also have our dancing soldier, or marching, it depends on how well you are. And we had jumping jacks.

(02:37)

Now this is not a doll, per say, to play with, this is Hotch Potch, our posture master. Children had to learn how to read, they learned their ABCs. They would have a set of cards like these that had the Hotch Potch man in the different poses of the letter, so he could make a letter K, you'd bend him around for different things. And one thing that is very interesting, if you look through those cards, these are reproductions, you would not find the letter J or the letter U, because those were not commonly used letters until after about 1800 when the dictionary came out. They would use a V instead of a U, and an I instead of a J.

(03:19)

We also had some things, now this is not so much a game as a trick, but it was always fun, you have a ball that goes up and down the rope, but if you learn the trick, you can stop that ball anywhere you want to. We also had another one, this was called the do-nothing machine and it would do absolutely nothing but keep you busy and quiet for a few minutes while you tried to figure it out.

(03:46)

Boys played with a lot of things they do today, we had tops, we had cat's cradle, was also called cratch cradle, and they'd do the same kind of hand movements with it. We had the Jacob's ladder. And the name comes from the Old Testament, there was a story about a man named Jacob, and he had a dream of angels walking up and down a ladder to heaven. Well gravity lets me these angels walk down, but it keeps them from letting them walk back up.

(04:18)

We had things like table-top ring toss, which is known as quoits. They played cards, now this deck of cards has an Aesop's fable on each piece, I don't know if they were going to stop and read one as they played cards, but it was nice to have it there. We have different kinds of spinners, this is kind of like a trainer model, little wooden one, you would wind it up, and then see how long you could keep it going.

(04:48)

And along those same lines we have this one, this was called the Buzz Saw. It was a metal coin with notches cut in it. You would wind it up, and then get it going, and it made a little buzzing sound.

(05:07)

Now looking along the lines of keeping your eye-hand coordination, we had the cup and ball, you tried to get that ball in the cup like that. Same kind of thing we have the hoop and the stick, you would try to get the hoop or the ring on the end of the stick. If you got really good — now if you only had one or two toys, you would get really good at them after a while — so once you got really good at, say, the cup and ball, you would graduate to the Bilbo-K, or the bilbo catcher. Now the theory is, you spin the ball, come up under it, and get it to sit on that cup. I've not gotten well enough to do it yet, but I've had a lot of practice. If you got good at that, you would turn it over, and try to pop that ball up and sit on the spindle.

(06:03)

We have clay marbles, glass was just way too expensive to waste on kids and toys, but there's plenty of mud and clay down by the river bank, you would make them as smooth as you can, put them up by the fire to dry, you'd have plenty of marbles in just a couple of days. Boggle is not a new game. They played with letter cubes, roll them out, and try to make a word. Let's see, I believe, I got "romp" out of that one.

(06:35)

Dice: Dice were very very popular, dice games were very prevalent, but it was illegal to gamble. So they had to find ways around it. And you know there will be ways around it. They would use things like tops. They would use a child's top. They would spin it, but it had numbers on it, and they could use that for gambling. Dominoes were a game that were played the exact same way we play today.

(07:01)

We have a game called Nine Man's Morris, which is very similar to Chinese checkers were you jump over them, take them out. A game called shut-the-box. You started with two dice. You would roll them, I've rolled a one and a five, so I have six, so I can put down six tile. And I would keep going, my turn keeps going until I can no longer put any down. So let's say I ended up about there. I have a four, a seven, and a nine, I don't add them, I read them across, my score is 479. If I was lucky enough to get all those tiles down in my turn, I'd let everyone know by shutting the box, which is where the name came from.

(07:47)

Back here we have draughts, same thing as checkers. Original draughts were played on a ten-square-by-ten-square board. A game called chess started becoming very popular, it was played on an eight-square-by-eight-square board, everyone decided they'd only want one board around, so they started playing checkers on the eight-by-eight. We have a ten-by-ten.

(08:09)

We had a game called hoops, now this is not something like a hula hoop, but you would use a barrel hoop and push it with a stick see how far you could go, have races about how fast you could go. We also had a game called the game of graces. Usually it was a girl's game. You would take two sticks and you would cross them, put the hoop on it, as you came up and pulled the sticks away it would toss the hoop. The person across would hopefully catch it. If you got really good at it you would get two hoops going at one time.

(08:45)

We also had wooden nine-pin bowling, played pretty much like you would now. We have a game called, or a toy called Bull Roarer. This originally came from the Native Americans.

(09:11)

Boys and girls played ball just like they do today, but they had to make the balls out of whatever they had on hand. Ours here is made out of leather stuffed with cotton. One of the really best balls to play with was actually a pig bladder stuffed with sand, which is kind of where we get the name pig-skin for football. Also had a game, now, sad to say, but it's true, if a child can misuse a toy, they're going to find a way. It was true back then. Their books were called battledores, and boys found that using their book to hit the ball or the shuttlecock made it go a little farther, so they would use the book, or the battle door, to hit it. Well it kind of evolved into the game of battledore and shuttlecock. They used wooden paddles and the cork balls with feathers, much like badminton except played without a net.

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