

Time to Play a Board Game?

By Inga Milbauer

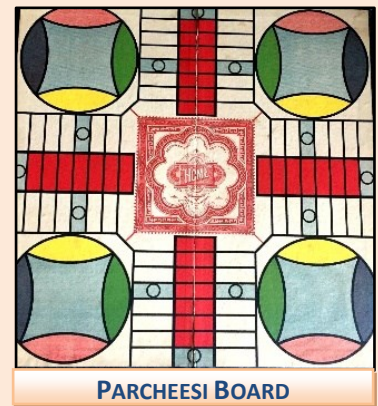
Playing a board game is a great way to spend some time during the cold winter days and dark winter evenings. The Boylston Historical Society Museum has three very interesting board games currently on display: Parcheesi, Backgammon and Marble Solitaire.



PARCHEESI GAME PIECES

The box with Parcheesi game pieces in the photograph on the left contains 4 black paper-covered dice cups with 2 dice, as well as 16 brass bound counters. This vintage set was made in 1895 by Selchow & Righter, Bay Shore (Long Island), New York. The Selchow & Righter Company had purchased the rights in 1870 and trademarked Parcheesi in 1874. The company dates back to 1867 when it was founded by Elisha Selchow as E.G. Selchow & Co. In 1880 the name became Selchow & Righter to reflect the partnership with John Righter. Parcheesi was the company's best-selling game until the 1950's when they bought the rights to Scrabble.

Parcheesi is a brand-name American adaptation of the "cross and circle" game Pachisi, which originated in medieval India. The cross and circle board game design is used for race games played throughout the world. Parcheesi is played by 2-4 players, the first player to move all four tokens around the board to the home position wins. The number of spaces moved on each turn is determined by a throw of two dice. "Traditionally, the dice were cowrie [large sea snail] shells, and the number of shells which land with their opening upwards dictates the number of spaces moved."¹ Since many families owned their own Parcheesi game boards, one did not come with this set. The game board shown on the right is the standard backgammon board for this set. Parcheesi was America's best-selling game until the release of Monopoly in 1935 by Parker Brothers.



PARCHEESI BOARD

The game board in the photograph below is actually a backgammon board. The board was donated together with the Parcheesi set, the checkers pieces, dice and dice cups. It is a faux book style game board. The game pieces fit inside and it looks like a two-volume leather bound book with the title "Macaulay's History of England" when closed. This was a common design for backgammon sets at the turn of 1900.



BACKGAMMON BOARD

Backgammon is one of the oldest recorded board games. Its history can be traced back nearly 5000 years to archeological discoveries in Mesopotamia. Similar games existed in Egypt (called Senet, with historical evidence dating back to 2620 BCE) and Asia (called Nard, dating back to 800 BCE). There is evidence dating back to 600 BCE that the Romans played a game, Ludus Duodecim Scriptorum ("Twelve-lined Game"), which was very similar to modern backgammon. It was referred to as Tabula in the 1st century, the generic name for the board on which it was played.

Backgammon is a two-player board game. It is part of the "tables" games – games with 12 vertical markings. Players roll dice to determine the movement of the pieces. In 1743, Edmond Hoyle codified the rules of play with the "Treatise on the game of Back-Gammon," the first official set of modern rules in existence.

The third game in the collection of the Boylston Historical Society and Museum is Marble Solitaire, seen here in the photograph on the right.

This Marble Solitaire board was donated by Norman French. "It was passed down to him from his grandmother, Mary Elizabeth (Andrews) French, when he was young and likely dates back to the 1870's. This circular board has a 9 3/4" in diameter and is likely made from a single piece of solid mahogany hardwood and turned on a lathe. It has 33 indentations in a cross pattern to hold the playing pieces, in this case glass marbles. While there are 33 spaces, the game is played with 32 marbles, as the central spot is left empty to begin the game. A new game would have come with a set of marbles all of the same size and quality, so it is likely that some of the marbles seen here are substitutes for the originals."²



MARBLE SOLITAIRE BOARD WITH MARBLES

As Carrie Crane describes in her Friday's Fascinating Finds article *Marble Solitaire*:

*"The word 'solitaire' as we use it in the United States refers collectively to a number of single player card games. In England and Europe however, the word refers to a game known as either Peg Solitaire or Marble Solitaire. This is also a single player game but involves a board and a number of moving pegs or marbles. The game dates back to at least 1687 and a Claude Auguste Bery etching from that year. The image depicts the Princess of Soubise, at one time the Mistress of Louis the XIV, playing the French 37-hole version of the game. The modern English or German, a 33-hole version, like the one shown above, is referenced as early as 1779 and its development is attributed to nuns and monks who used it as a way to entertain themselves in their solitary monastic life."*³

For many, playing a board game by themselves or with others is a great way to relax - so we wish our readers a peaceful New Year with time to play a board game or two with family and friends!

Acknowledgements:

¹ <https://www.britishmuseum.org/blog/top-10-historical-board-games>

² https://www.boylstonhistory.org/category/Marble_Solitaire/c141

³ https://www.boylstonhistory.org/category/Marble_Solitaire/c141

Editor: Nancy O'Loughlin Filgate, Director, Boylston Historical Society & Museum, Inc.

<https://www.britannica.com/sports/backgammon>

<https://www.britishmuseum.org/blog/top-10-historical-board-games>

<https://www.campaignfurniture.com/other-travel-items/games-sports/history-of-america-backgammon-book-box>

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Backgammon>

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parcheesi>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Selchow_and_Righter

https://www.thebiggamehunter.com/_mgxroot/page_10768.html

Photography by Suzanne Martiska & Oliver Milbauer, Boylston Historical Society & Museum, Inc.

Published

6 January 2023

Boylston Historical Society & Museum, Inc.