

Have you seen the Toys at the Museum?

by Carrie Crane

The volunteers at the Boylston Historical Society have been busy creating the new 18th & 19th Century Exhibition to be released May 21, 2025! There is a new armament display with weapons dating from 1600s to 1940s on display along with a timeline of the fateful day on April 19, 1775 when local residents marched to Cambridge, an effort that would help form Our Great Nation. There is even a display of the early Boylston families with an emphasis on those in the Sawyers Mill area of town, an area now under the reservoir.

We have also enlarged the display of vintage toys for kids of all ages. With this in mind, we thought we would put out this teaser article to entice you in to see what's new (well it's all actually still old). In today's article we will introduce the Plasticville, USA toys and include excerpts from a few previous Friday Fascinating Finds about some items now on exhibit from our toy collection.

Mammoth Alphabet Nesting Blocks, by Inga Milbauer



These creative learning toys were made by The J.A. Crandall Company which was founded by the American inventor and toy maker Jesse Armour Crandall. He was issued several patents for rocking toys, alphabet blocks and construction toys. His design of nested wooden blocks was patented in June 1881.”

“This set of vintage alphabet blocks in our Toy Collection consists of 10 five-sided boxes which can be nestled inside each other. These wooden carved blocks are covered with colorful lithographed paper illustrations of each letter. The smallest block is a 1.5 inch square, with the letters H, I, J, K. One of the smaller blocks features an ampersand. The six larger blocks are decorated with children and animals corresponding with the letters: R depicting a rat, C a cat. Several letters refer to nursery rhymes: J with “Jack and Jill went up a hill,” and the letter L with “Mary had a little lamb.” The largest block measures 6.5” square with the letters A, B, C on three sides. The fourth side has a picture of a girl who hands blocks to a boy stacking them.”

Marble Solitaire, by Carrie Crane



“The Boylston Historical Society Museum’s Marble Solitaire board shown above was donated to the Society 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 ¾” 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.

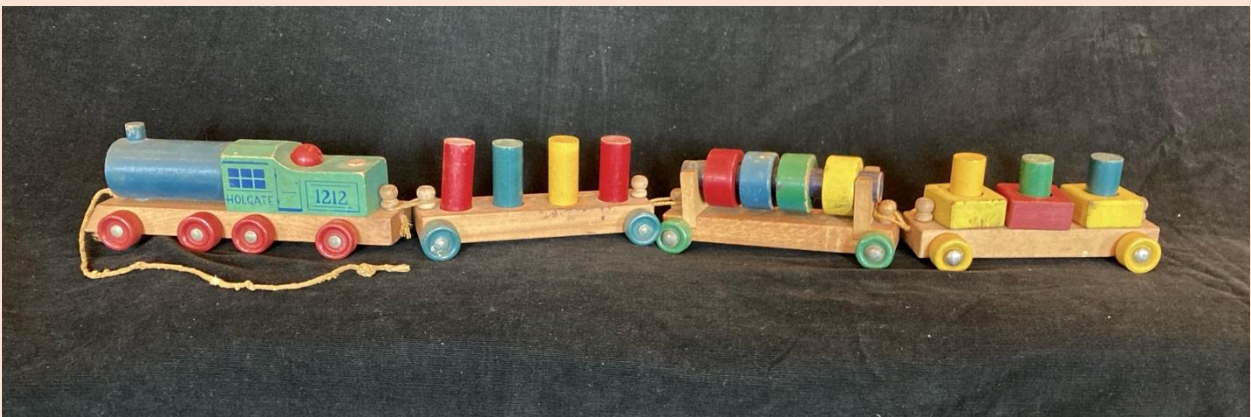
The game is played in a similar fashion to checkers. A piece is eliminated by jumping one piece over another and removing it. Vertical and horizontal moves are allowed but not diagonal ones. The goal of the classic 33-hole game of solitaire is to start with the center hole empty and end with all but one piece left which lands back in that center hole. There are numerous ways to reach this goal but the shortest solution involves only 18 moves (multiple jumps with one piece count as one move).”

One Little Red Fire Truck by Carrie Crane



“In the collection at the Boylston Historical Museum, there is a fine example of a steel pressed truck, the 28 ½ inch long *Buddy L Aerial Ladder Fire Truck* that once belonged to John Lawrence Brigham of Boylston. This vintage fire truck has a four section crank operated extension ladder which extends over 4 feet. Additionally, the ladder has a functional 180° turntable pivoting it. Other classic features which delighted a youngster’s imagination included a steering wheel that turned the front wheels and the fire bell that rang with the pull of the string to sound the alarm. This toy was manufactured in 1929 by the Moline Pressed Steel Co. of Moline, Illinois, founded in 1910 by Fred Lundahl.”

A Hoard of Holgate Wooden Toys, by Carrie Crane



“There is a fun collection of antique wooden pull toys at the Boylston Historical Museum. A freight train, a school bus, a touring card, and a car and camper. This group of toys were Donated to the Museum by Albert Thomas (1944-2013) who served as the President of the Boylston Historical Society from 2001-2005.”

“The toys are made up of multiple interactive wooden pieces; the freight train has a cargo of dowels and rings that insert into holes on the train’s flatbed cars; the school bus has a removable top to reveal the students inside, each student and the driver are colored pegs which can be inserted in the proper sized holes for the ride to school; the touring sedan and roadster car with camper trailer are similarly designed. Thes wooden classics were manufactured by the Holgate Toy Company between 1939 and 1947 and were some of the earliest educational wooden toys commercially made.”

Plasticville, USA: A 1950s Village



Plasticville, USA Supermarket and Police Station with fence.

In 1946, the Bachman Brothers Company of Philadelphia, a thriving business since 1833, decided to expand their production of injection molded plastic products. The company had been making hair combs and eyeglass frames successfully for some time but saw a growth opportunity coming. In the 1940s, there was a charming and widespread practice of creating what were called “Christmas Gardens”. These were sometimes quite elaborate displays made at the base of a household Christmas tree, often including model trains and tracks, trees, houses, churches, animals, even entire villages.

The executives at Bachman Bros. recognized that these vignettes were missing something crucial - the proper scale fencing. Fencing to keep the animals in, fencing to keep them off the railroad tracks, fencing for the church yard and the back yard. In 1947, they introduced the 16 piece “gate and fence kit”. As it turned out model train fans loved it. Seeing a good thing, Bachman Bros. designers began to expand the product line. They started with small accessories, trees, shrubs, wishing wells, and bridges to name a few. These sold well and they began to make buildings.



Plasticville USA Ranch House (above) and Train Platform (below)

Over the next few years, the line which had been named “Plasticville, USA” grew to include variations on a Cape style house, a Ranch house, a church, fire and police stations, a supermarket and a corner store, a train station, an airport, even an ice cream stand called “Frosty Bar”. The buildings came as easy to construct, snap-together walls and roofs, complete with outdoor lighting, flags, window displays, cars and people.

In the latter half of the 1950s, the company recognized the promise of specific train related buildings and added a water tower, a loading platform, a watchman shanty. Eventually, Bachman Bros. moved its production of the Plasticville, USA line to China where it is still made today. While collectors look for vintage versions of these toys, they can still be purchased newly manufactured, using nearly the same 1940s and 50s designs.

The Boylston Historical Society and Museum has several of these Plasticville, USA kits on display in the museum. You can see the supermarket, the police station, a Ranch house, and a train platform, as well as the pieces that started it all, fencing.

Acknowledgments:

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