

A Hoard of Holgate Wooden Toys

by *Carrie Crane*



Holgate Camp Peg Trailer #634

c. 1947

16"L x 3.5"H x 3.5"W

There is a fun collection of antique wooden pull toys at the Boylston Historical Museum: a freight train, a school bus, a touring car, 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. These wooden classics were manufactured by the Holgate Toy Company between 1939 and 1947 and were some of the earliest educational wooden toys commercially made.

The Holgate Brothers Company was founded in 1789 by Cornelius Holgate in Roxborough Pennsylvania which later become part of Philadelphia. The company specialized in wooden handles for a large variety of items from boxes to paint brushes. The company was passed down to Silas Holgate and then to his sons and was relocated twice, landing in Kane, Pennsylvania in 1884. At its peak, the company employed over 400 people.



Holgate School Bus # 641

c. 1943-1947
9.5”L x 3.5”H x 4”W



Holgate Touring Sedan #639

c. 1939
8.5”L x 3.5”H x 3.5”W

In the 1929, the then manager of the company, William Davis had a daughter in college who was learning about the new field of early childhood education. She would bring back the latest information to her father when she visited. With this knowledge in mind, Davis began designing educational wooden toys for young children. The toys turned out to be quite popular and were soon being sold across the country



Activity Train #1212

c. 1943-1952
35”L x 3.25”H x 3”W

through large retailers like Macy’s and F.A.O. Swartz. The parent Holgate Brothers Company formed the Holgate Toy Company at that time.

The toys were made of wood and painted with non-lead-based paint right from the beginning. Constructed to hold up to heavy use, they were designed and tested to encourage the development of early childhood cognitive and motor skills through play using color and shape recognition.

In 1958 Holgate Toy Company merged with their then rival Playskool and moved to Statesville, North Carolina where the line of toys was eventually phased out.

In the 1980s, Richard Bly, re-started the Holgate Toy Company and brought it back to Kane, PA. In 1990 he began a long-standing collaboration with Fred Rogers of Mr. Rogers Neighborhood and held the license to manufacture and sell the miniature replica of the Neighborhood Trolley. Dick Bly and Fred Rogers formed a deep friendship over the many years they worked together. In 2007, the company merged with the Pepperell Braiding Company which manufactured cord and rope for the craft industry. It continues today making a limited number of the favorite wooden toy models which are still sold under the name of Holgate Toys.

Acknowledgements:

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