

# Rock-a-Bye Cradle

By Judy Haynes

Cradles, babies, and lullabies just go together and the cradle that rocks a baby or dolly to sleep may do it to a softly sung folk tune “Hush- a- by baby on the tree top; or the more modern rendition Rock-a-bye baby on the treetops, when the wind blows, the cradle will rock....” Do you recall rocking your child or perhaps your first doll in its cradle?

Scholars debate the origin of the nursery rhyme and lullaby. The lullaby may have had its roots in an old English ballad first published as a Mother Goose Melody in 1765 or the words may have been developed and been influenced by a Native American custom in 1620s. Colonial women were said to have observed Native American mothers rocking their baby in a hollowed-out log, which served as cradle. The cradle was then hung from a tree; thereby moving the baby gently as the wind blows, allowing mother to work hands free.



**Peregrine White's cradle**  
Pilgrim Hall, Plymouth, Massachusetts

In one of our Fuller Research library books on antiques at the museum, a wicker cradle is shown. It was brought to Plymouth from Leyden, Holland, 1610-1620 on the Mayflower. This beautifully preserved cradle was the bed of Peregrine White, the first child born in Plymouth Colony. It has survived and is now on display in Pilgrim Hall, Plymouth, Massachusetts.<sup>1</sup>

One thing seems certain, a cradle defined as a “*moveable bed in which infants are rocked*” was a



**Carbonized Wooden Cradle from Herculaneum**  
British Museum Exhibition – Pompei and Herculaneum

most popular infant bed.<sup>2</sup> Some cradles were carved from wood with attached rockers, while some were carved as one piece. It is distinct from a typical bassinet, which is a basket-like container on free-standing legs with wheels.<sup>3</sup> The cradle that rocks is a satisfying way to calm a baby and has been utilized by mothers for centuries. The oldest known cradle was “A carbonized cradle was found in the remains of Herculaneum left from the destruction of the city by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 CE”.<sup>4,5</sup> In the U.S. some of the earliest patents for cradles with rocking mechanisms were registered in the mid-1800s.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> American Furniture 1620 to the Present, p. 28.

<sup>2</sup> Dictionary of the English Language by Joseph E. Worcester, Hickling, Swan and Brewer, Boston, 1860

<sup>3</sup> Wikipedia

<sup>4</sup> Note: Herculaneum is the modern day Ercolano, Campania, Italy

<sup>5</sup> Wikipedia

<sup>6</sup> www.Smithsonian Magazine.com

The Boylston Historical Society has in its museum an antique toy display with a handmade wooden doll's cradle, painted green. It has solid legs that do not move, but a cradle attached in such a way it can be pushed or swung to rock a young child's doll or a miniature person ensconced. This piece of furniture was donated from the estate of Marion Brigham Newall whose family referred to it as a Rock-a-bye cradle. It was built circa 1920.



**Rock-a-bye Cradle**

*Boylston Historical Society Museum*



**Cradle base and rocking mechanism**

Marian was born Marian Ethel Brigham on 19 June 1896. She was the daughter of Herbert Augustus Brigham, farmer and milk dealer of Boylston and Alice Charlotte Gilman. Her father, Herbert, ran the service station on Main Street. Marian married Wilbur Kehoe Newell in 1916 and they were Boylston residents throughout their married lives. They had three daughters: Alice, Velma and Ardelle.

The Boylston Historical Society and Museum cradle is 19 inches long and stands 15 inches high. The moveable part of the swinging bed is 16 inches long and a mere 8 and 1/4 inches wide, just big enough for a doll. It is currently on display with vintage toys and dolls in our museum for all to see.



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*Vintage Toy Exhibition*

*Boylston Historical Society Museum*

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