

Four Hundred Years of Fun

Timeless Toys Span the Ages

By LIBBY CARTY McNAMEE

Struggling to decide what toys to get your children for the holidays? If so, you are part of a fine Virginia tradition.

Parents have been dealing with the same gift-giving issue for centuries, probably even dating back to the early days of the Jamestown Settlement in 1607, currently celebrating what is called "America's 400th Anniversary."

Surprisingly enough, toys have not changed as much as you would think over the last 400 years. Although physically quite different, toys still try to teach the same skills. Sure, there may be more bells and whistles (literally), but the inherent purpose of a toy remains a timeless constant—to provide something safe, amusing and educational with which children enjoy playing.

Let's take a look at the playthings of the English and Powhatan Indian children during the time of the Jamestown Settlement and try to match them up with their rough equivalent of the modern day.

With what types of toys did these children play? Nothing battery-operated, that is for sure. Perhaps they were on to something!

Dolls

Powhatan children played with dolls made of corn-husks, while the Jamestown children played with "stump" dolls, better known as carved wooden dolls. As we can see from modern times, dolls have never gone out of style in the past 400 years!

Today, American Girl dolls are all the rage with hundreds from which to choose, each with its own background story. Dolls must be ordered online at



americangirl.com. The website offers historical figures such as spirited Colonial girls Felicity and Elizabeth, as well as Kaya, a Nez Perce Native American (\$87 each, with paperback book).

Toys That Teach, a locally owned and operated toy store, carries a line of dolls called the Only Hearts Club (\$15-20) which are strikingly similar in looks to American Girl dolls.

Like the American Girl line, none of these dolls wear eye makeup or bare their midriff. They are more economically priced, and buying in the store lets you avoid the shipping fee. Another bonus—Toys That Teach offers free gift-wrapping!

World of Mirth, another popular local toy store, sells the line of Groovy Girls dolls (\$10-16) for children three and up. It offers a large variety of dolls running the gamut from fairies to funky children of different ethnicities. Both stores offer the adorable Woodkins (\$15-21), wooden dress-up dolls in the spirit of old-fashioned paper dolls.

Still another attractive option is Kamp Kreatures, a new local store celebrating puppetry in all aspects—live performances, arts and crafts and puppets galore! Children can stuff and dress their own puppets and creatures to turn them into a custom-made doll or animal.



Four hundred years ago in Virginia, dolls were made of yarn, above, wood or corn-husks. All historic items were provided by Henricus Historical Park. (Photo: Frost)

Games

While Powhatan children often played a game with reeds similar to our pick-up sticks, English settler children frequently played dice games, classic jacks, clay marbles and wooden nine-pins.

These games helped children to learn skills they would draw on later in life, such as physical dexterity, problem solving and following directions and rules. Furthermore, they learned how to take turns, play fairly and use their imagination, all valuable aptitudes today.

Around the World: The Ultimate Global Boardgame (\$27) is a new fun and interactive family game that prepares children ages eight and up for living in America's growing cultural melting pot.

Children get to walk through the

streets of Bangkok, visit temples in Nepal and dive among sea turtles in Australia as they fill their "global scorecard" in the categories of Culture & Customs, Geography, Language and People & Places. Learn more at aroundtheworldgames.com.

Within the wide selection of games at Toys That Teach, Nerdly Wordy (\$18) is a unique crossword puzzle brain game for ages eight and up. The goal is to become the ultimate "word nerd" and outwit your opponent. It is enclosed in a great case for traveling!

Another neat find is Bibleopoly (\$25), a Monopoly-style game with Biblical landmarks and references. For ages eight and up, it emphasizes cooperation rather than competition. Other recommendations are Gobblet (\$30) or

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Goblet Junior (\$20), Apples to Apples Junior (\$18-25) and the card game Ruckus (\$10).

Tops

Settler children often played with wooden whipping tops with a string attached.



World of Mirth sells classic tops as well as larger battery-operated tops with different themes: color-changing, ballerina, train and circus (\$22). Find additional entertaining motion at Toys That Teach, with the ever-popular rocket balloons (\$10): foam rockets requiring no battery or fuel. They are amazing—and ready to blast off in seconds! The "junior" version is for ages three and up, whereas the "ultra" is for eight and up. The Children's Museum carries a balloon-powered boat, racecar and helicopter.

Balls

All ages of Powhatan Indians played with a round ball made of deer-skin used for "football" similar to our soccer. Jamestown children often played with a ball and cup. As you can see today, balls have transcended the passage of time.

World of Mirth offers small playground balls (\$6-8) decorated in a variety of animal and fish themes as well as large hoppity balls with handles (\$20). The Children's Museum has old-fashioned juggling balls (\$4) and high-bouncing pinky balls, and Toys That Teach has the O Ball (\$8), an easily graspable ball that babies can teeth on and toddlers can catch.

Instruments

Powhatan children played with various instruments such as reed pipes, gourd rattles and wooden drums with skin stretched across the top. The English children also had many types of musical instruments as toys, perhaps including jaw harps.

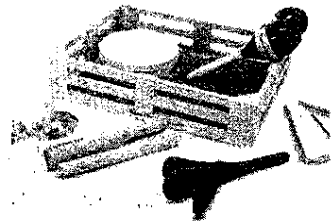
The Children's Museum carries the wonderful **Band in a Box** (\$20) made

by Melissa and Doug, containing 10 pieces including maracas, a drum and cymbals. The shop also carries xylophones that come with a kazoo and castanet. Another recommendation is the **Beginner Band Set** (\$10), which has a recorder, harmonica and jingle stick.

World of Mirth carries the **Bee Bop Band Set** (\$30), a fantastic collection of musical toys put out by Parents Magazine. Great for children 18 months and up, its clever carrying case also serves as a drum!

Wooden Tops

The English settler children regularly played with wooden toys of various sorts: yo-yos, hoops, ninepins and dominos, to name a few.

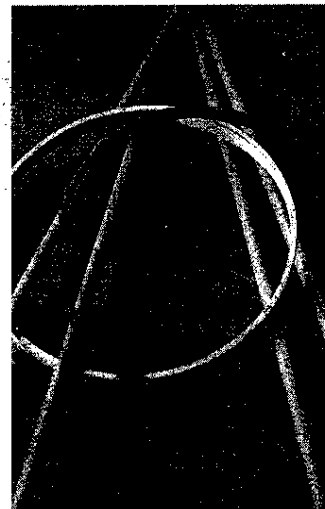


The Melissa and Doug company makes fun, educational and high-quality wooden puzzles for a wide gamut of ages, starting with jumbo-knob puzzles for one-year-olds. Their puzzles, available at many area toy stores, range in subjects all the way from ballerinas to farm animals and construction vehicles.

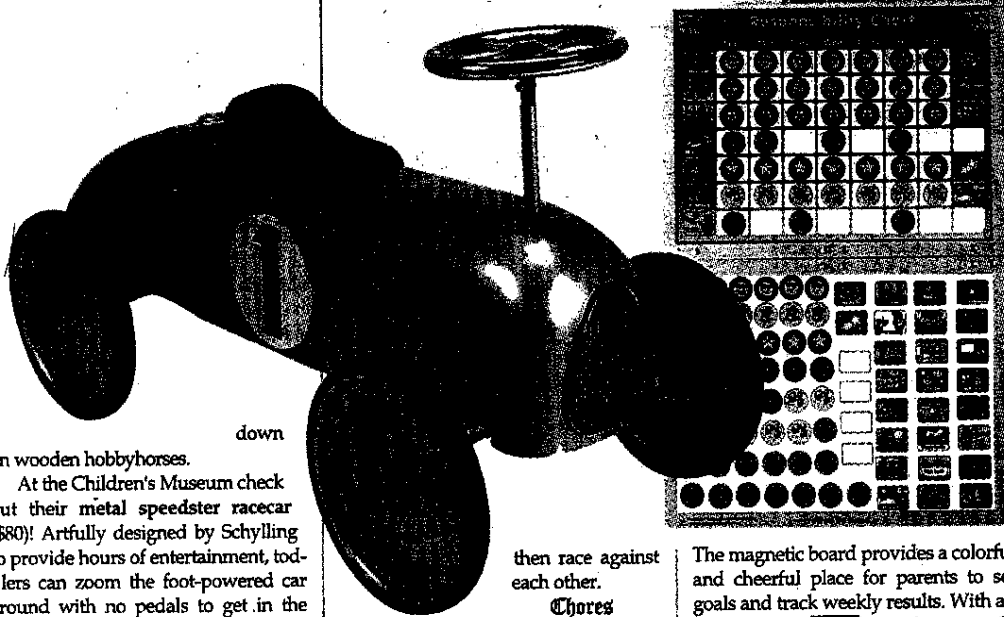
In addition, Melissa and Doug makes lots of other wooden toys such as dollhouses, castles, easels and baby rattles. Averaging \$10 to \$25, these products make fantastic gifts and are a remarkable value!

The Hobbyhorse

This toy horse was all the rage during the days of Jamestown for the English children and can still be found at toy stores around town. Just as children today love to imitate grown-ups driving cars, the children of the 17th century mimicked their parents by riding up and



Old and New—Jamestown children played with felted balls or balls made from old socks. Playground balls were provided by World of Mirth. In the game of graces, children threw and caught wooden hoops with two long sticks. This small version of ninepins could be played indoors. (Photos: Frost)



down
on wooden hobbyhorses.

At the Children's Museum check out their metal speedster racecar (\$80)! Artfully designed by Schylling to provide hours of entertainment, toddlers can zoom the foot-powered car around with no pedals to get in the way. It holds young racers up to 42 pounds. World of Mirth also has snazzy metal die-cast cars that are replicas of real cars, sized for a toddler's hand (\$6).

Also, the Children's Museum offers pinewood derby cars (\$6) that children five and up can paint, decorate and

then race against each other.

Chores

Last but not least, a gift for parents of young children! Surely children centuries ago had their share of chores to do, just as children do today.

The Children's Museum sells a wonderful wooden Responsibility Chart (\$20) made by Melissa and Doug.

The magnetic board provides a colorful and cheerful place for parents to set goals and track weekly results. With an upbeat board **RCM** that, chores could almost be fun!

Libby Carty McNamee is a local attorney and freelance writer who enjoys writing about kids when she is not busy preventing her toddler Sam from maiming himself and destroying family heirlooms.

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