

# Colonial Children's Games

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## Colonial Games

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**Introduction:** During colonial times, there were no cars, TVs, stereos, iPhones, or video games. People worked hard, but after their work was finished children sometimes enjoyed playing games. Families were large and often included extended families-parents, children (Patrick Henry had 14!), aunts, uncles, and grandparents. Many times they all lived in the same household. Children also played games at school and with their friends during other social occasions.

**Directions:** Demonstrate and talk about each game. Divide the students into groups. Allow groups time to play each game for 5-10 minutes. Switch groups to another game until groups have rotated through all games. Below is a list of games and descriptions that were played during colonial times. Games can be ordered from the following companies: The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, P.O. Box 1776, Williamsburg, Virginia 23187-1776. Email: [www.williamsburgmarketplace.com](http://www.williamsburgmarketplace.com) or phone 1-800-761-8331 or Cooperman Fife & Drum Co., 1007 Route 121, PO Box 821, Bellows Falls, VT 05101. Phone 1-802-463-9750 or email: [info@cooperman.com](mailto:info@cooperman.com) .

**Rolling Hoops:** Children have been rolling, bowling, and trundling their hoops from the time of the ancient Egyptians through the hula hoop craze of the late 1950's. Hoops appear on ancient Greek vases and reliefs being used as a toy and as a form of exercise. The early North American colonists brought this pastime along with them, the hoops being made of whatever material was at hand or borrowed from an old barrel or the like. In Victorian times, both wood and metal hoops were favorite playthings. The hoop could be trundled along, raced, used for skipping or twisted round and round the waist until it fell to the ground.

**The Game of Graces:** Opponents send brightly beribboned hoops whirling towards each other to be caught on the tips of slender wands in this exciting and elegant sport. The Game of Graces was considered both proper and beneficial exercise for young ladies in the early 1800's and it was proper as well for boys to join in the game in the company of girls or to play it among themselves as a "lark."

Also known as Les Graces or the Flying Circle, the Game of Graces was described as early as 1831 in the American Girl's Book, and judging by children's books and store advertisements, remained popular throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Game of Graces is a wonderful outdoor entertainment for older children and adults.

**Quoits:** The game of Quoits is at least 2,000 years old, dating back to the ancient Greeks in the original Olympic Games. The original game was played outdoors, with iron rings and a stake (also known as a hob or mott). Centuries later, English settlers brought Quoits with them to the colonies.

Colonial children played Quoits more than any other game, using strips of leather, and pieces of rope or chord or willow branches for the rings. The wealthier colonists originally used three-pound iron rings, later employing common horseshoes for the quoits. From there, the game of horseshoes developed.

During the Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth-century, sophisticated lathes were employed to mass-produce a table-top version of Quoits. Today, both Quoits and Horseshoes remain popular games throughout the world.

**Tabletop Ninepins:** Throughout the North American colonies, men and women of all classes enjoyed the popular pastime known as Ninepins. The game proved to be an amusing distraction as early as 1636 when young William Ward of Virginia received a reprimand for testing his skill at Ninepins instead of watching the cows.

A variety of pins, balls and rules of play developed as bowling games popular since ancient times evolved into the games we know today as Skittles, Duckpins, Lawn Bowls, Bocce, Petanque, and Tenpins.

**Cup and Ball Toy:** The Cup and Ball toy has been a favorite childhood amusement for many centuries. The object of the game is to swing the wooden ball into the cup, which is not at all as simple as it may appear to be. The task requires the development of dexterity and good hand-eye coordination. This toy was quite popular in Europe with adults and children alike throughout the time of settlement of the American colonies and would have been a favorite on this continent as well, as it could be easily made at home or purchased from a merchant. The Victorian period saw many cups and balls of quite ornate design. The Cup and Ball is a particularly versatile toy which can be enjoyed in solitary play or in the company of others.

**Bilbo-catcher:** The toys of the Cup & Ball family have been favorite childhood amusements for many centuries, unchanging in their basic form but marvelously varied in their specific designs. These toys were quite popular in Europe with adults and children alike throughout the time of settlement of the New World colonies and would have been favorites on the North American continent as well. In the Bilbo-catcher variation, also known as the bilboquet, a hole is drilled into the ball opposite the side where the string is attached. One side of the spindle is a straightforward Cup & Ball game, where the object of the game is to swing the ball into the cup, while the other side of the spindle is a game where one must catch the ball by its hole on the tip of the spindle.

**Whip Top:** The whip top is a very ancient member of the toy top family. Thought to have originated in the Far East, whipping tops were known to the ancients and made an appearance in manuscripts as early as the 13<sup>th</sup> century AD. The top itself has been made in all manners of shapes and sizes and of many convenient materials. The shape and size of this particular top is based on 18<sup>th</sup> century engravings. The whip could be made of any branch or stick with a varying number of leather or buckskin lashes. A custom existed in English villages in Elizabethan times of a “town top” or “parish top”. This was a large whipping top kept for public use to amuse and exercise the villagers when the weather was too frosty for work. Such a top could be whipped by several players or parties at once, and may have been used in yearly top racing contests.

There are two ways to get the top started. In the first, hold the top upright between your hands and spin it on the ground. In the second, hold the top between your thumb and forefinger and throw it out with a twirl so that it hits the ground spinning. As soon as the top is spinning, whip it with the lash so as to maintain or increase the speed of the spin. As soon as you have mastered the technique of controlling the spin of the top you are ready for a contest.

The whip top lends itself exceedingly well to straight forward contests: racing, in which markers are set up and each player attempts to whip his top to the end of the course in the fastest time, and encounters, in which players try to whip their tops against each other until one of the tops is knocked over.

**Whirligig:** Whirligig toys made of hammered lead musket balls or coins too old and thin to be of value have been excavated from early American town, plantation and military camp sites. Mentioned in English literature as early as 1686, these toys have also been found in Native American cliff ruins, indicating the toy's antiquity in North America. The buzzing sound of the whirling disk lent this toy its other names of "buzzer", "buzzsaw" and "whizzer". This whirligig is fashioned from lead free pewter reproduction of a Spanish Milled Dollar, a silver coin widely used during the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Place the loop formed at each end of the doubled string over fingers of each hand and slide the whirligig to the middle of the string. With tension on the string, move your hands in a circular motion so that the whirligig spins away from you and the string becomes twisted along its entire length. When the string is completely wound, simultaneously stop the circular motion and pull your hands apart gently, in a continuous motion. The whirligig will start to spin back toward you. Bring your hands toward each other just a bit to allow the string to rewind, then apart again each time the string is fully wound, in a gentle and rhythmic motion, slowing or quickening the speed of the whirligig by adjusting the timing and strength of your pull.

**Battledore & Shuttlecock:** Battledore & Shuttlecock is an outdoor game popular since the time of the earliest American settlements. Toy stores advertised this game in the mid-1700s, and it continued to appear prominently in advertisements and children's books throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Battledore & Shuttlecock is considered a forerunner of both modern badminton and table tennis.

The "battledore", or paddle, was originally solid wood, likely named after an old style wooden washing bat known by the same name and of similar shape. Later, the battledore might have had a parchment or net surface. The "shuttlecock" was much like the modern version, but made of natural cork and feathers.

**Keeping up the Game:** Each player takes a turn with a battledore. He or she tosses a shuttlecock up in the air, hitting it back up each time it comes down. The winner is the player who had the most successful hits before the shuttlecock hits the ground.

**Playing for Points:** Each player needs his or her own battledore. The shuttlecock is hit between or among players, with any player who lets it touch the ground

getting charged a point. The player with the least points after an agreed upon period of time is the winner.

**Trap Ball:** Trap Ball originated in 18<sup>th</sup>-century England, evolving from several other related bat and ball games, including Cricket and Rounders. Its popularity in America extended well into the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The reason for shaping the “trap” into a shoe-like form is unknown.

This game requires two or more players. Mark a circle 20 feet or more in diameter around the trap in the center. The first player (chosen) steps up to the trap with the bat. He strikes the trap with his bat, releasing the ball. He must hit the ball with his bat while the ball is in the air in the circle. The rest of the players stay outside the circle. If the player at bat fails three times in a row to strike the ball out of the circle, or if he strikes the ball out of the circle but it is caught by one of the other players before it falls to the ground, he loses his turn, either to the next batter chosen or to the player who caught the ball. If the batter hits the ball outside the circle and no one catches it before it strikes the ground, the batter scores one point and continues at bat in succession until he is caught out. The highest scoring player wins after all players have had their turn at bat or the time is up.



**Bibliography:**

*All game descriptions were copied from the tags on the games purchased from the following companies:*

The Cooperman Company

The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation