18th Century Games

By Allison Sedgwick

I have been working on a way to keep my children engaged at our regiment events. I thought it would be fun for them to learn about what children did in the 1700's. After looking around for information, I realized that *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book* by John Newbery had a list of games played by children during the Revolutionary War era. I went down the list and conducted further research to find the instructions of the games. Research is ongoing and these instructions will be updated when more information is found.

One thing that I did learn during this search was that stick-and-ball games were favorite pastimes for colonial soldiers. So gentlemen, it is “period-correct” to play ball in between military engagements—and there is a variety of ways to play too. For more information about ball games see the *Play Ball!* page on Colonial Williamsburg’s website.

The Games

More information about many of these games can be found at in *Sports and Pastimes of the People of England* by Joseph Strutt (1903) which can be found online at [http://sacred-texts.com/neu/eng/spe/index.htm](http://sacred-texts.com/neu/eng/spe/index.htm)

**Chuck – Farthing:** Toss coins into a hole in the ground from a set distance determined by the players at the beginning of the game. Each person takes a turn chucking his coins in the hole. The person who throws his coins closest to the hole will then move closer and throw all of his coins as well as the other's coins into the hole. He keeps the coins in the hole, and the second player chucks the coins that did not land in the hole. The game continues until someone no longer has coins to “chuck”.

**Flying the Kite:** We took a picture of a kite that had been “reproduced” and was on display in the Geddy House in Williamsburg. It looked to be of linen, wood, and string. It was said to be heavy and not fly well.

**Dancing round the May-Pole:** Children dance around a pole with ribbons, weaving them in a pattern as they go.

**Marbles:** There are so many variations that this game could probably be its own book.

**Hoop and Hide:** This is played the same way as Hide and Seek.

**Thread the Needle:** This is a game for girls and boys. They pair up and clasp hands making an arch with their arms. Those in the back of the line run under the arms of those ahead of them and then stand with their arms up at the front of the line. This continues until the players are done.
**Fishing:** This is pretty self-explanatory. Fishing is good way to possibly catch food and/or relax.

**Blind man's Bluff:** One player is blindfolded and the other players push him around a bit as he/she tries to catch one of them. When he/she does, the “caught” player and the “blind man” change places.

**Shuttle-Cock:** (We found the paddles and shuttles exhibited at Williamsburg in the insane asylum exhibit, of all places). The paddles had leather stretched inside a circular paddle, the outside thin wood, with a wooden handle. The shuttle was made of cork with feathers sewn around the cork with linen and metallic thread. I guess it was one of the games they let the more sane patients play. The game pieces were also dated in the early 1800's. The game was played by hitting the “cock” back and forth between the players. I do not know if there was a standard distance away from each other that each player kept.

**King I Am:** I have not been able to find instructions on how to play this game. There are references to the game in a couple of places, but no instructions. So far the best I have been able to come up with is from the picture and poem that the “Pocket Book” has about the game. The poem goes:

> Ambition here fires every Heart  
> And all assume the Monarch's Part  
> For a few minutes, though in Play,  
> Each rules with arbitrary Sway.

There could be a number of ways this game is played. The picture shows a boy on a chair and other boys playing around him. The Rule of Life that is stated is:

> Defend into thyself, to find  
> The Imperfections of thy Mind.

**Peg-Farthing:** This is played on a flat surface. Draw a circle about one yard in diameter, with a second circle around it for players to stand on. Place a farthing (coin) in the middle of the circle. Each player takes a turn spinning their string wound top. The top is spun in the middle of the circle by the coin and if it spins to the outside of the circle, the boy can pick up his top. While the top is in the circle, spinning or not, the other boys throw their pegs at the top trying to “split” or break it. The boy who successfully “splits” the top gets to keep the peg. The one who collects the most pegs wins. Usually the owner of the top tried to hit his top out of the circle to “save” it. The game continues as each boy takes a turn spinning his top. It seems that it was uncommon for a top to be split, but it did not deter the boys from trying. For more information about this game see the World Turn’d Upside Down blog post, Colonial Games: How to Play Peg-Farthing (February 4, 2011).

**Knock Out and Span:** I have not been able to find any information about this game.

**Hop, Step and Jump:** This seems to have references to what is known today as the triple jump.
Boys and Girls Come Out to Play: This is a reference to a children's rhyme. The first two lines appeared in various places from 1708-1725. The first six lines are in “Tommy Thumb's Pretty Song Book” published in London around 1744.

Girls and boys, come out to play,
The moon doth shine as bright as day;
Leave your supper, and leave your sleep,
And come with your playfellows into the street.
Come with a whoop, come with a call,
Come with a good will or not at all.
Up the ladder and down the wall,
A half penny roll will serve us all.
You find milk, and I'll find flour,
And we'll have a pudding in half an hour.

I sent a Letter to my Love: Children sit in a circle and pass a “letter.” It can be a piece of paper, around. They sing:

“I sent a letter to my love and on the way I dropped it. One of you has picked it up and put it in your pocket. Please, please, drop it, drop it. Please, please, drop it, drop it.”

The person holding the letter at the end of the song gets up and runs around the circle. The person on the right of the person running with the letter gets up and chases them. If the person with the letter does not get tagged, both runners sit back down in the circle. If the runner with the letter does get tagged, he/she sits behind the person who tagged them. The game goes on until only one person is in the circle. More information can be found on the Parent Child Education site post, Colonial America Game – “I sent a letter to my love!” (December 7, 2010)

Pitch and Hustle: A game of pitch and toss. Not much else seems to be known about this game.

Cricket: A game that dates back to at least the middle of the 13th century that is played with a ball and a bat. Originally, the bat was a crooked stick called a “cryc.” The person who throws the ball to the batsman (or hitter) is called a bowler. There is a variation of the game called Cricket on Horseback, which is played on horseback with sticks and balls.

Stool-Ball: This game can be simple or made more complicated.
Simple rules: Players form a circle around a stool and try to hit it with a ball. A defender protects the stool by hitting the ball away from the stool with his or her hand. Players throw the ball at the stool or to another player to hit the stool. Whoever hits the stool becomes the defender, and the defender joins the circle.

More complicated rules: More than one stool and more than one defender play at a time. A pitcher tries to hit a stool. The defender hits the ball away with his hand the defenders run around the stools while the pitcher retrieves the ball. If the pitcher hits the stool, he becomes a defender, and the defender becomes a pitcher. In some variations the defender has a bat.
Swimming: Cooling off in the heat and playing in the water has always been a fun thing to do!

Base-Ball: It seems to be an early form of baseball played without a bat and no set rules until the early 1800's. The bases were posts and there was a pitcher with a ball. The bat showed up sometime before the end of the 1700's.

Trap-Ball: This game is played by placing a ball on one side of a see-saw type lever. A player stomps on the side of the lever that is up, causing the ball to fly up into the air. The player then hits the ball toward the other players who try to catch it. The players rotate turns at hitting and catching the ball.

Tip-Cat: The cat is a piece of wood six inches long and one half inches in diameter on the outside. It is thinner on the inside and looks like two cones stuck together. The cat is placed on the ground and hit with a stick. This makes it fly up into the air, and as it comes down the cat can be hit away like a ball. It is another game that is an early form of baseball. It seems that there can be a series of bases run to and that the players that are “out” try to get the batter as he runs around the bases. For more information see the blog Boston 1775 post How to Play Tip-Cat (July 25, 2007).

Fives: It seems to be a precursor to handball, racket ball, and maybe tennis. It appears to have been played by hitting a ball against a wall with a gloved hand. There were five players on each team. For more information see page 158 of Sport in American Culture: From Ali to X-games by Joyce Duncan.

Leap-Frog: One player gets on their knees and bends down to the ground then the player in the back tries to jump over him/her from the back while trying to be frog like. The first player then gets on his knees and the other player jumps over him.

Birds-Nesting: I have yet to find information about this game. The illustration in the Pocket book seems to indicate that boys would steal birds' nests.

Train-Banding: I have yet to find information about this game. It could possible by children playing at soldiering.

All the Birds in the Air: I have not been able to find any information about this game.

Hop-Hat: I have not been able to find any information about this game.

Shooting: Learning to hunt and defend one's self was a valuable and important skill.

Hop-Scotch: This game appears not to have changed much over the ages!
**Who Will Play at My Squares:** This is a card game to teach the alphabet and numbers to young children before they went to school. It is based on John Locke's *Play to Learn* philosophy. It was written by Benjamin Collins who lived 1715-1785. It was published by John Newbery, an 18th century printer in London. More information can be found in the [University of North Texas Digital Library](http://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc9420/m1/6/?q=minature%20book%20squares)

*Riding (horses):* Riding a horse is not only fun, it teaches a necessary skill!

**Other Games**

These are other games that were found while looking up the Pocket-Book games.

**Hunt the Slipper:** Several children sit in a ring and one stands outside of the ring. The players in the ring pass a slipper around underneath their clothes so the player on the outside of the ring does not know where it is. When she finds it and gets it, the player that had it at the time changes places with the player on the outside and play continues.

**Hunt the Fox:** One player runs to a per-determined distance. When he reaches the per-determined distance, all the other players try to catch him before he makes it to “home”.

**Puss in the Corner:** Places of equal distance are marked out for all but one player to stand. A player stands in the middle of other players and as the other players switch places, the player in the middle tries to take a place in the circle or square. This game is like musical chairs without the music or the chairs.