

Building Blocks

“A CHILD was playing with some building blocks; and, as the mimic castle rose before his eyes in graceful proportions, a new pleasure swelled in his heart. He felt himself to be the creator of a ‘thing of beauty,’ and was conscious of a new-born power. Arch, wall, buttress, gateway, drawbridge, lofty tower, and battlement were all the work of his hands. He was in wonder at his own skill in thus creating, from an unseemly pile of blocks, a structure of such rare design.”
Godey’s, March 1857

“As soon as a child is old enough to play, they attach themselves the most to those that have ‘the most play in them.’ Blocks, for instance, for they can be placed in so many forms; ...”
Godey’s, February 1861

There is no specific date for wooden blocks being used as toys. Before the blocks were commercially made they were probably made from scrap wood by loving hands during winter evenings. By the mid-19th century the blocks were being commercially made.

In reading period magazines, one finds many references to building blocks but there were few specific descriptions and usually the terms, “building blocks,” “wooden blocks,” or “toy blocks” were used. There are a number of genre paintings from the 1850s that show children playing with wooden building blocks and alphabet blocks.

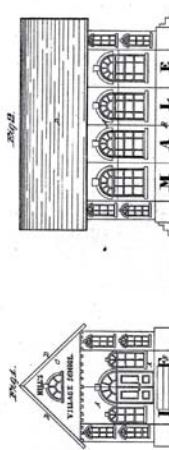
As early as 1836, blocks were used in the German kindergartens established by Friedrich Froebel. He developed a set of blocks which made up part of his *System of Gifts and Occupations*. Each “gift” was built upon the previous one and was designed to educate and entertain the child. In 1869, Milton Bradley began to manufacture Froebel’s gifts which he called, “Kindergarten Gifts.” He also published a book on promoting kindergartens in the United States; the book, *Paradise of Childhood*, explained the use of gifts and Bradley expanded upon Froebel’s original ideas. Blocks were also used to teach the alphabet and reading but they were not just educational toys for the young — they were used to teach geometry; budding architects and engineers used them to build their dreams, and younger siblings knocked the edifices down.

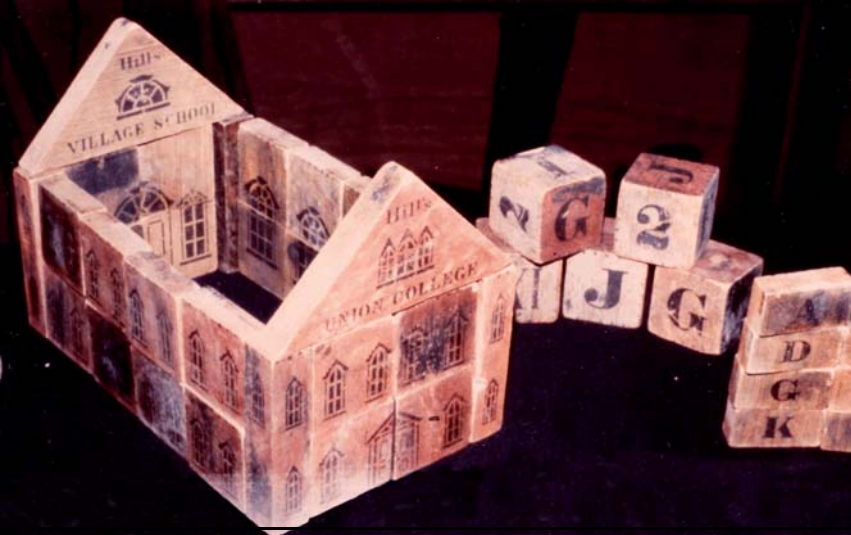
*S.L.Hill,
Alphabet Blocks,
No. 21,798,
Patented Oct. 12, 1858.*



Samuel L. Hill was the first to patent alphabet blocks in the United States. The patent (#21,798) was issued on October 12, 1858 and in 1865 (#51,720) he patented building blocks. The letters, numbers other images were printed directly on the wooden blocks rather than having the images pasted on the blocks as some others were. Both sets of Hill’s blocks were among the

*S.L.Hill,
Toy Building Blocks,
No. 51,720,
Patented Dec. 26, 1865.*





Sets of Hill's blocks from the cargo of the Steamboat Bertrand. Ironically, the Bertrand sank before the Village School set was patented.

personal cargo of the Steamboat Bertrand which sunk on the Missouri River in 1865. Toy building blocks were also patented by Thomas Harold (#46,525) in 1865 but these did not have any images on them. In 1867, Charles Crandall was issued a patent (#61,721) for interlocking building blocks and starting producing them. After the first pioneers in toy building blocks, a number of companies produced blocks of all sorts.

The following blocks were developed after the Civil War period.

