

Game Boards

BY GREGORY LEFEVER

IN THIS AGE OF GAME BOYS AND ONLINE REALMS, AMERICAN FOLK ARTISTS KEEP HANDMADE GAME BOARDS VIBRANT AND ALIVE WITH INTENSE COLORS, ATTRACTIVE DESIGNS, AND RESPECT FOR TRADITION.

Glowing on the wall like a jeweled tapestry, the brightly colored backgammon board catches the eye of a burly canawler sitting down to his tankard. He grabs it with one meaty fist then slaps it down in front of the green and trembling hogler from his boat. A few drinks, the dice warm up, and more than a few shillings slide to the hogler's side of the

table—he quakes no more.

Fueled by tankards of rum and frustrations from a long day, the two men—and a dozen others at adjoining tables—whoop and bellow for hours as they toss dice, shove draughts across the board, and pile the well-worn shillings of their wagers on the tabletop.

Such nightly rituals of backgammon and betting became so boisterous and notorious at taverns and

coffee houses from Boston to Charleston that writer Alexander Mackrabie fumed in 1768, “They have a vile practice here of playing backgammon, a noise which I detest, which is going forward in the public coffee-houses from morning till night, frequently ten or a dozen tables at a time.”

Look ahead two centuries to 1968 and you'll see the same backgammon board has found its way



NATIONAL GALLERY, LONDON, UK/THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY

Tavern patrons often played—and wagered on—board games such as backgammon, as depicted here in *Backgammon Players*, c. 1640-45, oil on wood by David the Younger Teniers (1610-90).

back to a wall. Only this time the wall is in a private home and the board is part of a prized collection of American folk art.

These two scenes bracket the checkered past of game boards in America. Although scorned by the early Puritans, games such as chess, checkers, and backgammon nevertheless gained popularity in raucous taverns and coffee houses throughout the colonies and early United States. When it came time to relax, wealthy families gathered around finely wrought, elaborately carved game boards in big homes with fine furnishings. Farmers, sailors, and other common folk shared the same fun with friends and family but played on more primitive boards, often of their own creation.

Unlike the homes and furniture of the well-to-do, fancy game boards passed into oblivion while their primitive counterparts hid safely in attics, basements, and barns. Then in the middle of the 20th Century they re-emerged to play a starring role in the robust American folk art revival. Recognized for both their rich cultural heritage and colorful visual appeal, vintage American game boards proudly joined museum and private collections. By the year 2000, they fetched an average of \$3,000 at auction, sometimes going for \$40,000 or higher.

Of course, playing on one of these museum pieces makes every round a game of *Risk*. So in recent decades old American game boards took a leap from the tabletop to the wall. Although the look is the same as in early American times and taverns, the reasoning is not. When not in use, colonial tavern-keepers hung their game boards on their walls to create more tabletop space for drinking and socializing.

Owners of vintage American homes—as well as people who adopted early American décor for newer homes—usually put game boards on walls as a decorative feature. The sweeping popularity of the country look that began in the 1970s broadened the attraction of game boards so much that they soon



Game board made in Venice, Italy, c. 1570-90, veneered with tropical hardwood (probably rosewood) and three patterns of lapis lazuli, with gilded Moresque decoration. It has a chess board on one side and half a backgammon board on the other, which would have formed half of a 16th-Century "pair of tables" with another similar board, completing the backgammon board and providing—on the reverse—a board for Nine Men's Morris.

shared wall space with theorems, *fraktur*, primitive portraits, and all manner of vintage signs.

The demand for colorful and captivating game boards soon eclipsed the supply—too few genuine old game boards survived to fill the wanting walls, and those that did were likely to drain the budgets of ordinary decorators and collectors. As a result a number of artists skilled in traditional American crafts stepped in to meet the need, reproducing early game boards in period styles but with modern (safer and more durable) materials.

Recently we talked with five of the country's finest game board artists to gain insights into their craft. Even with something as seemingly standard as a checkerboard, each demonstrates unique technique and style, providing potential buyers with choices in appearance and price.

PHARAOHS TO PHILADELPHIA

Origins are murky for many of the board games played in early America. Written histories conflict with one another, and archaeological evi-

dence is contradictory because variations of the same games have been unearthed in different ancient locales and from different periods. Moreover, the board itself usually reveals little about the underlying rules of the game.

Take backgammon, for example. Archaeologists found an ancient ancestor, a game called *Senat*, in 1922 in the tomb of Egypt's Tutankhamen after having been locked in a lightless vault for 3,200 years. Another form turned up in 2004 in Iran, dating to 3000 B.C. First-Century Romans played a derivative called *Ludus Duodecim Scriptorum*, later known as *Tabula*. A version called *Alea* became popular in Europe by the 6th Century. In the 1600s, the English began calling the game backgammon—likely from the Welsh *back* for little and *gammon* for battle—and Edmond Hoyle in 1743 wrote a rulebook to standardize the game.

In America, backgammon was popular by the mid-1700s. Samuel Rowland Fisher of Philadelphia, who traveled in the 1770s to South Caro-



This unusual game board with drawer was made in the third quarter of the 19th Century. A red and yellow checkerboard is bordered by a brown frieze, and the backboard—made from an older game board—is set within a molded frame analogous to a case with a single drawer.

COURTESY OF ANTIQUE ASSOCIATES AT WEST TOWNSEND, INC.

lina, later recalled his disagreeable evening in a Charleston coffee house, “There are very few there at any time but those who are playing Back Gammon, the noise of which is so great that you can scarce hear anything,” according to Sharon V. Salinger in her 2002 book, *Taverns and Drinking in Early America*.

Checkers—known as *Draughts* in England as early as the 12th Century—dates back in some form to 1400 B.C. Egypt. William Payne, a London mathematician, wrote the first English book of instructions for the game in 1756. Chess, which shares the same board design, was a more recent invention, created either in China around 200 A.D. or in India in 600 A.D.—no one is certain. It took its current form only in 1849 when Eng-

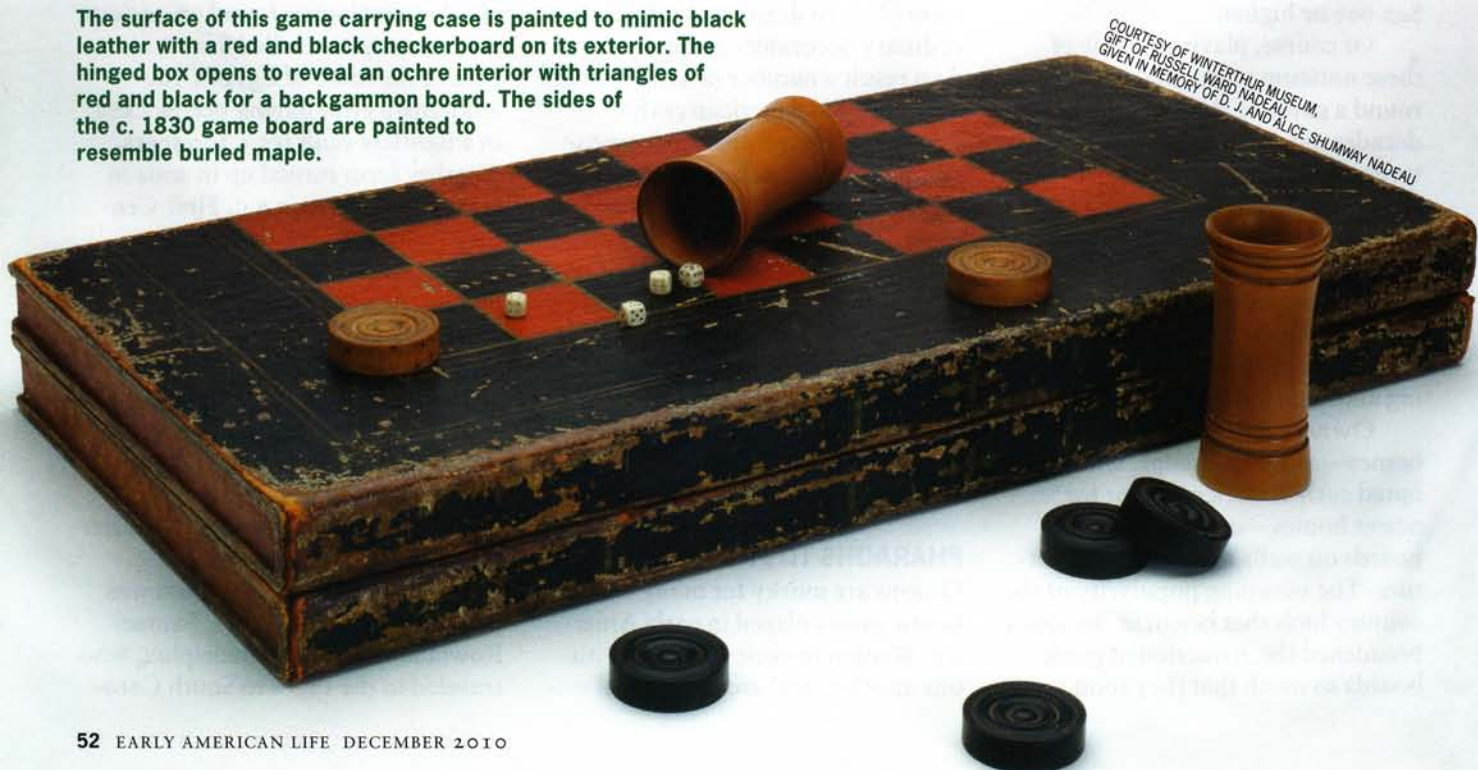
lish chess master Howard Staunton standardized it for competitions. Chess games with living, full-size players, now popular in Renaissance and other fantasy festivals, began in the imagination of Charles Dodgson when he, as Lewis Carroll, wrote *Through the Looking Glass, and What Alice Found There* in 1871.

But in India, the game we know as *Parcheesi* originated in about 500 B.C. when royalty actually moved around real-life dancers as pieces on large outdoor boards. The game, in a more manageable size, became known in England as *Ludo* and in

Spain as *Parchis*. Homemade board editions began appearing in America in the early 1800s, and in 1867 a man named John Hamilton of the Hudson River Valley obtained a copyright for the popular game, which he renamed *Parcheesi*.

European settlers also brought board games that have since become obscure. *Fox and Geese* originated in northern Europe in about 1300. *Nine Men’s Morris*—also known as *Mill*, or *Morelles*—harkens back to ancient Egypt and was popular with Europeans settling the New World. *The Game of the Goose* migrated from Italy to England in the 1600s as *The Royal and Most Pleasant Game of Goose*. Royalty-disdaining Americans adopted it in the 1850s as *The Jolly Game of Goose*.

The surface of this game carrying case is painted to mimic black leather with a red and black checkerboard on its exterior. The hinged box opens to reveal an ochre interior with triangles of red and black for a backgammon board. The sides of the c. 1830 game board are painted to resemble burled maple.



COURTESY OF WINTERTHUR MUSEUM, GIFT OF RUSSELL WARD NADEAU, GIVEN IN MEMORY OF D. J. AND ALICE SHUMWAY NADEAU

WOOD TO PAPER

Depending on the complexity of the game and who created the board, game boards in early America ran the gamut from ornate to crude. Furniture makers and sign painters in the 1770s created exquisite game boards of walnut, cherry, and maple that featured fine paints and finishes, highly detailed graphics, and intricate trims for affluent families. Boards for popular games such as checkers, chess, and *Nine Men's Morris* required relatively simple boards that amateur craftsmen, farmers, and sailors often fashioned in pine for their own enjoyment.

As the Industrial Revolution swept throughout Europe and America, commercial printers and lithographers took advantage of new technologies to print board games on paper and linen-backed paper, switching to cardboard as it became readily available in about 1830.

Then, in 1860, a lithographer named Milton Bradley invented a more efficient process for mass-producing color images. Between Bradley's company and Parker Brothers, a multitude of old and new games, stylishly yet inexpensively packaged, became a staple of the rapidly expanding American household.

But the introduction of cheap mass-produced cardboard games did not totally eliminate the centuries-old tradition of making game boards by hand. The art continued in America at the hands of countless anonymous, trained and untrained woodworkers and painters across the land.

Even a board as simple as a checkerboard became a canvas for the folk artist to adorn with an array of personally favored images: suns and moons, flowers and vines, human and animal figures, hearts and horseshoes, and the American flag—drawn either from the artist's imagination or borrowed from painted furniture, signs, or quilts. Although most of the surviving folk art game boards are simple painted wood, others feature intricate chip-carving, gold leaf, brass inlays or wood marquetry, stenciling or decoupage.



A pine, double-sided Parcheesi and checkers board, made at the end of the 19th Century, painted green, yellow, red, and black on the Parcheesi side and black and red on the checkerboard side.





A HITT AT BACK GAMMON.

A Hitt at Backgammon, etching and watercolor by Thomas Rowlandson (1756-1827), 250 mm x 250 mm (plate). This parody was published in 1810, during the golden era of English caricature when artists parodied developments in day-to-day politics and social life in Great Britain.

These early folk artists focused on the most familiar games—usually checkers, chess, and backgammon—although occasionally some sought inspiration from games of chance played at country fairs and carnivals such as *Wheel of Fortune*, ring toss, and penny pitch. Some even invented board games whose rules have vanished along with their anonymous creators.

“As folk art, game boards are expressions of individual artistic endeavors, but they also reflect the importance of social interaction, whether a game of checkers at the general store or a game of chance at the country fair,” noted Bruce and Donna Wendell in *The Encyclopedia of American Folk Art*. “The best examples have become icons of folk art imagery. Displayed on the wall, they often stir irresistible comparisons to modern art, with their patinated, painted surfaces and bold graphic impact.”

A TRADITION CONTINUES

The game boards most popular with today’s artists are the same boards artists have favored since the 1700s—checkerboards, chess, and backgammon. Although *Parcheesi* did not achieve widespread American popularity until the latter half of the 19th Century, its board presents artistic opportunities too tempting to pass up.

“I really like *Parcheesi* game boards the most,” offered Pennsylvania folk artist Kathy Graybill. “The antique originals seem to have the most color schemes, detail, and different designs, especially compared with checkerboards, although I’ve seen some pretty elaborate checkerboards.”

Cathy Aldrich in Washington State is a traditional purist regarding her colonial game boards, but she justifies her brilliant *Parcheesi* boards by explaining, “Some of the

games like *Parcheesi* didn’t come into play until much later and wouldn’t have been familiar to the majority of colonists, but any sailor who happened to go to India may have been familiar with it.”

Some artists expand their repertoire to include even obscure game boards. For example, Kandye Mahurin in Missouri said, “I like *Fox and Geese*, particularly because it’s a colonial game brought to America by the Hessian soldiers during the Revolution.” Maureen Carroll in Maine said, “I like finding boards that people might not be familiar with, but that might attract them, like one I have called *Nyout*.”

Diane Allison-Stroud in North Carolina, who creates a number of unique boards, explained, “I do a penny-pitch board, which is an old bar game, I believe from Scotland originally. And then there’s the *Well-Worn Heart*—the books I got that

one from couldn't date it and thought maybe a family had made up the game themselves."

As Allison-Stroud noted, books on game boards are a treasure trove for all of these artists, who use photographs as a starting point for their creativity. The three source books they most commonly mentioned were *The Art of the Game*, by Tim Chambers and Shelby Shaver (2001), *Gameboards of North America*, by Bruce and Doranna Wendel (1986), and *Canadian Gameboards of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, by Richard Field (1981).

Asked which of their game boards their customers want most, the artists agreed on some mix of checkerboards, *Parcheesi*, and backgammon. "It seems to go in trends," observed Mahurin. "For awhile, everybody wants a backgammon board then it'll go back to checkers. Then I'll have a run on Chinese checkers or *Parcheesi*. But I'd have to say that good old checkers would be the most popular because everybody knows how to play checkers, and not everyone knows how to play backgammon or *Parcheesi*."

ARTISTIC DIVERSITY

For something seemingly as standard as a game board, these artists approach their craft with surprising variation, as was typical of earlier folk artists. Some of the greatest diversity concerns the wood itself.

"I use mostly pine and poplar because those would have been the woods used by a country craftsman," said Aldrich, who targets the colonial period. "I do not use breadboards because I do not believe breadboards would have been used for games in the time frame in which I'm painting boards."

On the other hand Graybill said, "I like to use antique boards as much as possible. I use old breadboards and pie boards from the 19th Century when I can find them."

"I try to use old salvaged wood when it already has character, like a lot of old breadboards, which are getting harder to find," Mahurin explained. "They would paint game

boards on found pieces, you know, on the back of an old tabletop or an old bench, or on an old breadboard. So that's part of the aging—to use old wood that already has some character to it."

Carroll, like Aldrich, uses new pine she joins and planes herself for her game boards. Allison-Stroud differs from other board makers by having Russian birch shipped halfway around the globe to her isolated Appalachian-mountaintop home. She initially chose it over pine because the birch has more heft. "I am so not willing to switch over and use a different wood, because I believe this is the finest," she declared, adding that she uses Appalachian poplar for her board trim.

All five prefer to use acrylics, acrylic latex, or milk paints. While they readily share information about the paints they use, they carefully

guard their formulas for achieving an aged finish.

"I use stains and other things," Allison-Stroud said laughing, divulging nothing further. Mahurin also answered coyly, "It's a secret process, and I've been told it looks like no one else's."

Aldrich talked a bit more about her finishes, still without revealing her technique. "There's quite a process involved in it, one I've refined over the years. There was a time when a lot of the artists were using hide glue finish to get the crackled effect. From what I've seen of antique boards, it's not necessarily the best effect, plus it's not stable—if it gets damp, it can melt."

"I use an oil-based antiquing agent to finish my pieces," said Graybill, "as well as a distressing routine we came up with about ten years ago."

For Carroll, the antiquing pro-

This *Parcheesi* board, created in the mid-19th Century, retains the bold colors favored by many American game board collectors and traditional folk artists. Handmade *Parcheesi* boards in particular remained popular even after commercial publishers produced them because of the colorful graphic possibilities the boards present.



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cess is part of her painting technique. “The paint process I use took me a long time to get to where it is right now,” she explained. “It’s mainly milk paints with a little twist of my own to create an aged consistency that I haven’t seen in other reproduction boards.”

CATHY ALDRICH

With a lineage stretching back to the *Mayflower*, Cathy Aldrich artistically lives and breathes early America. “I focus on the games that would’ve been played in the early American time frame, the games that would’ve appealed to our colonial ancestors.” She does, however, include some games from the 1820s and later in the 19th Century, such as *Parcheesi* and *Ludo*, because she finds their boards personally interesting.

Aldrich, an Ohio native who runs *A Checkered Past* from her Shoreline, Washington, home, is a

purist when it comes to traditional craftsmanship. “My boards are totally made by hand. I don’t use any power tools. I use hand saws. I make sure I plane away by hand any machine milling on the boards. And I won’t use something like plywood because that wouldn’t have been a common wood during the period I’m focusing on.”

She paints her pine and poplar boards with milk paints then carefully ages them. “My boards are each individual. I mean that literally—I do not repeat designs,” she emphasized. “There might be a similarity, but even each checkerboard will be different. Even if the colors are the same, the size might be different, the moldings might be a different color. There’s something that makes each one totally one-of-a-kind, like an antique game board should be.”

All of her boards these days are

custom ordered. After the customer describes what he or she wants, Aldrich drafts a design for the customer’s approval before proceeding. “Prices depend on how many colors, the design, whether the board has moldings, whether it’s double-sided. A lot of factors come into play, which is why there’s quite a price range.” Her boards range from \$150 for a checkerboard to as high as \$800 for highly complex boards.

DIANE ALLISON-STROUD

Diane Allison-Stroud made the move from quilting to creating game boards about fifteen years ago and now has one of the most extensive offerings available. She lived in Dallas, Texas, when she began quilting at age thirty-five.

“The patterns intrigued me, I loved the geometric designs and the peacefulness quilting brought to me,” she recalled. Then she saw some an-

Maine artist Maureen Carroll combined playing surfaces for checkers and backgammon on her pine game board, left. On her checkerboard, Kandy Mahurin of Missouri incorporates motifs common to her Pennsylvania German heritage. The boards are displayed on a flat cart used for unloading train cargo outside the 1878 Train Station at Century Village Museum, Geauga County Historical Society, Burton, Ohio.





A corner of the 1798 Umberfield Cabin at Century Village, Geauga County Historical Society, Burton, Ohio, holds an antique rope bed with a trundle. The bed wears a woven wool blanket and homespun sheets and sits on a woven rag rug. The children on the bed, one holding a Chinese checkers board crafted by Diane Allison-Stroud of Texas, are following the play of their companions on a pine checkerboard by Cathy Aldrich of Washington State.

tique game boards in a magazine. “They looked like miniature quilts and had the type of graphics I’m attracted to. I hadn’t painted before and I hadn’t done anything with wood, but I thought, ‘Oh, this would be fun.’”

Today she sells a large variety of game boards via her web site from her home in Boone, North Carolina, where she moved fourteen years ago. Her boards are distinctive in the sheer number of styles she produces—including the uncommon

penny pitch and similar circle board designs—as well as her distinctive color palette and the black-paint imprint of her palm with which she signs the back of each board.

Asked about how her game boards differ from those of her peers, Allison-Stroud gave a surprising answer: “I don’t know. I’ve never seen anyone else’s.” She prefers to stick close to home. “I don’t do shows because, to me, those are days not working in the studio, where I’d

rather be, working on boards people have already ordered.”

Her game boards run from about \$160 to \$220, with a turn-around time of about three weeks.

MAUREEN CARROLL

Maureen Carroll is smitten with early American crafts and is completely undaunted in practicing them. “I’ve always been artistic and I’m completely self-taught,” she explained. “I’ve tried sewing, carving in

The front door and stone step of the Schoolhouse, Geauga County Historical Society, Burton, Ohio, form the backdrop for a checkerboard by Diane Allison-Stroud, left, and a board for Fox and Geese with a Pennsylvania German compass by Kandy Mahurin.



clay and wood, built primitive furniture for awhile, made floorcloths, and I make dolls. And there are my game boards. Pretty much everything I've made for myself I've ended up making for other people as well."

Carroll added game boards to her list about a dozen years ago when she and her husband were restoring the 1820 post-and-beam farmhouse where he was raised, in Limerick, Maine. They had restored

part of the living room and Carroll decided she wanted a vintage game board for one of the walls.

"I went looking for antique game boards, but they were hard to find and, if I did find them and they were in decent condition, they were astronomically priced," she recalled. "So I decided to make one." When she hung her first effort on the wall—a colorful *Parcheesi* board—people complimented her on her

great antique "find," and her husband suggested she start a business.

Carroll creates an array of checkerboards, *Parcheesi*, and backgammon boards and also enjoys finding obscure game boards to reproduce. To furniture-grade pine she applies several layers of milk paint, square-cut nails on the trim, and an effective aging process. "I try to bring my boards back to as close to authentic as I can. I also etch all the lines on the board, which I don't think very many people do."

She attends a few shows in New England and Pennsylvania but mainly produces custom orders. Her boards begin at about \$80 and can go as high as \$300 for complex designs.

KATHY GRAYBILL

Game boards join the long line of folk art Kathy Graybill has been creating for several years, from country painted tinware to painted furniture, tavern signs, *fraktur*, and other objects carried in more than sixty museum and retail shops across the country.

An aged *Parcheesi* board by Maureen Carroll rests on a wooden barrel in the Crossroads Store, a combination of two century-old buildings moved in 1959 to the grounds of Century Village, Geauga County Historical Society, Burton, Ohio.



"I want everything I paint to have the feel and look of an antique original, not a carbon copy," she explained. "I freehand everything I paint—no stenciling, no silk-screening—and I have a loose, folkly look to my art like the originals from the 19th Century. It's taken years to develop my look."

Graybill is drawn to game boards that display vibrant colors or unique design elements, researching them in books and periodicals. "My husband is an antiques dealer who sells original folk art, including game boards, and we've been fortunate enough to own a few antique originals." Some of their antique boards feature carving as a design element, "so we're also incorporating carving into our boards, which will separate my boards from those of other artisans," she added. "I always want something new for my customers that they can't get anywhere else."

Graybill uses antique wood as well as some new pine and poplar boards that husband Jeff prepares for her. She paints in acrylics with an oil-based finishing process to create a vintage look.

Her game boards range in price from about \$150 to \$300. She sells them at shows, shops, and through their business, Hidden Treasures, in East Wallingford, Pennsylvania.

KANDYE MAHURIN

An artist since she was a child, Kandy Mahurin ventured into an antiques shop one day in 1994 and saw a game board. "I was drawn to its attractive, graphic quality, but it was extremely expensive," she said. "I wondered if I could make one myself. I'd been doing landscapes, watercolors, things like that, but I'd never incorporated the history part into my work until I saw that game board."

Mahurin now operates Sassafras Creek Originals in Uniontown, Missouri, where she creates boards for checkers, backgammon, *Parcheesi*, Chinese checkers, and the rare *Fox and Geese* game.

"I have a German heritage and live in a very German area of Missouri—some people still speak Ger-

man here—and I've always been attracted to the beautiful designs on their brides' chests, their Bible boxes, *fraktur*, things like that," she said. "I try to find unusual German designs that not everybody is using. I do use some familiar ones—everybody's familiar with the mariner's compass and the floral patterns—but I scour my own area to find designs that are indigenous."

If she can't find salvaged breadboards or tabletops, she will paint on new pine. "I have to really distress it to get the same character as the old breadboards," she noted. She uses paints, waxes, and other solu-

tions to age her boards, a process she considers one of their most distinctive features.

Mahurin's work has appeared in various publications and she has been accepted into The Best of Missouri Hands. Her work costs from \$35 for a *Fox and Geese* board to \$150 for a backgammon board. She offers a color catalog. *

Gregory LeFever is a contributing editor to *Early American Life*.

Our thanks to the staff at Century Village, Geauga County Historical Society, Burton, Ohio, and models Katelyn Zeliznak, Catherine Lillibridge, Grace Lillibridge, and Georgia Lillibridge.

The one-room schoolhouse at Century Village, Geauga County Historical Society, Burton, Ohio, was built in 1872 and moved from its original location in Newbury, Ohio. On the floor, two children play *Parcheesi* on an oversized board by Kathy Graybill.

