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From the Collection

Denman's Amusements for the Young: Parlor Monuments to the Illustrious Dead

Accession Number 80.0413

Steven M. Wilson

Editor's Note: Steven Wilson is the Assistant Director and Curator at Abraham Lincoln Library & Museum, Lincoln Memorial University.

There was a child went forth every day, And the first object he looked upon,
that object he became.

— Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*

The land was changing, the people were changing, and the nation that was the century before a bundle of colonies had now become unified, at least to some degree. It stands to reason that children (or at least the perception of them) had undergone change as well.

They were no longer the tiny adults depicted in paintings and prints by eighteenth century artists who appeared uncertain of how to capture the essence of children. Nor were they strictly labeled the vile product of original sin by religious leaders. The change had been gradual, if inevitable, and entirely orchestrated by adults. Children became malleable innocents, tiny beings that could be guided, educated, and encouraged to adopt the principles and philosophies of their parents. Toys could be the instruments of intellectual and moral creation.

There were three kinds of toys available to children. Common items created by children's imagination might be sticks wielded as swords, bundles of straw that became dolls, or pieces of charcoal for young artists. Handmade toys presented by adults were more sophisticated and carried an emotional signature of love, support, and interest. These items could

be cherished by children as tokens of a greater strength and relationship. Finally, there were purchased toys or games. Often the latter were designed for the middle class, which itself was expanding in nineteenth century America as an indication of an increase in wealth, education, and position. If America was in the throes of an industrial revolution, it was equally experiencing a social revolution.

Denman's Amusements for the Young: Parlor Monuments to the Illustrious Dead (circa 1865) was a child's toy that combined the best of mass production and a parent's desire to prepare children for adulthood by instilling in them the correct moral foundation.

Manufactured by Oakley and Mason of New York, the set contains 24 wooden blocks with three monuments: the Children's Monument to Abraham Lincoln, the Freedman's Monument to Abraham Lincoln, and the National Monument to Abraham Lincoln. Portraits of Lincoln, George Washington, and Andrew Johnson are included as well. The first two are obligatory; the third helps to date the toy.

Like all artifacts in the museum's collection, Parlor Monuments is important not only for what it is, but what it represents. It is a manufactured toy, likely designed for middle-class families and certainly intended to memorialize a martyred president. Beyond that, it provides a vehicle with which Lincoln's beliefs (and supposedly the parents' as well) are honored and shared with children.

The impact of this toy is limited to the children of middle-class or wealthy families, which would be even further reduced without the necessary foundation of at least a rudimentary education. The 1850 census shows approximately four million students enrolled in schools of all kinds. By 1860 the number climbed to 5.5 million students. Education had become more comprehensive, structured, and available to young people, especially those between the ages of five and fifteen. As incomes of middle-class families increased, family size decreased, thereby, eliminating some of the burden of raising a family on a middle-class income.

According to the *Encyclopedia of American Social History*, "Between 1800 and 1860, a dramatically different pattern of family life emerged as women lengthened the interval between births. Instead of bearing seven or eight children, most women had five or six. By the end of the nineteenth century, women had further reduced the number of children to three or four, spaced them closer together, and ceased childbearing at an earlier age."

Advances in manufacturing, marketing, and transportation contributed to the production, promotion, and distribution of toys such as Parlor Monuments. The combination of these elements required one more ingredient that serves as the impetus for the creation of the toy. Without a national crucible such as the Civil War and without the presence and impact of Abraham Lincoln, the toy would have never been created. It was because of the importance of Lincoln's actions and his words, as well as the manner of his death, that Parlor Monuments to the Illustrious Dead existed.