GOT ANYTHING TO READ?

The purpose of this unit to explore the everyday literacy experiences of late 19th century children in New Jersey. What would a child from this time period find around the house, and why? Invite your students to examine the following objects and make conclusions. Below are descriptions of the items to help you better inform your students as they explore.

Are any of these items familiar to your students? Are any unfamiliar to them? Do your students have any of these items in their homes? Are there any items that surprise them? When grouped together, what do these items tell us about life in late 19th century New Jersey?

*Harper’s Weekly Magazine, 1861*

This is an entire issue of *Harper’s* that has been separated into individual sheets for easier viewing and because the pages are frail. Considering *Harper’s* had a circulation of 200,000 by 1860, it was a good bet that a copy would be floating around your 19th century home. Published from 1857 to 1916, *Harper’s* readers could find domestic and global news, articles, essays, fiction stories, illustrations (some spanning double pages), and ads for things like “Bellingham’s Stimulating Onguent for the Hair & Whiskers” and “Dr. Brown’s Patent Baby-Tender.” You could also find the latest chapter of Charles Dickens’ *Great Expectations*, and political cartoons by Thomas Nast. All this for 5 cents an issue. Each *Harper’s* was roughly eight pages, front and back. We’ve included a cover and four interior pages for you to peruse today.

*Religious tracts, American Tract Society, circa 1842*

The American Tract Society was established in 1825 with the purpose of publishing and distributing Christian literature. The tracts are small, thin, and cheap to produce, which made them very portable, inexpensive to ship, and easy to distribute. Their short length made them appealing to early readers (both adults AND children), so tracts like these also helped to spread basic literacy across the rapidly expanding United States. In more rural areas like New Jersey, colporteurs (i.e. individuals hired to distribute religious material) and traveling salesmen would often sell (or simply give) tracts to adults and children.

*Monroe’s Practical Speller, 1875*

Text books were, of course, part of life for American children in the 19th century. Notice how a large section of this book groups the words together under relevant (but somewhat dated) headings like “At the Apothecary’s,” “Moral Qualities,” and “Parts of a Carriage and Harness.” Indeed, the “Vehicles” section doesn’t mention cars or trucks. But it does mention velocipedes!
Personal diary of Jennie May Fagan, 1889
Sometimes, you created your own books! This small diary was easy to slip into a pocket and carry with you as you traveled. In fact, many of these entries are about Jennie’s travel to different locations in New Jersey. There’s also quite a few mentions of the weather, her health, and social meet-ups. There are also addresses and records of deaths, which seems a little morbid, but it was a common practice back then.

Alphabet sampler, circa 19th century
Literacy wasn’t always on paper! This is a sampler, which girls and young women created to practice their needlework and highlight their knowledge. An alphabetic sampler like this not only teaches the ABCs, it hones sewing skills – a very important skill to have when many households were still making their own clothes. Did you notice that some of the letters are missing from the alphabet? Also interesting is how most of this sampler is faded, but the pigments used in the thread for W, R, and P are still going strong.

Holy Bible, American Bible Society, 1860
If there was one book to be found in home during this time period, it was a bible. The fact that “A Teacher’s Gift” is stamped on the cover indicates that this was most likely a gift from a teacher to a star pupil. This was a very common practice in the 18th to early-20th centuries. It’s also possible this was a gift for Sunday School, a regular part of most children’s week. Bibles were intended for both literacy and moral education.

This bible was produced by the American Bible Society, the first printer to print the Bible in the United States. In the cities, the Society distributed books through book stores, but also as free giveaways in poorer parts of the city with immigrant populations. In more rural areas and the frontier, colporteurs sold or gave away copies. By the way, the American Bible Society is still going strong, even 200 years later!