The Business of Leisure

New METC exhibit explores the way we played

EXHIBIT RATING SYSTEM

★	Very amateurish; factual errors; poorly displayed.
★★	Factually correct but poorly displayed.
★★★	Interesting but nothing new or insightful.
★★★★	Strong scholarship, well displayed.
★★★★★	Excellent in scholarship and display quality.

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Exhibition:

The Work of Play: Where Business Meets Leisure

Museum of Early Trades & Crafts
9 Main Street
Madison, NJ 07940
http://metc.org
Tel.: 973–377–2982
Closes: August 31, 2013
Admission: Adults $5; Children (6+), Students, Seniors (62+) $3; Members, Children (under 5) Free
Parking: ★★
Kid-Friendly: ★★
Handicapped Accessible: ★★★
Exhibit: ★★★★
Review by The History Girl

In our spare time these days, we enjoy modern luxuries such as iPads, video games, and television. Over a century ago, before the advent of electricity, how did others relax and spend their leisure time?

The Museum of Early Trades and Crafts in Madison, NJ examines the business of leisure and its different forms in its latest exhibit, "The Work of Play: Where Business Meets Leisure." On display until August 31, 2013, this exhibit reflects upon how regular people, just like you and me, may have unwound after a hard day of work over a century ago. The exhibit also

EXHIBIT PARKING RATING SYSTEM

★ Not enough parking.

★★ Not many spaces but enough for a small museum/site.

★★★ Plenty of parking.

EXHIBIT KID-FRIENDLY RATING SYSTEM

★ Not really something young children will enjoy.

★★ Older children may find interesting.

★★★ Children of all ages will enjoy.

Some exhibits may not be for children but institutions may offer programs specifically for interpreting the displays for kids and school groups. Contact the museum or site.

EXHIBIT HANDICAP ACCESS RATING SYSTEM

★ Not accessible.

★★ Partially accessible or requires advance arrangements.

★★★ Fully accessible.

"Mansions of Happiness" was among the first mass-produced games.

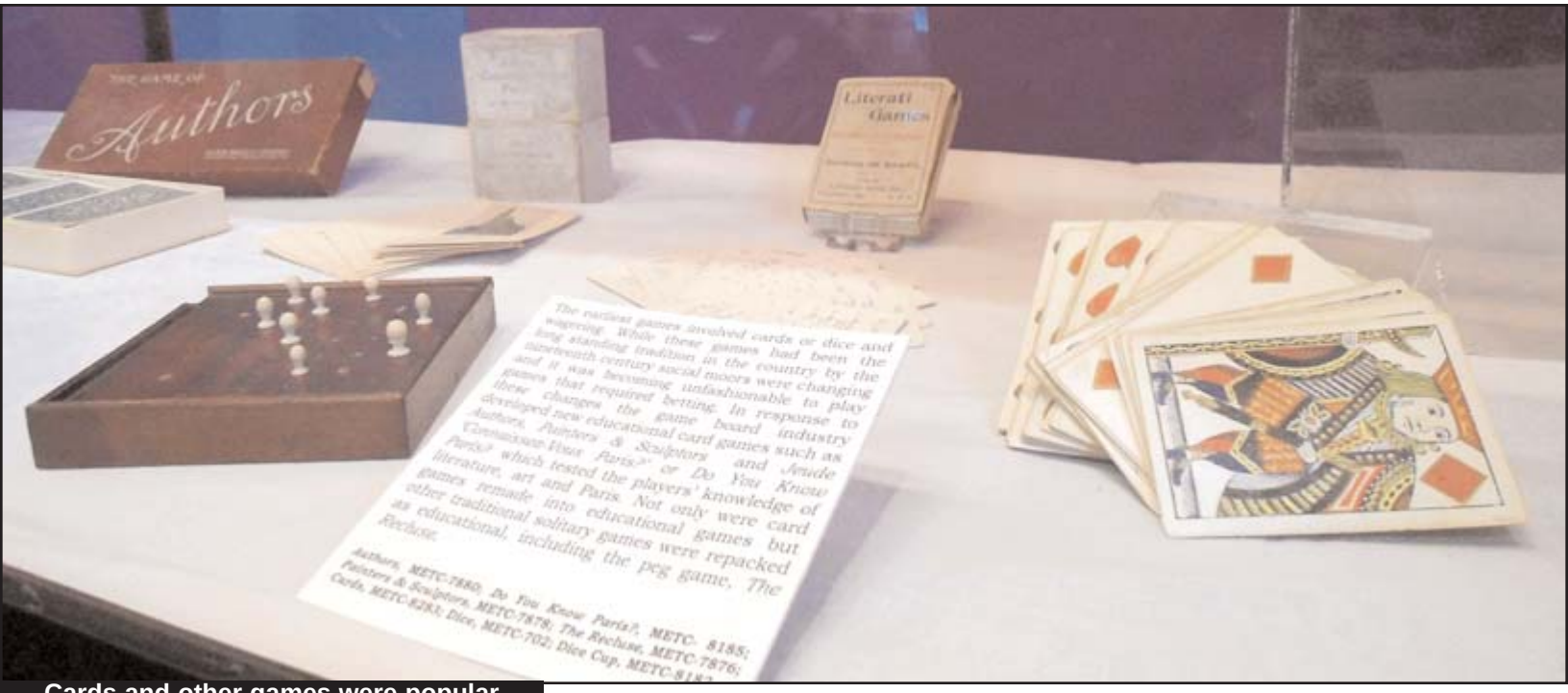
touches upon the businesses that evolved around and were associated with the production of many of the objects of such entertainment.

"The Work of Play" focuses on five distinct areas: toys and games, taverns, print culture, music, and fashion as leisure. Though it covers these areas briefly, it encourages the visitor to draw conclusions and imagine a world without our modern conveniences. The objects displayed give the visitor a sense of some of the many items that were used back then in an attempt to have a good time.

Throughout history, there has always been a desire to play games, especially among the young. During the American colonial era, it was usually young children who played, looking to get away from household chores. They would try to spend a few hours escaping the tedious and often repetitive tasks of the day. Playtime was often separated by the established notions of gender roles—the girls playing with dolls inside and the boys outside in more active play. Before the commercial manufacturing of toys, most were homemade. The first mass-produced "toys" were board games that emerged in the late nineteenth century. The exhibit includes an example of America's first board game *Mansion of Happiness*, which evolved into the modern version of *Chutes and Ladders*.

Other games involving cards or dice are shown, although usually these were more for the adults, who would sometimes gamble their fortunes away or reap the benefits of wining at such games. Adults would find games of chance at taverns, which, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, were multi-faceted buildings of amusement—a place for men to eat, drink, rest, game, and socialize. Early on, it was not socially acceptable for women to enter taverns, unless they were employed as a maid or cook. They often served as a town center and much business was conducted from them, in addition to regularly being a point for mail delivery, and a place for one to catch up on the latest town gossip or political happenings.

The rise of and availability of printed materials starting in the mid-eighteenth century made it easier for families to entertain themselves in the comfort of their own homes. In the eighteenth and nineteenth



Cards and other games were popular entertainment in taverns

centuries, the printed word provided enlightenment, education, and general entertainment. Many homes owned a family Bible and school books for the children. In the nineteenth century, magazines such as *Godey's Lady's Book* and *Harper's Weekly* allowed men and women alike to stay abreast of cultural trends and national news. Between the 1840s and 1860s, *Godey's* circulation rose from 70,000 to 150,000. The influence of these magazines was astounding. From fashion to political views, they helped shape and influence the opinions of Americans. It's worth noting that Morristown's own Thomas Nast drew for *Harper's Weekly* from 1859 to 1860 and again from 1862 until 1886. The wealthy spent time accumulating vast libraries of popular novels and books on a wide variety of topics such as botany, architecture, and philosophy.

Magazines such as *Godey's Lady's Book* helped make fashion a form of leisure.

Today, we have become accustomed to having music on-demand, in our home, on our computer, in our cars. We have the ability to choose, play, and switch the genre of music almost instantly. Before the advent of audio recording, however, music had to be performed and listened to live at church services, concerts, and even in your own home. Children learned to play a piano or flute under the tutelage of a trained professional, and could later perform at family functions. When they grew older, they might join a professional group and earn a wage as a traveling musician.

The upper classes became supporters of the arts, being able to afford

the luxury of attending concerts at the many great concert halls and opera houses that were built in the mid- to late-nineteenth century. Patrons would attend concerts with their family and friends, making a night of it, supporting not only the musicians and the venue in which it was performed, but also any stops before or after the concert to eat or drink.

Before audio recording, making their own music at home, church, or concerts was the only musical entertainment option

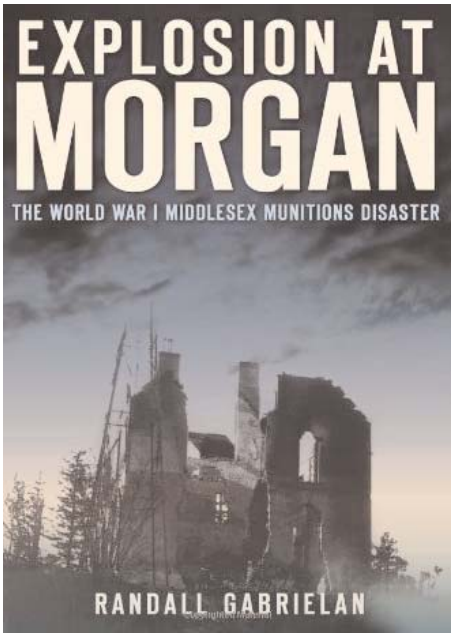
One might not consider fashion as a "leisure activity," but the exhibit shows how things like clothing, hairstyles, and makeup, indeed played a role. When attending concerts and lavish parties, it was the upper class that was the most prone to primping themselves, employing hairdressers, hat makers, shoe makers, and their own personal maids, amongst others. They were also the ones who had the luxury of spare time to peruse magazines—produced by the working class—to identify the most modern trends in fashion from Europe and around America. They would have also been able to afford new clothing, generating business for the textile mills and seamstresses in order to fill store shelves with the best quality fabrics and accessories.

While the exhibit has a good array of objects on display within a small space, one flaw is a lack of interactivity that the subject seems ready-made for. I noticed a video monitor on the wall next to the printed materials exhibit case, but it was not turned on. Reproductions of board and cards games or even stereoscope views would give visitors a chance to experience the fun for themselves.

This is somewhat surprising given how the museum focuses heavily on children, offering numerous quality programs and activities throughout the year to engage them. Interactivity would have been ideal for getting kids into the subject. If you bring a child to this exhibit, be prepared to engage them yourself by asking how their life a hundred years ago may differ from today, in a world without electronics. Otherwise, the exhibit may not hold the interest of a child except for seeing a few board games that they might recognize today.

Other portions of the museum's permanent exhibit, by contrast, engage the tactile senses by allowing children to open drawers containing reproductions of objects from the past. Given the subject of this exhibit, a greater degree of the same sorts of interactivity would have been approproate.

Adults, however, will still enjoy "The Work of Play: Where Business Meets Leisure" as an engaging exploration of how their ancestors spent the spare time we still never seem to get enough of.



Book:

Explosion at Morgan: The World War I Middlesex Munitions Disaster

Written by Randall Gabrielan

2012: The History Press, Charleston, SC
ISBN: 978.1.60949.517.6
Softcover, 160 pages, black and white

Review by Gordon Bond

★★★★

There seems neither rhyme nor reason why some historical events remain strong in our collective memories, while others fade into obscurity, appreciated only by local historians. Some get reinterpreted and take on a greater importance than at first considered, while seemingly major events are inexplicably forgotten.

Among the more striking examples from New Jersey history is the massive series of explosions that ripped through the section of Sayreville known as Morgan on October 4, 1918. Something triggered a devastating explosion at the T.A. Gillespie Shell Loading plant, where munitions were being made for World War I. At least a hundred people were killed, but the true number will never be known, as many were simply vaporized. The initial explosion ignited fires that caused secondary explosions, and fears mounted that if the flames reached the main storage magazines, the resulting blast would be felt as far away as New York City.

As spectacular as the event was, it might at first be understandable that communities would want to forget such bad memories. Yet as late as 2007, occasional reminders were unpleasantly unearthed in the form of unexploded shells, missed by subsequent efforts to make the site of the former plant safe.

What happened and why it remains so little-known is the subject of Randall Gabrielan's new book, "Explosion at Morgan" The World War I Middlesex Munitions Disaster."

Events like this don't happen in a vacuum—there is a lot of contextual background required to really get an appreciation of why it happened and its significance. Giving that full context runs the risk of getting too far into the weeds with tangential information. Gabrielan manages to strike just the right balance despite drawing on the local history of Sayreville, the Second World War, and the emergence of a modern American munitions industry with roots back to the 18th century.

One of the more interesting aspects is how Morgan was just the last of several events to happen in and around New Jersey during the war—and one of many both before and after. Some readers may be

BOOK
RATING SYSTEM

★	Poorly written, bad scholarship / factual errors.
★★	Factually correct but poorly written.
★★★	Interesting but nothing new or insightful.
★★★★	Strong scholarship, well written.
★★★★★	Excellent in scholarship writing style and / or graphics / typography.

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Residents of Morgan along the road to Perth Amboy looked like the refugees witnessed in war-torn Europe at the time.

familiar with the so-called "Black Tom" explosion in 1916, when fire on a barge carrying explosives blew up off Black Tom Island off Jersey City. Fewer probably know about a similar but deadlier incident at the Jersey City Central Jersey railroad docks in 1911. And fewer still likely know about a derailment of a Raritan River Railroad train carrying munitions plant workers in 1915, caused by someone pulling up the spikes that held the rails to the ties. Between accidents and sabotage, working at such plants was dangerous indeed.

The background established, "Explosion at Morgan" traces the development of the Gillespie plant and offers a detailed account of the harrowing explosion and its aftermath, drawn from firsthand accounts and plenty of contemporary images. It is perhaps difficult to imagine just how widespread an area was afflicted. Fires raged as firefighters were handicapped by a loss of water pressure; windows were blown out for miles around; buildings were knocked from their foundations; martial law; homeless families fleeing along the roadside. The unidentified remains of 14 to 18 workers were buried in a mass grave on Ernston Road in Old Bridge. Part of the reason why the total death count remains nebulous is the explosion came during the influenza pandemic. Families thrown out of destroyed homes in crowded refugee camps provided the perfect vector for the sickness. How many were then killed by the flu that would never have died had the explosion not occurred?

As with even the most heartrending disasters, however, when the dust settles comes the time for putting dollar values on lives and property; of finger-pointing and recriminations. Management blamed worker error; others questioned the safety practices of the company. Plans were laid to rebuild, but with the end of the war in 1919, the site was abandoned and slowly reclaimed by nature. The expansion of the postwar boom, however, had developers eyeing the land again—and finding that there was still debris, including unexploded ordnance. An intensive remediation project in 1994 was designed to make the area safe, yet unexploded shells were unearthed near schools in 1997 and 2007. "Ground zero" is now a pleasant residential area with little memory of what took place, but longtime residents know the story and still take extra care when digging.

"Explosion at Morgan" is a well-written account of this odd piece of New Jersey history, at once forgotten and yet occasionally—unsettlingly—still in the news.