



*Painted Cradle, 1710-1740*

Peabody Essex Museum  
Salem in History, 2006

*Painted Cradle, 1710-1740*  
Essex County, MA  
Wood, paint  
Gift of Mrs. Jacob C.R. Peabody  
120447



#### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In the colonial period, rocking was deemed an essential activity to establish a newborn baby's sleeping pattern and soothe it to sleep. In a harsh world with a high infant mortality rate, sleep was key to survival. It was also thought essential for infants to have a separate bed because one of the most feared forms of infant mortality was "laying over;" when an adult rolled over and smothered the baby when asleep. Protection against household accidents as well as from disease was of utmost importance, and small children in colonial America were often swaddled and placed in cradles or on various surfaces away from the hustle and bustle of the large families, while still close to the fire.

#### ART HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Cradles were constructed to be sturdy, insulating, and moveable. A hooded cradle with high sides provided protection from drafts, while the small size allowed cradles to move with the parents from bedroom to fireside as needed.<sup>1</sup>

#### SAMPLE GUIDING QUESTIONS

- Does this cradle have any decoration that you can see?
- How does it compare with cradles that are used today?
- Why might this cradle be somewhat different from those used today?
- What do you think parents in the colonial period worried about when they thought of ways to protect their babies?

#### SUGGESTED LEARNING ACTIVITIES

- View and discuss the Ward House that is included in this guide. Where in the house do your students think this cradle would be placed? (Visit the Ward House to determine whether your hypothesis was correct.)

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2003 Massachusetts History and Social Science Curriculum Frameworks: 3.3, 3.4, 3.12

<sup>1</sup> Dean Fales, *American Painted Furniture*, (New York, 1972): 78.