

# History Corner



## Nothing Evil or Scary about It: The True Origins of the Ouija Board

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The “talking spirit board” made its way into Victorian households, first manufactured under the name “Ouija” by the Kennard Novelty Company of Baltimore, Maryland, in the late 1890s. On 10 February 1891, E. J. Bond took out U.S. Patent #446,054, saying, “My invention related to improvements in toys or games, which I designate as an ‘Ouija or Egyptian luck-board.’” The Ouija board was a flat board with letters of the alphabet printed in two semi-circular rows, the numbers 0 to 9, and the words “yes,” “no,” and “goodbye,” which came with a planchette or indicator. Folks placed their hands lightly on the planchette, and the spirit allegedly moved it around the board to form words then sentences. But where did the idea for the Ouija board originate and what are its early origins?

It stems, organically, from the birth of Modern Spiritualism in 1848, a religious movement sparked by two teenagers, Kate and Maggie Fox of Hydesville, New York. They claimed to have communicated with the dead through raps they heard on the walls of their parents’ home. Mrs. Fox and her daughters called out each letter of the alphabet in order, then as a sound was made, they translated the raps into words. The alleged spirit was an everyday, ordinary person who identified himself as a peddler. He claimed he’d been murdered in the house and buried in the cellar. Neighbors witnessing the Fox phenomena spread the word. Fifty-six years later, in 1904, schoolchildren playing in the abandoned Fox house discovered human remains behind a crumbling cellar wall. Controversy erupted over the veracity of the sisters’ claims and the bones’ origins, but that didn’t lessen the impact of the discovery and the Spiritualist movement.

The method used by the Foxes became known as “calling the alphabet.” Someone called out a letter, then everyone waited for raps. If there were none, they called out the next letter. That system evolved within four years when Maria B. Hayden (1824–1883) traveled to England in 1852. She was the first American medium to spread Spiritualism there, and she used an actual precursor of the Ouija board. Maria brought with her to London a cardboard printed with the letters of the alphabet, as well as numbers 1-9 and 0. None of her boards survive, and historical accounts don’t indicate whether the alphabet was handprinted, or she had a printer create the board for her. But the contemporary descriptions are the same as what we’ve come to know as a Ouija board, as recorded in “Modern Miracles. Spirit Rapping and Table Turning. Mrs. Hayden’s Séances,” *The New Quarterly Review for the Year 1853*, Vol. II (London: Hookham and Sons, 1853), 306: “a card, the letters of the alphabet printed in two lines, and the numerals in a third line.” The sitter pointed to each letter of the alphabet with a pencil then waited for a rap. No one needed to call out the alphabet, although some no doubt did, but in fact, most of the questions posed during Maria’s séances were done mentally, not aloud. When pointing to a letter, no sound meant no, a rap meant yes. The sitter or a designated scribe put the letters together on paper to form words and sentences. Letters commonly ran together, however: *d e a r e s t* might be *dearest*, but letters that followed had to be taken into account: *h e r*, for *Dear Esther*.

Word of Maria's mediumship and accuracy spread. She used this alphabet-card method by the beginning of 1852, perhaps even earlier. It's difficult to know how she learned this method, but it was in use by mid-1852. One of the earliest Spiritualist newspapers, *Spiritual Telegraph*, which began publication in 1852, reported on people "calling for the alphabet" during séances. In one letter to the paper, on 7 August 1852, page 3, however, the unsigned writer reported that a Mr. McD attended a séance with "Mrs. Fox and her two daughters," then "as the clock struck nine, all in the room...seated themselves at the table. A peculiar series of *rolling raps*, five in number, at once was heard, which Mrs. Fox said, was a call of the spirits for the alphabet; and she immediately began running over the letters in order, stopping at each letter indicated by rays [sic]." This suggests the Fox family used, by at least August 1852, some type of alphabet card.

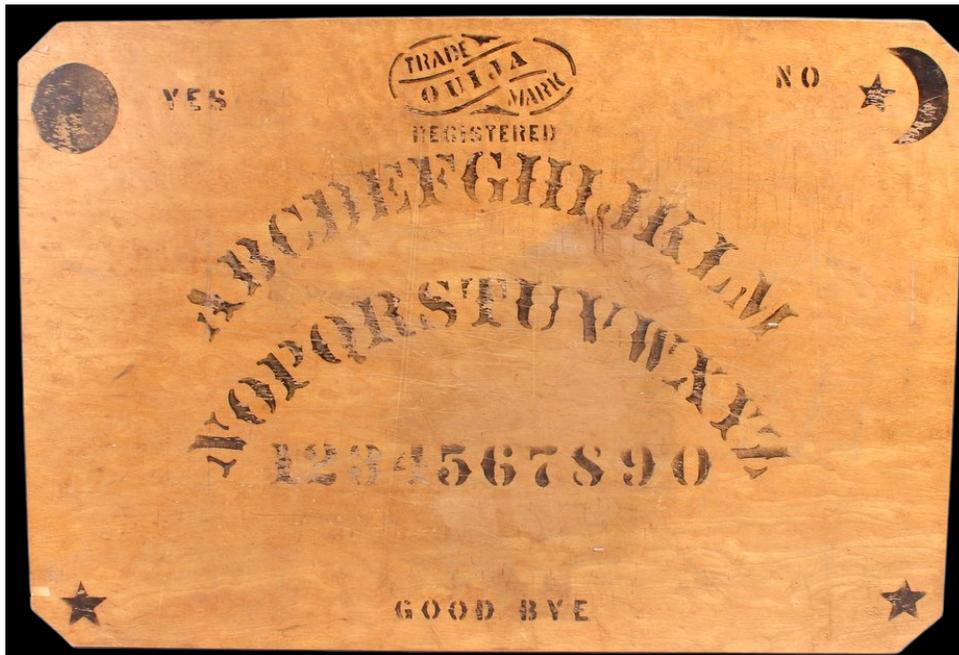


Photo by Adam Irish <https://oldasadam.com/goods/victorian-ouija-board/>

In another letter to the *Spiritual Telegraph* on 21 August 1852, page 2, M. B. Randall from Woodstock, Vermont, wrote, "The following communication was received in the presence of a 'rapping medium,' by the ordinary method of pointing to the alphabet and writing down the letters designated by 'raps.'"

Author John T. Trowbridge, in "Early Investigations in Spiritualism," *The North American Review* 188 (Oct. 1908): 526–27, however, reported a séance with Maria in early 1852, saying that "The medium's hands were in sight all the time, usually folded on the edge of the table, and she seemed to await the result of the word-building with as genuine an interest as any of us. At times, a mistake would occur, which would not be discovered until it was found that the sentence did not make sense. Then the pencil would go back over it until a rap would indicate the word that was out of place or misspelled...."

During Maria's séances, no one held hands, and most of her séances weren't held in the dark or at night. Some speculated that Maria read people's faces and made the raps by cracking her toes, hitting her shoe against the table leg, or she had an accomplice. But

oftentimes her back was turned from the sitter, her eyes were shielded from seeing the alphabet card, or she read a book or newspaper during the séance. Toe cracking was easily ruled out; it's physically impossible to crack one's toes consistently for two to three hours straight, the length of time each séance lasted. Additionally, people watched Maria's feet. As for an accomplice making the sounds, she often held séances in other people's homes without her husband present, where she didn't know anyone in the room.

Maria's year-long success in England was corroborated by writer Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton, social reformer Robert Owen, poet and author Catherine Crowe, editor of *Chambers Journal* Robert Chambers, professor of mathematics at University College Augustus De Morgan and his wife Sophia, members of Parliament, numerous dukes and duchesses, lords and ladies, marquees and marchioness, surgeons and physicians, and men of letters and science. They put her through test after test, and walked away convinced she was no fraud and that the dead can communicate, all via her cardboard-alphabet method.

Back home in America in the fall of 1853, Maria continued offering séances in Boston and eventually moved to New York City in the early 1860s. Her success, as well as that of other mediums using the cardboard-alphabet method, spread throughout the country. No doubt these common-place and likely home-made alphabet cards from the 1850s form the basis of what would evolve as the manufactured Ouija boards we still use today.

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**From the desk of**

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