

# Curator's Choice

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## *Toy Story: Not Your Parents' Green Army Man*

It seems appropriate to open the 2026 Curator's Choice series with a toy military artifact to begin a year of commemorations of the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence and the opening salvos of the Revolutionary War. Throughout our country's long history, countless American citizens have fought and died for democracy and freedom.

This lead alloy toy soldier (Figure 1) was found during archaeological excavations at the home site of Benjamin Banneker in Baltimore County (18BA282). Banneker (1731 – 1806) was a Free Black mathematician, astronomer, naturalist, and almanac author. He served on the team appointed by then U.S. Secretary of State, Thomas Jefferson, to survey the boundaries of Washington D.C.

Banneker was in his forties during the American Revolution, but there is no evidence that he was involved in the war. The solid cast figure found at the Banneker site appears to be a military standard bearer like one shown in the center of the top row in Figure 2. While it is unlikely to date to the American War for Independence, details that could have been used to definitively date the figure (like the head and the flag) are unfortunately absent. The short jacket and the striped spats suggest that this figure dates to World War I, based on examples shown online (Figure 3).



Figure 1. This cast lead alloy soldier would have originally been painted.



Figure 2. A set of modern replica soldiers representing an early 19th-century German infantry.

Diminutive human figures depicting soldiers have a long history, with some of the earliest known examples found in Egyptian tombs. The earliest "flat" toys were soldiers of pressed tin made in Germany from the 1730s onward. In the eighteenth century, toy soldiers were generally crafted from

### References Cited

Brown, David. 2026. Lead-Solid and Hollowcast. Vintage Toy Figures. Electronic resource accessed on January 3, 2026 at <https://collectablefigures.wordpress.com/materials/lead-solid-and-hollowcast/>.

O'Neill, Richard. 1988. The Collector's Encyclopedia of Metal Toys. Crescent Books, New York.

Warwick and Warwick. 2026. The Complete Guide to Vintage Toy Soldiers. Electronic resource accessed on January 3, 2026 at <https://www.warwickandwarwick.com/news/the-complete-guide-to-vintage-toy-soldiers>.

Wisconsin Historical Society. 2007. Lead Toy Soldier Casting Kit. Electronic resource accessed on January 3, 2026 at <https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Article/CS2658>.

lead, or tin, and were not made as toys, but as collectibles for the wealthy (Warwick and Warwick 2026). Most toy soldiers were made in Germany in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, with Ernst Heinrichsen, who began business in 1839, being one of the most prolific producers (O'Neill 1988:244).

In 1893, William Britain developed a process for hollow casting toy soldiers in lead and this process remained popular into the mid-20th century, when the production of plastic soldiers became standard (Brown 2026). The hollow, or slush, casting method used less lead than the solid cast figures and were less expensive to produce. In the twentieth century, simple home casting kits (Figure 4) imported from Germany were available in the United States for the home production of toy soldiers (Wisconsin Historical Society 2007).

When we think of toy soldiers today, we think of the plastic green Army men from movies like *Toy Story*. Or maybe you remember getting a bag of them in various poses from your local store. While different in material, the toy soldiers of yesteryear were much the same and allowed children to use their imaginations while admiring the sacrifice and courage of those that fought for their country. While not as popular as they once were, kids today may just prefer more immersive types of soldier role playing in the form of video games.



Figure 3. Group of cast soldiers dating to World War I (Photo from ebay).

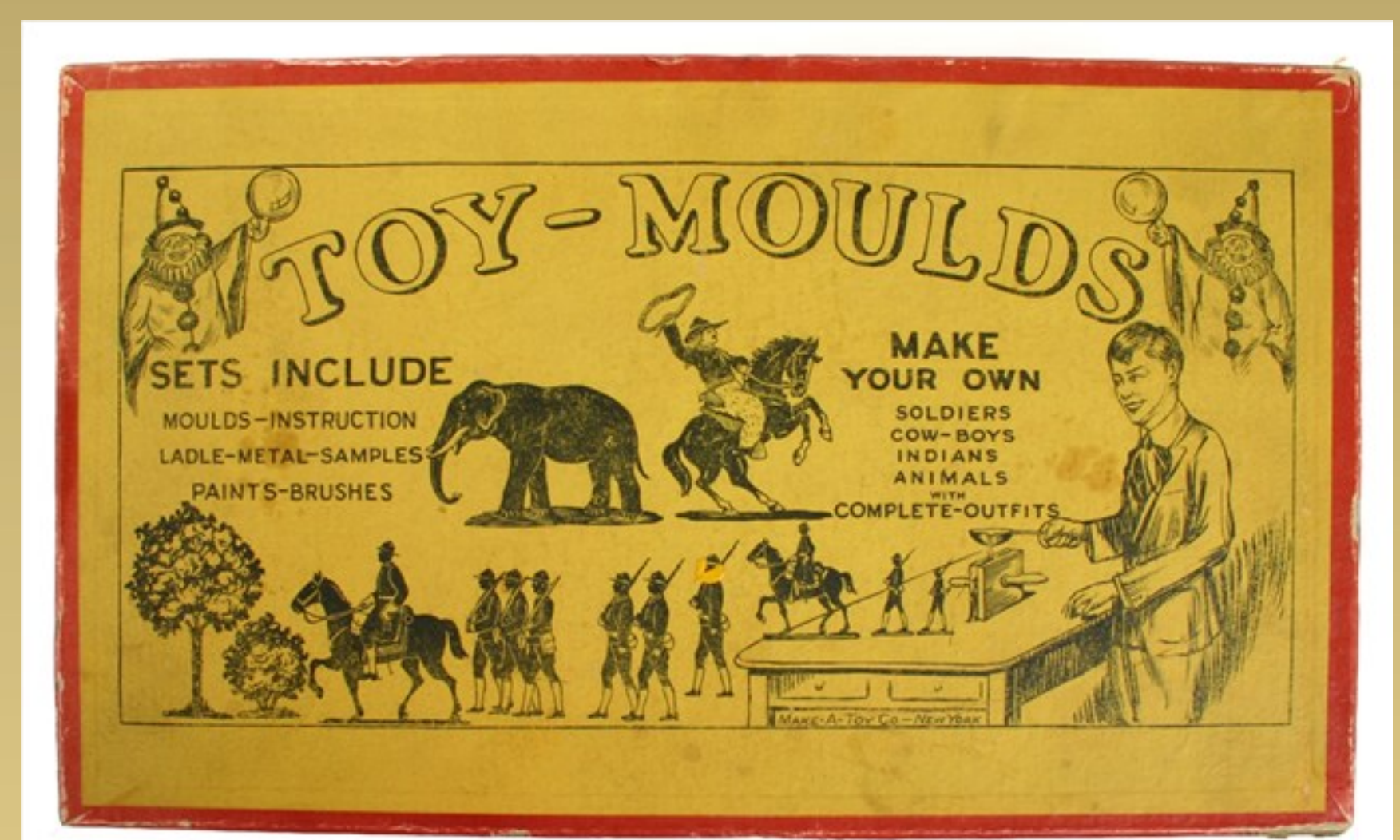


Figure 4. Home casting kit from the 1930s (photo courtesy of the Wisconsin Historical Society).



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