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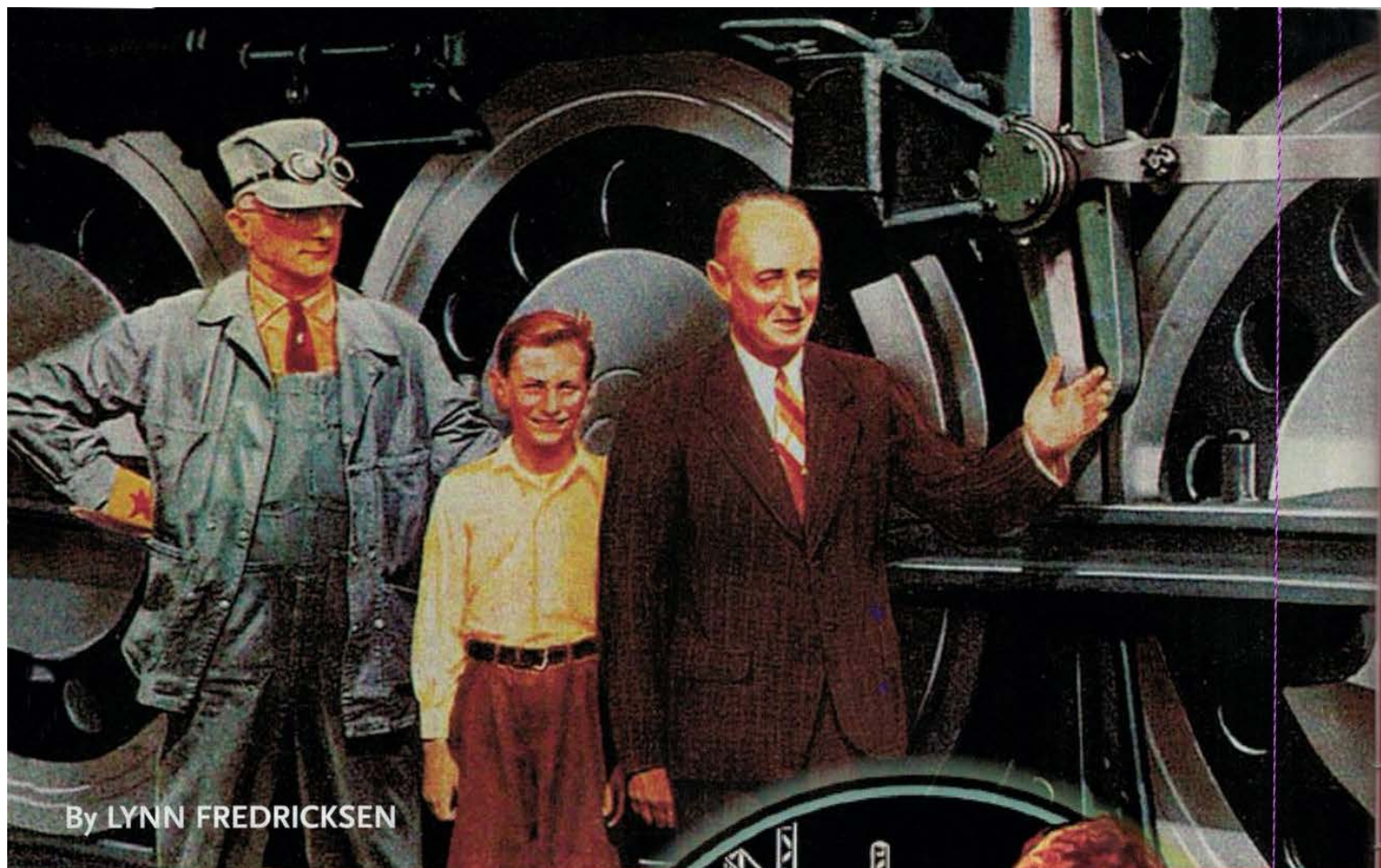
A black and white photograph of A.C. Gilbert, an older man in a suit and tie, standing behind a large, complex Erector set structure. The structure is made of metal rods and gears, forming a large, intricate framework. Gilbert is looking towards the camera with a slight smile. The background is dark, making the metallic structure stand out.

## The Man Who Saved Christmas

**A.C. GILBERT'S**  
REVOLUTIONARY ERECTOR SET TURNS 100

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20 Grand Avenue

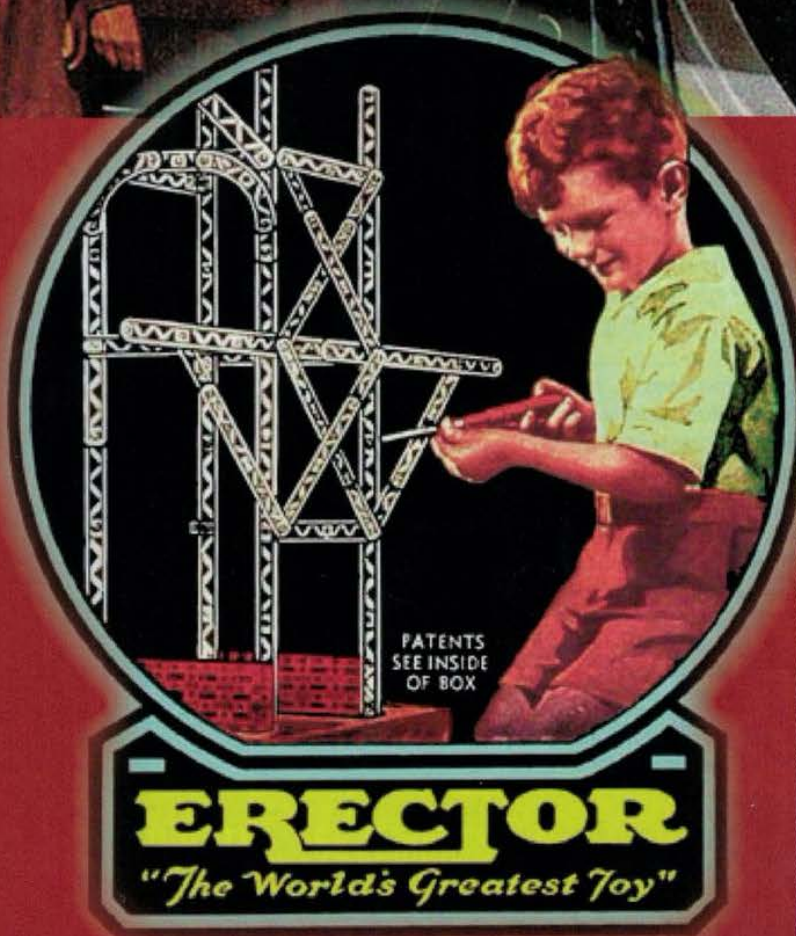




By LYNN FREDRICKSEN

# The 'Man Who Saved Christmas'

*On the centennial of his Erector Set, remembering A.C. Gilbert, New Haven's amazing Father of Invention*







A.C. Gilbert's original office in New Haven's Erector Square (top), the factory buildings are now home to several hundred artists and small businesses. (Bottom) Toys and a drill produced at the factory, in a window overlooking the complex.

PHOTOS: ANTHONY CRISAFULLI

**It is hardly an exaggeration** to observe that Alfred Carlton Gilbert (1884-1961) was **larger than life**. What's unusual is that he remains so more than 50 years after his death.

Gilbert, whose multi-faceted talents and intellect made him a leader in manufacturing, neighborhood development, employee relations and even athletics earned the title "The Man Who Saved Christmas." With his trademark Erector Set marking its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year, it provides an opportunity to peer inside the life of a man who

was one of this region's — and nation's — greatest treasures.

"I got an Erector Set when I was nine years old and it changed my life," says William Brown, director of the Eli Whitney Museum where an enormous A.C. Gilbert display will soon open to the public.

Brown, who boasts an encyclopedic knowledge of all things Gilbert, is pleased to share his insights.

"He was of short stature," Brown says, as he indicates a full scale image of Gilbert on a wall near the museum entrance. "In the 1950s he was jogging. Who else was jogging in the 1950s? He had a gym. His whole life was committed to physical fitness."

Gilbert's passion for fitness led him from his native Oregon to New Haven, where he earned a degree in sports medicine at Yale — an education he financed by performing as a magician in area clubs.

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As his athletic prowess led him to numerous triumphs, including as an Olympic pole-vaulter (the 1908 London games) and even one-time holder of the world record for consecutive pull-ups, it wasn't to be his livelihood. Neither was a career in medicine, despite his father's plans for his son.

Instead, having built a successful following for his magic shows, he turned to manufacturing. In 1909 he founded the Mysto Magic Co. with fellow magician John Petrie and a \$5,000 loan from his father (at the then-usurious interest rate of five percent).

Despite that interest rate, the younger Gilbert appreciated it.

"He was very grateful," says Bruce Watson, who wrote about Gilbert in his 2002 book *The Man Who Changed How Boys & Toys Were Made: The Life and Times of A.C. Gilbert, the Man Who Saved Christmas* (2002, Penguin Books).

"He said, 'Nothing my father ever did meant as much to me as that loan,'" Watson recounts.

Gilbert *pere* didn't have to wait long for him to repay it, either.

"The second year he was in business, he made \$7,500," says Kathleen Telman, Property Manager at Erector Square, the site of Gilbert's former manufacturing facility. "By year three he was making more than \$1 million a year."

Gilbert's innovation in the toy industry is apparent in his wide range of playthings geared for boys: the Gilbert Chemistry Outfit for Boys bears this message: "Hello Boys!" His Glass Blowing sets, Magnetic Fun & Facts sets, Atomic Energy Labs, Microscopes and the Erec-tronic Transistor Set were all marketed to young males.

Because most toys at the turn of the century sold for a dollar or less, Gilbert went out on a limb, proclaiming that his Erector Set, boldly priced at \$5, was an "investment in your son."

"He created the educational toy industry," says Watson. "He was the founding father of 20<sup>th</sup>-century industrial America. It's hard to meet an engineer or a chemist or a magician of 75 or older who didn't have one of his educational toys."

While Gilbert's toys are immortal, Gilbert has secured his own place in people's hearts, surely due to how he reached out to his young customers, asserts Watson.

"He was fairly enlightened," says Watson. "But he wasn't going to market to girls because it wasn't something parents were going to buy a girl." Although Watson adds that he recalls a Gilbert-made nursing kit for girls.

Part of Gilbert's reputation as a figure at the forefront of brilliant ideas lies in the fact that he is credited with being "The Man Who Saved Christmas," because he convinced the U.S. War Resources Board it was a bad idea to ban wartime toy sales and manufacturing during World War I.



The Parachute Jump erector set and the Ferris Wheel below remain two of the most iconic Erector Sets. Both are on display at the New Haven's Eli Whitney Museum. PHOTOS: ANTHONY CRISAFULLI





# APPLIANCES



The A.C. Gilbert company was best known for toys and model trains, but their extensive appliance business was a source of the most revenue, and of course they sold year round. New competition in the appliance business after World War II helped lead to the company's eventual demise. PHOTO: ANTHONY CRISAFULLI

So where did all this brilliance take place? Gilbert's office and factory at 315 Peck Street in New Haven remain largely intact. Ditto his former home on Ridge Road in North Haven.

His office, a third-floor walkup in a complex now known as Erector Square, is still an inviting space of some 500 square feet. Heavy beams buttress the ceiling. Wood veneer covers the walls. Leaded-glass windows welcome in generous amounts of sunlight. The original flooring is still firm and unyielding thanks to bow-tie joints. The fireplace, with its intricately carved wood, depicts leaves and bunches of grapes.

"He had his desk in the front corner," Telman explains. "This wall was open so he could watch his engineering people."

Purchased several years ago by real-estate developer Casper F. (Cappy) Amodio (who passed away earlier this year), the property is now operated by Telman and Amodio's widow, Debbie Amodio. Many of the buildings have been remodeled to accommodate yoga and pilates studios as well as artist studios and gallery space.

"We want to get this back to an office and keep this as a museum," Debbie Amodio says.

She and Telman elaborate on how kindly Gilbert treated his employees.

"Even with more than 3,000 employees, he would personally wish them a happy birthday," Telman says. "He even had a nurse station for employees for when they got sick."

Brown notes that Gilbert was particularly solicitous to female workers, providing maternity benefits as early as the 1940s and arranging for them to do piecework at home so new mothers could continue to earn a wage while spending time with a new baby.

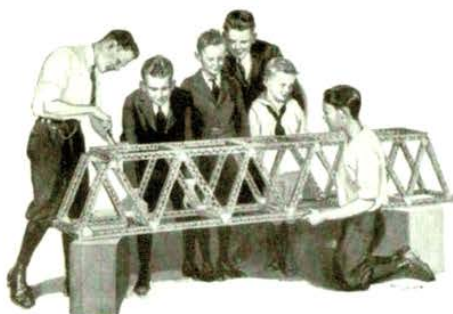
"The people who worked for him remember him with the deepest respect," says Brown.

An avid hunter, Gilbert and his friend Electra Webb went on hunting expeditions to Alaska. Some of the bears on display at the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History were brought to New Haven by Gilbert and Webb, Brown says.

As a dedicated outdoorsman and hunter Gilbert built a lodge on 600 acres in Hamden now known as Paradise Preserve. While the area has since been developed, Gilbert often shared it with his employees by hosting outings there.

Gilbert's former residence remains in its splendor on five acres in North Haven. The 6,000-square-foot-plus mansion still boasts its original slate roof. A stone wall runs the length of the property in front, stone columns mark the front and rear





## Boys Today—Men Tomorrow!

### ERECTOR

The most wonderful construction toy in the world. Boys can make airplanes, bridges, cranes, towers, in fact any building they can be imagined with a Gilbert Erector. The \$1.00 set has a sturdy plastic base that will last for years. Erector is the only metal toy that is so the most popular for the Gilbert Toy.



IF YOU want to know more about Gilbert Toys and the new Gilbert Toys, write to the nearest Gilbert Toy Company, 100 North Main Street, New Haven, Conn. 06510. They will send you a copy of the new Gilbert Toys, and a list of the nearest Gilbert Toy Company.

THOUSANDS of young men from 10 to 20 years old, who are today making great strides in engineering, chemistry, and other sciences were Gilbert Toys just a few years ago. I have watched these progress with intense interest and I will tell you that I am mighty proud that my engineering time has started these boys on the road to success. When I was a boy I loved to play with scientific things myself, but no one made the kind of toys that I wanted, so I said that some day I would make for a new generation of boys, toys that I wanted when I was a kid myself.

That is why there are wonderful Gilbert Toys for all kinds of scientific fun, electrical sets, telegraph sets, signal engineering, weather bureau outfit, civil engineering, hydraulic and pneumatic engineering, light experiments, sound experiments, glass blowing, astronomical instruments, as well as all kinds of model making, and sets to perform tricks with coins, handkerchiefs and cards. There is a Gilbert Toy for every boy. Their range in price from \$1.00 to \$10.00.

Make this the best Christmas one ever had in your life, get a \$1.00 Erector set or any other Gilbert Toy for the kid brother, boy friend or son.

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## GILBERT TOYS

Gilbert was an aggressive marketer and advertiser, in print and the new revolutionary medium radio. Among his many firsts, some say he was the first to "brand" his products.

entrances to the estate, a stone's throw from the Edward Malley mansion on a busy street, tucked behind mature plantings.

"It was a good place to grow up," said Glen Greenberg, whose father bought the property in 1975. "I suppose I've taken it for granted, but I always knew it was a special house."

An entrepreneur who now lives in Guilford, Greenberg recently offered a visitor a private tour.

"When I was growing up we had wall-to-wall carpet in here," Greenberg explains. "Ten years ago I convinced them to take it up and when they did we saw these floors were in perfect condition."

The floors are identical to those in Gilbert's New Haven office. So are the latches on the windows. Greenberg's family had listed the house, built in 1923, for sale, but recently took it off the market. Greenberg says the family plans to list it again next spring. (The property was recently appraised for \$1.63 million.)

The house and grounds still speak to Gilbert's flair for luxury living. There is a formal garden, an English garden, an herb garden, meditation garden and a mini-orchard. While in high school, Greenberg got both waterfalls operating again. A 20-foot waterfall occupies one area, while a

smaller waterfall adds a tranquil touch to the meditation garden. Stone steps lead to a tennis court and pool. The entire place exudes graceful elegance.

Throughout the property, and the neighborhood, mountain laurels and rhododendrons stand out among the plantings. Many were brought here by Gilbert from his Hamden retreat, Greenberg explains.

Inside, the kitchen has been remodeled and updated. A previous owner added a sunroom. But for the most part, the house Gilbert designed remains as he left it. A large master suite upstairs includes two bathrooms, a dressing room and private sitting room. Each of the six bedrooms has its own private bath. Quarters near the kitchen were built to comfortably accommodate household staff. There is a four-car garage, a work area in the basement and a vast walkup attic with a walk-in cedar closet.

"We had a fort up here," Greenberg says of an area on the third floor. "We used to play here."

Gilbert's own home office remains intact, as does his billiard room. It is apparent that the billiard room was one of Gilbert's favorites. A grand fireplace lines one wall, a large billiard table takes center-stage and the same heavy beams that adorn his New Haven office add to the sporting ambiance.



At the Eli Whitney Museum an elaborate exhibit depicts the wide-ranging roster of products and innovations devised by the man. Known best for his "learning toys," Gilbert's products were often household items. His line of small appliances sold under the name Polar Cub. Many people don't know he also made vacuum cleaners, hair dryers, blenders, stand mixers, fans and (this next was one product he *did* market to women) a vibrator sold in packaging that touted its merits as a device to relieve muscle pain and tension.

And then there are the trains. In 1937 Gilbert purchased the American Flyer Train Co. and continued to produce the trains that would provide generations of youngsters with hours of entertainment. As part of the Eli Whitney exhibit, an expansive train setup includes intricate track patterns and a three-ring-circus in the middle.

(The exhibit, which is free and open to the public, runs through January 26 at the 915 Whitney Avenue museum. Hours are 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturdays and noon to 5 p.m. Sundays.)

Perhaps an easier way to understand the magnitude of A.C. Gilbert and his legacy is to take a look at the world of his youth and young adulthood. His idea for the Erector Set was incubated as he rode a train into New York in 1911 and noticed a construction site. When he returned home that evening, he told his new bride, Mary, that it had given him an idea for a learning toy. That toy would teach through activity the basic principles of physics, engineering and electricity. That evening, the Gilberts painstakingly cut shirt cardboard to make the pieces that would become the prototype for future Erector Sets.

"That was about the same time they were completing Grand Central Terminal and the Yale Bowl," Brown says.

Brown adds that because the Erector Set was something children played with repeatedly, the lessons it taught became ingrained.

Thus, right through the 1950s the Erector Set was a staple on nearly every boy's toy shelf. It wasn't until television became popular that the demand for Erector Sets began to wane.

"Television was the death of the Gilbert toys," Brown says. "It took you from being actively engaged to being a passive audience."

Notwithstanding his enthusiasm for hunting, Gilbert loved animals. In particular, he was fond of German shepherds.

"He was the leading force of establishing the breed in this country," says Brown. Indeed, for many years Gilbert and his canines dominated the Westminster Kennel Club dog show, he adds.

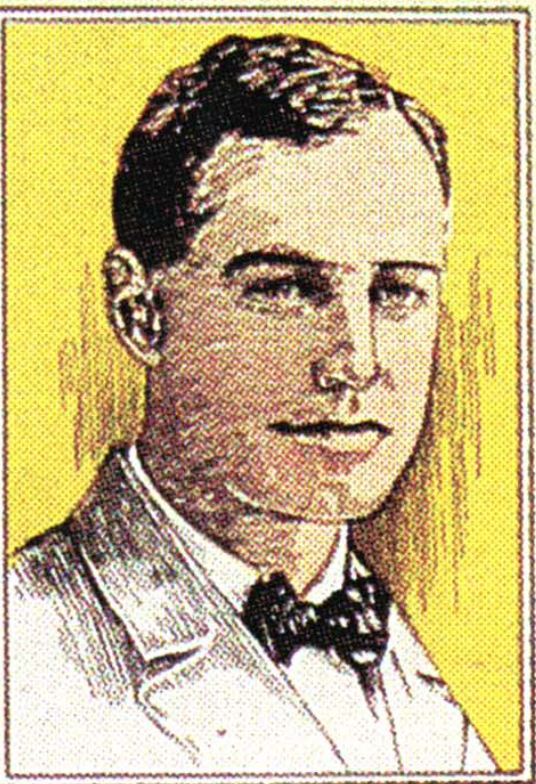
The name "Maraldene" became a prominent one in Gilbert's life. The stone columns that mark his estate's rear entrance bear his name as well as "Maraldene."

Also at that rear entrance, a street sign now reads "Maraldene Drive." Sources say the name stems from an Elizabethan philosophy about neighborhoods that Gilbert adopted to establish near his home an area exclusively devoted to other "fine homes."

At one time he and his wife purchased 40 acres surrounding his North Haven property. As he built homes on different lots, he would sell them off restricting the deeds to help ensure the area would be one of fine homes in perpetuity. Even the divided roadways on Old Farm and Old Orchard roads remain as they are today due to deed restrictions imposed by Gilbert. All told, he built 50 homes in the area. ❖



# Learn More about A.C. Gilbert



Despite being one of New Haven's most prolific and legendary inventors, A.C. Gilbert doesn't seem to get as much recognition or time in the spotlight as he might deserve, even from the Elm City, where some of his most successful products were made. Not that his toys aren't well-known – the hundred-year-old Erector Set alone is a sturdy and well-established edifice of American culture. The New Haven Museum did, however, celebrate the set's centennial with a celebratory event in July; the museum has a collection of Erector Sets, manuals and other Gilbert toys.

Here's a rundown of a few other cases where Gilbert – dubbed "the man who saved Christmas" by not ceasing toy production and turning his factory into a munitions machine during World War I – has gotten his due, which includes books (even children's books), films and stage productions.

**A.C. Gilbert Heritage Society.** Formed in 1991, this society is made up of 450 collectors of Gilbert products from over the years to promote the history and scientific advancement of Gilbert and his company. Members even get quarterly newsletters and participate in annual conventions. The group's website features an extensive archive of Gilbert products and information. [acghs.org](http://acghs.org).

**A.C. Gilbert's Discovery Village** (Salem, Ore.). Gilbert's biggest inventions may have come out of the Elm City, but he was born in the Northwest town of Salem, Oregon. That city in 1989 established A.C. Gilbert's Discovery Village, a non-profit children's museum that features three historic houses loaded with educational exhibits and activities, as well as an outdoor community-built exhibit that features the world's largest Erector Set. [acgilbert.org](http://acgilbert.org).

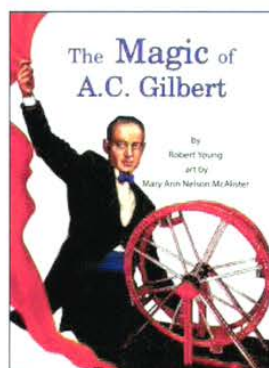
**Untitled A.C. Gilbert Play.** The next original theatrical work by A Broken Umbrella Theatre, a local production group, will be inspired by A.C. Gilbert and will have its premiere at Erector Square on Blatchley Ave. in May, in a collaboration between the complex and the Eli Whitney Museum. The Broken Umbrella group creates site-specific works inspired by the history of New Haven. For more information [abrokenumbrella.org](http://abrokenumbrella.org).

Did you own an Erector Set or know the influential Gilbert? Send your memories to [rachel@abrokenumbrella.org](mailto:rachel@abrokenumbrella.org)

**"The Man Who Saved Christmas" (play).** The story of Gilbert and his Christmas-saving ways is deemed worthy of a stage production by Virginia's Halifax County Little Theatre this November. [themanwhosavedchristmas.com](http://themanwhosavedchristmas.com).



**"The Man Who Saved Christmas" (film).** This 2002 made-for-TV movie stars Jason Alexander (best known as George from "Seinfeld") as Gilbert, and tells an embellished account of Gilbert's efforts to keep toy production going during World War I and earning his title as the "man who saved Christmas."



**Books.** A variety of books on A.C. Gilbert have been penned, and one might start with the man's autobiography "The Man Who Lives in Paradise;" for children there's "The Magic of A.C. Gilbert" (by Robert Young and Mary Ann Nelson McAlister), a 32-page picture book; and yet another book chronicling the Gilbert story is "The Man Who Changed How Boys and Toys Were Made: The Life and Times of A.C. Gilbert, The Man Who Saved Christmas," by Bruce Watson. Others, like "A.C. Gilbert's Famous American Flyer Trains" (by Paul C. Nelson), discuss specific products. —NHM

**Ebay.com** Vintage Erector Sets, American Flyer Trains and a changing variety of A.C. Gilbert "sets" from Mysto Magic to an A.C. Gilbert Chemistry set can be found for sale on [ebay.com](http://ebay.com)

The "vintage" A.C. Gilbert Microscope an early inspirer of many of today's bioscientists can be had for \$29.95. The famed Mysto Magic may cost up to \$125 or more.



## Eli Whitney Museum Exhibits

"The Eli Whitney Museum collects and studies the products and legacy of A.C. Gilbert and his company."



The Museum maintains a large collection of exhibits of products, toys, appliances and advertisements produced by the A.C. Gilbert Companies.

Each Christmas the museum

hosts a large model train exhibit of A.C. Gilbert produced trains. The Museum website hosts **The Gilbert Project** an extensive collection of historical information and images.

**Beginning on November 29, 2013 The Eli Whitney Museum will host an interactive exhibit recognizing the 100 Year anniversary of the Erector Set. Check the Museum Website for details, [eliwhitney.org](http://eliwhitney.org).**