

Toys in Times of Crisis: Paper Dolls



(McLaughlin Brothers Paper Dolls, 1880s. WRHS Collection)

Paper dolls offer an accessible alternative to expensive toys, especially during difficult periods in history such as the Great Depression or the World Wars. After the boom following the Civil War, several factors including the demonetization of silver and troubles in the railroad industry caused what is known as the Panic of 1873. Events triggered a period known today as the Long Depression of the 1870s.

These paper dolls from the WRHS collection were printed just following the “Long Depression” and would have been more affordable for many Cleveland parents at the time. They feature a bride, Diane, with gown, accessories, and trousseau items. The maker, McLoughlin Brothers publishing firm, pioneered printing techniques in books and toys for children. These bridal paper dolls showcase beautiful coloring and detail and likely would have been sold in toy stores or by mail order. Simpler paper dolls were surely available in Cleveland too. In 1884, Bingham-Hanna house resident Coralie Hanna and her daughter Lillian manned a booth of “fancy ware” and paper dolls at their church fair.

For those of you looking for a project at home, you can print these images directly from our Digital Learning Resources website. We’ve included a few WRHS dresses from other periods: add your own folding tabs, and see if you can make them work for Diane. Toys like this allow for imaginative play and creativity. Share your results with us on social media @ClevelandStartsHere!