

A Popular Tiny Toy



Toys provide insights into the lives of children and can be some of the most poignant, and interesting, items found at archaeological sites. As they do today, toys in the past varied in size, and a diminutive form of doll (Figure 1) made during the period of roughly 1850-1920 was very popular. Produced originally in Germany, the affordable, molded porcelain dolls had rigid arms and legs and came in sizes generally ranging from 1 to 18 inches tall. In the nineteenth century the smaller of these were known as “penny” dolls because of their price. Regardless of social class, children in many American homes could

have had access to these toys given their inexpensive cost and wide availability during the Victorian and early Edwardian periods.

Other names exist for the dolls, but they are referred to as “Frozen Charlottes” by many today. How that particular name came to be paired with them is interesting. Often, the name is attributed to a tale/poem from the early 1840s called “A Corpse Going to a Ball,” where a young lady went to a ball in an open sleigh. Against her mother’s advice, she had not dressed warmly enough for the nighttime winter ride, and upon arrival, was found to be frozen. An American musical folk ballad, “Young Charlotte” or “Fair Charlotte,” followed later in the nineteenth century and revolved around the same often-repeated story. Given the high mortality rates for children in that period, and the fact that death was more of an integral part of various facets of their culture in so many ways, one can see how it would be possible to believe that for Victorians, a pale and unmoving child’s doll could be affiliated with a sad tale of demise.



Figure 1: Penny doll in the author’s collection.

Recent research by Bonnie Taylor-Blake concludes, however, that “exhaustive searches of historic newspaper databases, magazines, and books of the period have failed to unearth contemporaneous evidence to support the idea that 19th-century Americans equated the penny doll with the legend of Fair Charlotte. Further, no one who has written about the penny doll and included a Victorian connection to the legend in his or her analysis has published anything from the 19th or early 20th centuries to support the claim.” Instead, her study indicates that the earliest the “Frozen Charlotte” name for the doll became apparent in print was around World War II and appears to have been “coined within the doll-collecting community.”

Although historical archaeology offers a lens through which we can learn about what would have been available for play in the past, “the archaeology of childhood has only emerged as a specific research domain since the 1990s.” Historical archaeologist Ivor Noël Hume stated that “the most common of all relics of Victorian childhood to be recovered from American historical sites are the heads, arms, and legs of German (Thuringian) “china” dolls.”



Figure 2: Example from site12M63. Image courtesy of Christine Thompson, Applied Anthropology Laboratories, Ball State University.

These types of dolls, or fragments of them, have been found in archaeological contexts at Indiana sites. For example, investigations by Ball State University archaeologists at 12M63 in Madison County recovered a complete penny doll (Figure 2). The assemblage from site12VG2020 in Evansville includes the head of one of these dolls. That site encompasses several lots where homes had originally been built between 1895 and 1910. Background research conducted by the investigating archaeologists found that “the residences were owned and rented by generally white, professional workers and laborers who were first- or second-generation Americans.” Therefore, it is not surprising that test excavations at a site of this type (in a residential setting) and age (within the dolls’ primary period of manufacture and popularity) would result in the discovery of an artifact such as this.

Studying nineteenth and early twentieth century consumer consumption and material culture can add to our understanding of cross-cultural connections, gender roles and socialization, and more. These small playthings are charming and offer us a glimpse into the home life and culture of youngsters from earlier times.

If you would like to learn more about the Frozen Charlotte doll, we suggest the article by Bonnie Taylor-Blake at <https://btaylorblake.com/2019/07/06/defrosting-frozen-charlotte-21st-century-misconceptions-about-a-19th-century-doll/>.

