

Early American Girl

MEET FANNY GRAY, THE ORIGINAL AMERICAN GIRL DOLL—PAPER DOLL, THAT IS.

By Lori Ann Achzet

In 1986, the Pleasant Company introduced a line of historically contextualized dolls named American Girls, which were sold with books that told their life stories. While viewing some new acquisitions in the Jay T. Last Collection of Graphic Arts and Social History, I met Fanny Gray, a paper doll of the 19th century, who came complete with a poetic booklet detailing the “history of her life.” Fanny, according to the booklet, was the daughter of a widow who died shortly after her husband did, leaving Fanny orphaned. Left to fend for herself, she sold flowers and matches until she met a stranger who proved to be her uncle “and, with a joy and love untold / He claimed sweet Fanny for his own.” The paper doll set—published in 1854 by Crosby, Nichols & Co. (Boston) and considered the earliest commercially made boxed set of American paper dolls—is “intended as an amusement for children, and will, it is hoped, be an acceptable present for the Holidays.” This desire came true according to a tiny gift envelope enclosed. It was dated “Dec 25th / 54” and inscribed to Ellen W. Adams. Even though there is not a known connection between The Huntington’s holding and the Pleasant Company, I could not help but relate this printed toy set to the American Girl dolls of my childhood.

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Fanny Gray Paper Doll Set, Crosby, Nichols & Co., Boston, 1854. Jay T. Last Collection of Graphic Arts and Social History. The Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens.

