

Curator's Choice

Camden Yards Piano Baby

By: Patricia Samford, Director, MAC Lab

This white porcelain figurine head depicting a toddler sporting a top hat was found in an excavation in Baltimore City. Today the site of Camden Yards Oriole Park, this part of Baltimore contained an African American neighborhood filled with row houses in the early twentieth century. Before indoor plumbing became common, small outdoor structures set over brick-lined pits served as toilet facilities for many urban households. This figurine head was discovered in 1989 during the archaeological exploration of one of these privy pits at a row house site (18BC80). Such pits became convenient dumping places for household garbage in the days before city-wide trash pick-up.

Discarded because it was broken, the figurine was most likely what is known by collectors as a “piano baby”. These figurines, generally ranging in size from 6 to 18 inches, were placed atop the shawls used to decorate pianos in Victorian and early 20th-century homes. While the figurine head showed no manufacturer’s marks that would provide clues to its age, many piano baby figurines were made in Germany in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Other artifacts found in the privy at this site—broken dishes and bottles—all dated to the first several decades of the twentieth century and fit nicely with the date range that piano dolls were popular. The head is realistically molded and although it contained no traces of paint or colorful glazing, many piano babies were painted, suggesting that this figurine’s paint may have flaked away in the soil of the privy fill.



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It is tempting to speculate that this toddler represented the New Year’s baby, but it is impossible, in the absence of the remainder of the figurine, to know for certain.



These painted bisque porcelain piano babies are 11” tall.



Several piano babies, as well as a clock and other knickknacks, are displayed on the piano in this late Victorian parlor.



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