

Black Dolls Made by Horsman

The Horsman company, originally located in New York City, imported, assembled, and sold dolls since the 1870's. It was not until 1897 that the first Horsman dolls were brand marked.

Babyland Rag dolls, a series of cloth dolls, were the first (1893) series of dolls popularly associated with the Horsman name. The Babyland name continued in use until about 1928.

The early versions had hand painted cloth faces. In 1907 Horsman contracted a supplier (perhaps Albert Bruckner of NJ) to produce Babyland Rag dolls with "Life-Like" photograph faces.



Black Babyland: 14 1/2", 1914 lithographed cloth face. Courtesy Jean Grout



Black Babyland: 14 1/2", all-original with hand painted face. Courtesy Jean Grout

In 1912, Horsman advertised a third style of Babyland Rag dolls with a molded or pressed three-dimensional cloth face and lithographed features.

One of the best known of the Babyland Rag dolls was Topsy-Turvy, a two-headed cloth doll. Turned one way, it was a white doll, turned upside down, with the skirt covering that face, it became a black doll.



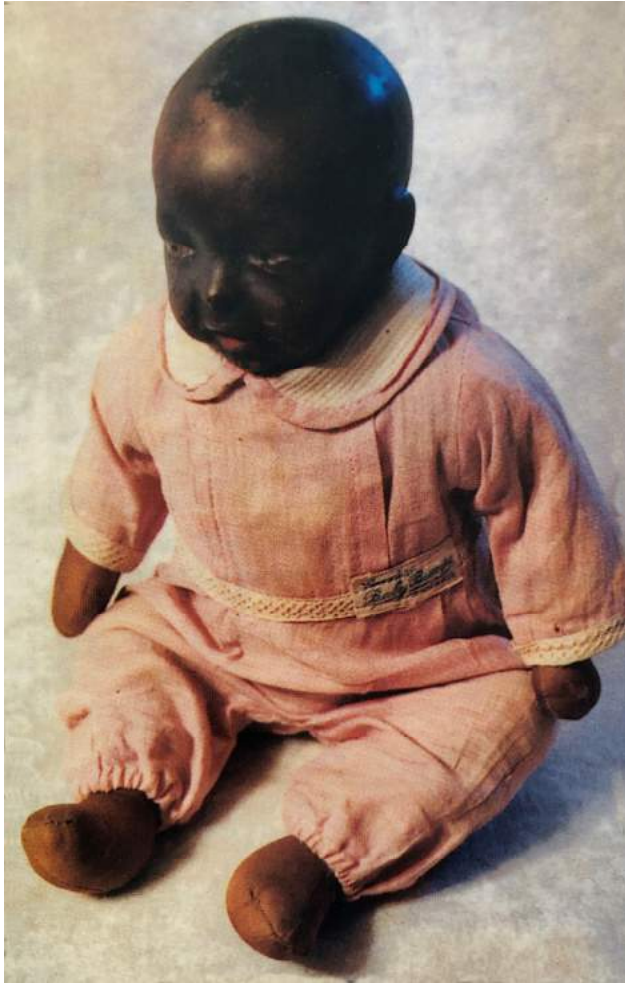
Bruckner, 14", Topsy-Turvy two-headed doll with stiffened, molded mask-type face made by Bruckner as part of Horsman's Babyland Rag series. Courtesy Jean Grout.

Series of Babyland Rag dolls as shown in a Horsman catalog, circa 1913.



Baby Bumps dolls, introduced in 1910, were unbreakable composition dolls and Horsman's first real character doll. Horsman would later shun the old fashioned "angel faced" doll in favor of those modeled after real children, and known as "Art Dolls."

The Baby Bumps name, which would be used for years, was chosen to reflect that the doll's flange-neck Can't Break 'Em composition head could "take all kinds of bumps." While most were white, a doll Horsman advertised as Colored Bumps was sold.

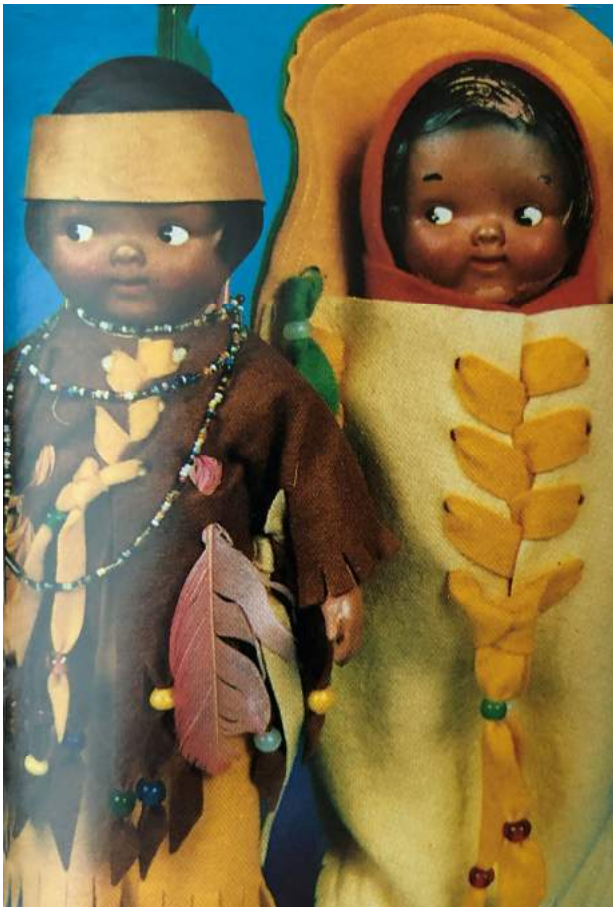


*Baby Bumps: 12" black version wearing original pink romper tagged "Genuine Baby Bumps - Trade mark."
Courtesy Dorothy Bohlin.*

In 1910 the Joseph Campbell Co. licensed Horsman to make and sell Campbell Soup Kid dolls. Chief designer Helen Fox Trowbridge would turn Artist Grace Gebbie (Wiederseim) Drayton's illustrations of cute and chubby soup-loving youngsters into a sculptured doll head.

Over the years, Campbell Kids were dressed in many other costumes as well. These included Campbell Dutch Boy and Dutch Girl, Campbell Kid Cowboy, Cowgirl, and Baseball Kid.

There was Pocahontas, and her boy companion Kickapoo, described in Horsman's advertising as "attractive and comical little Indians." They were painted in brown-skin with black hair.



Indian Pair; 11", Campbell Kids as Kicapoo and Pocahontas. Courtesy of McMasters Doll Auction.



Pocahontas: 11". Campbell Kid with brown-tone complexion.

Starting in 1911, Horsman introduced most dolls under the collective group name, American Kids in Toyland, a term that seemed to disappear from the firm's advertising after several years. Some of these dolls shared the same head type and can be specifically identified by name only when wearing their original outfits.



"American Kids in Toyland," part of Horsman's 1911 line of unbreakable Art Dolls

Cotton Joe - One of the original American Kids in Toyland, Cotton Joe, a black doll, came, like many of Horsman's Can't Break 'Em dolls of this era, in two sizes, 10" and 14". Initially his face seems to have been a copied from a French S.F.B.J. bisque head. He remained in the company's line for some half-dozen years, though his head mold did change about 1914. In addition to his brown-painted face, his stuffed body and arms were tan, but his legs were made of olive fabric. Cotton Joe was dressed in red flannel or striped shirt, brown or khaki pants and, in some versions, wore a broad brimmed straw hat. Other black dolls advertised included Bingo, in 1910, and during the 1914-1916 period, Sambo, in short tan pants and calf-length white stockings, red shirt with sailor collar, and in a sun hat; and Topsy, with a hair bow stapled on her black molded hair.



Cotton Joe.



Bingo and Cotton Joe, standing.



Cotton Joe: 14". Early version, circa 1910. He received a new sculpted head about 1914.



Topsy: 16". Her boy counterpart was called Sambo.



Blink; 14". One of the Gene Carr Kids. Re-dressed.

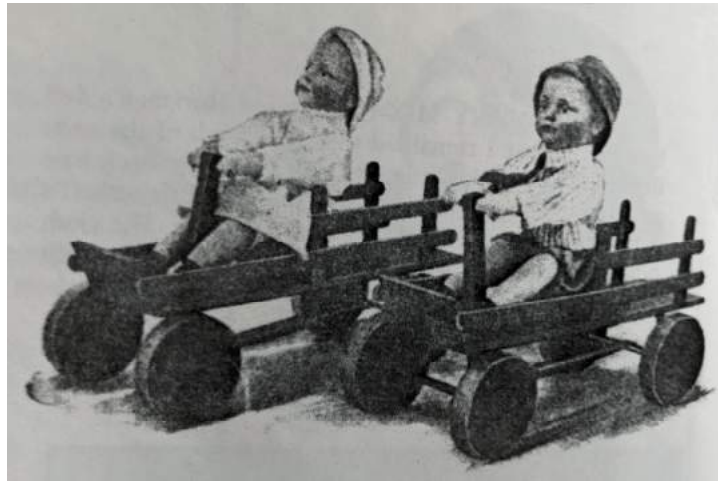
Comic Characters - Gene Carr Kids - These were a series of characters from artist Gene Carr's popular *New York World* newspaper comic strip, "Lady Bountiful." Horsman acquired the rights to produce these dolls in 1915, and commissioned Bernard Lipfert to model the cartoon faces. Over several years, seven character dolls appeared, although some of them may simply have been redressed and given different names.

They were 14" tall, had round faces and exaggerated features including a wide, smiling "watermelon" mouth. Skinny and Blink (and in 1916, a girl character named Lizzy) had eyes molded shut in a pronounced squint; Mike, Jane, and a black boy Snowball (and Smoke who was also black and seemingly replaced Snowball in 1916) had big, round, wide-opened eyes.



Jane; 14". One of the Gene Carr Kids. Restored, re-dressed.

In 1914, Horsman introduced a series of dolls on wheels, or more accurately, doll pull toys. These included the Irish Mail Kids, the Coaster Kids and the Cycle Kids, sometimes known as the Velocipede Kids. They consisted of a Can't Break 'Em composition doll - boy, girl, clown, or black child - attached to a toy vehicle, a tricycle, wagon or Irish Mail, a self-propelled handcar. Related to these were the Crawling Kids, a creeping doll infant on wheels.



Irish Mail Kids

Baby Dimples, which first appeared in Horsman's line in 1927, was one of the most appealing baby dolls ever made, with its characteristic twin dimples in each cheek, and the crinkle laugh lines around its painted or celluloid sleep eyes. The cloth body, bent limb doll came in sizes from 16" to 22". In the larger sizes, the baby doll seems to have been sometimes advertised simply as Dimples. Also an all-composition, straight-legged toddler version was called simply Dimples. A so called Laughing Dimples had an open closed mouth with painted teeth.



Black Dimples: 13 1/2 "

The Wise Dolls was a family of black cloth dolls sold by Horsman beginning in 1921. They included Mammie Wise, Lizzy, Baby Wise and Miss Polly Wise.

In 1929, Horsman brought back an old familiar name, Peterkin, although it was introduced in 1918, and marketed into the early 1920's. This new Peterkin family, which came in a wide range of outfits from rompers to Boy Scout and golf caddy uniforms, bore a strong resemblance to the Campbell Kids. This was no accident. In 1929 Horsman lost its right to use the Campbell name. The soap company granted the exclusive license to the American Character Doll Co.



Black Peterkin: 13 1/2". This girl, circa 1929, has cloth body, composition arms, legs, and head, marked E.I.H. Co. Horsman.

The start of the Great Depression of the 1930's hit the Horsman Company hard. Other major doll makers brought out innovative new dolls - Effanbee's Patsy, Ideal's Shirley Temple, and Madame Alexander's Dionne Quints - which helped them weather the difficult times. Horsman did not, offering little that was new and different. The Horsman management appeared to believe that the company's reputation for quality and value was enough.



Patsy Look-Alikes: In 1931, Horsman introduced four dolls to compete with Effanbee's Patsy family. Rear, from left, 20" Nan, 17 1/2" Jane. Front, from left, 14" Sue, in white and black versions and 12" Babs.

By 1932, E. I. Horsman Co. was in deep financial trouble, and in March, the firm reorganized as Horsman Corp. New capital was found, but the company retained the same management and sales staff. A flurry of advertising promoted its own copy-cat versions of Effanbee's popular Patsy series and introduced a new baby doll, Buttercup, which initially had a composition head but, within months became Horsman's first all-rubber doll.

The Regal Doll Company came to Trenton in 1931. Its brand new plant was termed the nation's largest doll house. It was selling a well-advertised and favorably received line of dolls called Kiddie-Pal. An accomplished sculpture, Ernesto Peruggi, was commissioned to model a remarkable likeness of America's hero of the hour, trans-Atlantic aviator Charles A. Lindberg, the prototype for Regal's impressive 33" Our Lindy doll. The next step for the company was to acquire the venerable and prestigious Horsman name.

In late December, 1932 the Horsman Corp. was purchased by the Regal Doll Manufacturing Co. It was incorporated as Horsman Dolls Inc., a Regal subsidiary. Horsman's manufacturing facilities in New York City were shut down and all production was shifted to the Trenton factory.

The Regal-Horsman connection sometimes seemed confused in the 1930's. Sometimes Regal's advertising appeared to suggest that it simply manufactured dolls for a quasi-independent Horsman Dolls, Inc. At other times, it treated Horsman as though it was a higher quality premium line of dolls. In 1935, Regal announced a new but short-lived pricing structure for the Horsman doll line that narrowed the price difference with those sold under the Regal brand.

The company focused its production on well-made dolls in moderate price ranges, neither top-of-the-line nor dime store cheapies. This tended to price Horsman out of both Wanamaker's and Woolworth and its important market became the mail order catalogs of Sears, Roebuck & Co. and Montgomery Ward where middle class America shopped.

In the late 1930's the Regal Doll Manufacturing Co. was reorganized as Regal Doll Corp. In March 1937 the Regal brand name disappeared from its line of dolls. Horsman was clearly the dominant name, and in April 1940, the corporation itself was renamed Horsman Dolls, Inc.

Through much of the 1930s and the war years, the company's emphasis on supplying mail order firms, and to some extent, producing dolls and doll parts for other toy makers.

Horsman's dolls would come in many new and varied outfits over the years, but the dolls themselves would change only slowly. Horsman's reputation for well-made dolls would continue, but the firm would price them for a middle-American market.

Horsman technicians had been experimenting with vinyl during the non-doll making war years since 1945 and two years later they were ready, long before the competition, to market such realistic, soft, lightweight washable dolls, guaranteed not to rot, crack or mildew. Later a more flexible vinyl called Super-Flex was developed. Horsman dolls of softly stuffed vinyl were trademarked Fairy Skin. A hard plastic, Butyrate was developed for its "girl" dolls. The company promoted the fine molding and "lifelike tonality" of its flesh color. Doll wigs - and eventually "hair"

implanted in soft vinyl heads - were made of Saran, a plastic filament like nylon, which could be washed, combed, and curled.

Ninety-five percent of Horsman's output was baby dolls. The other 5 percent was what the company scornfully described as "trick" dolls, the sort that walk, talk, sing, whistle or dance.

The company would employ about 800 workers, many of whom lived in the neighborhood of the factory that covered a solid block bound by Adeline, Chestnut, Grand and Elm streets. They made dolls the way Detroit made cars, on an assembly line, with separate departments supplying the heads, bodies, arms, and legs. Thirty-five women artists painted the features, there were 60 to 70 wigmakers, a particularly demanding job requiring formal apprenticeship training.

The dressmaking department had 250 to 300 women operating sewing machines. To keep those machines constantly humming, a crew of men used electric knives to cut out the fabric pieces, 216 thicknesses of cloth at a time.

From start to finish, it was estimated that it took about 3 days to make a doll and package it—Horsman employees did it all. The company even had its own box factory, turning out doll boxes of all sizes.

One of Horsman's recycled names was Rosebud, which first appeared in 1914 as Baby Rosebud, a Can't Break 'Em head, cloth body baby with bent legs. In 1928, a dimpled smiling Dolly Rosebud, now a sleep-eyed doll with mama crier, was sold as a big sister of Baby Dimples. By the mid 1930's, it was simply Rosebud, an updated toddler with mama crier, shiny glassine sleep eyes, mohair wig, and beautiful creamy complexion. And Rosebud appeared once more about 1950, as a soft vinyl doll that came in both white and black versions.



Rosebud: 21", Rare black version from 1940's,

The 1944 Ward's Christmas Book featured a two-page spread displaying a group of wonderful Horsman dolls, apparently representing an upgrade in quality and price from the previous holiday season. What is especially interesting is that six of the 11 dolls were black babies.



1944 Ward's Christmas catalog dolls. Lower row, from left, (7) 19" Baby Doll in Organdy with molded hair and sleep eyes, (8) 15" Baby Doll, soft cotton-stuffed body, composition arms and legs, sleep eyes, (9) 21" Poppa-Mamma Baby Doll with two voice crier, molded hair. Upper row, from left, (10) 22" Premium Baby Doll, with momma crier, flirty eyes, molded hair, bent-leg composition baby legs, . (11) 21" Baby Doll in Pinafore, with mohair ringlet wig, glassine sleep eyes.



1944 Ward's Black Dolls: "Of well-known quality" these are "dainty, lovable Colored Baby dolls," the Christmas catalog noted. All are "exquisitely tinted a warm brown with sparking brown glassine sleeping eyes." Lower row, from left, (1) 20" Colored Baby, composition head with molded hair, soft cotton-stuffed body, (2) 17" Baby in Pinafore, with black mohair ringlets, flock-dot cotton dress and bonnet, (3) 20" Colored Baby with black mohair curls. Top row, from left, (4) 16" Colored Baby, molded hair, white organdy dress and bonnet, (5) 23" Colored Baby with black mohair wig, white organdy dress and bonnet. At \$6.95, this was the most expensive doll on the page, (6) 18" Colored Baby has molded hair, pink rayon coat, net trimmed cape collar and matching bonnet, white flock-dot cotton dress.

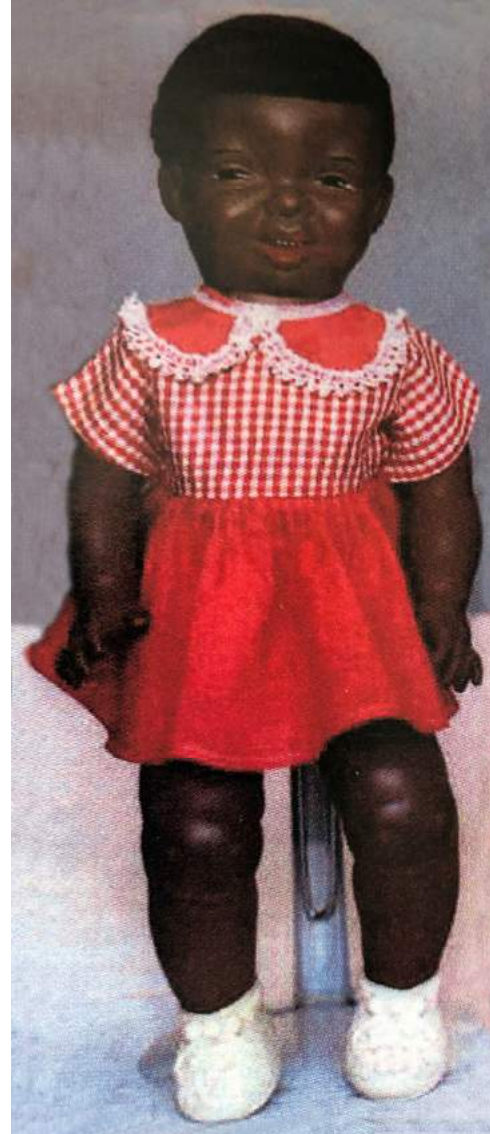
The catalog text notes that Ward offered them “in response to many requests for well-made, well-designed colored dolls...of well known Horsman quality. They are exquisitely tinted a warm brown, with sparkling brown glassine sleeping eyes, real lashes. Lips are shaded a delicate rose...Dainty baby clothing is carefully made and finished.”

These “colored baby dolls” except for their slightly darker complexion, looked nearly identical to the five white baby dolls. They came in sizes from 16” to 23” and were from \$3.49 to \$6.96, significantly more than the so-called “popular value” range.

By the early 1950’s, Horsman, like most other U.S. dollmakers was well aware that there was a market for black dolls. The size of the market and the types of dolls it was looking for were less clear. With almost no exceptions, the dolls made were merely “white” dolls whose vinyl was tinted various shades of brown.



Pete, 1957. Photo Beverly Searcy.



Polly, 1957. Photo Beverly Searcy.



Cindy 18", rare black doll. Photo Judy Wesloh.

In the 1950's 1,000 to 1,200 full and part-time employees at the Trenton factory turned out as many as 1.5 million quality dolls a year. The large, skilled, and stable workforce was one of the company's greatest assets. The unionized workers were earning substantially more than their counterparts in New York City doll factories.

After Horsman Dolls, Inc. threatened to close down in 1952, the union made concessions that kept the plant operating for eight more years. But in 1960, labor costs again had become a serious problem, and Horsman closed the Trenton factory, moving to a new, spacious, non-union facility in South Carolina.

By the 1980s, virtually all U.S. doll manufacturing had ended, with production shifted to the Orient, with its cheaper labor costs. Horsman remained one of the last and largest American doll manufacturers in the United States. Stubbornly, the company resisted TV advertising and re-

fused to shift its production from South Carolina to overseas sources.

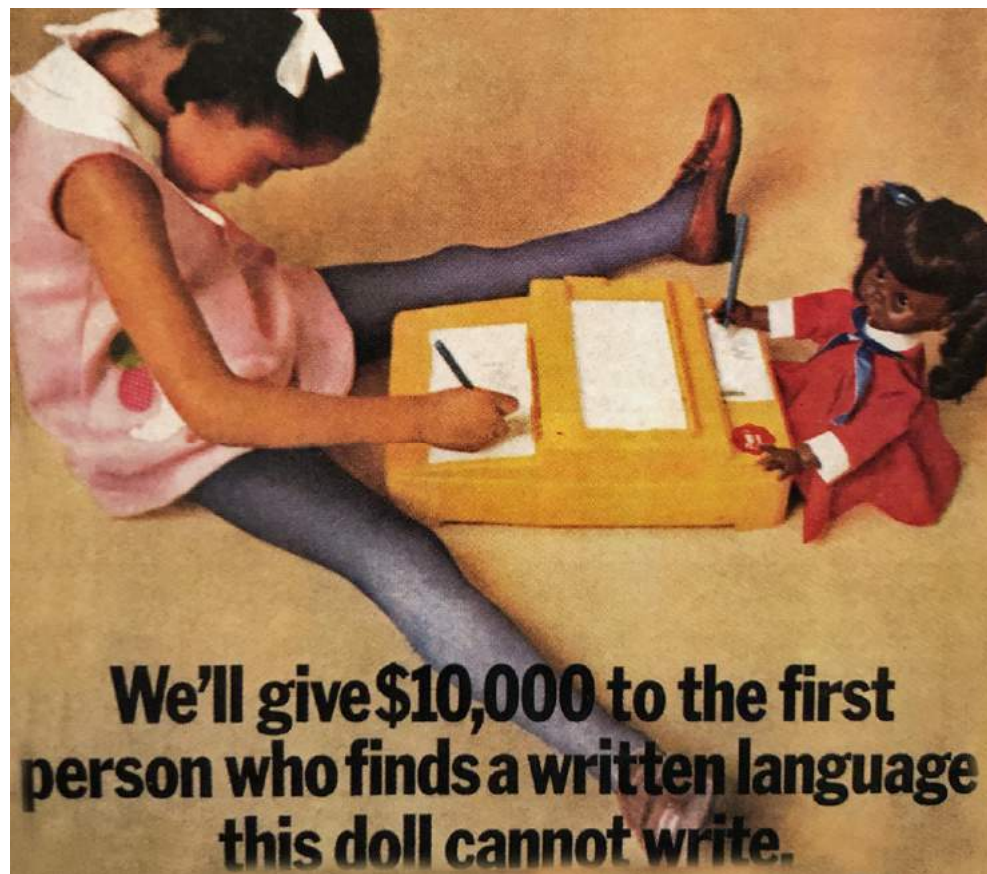
Horsman stuck to its longtime formula, manufacturing a limited range of moderately priced basic but well-made children's dolls. Horsman did not change but unfortunately, the toy market did. Children were asking for the mass-marketed dolls that they saw on TV.

Horsman Doll, Inc., which had gone through several changes in ownership, saw its sales, production, and work-force shrink. In 1986 it laid off its remaining 150 employees and closed the factory in Cayce, South Carolina.

The venerable name of Horsman was sold to Gata Box, Ltd. On a modest scale, Gata began selling dolls manufactured in Hong Kong. Gata's products were directed toward both children and adults doll collectors. They would produce limited editions of classic dolls from the past, such as: Tynie Baby Twins, HEbee and SHEbee, Bilken, Ella Cinders, Sister and Bright Star, Baby, Dimples, Brother, Buttercup, Baby Rosebud, and Pinafore Baby.

In 1999 Gata Box, Ltd. went out of business, succeeded by a new corporation known as Horsman, Ltd., headquartered in Great Neck, Long Island, NY. Millennium Edition dolls, including a pair of small Campbell Kids dressed as a bride and groom, were sold in 2000-2001. The company would market dolls that were made in China.

Today Horsman LTD. is based in Redwood City, CA. It is a web company as well as an agent company for companies in the U.S. that need overseas production sourcing.



Horsman advertised its African-American Peggy Play Pal in Ebony Magazine.

Information for this article on black Horsman dolls was extracted from the following two books:

- *Collector's Guide to Horsman Dolls 1865 - 1950* by Don Jensen
- *Horsman Dolls The Vinyl Era 1950 to Present* by Don Jensen

The information focuses on a very brief history of the Horsman doll company with a focus on information and photos of black Horsman dolls that were found in the two books. The article's story on black Horsman dolls basically ends in 1960 when the Horsman manufacturing plant left Trenton for South Carolina. The article is by no means a complete history of Horsman dolls.

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Trenton City Museum
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