Be Ours in 2021

Celebrate Worcester’s Valentine-making History with

#WHMValentine2021
A brief look at Worcester’s unique role in the history of American valentines.

And, an invitation for you to “BE LIKE ESTHER” by making your own Worcester-inspired Valentine!
Valentine’s Day represents the merging of an ancient pagan festival and the death of a Roman priest named Valentine.

His fond farewell message to his jailer’s daughter was signed “from your Valentine.”

Valentine’s Day has become a time for sweethearts (or hopeful sweethearts) to display their affection through messages.

Handmade, late 18th century – a “love knot”
Early valentines were heartfelt labors of love. This example, from the collection of Worcester Historical Museum, was hand-made in America in the late 18th century. It features a love knot design.

If you look closely, you can see that the verses are written on the inter-weaving lines of the knot.
According to local tradition, Worcester’s Esther Howland received an English valentine shortly after graduating from Mount Holyoke College in 1847. She was so impressed that she made similar valentines for her friends. Recipients liked her cards so much that Esther began to make some to sell in her father’s stationery and bookstore on Main Street.
Working out of the third floor of her family’s home on Summer Street, Esther Howland hired young Worcester women to work in assembly line fashion, making cards like this one. Esther’s business proved to be a big success.

Each woman added something different to the card. Background paper, brightly colored paper wafers, gilded lace, and decals imported from Europe were standard features.
Esther Howland’s valentines came in many sizes, colors, and designs. It is said that no two were ever exactly alike.
While it is generally agreed that Esther Howland was the first to make valentines in Worcester, the first commercial maker in America is subject to debate.

According to family folklore, Jotham Taft of North Grafton might have been making them before Esther.
Esther Howland’s valentine business moved to Harrington Corner, Main and Front streets, in 1874.

In 1879, she joined forces with Jotham Taft’s son Edward to form the New England Valentine Company (NEVCO). They made cards like this.
A feature of these early cards, the use of “springs,” was developed by Esther. Small folded strips of paper—“springs”—hold the top layer above the base for a three-dimensional effect.
Early valentines usually had short verses on the inside.

Some were printed right on the card; others were pasted in.
By the late 1880s, George Whitney was running the valentine business he and his brothers had opened in Worcester more than a decade earlier.

Whitney eventually bought out ten other American valentine makers, including Jotham Taft’s business and the New England Valentine Company.

Esther Howland retired to care for her sick father.
Similar to Howland and Taft valentines, early Whitney cards were hand-assembled, starting with a colored background to which a layers of lace and decals were applied.

George C. Whitney Valentine Company, c. 1870
By 1900, Whitney valentines were being printed. No longer “one of a kind,” the mass-produced cards used the traditional elements of earlier cards.

Instead of separate layers of background, decals, wafers, and lace, all the layers are machine printed directly onto the paper which was then folded to form the card.
Whitney valentines from the 20th century had longer verses and often included illustrations.
Worcester Historical Museum  ♥ Be Ours in 2021

The Whitney Company also made valentine postcards in many different styles.
This card is typical of the type of valentine the Whitney Company was producing by the tens of thousands when the factory closed in 1942.
Be like Esther…

…Jotham, Edward, or George!

BE LIKE ESTHER...

Here’s what you’ll need, or might want to have at hand (Don’t be limited by this list!)

- Heavy papers (assorted colors)
- Paper wafers
- Paste/glue sticks
- Lace (paper doilies)
- Paints, markers, crayons
- Scissors
- Decals: stickers, magazine pictures, photographs
- Miscellaneous decorations: beads, rickrack, buttons, feathers, yarn, etc.

and, of course, your imagination/creativity.

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