

# Curator's Choice

## Fig. 2. A "Whale" of a Well-Shaped Waist, 19th Century Style

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*Game of Dominoes* by Davidson Knowles  
printed in *The Illustrated London News*, Janu-  
ary 27, 1883.

While certainly not the most photogenic artifact in the collections at the Maryland Archaeological Conservation Lab, this six inch long strip of "whalebone" did not have to look good to be effective. It spent its useful life hidden from view, ensuring ladies the hourglass silhouette prescribed by Victorian fashion standards. Recovered from a Baltimore privy filled between 1850 and 1870, this unusual object was boning from an undergarment known as a corset.



Baleen corset boning from Feature 30 at the Federal Reserve Site (18BC27).

**B**aleen, commonly known as whalebone, is actually a keratinous hard tissue that forms in brush-like plates in the some aquatic mammals of the Cetacea order (MacGregor 1985). In whales in the Mysticoceti suborder, including the humpback, right, sperm and blue whale, these plates serve to filter the crustacean krill from seawater, which they then eat. Both flexible and strong, baleen was well-suited to the manufacture of a number of items, including combs, collar stiffeners, picture frames, fan blades and riding whips (Lauffenburger 1993:220).

**B**aleen was apparently first used in women's fashion in the western world in the 1590s, when the hooped petticoats known as farthingales were stiffened with strips of the substance (Lauffenburger 1993:219). It soon became an important component of corsets and stays, undergarments used to shape and hold the

torso into a prescribed shape. Baleen strips could be bent to the contours needed for the silhouette demanded by the fashion of the day. The strips-sometimes dozens per corset-would be inserted into narrow channels sewn into the body of the undergarment (Holloway Scott 2010).

**B**aleen corset boning from Feature 30 at the Federal Reserve Site (18BC27). By the mid-19th century, baleen began to be replaced by steel boning, which was less expensive and easier to manufacture (Holloway Scott 2010). Perhaps its presence in the circa 1850-1870 privy assemblage is explained by the arrival of newer technology or may reflect broader cultural outlooks about wearing corsets and campaigns for dress reform (Steele 2001).



54 View of pieces of baleen that have been cleaned and are standing outside.  
Alaska State Library, Rev. Samuel Spargo Photograph Collection (9328-99).

Alaska trader standing with plates of baleen, circa 1900 (<http://echospace.org/assets/'243.html>)

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Late 19th-century corset advertisement (<http://images.fineartamerica.com/images-medium-large/corset-ad-1898-graner.jpg>)



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