

# Curator's Choice

## *The Domino Effect: How an ancient Chinese game made it to America*

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Many of us played dominoes when we were young, but the game isn't just for children. It was a popular tavern and parlor game among adults in the 18th and 19th centuries in both Europe and America and is still a pastime enjoyed by many today. The MAC Lab curates several 19th-century collections from archaeological sites throughout Maryland which have well-preserved examples of these early game pieces (Figure 1).

There's evidence that the earliest version of the game originated in China as early as the 10th century, having evolved from dice (Encyclopaedia Britannica 1998). Chinese dominoes, also called tiles, bones, or stones, were designed to represent all the possible throws of a pair of dice (The Universities at Shady Grove 2015). In Chinese, dominoes are referred to as "dotted cards" and their design and use are more comparable to Western card games than the various games played with dominoes today (Encyclopaedia Britannica 1998).

The Western version of dominoes, and the one most often played in America, originated in Italy and France in the mid-18th century. It's unclear whether this was an independent invention or if the game arrived in the West via trading routes from the Far East. Shortly after appearing in Italy and France, the game made its way to England, likely via French prisoners of war, where it remained popular throughout the 19th century (Figure 2). The game found its way to America in the late 18th century, either from England or other European countries. Evidence that at least some dominoes made it to America directly from the European continent can be found among the artifacts recovered from the Roosevelt Inlet Shipwreck, a European trade ship that sank at some point in the last quarter of the 18th century off the coast of Delaware. Dominoes were among the tens of thousands of artifacts recovered from this shipwreck site (SEARCH n.d.).



Figure 2. "A Game of Dominoes" by Davidson Knowles printed in *The Illustrated London News*, January 27, 1883.

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Figure 1. A selection of dominoes from the MAC Lab's archaeological collections.

The name "domino" for the game piece likely came from the resemblance to the black and white hooded cloaks of the same name worn at masquerade balls in 18th-century France, which were in turn derived from the hoods worn by French priests in the Middle Ages (Schmidt 2017).

The earliest Chinese dominoes were made from animal bone or ivory, as were the first dominoes that appeared in Europe in the 18th century. However, by the 19th century, the game pieces had a thin, carved bone face with black dots and a dark wood back, possibly ebony, which were held together with small iron or copper nails (Figures 1 and 3). All the dominoes in the MAC Lab's collections are of this manufacture.



Figure 3. Late 19th/early 20th-century French bone and ebony domino set (Vintage Décor Français 2023).