

||| The HOME FORUM |||

A not-so-boring history of flooring

ARE THE FLOORS in your home made of wood? Tile? Are they covered with carpeting or vinyl? We have plenty of options for covering our floors now, with even ancient types of floors still in use today in different parts of the world. Here's a look at what's been underfoot for the past 5,000 years or so.



Track the dirt inside

In many early homes, the floor was just a patch of ground. This is still true in some parts of the world, such as places in Africa where the weather is always warm. Dirt is a good, inexpensive surface. Hay, straw, and cow dung are sometimes strewn on the floor and tamped down as people walk on it, creating a surface almost as hard as cement.

In some regions, household waste was just thrown on the floor and trampled down. During the Middle Ages in Europe (about AD 400 to 1400), animals sometimes shared the house with peasants, though in a separate room.

Occasionally the animals wandered into the humans' part of the house, and their dung was also trampled into the floor. When the mineral called saltpeter (potassium nitrate) was first used to develop gunpowder around the 1100s, the floors of former peasant homes served as a good source for saltpeter. It is found in places where manure and refuse accumulate in the soil under dry conditions.

The first known use for mint in Europe was as a room deodorizer. The herb was strewn across the floors to cover the smell of the litter. Stepping on the mint helped to spread its scent through the room.

In early North American homes, settlers would sometimes spread sand on top

of the dirt floor. When the litter in the room became unbearable, they'd simply sweep it out the door along with the sand. Then they'd spread a new layer of sand on the floor. Other settlers would spread peanut and sunflower seed shells on the floor. As these were trampled underfoot, the shells spread oil into the dirt to help settle the dust.

In the Los Banos area of central California, native American Yokuts dug house pits about three feet deep. They piled the dirt outside the hole for walls. Then they made domes from branches, reeds, and mud for a roof. As they walked across the dirt floors with their bare feet, the oil in their feet gradually made the dirt watertight and easy to clean.

Sometimes dirt floors were decorated to make them more attractive. Colored sand was used to form patterns in the dirt. In India this evolved into a well-known art form called "rangoli," or floor painting. On a mud floor, a painting could be formed from rice powder and flower petals. These were created at the doorstep to greet visitors entering the home or to mark an important occasion.

Dressing up stone

About 5,000 years ago, Egyptians developed stone construction. Stone and brick floors began to appear. Soon these floors became works of art as well as a useful surface for the home. Colored tiles created patterns called mosaics across the floor to add beauty to the house.

As far back as 3,000 years ago, Greeks created pebble mosaics for their floors. Gradually they began using oblong stone shapes rather than pebbles. This technique was used in ancient France, Spain, Italy, and Northern Europe.

During the Roman Empire (27 BC to AD 476) engineers found another advantage of stone floors – heating. They built a small basement with pillars under the floor to support large stone squares. A vent was created at one end of the basement, and a fire was started under the opposite end. The heat and smoke from the fire would heat the stone floor above.

Evidence also shows that ceramic tiles were used for floors thousands of years ago. The Romans introduced tilemaking in portions of Western Europe. After the fall of Rome, however, the craft was forgotten for centuries. Tile floors appeared and disappeared. Decorated tiles were used in Turkey, the Middle East, and in the Netherlands during the 1600s. It wasn't until the mid-1800s that they became popular again throughout Europe.

The modern tile industry began in 1843 when Herbert Minton revived tilemaking in England. In Latin and South America, plain, undecorated ceramic tiles were common. Tiles became popular in North America during the late 1500s and flourished until about 1930.

Walking on wood

The earliest known wood floors came into use during the Middle Ages. At first, rough planks were laid across the floor. Then these were sanded or smoothed by rubbing them with stone or metal. Later, varnishes or stains were applied to help smooth the floor and make it last longer.

Stains were also used to add patterns to the floors. Sometimes inlaid patterns were created by carving shapes out of different-colored woods and piecing them together to form patterns, like a puzzle. People also painted patterns and designs on the floor.

Now for something woolly

The oldest known woven rug was discovered in Siberia in the 1940s. Called the Pazyryk carpet, it dates back to about 400 BC. Other evidence suggests that some forms of rug-weaving were used in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the Middle East and Asia about 4,000 years ago.

Continued on next page

Phrases inspired by floors

It's hard to tell sometimes where or how a saying started, especially if it's an old saying. Here are some theories about the sources of common expressions related to floors.

From 'besom' to broom

To sweep floors during the Middle Ages, the British used a 'besom' – a handful of twigs with the leaves attached. Besoms were often made of twigs from the 'broom scrub,' and so the sweeping implements came to be called 'brooms' around AD 1000. Superstitious people put brooms across the door of a house to ward off witches. They thought that a witch had to count every straw in a broom placed across a door before entering.

'Snug as a bug in a rug'

Benjamin Franklin presumably invented this saying in 1772 when he used it in a letter to mean 'the utmost contentment.'

Carpetbagger

After America's Civil War, some greedy northerners (mostly poor whites) wanted to take advantage of southern blacks who had just been given the right to vote. They packed up their belongings in luggage made from carpets and moved south. They became known as 'carpetbaggers.'



SOURCE: 'Word and Phrase Origins,' by Robert Hendrickson.



ILLUSTRATIONS BY RICH CLABAUGH - STAFF

Continued from previous page

Carpetmaking in China dates back to the Sung Dynasty (AD 960 to 1279). Italian explorer Marco Polo saw some of these works during his travels through China and Turkey in the 1200s. He greatly admired their artistry.

The Romans used rugs on the floors and walls of their palaces. They even used them to pay taxes. When Egyptian Queen Cleopatra first met Roman Emperor Julius Caesar, she had herself smuggled in to him rolled up in a giant carpet.

Iran (then called Persia) greatly developed the art of rug weaving during the Safavid Dynasty (1502 to 1736). The patterns they developed are still used in

rugs around the world. "Persian rugs" are highly valued still.

A forgotten fad: floor cloths

A similar type of floor covering is the floor cloth, which has designs painted on sturdy material. These were used in fine homes in France as far back as the 1300s. In the 1600s they became common in England. Sailors brought home portions of canvas sailcloth painted with an attractive design to adorn their dirt floors. The cloths became popular and were produced in factories in England and New England. Their popularity waned with the development of linoleum.

Early American settlers often painted tile-like patterns on their floor cloths. Thomas Jefferson had two grass-green floor cloths in his home at Monticello in Virginia, to give a natural feeling indoors.

Finding a floor by accident

Resilient floors include such pliant floor surfaces as rubber, linoleum, or vinyl. Rubber floors first appeared

around 1200 and remained popular until the 1600s.

An English rubber manufacturer, Frederick Walton, noticed how linseed oil formed a leathery skin on top of paint. In 1863 he patented linoleum, still made by mixing linseed oil with powdered wood or cork (or both), resins, pigments, ground limestone, and drying agents.

Rubber, cork, and asphalt tiles were developed in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Laying different colored tiles was a popular way to make geometric designs.

Soon an "accidental" discovery led to a floor surface that quickly replaced these soft tiles in popularity.

In the late 1800s, European researchers combined a gas called vinyl chloride in a mixture

that resulted in a rigid material. No one could think of a good use for it, though.

In 1926, American inventor Dr. Waldo Semon was trying to bond rubber to metal. He tried using the vinyl chloride mixture with other chemicals. His first attempts resulted in wisps of gas and an occasional explosion. Eventually he created what we now call PVC (polyvinyl chloride) or vinyl. It was first used in shock absorbers. Later, it was used to develop synthetic tires. Used to insulate wires during World War II, it became popular as a floor covering after the war.

Today, sales of resilient flooring are second only to carpet in the United States. But you aren't limited to just one choice. Many people prefer an easy-to-clean vinyl or tile in the kitchen or bathroom, and wood, rugs, or carpeting in other rooms.

How many different types of flooring do you have in your home?

Sharon J. Huntington