GEORGE WASHINGTON'S DENTAL HEALTH

as demonstrated by his life portraits
by John M. Hyson, Jr., DDS
George Washington suffered from poor dental health throughout his lifetime. In 1756, at age 22, he lost his first tooth. Toothaches followed by extraction became an annual experience. In 1789, John Greenwood of New York made the first of four dentures for the first president. When Washington took the oath of office in 1789, his only remaining tooth was a bicuspid in his lower jaw. Eventually Washington utilized the services of nine different dentists and had at least six sets of artificial teeth.

In March 1781, when Washington was unable to go from New Windsor, New York, to Philadelphia for dental treatment, he wrote his dentist, Dr. John Baker (1732-1796):

A day or two ago I requested Colo[nel] Harrison to apply to you for a pair of Pincers to fasten the wire of my teeth. — I hope you furnished him with them. — I now wish you would send me one of your scrapers, as my teeth stand in need of cleaning, and I have little prospect of being in Philadelp[h]ia soon.

...Greenwood made several sets of artificial teeth for Washington, carving them out of hippopotamus ivory using beeswax molds.

Apparently, under the exigencies of war, Washington was forced to adjust his dentures and clean his own teeth. Undoubtedly the wire reference was to the wires that fastened a partial denture to his natural teeth.

John Greenwood (1760-1819) of New York City, a Revolutionary War veteran, was to become George Washington's favorite dentist. ("I shall always prefer your services to those of any other in the line of your present profession," Washington once confided in a letter.) Between 1789-98, Greenwood made several sets of artificial teeth for Washington, carving them out of hippopotamus ivory using beeswax molds. The dentures were held in place by spiral springs connecting the upper to the lower. After seeing the Greenwood set at the 1876 Centennial in Philadelphia, Dr. Henry Lovejoy Ambler (1900) remarked:

The wonder is, they say, that any man ever held them in his mouth five minutes. The teeth are bits of bone, scarcely trying to look like teeth, attached to gold plate, with strips riveted across to strengthen the teeth in place, while coiled wire at the end of the jaw make a spring, and assists in opening and closing the machine.

It must be mentioned that at the time, little was known about how dentures were to fit properly in one's mouth and a patient's ability to keep them in place "depended somewhat on training of the facial muscles." This problem was apt to give "a puff or 'pouting' expression" to Washington's face.
Describing Washington in 1790, one anonymous Englishman noted: “His mouth was like no other that I ever saw; the lips firm and the under jaw seeming to grasp the upper with force, as if its muscles were in full action when he sat still.” Oliver Wendell Holmes (1886) remarked:

Think of poor George Washington, his teeth always ready to drop like a portcullis and cut a sentence in two. See him in Stuart's admirable portrait, his thoughts evidently divided between the cares of empire and maintenance of the Status in quo of his terrific dental arrangement.”

Undoubtedly, George Washington’s daily routine both on the battlefield and at home on his estate at Mount Vernon was affected by his dental problems, despite his indulgence in oral hygiene products, prosthetic devices, and the services of professional dentists. Sognnaes (1973) described the probable effects of Washington’s dental dilemma:

During his Presidency, he must have suffered untold dental discomfort and pain, distractions from the business at hand. He probably did not laugh a lot and his choice of food must have been subject to extreme limitations, especially at official functions.

His artificial dental anatomy must have had a profound influence on his speech. At the very least, he would have kept the pronunciation of long words, especially those with “s” sounds, to a minimum. And certainly he must have been self-conscious in public, for he was continuously faced with the ever-present danger of a humiliating dental disaster. He must have had a deeply concerned look on his face, as well as the pouting lips which he repeatedly asked his dentists to help correct, in vain.

As a youth, Washington’s smile was described as “extraordinarily attractive”; however, this changed as his yearly tooth...
loss occurred. General Horace Porter (1886) commented on Washington's gradual facial changes, which his life portraits clearly demonstrate:

*History says that in his youth he had a beautiful bow mouth that captivated all the women in Virginia, married and single, but his dentist came along and manufactured those artificial teeth, which were said to have been set on solid blocks and tied in with a shoe string. They gave that postoffice box mouth to the father of his country, with which he has gone down to history.*

Washington's various life portraits demonstrate a vast difference in his countenance, perhaps best explained by his early tooth loss with loss of lip support and vertical dimension (loss of distance between the chin and nose), which was not corrected by his roughly-made, ill-fitting, clumsy, and irksome dentures. Then, too, he had many sets of artificial teeth, some of which he wore and then discarded; occasionally, he did not even wear his dentures. Besides the well-known Charles Willson Peale and Gilbert Stuart, other contemporary artists who painted Washington were Pierre Eugène du Simitière (1779), William Dunlap (1783), Robert Edge Pine (1785), John Ramage (1789), Marchioness de Bréhan (1789), Christian Gülager (1789), Edward Savage (1789-90), John Trumbull (1790-92), Joseph Wright (1790), Archibald Robertson (1791), William Williams (1793), Walter Robertson (1794), F. Kemmelmeyer (1794), Adolph U. Wertmüller (1795), James Sharples (1796), and Charles B. J. F. de St. Mémin (1799).

In 1824, the diversity of Washington's portraiture influenced the National Academy of Fine Arts to establish a committee to select the artist's rendering which most correctly represented his real image.

**CHARLES WILLSON PEALE: 1772-79**

Of all the portraits, the ones (seven in all) by Charles Willson Peale (1741-1827) are generally considered the most authentic and realistic likenesses.
of Washington. All the other artists failed to correctly portray his mouth in an easy pose. Peale, of course, did have the advantage of painting a younger Washington in 1772 before he lost his teeth. He may have retained this image for his later portraits.

Peale also may have enjoyed some advantage by having practiced dentistry (he discovered how to fuse platinum to porcelain teeth) and probably surmised that the ill-fitting dentures were the real cause of Washington's mouth distortion. Therefore, according to Tuckerman (1859), Peale proceeded to carve and mold a set of lead dentures sculptured to relax and support the facial muscles in a natural position. Held in place by springs, Washington supposedly only wore these while posing for Peale at various sittings. They gave Washington a better expression and more youthful appearance.  

Peale's first portrait of Washington, at age 40, in the uniform of a Virginia Militia colonel, painted in May 1772 at Mount Vernon, depicts a young, contemplative, "soldier-philosopher" Washington before he lost the majority of his teeth. His beard is dark, eyes to the right and deeply set, and his cheeks ruddy. Washington referred to being "under the hands of Mr. Peale," describing him as being a sullen man "now and then so under the influence of Morpheus when some critical strokes" were painted that Washington wondered just how Peale would succeed "in describing to the world what manner of man I am." Biographer Ferling (1988) points out that Washington, for his first portrait, chose to be portrayed as a soldier rather than as a planter because his military service was the high point of his career to that time. Washington paid Peale 18.4 pounds for the portrait.  

Peale, commissioned by John Hancock, painted Washington sometime in mid-1776, and he is known to have executed at least five other paintings of Washington.
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Jean-Antoine Houdon 1785

The plaster of Paris life mask of Washington done in October 1785 at Mount Vernon by Jean-Antoine Houdon (1741-1828), a French sculptor commissioned by the state of Virginia, is considered the most accurate rendering of the 53-year-old Washington's face. It shows a "firm and handsomely contoured mouth," though not full-lipped, and an attractive face. Houdon spent nearly three weeks at Mount Vernon, working on the mask and a clay bust from which he made a life-size statue, currently standing in the rotunda of the state capitol in Richmond. The bust shows a "sinewy man of action, a leader whose tough, resolute, indomitable appearance served as a clarion call to others to follow his command." The face appears "broad, short and round and with a very unsymmetrical chin."
Joseph Wright (1756-1793) painted Washington in 1784 and 1790, during his second year as president. The second portrait is considered a “true and faithful likeness” of Washington’s face; however, it differs from the Houdon’s work in that the “eyes are not as deep,” the nose is too long and pointy, the upper lip is “shorter and straighter,” and the mouth is broader with a greater distance from the lower lip to the chin. Also, the face is “narrower” and not as “fleshy.” Wright also made a life mask of Washington, which was flawed because he laughed before the plaster set. Of Wright’s work, Washington said:

*His forte seems to be in giving the distinguishing characteristics with more boldness than delicacy, and although he commonly makes the features very strongly, yet I cannot flatter you that you will find the touches of his pencil extremely soft...*
George Washington Parke Custis (1781-1857), Martha Washington's grandson and Washington's adopted son, stated:

In 1789, the first president lost his teeth, and the artificial ones with which he was furnished answering very imperfectly the purpose for which they were intended; a marked change occurred in the appearance of his face, more especially in the projection of the under lip, which forms so distinguishing a feature in the works of Stuart and others who painted portraits of the great man subsequent to 1789.  

Charles Fraser, the miniature painter, said that after 1791 age and "the use of false teeth" altered Washington's appearance so much that when Stuart painted him in 1795, "he looked like a different person."  

Both the Stuart and Charles Willson Peale portraits present a marked difference in Washington's expression, although both men studied under the same mentor, Benjamin West (1738-1820), in London. In Stuart's 1795 portrait—millions of copies were made from engravings of this so-called "Vaughn Portrait"—there is a "projecting upper lip" which gives a pouting expression unnatural to Washington. The president, himself, did not like it. As early as 1850, the Philadelphia Bulletin remarked: "In Stuart's portrait the mouth is remarkably firm, tightly closed, and altogether peculiar. It has often been referred to as singularly characteristic of Washington's iron resolution. Yet the truth is it obtains this expression from a badly fitting set of teeth. A close observer can see on scrutinizing the portrait that the mouth looks swelled above the lips, so that the picture itself, in the eye of a competent critic, corroborates the tradition."
ne dentist remarked that it “always looked as tho [sic] he had a quid of tobacco in his mouth.” Other contemporary experts put the blame for the “certain feebleness about the lines of the mouth” on the dentures made for Washington just before the April 1796 Stuart portrait. They were described as “too large and clumsy” and gave Washington's mouth the peculiar expression that some critics called “grandmotherly.” Stuart later stated that he wanted to paint Washington “as he looked at that time.” Reportedly, Stuart packed cotton inside Washington's mouth to support the lips. Then, too, there was the fact that Stuart, a New Englander, was not particularly fond of Washington and may have deliberately overemphasized his facial deformity. According to Washington biographer James Thomas Flexner, “No other man's rage did Washington's historical image more harm.”

In all, Stuart did three life portraits of Washington. The Vaughn Portrait from 1795 depicted a robust, healthy but overweight Washington. Some thought he appeared “tight-lipped, assertive, humorless, and majestical.” His hair was gray and receding. Even Stuart did not like it. The second Stuart life portrait (full length), done in 1796, is called the “Lord Lansdowne Portrait” and the third, the “Athenaeum Portrait,” was done at Martha Washington's request the same year. Stuart used the opposite side of the face (the left) for these last two portraits, but they still gave a “drawn or stiff appearance to the mouth,” even though he refined the lines and idealized the facial countenance. Some called the mouth “slightly caricatured.” From these portraits, Stuart painted 80 to 100 likenesses of Washington. The “Athenaeum Portrait” has remained the most popular among the public.
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