

'Dentists' and the establishment of the Anglo-American profession in the 18th century. Part 4. North America

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This series of papers examines how the Anglo-American dental profession was established in the eighteenth century, examining its need for a name and identity, public recognition and official status. This final paper describes the presence of the new dentists in North America before and after the revolution.

INTRODUCTION

North America before and after independence

The history of dentists in North America is the history of boldness and enterprise, of men prepared to undertake the hazardous journey to cross the Atlantic, and once across to establish themselves in a new profession under the new name of 'dentist' which they took with them. That some then became enmeshed in the revolution of 1775 until 1783 was not to be foreseen, but is a reason why at least some of their history was recorded. Paul Revere (1734–1818) and his ride on April 18th 1775,¹ and the dental tribulations of George Washington (1732–1799, President 1789–1797), ensured historical immortality to men who otherwise might have sunk into obscurity.

The exchange was by no means one way. Men like Robert Wooffendale (1742–1828) whose wife was American, and whose son John also went to America in 1794, moved to and fro, finally settling there in 1795. American dentists like Peter Whitewood (–1799) came to London. Jacob Hemet (1727–1790) went to New York in 1769, and was in America at least until 1773, returning later to London. Charles Edward Whitlock (–1822) was another who moved to and fro across the Atlantic, to Annapolis in 1793 and then via Philadelphia, Charleston, Boston, to New York.² He is recorded as having treated

some of Washington's family³ before returning to England in 1807, and then back to America for 1812–13. He, like the Italian Grimaldis who were famous in London in the eighteenth century as actors and dentists, had found that being an actor-manager (his wife was the sister of the famous actress Sarah Siddons) was no impediment to dental activity of an itinerant nature.

With the new nation and the new profession of dentists, free from old associations, came fresh thinking, and, as detailed in a previous article in this Journal, it was the American Parmlly brothers who trialled the concept of the dental institution or school in London early in the following century.⁴

Official appointments in North America

While North America was still British, Gazettes published in England covered hospital appointments in the Colony. However, in 1776, at the start of conflict, no dentists or operators for the teeth were listed on the staff of British hospitals in North America⁵, and nor were they in 1783 at the end of the war.⁶ Clearly, after independence, there would be no Royal appointments but Baker, le Mayeur and John Greenwood (1760–1818), three of the practitioners consulted by George Washington, the first President of the United States following the Constitution of 1789, were all 'dentists' or 'surgeon-dentists'.

An undated trade card, reproduced in the first volume of the *American Journal of Dental Science* (the first such journal in the world), carries his likeness and declares Greenwood to be 'Surgeon Dentist to his Excellency George Washington'.^{6,7} The Journal also relates some episodes from his life and exciting times during the war. Washington experienced a large number of

IN BRIEF

- Examines the move of the new title of 'dentist' across the Atlantic to North America.
- Notes the significance of the new dentists coinciding with the new nation.

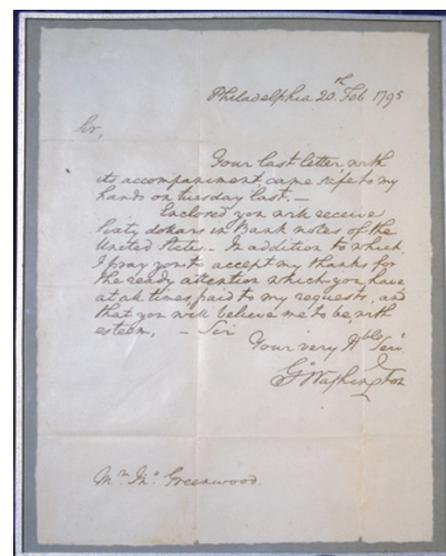


Fig. 1 Letter from George Washington to John Greenwood. 1795. ©Courtesy of the Science Museum/Science & Society Picture Library

dental complaints, and he lost all his teeth by 1796. The Science Museum in London holds a copy of a letter dated 20th February 1795 from Washington to Greenwood, thanking him for a denture and enclosing payment of 60 dollars (Fig. 1).

Robert Wooffendale, John Baker, Thomas Hamilton

In 1766 the first dentist under that name to arrive in North America from England was Robert Wooffendale. He advertised his services in New York in September that year,^{8,9} 'ROBERT WOOFFENDALE, Surgeon Dentist, lately arrived from London; (who was instructed by Thomas Berdmore, Esq; Operator for the teeth to his present Majesty) begs Leave to inform the Public, that he performs all Operations upon the Teeth, Gums, Sockets, and Palate: Likewise fixes artificial

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*Teeth so as to escape Discernment, and without Pain, or the least inconvenience. N.B. May be spoke with at his Lodgings, at Mr. John Laboyteaux, at the Golden-Hill, betwixt the Fly-Market and the New-Dutch Church, from the hours of Nine in the Morning to Six in the Evening, said Wooffendale intends to Leave New-York, the 16th of next Month.*¹⁰

He was clearly successful enough to postpone leaving, and advertised again in January 1767 from 'Mrs. Hunt's, opposite Mr. Roberdeau's, in Second-street': *'From the Encouragement he has received from the Public, thinks it necessary to stay some Time longer in this City -.'*¹¹

John Baker (c1732–1796) arrived in America on or before 1766 (Weinberger 1761,¹² Encyc. Brit. 1763¹³) in Boston, in June of that year calling himself an 'operator for the teeth'.¹⁴ However, by 1767, in three newspaper advertisements he is termed 'surgeon dentis [sic]'¹⁵ which may or may not have been a misprint, or possibly a mistake from merely hearing the new name rather than seeing it in print. (Interestingly, as seen in Part 1 of this series, the entry for Joseph Fox was similarly misspelled in the Barber's register in 1784). In 1768 Baker's 'pupil' Paul Revere (1734–1818) refers to him as 'surgeon-dentist'.

The transitional nature of the new professional title is underlined by a Thomas J. Hamilton, who, as recorded by Anne Hargreaves, advertised his presence in Boston, Philadelphia, New York, and Baltimore from September 1768 to 1800 as a 'surgeon dentist and operator for the teeth, from London'.¹⁶ Another to use a mix of terms was James Daniel, wig-maker, hair-dresser, and operator for the teeth. Somewhat surprisingly, although he stated that he had studied in London under Marsh, the surgeon-dentist, he chose not to use the title himself in his advertisement in New York in 1766, otherwise he would have joined Wooffendale and Baker as a pioneer.¹⁷

Baker extracted several teeth for George Washington at Mount Vernon in October 1773,¹⁸ and he was still in correspondence with Washington in 1781, some of which correspondence was intercepted by the British. A recent and well-illustrated history of Baker and Revere may be found on the website of J. L. Bell.¹⁹

John Baker is the more notable in the American histories, partly because, unlike Wooffendale, he did not return to England (Wooffendale was back by at least 1783) and because he has gone down in history both as the dentist who instructed the revolutionary hero and symbol Paul Revere and as the instructor of the first all-American

dentist, and neighbour of Revere in Boston, Isaac Greenwood, (1730–1803). Greenwood termed himself an 'ivory turner' when offering dental services in 1781, and by 1789 was 'dentist'.²⁰ It was his son John who would in turn become Washington's dentist.²¹

Paul Revere advertised only briefly in his dental capacity, in 1768,²² when he did not term himself a dentist, but as a goldsmith who was prepared to maintain the false teeth fixed by Baker, and to construct artificial teeth. By 1770, however, he was referring to himself as a dentist, (not surgeon dentist) able after two years experience and hundreds of cases, *'to fix teeth as well as any Surgeon Dentist who ever came from London'*.²³

In Part 2 of this series, the importance of the use of the term 'patient' in referring to those cared for by dentists was stressed, and possibly the earliest example of this usage in North America appears in 1768, in an advertisement in the *New York Journal and General Advertiser* inserted by Michael Poree, surgeon-dentist. *'The Number of Patients now under Dr Poree's Care, in Philadelphia, prevents his visiting the different Parts of North America...'*²⁴ This is the same year that Berdmore used the term in England.

The American War of Independence

The American War of Independence, which lasted from 1775 until 1783, with France joining the new United States in war against Britain in 1778, might have placed American dentistry firmly in the French camp. However, there is little sign of this having happened either linguistically or in the interchange of personnel. In his list of dentists and surgeon dentists practising in America in the eighteenth century, Weinberger identifies only two using the French spelling – F. Raymond in Baltimore in 1792, *dentiste* and *oculiste*, and Liber in Philadelphia, *chirurgien dentiste*.²⁵

The porous nature of the Anglo-American front line during the revolution is clearly demonstrated by the move of Whitewood to London in or before 1777,²⁶ where he was important for his instruction of Waite senior, and, in the opposite direction, the French dentist Jean Pierre Le Mayor who left London in 1781 after several years in practice as a surgeon in Gt Portland Street for practice as a dentist (not *dentiste*) in America where he also anglicised his name to John Mayer. Having taken exception to something said at dinner by an English general, he hopped over, and is noted as one of George Washington's dentists. The whole story is related by Weinberger.²⁷

Immediately after the war ended, Andrew

Spence arrived in Philadelphia in 1784. He was the nephew of Thomas Spence, who had instructed him, and who was 'dentist to his Britannic Majesty' – which Andrew obviously considered to be no bar to his own success in independent America. Another to make his way across the Atlantic was the second son of Bartholomew Ruspini who offered his services as surgeon-dentist for a short time at 34 Hanover Square, New York City in 1786.²⁸

Numbers of dentists in America in the eighteenth century

Weinberger in his comprehensive *History of Dentistry in America* mentioned above, identifies some 51 dentists and surgeon dentists between 1766 and 1799, a number which compares favourably with the numbers (71) Wright recorded in London (see Part 2 of this series). He records as the earliest surgeon-dentist William Baker in Virginia in the context of treating George Washington, on the basis of an entry in Washington's Ledger of 26th November 1755. The ledger, which is now available to all online, identifies this Baker as a hatter, not a dentist, and the circumstantial evidence offered by Weinberger is not sufficient to allow for Baker to be cited as the earliest user of the title dentist in America. This usage would have pre-dated the confirmed use in England. Possible, but unlikely. In what was to become Canada, the European population was small, particularly so in English speaking North Canada, and it would seem that the word dentist did not appear in print in the eighteenth century. South Canada was predominantly French speaking.

Public service; Hornby and Richard Cortland Skinner

Weinberger draws particular attention to a Mr Hornby, surgeon-dentist from London, who in 1772 advertised that he would give *'ADVICE and MEDICINE to the POOR gratis'*. This limited pro-bono activity, though to be commended, is of a different order from the position of the dentist who closes this account, Richard Cortland Skinner (–1834). If the dentists who cared for George Washington are the equivalent of the Royal appointments in England, Skinner is the counterpart of those in England, Rae, Parkinson and others, who had been appointed to serve, either pro-bono or as official appointments, in orphanages and dispensaries. The benevolent institution founded by Bartholomew Ruspini was noted in Part 2 of this series. Skinner was a pupil of Ruspini, from whom perhaps he had acquired the motivation towards his public service. He had practised in Philadelphia but is noted here for his appointment as Dentist to the Dispensary of New York in 1792.²⁹

The certificate given by the Board of Managers of the Dispensary of the City of New York to surgeon-dentist Skinner on September 2, 1792 reads: 'Sir, *The Board of Managers of the Dispensary received yours addressed to them; they directed me to acquaint you of the acceptance of your offers, in such cases as may be of a aid to the Dispensary. It gives pleasure, Sir, to find that an institution founded upon such motives, will meet with your benevolent attention...*' Skinner added the rider that; 'Poor people afflicted with complaints in the teeth and gums, will be attended at the dispensary, Hospital, Alms-house, or at the house of the operator, No. 64 Fair Street, and relieved gratis. A request from any physician or surgeon of this city, or any of the superintendents, trustees, or official visitors of either of those benevolent institutions, will be immediately attended to, and assistance given free of any expense.'³⁰ It is interesting that Skinner refers to himself here as 'the operator' as late as 1801 although dentist is used elsewhere in the text.

SUMMARY

A question not infrequently heard in relation to the profession of dentistry, is, 'Dentists were barbers, weren't they?' To reply, 'Not really, although some barbers did do some dentistry, particularly extractions', is both long-winded, (made worse if an explanation of operators for the teeth is attempted), and defensive.

This paper brings to a conclusion a sequence of four which provide contemporary evidence showing that the introduction of the term dentist to describe practitioners of dentistry over the fifty years from 1745 in England (including the 13 states in North America until 1775–86) and then the new nation of the United States, was much more than a passive process of adoption from the French or Italian, but an active, and indeed essential contribution to the creation of the modern profession.

In North America the profession took vigorous root, and if, as described in a previous paper, Americans attempted without success to start a school in London just 20 years into the next century, it was in America that the first school for dentists was to be successfully launched in Baltimore in 1840.

By adopting a name and fulfilling the

three Hancocks' criteria, the new dentists in both old and new countries created their profession. *In nomine erat omen*.^{*} In answer to Shakespeare's question, examined by Hancocks; 'What's in a name? That which we call a rose By any other name would smell as sweet' (Romeo and Juliet, Act II, Scene II.), the answer for the dentist was, and is, *everything*.

These analytical essays would not have been possible without the huge amount of data recorded by the historians of the profession. If Hillam, Hargreaves, Menzies Campbell, Weinberger and King are singled out for particular mention, it is only because they have provided the bulk of the material used. Michael Gunningham advised on the Latin. The assistance of the Librarians and Curators at the Honourable Company of Barbers of London, the British Dental Association, the Royal College of Surgeons, the Wellcome Institute, the Science Museum, and the British Museum and Library is gratefully acknowledged.

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