

Taking care of your teeth now alleviates problems in the future...

Removing a Common Myth About Our First President

by Dr. Brad Edgren

Contrary to the popular urban myth, George Washington did not have dentures made with wooden teeth. However, the truth behind his dentures may be more unsettling.



George Washington by Gilbert Stuart, oil on canvas, 1796.

The first president of the United States suffered from gum disease and tooth decay for most of his adult life, having his first tooth extracted at 24 years of age. By the time he became president in 1789, at the age of 67, he was left with only a single premolar.

The teeth for dentures in the 18th century were not made from wood but from more unsavory sources. The teeth in George Washington's dentures were made from hippo or elephant ivory, teeth from horses, cows, donkeys and yes other humans. Unfortunately, or fortunately these teeth from other sources deteriorated over time.

Copper, lead-tin, and silver alloys were also used in the construction of his dentures. The teeth were wired into place with lead used as the base to hold the

teeth into position. His upper and lower dentures were attached with a hinge and springs to aid in opening while the dentures were in use. His dentures didn't fit well and President Washington had to clench to keep the dentures in place; hence why he rarely smiled. Washington often complained about his facial appearance because his dentures affected the profile of his lips making them "bulge out" according to a letter he wrote to his dentist John Greenwood.

So why did the rumor of George Washington having wooden teeth arise? President Washington enjoyed his fortified Madeira wine. The wine would darken the teeth and stain the hairline fractures inherent in the ivory giving them a wood grain appearance. The darkening of his dentures from his enjoyment of wine gave rise to the myth.

President Washington had several sets of partial and complete dentures during his lifetime. His teeth were very important to him. There is only one remaining complete set of his dentures left and they are part of the collection at his home at Mount Vernon.



Washington's dentures, that he wore to hide his edentulousness, were made from multiple materials. The last remaining complete set of Washington's dentures are in the collection at Mount Vernon.

Today, dentures are made of out of acrylic resins, porcelain, and in the case of partial dentures, metal bases (not lead) are used to hold the fake teeth. Implants



The modern dentures of today provide superior support, wear, and aesthetics compared to the dentures of a couple of centuries ago.

can also be used to hold the dentures in the mouth, keeping them from shifting during talking and chewing. Dentures have come a long way since President Washington's "wooden teeth". However, nothing is as good as the teeth you are born with, so take care of your teeth! **G**

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