

“Holding the Atlantic World In His Mouth”: George Washington, an MHS Portrait, and the Culture of Teeth in the 18th Century

Peter Drummey 00:00

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Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 01:06

[Intro music fades in] This is Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai.

Cassie Cloutier 01:18

This is Cassie Cloutier.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 01:21

And this is The Object of History, the podcast of the Massachusetts Historical Society (MHS). Since 1791, the MHS has sought to collect, preserve, and communicate the building blocks of history. Each episode examines an object, document or set of items from the society's millions of manuscript pieces and artifacts. We take you on a behind the scenes tour of our stacks to explore the incredible stories held within our collections. As you just heard from Peter Drummey, Chief Historian & Stephen T. Riley Librarian, we are trying to unravel the mysteries behind one of the

most unconventional portraits of our nation's first president. What makes this portrait of Washington look so unfamiliar and unusual? Could it be linked to the intricate history he shared with his dentures and teeth? And does he bear a passing resemblance to the renowned actor George C. Scott?

Cassie Cloutier 02:18

Join us along with Peter and Anne Bentley, the MHS Curator of Art & Artifacts, as we reveal the unexpected connections that lie beneath the surface of this iconic image. But first, we hear from Lucy Smith, a doctoral candidate in history, and Women's and Gender Studies from the University of Michigan, who will take us on a journey through history, exploring the fascinating and at times disturbing world of 18th century dentistry, the pain Washington and many of his contemporaries endured and the surprising materials and origins of his dentures. [Intro music fades out]

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 02:58

Lucy let's have you start with the origins of this project, and then go into it a little bit, give our listeners something to sink their teeth into.

Lucy Smith 03:07

Yeah, for sure. In my former career before going to graduate school, I actually worked at the museum field at George Washington's Mount Vernon, where I worked with K through 12 educators around the country. And we brought in culinary food historian Michael Twitty to speak to our educators. He was really thinking about kind of a lot of African food ways and as well as kind of the preparation of food that was done by the enslaved population at Mount Vernon. And Michael made an offhanded comment about how not only is Washington consuming food that's from historically African and black food ways prepared by enslaved African chefs, but also physically needed enslaved bodies to consume his food, in the sense of the assumption that there is a possibility that Washington has enslaved teeth in his dentures. And that idea just really stuck with me. And I did not go to graduate school assuming I'd be writing about teeth at all, but I kind of threw it out there as a topic, an idea and started to look around to see if there was kind of enough

meat on the bone as it were to do this. And there really was, and it's been pretty eye opening, the amount of teeth and dentures and dentistry that keep coming up in the archives that really played a key foundational part in a lot of our ideas about the body that we still see today.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 04:13

Just that idea of Washington needing enslaved people's teeth. There's a lot there to unpack. You write here that nine teeth Washington purchased from the enslaved community that were potentially used in the process of live tooth transplantation, or to craft dentures for Washington. How does he purchase something from someone who is an enslaved person, first off, and then there's more there?

Lucy Smith 04:40

I think the first thing is we often think about the history of enslavement. I think the most Americans really gravitate to think about 19th century slavery. So, *12 Years a Slave* and a lot of the enslavers are coming out there, which is a really distinct moment. Earlier in the 18th century, it wasn't uncommon for enslaved folk to sell items and for Washington to purchase them and those are things like eggs, different produce, notably tended in gardens, because once again, their food rations are not enough to survive. So enslaved people are having to supplement their diet sometimes with hunting and fishing, as well as, like I said, produce and poultry. Washington is regularly purchasing these items. Similarly, there were cases where enslaved people would be hired out sometimes have their own kinds of funds as well. So, you know, enslaved people had purchasing power in the 18th century. And so, it's not incredibly uncommon to see an enslaver purchasing items in the 18th century from the enslaved. It was not uncommon for people to sell their teeth in the 18th century. Open any colonial newspaper, you're going to see advertisements for people saying, I will buy your teeth typically for about two guineas each is typically what the going rate was. Washington does purchase the teeth from the enslaved population. However, he pays only about half of what it would be on the market value. Once again, we don't know what those conversations look like. We don't know what the coercion looked like, there's a lot of things we

don't know. But the reality is, those teeth were purchased in a system that is alarming, and certainly paid far less than what would be seen typical during that time.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 06:08

So, if the tooth is decaying, if there's a problem with it, it's probably easier to extract. But the idea of going into someone's perfectly healthy mouth, how do the mechanics of this work, they walk around saying, 'Open your mouth, those are nice teeth, that I want that one right there, and I'll give you two guineas for it.' And then that person says, 'Deal.' So, they sit down and just have to undergo this horrible, painful, excruciating experience.

Lucy Smith 06:36

Yeah, I mean, I think we have to understand as well, that I mean, obviously the folks who are quote, the donors, which is the phrase they use in these early medical texts, these are folks in really precarious economic positions, right? To go through that process is going to require a certain level of desperation. And so, like I said, there were those advertisements, but you use the phrase, nice teeth, oh, that's a nice tooth, right? We know that today. And that's what happens during this time period. There's this evolution of idea of going from teeth are a thing we have, it's functional. As you age, they're going to get lost, there's going to be problems. And that's just part of being a human being. However, there's a real shift that happens. Teeth mean something. And we do this today, think about the rise in the proliferation of braces in our society. Think about the rise of cosmetic dentistry. We read people based on their teeth and their smile, it tells us a lot about someone, and those ideas are really start to happen in 18th century, particularly in 18th century America, where there's a transition to having a clean white bright smile means you are a virtuous, good character. In other words, I can look at your outside self, and I can see something of that hidden inside self. And that's a really pivotal ideological shift that happens throughout this time period. And so, all of a sudden, people are looking at their own teeth that are now being rotted and decayed because of things like the sugar trade because of coffee, Madeira, chocolate, tea, all of these different kinds of ritualistic consumption moments. Those are rotting your teeth, literally. And now people think oh, that reflects poorly on me. So now I got to do something about it. And that's how we then get to I

now need teeth from people selling them as I've mentioned before, typically two guineas. Another place that was common in the early 19th century was actually from European war dead, battlefield dead. It was not uncommon for scavengers to go and remove teeth from battlefield dead. So much of this became known as Waterloo teeth. And even in the fact in 1807, John Greenwood, George Washington's final dentist, actually could brokered a deal with a French dentist and imported 4,300 human teeth. I'll say that again. He imported 4,300 teeth for about 2,628 francs, or 438 pieces of silver. In case you're wondering, 4,300 teeth is equivalent to about 135 mouths. So, 135 people. Now, they didn't take all the teeth. Certain teeth had different values. For example, the front teeth are often seen as the most valuable and there's actually literally an itemized receipt to Greenwood, about what number of teeth that are there. So, there's X number of good teeth, there's X number of eye teeth what we would call now canines, and it goes through this list. So, we have the literal receipts to show that this is an Atlantic world trade that is happening.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 09:41

What does it say that your teeth are not from you, but potentially from a cadaver or from a person who is enslaved? Does that matter?

Lucy Smith 09:51

And that's the big question is whether or not do you actually feel concerned about that? And I think there's kind of two different ways we can think about this question. So, on one hand, there becomes a concern about contamination in Britain in particular as a coming anxiety around class contamination. But the reason why live tooth transplants, for example really goes into decline, a) it doesn't really work. But b), it's because it gets really associated with venereal disease. There's this anxiety that somehow venereal disease, particularly Syphilis is going to get transferred to whoever receives this donor tooth. It's complicated, because at the time, to treat syphilis, you would take mercury, which causes your teeth to fall out. So, it becomes this kind of anxiety for it. And particularly for young ladies. If you're a gentle lady, you've gone through this process, you have this tooth in here, and then oops, I now have syphilis, it must be the tooth. Now it's reflecting on your virtue. And so there's on one hand, there's an anxiety about that process happening, which is one of

the reasons why that fad really fades. And instead, they move more towards things like dentures, artificial teeth, things like that, which they have their own problems. But I think another way for us to think about is a lot of the rationalization happened is this is during a moment of the consumer revolution. We are buying goods from literally all over the world, people are putting them in and on their bodies in every kind of way. This is just another commodity essentially, that is going to be in use, or you can think about it in terms of how it was fairly common for children to be led out to wet nurses, whether those are free or enslaved or poor, literally farmed out into the more rural areas. And so, there's already kind of a culture of bodily exchange for lack of a better word for my own nourishment, my own needs. So, there's already that kind of mental framework that people accept that these bits and pieces can move and change. And so therefore, I'm going to use those trappings for myself, and we do this today with our own cosmetics, you know, not necessarily human teeth, but within a lot of own cosmetics things. There are all kinds of animal bits and things like that are there. We still do that. We've just have a little bit more distance perhaps from it.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 12:05

Alright, well, let's turn to George Washington. You probably got this question a lot at Mount Vernon. But what is the deal with George Washington's teeth?

Lucy Smith 12:15

Washington kind of always had dental troubles. Part of that is a combination of probably genetics, as well as changing diets that are happening throughout the 18th century, things like sugar, tea, coffee, hot chocolate, things like that, perhaps some illnesses from when he was younger, might have affected some of his kind of bone loss and things like that. So, Washington has his first tooth removed when he is 24 years old. And one of the useful things about Washington is that he is very fastidious notetaker and marks everything, which I imagine if I was working for him, I would get pretty annoyed with but it's really useful for historians. And so, he's really kind of writing about dental pain and dental tooth troubles throughout his entire life. He loses his first tooth when he is 24 years old, and continues to kind of loose teeth throughout. So much so that actually during the American Revolutionary War, he is writing to dentists constantly to try to get relief. I mean, imagine

you're trying to command an army while you have just excruciating pain that's happening in your mouth. Everywhere he travels, he's trying to find a dentist to try to get some kind of pain relief of some kind. Sometimes these are artificial teeth. Sometimes these are tooth extractions, and things like that. So much so during the American Revolutionary War, because when the French became involved with the Rev War, one of the things they brought were their medical practice and within the French military, you always had your surgeons trained in tooth extraction and dental health. And the Americans really adopted that because you need to have your troops have strong healthy teeth so they can tear open gunpowder packets. So now we have all of these troops who are being exposed to dental care. Now we have all of these surgeons in the military who are being trained in dental care. And then after the war, they're being dispersed back in their own communities. And Washington is part of that. He is trying to pick up dentists everywhere he can kind of go. His first big denture start happening in the 1780s. So, when he's inaugurated into office, he only has one remaining tooth in his head, and the set of dentures that he has there that is now currently housed in New York Academy of Medicine. It's an ivory base, with some human teeth and some ivory in it as well. But there's a hole in the molar so it could slip over his one remaining molar and stay there. Shortly after that he does lose that tooth as well, which actually then was sent to his dentist John Greenwood, who had it made in a little locket on his watch fob that he carried with him always. And then Greenwood made Washington's final pair of dentures that are kind of the iconic ones we can see today that are currently housed at George Washington's Mount Vernon. And these are painful to look at and I'm sure were painful to wear. They weighed nearly a quarter of a pound, and they were made out of a lead tin alloy cast based, and then had ivory, and some domesticated North American animal teeth, human teeth that were then strung together with a brass wire and embedded. The dentures themselves had a spring loaded hinge on either side to help kind of mimic natural movement. There's also brass and silver alloy. These are based on a lot of concepts and designs that are coming out of Europe and then were assembled in North America. So, Washington's really holding the Atlantic world in his mouth with these dentures in many ways. But the fact that they were spring loaded meant that Washington had to constantly clamp down his jaw, otherwise, his mouth would spring open. So, if you think about the iconic portrait that's on the dollar bill, the Gilbert Stuart portrait, Washington looks really upset, he looks cranky, his jaw is

tense, and he has to clamp down that jaw, otherwise, his mouth will spring open, and the dentures will fly out, like what happens to Charles Willson Peale at a dinner party with Dolley Madison Madison. So, Washington with this entire kind of life at the latter end, and he's trying whatever is the new technology, he's going to try it, because it's important for him to have the appearance of a good firm jaw, and to have a full set of teeth. Whereas 100 years ago, a leader of the country wouldn't have cared about that.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 16:16

Aren't some of these alloys not poisonous?

Lucy Smith 16:18

Oh, they're not great for you. There's a reason why we do lead testing on paint today. Now granted, this is towards the very end of Washington's life. They're not only as they're going to have the metals and problems, but also there are wires sticking here and there and other. Today with a lot of dentures, there are screws that are other things that are put into the bone, to then attach the dentures to if you don't have any remaining teeth, there's nothing for it to be attached to, besides your sheer willpower. But once again, those types of dentures were primarily for elites and cost about \$60. Whereas a little bridge work or one or two artificial teeth to fill in a gap that you would then tie to the other teeth was much more common for the middling sort. And actually, even Martha Washington herself, she also had dentures as well, though hers were more for practical purposes, rather than aesthetic purposes.

Cassie Cloutier 16:18

So, because of the pain level that he's experiencing, is he wearing his dentures for just public appearances or is it all the time?

Lucy Smith 16:55

Yeah, that's an excellent question. So, the pain is a really clear thing both in wearing them for sure. But Washington is extremely self-conscious, and keenly aware of his physical appearance at all

times. And how he is presenting himself to the world. When I mean to the world, he is very keenly aware as the general then as the first President that he is setting precedents and is really, really keenly aware. So he's certainly wearing these a lot anytime he's in public. But there's an argument to be made that Washington is known for being a fairly quiet president not giving a lot of public addresses very short, to the point, and I think that was partially his temperament. But also, it was physically difficult to talk, because it sounded like he had dentures rattling around in his mouth, but also it caused physical pain. And so, some of his kind of quiet statesman, republican virtue ideal is part of is dealing with a real bodily reality. A big part of 18th century elite culture, where toasts and kind of dining is ritual. And so, Washington is wearing his dentures throughout this time, because what he's knows he's being watched, so he's not going to be seen without his dentures in many ways. And so, he often is eating very small pieces, kind of at the dinner table. There's accounts of people writing me like, Oh, poor Washington, he had like three bites all night. Just probably one reason why his favorite meal was apparently hoecakes swimming in butter and honey, which is like a corn cake, and it's pretty soft on your teeth or on your gums. But so much so Washington is also drinking a lot of Madeira. So, a key part of the ritual of elites and ritual dining are all these toasts. And you'll do it with Madeira which is a fortified wine, comes off the coast of Portugal. So much so that Washington at one point sends his dentures back to his dentist to be cleaned. Because once again, if you have ivory teeth and things, even if you only have a small handful of human teeth, there's no enamel on that to protect it. So, they take on stains incredibly easily, which is why one of the arguments that Washington, quote had wooden teeth, yeah, he didn't, that never was a thing. However, there are some arguments that folks might have thought that because the staining on the ivory looked like wood grain from Madeira. But Washington's dentist writes back to him and is really cranky with him. You know, he says, I got these dentures from you. And they were so blackened either by the occasion of either you soaking them in Port wine, or by the drinking of it, and he basically tells Washington, 'bud you've got to take better care of them. They're just gonna look awful within a day or two from all this Madeira. He's wearing them kind of all the time, because he's also on display all the time. And so, they become really much a part of his trappings. And part of his kind of public persona is that jaw line, is having a full set of teeth because it comes

associated with virtue and Republicanism and a Republican body, how you hold and move your body through the space.

Cassie Cloutier 19:12

We sat down with Peter Drummey, the MHS Chief Historian & Stephen T. Riley Librarian, to discuss a curious portrait of George Washington in the MHS collections.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 20:25

So, Peter, the painting in question of George Washington used to hang in what we call the Red Room, and when people would come in, and they would see it, some people might be stumped by who the depiction was of. How would you explain this painting to them?

Peter Drummey 20:44

Well, our portrait of George Washington by Christian Gullager is quite different from almost any other portrait of him. It's painted while he is on an official visit to New England as president in 1789. He comes here in the fall of 1789. And the description of his visit in his own diary and in public accounts of it is it must have been an exhausting event. He didn't have time to sit for a portrait here in Boston. So, the painter Gullager, who was working in Boston, followed him to Portsmouth, New Hampshire, where Washington provided him with two hours time to paint it. This is a long way of saying I think Washington was exhausted. He was only in his late fifties. But he had led a long active outdoor life. And I think many people understand the portrait to be probably a more honest depiction of his appearance in the 1780s.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 21:51

So let's turn to the artist himself.

Peter Drummey 21:55

Christian Gullager is a Dane, born in 1759, who comes to Massachusetts as a young man. He is the son of a servant to an officer of the Danish government, and through this connection, attends the

Royal Academy of Art in Copenhagen, so he has some training as an artist. The first evidence we have of him in Massachusetts, is his marriage to a widow, Mary Selman in Newburyport in 1786. The last evidence we have of him in Denmark is from 1782. So, he came to America and to Massachusetts right at the end of the Revolution, and by the 1780s, had moved from Newburyport to Boston, and established himself as a painter advertising himself in newspapers as a portrait painter in Boston in 1789.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 22:54

Do we have any accounts of him tracking down Washington, his experience interacting with him?

Peter Drummey 23:02

We have at least two wonderful accounts. One is written in the diary of a founder of the Massachusetts Historical Society, the real principal founder Jeremy Belknap, who when Washington is attending an event at King's Chapel, the Anglican Church becoming a Unitarian Church here in Boston. During the course of Washington's visit, this is an October of 1789, Belknap records that Gullager sat in a pew behind the pulpit as he describes it and was covertly sketching Washington. Then a few days later, when Washington is in Portsmouth, he writes in his diary, Mr. Blank came to paint me so he doesn't even know exactly who Gullager is. But Gullager came with a letter of introduction from a Boston merchant Samuel Brack, and that introduction caused Washington to take time out of a very busy schedule to sit for Gullager. It's the case that Washington by this time was so used to having his portrait painted, or a sketch made of him, that he, in his writings described how he was like a kind of an old horse that's taken out to get be harnessed for work that he sat in the painters chair in the manner of, you know, a dutiful domestic animal being sort of put to his work.

Lucy Smith 24:32

Anne Bentley, Curator of Art & Artifacts at the MHS, then showed us the portrait in question. Can you describe the portrait that Gullager painted?

Anne Bentley 24:42

It's a very simple portrait. It's a bust of George Washington as a civilian. We're used to seeing him in his military uniform, but this is President George Washington, and so he's very soberly dressed in a dark brown brownish black coat and a dark waistcoat with a narrow bit of linen around his neck as a collar and he has his powdered hair in not a wig, but his own hair with a single pinch and roll over each ear and it's tied in the back in a cue with black ribbon, you can just see the silk ribbon. And the lovely thing about this portrait that I always enjoy is pointing out that he's not wearing a velvet coat, it looks like it. But what all the white is around his collar and the shoulders is the white powder that has drifted down from his powdered hair. And there is no architectural background. It is a simple color, greenish brown, almost a halo effect around his head. The lighter color around his hair and in his face and as it goes out to the corners, it gets progressively darker and there is a painted mat, an oval mat around him. So that is our portrait of a Washington and he is facing to the viewers right three quarter face.

Cassie Cloutier 26:07

How does this portrait compare to others that we have of George Washington?

Anne Bentley 26:13

This is the civilian Washington. Our other portraits are all military. We have the one that Thomas Jefferson commissioned from Joseph Wright. And we have the full-length equestrian portrait. Two of those, one is an apocryphal painting, a completely imaginary of Washington on his horse, which is rearing and his army in the background. And then we have a copy of the Albemarle portrait, which is Washington and his horse unmounted. It's a startling portrait in that we're all used to Stuart's view of General Washington in the prime of life. This is President Washington and he is elderly and his years of military campaign have taken their toll on him. But it's a dignified because Washington, above all was a dignified person. So, it's a dignified portrait of him.

Cassie Cloutier 27:13

We then ask both Peter and Lucy why this image of George Washington appears so different from traditional depictions of the first president, and why observers might think that he is not wearing dentures in the portrait.

Peter Drummey 27:25

I think it's striking to think of Washington, in 1789 is from where I'm sitting, not of great age, but someone who has been sort of worn out by his active life, and also all the burden of carrying around his dentures with him. And it's striking, if you see a portrait of Washington, before the Revolution, where he already had these dental difficulties to deal with. And we have a number of Washington portraits. And right at the end of the Revolution, we have another portrait of him copied for Jefferson, who thought it was if not the best portrait of Washington, Joseph Wright's portrait of Washington that he liked. But you see this very rapid aging of someone. And I think it's reflected in this portrait. And it's very hard from what we know about his dentures and his difficulties with dentistry, not to sort of read that into it.

Lucy Smith 28:29

Absolutely and what I find striking about this portrait too, is it's unusual not only kind of that feel the weight of history on him, right in many ways. But also, it's at a particular angle that I think we don't typically see for Washington portraits. Normally, you're seeing him either it's like standing up a lot of the Peale portraits, or the Gilbert Stuart portraits as kind of the more and more famous ones, where it is very much in some ways, 18th century Photoshop that they're doing in a lot of ways. And so, I think what's interesting about this portrait is it's doing a lot of different types of work. And I'm saying particularly kind of the angle that he's in, I would almost say annoyed expression that he's in so he's almost a two thirds kind of looking at kind of side eye and at the artist, really elongated chin, rather than kind of the front on very square jaw, we really associate with Washington. So, I was really struck when I was first kind of showed this portrait because of that kind of moment and raising the question does he have his teeth in or not? That's the big question. And I would say is, I cannot conceive of Washington sitting for a portrait without his dentures in. He is so self-conscious about his physical appearance about every trappings that's on his body every

way he has been preserved from the suit that he's inaugurated in, which is you know, made from American cloth and everything is very intentional to the way that he's designing and decorating Mount Vernon with which art is on the wall. Every single detail is intentional, to send a very particular kind of message and so I struggle to think of him particularly at this moment of trying to do a lot of political convincing to be like, 'yeah, sure, come on in in the morning, I haven't put my teeth in.' That just seems very, it seems off brand for Washington in many ways. However, I think the reason why there's that question is for several reasons, think one, that angle is so unusual for Washington portraiture. But also, he has at this point, this is '89. He's got one tooth in his head. So, he has a set of dentures, a lower segment, upper set, but primarily the lower set that just sits on top of the jaw with that hole going through the molar. It's not the big, bulky ones we associate that are the very tail end of his life that are now housed at Mount Vernon. And so, I think those earlier ones are not going to create that really firm, rigid jaw that we expect. Think about his jaw muscles to its before the spring loaded hinges, so he doesn't have to constantly press down with that kind of tension. He's still got to do some finagling to keep him in his mouth, it doesn't require the same kind of muscle build up. And so, if I was a betting woman, I would bet he's wearing these earlier pair that are just not as firm, or he loses his kind of last tooth around this time period and starts dabbling in different designs. It could also be that he's got some that are sent off to Greenwood, his dentist at the time. And he's basically wearing his backup pair the way that you wear your backup glasses. They're not great, but they'll get you through for a little bit. And I could definitely see that also being a factor as well. And the reason why I think he doesn't still doesn't have his dentures completely not in is he doesn't have the kind of hollowed out cheeks that you will see in portraiture or folk without teeth, or the kind of curved lips that go over because one of the big concerns that Washington had is the upper in his mouth, once those teeth were removed, and at this time they were gone. You start to get a lot of bone loss there. And that kind of leads to a physical changing of the face. And you don't see that in that moment, which implies to me that there's something in there. It's not the best but there's something that is definitely in there for Washington.

Lucy Smith 32:13

I think a lot about all of the quote unquote donors, right, who have gotten rid of their two front teeth, and they're not getting those back, and they are going to be perpetually excluded and visibly marked as that forever. So, there is that relationship between giving up some of your own American identity so that others can have an American identity that I think is an uncomfortable tension for us and in many ways what was also the lived reality of the situation as well.

Cassie Cloutier 32:39

[Outro music begins] To look at the portrait discussed in today's episode, visit our show website at www.masshist.org/podcast. The Object of History was produced by the research department at the Massachusetts Historical Society. We would like to thank Lucy Smith, a PhD candidate at the University of Michigan, Peter Drummey, Chief Historian & Stephen T. Riley Librarian at the MHS, and Anne Bentley, Curator of Art & Artifacts, and Sam Hurwitz, Podcast Producer at the MHS. Music in this episode is by Dominic Giam of Ketsa Music and Podington Bear. See our show notes for details. Thank you for listening.