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1780: American dentistry had its roots in RI during the Revolution

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When Count Rochambeau sailed into Newport on July 11, 1780 to aid the Continental Army, it was a seminal moment for dentistry in America, thanks to French Navy surgeon-dentist DR. JOSEPH LEMAIRE.

Rochambeau’s force remained in Rhode Island for more than a year. During the winter of 1781–1782, at Brown’s University Hall, which served as a military hospital, Dr. LeMaire, with Rochambeau’s approval, trained two young men in the dental arts.

According to “Patriot and Pioneer Surgeon-Dentist” by Burton Lee Thorpe, DDS, published in Oral Hygiene (1920):

During the winter of 1781 Dr. LeMaire tutored two fellow-patriots in the art of dentistry, one a fellow countryman, physician and surgeon James Gardette, aged 25, the other an American Josiah Flagg, eighteen years of age, both of whom afterward proved a credit to American dentistry.

The article further noted Dr. LeMaire’s skill in transplanting teeth and carving artificial teeth from ivory. It cited him as “the first and original dental preceptor and his coming marked the commencement of dentistry as a profession in America.”

Josiah Flagg of Boston was the first American-trained dentist, who apprenticed during the American Revolution in Providence, RI, with a French dentist.

This broadside of Dr. Flagg’s advertises: “Cash given for handsome and healthy live teeth.” The reverse offers instructions on brushing teeth.
Beecher’s Manual and Dental Directory of the United States (1884) credits Josiah Flagg as the first American-trained dentist “as far as is known.”

Transplants and Teeth Whitening
Immediately after the war, various dental journals relate, Flagg traveled as an itinerant dentist and for a time practiced in Rhode Island and surrounding areas before setting up a practice in Boston.

The contents of a circular he distributed from 1790, stated:

Dr. Flagg transplants teeth, cures ulcers, fastens those that are loose, mends teeth with gold to be as useful and lasting as sound teeth, and without pain in the operation, makes artificial teeth and secures them in a lasting and serviceable manner.

He also advertised teeth whitening without “the use of saws, files, acids and such abusives as have shamefully crept into the profession and which have destroyed the confidence of the public.”

Flagg was also a purveyor of dental appliances: tinctures, chewsticks (which were a branch of the creeping shrub of the West Indies buckthorn family), masticks (a Mediterranean evergreen) and teeth and gum brushes “suitable for every age and climate.”

According to the Massachusetts Historical Society archives, he constructed the first dental chair in the United States by using a Windsor chair and configuring it with an adjustable horsehair and leather headrest, an extended armrest and drawers under the armrest and seat for dental tools.

During the War of 1812, Flagg enlisted and was captured by the English fleet and sent to England, where he made the most of his captivity by studying with European dentists and practicing. After the war, he was shipwrecked on the voyage home, off New York harbor.

Several years later, in 1816, he died of yellow fever in Charleston, SC, where he had gone in search of a warmer clime. His profession was carried on by several of his sons, who became noteworthy in the field.

For photos, more information on Flagg’s dental tools and chair, visit the historical dental museum collection at Temple’s Kornberg School of Dentistry, http://temple.pastperfect-online.com.

Contrary to popular legend, George Washington’s teeth were not made of wood. During his lifetime he used dentures made of bone, ivory, human teeth, brass screws, lead, and gold metal wire.