
Imagine if you were a slave in ancient Egypt lucky enough to have a full set of choppers. You just might find yourself selected to supply your pearly whites to a member of the royalty who had fared less well in the dental sweepstakes. That’s right: even back then, dentists (of sorts) could provide replacement teeth to those—well, the rich and connected ones anyway—with gaping holes in their smiles. They created these early dental bridges using “donated” teeth held in place by gold bands.

Fast-forward to the 18th century and the Father of Our Country. Yes, we know you’ve heard the myth that George Washington’s false teeth were wooden. Actually, most of his dentures were made of ivory or a combination of horse, cow and human teeth (most often bought from his slaves). You can see one of four known sets of Washington’s dentures (he’s buried with a fifth) at the National Museum of Dentistry at the University of Maryland, Baltimore, where the first dental school in the world was established in 1840.

While a few exhibits reach back to the distant past, most of the museum focuses on the mid-19th century to the present, tracing the history of dentistry and its importance to good health. Exhibits draw from a collection of more than 40,000 dental-related objects, from historical progressions of toothbrushes, dental instruments and drills, to teeth-related toys and vintage advertisements. On the day I visited, Curator Scott Swank was cataloging a collection of novelty toothbrush holders donated by—who else?—a dentist.

The most frequent visitors to the 7,000-square-foot two-story museum near the University of Maryland Medical Center include school groups learning about good oral hygiene and attendees of dental conventions. But if you’re the curious type, you’ll discover more than a few nuggets of interest on your visit to the museum. Did you know, for example, that a dentist invented the cotton candy machine? “We joke that he invented it to get more patients,” says the museum’s research associate Patrick Cutter.

Children are captivated by the three-foot tooth, or tusk, from a narwhal whale (mistaken by many for a horn), Cutter says, and they love to pretend to be a dentist or a patient in the role-play exhibit “Mouth Power,” where they can also brush a giant set of teeth. Swank’s favorite item on exhibit is a tool best described as a Swiss army knife of dental extraction instruments. Personally, I enjoyed the dentist-related video clips from old movies and TV shows (think the Little Rascals visiting the dentist).

“I think it’s part gruesome history, part everybody has to go to the dentist and everybody has teeth—or wants teeth if they don’t have them—so the National Museum of Dentistry is just something fascinating to come see,” Cutter says.

—Theresa Gawlas Medoff

What: Dr. Samuel D. Harris National Museum of Dentistry
Where: 31 South Greene Street, Baltimore, Maryland
When: Monday to Friday, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.
How much: $7 for adults, $6 for seniors and students with ID, and $5 for children ages 3–12
For more information: dentalmuseum.com or 410/706-0600