

Revere House Radio

Season 1 Episode 10

Paul Revere and Dentistry

Welcome to Revere House Radio, I'm your host, Adrienne Turnbull-Reilly. This spring we've covered a wide variety of topics that relate to Paul Revere's life and legacy, and we will continue to bring you episodes that are relevant to Revere, Boston, and life in the 18th century. Today, we will be doing a deeper dive into one of our previous Revere House Radio subjects, Revere's odd jobs. I'll be discussing one of the most polarizing activities in modern America - going to the dentist. Some people love it, many people hate it. No matter where you land on that spectrum, I would argue that after today's episode you'll feel a little more grateful that your dental work is taking place in the 21st century.

Now, you may wonder what Paul Revere has to do with dentistry. If you study Revere's life, you'll find that he was amazingly entrepreneurial. Some of his endeavours met with longstanding success and others were more short lived. One of the occupations that surprises people the most is that he advertised for a few years in Boston as a dentist. We know this because there are two advertisements Revere placed in the *Boston-Gazette*, one from 1768 and one from 1770. Though the most recent advertisement we know of dates to 1770, there is an entry in his 1774 account book for a cleaning. We don't think Revere acted as a dentist for a particularly long time, in fact, is it our belief that he probably turned to dentistry during the revolutionary war years as a financial maneuver while his gold and silver business was suffering losses due to the conflict.

Revere's silver career did survive the war, fortunately, and today it is what he is most known for other than the midnight ride. Revere learned silver and goldsmithing from his father, and he learned dentistry under John Baker, who identified as a "surgeon-dentist" and practiced in Boston and then later New York. A surgeon-dentist would advertise more invasive dental procedures, such as pulling bad teeth and sometimes transplanting them. Revere never claimed such a title, but he does claim that his work is of the same caliber as a surgeon dentist's. His advertisements promote basic cleanings as well as installing fake teeth in a customer's mouth, but nothing so gruesome as what some others were practicing at the time. Revere's ability to create small items out of silver and produce fine engraving would have served him well working in the small space of a client's mouth or carving a false tooth. After Baker left Boston to practice in New York City, we see a 1768 notice in the *Boston-Gazette* that Revere can maintain Baker's work, should the teeth that Baker installed loosen in a customer's mouth. There is relatively little

detail, however, on how much business Revere actually received. His 1770 advertisement says he “has fixt some hundreds of teeth” but who knows if that’s true or just him trying to build confidence in potential clients?

We do know of at least one famous customer, however. Dr. Joseph Warren, a leader in the Sons of Liberty, close friend of Paul Revere’s, and a Patriot who was killed at the battle of Bunker Hill. Due to the treatment of Warren’s body by British troops after his death, he was very hard to identify. Revere identified Warren’s body almost a year after his passing based on dental work he recognized as his own, and thus Warren’s family was able to re-inter his body properly. Dr. Warren now rests in the Forest Hills cemetery in Boston.

Unfortunately it is extremely difficult to associate certain dental work with specific dentists, and this connection between Revere’s work and Dr. Warren’s denture is very rare. The Paul Revere house was, however, gifted a partial denture in 2016 that is attributed to Revere. The donor was a dentist himself, and a collector of dental history. While we can’t prove that Paul Revere actually made this denture, the style and materials are consistent with 18th century dental practices, and it’s certainly very plausible that it is Revere’s work.

We do have the partial denture on display at the Paul Revere House, so when we are able to reopen safely you should definitely come by and see it. In the meantime, you can read an article written by our curator Edith Steblecki published shortly after we put the denture on display. That article is fascinating and available on the membership page of our website, paulreverehouse.org. On that page you can also see more information about becoming a member if that’s something that interests you. As always, follow-us on social media - we’re on Twitter and Facebook, and check back here often for new episodes of Revere House Radio - thanks for listening!