

Quacks and Tramps: A Brief History of Dentistry in Canada

By Catherine Morana

Dentistry has come a long way from its grim days of tooth-pulling by blacksmiths, farmers and other local town tradespeople



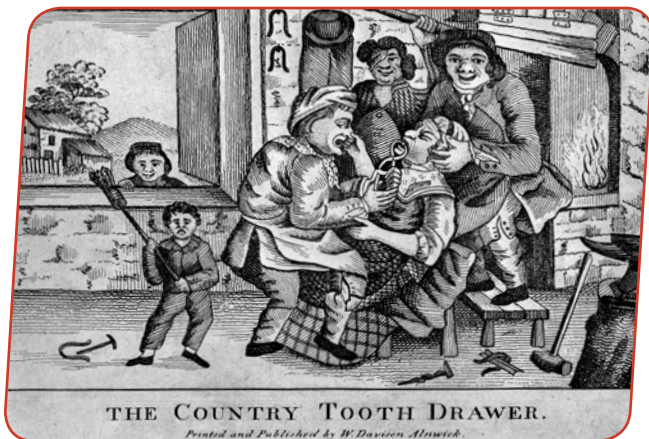
The Ontario Dental Association (ODA) turns 150 years young in 2017. And to honour this milestone, we're taking a look back at the early days of dentistry in Canada and the roots of the ODA.

Today, patients can expect a hygienic, professional visit to their dentist's office. But it wasn't always this way. There were few cities in Canada in the early 1800s, and the country's population was largely made up of farmers scattered across the land. Dentists were scarce, and those with toothaches turned to the local "tooth-puller." Early pioneer accounts reveal that tooth-pulling could be offered by any craftsmen who had instruments. In rural areas, some farmers gained a reputation as a dental specialist, simply because they'd had some luck extracting teeth with an instrument they'd made. One account states that "it was not uncommon for a plain and simple farmer, with no pretension to a knowledge of medicine or surgery, to acquire a reputation as a specialist in some particular branch of the profession."¹

In towns, wagon makers, druggists, candy makers, gunsmiths and blacksmiths frequently offered to pull teeth on their premises, in addition to their usual trade. Hygiene was never a priority. Teeth were usually removed by a device called a turn-key, which was used until the mid-1880s in Canada. It was later replaced by the forceps.



Turn-key from the University of Toronto, Museum of Dentistry.
Photo by Catherine Solmes.



The Country Tooth Drawer, circa 1812 – 17.
Courtesy of the British Dental Association Museum.

Professionally trained dentists were few and far between in the mid-1800s, and there was only one dental college in North America, which was in Baltimore. Anyone seeking a proper education as a dentist would learn the trade serving as an apprentice to a practising dentist. Apprenticeships were a trend that arose in France, with the publication of the textbook *Le Chirurgien dentiste (The Surgeon Dentist)* by Pierre Fauchard, a dentist from Paris. His knowledge and observations improved the practice of dentistry, making it a more scientific and health-related profession that encouraged the sharing of information and improved the opportunity to learn dentistry.

By 1867, there were two types of dentists in Canada: those who had some form of dental training and scientific knowledge and "quack" or "tramp" dentists.² Quack dentists would go from town to town, setting themselves up at public fairs or visiting local hotels or steamers, employing ridiculous claims and carnival tactics in order to draw a crowd. Their advertisements offered "painless dentistry" and low-priced extractions. Some even borrowed the name of a good dentist, duping their patients! And many patients suffered horribly at the hands of these quacks.



A quack advertisement from a Hamilton newspaper, 1843.

Reputable members of the profession hated the tactics of these quacks. Not only were they a danger to the public, but they also harmed the reputation of trained dentists everywhere. In 1866, Barnabas Day, a doctor from Queen’s Medical College in Kingston, who was also trained as a dentist, decided to change all this.

He called for a meeting in Toronto, aiming to seek legislation and proper standards to control how dentistry was practised. He contacted all the dentists he knew, and on January 3, 1867, nine dentists attended a meeting at the Queen’s Hotel in Toronto. Those present included dentists Francis Callender of Cobourg, John O’Donnell and J. Stuart Scott, MD, of Peterborough, Henry Wood of Picton, Antoine Lalonde of Brockville, Curtis Chittenden and D. A. Bogart from Hamilton and Martin E. Snider of Toronto — and the Ontario Dental Association was formed. Their first task? Drafting a bill to regulate dentistry. News spread, and when the organization met again in Cobourg in July 1867, more than 60 dentists from across the province attended the meeting. A draft of the bill was read and approved by all.



Gabriel Gostiaux, *Monsieur Sans-Douleur, Dentiste et Pedicure*, 1868, France.

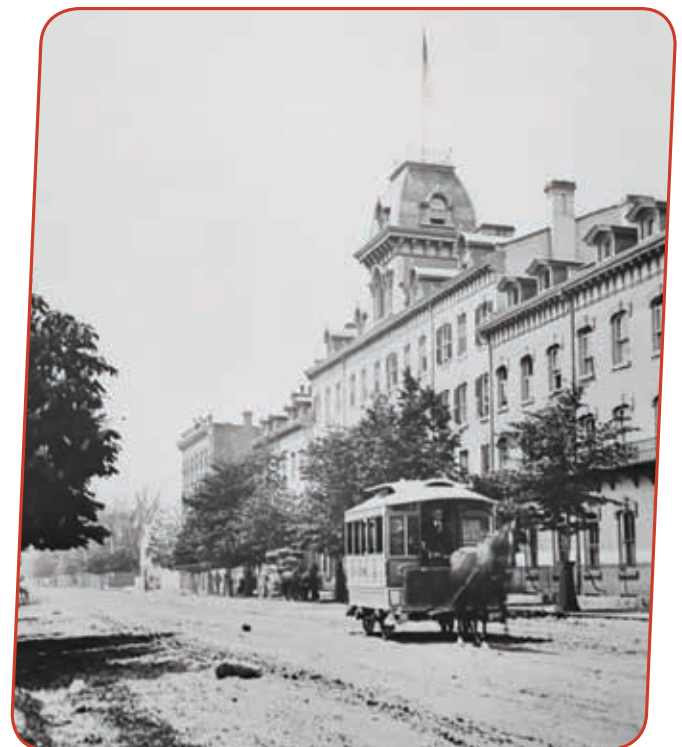
By January 1868, the ODA had collected 100 signatures in a petition they would send to the Ontario Legislature with a draft of their proposed bill. *An Act Respecting Dentistry* became law on March 3, 1868, and full powers of regulating and licensing were given to the Royal College of Dental Surgeons of Ontario. It was the first legislation in the world to grant self-regulation to dentists. Now, anyone who practised dentistry without a licence could be fined \$20.

The act was revised in 1870. Dental students now had to pass an entry examination and train for three years as an apprentice with a licensed dentist. At the end of their apprenticeship, dental students had to pass a final exam before becoming licensed to practise dentistry.

An Act Respecting Dentistry served as the key model for other dental organizations seeking dental legislation across North America. In 1875, Dr. J. Branston Willmott would boast in a letter to his dental colleagues in New York that it was the best Act in force anywhere. Not only was Ontario attracting better applicants, but he also believed the Act had raised the standards of the profession and improved the overall theory and practice of dentistry.

REFERENCES

1. Herrington, W. S. *Pioneer Life Among the Loyalists in Upper Canada*. Toronto: MacMillan, 1915. Print and digital file.
2. Shosenberg, Dr. James W. *The Rise of the Ontario Dental Association; 125 Years of Organized Dentistry*. Toronto: Ontario Dental Association, 1992, pp. 4, 8.



Nine dentists would meet at the Queen’s Hotel, Toronto (now occupied by the Fairmont Royal York Hotel).