

# Curator's Choice

## *Bones and Boar Bristles: Turn of the Century Dental Detailing*

By: Patricia Samford,  
MAC Lab Director

It is a common challenge for parents to persuade their young children to brush their teeth. Let's face it, kids don't tend to think a lot about the future consequences of their actions and, besides, standing at a sink for two or three minutes when there are video games to be played is just plain boring.

Perhaps if today's youngsters understood that they have it easy compared to kids from just over one hundred years ago, they would consider themselves lucky to be getting up close and personal twice a day with nylon bristles set in a plastic handle. Up until the 1920s, when the use of plastic became common in toothbrush manufacture, they were made from cow bone with bristles of hog's hair. Unlike wood, bone stood up well to being wet and was also inexpensive. Cattle femurs were shaped and then bleached or boiled in hydrogen peroxide to remove grease (Mattick 2010:11). Bristles were made of natural materials—primarily boar bristles—until 1937, when shortages were caused by the war between China (the leading source of bristles) and Japan (Segrove 2010). The bristles were attached in a series of drilled holes using copper wire or thread to keep them in place.

While most toothbrushes found by archaeologists have been broken (hence discarded), this toothbrush from the Howard-McHenry Mill (18BA100) is complete. Also unusually, the handle is stamped with identifying information: "Geo. E. Seal Baltimore; O/68/M." Baltimore business directories show Seal was in business as a druggist in Baltimore between 1883 and 1906 (Woods 1883:1107, Polk 1906:1803). Green staining from the copper wire is visible on the back of the toothbrush.

Toothbrushes have become such a fundamental part of our daily hygiene routine that it is sometimes easy to overlook the fact that they were not in common, widespread use in North America until the twentieth century. It is estimated that only one person in four in the United States owned a toothbrush in the 1920s (Segrove 2010:19).



Figure 1. Colgate advertisement by unknown artist, from *Saturday Evening Post*, September 7, 1918. Toothpaste company advertisements invariably showed children enjoying the process of cleaning their teeth.



Figure 2. Complete toothbrush from near the house at the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Howard-McHenry Mill site in Baltimore County.



Figure 3. Reverse side of the toothbrush, showing staining from the copper wire used to hold the bristles in place.

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10515 Mackall Road  
St. Leonard, Maryland 20685

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