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1760s: The Power of Words

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1760s: The Power of Words

PETER CARINI: Hi and welcome to the first episode of Hindsight is 20/19, in which we look at 250 years of Dartmouth's history through 25 objects from the Library's archival collections, one per decade. I'm Peter Carini and I'll be your host for this episode.

Student Interview:

LINKAS: I'm Sophia Linkas. I am a freshman at Dartmouth, the class of 2021.

CLAUSEN: I'm Dylan Clausen and I'm a member of the class of '21.

CARINI: We're looking at this document here and my first question for you is, what do you think it is?

LINKAS: It looks like an old document. It kind of looks like it has a stamp, so maybe something legal or political and it looks super old because it's hand written in cursive and, I don't know, maybe it is made out of parchment.

CLAUSEN: Like a charter or something. It is kind of faded. I can't really tell.

LINKAS: Well this here, oh this says, "Trustees of Dartmouth College". "Dartmouth College" is written bigger than everything else.

CLAUSEN: Is that like - it's like a seal of some kind. I'm not, I don't really know my seals.

CARINI: Yeah, and no one would necessarily.

D: Is that like a government or something?

CARINI: Mhm. Yeah. It's a royal seal. King George III's royal seal and then you said you saw the word Dartmouth, so does that lend you to think that it might be something...

CLAUSEN: Is it like Dartmouth's charter?

CARINI: Yeah, really good. Okay. So my second question is, what surprises you about it?

LINKAS: Um, it... there's just writing. I don't know. I would've expected there to be... I can't really see any signatures, it's not like normal page size, I guess its super old and also the writing is super faint.

CLAUSEN: That it is still intact probably would be my first reaction. Um, I didn't know we had such a connection to like the royal England, I guess.

CARINI: So, what questions does it lead you to ask?

LINKAS: Um, well. Firstly, I wish I could read it. I guess if I looked very hard I could read it and know what it says. Also, I wonder if it's still being used today and if we still abide by it today that would be cool to know.

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CLAUSEN: Like why was it made in the first place? What's its significance?

CARINI: Right, like why is a charter important for a college and why would we want a royal charter at that time?

CARINI: So as you can tell from our conversation with Dylan and Sophia, we're looking at the college charter and more specifically, we're looking at the 1760s through the college charter.

CARINI: This Royal Charter established Dartmouth College as an institution of higher learning in 1769 and the charter itself is handwritten, as Sophia noted, and carries the royal seal of King George III. It measures about 64 x 83 centimeters and today it lives its life sandwiched between two thick pieces of Lucite and stowed away in the stacks of Rauner Library.

So, in response to Sophia's question; yes, the Charter is still used as a governing document today, even though it's been amended over time. So, think of it like the U.S. Constitution. The Constitution, the original, is enshrined in the National Archives and you can go see it, under very low lighting, but it's not the living, breathing document that we change and work on all the time. It's the enshrined, beginning version, and that's kind of like how the Dartmouth Charter is too. It's been amended and changed overtime, but the basic charter is still there as the governing document for the institution. Now, Dylan's question about why we needed a charter to begin with, that's a little more complicated and it really lies in the story of Eleazar Wheelock's struggle for power and control in the beginning of his school. So, let's go back a little bit and talk about how this all began and start from the beginning.

In the 1740s, Wheelock began taking on pupils to tutor and the story goes that he was poor and needed additional income, but this popular narrative it might not be entirely true. But that's probably something we will try to cover in a different episode or maybe in a blogpost or something 'cause it is a little bit more complicated than we need to get into here. So, one of the pupils that Wheelock took on, was a man named Samson Occom from the Mohegan Nation and Occom turned out to be an extremely apt student and from this experience, Wheelock devises this idea of training Native-Americans to be ministers as a way to spread the gospel to members of the native tribes. His premise was that through conversion he could better assimilate them into European-American society.

While the idea of anointing Native-Americans as ministers to preach the gospel to their own people is a fairly original one, the concept of assimilation through education and religion is not so much. So, John Eliot, who is credited with printing the first Bible in North America and also was responsible for the setting up the praying towns in places like Barnstable, Massachusetts, had similar ambitions and he also founded a school for Native-Americans in Roxbury almost 100 years before Wheelock did.

So ultimately, Wheelock was really following in Eliot's footsteps. Wheelock's actions have been widely condemned and rightly so. He was part of a long line of European-Americans who worked to erode and even destroy some Native-American culture. At the same time, it's really important to recognize Wheelock as a man of his time and to understand that his religious fervor

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was such that he very literally believed that he was saving the souls of these people. He also believed pretty strongly in their intellectual abilities. The education that Wheelock providing to Occom and these other Native-Americans was only a very few European-Americans were able to obtain and many of them would not have been able to do this level of work. So, he had a really high regard for them in terms of intellect.

But, by extension, both Wheelock's and Eliot's actions end in one of the most unfortunate chapters in this country's history and that's the forceful removal of Native-American children to off-reservation boarding schools in the later part of the 19th century and it's really important to keep this in mind as we talk about the history of Dartmouth College. Like anything, it's not black and white. There are a lot of gray areas.

So, as his school began to grow, Wheelock realized that to remain in control of the school he would need a charter to cement his authority. In addition, he realized also that the school itself needed to be incorporated so that it could hold real property under the law and getting a charter proved to be a really complex process for him and it took him a long time. He tried several times in Connecticut but wasn't able to get one there. So, his final attempt to get a charter was in New Hampshire, and by that time his mission had shifted a bit and this change to his mission can be seen in one particular passage of the Charter, and I am going to read this passage. It is a little abbreviated, so it may not make the best sense, but...

“by and with the advice of our counsel for said province, by these present, will, ordain, grant and constitute that there be a college erected in our said province of New Hampshire by the name of Dartmouth College, for the education and instruction of youth of the Indian tribes in this land in reading, writing, and all parts of learning which shall appear necessary and expedient for civilizing and Christianizing children of pagans, as well as all liberal arts and sciences, and also of English youth and others.”

So, you often hear the phrase that, “one word can change the course of history,” but it is kind of hard to find examples. But, in this case, one word in the charter actually did alter the course of history and that word was “College”.

In 1766, Wheelock published the third of his reports that are commonly referred to as the Narratives on his Indian Charity School and the word “School” is kind of key here. These types of pamphlets were really popular at the time and they were used to disseminate information and to ferment arguments and things like that — think of them as like a blog post or a podcast or something like similar to that. But for Wheelock they were also fundraising tools. He put them out so people would give him money for his school and in this report, he reprints his letter of introduction for Nathaniel Whitaker and Samson Occom, who he sent to England to raise money for his school, and in his own words, he clearly states his intention regarding their mission.

“Whereas it has pleased God in his Providence to call our Reverend and Worthy Paster, Mr. Nathaniel Whitaker, from us for a Season, to go to Europe to solicit Charities for the Indian Charity School under the care of Reverend Eleazar Wheelock of Lebanon and promote Christian Knowledge among the Indians on the Continent.”

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The key word here, as I said before, is school, actually it's a college, but the alternate is school. Nowhere in the first four of Wheelock's Narratives, including the one that was printed in 1769, does the word college ever appear in conjunction with Wheelock's intentions. But, the introduction of that one small word would alter the course of the institution's history dramatically.

So where does this infamous, life changing word come into the story? The first mention of a "college," that we can find, does not come from Wheelock at all; it is a suggestion made by William Smith (the younger), a prominent New York lawyer and a member of the Governor's Council in Albany, New York. In a letter written in May of 1767, Smith attempted to persuade Wheelock to locate his school in Albany and in his letter Smith mentions that the people there would be happy to give him two thousand three hundred pounds (the approximate equivalent of three hundred and seventy thousand pounds in today's money) and would be pleased to see the school made into a university or college, with Wheelock at its head.

Now, Albany was not the only place that was wooing Wheelock by offering to aggrandize his school by making it into a college. Others including several towns in New Hampshire and Massachusetts tried the same approach.

And a year and a half after Mr. Smith's letter in November of 1768, Wheelock writes in response to a letter from a man named Timothy Woodbridge who is entreating him to bring his school to western Massachusetts. In his letter, Woodbridge had mentioned that the Governor of Massachusetts would also be interested in turning the school into a college and replying to Woodbridge, Wheelock objects that there is already a college in that colony, and so there is no need for another one. Though he doesn't name it, he of course is referring to Harvard. This is the first hint we can find that something, or someone, has turned Wheelock's head and he is now thinking of his school as a college.

But why? That's the big question. Is it prestige? Is it money? Is it because he knows that his grand experiment to train Indians as ministers is failing? We don't really know. It appears to be one of those frustrating silences we often encounter in the archival record. Either Wheelock did not write to anyone of his change of heart, or the letter where he discusses these thoughts just didn't survive. This happens all the time in historic records.

The next time that Wheelock refers to the school as a college is in a letter to Governor Wentworth of New Hampshire in August of 1769. It's a really short letter and the suggestion appears as a post script at the end of the letter. Considering the profound effect that such a change was bound to have on the makeup and purpose of Wheelock's institution, and knowing that Wheelock was a shrewd strategist, it's hard to believe that this was not a kind of a carefully calculated suggestion. So, we don't appear to have Wentworth's response, but in a letter to Alexander Phelps in October of that same year Wheelock expresses his pleasure with the Charter approved by Wentworth, and largely authored by Wheelock himself, and his intention to name his school-turned-college after Lord Dartmouth.

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So finally, the charter is signed and sealed on December 13, 1769 and Wheelock's school is officially lifted up to become a college and set on the path that would make it one of the most prestigious institutions of higher learning in this country or indeed in the world.

And it is the story of the ups and downs of Dartmouth's ascent and development from what was really a handful of students on the frontier of European America to a prestigious university that we will be following in the rest of this podcast.

Future episodes are going to have things like stuff about College traditions, the founding of the medical school, we'll explore the role of slavery in the early history of the college and much, much more. Now, the episodes will come out in random order, and you can listen to them that way, or you can wait 'til they're all done and listen to them decade by decade in chronological order if you prefer.

If you're interested in learning a bit more about Wheelock and the development of the Charter, we highly recommend Eleazar Wheelock and the Dartmouth Charter, by Jere Danielle, Emeritus Professor of History. You can find copies of this piece in either Baker/Berry or in Rauner Library.

Thank you for listening and we hope that you will continue to enjoy Hindsight is 20/19.

Hindsight is 20/19 is a production of the Dartmouth College Library and is produced as part of the celebration of Dartmouth's 250th Anniversary. This episode was written and directed by Peter Carini and produced by Julia Logan. Our sound engineer was Sara Holston, Class of 2017.

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