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1780s: The Alternative Narrative

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Hindsight is 20/19
1780s: The Alternative Narrative

PETER CARINI: Hi, and welcome back to *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. My name is Peter Carini. I will be hosting for this episode.

When Eleazar Wheelock, the founder and first President, died suddenly in 1779, apparently after carrying a saddle up a flight of stairs, the Presidency of the College passed to his second oldest surviving son, John Wheelock. At the time John was a lieutenant colonel in the Continental Army serving under General Gates and was not particularly pleased to leave that position for the presidency of a college in the backwaters of New Hampshire. John's appointment was actually written into the charter in good feudal tradition where title and property passed from father to son. In this case, the second son because the eldest son was incapacitated by epilepsy.

By all accounts John was as shrewd and clever as his father, though at 25, perhaps not as subtle in his approach. One indication of John's personality can be gleaned from the account of one of his brothers in arms who threatened to shoot John if he did not desist in his practice of looting suspected Tory homes.

While all other colonial colleges ceased operation during the Revolution, Dartmouth continued to enroll students and hold classes. This had more to do with the institutions location, far away from major fighting, than any altruistic commitment to higher education. In fact, New Hampshire saw no major action in its territory during the war, though it contributed to many battles, notably Bunker Hill and the decisive action at Bennington Vermont. If you want an idea of just how out of the way the British viewed New Hampshire, take a look at the American Military Pocket Atlas, also in our collection and available online. This pocket-sized atlas that was often carried in a holster, was issued to British officers involved in the North American campaign. The most detailed map of New Hampshire in the atlas notes four locations, Portsmouth, Walpole, Charlestown and Dartmouth College. There just wasn't that much of concern to them in the area.

When John arrived to take over the presidency, he found that the College's coffers were less than well stocked. In fact, while his father had amassed a small fortune over his lifetime, his college had not fared nearly as well. Since there was no money to be had in the fledgling United States, John thought to replicate his father's successes in England with a fund-raising trip to Europe.

John was clearly smart enough to know that he could not just waltz into the French court and ask for money, so in 1781 he began the process raising support for his trip. This support took the form of a letter of introduction, that we refer to as his "passport", but this letter was on a grand scale! It's hard to describe it adequately with word, but it measures about 27 inches square and like the Charter is on velum (make noise with velum here). Velum for those who don't know if animal skin that has been worked to the point where it is almost paper-like in its consistency. You can see by the creases in the material that it was carried about folded up, but even then, it would have been the size of a paperback book or a tablet.

How he managed to pass this document around to the signatories remains a mystery, but over the course of about a year, he sought and received the signatures of representatives of 12 of the original 13 colonies as well as a number of other key figures in the United States, chief among

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them being none other than George Washington! In fact, Washington's signature, in the lower middle of the document is one of the largest.

While this document is pretty impressive for what it says about Dartmouth's place in early America and the recognition it had achieved in a short period of time, what makes it particularly interesting from the point of view of Dartmouth history is that this appears to be the first time that the College trades on the story of its founding, a story that would become so enshrined in its history that it still defined the institution today.

The story outlined in the preamble of the "passport," the part above the signatures, is that of Eleazar Wheelock setting up a school in Connecticut for "civilizing, instructing and Christianizing the Natives." This story—minus the part about civilizing and eventually even the Christianizing—became the dominant narrative about the College to the point where even today when you mention Dartmouth people are apt to bring up its origins as a school for Native Americans, something that it never has truly been.

The story in the passport also take us back in time to 1767, two years before the College was even founded, when Samson Occom, the first Native American who Eleazar Wheelock took on for tutoring and the Reverend Nathaniel Whitaker, Wheelock's colleague and agent were sent across the pond on a funding raising trip.

What is not mentioned here is almost as interesting as what is mentioned. While Whitaker's name comes first on the passport, it was Occom who, by preaching—or as he later characterized it being Wheelock's "Gazing stock, Yea Even a Laughing Stock"—raised most of the funds. Although Whitaker often gets first credit for the trip, even most of the introductions to the well-heeled and piously inclined donors were made primarily by George Whitefield, the father of the Great Awakening. Not only that, but Whitaker turned out to be more of a deficit to the trip than an asset. He came to be seen as a conniver and manipulator. Eventually questions were raised in England about his handling of the funds. Despite Whitaker, the trip was a resounding success and raised about twelve thousand pounds the approximate equivalent of 2.5 million dollars in today's money.

Later, when Occom learned that Wheelock had used the funds raised in England to create a college, rather than to better endow his school for Indian youth, Occom turned on Wheelock. In a now famous letter written in 1771 he castigated his teacher for deceiving him, and for what he felt was a misappropriation of funds. While he and Wheelock sort of patched things up, it is notable that they never saw each other again and that Occom never set foot on the Dartmouth campus.

But back to John and his trip to Europe!

Prior to setting out the Trustees, and John, decided to grease the wheels of giving, so to speak, by awarding a bushel of honorary degrees to a verity of notables from both the United States and Europe, most significantly to the Minister to the United States of his Most Christian Majesty Louis the 16th of France.

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John and his younger brother James were delegated by the Trustees to make the journey using a thousand dollars in borrowed money. They set out in November of 1782 and arrived in France in January of 1783. On the sixth of February the brothers met with Benjamin Franklin, the American Ambassador to France, who was less than excited to see them once he learned of their endeavor. After all, Franklin himself was engaged in raising funds from the French to support the United States in its war with Great Britain.

Franklin quickly shooed the Wheelocks off to the Netherlands where they arrived just as the peace treaty between the United States and England was being negotiated, a treaty that did not bode well for the Netherlands in terms of trade. As a consequence, they went away somewhat disappointed in their fundraising efforts.

With peace now a reality between the United States and Great Britain, John and James decided to finish off their trip in the mother country. As you can imagine, their reception there was on the cool side. In England John made contact with the Society in Scotland for Propagating Christian Knowledge in an attempt to smooth over the College's relationship with the Society.

The Scottish Society had always been suspicious of Eleazar's intentions due to religious differences, among other issues, so suspicious in fact that they insisted that the funds Occom raised in Scotland go into a trust controlled by the Society. They were also very specific that the money only be used to support Native American students, of whom there were very few in those early years. In fact, not a single one had graduated by the time John and James made their trip. Ultimately, Eleazar Wheelock only received one hundred and ninety pounds from the fund during his lifetime. Since the relationship between Dartmouth and the Scottish Society continued to be strained well into the 20th century, John does not appear to have been particularly successful in this endeavor. While in England he also worked to acquire books and scientific apparatus for the College, but fundraising proved to be difficult and the brothers left England with little to show for their troubles.

As if to add insult to injury, the ship that the brothers were traveling in on their return journey ran aground off on the coast of Cape Cod and many of the apparatus and books they had acquired were lost.

There is no good accounting of the outcome of the trip, though it appears to have cost about \$600, about twelve thousand dollars today, and it is likely that the losses outweighed the gains in terms of money and materials. While John did go on to put the institution on solid financial footing, some of his later decisions would rock the institution to its foundations. If we had stuck with John, we wouldn't be celebrating our 250th this year, that's for sure! But that story will be explored in another episode!

The next time you're anywhere near Rauner Library, I urge you to stop by and ask to look at John's "passport." Not only is it physically impressive, but it's worth it just to see George Washington's signature!

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

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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 hosted by Peter Carini and produced and directed by Julia Logan. Our sound engineer was Jay Satterfield.

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