JAY SATTERFIELD: Welcome back to *Hindsight is 20/19*, the podcast where we look at 250 years of Dartmouth’s history through 25 objects from the library’s archives, one per decade. I’m Jay Satterfield. I’ll be your host for this episode.

Today’s object doesn’t look like much. It’s a pretty simple letter. Nathan Smith, a young doctor only nine years older than a very young Dartmouth College, wrote to the Board of Trustees a three-sentence letter proposing the establishment of a medical school at Dartmouth. He tacked on another sentence in a postscript assuring the Board that they would not have to pony up any cash for his expenses.

The letter initiated the launch of what is now the fourth oldest medical school in the United States—and it marks the beginning of the first of three medical schools that Smith would found over the course of his life.

In Smith’s mind, it was just so simple: Let me read the letter to you. I’m not even going to try to imitate Smith’s strong 18th-century New England accent noted by his students, so you’ll have to try to imagine that.

Gentlemen,

Relying on your Patronage, and being confident, that you will favour any measures, which are likely to promote useful Science, I have ventured to make certain proposals, which, I now present for your consideration.

As we have no medical school in this State where students of Physic can be regularly instructed in the several Branches of that Science, I propose, if the Honorable Board will establish a medical school in this College and will honour me with an appointment in it, that I will go to Edinburgh in Scotland, and will attend to the Several Branches of Medicine as taught and practiced there and will then return to this College where I will commence public teaching as soon as may be after my return.

I am with due Respect your Very Humble Servant

Nathan Smith

He also sent in a slightly more fleshed out version, but that didn’t add much detail.

Wow, that’s pretty ambitious. Smith received his first medical training as an apprentice to doctor Josiah Goodhue at a practice in Putney, Vermont, then after three years, he set up his own practice in nearby Cornish, New Hampshire. Only then did he go to college—he entered the bachelor’s program at Harvard Medical School’s and became just their fifth graduate. I guess the challenges offered by rural medial practice didn’t satisfy him, so he approached Dartmouth with his proposal. Pretty ambitious, and a little cocky, too. Smith had no connection with Dartmouth, was a country doctor in a nearby town, though one with a measure of institutional training, but here he was proposing a significant expansion of Dartmouth headed up by none other than himself.

That bit of institutional training at Harvard was significant, though. Medical education for most doctors in the United States was not particularly structured at the time. Most worked with another doctor as Smith had done to apprentice into the trade. The established doctor would then vouch for his protégé, and he was good to go. And there were women in the field, too, mainly as midwives, who met many of the medical needs of their communities.

This founding letter is dated August 25th, 1796. Smith went off to Edinburgh, picked up some more training, then offered his first lecture in November, 1797. The school was officially founded just 14 months after this letter was written.

You probably have a picture of a medical school in your head, but in the 1790s it was a lot different. It generally just consisted of a series of lectures and examinations. After the Board of Trustees gave its assent, Smith made sure that Dartmouth was equipped for rudimentary training. He had an anatomy lab, and, while there wasn’t a hospital yet, people could come to Dartmouth for inexpensive or free treatment as long as they were comfortable being used as teaching objects.

By most accounts, Smith was a kind, dynamic teacher. He was frequently plagued by money problems, and sometimes struggled to manage the finances of the medical school. But, despite his administrative shortcomings, he managed to found three medical schools in the Northeast, including the one at Yale. Interestingly, his role as a pioneer in medical education is not what he’s best known for: he is more famous for conducting an operation on a young (and unrelated) Joseph Smith that potentially saved the life of the founding prophet and inspirational leader of the Latter-Day Saints.

There is a great, kind of lurid story that goes along with the founding of the medical school. Someone in Concord must have gotten wind of Smith’s plans, because in July the state assembly passed a new law making it illegal to remove the bodies of the dead without a license. The penalty for such an offense included 39 lashes—a biblical reference that underscored the belief that dissection would do irreparable harm to a corpse awaiting the second coming. Just a little over a decade later, in 1810, the state’s fears were proven justified as three medical students were caught red-handed pilfering a body from the Norwich, Vermont, cemetery. One wonders if the students crossed the border to avoid New Hampshire’s strict grave robbing laws, or because they were afraid any bodies from the Hanover graveyard might be related to their professor. It could’ve been that they were just early adopts of the idea that everything is better if it is from Vermont—artisanal bodies included.

Their apology letter didn’t offer much of an apology and is indicative of the elitism that permeated the profession. Bodies for dissection were hard to come by at the time and grave robbing was not as uncommon a practice as you might think. In the 19th century, medical schools usually obtained bodies from prisons. Condemned criminals were often further punished by having their bodies given over to science. If you had done something really bad, they give you to Dartmouth. But this offered only a limited supply of cadavers for study.

In their apology letter, stated "with the most pungent sensations," the students put the burden back onto the people of the town: “Painful considerations force themselves upon us, with increased effect, when we contemplate our fellow citizens, in the neighboring villages, trembling for the relics of their dead, which, they have long been educated, to hold sacred; the unlawful removal of which, in their view, can be nothing short of sacrilege.”

The good folks of Norwich are reduced to trembling, uneducated peons who seem unable to differentiate between the relic and the reality. The medical students were not so much sorry about what they did, but that the superstitious townspeople believed it to be wrong.

Fast forward almost exactly 100 years to 1910, and the Dartmouth Medical School seemed doomed. That year the Flexner Report was issued: it lambasted Dartmouth (and most other medical schools) for poor facilities, and not enough hard science in its curriculum. The education Dartmouth and most other medical schools offered was far too practical. Flexner demanded more rigorous training for doctors and access to larger clinical facilities. In so doing, the report damned rural medical schools—with their surrounding populations too limited to supply the number and variety of cases deemed necessary for solid medical training. Dartmouth stopped granting medical degrees and the Dartmouth medical school collapsed into a preparatory unit that fed urban medical schools. It wasn’t until 1959 that the medical school was reborn as a degree granting institution—but that would be a story for another day!

Back to the 1790s. It’s pretty much impossible to represent the decade with just one story. The 1790s were a busy time for Dartmouth—it was just old enough to have some institutional credibility, but still young enough to be fragile. The school nearly went broke several times in those years, and a document we could have talked about is a letter just one year after Smith’s Proposal. It was from the Society in Scotland for Propagating Christian Knowledge to John Wheelock, son of Eleazar and his successor as President of Dartmouth. The letter from these financial backers of Dartmouth oozed a sense of foreboding: the school was on shaky financial ground, and the younger Wheelock needed to control his ambitions for the institution. Perhaps, in this context, the Board saw Smith’s proposal as a way to bolster the College’s finances. A medical school might be just the thing to satisfy those nervous creditors.

*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, highlighting selected objects from Rauner Special Collections Library. This episode was written and directed by Jay Satterfield, and produced by Laura Barrett, our sound engineer was Peter Carini. Thank you for listening and we hope you will continue to enjoy *Hindsight is 20/19*.

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