SARA HOLSTON: Hi, and welcome back to *Hindsight is 20/19*, the podcast where we look at 250 years of Dartmouth’s history through 25 objects from the archives held by the library, one per decade. I’m Sara Holston, class of 2017, and I’ll be your host for this episode.

1851, July 4th, Mr. Jerimiah Thimble.

Mr. Thimble was instantly killed from the accidental discharge of a cannon. The piece had just been discharged, but in their haste to reload it to see how rapidly they could reload and discharge, they neglected to wet and apply their sponge as they ought to have done and the which was the most consummate piece of carelessness possible and some fire was still remaining in the gun and in pressing down the second charge, it exploded and consummated its work of death. Two other individuals were very seriously mangled by the same explosion. When will this savage custom of noise and powder burning cease?

So, writes William Worthington Dewey in his journal.

Now, I know what your thinking. This is not what you expected when you imagined the juicy gossip archivists might find while sitting around reading people’s diaries. Where are the extramarital affairs? Where are the insider reflections on the politics at the time? Why are we reading about this honestly pretty gruesome death? What the heck does any of this have to do with Dartmouth’s 250th anniversary?

I know but bear with me for a second.

William Worthington Dewey was a citizen of Hanover in the 19th century. He was a bit of an odd bird, I’m not going to lie. By our account, he was 2-years-old when his father moved to Hanover to run the blacksmith shop. Dewey himself appears to have run a temperance house, worked construction on a number of local houses, and maybe also have been a farmer? His interests were definitely all over the map – not only did he apparently work at a number of diverse jobs, Dewey also developed a passion for local history. Now, I’m interested in local history, too, as, I’d guess, are many of our listeners. Dewey’s fascination, however, took a decidedly unusual bent – he was particularly intrigued by death in Hanover, and took to recording a list of all the deaths in the town and surrounding area. While churches often kept track of this kind of information, Dewey determined to go a few steps further, and he listed not only the name of the deceased and the date of his or her passing, but he also included the cause of death and some other knowledge or observations about the departed.

As you’ve probably guessed, that passage on Mr. Thimble’s demise comprises one of the longer entries Dewey recorded in his lists of deaths in the vicinity of Dartmouth College, including likewise the Hamlet usually called Greensboro from AD 1769 to 1859. So, not a traditional diary per say, although, I will note that there are occasionally some extra martial affairs, but this still doesn’t answer our big question. Why look at this object in connection to Dartmouth’s 250th anniversary?

Well, don’t get me wrong – Dewey’s obsession with recording every local death is a really weird hobby in any place or time, but its actually super helpful for research on early Hanover or Dartmouth and it gets a lot of use in the archive today. Because, while many of these entries are fairly entertaining, in a morbidly comedic sort of way, they also tell us about the lives of people who don’t appear in many other records. Mr. Thimble’s death isn’t recounted anywhere else as near as I can tell and I can’t find anything on John Russel, who, in 1795, was “gorged to death by an engaged bullet” with which he was contending. Again, funny if kind of dark, but also insightful on numerous levels. If you’re looking for information on one of these somewhat historically unimportant people this might be the best place to find anything, and if you don’t care specifically about the individuals, the stories still give us a human face on Hanover. It changes the narrative when Hanover isn’t just a town of faceless people who always seem to be irritated, understandably by the shenanigans of college boys, it’s a town of individuals with sometimes crazy lives of their own.

I don’t know about you, but I could definitely picture some people, maybe excited with all of Fourth of July festivities, getting so enthusiastic about trying to see how fast they can fire and reload and fire again that they would forget to pay attention to basic safety and it forces us to ask questions we may not have otherwise. Like, how did the town respond to this tragedy? Were the cannons a part of the Independence Day celebrations? If so, what did those festivities look like? If not, why are there a bunch of, presumably, unattended cannons around town? And these are just the somewhat absurd stories. There are also entries that are more serious and can reveal a lot about the corners of life in the college town that other, sometimes more carefully curated records, don’t fully address.

Dewey’s journal included the deaths of some of Eleazer Wheelock’s slaves and descriptions of them. One of two few laces these people appear in the archival records. He lists when people are dying of contagious diseases as well as who the first victims were and how the epidemics played out. Even analyzing the many entries that just list the date, name, age, and cause of death for a person can tell what the usual cause of death was, consumption, or the rate of death, an estimated 742 people between the founding in 1856. In the 1850s, in Hanover, most deaths were in Vincent’s small children under the age of 6 or elderly people in their 60s or 70s. Many of the death between these ages are actually of Dartmouth students with about 22 having died by 1856.

It is perhaps unsurprising that the very young and the very old were particularly susceptible to diseases, especially given that health care then was not quite where it is today. We have to be careful not to become trapped by assumptions that 1850s Hanover experienced rapid death on the count of terrible healthcare.

Dewey notes that actually Hanover is often hit less hard by many of the disease epidemics than other parts of the country, even neighboring towns and given that several of those who died in Hanover eventually came to seek medical aid, we can actually guess that Dartmouth’s medical school and the local hospital, were already building an impressive reputation and while the healthcare was certainly not up to today’s standards, I was surprised to find that death doesn’t seem to have changed its face too much in the almost 250 years since Dewey began his work. More of the deaths in the 1850s, than I would have thought, came as a shock. They were stupid accidents like exploding canons or simple accidents like choking on something. After recording one unexpected death, Dewey reflects how uncertain is life and on the death of one young man, only 17-years-old, Dewey writes that he was an uncommonly promising youth.

So, yes. People were dying of sickness that the medical care couldn’t have address, but we still see that today, its just that some of the illnesses responsible have changed and even those deaths by disease aren’t just a number in Dewey’s notebook. Each individual is listed by name, maybe some other details, and Dewey sometimes notes that these sicknesses are striking down people who seem otherwise to be perfectly healthy. Life in Hanover in the 1850s appears to have been as vibrant and exciting and sometimes chaotic a time in which people are living fully and enthusiastically as we would consider life to be today; and when it ends, especially when it ends too soon, that death is often just as unexpected and just as distressing, but before we wrap-up, I have one more story to tell from Dewey’s journal.

This one comes from 1779 and further cements the intimate relationship between Hanover and Dartmouth that is threaded all through the notebook. It’s also a story about how archives can provide us these windows into the past. It’s about the death of Eleazer Wheelock, founder and first president of Dartmouth College, and in the mythologized, fairytale-like legend the life of Wheelock has become, the tale of his death brings that carefully constructed image of the man to completion. It goes a little bit like this:

Eleazar Wheelock is old and tired after his long hard work in the service of the Lord and he lies in bed, life just about spent. Having moved up to New Hampshire, then in the middle of nowhere, and built a home, a school, and a small town there, it is no surprise that the Rev. Dr. Wheelock is finally winding down. So he lies there, surrounded by his loved ones as he claims not to fear death and recites Psalm 23. He piously advises his children on the value and importance of faith, before expending his last breath without a struggled or a groan and imparting his soul unto the Lord. According to David McClure, who records this story in his biography of Wheelock “the peace and joy of his mind, in the moment of death, impressed a pleasing smile upon his countenance.”

Or, so they say. A few years ago, this otherwise unquestioned account of Wheelock’s death, was somewhat exploded by the discovery of a very different account couched in, you guessed it, Dewey’s journal between the death of a visiting clergyman and those of two Native Americans, one of whose name is “Not Recollected”. Dewey’s journal offers an entirely different account of Wheelock’s death.

It goes something like this:

His decease was instantaneous. About 9 O Clock AM he was at my Father’s shop in apparent good health and took from thence an article for a goldsmith’s use and went and deposited it on the western side of the common and without stopping took a borrowed saddle and carried to another house some forty rod distant and carried it to the attic and returning on the stairs remarked that he was faint and dropped down and never breathed afterwards – a very few minutes only intervened from the time he that left our house and the news of his decease.

Ok, so that’s completely different. In the one account, the pious Rev. Dr. Wheelock dies an idyllic, peaceful death. In the other, the tirelessly determined businessman Eleazar Wheelock simply expires in the middle of his endless to-do list working towards his goals.

This raises an interesting phenomenon in archival research – though it can be easy to assume that the archives contain the last word on a particular event, person, or historical moment, the reality is that archives merely provide tools for coming to a better understanding of the past. We have more information than the average joe, but we’re just as limited by what was preserved. We don’t have the full picture. And so sometimes, we get cases like this one. When our only information was David McClure’s narrative for Wheelock’s death, that was the best evidence we had to go on. But then we found something new that didn’t reconcile with what we thought we understood before. So now we have to examine two very different accounts to determine which we think is more likely.

I’ll be upfront about our bias, the staff of Rauner tends to view Dewey’s story as more probable. McClure paints this picture of an ideal, but somewhat unrealistic death. I mean, who wouldn’t want to go out peacefully in a bed surrounded by their friends and family while reciting favorite lines from memory? And this idea of death was especially the ideal in the 18th century. Given the overt and pervasive influence of Christianity in the daily routines and the ideals of the 1700s, a highly educated, Great Awakening pastor like Eleazar Wheelock would be expected to die with all due gravitas and nobility, but also in gracious acceptance, willingly yielding his soul with joy to, as Wheelock describes it, “depart and be with Christ.” He even imparted some final advice to his family to be “faithful unto death.” Kind of like he was being? Yeah. So this picture perfect ending carries with it a lot of expectations and while that doesn’t automatically mean it isn’t true – because I don’t think we’d claim that nobody has ever died peacefully in bed – you can kind of imagine someone embellishing the story, or even outright making it up, to maintain this persona and image for the Rev. Dr. Wheelock.

On the other hand, Dewey’s account doesn’t make much sense if it’s not true. It doesn’t paint Wheelock in this pious light which so much of the mythology around him has worked to construct, and it’s not clear what Dewey has to gain by subverting that image. And actually, Dewey’s version does track with some of the other things we know about Wheelock. Like Peter Carini mentioned in our first episode, on the founding of the College, Wheelock was a pretty ambitious man, and a pretty savvy businessman. I mean, he’d have to be to move to the wilderness of New Hampshire at 59 and start up a College from scratch. And we also know that Wheelock had been running a profitable trading business since way back when he was a student at Yale. Given this image of a more driven, worldly Wheelock, it’s believable that he might have been fiercely charging after his goals right up until the moment when his body just gave out. And while McClure’s story of Wheelock’s death comes in his biography of the man – very carefully presenting a certain persona for Wheelock – Dewey’s is couched in the midst of a lengthy list of deaths in Hanover. For Dewey’s purposes, the accuracy of the details of Wheelock’s death are far more important than any political implications the story has for Wheelock’s character.

So, it seems likely to us that Dewey’s account is more true than McClure’s. The reality, though, is that unless we turn up another document or artifact somewhere that provides further support of one or the other, or even new information, we won’t really know what happened that day in late April 1779.

Let’s step back a bit and return to our artifact.

Part of what makes Dewey’s journal so interesting is that, while it doesn’t comprehensively answer the question of the circumstances of Wheelock’s death, it could serve as that additional, corroborating bit of evidence that fleshes out a different kind of inquiry. Like we saw in the beginning of this episode, Dewey’s journal spans about 90 years of Hanover and Dartmouth history and keeps a pretty detailed record of life in Hanover. through death in Hanover, that ends up being useful for a surprisingly large range of topics.

You could see that entry on Mr. Thimble being an important piece of evidence in some other story. So, in some ways, we wanted to talk about this artifact as a way of windowing into a couple different parts of Dartmouth history, but also as a way of contextualizing what archival research can look like and how and where we’re finding some of the information that’s appearing in the rest of the podcasts – and that’s the really cool thing about most of these objects that you should bear in mind in every episode. Depending on what you’re looking for as a researcher, one text or artifact can be rich in very different kinds of content, and this one in particular is a tremendous archival object that has a lot of stories to tell.

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