JULIA LOGAN: 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 archival collections, one per decade. I’m Julia Logan. I’ll be your host for this episode.

In September of 1824, a student committee made up of representatives from the freshman through senior classes, submitted a letter to the “Immediate government of Dartmouth College”, addressed to the “Honourable Instructors.” The letter came as a direct reaction to the board of Trustees false claims and actions taken upon Edward Mitchell, a candidate for admission to the class of 1828 whose acceptance was revoked by the board.

By the beginning of the 1824 academic year, Mitchell had been examined and approved by the Dartmouth College faculty. In the 1820’s Dartmouth:

*Required of all candidates that they bring satisfactory testimonials of good moral character; be well versed in the Grammar of the English, Latin, and Greek Languages, including Prosody; and be able to construe and parse Virgil, Cicero’s Select Orations, Sallust, Jacob’s Greek Reader, or an equivalent, and the Four Gospels, and to translate English into Latin correctly.*

In a letter dated August 12, 1824, Newport Academy principle, William Clark attested to Mitchell’s “good moral character” and having passed the classics required for admission into the N. [New] England collages.”

By all accounts Mitchell was a strong candidate. After all he had met the requirements of admission and was already approved by the faculty. So, why then had the board of Trustees denied Mitchell’s acceptance? Well, Mitchell was African American and the Board believed that his presence “might prove detrimental to the interest of the institution, from the fear that his entrance into it would not meet with cordial reception on the part of the students.”

When the students caught wind of the situation and the trustees’ claims that they rejected Mitchell based upon student popular opinion, they felt compelled to respond and have their true opinions heard. Their response, in form of a 1-page written petition is the object we are focusing on in today’s episode.

Dated September 24, 1824 the petition holds the signatures of Leonard Worcester class of 1825, Henry Shedd class of 1826, Charles D. Cleveland class of 1827, and Nathaniel S. Folsom class of 1828. These four young men responded on behalf of their respective classes in a written request. United in their opinions, they stated: “[W]e are happy in being able to say that there is but one feeling throughout the college; and that that feeling is a desire for his return.”

We do know that at the time of the event and even 50 years later Mitchell’s contemporaries remember this as a defining moment both in their lives and in the history of the college. The class of 1827, who would have been sophomores at the time proudly recount this moment of activism in their 1869 memorial book. “One of the brightest honors of the College, its freedom from distinctions on account of color, was won for it during our course, and with no unimportant aid from our own class.”

Charles Cleveland, who represented the sophomore class on the student committee considered himself to have a “dark complexion.” It is stated that in pleading for Mitchell he urged the argument, that, if color excluded from the college, he himself could not be a member.”

Much of Mitchell’s life is fascinating yet unknown and has left researchers, including myself frustrated by the lack of documentation found within Dartmouth’s archival holdings. But, here is what we do know. Mitchell was born in 1792 on the French island of Martinique. A mariner during his youth, he first experienced America when a voyage took him to Portland, Maine. He later immigrated to the United States, settling in Philadelphia around 1810.

Mitchell was the first student of African descent to graduate from Dartmouth College at a time when other American institutions were denying black students admission. It wasn’t until 40 years after Mitchell that any other Ivy league school admitted another African American student. Former College President, Jim Wright credits the story of Edward Mitchell as the beginning of Dartmouth’s commitment to diversity. In the 70 years following Mitchell, 33 African American students were admitted to Dartmouth and its associated schools and between 1900 and 1928 that same number is duplicated under President Tucker’s and Nichols’ administrations.

However, it wasn’t until the 1970’s under the leadership of President Kemeny that Dartmouth made a recommitment to diversity. If you come into Rauner Library, and compare the 1969 yearbook to the 1973 yearbook you can see a visible difference in the makeup of the student body.

The story of Edward Mitchell leaves us with many questions: For me, I wonder about connections between local secondary schools and Dartmouth. For example, several African American alumni attended Kimball Union Academy in Meriden, NH before enrolling at Dartmouth during the mid 19th century. Additionally, what did Mitchell do in Hanover for the four years prior to entering the College? The answers to these questions are still unknown and perhaps may never be discovered. However, what I prefer to believe, is that the answers to lay deep inside our holdings or among collections at other repositories. In fact, it was not until recently, that information about Mitchell’s early life and life after Dartmouth was uncovered in a Canadian Archive. Using the Mitchell Family fonds at the McCord Museum in Montreal, Forester A. Lee researched his book, *a Noble and independent course: the life of Reverend Edward Mitchell*. I referred to Lee’s book to fill in many gaps about Mitchell’s early life, pre-Dartmouth, specifically my interest in how a mariner from the French Island of Martinique ended up in Philadelphia.

Mitchell’s first introduction to the College was through Reverend Francis Brown, third college president and his wife, Elizabeth.  You may remember President Brown from our episode, “The Butterfly Effect” which focused on the Dartmouth College Case. Brown’s predecessor, John Wheelock was ousted by the Board of Trustees and Brown inherited an institution divided.

It is reported that Brown suffered from a pulmonary condition. More than likely, his health was further debilitated by the stress of the litigation from the Dartmouth College Case. In the fall of 1819, Brown’s health was failing. In search of milder temperatures and warmer climates, he and Elizabeth embarked on a journey to the South on October 11, 1819.

Elizabeth documented their trip in her “journal of tour to South.” Making note of her encounters, weather, lodging, daily activities, updates on her husband’s health, and mileage traveled, even going as far as 29 miles in a day without stopping. Mind you that this was on a horse-drawn coach. From Elizabeth’s entries, we know that it took them about two months to reach South Carolina and can glean that their farthest southern destination was Savannah, Georgia, or in the vicinity thereof. On April 3, 1820 Elizabeth notes in her journal that Savannah has “every appearance of a New England town …” A few days later, the Brown’s set out on their journey home - set to return to Hanover by June.  It is on their journey north, during a layover at the Philadelphia home of Elizabeth’s cousins, Benjamin and Hannah Gilman, that they are introduced to Edward Mitchell, who at the time worked for the Gilman’s as a porter.

Mitchell’s name first appears in Elizabeth’s diary on May 31, 1820. Mrs. Brown writes in her journal, “In Philadelphia we parted with Mr. T. who returned to Georgetown near Washington city, and we have hired a man of color for the year who attends us on horseback, named Edward.”

Edward traveled North with the Brown’s and by all accounts stayed on with the family in Hanover until 1828. We are unsure about Edward’s exact whereabouts and activities during the years prior to attending Dartmouth. There has yet to be any documentation found referring to Mitchell working or living in Hanover during this time period. The recommendation letter from Newport Academy tells us that at some point prior to 1824 he studied at the Academy, about 30 miles south of Hanover. We also know that he was a devout man heavily involved in the Etna Baptist church. But for how long and when exactly we do not know. The sense of reaching a dead end is all too familiar for those researching within Archival collections. So, Let’s get back to the petition and things that we do know.

The students in their own words stated: “from what we know of Mr. Mitchell’s moral character; (and) intellectual attainments we wish him every success; (and) so far from feeling any disrespect towards him on account of his colour or extraction, we think him entitled to the highest praise, that, not withstanding these, he has persevered in his noble and independent course. And should he be permitted to return (and) enjoy, with us, the advantages of our institution. We are decidedly of the opinion, that every member of his (and) of the other classes, will cheerfully receive him as a companion and fellow student; (and) that the feeling of pleasure upon his return will be as universal, as that of regret, was at his departure.

The Board overturned their decision and Mitchell rejoined the class of 1824.

After graduation Mitchell accepted a position at the Baptist church in Burke, VT. He met and married Ruth Cheney and later emigrated to Canada in 1833 settling as a family in Quebec.

Undoubtedly, Mitchell’s story marks a significant moment of student resistance in Dartmouth’s often complex history of diversity. Adding to the complexity, in the 1830’s Dartmouth had both an Abolitionist Society and a Colonization Society. Additionally, twenty African American Students were admitted under the leadership of President Nathan Lord, who at one time supported abolition but later on during his tenure turned towards pro-slavery rhetoric and writing. But this story is for another time. Thank you for listening and we hope you will continue to enjoy Hindsight is 20/19.

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