**1770s: Dirty Little Secrets, Slaves and Slavery**

PETER CARINI: 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 Peter Carini. I’ll be your host for this episode.

Before we start today’s episode, I have to warn our listeners that some of what you are about to hear may be disturbing.

Today’s object is a letter, written by Eleazar Wheelock to a Captain Foot in January of 1776. I’m going to read you a short excerpt of the letter. Wheelock begins,

*My Dear Sir –*

*Mr. Bingham supposes that He sent you a message by Elihu Pomaroy later than your Letter and that the cheese is now upon the road and if that be the case and the Negro also with it, it is well. If you have yet waited for my answer – I would have you procure the Cheese and send it along by the Negro if that may be done with safety; and provided also I can make such remittance, as will answer, I understand the money must be paid down for the cheese, I have no expectation of getting the hard money, and I am not quite certain of Paper, tho I depend upon having it. And as to the Negro, I don’t know when I shall be able to pay for him, as I am in no capacity to collect a debt, and when our Wise Men will order matters so that I may have justice in a course of Law I can’t tell, however I will do the best I can.*

The letter goes on for a little longer, but this opening section is what we’re most concerned with. 18th century writing can be a bit circuitous and can be hard to follow, but basically, Wheelock is asking that this Captain Foote send him a cheese and an enslaved man, though he’s not sure he can pay for both up front. If you want to read the full letter in full it’s available here in Rauner.

In this episode, we are looking at the 1770s and Dartmouth’s relationship to slavery. The text of the letter you’ve just heard is disconcerting and disturbing to those of us living in the 21st century. The idea of casually discussing the purchase of an inanimate object, a wheel of cheese, and the purchase of a person in the same breath feels deeply discordant, and just plain wrong. It also leaves us with many questions about the institution of slavery in New England, the people involved and more specifically what role the founder of Dartmouth College played in this institution. It also brings up questions about what responsibilities the College has in terms of acknowledging its ties to slavery and the legacy of slavery in Hanover and Upper Valley.

To try to answer some of these questions we researched as many of the existing documents in the Archives as we could find that mention enslaved peoples. These included letters, deeds of sale, confessions, reports, wills and account books. We also spoke with Deborah King, Professor of Sociology at Dartmouth who has done extensive research on former slaves and the African American community in Hanover and the Upper Valley in the 18th and 19th centuries.

So, our story actually begins in 1735 the year Eleazar Wheelock was settled as the minister of the Second Congregational Church in Crank, Connecticut, now part of Lebanon. When he moved to Crank, Wheelock purchased a large farm and set up household with his new wife, Sara Davenport, a widow, whom he married in April of that year. We know that Wheelock owned at least one enslaved person at the time. Like so many of the enslaved people of that time, she remains unnamed and her fate is unknown.

The fact that Wheelock was a slave owner is not that unusual for the time period. Although, we think of slavery in the Americas as a feature of either the sugar plantations of the Caribbean islands, or the cotton plantations of the southern United States, slavery actually wasn’t limited to these areas. While less prevalent in New England, slavery was a prominent feature of life in the northern colonies, and like Wheelock, most ministers and doctors owned at least one or two enslaved people.

What’s different about Wheelock is that he owned at least 19 enslaved people throughout his life.

As a minister, Wheelock would not have had a lot of time to devote to his farm and he would likely have been looking for help. In 1743, he purchased a man named Fortune. In 1745 and 1746 we find references to two other enslaved men named Bill and Billy. From information in Wheelock’s account book, we know that all three of these men did a variety of farm labor. This type of work was hard on people’s bodies. Documentation of the skeleton of another enslaved man, also named Fortune, who was owned by Dr. Preserved Porter of Waterbury Connecticut paints a picture of the toll hard labor took on men like these. The skeleton indicates that this second Fortune broke his lower back, his hand and his foot over the course of his life, injuries that were not unusual for agricultural workers in the18th Century.

In 1748, Wheelock’s father died and left his 300-acre farm to Eleazar. This meant that he had two farms to manage. At around the same time, Wheelock decided to start a school run out of his house for Native Americans. We know that Wheelock struggled to keep the Crank farm running, even with slave labor. Letters written to Wheelock by the parents of the Native American students in his care are full of complaints about their sons and daughters being forced to perform labor on the farm.

In 1757 Wheelock purchased another man named Ishmael. In 1760 we have a record of the purchase of a man named Brister and in 1761 he bought a man named Sippy back from two men he’d previously sold that man to. Two years later, in 1762 he purchased a man named Exeter, a woman named Chloe, and a boy named Hercules. And, finally, in 1769, the year the College was founded, he purchased a woman named Dinah.

This means that between 1735 and 1769 we find proof that Wheelock owned or purchased eleven enslaved people: eight men and three women. Apparently, Wheelock was very much a man of his time since the slave population in the Colony followed a similar trend increasing from 1,000 in 1740 to 4,300 in 1761. By the start of the Revolution, Connecticut was the largest slave holding colony in all of all New England.

So, what was life like for enslaved peoples in in Connecticut? Well as you probably suspect, it wasn’t that easy. In addition to being forced to perform work for those who owned them, relationships and marriage were difficult. While enslaved men and women might be allowed to marry, the couple might not be owned by the same people, and thus would not be able to live together as a family with their children. Enslaved men were often required to provide support for their wives and children by finding ways to perform work for hire, beyond the forced labor they did for their owners.

Enslaved people lived with a number of other restrictions. For instance, they could not be on the streets after 9PM and they couldn’t move beyond the town limits of where they lived without a ticket or pass. If they disturbed the peace they were to receive a minimum of 30 lashes and they would receive 40 lashes for speaking out against a free white person. While some enslaved people were house servants, the vast majority performed hard labor on large farms like those owned by Wheelock.

As I mentioned earlier, we suspect that Wheelock owned more slaves than we know about. One reason we believe this is the 1761 deed of sale, I mentioned earlier, in which Wheelock is buying the man named Sippy back from two men he had earlier sold the Sippy to, so that those two men can pay off their other debts. This means that Wheelock must have purchased Sippy prior to the 1761 transaction, but we can find no other record of his existence either before or after this document was signed. Likewise, the enslaved men named Billy and Elijah only appear in Wheelock’s account book and nowhere else in the extant record.

The reason we can be sure that all of these individuals are enslaved people of African descent is because they have no last names. Everyone else who appears in Wheelock’s account book, or correspondence, is provided with both a first and last name, or a title and a last name. This includes a white indentured servant named Thomas Devine.

While we don’t know which of these enslaved people worked the Crank farm and which worked the Windham farm, we do know that Wheelock was profiting from their work in more ways than one. In the case of the enslaved men who appear in the account book, their names appear in the debtor’s column, the part of the account book that records money owed to Wheelock. This is because Wheelock was hiring them out to do labor for others and keeping the money he made on the transaction. Because he couldn’t have consumed all of the produce from two large farms, we know that he must have been selling some of this produce and thus also profiting from slave labor in this way also.

In 1770 Wheelock moved his household from Lebanon, Connecticut up to Hanover, New Hampshire. According to John King Lord’s history of Hanover, Wheelock brought seven enslaved people with him. There is no record to tell us what these enslaved people did when they arrived in Hanover, but we do know that the Hanover Plain was covered with enormous White Pines. Some are said to have stood over 170 feet tall and to have been five feet in diameter. Wheelock’s first actions on arriving were to fell many of these trees and build rough log structures to house himself, his followers, and his students. It is likely that the enslave people were heavily involved in this process.

In 1778, about a year before his death, Wheelock sold both of his Connecticut farms for a total of one thousand pounds. Even with the American economy in shambles due to the Revolution, this was still a substantial sum. As a reference, a sergeant in the British Army made an annual salary of ten pounds in the same time period.

But, Dartmouth’s legacy with slavery does not end with Wheelock’s death. The enslaved people he still held when he died went to his son John. There is no clear indication of what happened to most of these people.

What we do know is that when Eleazar Wheelock died he freed some of these enslaved people and he promised to free others. For instance, Exeter, who he’d purchased in 1762, was freed and granted the use of his wife, Chole. For her part, Chole remained enslaved to John in service to his mother. It’s not clear if Chole ever won her freedom. Brister, who was purchased in 1760, was also to be freed when he married and quote “he be in a capacity to support himself and family.” Similarly, Wheelock’s will also states that a boy named Achelous, for whom we have no purchase information, was to be freed when he turned twenty-five so long as he was judged to be of good “moral character” and might “safely be trusted with his freedom.”

It’s all very paternalistic.

On the other hand, Brister and Achelous are granted large amounts of acreage, but in remote places for that time period, such as Landaff, New Hampshire. Whether any of this came to pass is unclear though William Dewey, who chronicled deaths in Hanover, records Brister’s death at the age of 70, which would indicate that he was still living in Hanover. Dewey also records that he was married to a woman named Lavinia and had two children, so presumably he was freed.

For his part, John Wheelock, the ultimate recipient of his father’s slaves, married into a major slave holding family from St. Thomas in the Virgin Islands. His wife, Maria Shum was given a young enslaved girl named Phoebe by her stepfather to be an attendant to John and Maria’s daughter. How many other enslaved people John owned is not clear. Phoebe eventually won her freedom and her story became the source for Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin.*

Since many of the early member of the Board of Trustees were members of the clergy, or held other prominent positions in colonial Connecticut, it is statistically likely that they each owned at least one or two enslaved people. Likewise, many of the earlier settlers in the Hanover area came from Connecticut (just look at the names of the towns in the Upper Valley and you can see the Connecticut influence) and we know that some of them were slave holders also.

So, while Dartmouth College’s role in slavery has traditionally been cast as indirect, that’s clearly a misconception. While Dartmouth as an institution wasn’t financed by the slave trade in the way that Brown, Georgetown or Princeton was, its founder was a major slave holder in New England for his time. He also clearly lived well off the proceeds of the two farms he owned in Connecticut. It is also very likely that the early College was constructed and run using slave labor.

So, given Dartmouth’s undeniable link to slavery from its very beginnings, what is the legacy of slavery in this part of New Hampshire and what effect has it had on the Upper Valley and Hanover more specifically?

To get some answers to these questions, I sat down to talk to Deborah King, Professor of Sociology, about her research, particularly as it relates to a woman named Jane Wentworth, a former enslaved woman from Hanover and her family.

DK: My name Is Deborah Karen King and I am an associate professor of Sociology and I have affiliations with WGSS as well as AAAS here at the college.

PC: It’s sometimes said that it is important to remember that the experiences of enslaved peoples were individual experiences and so we should not generalize on the topic. Can you comment on this?

DK: Well certainly in one level, one can sort of agree with that in that we certainly know that In a group of individuals, put them through the same experiences and different things will resonate for them, they’ll see and hear and emphasize different parts of it. So I think In that broad sense, I can agree with the statement generally. But more particularly I think Is we're trying to discover something bout what the lives of those who were enslaved were like, and the fact that we don’t have records of the Individuals who were enslaved, though we often try to pull together accounts and get some sense of their experiences from scraps of evidence here and a little bit of evidence there and there that there’s no way that one can sort of represent or even begin to imagine what the range of those individual experiences were like for the Africans in the colony In the early republic. I should say that I got Interested particularly in Northern New England. It was in fact a curiosity that was triggered by president James Wright at one point after Brown had released Its study of Its connections with slavery and he sort of said that well Dartmouth has no kind of ties like that, with slavery, and I was like "that’s Interesting." But what do we know beyond Eleazar Wheelock had a few slaves? What else do we know about the lives of the enslaved who might have been connected with Dartmouth etc. And so for me It began by discovering "Oh, there’s a woman who was a former slave who was buried In the Dartmouth cemetery, Jane Wentworth, and It was from there I began sort of looking for the pieces of Information about her life and she's fascinating In part because she’s actually mentioned In some of the histories of Dartmouth college. So I get these tidbits, but I'm also Interested "Well where did they get this Information." And then I just began sort of looking any and everywhere. I do genealogy so went to the census, and then I recall, in fact, that I believe It was you, Peter, who suggested to me one day, "Deborah, why don’t you look at the ledger and daybooks of the merchants In town." Nobody ever looks at those and so It was there, particularly for Jane Wentworth and her family, that I found a treasure trove of Information that was really quite different from not only what was in the histories of Dartmouth. Some of the earlier newspapers have had sort of full accounts of her life. There were clearly some sources of some of the early history, but they only took tidbits of them. So I found this long extensive obituary of hers that really helped me go back and actually find out to who John House sold her, where and when she met Charles Wentworth, but It was In those ledgers, In the town records of Hanover, that I began sort of piecing together aspects of her life. So In the ledgers, I am able to trace when she goes In to purchase gingham and to purchase molasses and to get sugar and how frequently those things were occurring and how often they were occurring. I am able to look and see when other family members come In and purchase things so one of the things that I've been doing Is actually trying to particularly mark those occasions when they are getting the special things in life. But the day that was most marvelous for me, well earlier, I should say, we know that Jane Wentworth from the college's archives and those little slips of paper of the receipts of her pay so that I knew that she often swept the college chapel and the college buildings and I began seeing what appeared to be her signature and so I'm really sort of excited about that sort of piece. Was she literate? Was she only able to sign her name? How do we begin to explain this. So I remember going back to the ledger and daybooks and noting a number of things about her and one Is she signs things there. She, unlike others who might be referred to by their first names or mentioned as so and so's boy so and so's girl. She almost consistently was listed as Mrs. Jane Wentworth, consistently. And so to me that was saying something about her status In the community although I didn't have her individual voice to verify that but It seemed to confirm some of the other accounts and then the day comes when I come upon this order. She's paying for a subscription to the Vermont Chronicle, which was the paper of the congregational church In Vermont. She's bought history book, grammar books, spelling books, a string for Denizen's violin or something, Denizen is her son, and I think a geography book and I literally wanted to dance in Rauner. Oh my gosh, even If she's not literate, she's absolutely making that her son and others in that household are going to have the ability to be educated and to be literate.

Carini: So you mentioned that you know when she was purchased as a slave and by whom and that she married a man named Wentworth. And do we know anything about his background, her husband's background?

King: Her husband's background, her husband Charles Wentworth. Everything says so far has said that he was a slave of Governor Wentworth of the colony, but I haven't found in Governor Wentworth's papers any reference or documentation.

Carini: Um, and the Interesting piece to that of course Is that governor Wentworth was a trustee of the college, ex officio, but still a trustee of the college and Integral In the founding of the Institution, so that’s a direct connection that we have between a board of trustee member and slavery, potentially. So that also tells us something about enslaved peoples living In Hanover and that there were more than just the slaves that were held by Wheelock himself. And do you have any sense of the kind of numbers that were talking about locally at that, you know, pre-revolution kind of time period.

King: Right because the first US census Is 1790, and so we sort of begin there and I think there's about 14 or 16 who were In Hanover at that time and of course by then, John Wheelock, who's the son of Eleazar has about 5 slaves. New Hampshire's difficult to sort of note Individual status. We're clear that he had 5 slaves. There were two others in town, but then there were a number of free persons of color who were in the census and It Is difficult to know whether those were Native Americans. They could have been persons of African descent, and New Hampshire Is really vague and unclear about when slavery Is abolished, and I wonder what conditions.

Carini: Talk a little about where they lived in the town.

King: In the early references to the black community in Hanover, there are discussions of what in polite company we would say Is the n-word Hill and the n-word Island. As a scholar, I think It Is important and in certain contexts to actually use the term. So there's an area in Hanover that’s called Nigger Hill and the Island Is now known as Gilman Island but was called Nigger Island. So that’s at least suggesting that there were pockets where blacks lived.

PC: So, we know there was an exodus of Black families from the Hanover area in the 1850s. We also know that the Fugitive Slave Act went into effect that same year, and that Daniel Webster, Class of 1801, played a key role in passing that legislation. Do you think that this event was the reason by behind that exodus?

DK: You've posed this question to me before and I've been wrestling with It and trying to piece together what made the accounts and I think Its probably not one single thing. I think there’s a series of things. One may be Hanover and Dartmouth Itself. It's rather sort of curious, though we know that there were some abolitionists and rather strong radical abolitionists among Dartmouth students. Many of the Dartmouth faculty who were abolitionists were for colonization, were for returning those of African descent either back to Africa or to the Caribbean. We certainly also know that for Nathan Lord changes his position on slavery, moving from being someone who has a more abolitionist stance to one who believes its justifiable and certainly some of that seems to be in reaction to the radical abolitionists like William Lord Garrison who's like "If God has anything to do with slavery, forget God." And we have an account of some abolitionists coming to speak at Dartmouth who are heckled by the students, so that’s one piece. But Dartmouth and Hanover, like many other places In New England are wrestling with this topic of slavery, so I don't know that I want to totally pin It only on Daniel Webster and his position or on Nathan Lord. The other thing I find curious is that in what we've been able to discover about the Underground Railroad in New England, is that so far In my reading, there were no stations In Hanover. There's stations In Lebanon, there’s station Meriden, there's stations In Enfield. There's stations In Lyme, In Norwich, In Woodstock, all around Hanover, and that strikes me as Interesting. It's a big sort of question mark that either they were so well hidden that they haven't been uncovered, which Is quite possible, or that this was an environment that was perceived by those who were abolitionists as not a healthy environment. In August of 1934, at the Knolls Academy, which Is in Canaan, which establishes an interracial co-ed institution. The good town's people of Canaan decided, "Oh we're not having this." With more than a hundred men, they took almost 75 oxen, literally dragged the school off of Its foundations, but It’s also rumored that there were Individuals from Hanover who also participated. That’s In sort of all the records, and I haven’t seen a name or anything else, but that’s sort of there.

PC: So, my last question for you is what is Dartmouth’s, or any community for that matter, responsibility for its past in terms of enslave people?

DK: Colleges have been one of the sites for helping us to try to understand the lives of the enslaved, whether It’s the research of the professors who are scholars, whether it's within the classroom. And then certainly more recently, the Institutions themselves have been wrestling with this question of as Institutions, what Is their ties and connections within this whole Issue around slavery abolition within that context and how did It effect the lives of the enslaved as well as the Institutional rock. So, how does Dartmouth begin as an Institution to sort of think about its connections and ties following some of the examples of other schools and there have been sort of wide range of reports. The University of Virginia Is being more attentive to the lives of the Individual, those who were enslaved who worked at the college. How do you recognize and acknowledge that? Harvard, I believe, last year did a similar sort of acknowledgement to those early contributions and those who often unnamed, you know, as well as the examples like Brown of a much more comprehensive sort of "lets look at the evidence" or the recent things around Georgetown and their sale of 270 somewhat enslaved persons to finance. So how does Dartmouth, how does the Upper Valley begin to sort of acknowledge the lives of those who were formally enslaved of African descent and would probably include the Native Americans in this conversation. You know that other portions of the state have began doing that, you know Portsmouth, largely through the efforts of Valerie Cunningham, you know, the discovery of the African burial ground in Portsmouth and all that has emerged from that. Her work in terms of the Harriet Wilson, the statue Is sort of recovering that. So there Is a lot of other examples of how might we better Incorporate the lives and experiences of those Individuals and families and groups of persons of African descent In the history of Hanover and how do we make It visible to the contemporary period.

PC: We certainly hope that this episode has provided you with a better sense of Dartmouth’s relationship to slavery and the legacy of slavery in the Upper Valley. What we now know on this subject is far greater than what knew just a year or two ago due to the research that we have conducted. If you’re a student or someone interested in trying to uncover more information on this topic, there are many other issues waiting to be explored!

I’d like to close by reading the names of all of those people we know of who were enslaved by Eleazar Wheelock,

An unnamed girl

Fortune

Ishmaal

Brister

Sippy

Exeter

Cloe

Hercules

Dinah,

Hagar

Elijah

Billy

Bill

Peggy

Achelous

Selinda

An unnamed infant

Ama

Caesar

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

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