



Dr. Eleazar Wheelock, 1711-1779  
Founder and First President of Dartmouth College

## **THE FOUNDING OF DARTMOUTH COLLEGE IN 1769**

The founding of Dartmouth stands as a landmark in the pre-Revolutionary period of the history of New Hampshire. It was inspired by a spirit of fervent Congregational Evangelism to bring the Blessings of the Christian gospel to the Indians, especially those in the upper Connecticut River Valley wilderness. In fact the motto of Dartmouth still stands, "VOX CLAMATIS IN DESERTO"--voice crying out in the wilderness--as was that of John the Baptist in Judea and Galilee some 1700 years before.

### **1. Pre-Revolutionary New Hampshire**

The American colonial period following General Wolfe's victory Over the French at Quebec in 1759 brought a surge of immigration and settlements into the upper Connecticut River valley. Heretofore, this area had been a vast wilderness, with its northern outpost at Fort Number 4, Charlestown, New

Hampshire. The story of Major Rogers' Rangers' return from their destruction of the St. Francis Indians on the St. Lawrence is described in Kenneth Roberts' *Northwest Passage*. Rogers and his split-up party suffered incredible hardships, tracking through the wilderness until he first reached Fort Number 4, November 5, 1759. These two engagements gave the English colonial's confidence that the rich lands were now free from Indian raids. Settlers poured into the fertile Ox-Bow valley and timbered forests, from Connecticut, Massachusetts, and lower New Hampshire. Within the succeeding ten years scores of township grants for settlements were rapidly developed in the river valleys and hillsides. By the end of that period Dartmouth College was founded.

## **2. The Three Leading Spirits**

It may be said that the three leading and most contributive spirits to the founding of Dartmouth were Dr. Eleazar Wheelock, Rev. Samson Occom, and Governor John Wentworth.

Eleazar Wheelock was born in Windham, Connecticut in 1711. He sprang from a line of devout Puritan ancestors. His great grandfather, Ralph Wheelock, a graduate at Cambridge, England, migrated to Dedham, Massachusetts, in 1637. After graduating from Yale College, Eleazar became the minister of the second parish of Lebanon, Connecticut.

Wheelock became an eloquent and zealous preacher of the word of God. In 1740 he joined "The Great Awakening" with Rev. Jonathan Edwards and the evangelist George Whitefield of England. Both Wheelock's church in Lebanon and Edwards' parish in Northampton became evangelistic centers. Tracey, the historian of the "Great Awakening", estimates that from 25,000 to 50,000 persons were converted during that period.

However, religious and political reactions against the scruples of Calvinism followed in the wake of the "Great Awakening." Rev. Wheelock turned his tireless energies toward bringing the Christian faith to American Indian tribes. He founded an Indian School at Lebanon, Connecticut, then one for the Iroquois who occupied upper New York State. His Lebanon School also taught English boys to be missionaries to the Indians as well as training Indians for the same work.

Samson Occom was an Indian boy of the Mohegan Tribe, born in 1723, in Wheelock's neighboring village of New London, Connecticut. Samson's mother arranged for his admission to Wheelock's Indian School in 1743. On his graduation in 1747 young Occom settled among the Montauk Tribe in Long Island as a schoolmaster. He was ordained a minister in 1759. Occom had a large family and was wretchedly poor but as a Christianized Indian was a marked success. He subsequently went on a mission to Indians on Sir William Johnson's great estates in the Mohawk Valley, and then to the Oneida Tribe as their preacher. He also wrote hymns.

By 1764 Wheelock's School and mission had reached a point where money in larger quantities was demanded. From the poverty of the colonies it was hopeless to expect adequate help from America. However, it was believed there were good supplies of money in the motherland, yet untapped. Whitefield

had aroused the interest of influential and wealthy citizens in England and Scotland.

In that year Wheelock received word that "an Indian minister in England might get a bushel of money for the School." Occom was Wheelock's greatest asset for such an enterprise. Accordingly at the age of forty-two Occom sailed for England in company with Rev. Nathaniel Whittaker of Norwich, Connecticut.

They reached London on February 6, 1765. Forthwith, Occom began addressing crowds in the huge tabernacle erected to accommodate Whitefield's congregations. Occom's success was instantaneous in appealing for funds for the Indian mission. Rev. Whittaker also busied himself with private interviews with people of influence and wealth. Among the early contributors of 21 pounds was one young John Wentworth, newly appointed Governor of the Province of New Hampshire.

Occom and Whittaker remained in London until March 1767, then journeyed through western England and Scotland. Their goal of 100 pounds per week was more than attained. The net result was about 11,000 pounds, perhaps a greater sum than was ever obtained by any other American educational institution in Great Britain in pre-revolutionary days. These funds were set up in a combination English and American Trust with John Thornton of Clapham, Treasurer. He was a London merchant who inherited large property and increased it by successful business dealings. All his remaining life he became a generous benefactor for the cause of the American Indian College.

One feature of the Trust was the settlement of 50 pounds per year upon Wheelock. However, this did not last long because of the depletion of the Trust principal to erect and conduct the new school in New Hampshire.

The contribution of Occom was a really indispensable factor. However, upon his return to America he had become such a changed person that he parted with Wheelock and fell into great poverty. He was helped financially by the Trust and Thornton--but unfortunately, after parting with Wheelock, never visited Hanover.

Among the wealthy English peers and merchants who brought aid to Wheelock's Indian School was William Legge, second Earl of Dartmouth. From the point of view of influence he was the most important. This young and opulent nobleman had become interested in the Methodist movement and was reckoned a devoted follower of Whitefield. Among the Earl's other devoted friends was King George III. Through Lord Dartmouth's influence the King made a donation of 200 pounds, which placed the enterprise under most favorable auspices. Lord Dartmouth became the President of the Board of Trustees managing the funds raised by Occom and Whittaker (1766-1768). The Trust was established to assure the funds would go for their intended purposes.

The great influence of the Earl of Dartmouth in the collection of the \$50,000 Trust funds brought Wheelock to propose his name for the college and Wentworth's name on a House at the College. Wentworth agreed--and DARTMOUTH COLLEGE it became.

There seems to be no record that the Earl of Dartmouth ever visited the college. The eruption of the Revolution between New Hampshire and England may have been the cause.

At the time Occom and Whittaker were raising funds in England, it was becoming evident to Wheelock that his reliance upon Indian students to become missionaries was unsuccessful. His Lebanon enterprise had encountered a temporary check. This brought out, in a more definite manner, his program to find a new site for the school.

During the period from 1765 to 1778 Wheelock considered several sites. Among them were the Wyoming Valley in Pennsylvania, North Carolina, the Kennebec River Valley in Maine, and the shores of the Ohio River below Pittsburg. Also, an offer of land near Albany, New York, was made to him.

During this search of Wheelock for a new site, there enters into the picture John Wentworth, Governor of New Hampshire Colony. It is said that next to Wheelock himself, Wentworth was the most powerful factor in the establishment of the college. He was a graduate of Harvard in 1755 and a nephew of Governor Benning Wentworth and a resident of Portsmouth. In 1763 he was sent by his father to England as a business representative. He soon acquired a secure position in society of London and the friendship of many members of the British aristocracy. In 1767 he returned to Portsmouth to replace his uncle, Benning Wentworth, as Governor of New Hampshire and Surveyor General of His Majesties' Woods in North America.

At that time New Hampshire was the only province north of Maryland in which a college had not been established. Wentworth, well aware of the English-American Trust for Wheelock, offered Wheelock various sites in New Hampshire, especially in the Coos region. In the fall of 1768, Wheelock's agents, Rev: Cleaveland and John Wright, went into the Coos region to inspect the sites offered. It was in large part through Governor Wentworth's influence that a charter for the college in New Hampshire was obtained from England. It bore the date of December 13, 1769.

### **3. The Hanover Township**

With the college named and its charter procured for a New Hampshire location, it now became necessary and fitting to select the most advantageous and appropriate site in the New Hampshire Province. Offers of land were made by the proprietors of Plymouth, Rumney, Campton, Haverhill, Orford, Charlestown, Plainfield, Lisbon, Lyme, Piermont, and Landaff. It was evident proprietors of these townships believed the settlement of a college would increase the local land values.

In May 1770 Eleazar rode horseback to New Hampshire to inspect townships. On June 3rd he reached Hanover, which he visited for three days. At one time Governor Wentworth had recommended Landaff for the new college site. Wheelock must have earlier convinced the Trustees of the major benefit of the Hanover site, for on the 9th of July, 1770, the Trustees chose without a dissenting vote to locate Dartmouth College at Hanover.

The selection of Hanover came for several reasons: (1) best spot on the river for the erection of a bridge; (2) straight line from Portsmouth to Crown Point; and (3) probably the determining factor, the large 3300 acres, including the promised governor's lot, was located in one block, instead of being in scattered lots. Such was the case of the offered land grants of other competing towns. However, Hanover Plain held no ready view of the river, such as was offered at Orford or Haverhill. The river at Hanover, running in what is almost a chasm, plays no part in the scene.

#### **4. Dr. Wheelock and His Staff Move to Hanover**

Wheelock was now fifty-nine years of age. He considered himself to be an old man and was likewise in debt. In the spring of 1770 he spent some time at the mineral springs in Lebanon, New York. Upon his return he journeyed on horseback to the Coos country, to Portsmouth, and to Boston, then to Lebanon (Connecticut) to settle his affairs. In August he left his family in Lebanon and rode horseback to Hanover to direct the work of some 30 to 50 laborers who had begun clearing the land for the college site.

In all Wheelock had now come to an estate in New Hampshire of over 40,000 acres scattered over the province, in which was included the 3300 acres in Hanover. The charter of the Hanover Township had been granted in 1761. The first settlers came to the town in 1765 and by 1770 about twenty families lived within the center of the town. In that summer of 1770 an unbroken forest of white pine covered the greater part of the Hanover plain. There were enormous trees reaching 100 feet in the air at the first branch, some with a total height of 270 feet. The present area of Alumni Field and Chase Field was a hemlock swamp. Six acres were cleared in the first summer.

By August 27th Wheelock had begun to live in a log house which he called "My Hut in Hanover Woods." It was soon ready for Wheelock's family. Madame Wheelock then came up from Lebanon by slow stages in the English "chariot" which Thornton had given Wheelock. A student drove it. Wheelock's nephew, Jabez Bingham, followed with a cartload of goods, including a barrel of rum. Evidently this was the "500 gallons" which has become renowned in Dartmouth song. It can also be mentioned that Bingham reported a "cog of wine", a hundred pounds of tobacco, a gross of pipes, a quantity of apple brandy and Exeter, a slave. An Indian boy was driving cows in the rear of the column. They were jolting their wagons over the rough Connecticut Riverside route from Lebanon, Connecticut, to Hanover, sometimes called the "Dartmouth Trail."

Wheelock brought with him about thirty students, only three of whom were Indians. Because of lack of provisions, ten students had to be sent home, except those on charity. Classes were begun, between the working hours and the demands of falling trees and building cabins. A church was gathered on January 23, 1771, with Wheelock as pastor and a membership of twenty-seven. By the end of the next summer forty acres of land had been cleared. College buildings had been completed in the rough. The new college, Dartmouth in Hanover, had been chartered, located, built and staffed and was now in operation. So the story of the founding of Dartmouth College may come to an end, with a note of its progress during the Revolution.

Wheelock's interest in and affection indicated to and for the Indians in the northern Coos and Canadian areas beyond New Hampshire are said to have been a cause and safety valve from raids during the Revolution 1775 to 1783. Nevertheless, there was considerable apprehension until Stark's victory at Bennington and Burgoyne's surrender at Saratoga in 1777.

As to the growth of the college, Dartmouth was to take its place beside Harvard, Yale, and Princeton. In the decade from 1791 to 1800 Harvard graduated 394, Dartmouth 362, Yale 295, and Princeton 240. The position of Dartmouth became established as a recognized institution of learning on parity with other private northeastern colleges, later classified as the "Ivy League."

It was in large part the great labor of Governor John Wentworth which brought about the Dartmouth Charter and Hanover site. Having made such a contribution, it could be expected he made welcome visits to Hanover thereafter. However, the only record is his visit in 1771. When the Portsmouth patriots stormed Fort William and Mary in December 1774, Wentworth was forced to flee his Governor's Residence in Portsmouth to the Isles of Shoals. He later went to Boston and Halifax. Still later he became Governor in Halifax, but there seems to be no record that he ever visited Hanover after he left Portsmouth. But his great contribution to the founding of Dartmouth should never be forgotten.

## **5. Death of Eleazar Wheelock**

After ten years of leadership in the founding and early administration of Dartmouth College, Eleazar Wheelock died in Hanover in his 69th year in 1779. By that time he could be assured that the college he had founded in the wilderness would long survive him. By his will and the arrangement of Trustees, his son would succeed him as President. He was put to rest in the graveyard he had laid out in Hanover where the wide 3300-acre college plot was first appropriated to college use. His memory and great achievements will long be cherished by every loyal son of Dartmouth.

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TRAVELER

GO IF YOU CAN AND DESERVE THE SUBLIME REWARD OF SUCH MERIT"

**ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

Compatriots Weld and Richter were roommates and fellow-members of the Class of 1921 at Dartmouth College. "Abe" Weld lived much of his adult life in New York but retired to Bradford, New Hampshire, and became an active member of the S.A.R. in this State. His was the opening paper in the Bicentennial series sponsored by our Society. Unfortunately he died before it could be printed, and his old classmate, Hibbard Richter, put it into form for publication.

Compatriot Richter held the degree of J.D. from Harvard Law School, and had long been interested in S.A.R. activities. He is a former President of the Massachusetts Chapter of the National Society.

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