

## Eleazar Wheelock: The Man and His Legacy

*Three hundred years after his birth, Dartmouth still owes much to its founder*

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*On June 27, 1776, even as Jefferson was putting the finishing touches on the Declaration of Independence, which placed the "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" as a central concern in America's quest for freedom from the British, Wheelock delivered the following sermon. In some senses it was a capstone to a life dedicated to promoting a right understanding of the pursuit of happiness.*

"It is very certain that men, one generation after another, are fondly desirous of happiness and in eager pursuit of it; they would fain have the various appetites and cravings satisfied, and come to be in such a state of pleasure and joy as best suits with their inclinations. And the reason why the generality of mankind go into very unsuitable methods and courses for obtaining happiness, because they have very mistaken and wrong notions and apprehensions about it, accounting the real and lasting felicity to consist in something which is not essential to it, or which at most is not considerable ingredient of it. It is very evil and the thoughts about happiness differ as much from the truth as a man's dreams do from the just conception and judgment of things he has in his waking hours."

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**E**leazar Wheelock (b. April 22, 1711), pastor, evangelist, teacher, farmer, family man, and founder of Dartmouth College, single mindedly pursued a vision, his so-called “Grand Design”, of an educational institution for Native Americans and English missionaries that would be an instrument of salvation for native populations in the Northeast. By examining the man and his mission we discover a gifted leader who was driven to succeed despite many obstacles. His legacy is still with us today in a variety of ways; indeed, the College owes a great debt to this man of high principle with a compassionate heart and a cross-cultural outlook that was well ahead of its time.

Wheelock, a second generation Connecticut Yankee and third generation Puritan New Englander, was born into a prosperous farming family in Windham. His father, Ralph, owned a farm of 300 acres. His family was well educated and relatively prominent – his great grandfather obtained a master’s degree from Cambridge before arriving in Dedham, Massachusetts in 1637. His mother, Ruth Huntington of Norwich, Connecticut, was of similar solid New England stock. Eleazar was their only son.

Not much is known about Eleazar’s childhood, but we do know that in 1729 he entered Yale, and that he was a promising scholar. That he had a religious and philosophical bent early in life is witnessed by extracts from a letter he sent to his parents at the age of 22, in which he considers the futility of human happiness apart from God.

“Most Dear and Honored parents,

Though the great and principal things that we seem to have respect to in all our actions is happiness, a desire of which is implanted in our natures by their author... [We] are almost always flattering ourselves with the prospect of something that we hope to take satisfaction in, which if we aren’t wholly disappointed of yet we seldom find that satisfaction in fruition we promised ourselves... Very good reason I think had the wise man to pronounce vanity of them all for verily all is vanity.

Your Dutiful son,  
Eleazar Wheelock”

This theme of happiness was one that he would come back to later in his life, for he saw it as the wellspring of all action, yet also the source of many vexations.

After a post-graduate year of theology, Wheelock was called to the pastorate and took a position in Lebanon, Connecticut in 1735. There he would serve for 34 years, a remarkable stint by today’s standards. But Wheelock was much more than a local pastor. Like many contemporaries in the pastorate, he was a farmer, family man, private tutor, and enforcer of the town’s moral standards, since most residents were also church members. By age 48 Wheelock had two step children and eight children by two wives (his first wife died in 1746).

He was also an effective orator and active participant in the first Great Awakening of the late 1730s and 1740s, a period of spiritual outpouring in New England. Wheelock was in much demand as a revivalist; in one year alone he is reported to have preached 465 sermons. He was no stranger to controversy, either. As an itinerant preacher himself, he initially supported the rights of itinerant preachers (or so-called

“new lights”) to preach in towns without invitation and even to criticize local clergy. Under attack by “old lights” for his views, his peripatetic preaching, and the neglect of his own parish, he was deprived of his salary in 1743 by the General Assembly. Eventually he would temper his views, but the removal of his salary did prompt Wheelock to take in students for the first time, effectively launching his career in education.

In 1932, Dartmouth professor and Wheelock biographer James McCallum wrote, “Today we hear so much about the rush of modern life and the lack of time that there is a tendency to look back on this eighteenth century minister as a man of comparative leisure, going about his duties in an unharassed manner. The contrary is true. Wheelock was hurried, and he felt he was hurried. Frequently we come across comments such as ‘I have but a moment to write,’ ‘I am in the midst of affairs,’ ‘I am in addition to my hurry about haying of a harvest...’ Wheelock’s lay duties were in themselves sufficient for the ordinary man. But so, too, was each of his other occupations.”

Examining some of the more than 5,000 items in the Wheelock collection at Rauner Library, one gets the sense of a man very much engaged in the issues of the day who was regularly consulted on a range of church and civil matters. He was also a business man, as witnessed by the extensive accounts he kept, and a prolific correspondent. Although Wheelock succeeded in balancing many roles, ultimately it was the life of the scholar that he would need to abandon in order to accommodate his other ambitions. There simply weren’t enough hours in the day.

Wheelock’s concern for the soul of Native Americans was not unique. By the mid-1700s, just 130 years after the arrival of the separatists at Plymouth, the population of Native Americans in Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island had plummeted. War, disease, and plunder of their lands by English settlers had reduced many tribes to penury. Evangelization of Native Americans had begun in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and in the middle part of that century there were 14 towns of eleven hundred “praying Indians”. But following King Philip’s War in 1676 the number declined to four towns. There was a concern that as many as possible be converted to Christianity before they disappeared entirely. In Wheelock’s words, “Can we think of this wretched state of our fellow men, and feel no compassion moving towards them?”

Wheelock was also concerned for the corrosive influence on Native American culture of the worst English vices, particularly alcohol. Like many of his contemporaries in the pastorate, he did not view the plight of Native Americans as unique; according to his Calvinistic theology all people were sinful and in need of a Savior. This view is perhaps best expressed by Jonathan Edwards, a friend of Wheelock’s and considered to be one of America’s greatest theologians. From 1750-1757 he served as the pastor at a mission school in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. According to his biographer, George Marsden, “In Edwards’s first sermon to the Mohawks in 1751, he enunciated the leveling principle, in a view of human nature as fallen. ‘It was once with our forefathers as it ‘tis with you’ he assured them. ‘They formerly were in great darkness.’ ... ‘We are no better than you in no respect,’ he explained, ‘only as God has made us to differ and has been pleased to give us light. And now we are willing to give it to you.’”

Wheelock feared God's judgment on the settler's failure to bring the light of the gospel to the native inhabitants of the land, and sensed this retribution might already be at hand through French and Indian attacks on English territories. This spiritual view was curiously mixed with a highly pragmatic *realpolitik*. The French Jesuits, or "black robes", had been active in New York, gaining ground and the confidence of the Mohawks through adoption of an austere and mobile lifestyle more consistent with that of the Mohawks than the life of English farmers. Native Americans allied with the French attacked settlements in Western New England several times from 1754-1763.

The English had a demographic problem, and the Native Americans were well aware that their lands were under threat. As much as they might make promises to let the natives remain on the land, or seek to integrate them into colonial society, there were constant pressures to expand farmland, and many early settlers bought up or expropriated native lands at a rapid clip. Although Wheelock could not solve this problem, he reasoned that a converted, Protestant, and English speaking native population would be "a far better defense [against French attacks] than all our expensive fortresses." Wheelock hoped to, in the words of his first biographers McClure and Parrish, "conciliate them by kindness, and bind them to us by kind offices."

Wheelock conceived of the idea of founding a school for Native Americans when, in 1743, the Mohegan Samson Occom came under his tutelage. Samson was a quick learner, a Christian convert, and later became an emissary to England and Scotland, where he raised substantial funds for Wheelock's educational initiatives. After Occom, Wheelock took in other native students, and in 1754 he founded a school for Native Americans in Lebanon, Connecticut, which later became known as Moor's Indian Charity School, after Joshua Moor who provided funds and deeded land as the school expanded.

Wheelock's approach was to serve as foster parent and teacher for native children, thus removing them from the influences of their tribes and families, eventually sending them back as missionaries to their own or other tribes. Simultaneously he would educate Native American girls to accompany their missionary husbands and tend to the spiritual needs of women, as well as English youth, some of whom were destined for the mission field. In 1756, he described the rationale for this model to the famous Anglican evangelist George Whitefield in the following terms:

"I Say when I have considered [the impediments to an English mission among the Indians], it has been Settled in my mind that the Most likely Expedient, for accomplishing the great Design, is to take of their own Children (two or more of a Tribe, that they may not Loose their own Language), and give them an Education Among ourselves, under the Tuition, & Guidance of a godly, & Skillful Master; where they may, not only, have means to Make them Schollars, but the best Means to make them Christians indeed,... to fit them for the Gospel Ministry among their respective Tribes."

Although the model was good in theory, it proved difficult in practice. This is in part because later students proved less adept than Occom, and many had difficulties adjusting to the English lifestyle. Five years later, writing to Whitefield again, Wheelock was close to despair: "None know nor can any, without experience, well conceive of the difficulty of educating an Indian... They are used to live from

hand to mouth (as we speak) and have no care for futurity. They have never been used to the furniture of an English house, and don't know but that a wine glass is as strong as a hand iron..." Despite all this, Wheelock was not entirely without hope: "However, experience has taught us that it may be done."

Though such judgments seem harsh by today's standards, it is clear from his correspondence that Wheelock had a genuine care and concern for his students. He opened his doors to Native Americans to live with his family, which was uncommon in his day. Most of his former pupils wrote affectionately to him and were appreciative of his efforts, though it is true that misunderstandings and differences did arise, as is common in any cross-cultural setting. In fact, differences eventually arose between himself and Samuel Oocom over his efforts to establish a college, which Oocom anticipated (correctly) would place less emphasis on Native American education. He felt Wheelock had used him to raise large amounts of funding for this purpose only to find, on his return to New England, that greater emphasis would now be placed on educating white missionaries. He wrote acerbically to Wheelock in 1771, "I am very jealous that instead of your seminary becoming alma mater, she will be too *alba mater* [white mother] to suckle the tawnees."

It is clear that, at best, Wheelock's vision met with mixed results. Some of his students left the school prematurely owing to illness or home sickness, others died, and yet others became accustomed to the English lifestyle and could not be convinced to return to their tribes. By the mid 1760s the school had sent out Native American and white missionaries to the Mohegan, Montauk, Narragansett, Mohawk, and Oneida. Yet the evidence suggests that less than five of the 52 Native American students at Moor's School ever served as missionaries (seven more served as school masters) and those who did met with substantial opposition and difficulties in the mission field. One of his most promising graduates, Joseph Johnson, a missionary and school teacher to the Oneida, struggled with alcohol and often found himself harassed by natives unsympathetic to the Christian message.

It is difficult to underestimate the many and varied obstacles that are chronicled in letters sent to Wheelock by his former pupils who had taken up the call to serve as missionaries or educators. They include Native American children who were ill prepared for the rigors of formal education; famines and disease that laid low whole communities; and physical attacks by those opposed to their efforts. In addition, some influential colonial officials were opposed to the mission work. Wheelock aroused such antipathy in William Johnson, British representative to the Iroquois, that in 1768 he withdrew all students of the Six Nations from Moor's School.

### *The Founding of Dartmouth*

It was partly this opposition that caused Wheelock to seek greener pastures elsewhere. Other reasons included the paucity of land in Lebanon for the expansion of the school, and his perception that the enterprise would only succeed if it were located closer to native population centers. Proposals were made for locations in Pennsylvania and New York, closest to the largest concentrations of native populations, but these ultimately came to naught. The negotiations for a site near Albany, New York, led by his son Ralph Wheelock, ultimately broke down. A site on the Susquehanna was beset by boundary disputes and was ultimately deemed too remote.

Although more distant from the largest Native American populations, New Hampshire had the advantage of a supportive Royal Governor, John Wentworth, and proximity to Canadian natives. In 1767, Wheelock sent a delegation to the Upper Valley, the Berkshires of Massachusetts, and Albany to assess alternative locations. The delegates were unanimous in agreeing that the Upper Valley held the greatest promise – land was fertile and abundant, which meant that it could be improved and resold to benefit the college, and local communities almost stumbled over each other in offering inducements. Sensing that a college would increase investment in their communities and afford educational opportunities for their children, no less than twelve towns, including Haverill, Lyme, Orford, Piermont, Plainfield, Hartford, and Norwich, made offers of land and promises of in kind support.

Wheelock determined that, despite its dense growth of towering pines, the Hanover plain was the most suitable location. After extensive correspondence, he finally obtained a royal charter from King George III for the establishment of a college in 1769. The name Dartmouth was chosen in honor of the Moor's School trustee and the college's largest beneficiary, William Legge, the Second Earl of Dartmouth. Ironically, Legge opposed the founding of a college because it would dilute Wheelock's attention to Moor's School. Ultimately, this proved to be true. The school was moved, along with Wheelock and his family, to Hanover in 1770, but it did not survive his death in 1779.

We may not think much of a major move at the age of 60 or even 70 to a retirement community in warmer climes. By contrast, Wheelock's move at the age of 59 to a relatively remote and unsettled region entailed substantial risks. He had to uproot his entire family from Connecticut, where he had considerable landholdings, and resign his pastorate. This was an era in which the social capital built up in a local community over generations was a sizeable part of one's retirement portfolio.

Wheelock served as Dartmouth's first President, as well as Trustee, Professor of Divinity and Minister of the College Church. Much could be written about the early days of the college (for details see Dick Hoefnagel's *Eleazar Wheelock and the Adventurous Founding of Dartmouth College*), but suffice it to say that removal to Hanover did not spell the end of Wheelock's difficulties. Wheelock wrote to Samuel Savage in December 1770:

"For more than three months since I came into this Wilderness I had not so much as one hour's leisure from my continual crowd of care & business to write a letter to a correspondent unless in cases of present & unavoidable necessity. And now [that] I am got settled with my family in my own House, I can write but a few lines without interruption by family, School, or laborers having the care of all yet upon me."

The College in the early years was in precarious financial condition; college buildings and residences were rough hewn and drafty; and the revolutionary war brought added hardships and tested allegiances to his British benefactors, though he ultimately sided with the Patriots. The war brought additional problems for his "Grand Design". Much of the Iroquois territory was closed to missionaries owing to the conflict, and there were difficulties in finding new Native American students. In 1774 he sent emissaries to Quebec who returned with four boys of mixed native and English parentage whose parents had agreed to send them to Moor's School. These naturalized natives were descendents of English captives

from the French and Indian wars. From 1771-1774 twelve English and six Native American young men were graduated from Dartmouth.

By the end of his life Wheelock had only taught a few dozen natives, many of whom predeceased him. Having sunk most of his personal fortune into this new venture, he was acutely aware of his penury. A month before his death at age 68, he wrote his friend Nathaniel Whitaker:

“I have near or quite run through the little estate I left in Connecticut in supporting this school in its deserted state and have but small means of subsistence more than the little remains of my principal, and now feel more than ever the want of a pension, which I think the world owes me with which I might buy a cask of wine and other suitable spirits which my physicians all advise to be necessary for me also coffee, chocolate, tea, &c., &c., which I am obliged to live wholly without for want of money to purchase the same. I wait upon God to provide for me in these respects and assure myself as long as He has work for me to do for Him He will feed me.”

If viewed only in light of what he had achieved before his death, without considering the longevity and eventual prominence of the College, he might well be considered a failure. Like the prophets of old, one wonders if he chose the College's motto, *Vox clamantis in deserto* (“The voice of one crying in the wilderness”, John 1:23), out of an acute sense of being alone in his pursuit of the “Design”.

#### *Wheelock's legacy*

What are we to make of Wheelock and his legacy? In terms of character, despite the whining tone that comes through in some of his correspondence (financial woes, poor health, and complaints about critics are favorite topics) and an ambition that some found distasteful (Yale President Ezra Stiles claimed he got it from his mother's side), it is clear that he was that rare kind of idealist who is pragmatic enough to get the job done. Though he was a visionary, he had his hands on the details of the entire enterprise, keeping meticulous accounts. He was a consummate networker and made good use of his many connections to high officials and notable clergy on both sides of the Atlantic, even obtaining consideration of his proposal for a college by King George himself. He appealed to the self-interest of those in power, perhaps overstating the case for missions as an appeasement strategy. Yet there were few others experimenting with similar approaches and thus little in the way of collective experience to better inform how to go about it.

Jonathan Edwards also discovered just how difficult the work could be. His work at Stockbridge Settlement in the Berkshires was consistently interrupted by threats of war and infighting among colonists over control of the Indian school. Natives would send their children to study only to withdraw them when angered by the disingenuousness of some English settlers. Edwards also had many detractors, for not everyone was sympathetic to the Native American cause. In fact, members of the Williams family of Williams College fame were a constant thorn in his side as they sought to buy up extensive land holdings in Western Massachusetts with little regard to native land claims.

Even McClure and Parish, whose biography verges on hagiography, questioned Wheelock's emphasis on a classical education of Latin and Greek rather than teaching Native Americans the practical skills they would need for a settled lifestyle. Late in his life, Wheelock's emissaries to Quebec made approving note of the Jesuit approach to missions: First obtain a tract of land, convince a few native families to settle upon it, assist them with building houses and cultivation, and supply them with basic necessities. By these means others would be attracted to the settlement and the natives were "thus taught to esteem them as their Landlords, their Fathers, and Benefactors and to pay a great reverence and strict obedience to their directions, instructions and commands." By contrast, Wheelock generally sent out missionaries one by one, often with scarcely enough assistance for themselves let alone the wherewithal to provide materially to those whom they were sent to serve.

For our nation's first schools – Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and Dartmouth – a Christian worldview initially provided the only framework within which to assimilate knowledge. There was a belief in the unity of truth, since all fields of knowledge were assumed to have their origin in the Godhead. Along with its peers, Dartmouth underwent a progressive secularization during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, though it is notable that Dartmouth's first nine presidents, right up through William Jewett Tucker in 1909, were ministers. As Julie Rueben points out in *The Making of the Modern University*, by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Christian underpinnings of colleges and universities were steadily eroded as the core curriculum of theology and moral philosophy had to make room for an increasing number of electives associated with the many new disciplines being developed. With the rise of the scientific method, questions were raised about the verifiability of claims concerning the authority of the Bible. Finally, a growing emphasis on the freedom of inquiry meant that many schools began to distance themselves from their denominational roots.

Attempts to apply a scientific approach to the study of theology largely failed, and eventually the discipline was dropped altogether and there arose in its place the new field of religion, which simply sought to describe what different religious groups believed. Moral education was eventually relegated to an extracurricular activity as embodied in Dartmouth's Tucker Foundation. Wheelock and his immediate successors would hardly recognize this educational model. They would be equally baffled by post-modern notions of the subjective nature of truth and the disconnect that is all too common today between beliefs and action. Yet in many ways President Kim has picked up the missions theme, stripped of religious connotations, when he stated that "one of our goals is to create ... leaders who are so well prepared — on fire — to tackle the world's problems."

Although Wheelock never had the satisfaction of seeing his "Grand Design" come to full fruition, and the next generation lost the vision, we can admire a man who risked all to establish an institution that has endured and prospered. In contrast to his profile on the Baker Tower weathervane, which shifts with every passing wind, his single minded focus enabled him to overcome substantial obstacles, including well meaning opposition from his own benefactors and protégés. That Dartmouth again took up the call of Native American education in 1970 was a direct response to the College's earlier failure to implement its founder's vision. And though Wheelock himself may have been partially responsible for the progressive neglect of native education, without his legacy it is doubtful that the hundreds of Native American students who have graduated in the past 40 years would ever have come to Dartmouth. Their



presence – together with a thriving Native American Studies Department and an annual powwow on the Green – has enriched the school’s intellectual life, provided much needed diversity, and helped underscore the importance of respect for different cultures and world views. These elements, together with the Eleazar Wheelock Society and *The Dartmouth Apologia*, demonstrate that Wheelock’s legacy is still very much alive at Dartmouth. Perhaps in this sense, Wheelock’s “Grand Design” lives on.

Three hundred years on, no more suitable homage may be written for Dartmouth’s founder than that which Wheelock himself composed soon after arriving on the Hanover plain at the age of 60:

“I am greatly mistaken if I have not been enabled to commit my way unto the Lord, and trust in him to bring to pass that whereby he should be glorified, and his own cause and kingdom advanced in the earth... if the event shall prove that I have done right, and the success shall be according to my hopes, I know for certain that none of the glory of it will belong to me, but to God alone who has chosen an instrument for his purpose from among thousands better qualified by nature and grace, and he has done it that he might have occasion to shew the excellency of his own glorious perfections, in accomplishing the designs of his grace hereby, and thus secure all the glory to himself alone.”

***Further excerpt of the sermon on happiness preached at Dartmouth on June 27, 1776***

“The reason why men vary so much in the ways taken to be happy is because their inclinations are different, and according to this difference judge variously about happiness; some thinking that if you can obtain such a thing, you shall be happy; others thinking of some different object obtained will go far towards the being in a state of happiness. But notwithstanding, men do [*unreadable*] desire to be happy, and such a variety of causes are taken by different persons for getting into a very satisfying and joyous condition, that it is undeniably true that none in the present world become so fully satisfied as not to be exceedingly desirous of something further, something better; and it is no doubt even true that tho one man could attain to enjoy all the agreeable things which all the men in the world ever have or now do enjoy while alive, he would not be such a happy person as to have all his desires or even the most rational of them fully satisfied.

“And so reason directed by a view of the state of men in this life will lead us to conclude either that mankind are never to obtain the highest happiness of which we are capable, which is the case if we do not live in another state after this, the which seems not at all consistent with that wisdom and goodness of God which have formed us with such a capacity and desire as we are possessed of. Or else that it is not an end of them when they die and that provided they are prepared for it, they will be completely happy in a future state. This which is very agreeable to reason, is not discoverable by it, is very explicitly declared in that supernatural revelation of scripture that scriptures contain. Therein is made known to us that all virtuous godly persons shall hereafter be admitted to the uninterrupted and eternal completion and enjoyment of God and be forever happy; that the whole person shall partake in this happiness, the bodies being raised and changed, suited to a state of glorious immortality. Now this perfection of human happiness, [stated in the Word], eternal life, is what we should all aspire after, which we should all labor to become prepared for, so as yet upon proper ground, we may expect it and in hope of it maintain a constant cheerfulness of spirit.”