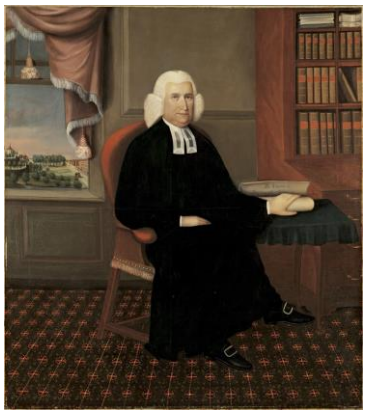
A Brief Chronicle:

Eleazar Wheelock and the Founding of Dartmouth College

Art Simington, Dartmouth '64



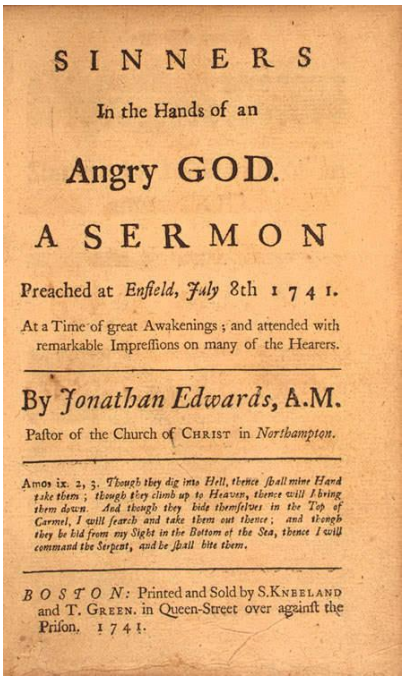
Eleazar Wheelock portrait by Joseph Steward

Why Eleazar Wheelock? Because, as the opening line in Richard Hovey's poetic tribute begins: "*Oh, Eleazar Wheelock was a very pious man.*"

And a pious man he was, indeed! Although he was raised on his parents' Connecticut farm, he was a good student and at a very early age knew he wanted to enter the ministry. He graduated from Yale in 1735 and was soon called to serve the Second Parish Church of Lebanon, Connecticut, a pulpit he held until the day he left Connecticut for Hanover—35 years later.

Early records describe Wheelock as a commanding personality who was erect and dignified, amiable and patient with a smooth and harmonious voice. He had a mild and winning aspect but could be fretful, dictatorial and peevish. He was seldom at rest.

In addition to his parish responsibilities he became part of America's Great Awakening movement of the 1730s and was a member of a group called the "New Lights" founded by Jonathan Edwards in Northampton. The Great Awakening movement believed that anybody who did not undergo a mindful conversion experience was bound for hell. Although Wheelock was not as radical as other New Lights, the movement was so successful that the established Congregational Church in Boston would always regard Wheelock with a high degree of suspicion—a



SINNERS

In the Hands of an

Angry GOD.

A SERMON

Preached at *Enfield, July* 8th 1741.

At a Time of great Awakenings; and attended with remarkable Impreſſions on many of the Hearers.

By *Jonathan Edwards*, A.M.

Paſtor of the Church of CHRIST in *Northampton.*

Amos ix. 2, 3. *Though they dig into Hell, thence ſhall mine Hand take them; though they climb up to Heaven, thence will I bring them down. And though they hide themſelves in the Top of Carmel, I will ſearch and take them out thence; and though they be hid from my Sight in the Bottom of the Sea, thence I will command the Serpent, and he ſhall bite them.*

BOSTON: Printed and Sold by S. KNEELAND and T. GREEN. in Queen-Street over againſt the Priſon. 1741.

Jonathan Edwards sermon

contentious relationship that would bear on the founding of Dartmouth College many years later.

Wheelock was a gifted orator who had the ability to awaken a "terrifying sense of sinfulness and fear of damnation in his audience." He was a much sought-after preacher throughout New England and at one time preached more than 450 sermons in a single year.

Sampson Occom portrait painted by Nathaniel Smibert, 1751-56

He was often at loggerheads with his small home parish over his small salary and also the absences he took for his New Light ministry. In order to supplement his income he began to tutor local students, and it was in his role as teacher that friends convinced him to take on an Indian student named Sampson Occom in 1743. 18-year-old Occom had been converted in the Great Awakening and was eager to pursue a life of education and ministry. It was that pairing—a gifted teacher and a very hard-working and dedicated student—that produced the success that led Wheelock to the mission of his lifetime: to educate and convert the American Indian. Not only was Occom Wheelock's most successful pupil, but after an effective ministry of his own he would become the primary fundraiser for the resources that made Dartmouth possible.

Why the Indians? And poet Hovey continues: "*He went into the wilderness to teach the Indian*."

Of course he did not teach Indians in the wilderness to begin with. Wheelock was already dedicated to the saving of souls, and with the Great Awakening starting to lose momentum and his own success at educating Occom, he turned his primary attention to the possibility of creating

a school for teaching and converting Indians. He thought the advantages of Indians as missionaries was supported by sound reason:

- Indians spoke the tribes' own languages and were accustomed to Indian culture and lifestyles.
- The French and Indian War was still very much in progress, and he felt the Indians fighting alongside the French would be less likely to attack a school with Indian children.
- Such a school would serve to lure Indians *away* from French and Jesuit influence and *toward* British and Protestant influence.
- Also, his Indian school would teach farming—agriculture would help make this nomadic people more settled and therefore more civilized.
- Last but definitely not least, Wheelock felt that an Indian missionary could be trained and supported at half the cost of an English missionary.

Of course getting the resources needed to create such a school was the first major hurdle, and that need would launch Wheelock on a never-ending effort: it can be said that he spent the rest of his life looking for sources of financial support. The initial funds needed for this effort included some of Wheelock's own earnings, as well as gifts from local contributors, some prominent Colonial individuals (including Benjamin Franklin and Benedict Arnold), and assorted other sources, including the Exeter Academy, supporters in Boston, and supporters in England and Scotland who embraced spreading the Gospel. However, the primary benefactor was wealthy farmer, Col. Joshua Moor. In 1754 the Moor's Indian Charity School opened for students.

Wheelock regarded the school and the education of the American Indian as a divinely inspired mission, a commitment that guided him for the rest of his life.

Moor's Indian Charity School -- Lebanon Connecticut

Each day at the school started with prayer and catechism with the rest of the morning spent in formal instruction of basic subjects, including Greek and Latin. Wheelock conducted the school's devotions, but the primary instruction was done by teaching masters. Afternoons included work on Wheelock's farm; this course was called "husbandry" and was never a favorite of the students— not for the Indians or the white students that Wheelock continued to enroll. He also recruited some Indian girls. These young girls were used mostly as servants in local households but did receive limited academic study; with exposure to "more civilized" ways Wheelock felt they would be better equipped as wives to their missionary Indian husbands.

Because of the French and Indian War, early students were recruited from New Jersey and New England, but with the end of hostilities in 1760, the school was able to increase enrollment with students from the Iroquois tribes in New York State. Not only did the school teach students at Moor's School, but it funded and sent out several of its graduates and other white missionaries to the tribes to teach and evangelize.

Ways and means: however could he do it? As another Dartmouth poem extols: "*Good Eleazar Wheelock had the faith which brings success.*"

Although Wheelock's salary was very modest, he did receive acreage from his call to the Connecticut parish, acreage from both of his two marriages, and acreage and a house from his father's inheritance. It was therefore farming that supplied most of his income. He never got a salary from Moor's School nor, incidentally, did he ever take a salary from Dartmouth College during his ten years as president.

Wheelock estimated that resources to support each Indian student—all charity students—equaled about 20 pounds per year, even considering the students' free work on the farm. There were also expenses needed to support some slaves for the farm work (he may have had as many as seven slaves), expenses for the teaching masters, and later some expenses to send and support the missionaries out into the tribes. During its 15 years the Moor's School only educated 49 Indian boys and 18 Indian girls—probably never more than 10 or 12 at any single time.

Map of Connecticut

With the constant threat of the school's insolvency he was always looking for benefactors, but financial constraints aside, by the early 1760s his vision extended well beyond a small academy in a small Connecticut village: he wanted a bigger school with more students; he wanted the school to become incorporated so it could legally own land; and he wanted a state charter so it could grant degrees.

However, despite the Moor's School's many successes, after ten years the school's performance was disappointing. There was now substantial regional competition for Indian students, and even with access to the Iroquois, his school's Indian enrollment was dwindling. Then in 1768 the sudden and unexpected withdrawal of all the Iroquois left Wheelock with only three Indian students. In addition, by this time the white missionaries in the tribes were stepping

down, and the Indian missionaries he had educated and sent back into the tribes seemed to quickly revert to tribal customs. Wheelock was losing faith that his Indian students could ever function as teachers and missionaries. Although his goal of educating and converting Indians remained foremost in his thoughts, he felt that his original plan had failed. He began to believe that perhaps his school's divinely inspired mission could be better accomplished by training white missionaries than by training Indians.

Portrait Governor Wentworth by John Singleton Copley

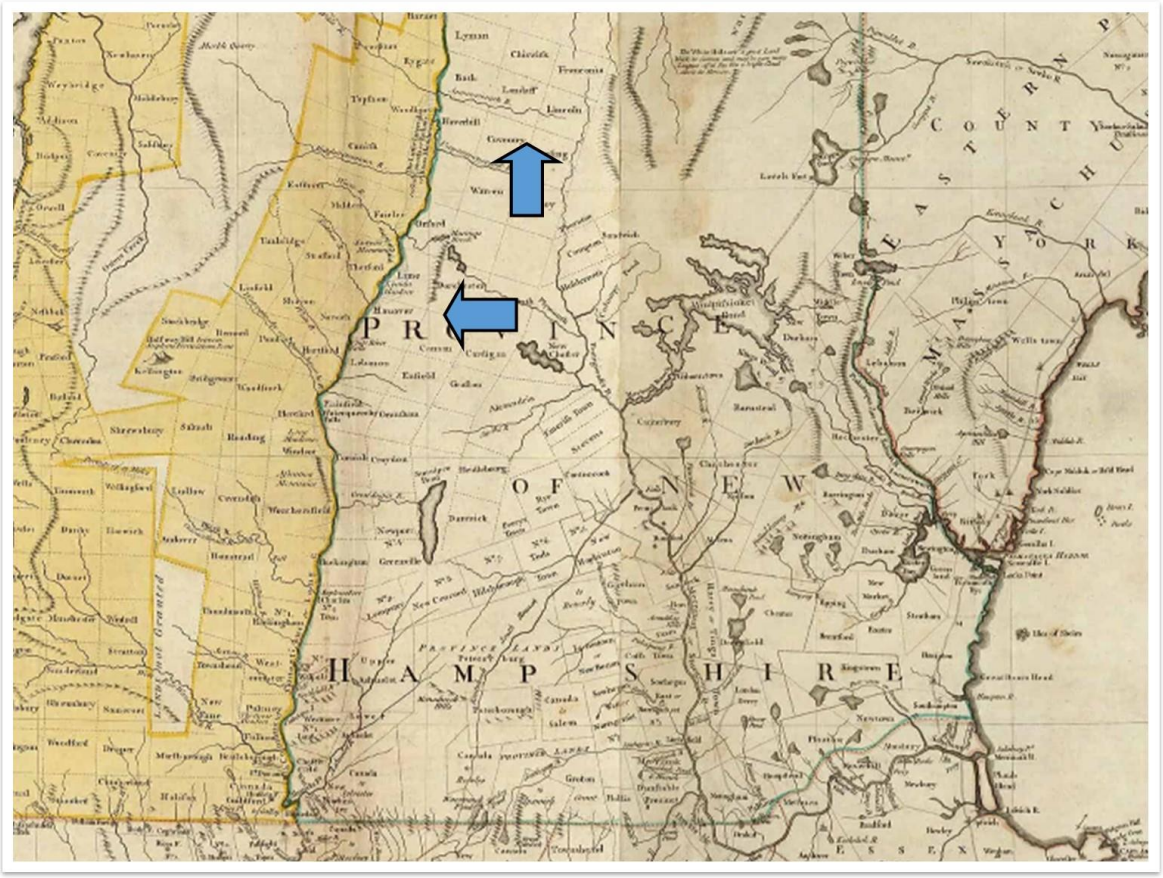
Wheelock and his school needed to be rescued, and that rescue came in the person of his first Indian student, Sampson Occom, now 43 years old with a history of successful ministry. There was still ample evidence of support in England and Scotland for evangelizing and educating American Indians, and Wheelock made a successful bet that there were resources to be tapped abroad. He sent Occom, along with Nathanial Whitaker as his agent, on a two-year fund-raising tour of England and Scotland. The delegation was immediately well-received. Occom, who had an obvious Indian complexion and features but was attired in civilized Colonial attire, was a warm and convincing speaker. He ended up giving some 200-300 sermons—often several on the same day. He and Whitaker were invited to dinners and meetings with a chance to meet dozens of very well-connected and successful people—none more important than John Wentworth, soon to become governor of New Hampshire, and William Legge, 2nd Earl of Dartmouth.

Lord Dartmouth portrait by Nathaniel Hone 1777

Lord Dartmouth was a devoted Anglican but had met John Wesley and become attracted to the Methodist movement. He was also dedicated to the education and conversion of the American Indian and to the efforts of Eleazar Wheelock. He held a series of very responsible positions in the British government, and as Lord of Trade and Plantations before the Revolution he was generally favorable to Colonial wishes and needs. He was also very well-connected in England—to Lord North through family and also with George III (from whom he successfully solicited a 200-pound gift to Moor's School).

By the time Occom and Whitaker returned to America in 1768 they had raised over 12,000 pounds (a $2.5 million equivalent), far exceeding Wheelock's wildest dreams. He now had money to pursue the changes he dreamed of. However, the funds rested across the ocean, and even though the school now had the resources, he wanted ready access to that money with minimal interference from its donors.

Although Wheelock understood the need for the donors' confidence that the funds would be spent for the intended purpose, he agreed only reluctantly to the formation of English and Scottish trusts to oversee the use of the funds. And constraints to his use of the money were not imaginary: the English trustees were dedicated Anglicans and they were still suspicious of Wheelock's Congregational and New-Light background. (Fortunately Lord Dartmouth, still a supporter of the American Indian mission, was president of the British Fund.) In addition there was the need to channel the money through sub-boards in Boston and Connecticut that were both worried that Wheelock would use the money for supporting his own farm instead of teaching Indians.



Map of New Hampshire

How did the college end up in *The Granite of New Hampshire?*

For some years it had become clear to Wheelock that if his goals of incorporation and charter were to be realized he would almost certainly have to move the school. Connecticut was already an incorporated state, and the idea of one corporation incorporating another institution was legally uncertain—besides which, Connecticut already had Yale. Massachusetts was also an incorporated state and already had Harvard, and if that weren't enough Boston was still the seat of the established Congregational Church that remained very leery of the radical Eleazar Wheelock.

Wheelock's interest in moving the school was not a secret. In prior years he had received offers of support and land from multiple sources: a 500-acre parcel of land in northern New Hampshire; another offer from the Ohio River Valley near Pittsburgh; 6 acres in Albany, New York; two offers from western Massachusetts; and even interest from the Susquehanna River Valley in Pennsylvania. Now that he was head of a school with substantial financial resources, these sites started to recruit him in earnest.

Wheelock maintained contact with all these sources, but for several reasons he became increasingly attracted to moving the school to New Hampshire. Not only had the newly appointed governor, John Wentworth, and several other prominent Portsmouth figures already contributed to Moor's School, but Wentworth and the state legislature were very anxious to develop western New Hampshire along the Connecticut River. Furthermore, New Hampshire was still a royal colony, and it was Wheelock's perception that its governor had the authority to issue a royal charter.

If the pursuit of these arrangements required careful handling, it can be said that Wheelock's years of negotiating for Moor's School prepared him for the challenge. At the core of his challenge was the need to retain access to the trust money in England and the need to convince Governor Wentworth to agree to support a charter. Wheelock used several negotiation intermediaries, including lobbying by personal friends and other maneuvers that can only be regarded as deception. For instance, Wheelock was reasonably sure that the British trustees would not be in favor of a royal charter for a new school, and the trick was to hide that possibility from Governor Wentworth. In addition, the several weeks needed for correspondence to cross the ocean gave Wheelock a tool he was able to use with great effect—he became

accomplished at the art of dragging his feet, both in sending questions and providing answers to the British trustees.

Issues involved in the negotiation for a charter included whether the governor even had the right to grant a charter and, since Wentworth was also a devoted Anglican, whether the new school would be Episcopalian or Congregational. Would it be chartered as a school, an academy, or a college? There was also extensive debate over the make-up of the new college's board of trustees (including for a short time the possible addition of the bishop of London); Wheelock's prerogative to appoint his successor as president of the school; how the charter would address the enrollment--white students or Indians; and even, when the new school's board of directors had to hold its first meeting. Wheelock demonstrated remarkable flexibility when he thought it would make Wentworth and the British trustees look more favorably on a charter—such as *where* in New Hampshire to locate the new college and even what to *name* the new school.

As he walked a tightrope between the governor and the British trustees, Wheelock's storehouse of negotiating skill was displayed in full. Wheelock's efforts were nothing short of spectacular and led to the signing of the royal charter on December 13, 1769. As the ninth and final royal charter school in pre–Revolutionary America, Dartmouth's articles of incorporation were regarded at the time to be the most progressive and liberal in the country.

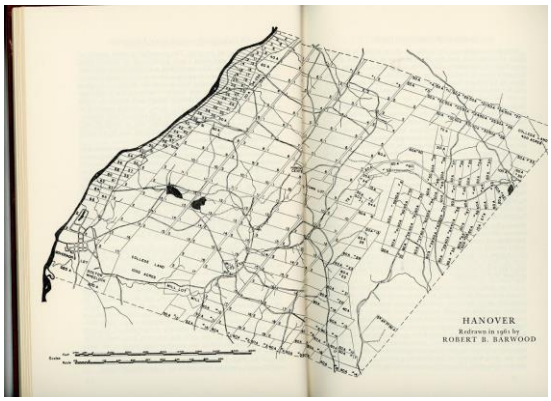
Why Hanover? *"They built the walls of Dartmouth's halls"*

Until the end of the French and Indian War, Fort #4 in Charleston was the northernmost "safe" town in western New Hampshire, but the cessation of hostilities in 1760

Governor Benning Wentworth painting by Joseph Blackburn, 1760

opened up the possibility of developing the rest of the state to the north. To this end then-Governor Benning Wentworth (John Wentworth's uncle) commissioned a survey of the Connecticut River Valley in 6-mile increments from Charlestown all the way up to the Ammonoosuc River (now Woodsville). Each township encompassed about 22,000 acres. Wentworth received and granted requests for dozens of town charters based on political patronage at little or no cost. The first 68 shareholders for Hanover Township were all from Connecticut. They regarded their newly acquired properties purely as investments and never had any interest in living in New Hampshire. The first actual settlers didn't arrive in the township until 1765, so that all the Hanover town meetings were held in Connecticut until 1767 when there were finally enough residents in the township to meet—92 persons.

Wheelock never actually set foot in Hanover until June 7, 1770, six months *after* the college charter was signed and a full month *before* the final decision was made as to where the college would be located. Since there were no inhabitants, no buildings, and no accommodations near the college site, he spent three days across the river at an inn in Norwich.



Map of Hanover

Because any college would be a natural magnet for settlement and increased land values, there was considerable competition among several of the Connecticut River townships to persuade Wheelock to bring his college to them, especially a school with resources. Wheelock's visit to Hanover was the first New Hampshire stop of a six-week exploratory trip to all the

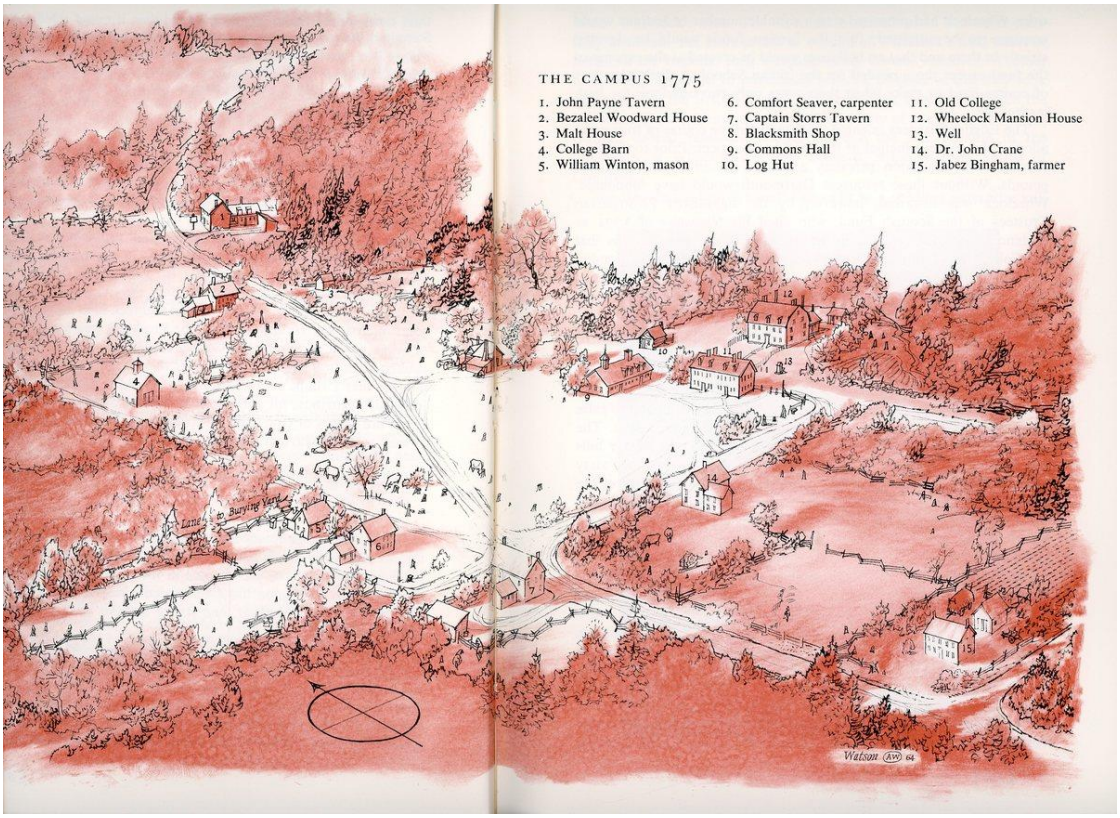
towns along the Connecticut River that had offered incentives as well as a promise of land. Hanover had offered the college 3,000 acres at its southwestern border, and Lebanon Township offered another 1,000 acres abutting the Hanover tract. (The Hanover offer naturally included 300 acres to Wheelock; with no other income, he would need a farm to support himself and the new school.)

Wheelock's trip put him under enormous pressure from each of the townships he visited to locate the new college at its own particular bend of the river. But if Wheelock was the subject of great pressure, so too was the new governor. Wentworth was the target of desperate pleas from several towns to find in their favor. Before Wheelock's trip was scheduled to arrive down in Portsmouth to meet the governor and make a final decision, Wentworth had pretty much decided on Landaff, the 500 acres between Woodsville and Franconia that his uncle had gifted Wheelock years before and that the college already owned. Wentworth regarded Orford and Haverhill as reasonable alternatives, but Hanover wasn't even on his short list.

However by the time he arrived in Portsmouth to meet with the governor, Wheelock had decided to recommend Hanover. There is no record of the discussions between Wheelock and Wentworth during the week in Portsmouth, but whatever took place, Wheelock was able to change the governor's mind. On July 9th the site of the new college was announced: Dartmouth College would be in Hanover, New Hampshire. When the news of the decision broke, the towns that didn't get the bid were outraged—at both Wheelock and at Wentworth—and some of those towns fostered a bitterness that lasted for years.

From Portsmouth Wheelock returned directly to Moor's School and immersed himself in plans for the move. He had to deal with the disappointment of his Connecticut parish and town at losing the school, make arrangements for management of his own properties, assign

responsibility for a group that would pack the school up and move it north, and assemble a work crew of 30-50 men to travel ahead and build housing in Hanover. Wheelock and his work crew arrived back in Hanover in early August, only a month after the Hanover decision. He was confronted with an unbroken forest of white pine—some trees 270 feet tall. In the following few weeks the crew cleared about 6 acres—basically what is now the Dartmouth Green—and constructed the first buildings of the college with the logs they cleared. The arrival of Wheelock's wife, all the Moor's School belongings and livestock, and 30 students in Hanover in early October marked the beginning of Dartmouth College as a real institution with real property, with some primitive but real buildings, and a real student body it could begin to educate—even if it now included only three Indians.



Dartmouth Campus, 1775

Postscript: *"Dartmouth Undying like a vision starts"*

Of the pre-revolutionary colleges in America, Dartmouth is the only institution that owes its existence to the vision, energy, and untiring effort of a single individual. Wheelock was 59 years old when he moved the school to Hanover. He had regarded himself as in poor health but claimed that the successful outcome of all his efforts imbued him with new energy that carried him forward and supported his ten-year presidency of the college. It's difficult to imagine the degree of dedication, fortitude, resilience, and single-minded devotion needed to do what he accomplished. Nobody summarized this better than David McClure, one of Wheelock's charity students who went on to do missionary work in the tribes, returned to Moor's School and the new college as teacher, and later went on to join the Dartmouth board of trustees:

> "That an individual clergyman, without wealth or connexions [*sic*] with the rich or great, settled in a small and obscure parish, in a country where at that time few or none were rich, that he should by his own exertions raise an institution which has commanded the notice and charities of all orders of men in Europe and America from the menial servant to the powerful monarch on the throne, and finally found a flourishing University, laying a basis for endowments by which it has become extensively useful, and promises to be an eminent blessing to future generations, is an impressive example in the history of the world of what one man of persevering zeal may accomplish."

Suggested Reading

A history of Dartmouth College and the town of Hanover, New Hampshire, ed. John K. Lord, Chase, Frederick, 1840-1890, Brattleboro Vermont Print. Co., 1928

History of Dartmouth College, Richardson, Leon Burr, Dartmouth College Publications 1932

The college on the hill; a Dartmouth chronicle, editor Hill, Ralph Nading, Hanover, N.H., Dartmouth Publications 1965

Eleazar Wheelock and the Dartmouth College Charter, Jere R. Daniell II, Dartmouth Bicentennial 1969

Dartmouth Song Book, ed. Zeller, Paul R., Dartmouth Publications 1950