
Biography of Dr. Eleazar Wheelock, Founder of Dartmouth



Dr. Eleazar Wheelock

Rev. Eleazar Wheelock, Congregational minister, orator, educator, and founder of Dartmouth College, was born 22 Apr 1711 in Windham, Connecticut, first and only surviving male child of Ralph Wheelock and Ruth Huntington. In 1729, at the age of 18, Eleazar entered Yale College. His college education was funded with the proceeds of a legacy left by his grandfather, Captain Eleazar Wheelock, of Medfield, Massachusetts.[1] He graduated from Yale in 1733, sharing with his future brother-in-law, Rev. Benjamin Pomeroy, the first award of the Dean Berkeley Donation for the distinction in classics.

For a year following his graduation he continued his theological studies at Yale. In May 1734 he was licensed to preach, and in February of the following year he was installed as pastor of the Second Congregational Church of Lebanon, Conn., where he served as minister for 35 years. Two months later (29 Apr 1735) he married Sarah

Davenport, widow of Captain William Maltby of New Haven, Connecticut.

At the time of Rev. Eleazar Wheelock's graduation, a religious revival known as the Great Awakening was sweeping the Connecticut River Valley. Itinerant evangelists, dramatic religious conversions, and religious zeal characterized this movement. One popular preacher, George Whitefield, toured the seaboard of the Connecticut River Valley, preaching salvation to crowded churches, and hillside throngs. Jonathan Edwards, a preacher from Northampton, MA delivered a now famous sermon in Enfield, CT entitled "Sinners in the hands of an Angry God." [2] Although the Great Awakening drew increased church attendance and membership, it created deep divisions and conflicts within the established church.

Rev. Eleazar Wheelock participated fully and enthusiastically in the Great Awakening. He was one of its greatest proponents in Connecticut, serving as the "chief intelligencer of revival news". His sermons were enormously popular. In 1741, he wrote "a hundred more sermons than there are days in the year" to promote the revival. [1,3] He was criticized by some of his contemporaries for stimulating excess emotion and fervor in his preaching. Charles Chauncey, in his work "Seasonable Thoughts on the State of Religion in New England, 1743" criticized Rev. Wheelock (among others) for his over zealous pursuit of revivalism and for encouraging the Separatists, who wanted to form separate communions consisting solely of revival converts.

As a supporter of the Saybrook Platform [5], Rev. Wheelock was not a proponent of Separatism. But he was an emotional orator, and to that extent Chauncy's charges were substantiated. In 1743, the Connecticut Assembly, in an attempt to regulate revivalist activity, passed "An Act for Regulating Abuses and correcting Disorders in Ecclesiastical Affairs". [4] This act stated that ministers who preached outside their own congregation could not collect a salary. As a result of this, Rev. Wheelock lost his salary. [6] Though he owned a great deal of farmland, much of it inherited from his father, Ralph Wheelock, it was necessary to find an alternative source of income. Toward this end, he began to take students into his home, and in 1743, he took in Samson Occom, a Mohican who knew English, and had been converted to Christianity in his childhood. Rev. Wheelock had great success preparing Samson Occom for the ministry. Occom went on to become a popular Presbyterian minister, preaching both to Native American and colonial audiences.

Rev. Wheelock's success with Samson Occom encouraged him to pursue a school for Native American Indians, with the purpose of instilling, in the boys, elements of secular and religious education, so that they could return to their native culture as missionaries. The girls were to be taught "housewifery" and writing. The school was to be supported by charitable contribution.

Toward this end, in 1754, Rev. Wheelock accepted two Delaware Natives from New Jersey. The premises for the school (2 buildings, and some land) were furnished by a contribution from Col. Joshua More, of Mansfield, CT. [7] Other Native Americans from New England tribes, and from the Six Nations were gathered, and by the year 1762, Wheelock had more than 20 youths in his charge.

Rev. Eleazar Wheelock spent considerable time raising funds to support the school, in which efforts he was quite successful. The records of the Massachusetts General Court show that he made at least four successful appeals for money between the years 1761 and 1767. In 1765, he sent Samson Occom and Nathaniel Whitaker (a Presbyterian Minister) to the United Kingdom to raise funds. This two year effort was a success, and they returned with 12,000 pounds, most of which was placed in the charge of an English board of trustees, headed by William Legge, Earl of Dartmouth. Things had not progressed so well on the missionary and recruiting front. Many of the Native Americans under Rev. Wheelock's care became sick and died. Some turned profligate and in other ways failed to successfully pursue the charter of missionary work. Sir William Johnson [8], an agent of Native American affairs, and trusted advocate, perceived that Rev. Wheelock was trying to acquire territory among the Six Nations. After the Fort Stanwix Congress in 1768, he withdrew his favor from the Charity School, and his Native Americans with it. After this, Rev. Wheelock could no longer expect to recruit Native American students from New York.

In addition to this, he was having some trouble with his parishioners in Lebanon, stemming in part from a dispute over his salary.

These events, coupled with his desire to enlarge his school to include a college (for the education of whites in the classics, philosophy, and literature), no doubt led him to look for a new location for the school. Samson Occom and the English Board of Trustees headed by Lord Dartmouth were against

adding a college to the school, but Rev. Wheelock persevered, and finally obtained a charter from King George III, through the efforts of John Wentworth, royal governor of New Hampshire. This charter, dated 13 December 1769, named Eleazar Wheelock founder and first president of the college, and gave him the privilege of naming his successor [9]. Rev. Wheelock chose the name Dartmouth for the college, even though William Legge, Earl of Dartmouth, after whom the college was named was against its establishment.

Several offers of land were obtained for the location of the college. Dresden, NH (later renamed Hanover) was finally chosen as the site. No clear record exists as to why this site was chosen, though it may have been because of the "healthfulness" of the region, and its proximity to Canada, where Wheelock hoped to recruit Indian students for the Charity School. Rev. Wheelock obtained a dismissal from his church in Lebanon (where he served 35 years), and left for Hanover in August of 1770. At this time Hanover was largely wilderness, and the first months were spent clearing land, and building rough cabins to house the college. The living conditions were severe, and considerable fortitude was required to endure the first winter.

In 1771, four students were graduated in the first commencement of Dartmouth. Among these four was Eleazar Wheelock's son, John, who had earlier attended Yale, but came to Hanover with his father to complete his education at Dartmouth. [10] John later became the second president of Dartmouth.

The funds collected in England ran out in 1774, and the institution of Dartmouth was blighted by debt during the remaining years of Rev. Wheelock's life. The American Revolution was particularly hard on the Indian Charity School. Many tribes sided with the English, leaving few recruits for the school. Of notable exception was the Oneida Nation, whose stalwart support of the colonials might be due in part to the existence of the Charity School.

The war left Dartmouth in considerable debt. Many decades would pass before the college again became solvent. In 1786, the Vermont legislature made a grant of 23,000 acres of land to Dartmouth, in the form of Wheelock, Vt. During the early 1800's, substantial support for the college came from this grant of land.

Rev. Wheelock suffered ill health during his later years. He was afflicted with asthma, and "hypochondriac wind", but never slowed down in his duties as founder, pulpit orator, and educator. He was relentless in his pursuit of funds for the college; and excelled in his many administrative duties, which included supervising farming operations, arranging recruiting parties to Canada (for Native American pupils), serving as Justice of the Peace, teaching, and presiding as president of the Moor's Charity School (without salary), and of Dartmouth College.

Rev. Eleazar Wheelock died during the Revolutionary War, on 24 April 1779. He is buried in Hanover, NH. He received the degree of D.D. from the University of Edinburgh in 1767. His sparse writings include "Narrative of the Indian School at Lebanon", with continuations.

Rev. Wheelock's descendents include John Wheelock, Lieutenant Colonel in the Continental Army, and second president of Dartmouth College; Eleazar Lewis Ripley Wheelock, Captain with the Texas Rangers, and founder of the town of Wheelock, Texas; Eleazar Wheelock Ripley, a General in the War of 1812, and namesake of the town of Ripley, Louisiana; and James Wheelock Ripley, a former United States Representative from Maine.

(Written by Roderick Beebe Sullivan, Jr., Oct 1998)

Sources, References, and Notes

[1] "Appletons' Cyclopedia of American Biography", edited by James Grant Wilson and John Fiske, Volume VI, D. Appleton and Company, NY, 1894.

[2] Jonathan Edwards, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" as quoted in Monroe Stearns, "The Great Awakening, 1720-1760" (New York, Franklin Watts, Inc. 1970) pp 34, 38

[3] "The Great Awakening in New England", Edwin Scott Gaustad, Harper and Brothers, 1957, pg 45.

[4] "A Dramatic Revival: The First Great Awakening in Connecticut", A Concord Review advanced placement essay by Sarah Valkenburgh, 1993.

[5] The Saybrook Platform was an effort to bring unity and consistency to the Congregational Churches of the colonies. Until Cotton Mather proposed the ideas that formed the basis of this policy, the independent Congregational Churches were drifting toward "spiritual decline and anomaly." The Saybrook Platform, upheld by the Connecticut General Court in 1708, required that the independent churches establish an association of ministers to examine and license candidates for the ministry; and that a consociation of ministers and laymen have judicatory standing over the churches. (Source: "A Dramatic Revival: The First Great Awakening in Connecticut", A Concord Review advanced placement essay by Sarah Valkenburgh, 1993.)

[6] "Encyclopedia of World Biography", edited by Suzanne Michele Bourgoïn and Paula Kay Byers, Gale Research, 1997.

[7] The "Moor's Charity School" was located in Lebanon, CT. At the site of the original school are several plaques and historical markers commemorating the location. Portions of the original school building remain (as of 1933), but in a form much changed from the original.

[8] Johnson, Sir William (1715 -- 1774) was an Indian agent; born in Smithtown, Ireland. He gained the full confidence of the Iroquois tribes, especially Mohawks. He became their agent in 1754 and led militiamen and Iroquois in a victory over the French at Lake George in 1755 (for which he was knighted). He retained his influence with Indian tribes until his death.

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[9] He named his son, John Wheelock, as his successor. John was one of the four students to graduate from the first class of Dartmouth, in 1771.

[10] Levi Frisbie was another one of the first graduates. Like John Wheelock, Levi attended Yale, and then removed to Hanover with the Rev. Wheelock. Levi later became a minister in Ipswich, MA. (Source: "History of Ipswich, Essex, and Hamilton, Mass.", by Joseph B. Felt, 1834)

[11] "Dictionary of American Biography", edited by Dumas Malone, published by Charles Scribner and Sons, NY, 1936