

Finding Community

The Life of Edward Mitchell 1828

Edward Mitchell was the first student of African descent to attend Dartmouth College. In 1824, students protested the Board of Trustees decision not to admit Mitchell because of his race. The students' activism was supported by the faculty, the Board relented, and Mitchell took his rightful place in the student body. Born in Saint-Pierre, Martinique, in 1792, he had been a sailor and a porter before coming to Hanover. He graduated from Dartmouth in 1828, was ordained, and moved to Georgeville, Canada, where he found community and his calling in ministry. This exhibit examines the fascinating life of Edward Mitchell from Saint-Pierre, to Dartmouth, to Georgeville.

The exhibit text was written by Forrester "Woody" Lee '68, co-author of *A Noble and Independent Course: The Life of the Reverend Edward Mitchell* (Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 2018). The items were selected and mounted by Jay Satterfield. Special thanks to the McCord Museum in Montreal for supplying scans of key documents from the Mitchell Family Fonds.

The exhibit is on display in Rauner Special Collections Library's Class of 1965 Galleries from April 8, 2022, until June 17, 2022.

CASE 1

From St. Pierre to Hanover

Rev. Edward Mitchell 1828 (1792–1872), the first person of African descent to graduate from Dartmouth in 1828, was an immigrant from the French slave colony of Martinique. Born to Olive, a free "mulâtresse," and an unnamed Frenchman, he was raised in the Island's vibrant cultural and commercial life of St. Pierre, the "Paris of the Antilles." With aspirations to be a ship captain, Mitchell left the Island in 1810 with Captain William Prentiss of Portland, Maine. While based in Portland and living with the Prentiss family, Mitchell suffered a near-death experience at sea and sought religious guidance from two prominent clergymen, Revs. Edward Payson and Nathan S.S. Beman. Offered a path to salvation through God, he abandoned the sea and went to Philadelphia in 1811.

Mitchell had good reasons to come to Philadelphia. The city's free blacks numbered 20,000 and included leaders of the earliest independent African Methodist and Episcopal churches. Mitchell broke bread with these leaders and served on their councils. He was baptized and mentored by Rev. William Staughton, a prominent white Baptist minister who became president of Washington

University. Mitchell married in 1816 but lost his wife and family two years later. Left adrift, he prayed for guidance and trusted in God's providence.

In 1820, Mitchell had a fateful encounter with Dartmouth President Francis Brown, who had traveled South with his wife in hopes of recovering from a progressive illness. Homeward bound by horse and buggy with her husband, Francis Gilman Brown, wrote in her diary on May 20, 1920:

In Philadelphia we parted with Mr. T. who returned to Georgetown near Washington City, and we hired a man of color for a year who attends us on horseback, named Edward.

1. Thomas Jefferys. *The West Indian Atlas; or a General Description of the West Indies*. London: R. Sayer, 1792.

Call number: Rare G1600 .J4 1792

Mitchell was born and lived until age eighteen in St. Pierre, Martinique, the "Paris of the Antilles" and commercial capital of the French Caribbean slave colonies. Its wide harbor carved a graceful arc at the city's edge. Cargoes of goods and supplies arrived side-by-side with ships of enslaved Africans. The city had 7,500 inhabitants, 90% of whom were enslaved Africans.

2. Elizabeth Gilman Brown, Journal, May 31, 1820, Typescript.

Call number: DC Hist. CT275.B7 A3

Elizabeth Brown's crisp diary entry on May 31, 1820, read, "In Philadelphia we hired a man of color for a year who attends us on horseback, named Edward."

Admitted to Dartmouth

Once a sailor, then a porter, and now an attendant to a College president, Mitchell returned to Hanover with President Brown, who died a month later. Mitchell lived in the Brown household for the next four years. He served as a lay preacher to brethren in the Hanover-Etna Baptist church and then applied to Dartmouth in 1824. The Baptist church clerk wrote in a supporting letter that Mitchell was "a person of piety and promising talent who sought an education, for which he was qualified and deserving."

In 1824, Mitchell passed the Dartmouth faculty entrance examinations but was denied admission by Dartmouth Board of Trustees, who averred that they did not want to offend students. Upon learning of the Trustee's decision, Dartmouth students from all classes convened and transmitted their collective protest in a decorous letter that concluded:

Far from feeling any disrespect towards him on account of his color or extraction, we think him entitled to the highest praise. We will cheerfully receive him as a companion and fellow student.

The student intercession was led by a future abolitionist spokesperson, Charles Dexter Cleveland 1827, and would be celebrated later as one of the earliest instances of Dartmouth student activism. Mitchell graduated “with honor” in 1828 to become the third self-identified man of African ancestry to graduate from a U.S. college and the first of the Ivies by four decades.

1. Baptist Church of Christ in Hanover document of Edward Mitchell's standing as member of the church, January 20, 1822. *Facsimile courtesy McCord Museum, Montreal.*

Call number: McCord PO44-A-1.2

Dartmouth required evidence that the applicant "sustains a good moral character."
"Brother Edward Mitchel is a member in good standing in this Church and is esteemed a person of piety, and promising talents."

2. Student petition to admit Mitchell, October 25, 1824.

Call number: MS 824525

Charles Dexter Cleveland 1827 who has been described as "relatively dark for a Caucasian," told the trustees that if skin color was a criterion for admissibility to the college, he might himself be disqualified.

3. Dartmouth College. *Catalogue of the Officers and Students of Dartmouth College.* Hanover: Dartmouth College, 1824.

Call number: DC History LD1427.D3 1824

CASE 2 **Dartmouth in the 1820s**

Mitchell entered a Dartmouth that was far different than the school we know today. The student population was small and relatively homogenous. The other students who matriculated in 1824 with Mitchell came from only six states, New Hampshire, New York, Massachusetts, Vermont, Maine and Connecticut. They were faced with a rigid curriculum designed to prepare them for careers in the clergy, law, medicine, and education. But it was a community that welcomed and supported the 32-year-old Mitchell and even invited him to participate in the Social Friends, one of only two fraternal societies on campus.

1. Dartmouth College. *Laws of Dartmouth College.* Hanover: Dartmouth College, 1828

Call number: Rauner Ref LD1420.5 1828

2. Able Bowen. Engraving, *Dartmouth College*. John Farmer, *Gazetteer for the State of New Hampshire*, 1823.

Call number: Iconography 396

3. Unknown Artist. Drawing of Dartmouth College. Circa 1835.

Call number: Iconography 289

4. Catalogue of Books in the Social Friends' Library at Dartmouth College, March, 1824. Concord: Printed by Isaac Hill, 1824.

Call number: DC History Z881 .H254 1824

From the 1780s until the advent of Greek-letter fraternities in the 1850s, social life centered on the Society of Social Friends (of which Mitchell was a member) and the United Fraternity.

Finding Community at Dartmouth

Mitchell had a smooth college course over his four years. He lived first with the Brown family and then with Professor William Chamberlain, Jr., and family for his last three years. The Massachusetts Baptist Education Society supported his college expenses, which Mitchell later repaid. During winter semester breaks, he taught in small-town New Hampshire schools and remained associated with the Baptist brethren at the Hanover-Etna church. Shortly after graduation, Mitchell was ordained by the Church as a Baptist Evangelist.

1. Sarah Parker Parrott, Hanover, to her mother, 11 June, 1828.

Call number: MS 828361

In 1828, Sarah Parrott was in Hanover caring for her brother when she first encountered Mitchell at the breakfast table in the boarding house. She noted that as a student, Mitchell was "very highly respected by the government [i.e., the faculty] and the students." Mitchell's fellow student Alpheus Crosby, reminiscing years later, wrote that "his character, bearing, and intellect were such that he must have been shameless who could have treated him with disrespect."

2. Dartmouth College. Student Account for Edward Mitchell.

Call number: DA-2, Box 1750

During his four years at Dartmouth, the tuition, which included a library fee, was \$28 per year, and total expenses—including tuition, room and board, firewood, and the "usual incidentals"—were estimated by the college trustees at \$101.87 per year. A five-dollar graduation fee, which went to the college president, was imposed at the completion of studies, and one dollar was charged for the diploma.

3. Edward Michell. "To: Γ Ν Ω Θ Ι Σ Α Υ Τ Ο Ν, [Know Thyself]," Dartmouth Composition, no date. *Facsimile courtesy McCord Museum, Montreal.*

Call number: McCord, PO 44-A-2.2

Mitchell contends that one who has studied human nature in himself is better prepared to understand human nature in others and in society. He concludes his essay with an eye to the future. "How important then is this knowledge to our own interest? Let the student then with all his getting, get this noble science. It is this that will buy a foundation for his future greatness."

4. Edward Mitchell. "Religious Bigotry," Dartmouth composition, March 26, 1828. *Facsimile courtesy McCord Museum, Montreal.*

Call number: McCord, PO44-A-2.5

In his essay on "Religious bigotry," written in his sophomore year, Mitchell deplored the expulsion of Jews and Moors during the reign of Philip III, king of Spain from 1598 to 1621.

5. Edward Mitchell. "Honor and Dignity," Dartmouth composition, April 1824. *Facsimile courtesy McCord Museum, Montreal.*

Call number: McCord PO44-A-2.8

"But true honour and dignity lie in real virtue...Hence a man rises or falls in the estimation of an enlightened publick in proportion as he is thought to be virtuous or vicious.

6. Edward Mitchell. "While We Live, Let Us Live," Dartmouth composition, undated. *Facsimile courtesy McCord Museum, Montreal.*

Call number: McCord PO-44-A-3.12

"Therefore whilst within the precinct of an Academy or College, "let us live," as though we felt the work of time and the importance of improving it."

7. Society of Social Friends, Minutes, October 27, 1824.

Call number: DO-2, Box 6249, folder 5

One of Mitchell's presentations to the Social Friends was on "The Age of Pericles"—for him, an unusual departure from subjects related to Christianity. He commented in the introductory paragraph that "Little can be written (by a freshman) within the limits of an essay."

CASE 3 **Mitchell's Ministry**

Immediately after Dartmouth, Mitchell traveled northward on an evangelical mission sponsored by the Baptist missionary organizations that embraced pulpits of small northern towns in New Hampshire, Vermont, and Lower Canada. Having no family roots in the United States, he chose to remain in this near-monoethnic world, where he found family, community, and social affiliations. He married Ruth O. Cheney in 1832 of Putney, Vermont, daughter of a Baptist minister.

In 1833, five years after Dartmouth, Mitchell settled permanently in Lower Canada. Slavery in Canada and most colonies of the British Empire had been abolished that same year. Over the next decade, his missionary labors covered almost 20,000 miles. Baptist sponsors considered him to be "indefatigable."

Mitchell died in 1872 at age 80 and was buried in a family plot in Georgeville's Ives Cemetery. A newspaper editor wrote, he was "a man of steadfast integrity; a preacher of marked ability; and a scholar. In the very last years of his life you would find him reading the Bible in the original languages. He has gone to receive his crown." Baptist biographers judged him to be "the most profound theologian ever settled" in Lower Canada.

1. 1828 Commencement program

Call number: Rauner Ref LD1443 .A25 1818-1904

2. Boston newspaper accounts of the Dartmouth's graduation ceremony, 1828.

Call number: Commencement 1828 Vertical File

Mitchell graduated from Dartmouth with thirty-nine classmates on August 20, 1828. The news reports listed all graduates of the class of 1828 without reference to race, hometown, or birth origin.

3. William Chamberlain. "List of Candidates for the Degree of A.B. Who Have Paid All Their Bills and Fees for Graduation at the College Treasury." 1828.

Call number: MS 828469.3

Mitchell lived with Prof. William Chamberlain, Jr., and his family for three years. Chamberlain, known for moderate antislavery views and speeches, died young at age 32. At a 4th of July celebration in 1826, Chamberlain declared, "We must root out from among ourselves the institution of domestic slavery, or, before the close of another half century, we may have to abide the consequences of a servile war."

4. Eugene Sanger, Hanover, to Edward Mitchell, Waterville, 18 September 1848.

Call number: MS 848518.1

Sanger was an 1849 graduate of Dartmouth, a controversial Civil War surgeon, and a leading physician of Maine.

5. Edward Mitchell. "To a Friend," February 26, 1831. *Facsimile courtesy McCord Museum, Montreal.*

Call number: McCord PO 44-A-5.1

Mitchell wrote a poem, "To A Friend," mourning a death dated February 26, 1831, from Windsor, Vermont.

6. Edward Mitchell, Outline of the Religious Experience of Edward Mitchell, August 13, 1829. *Facsimile courtesy McCord Museum, Montreal.*

Call number: McCord PO 44-A-6.1

Handwritten manuscript of Mitchell's testimony to the Baptist brethren of Etna, New Hampshire, at his ordination as a Baptist Evangelist on August 13, 1829. The first 850-word section describes important events of his life, culminating in personal salvation and avowal of faith in God. The final sections detail his understanding of Baptist religious ordinances.

7. Edward Mitchell. "Sermon on the closed door to the Kingdom." No date. *Facsimile courtesy McCord Museum, Montreal.*

Call number: McCord PO 44-A-11.7

Mitchell's lengthy sermon delivered from the pulpit of the Georgeville Baptist Church implored congregants to seek the door to God's Kingdom "while it is open, and repent of our sins and believe in Christ with all thy heart."

8. *Nathaniel Parker Willis and W. H. Bartlett. Canadian Scenery Illustrated.* London: G. Virtue, 1842.

Call number: Illus B258c

The Georgeville Baptist Church where Mitchell presided is depicted in this 1842 engraving by William H. Bartlett.

Legacy at Dartmouth

In contrast to Mitchell's peaceful life in Quebec, Americans remained divided over the fate of Africa's children enslaved on American soil. Barely noticed were the small favorable few signs of progress at Dartmouth. Jonathan Fox Worcester (D.C. 1827) wrote in 1852 that with Mitchell's admission, Dartmouth "won one of the brightest honors of the College, its freedom from distinctions on account of color."

At the Dartmouth Centennial of 1869, Prof. Samuel Gilman Brown, who knew Mitchell personally, noted in his keynote address, "No student was ever excluded from the College on account of color. Many young men of African lineage entered the College, and none have been treated with disrespect." By that year, twenty Black men had attended Dartmouth, more than any other New England school. Dartmouth historians later wrote that Dartmouth "has shown an unfailing hospitality to the Negro, even when the doors of other institutions were closed against him."

1. Dartmouth College. Annotated list of Black students prior to 1900.

Call number: Black Alumni Vertical File