

“Power, Honor, and Authority,” Samson Occom and the Founding of Dartmouth College

As Dartmouth approaches the 250th anniversary of its founding, many of us are reflecting on the institution’s history. The idea that Dartmouth was founded as an “Indian School” prevails today as a dominant narrative among many members of the public as well as those associated with the College.

The truth behind the College’s founding is far more complex. Eleazar Wheelock’s original stated intention was to open a school to convert Native Americans to Christianity. His reasons were primarily because he literally feared for their souls, but also because he thought this mission would address the conflicts between European Americans and Native Americans. He eventually abandoned this goal in a pragmatic pursuit of financial gain and prestige. Central to this story is the life of Samson Occom, the first Native American who Wheelock trained into the ministry. This exhibit explores Occom’s role in the founding of Dartmouth College, and the documentary history of Wheelock’s changing intentions.

Exhibit Case 1: Raising Funds, Making Connections

In winter 1766, Occom and Nathaniel Whitaker journeyed to Great Britain to raise funds for Moor’s Indian Charity School. George Whitefield, a founding minister of Methodism who influenced religious revivalism in the American colonies, hosted Occom and Whitaker at his London church. Whitefield later introduced them to William Legge, 2nd Earl of Dartmouth, who became a major contributor to the project. In total, Occom spent two years traveling throughout Great Britain, preaching to rapt audiences and raising £12,000 -- equivalent to approximately \$2.4 million today. He was notable enough to receive an invitation to George III’s robing ceremony and his preaching was even parodied on the London stage. His return to the colonies, however, precipitated his break with Wheelock. He discovered that his family had been neglected, and that Wheelock planned to move his school to the New Hampshire frontier.

1. Samson Occom, Journal, 1765-1766. [MS-1237](#), box 1, folder 9

“this Evening I heard, the Stage Players, had been mimicking of me in their Plays, lately — I never thought I should ever Come that Honor, — o’ god would give me greater Courage —”

2. John Marshall, Receipt, 25 February 1766. DC Hist Mss 766175.2

John Hancock -- Boston merchant, smuggler, and signer of the Declaration of Independence -- was a part-owner of the ship that Occom and Whitaker sailed on. He gave them a discount on their passage to England as a contribution to the campaign.

3. Alfred Mills, *Portraits of the Sovereigns of England, From Egbert to the Present Time. With Some Account of Their Lives*. London: Printed for Darton, Harvey, & Darton, Gracechurch-street; and J. Harris, St. Paul’s Church-Yard, 1817. [Miniature 58](#)

Reflecting on his audience with George III, Occom considered the king's presence in terms of his religious beliefs: "We were Conducted to See the Kings horses Carriages and horsemen etc. — and then went to the Parliament House and went in the Robing Room and Saw the Crown first, and Saw the King, had the pleasure of seeing him put on his Royal Robes and Crown, — He is quite a comely man — his Crown is Richly adorned with Diamonds. how grand and dazzling is it to our Eyes — if an Earthly Crown is So grand — How great and glorious must the Crown of the glorious Redeemer be at the right hand of the majesty on High — though he was once crowned with Thorns."

4. *A Continuation of the Narrative of the Indian Charity-School, in Lebanon in Connecticut, New England: Founded and Carried on by the Rev. Dr. Eleazar Wheelock; With an Appendix, Containing the Declaration of the Trustees of That Charity; A List of the Names of the Subscribers; An Account of Monies Received and Paid; Together with Dr. Wheelock's Annual Account of His Receipts and Disbursements.* London: Printed by J. and W. Oliver, 1769. DC Hist [E97.6.M5 W54 1769](#)

Wheelock published several editions of a pamphlet series promoting his work among the Indians. This version, from 1769, notes the donation by Lord Dartmouth.

5. Phillis Wheatley. *An Elegiac Poem, on the Death of That Celebrated Divine, and Eminent Servant of Jesus Christ, the Reverend and Learned George Whitefield, Who Made His Exit from This Transitory State, to Dwell in the Celestial Realms of Bliss, on Lord's-Day, 30th of September, 1770.* By Phillis, a Servant Girl, of 17 Years of Age, Belonging to Mr. J. Wheatley, of Boston. Boston: Printed and sold by Ezekiel Russell and John Boyles, [1770]. [Rare PS866.W5 E5 1770](#)

Wheatley, the first published African-American poet, was enslaved by the Wheatley family of Boston. The Wheatleys were contributors to Wheelock's project, and colleagues in the network of religious leaders that included Wheelock and Whitefield. At the end of Occom's journal of his trip to Great Britain, he lists several letters sent in March 1766, including one "To a Nergro [sic] Girl Boston." This letter is now lost, but evidence suggests that the two were correspondents for some time, including a letter printed in the Connecticut Gazette in March 1774. Responding to a public sermon where Occom had remarked on the hypocrisy of Christian slaveowners, Wheatley commented on the contradiction between the colonists' desire for liberty from Great Britain and their commitment to uphold slavery: "I desire not for their Hurt, but to convince them of the strange Absurdity of their Conduct whose Words and Actions are so diametrically, opposite. How well the Cry for Liberty, and the reverse Disposition for the exercise of oppressive Power over others agree, -- I humbly think it does not require the Penetration of a Philosopher to determine."

6. Phillis Wheatley. *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral.* By Phillis Wheatley, Negro Servant to Mr. John Wheatley, of Boston, in New England. London: Printed for A. Bell, Bookseller. Aldgate: sold by Messrs. Cox and Berry, King-street, Boston, 1773. [Rare PS866.W5 1773b](#)

In addition to supporting Moor's Indian Charity School, Lord Dartmouth was also Secretary of State for the Colonies in the early 1770s. Wheatley's ode suggests that

his leadership will further the colonists' liberty. Why would she, who "by seeming cruel fate/ Was snatch'd from Afric's fancy'd happy seat," hope that her American slaveowners would have a freer society? Wheatley argues: being enslaved, "can I then but pray/ Others may never feel tyrannic sway?"

Exhibit Case 2: The Founding of Dartmouth College

While Occom was in England raising funds for Moor's Indian Charity School, Wheelock was in Connecticut attempting to establish the school's charter. At first, Wheelock was stymied because the colony of Connecticut was itself incorporated. Under English law at the time, one corporation could not charter another. Because of this Wheelock began to look further afield. He considered sites in New York, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire. As his efforts progressed, his vision became something grander. Whether it was Wheelock's idea or someone else's carefully placed suggestion is unclear, but the idea of founding a college first appears in his correspondence around 1768. Ultimately, Wheelock settled on New Hampshire as the site of his new endeavor. The colony's new Governor, John Wentworth, was willing to provide him with land and a charter. However, this decision flew in the face of his stated intentions.

1. Reverend Eleazar Wheelock, 1711-1779, Founder and first president of Dartmouth College. Wheelock Photo File
2. Sir John Wentworth, 1st Baronet, 1737-1820, Governor of New Hampshire, 1767-1775. Wentworth Photo File

As the newly appointed Governor of the Royal Colony of New Hampshire, John Wentworth was anxious to locate an institution of higher learning within the colony. When Wheelock first proposed using the term "college" in a draft of the charter in 1769, Wentworth did not balk. He readily added the wording to the Royal Charter he granted for the founding of Dartmouth College in December of 1769.

3. William Legge, 2nd Earl of Dartmouth, 1732-1801. [Iconography 738](#)

Lord Dartmouth was a leading trustee for the English board that oversaw Eleazar Wheelock's support for Moor's Indian Charity School in Lebanon, Connecticut. In addition, Lord Dartmouth also contributed £50 toward the school when he was approached by Samson Occom and Nathaniel Whitaker during their trip to England. When Wheelock set up an American colonial board he ran afoul of the members of the English board. In an attempt to appease them he named his new college for the most powerful member, Lord Dartmouth.

4. *An Accurate Map of New Hampshire in New England, From a Late Survey*. London, 1781. [Evans Map Room Special G3740 1781.A5](#)

Map showing New Hampshire and its environs, soon after Wheelock established Dartmouth College.

5. William Smith, Jr., Letter to Eleazar Wheelock, New York, May 26, 1767. DC Hist Mss 767326.1

William Smith (the younger), 1728-1793, a prominent New York lawyer and a member of the Governor's Council, wrote to Wheelock in an attempt to persuade him to locate his school in Albany. In his letter, he mentions that the people there will give £2,300 and would be pleased to see the School made into a university or college, with Wheelock at its head. This appears to be the first mention of the possibility of a Wheelock's school becoming a college. Wheelock turned this offer down because his relationship with the Six Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy had soured. He could not anticipate many Indian students coming to the school from the Albany area.

6. Eleazar Wheelock, Letter to Rev. Timothy Woodbridge, Lebanon, Connecticut, November 12, 1768. DC Hist Mss 768612

Wheelock writes in response to an earlier letter from Woodbridge entreating him to bring his school to western Massachusetts. In his letter, Woodbridge suggests that the Governor of Massachusetts would be interested in making the school a College. Here Wheelock notes his reasons against locating the school in Massachusetts, chief among them is that there is already a good college in the colony. Here we see, for the first time in Wheelock's own words, that he had aspirations to make his school into something greater. No extant letters indicate that he shared this intention with Occom, who had been instrumental in raising the funds necessary to found what would become Dartmouth College.

7. Eleazar Wheelock, Letter to Sir John Wentworth, 1st Baronet, 1737-1820, Governor of New Hampshire, Lebanon, Connecticut, August 22, 1769. DC Hist Mss 769472.2

Wheelock writes that he is forwarding a draft of the charter. He notes that many of the people in his vicinity wish to move with him to New Hampshire. In the postscript, he suggests that the word "College" might be used instead of "Academy." This is his first proposal that the school should be a college.

8. Draft of the Dartmouth College Charter, December 13, 1769. DC Hist Mss 769663.2

Final Draft of the Charter as it would appear in its official form using the term College instead of Academy.

9. Samson Occom, Letter to Eleazar Wheelock, Mohegan, Connecticut, July 24, 1771. DC Hist Mss 771424

Occom writes a scathing letter berating Wheelock for abandoning his intention to school Indian youth in favor of creating a College. He states that he was your "Gazing Stock, Yea Even a Laughing Stock, in Strange Countries, to Promote your Cause." He further notes that Whitefield had warned him that he was nothing but a tool that would be used and set aside. Even in the heat of passion, Occom does not

forget his schooling. He throws the learning Wheelock had given him back in his face. He writes: "I am very Jealous that instead of your Semenary Becoming alma Mater, She will be too alba mater to Suckle the Tawnees, for She is already a Dorn'd up too much like the Popish Virgin Mary She'll be Naturally ashame'd to Suckle the Tawnees for She is already equal in Power, Honor, and Authority to and any College in Europe."

Exhibit Case 3: A Life of Service

Samson Occom was born in Mohegan in the colony of Connecticut around 1723. His adolescence coincided with the Second Great Awakening, a time of renewed religious fervor in the American Colonies and elsewhere. Swept up in this movement and wishing to support his people, Occom sought an education from Eleazar Wheelock, a local minister. Occom excelled at his studies, persuading Wheelock of the potential for education to Christianize the Indians. Occom went on to become a minister himself, and was later sent to Great Britain by Wheelock to raise money for Wheelock's school. Following his trip, Occom fell out with Wheelock over the school's neglected mission of Indian education, among other issues. However, Occom's faith was undaunted; he continued to preach and was known for his clear and direct style. A sermon he preached at the execution of Moses Paul became so well known that it was reprinted and translated well into the nineteenth century. Following the Revolutionary War, Occom, disillusioned with European-American Christian society, led an exodus of Christian Indians to Oneida country in upstate New York, where they founded the Brothertown tribe. Occom died in Brothertown in 1792.

1. M. Chamberlin; J. Spilsbury. *The Reverend Mr. Samson Occom: The First Indian Minister That Ever Was in Europe, & Who Accompanied the Rev'd Nathan'l. Whitaker, D.D. In an Application to Great Britain for Charities to Support Ye Rev'd. Dr. Wheelock's Indian Academy, and Missionaries among Ye Native Savages of N. America.* London: H. Parker, 1768. [Iconography 250](#)

This mezzotint print was based on the portrait of Samson Occom by Jonathan Spilsbury. The portrait was completed while Occom was in England and represents him as he would have appeared at that time.

2. Samson Occom, *Autobiography*, 1768. DC Hist Mss 768517

In answer to criticism leveled against him by members of the Boston-based Society for Propagating Christian Knowledge among the Indians of North America, Occom wrote two brief autobiographical statements, the first in 1765 and the second, longer version seen here, in 1768. Occom asserts, "I was Born a Heathen and Brought up In Heathenism." He recounts how he learned to read and how, through his religious awakening, he came to revere the word of God. He discusses his studies with Wheelock and his early preaching, and details the poverty and struggles he faced.

3. Jonathan Edwards. *Some Thoughts concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New-England, and the Way in Which It Ought to Be Acknowledged and Promoted; Humbly Offer'd to the Publick, in a Treatise on That Subject.* Boston, Printed: Edinburgh, Reprinted by T. Lumisden and J. Robertson, and sold at their printing-house in the Fish-market, 1743. [Rare BR520 .E5 1743](#)

This treatise by Jonathan Edwards influenced the religious revival that swept the American colonies, and New England in particular, in the early eighteenth century. The preaching of ministers such as Eleazar Wheelock had impressed the young Samson Occom and drew him to Christianity.

4. Judah Monis. *Dickdook Leshon Gnebreet: A Grammar of the Hebrew Tongue, Being an Essay to Bring the Hebrew Grammar into English, to Facilitate the Instruction of All Those Who Are Desirous of Acquiring a Clear Idea of This Primitive Tongue by Their Own Studies; In Order to Their More Distinct Acquaintance with the Sacred Oracles of the Old Testament, According to the Original. And Published More Especially for the Use of the Students of Harvard-College at Cambridge, in New-England. Boston, N.E.: Printed by Jonas Green, and are to be sold by the author at his house in Cambridge, 1735.* Rare [PJ4566 .M7 1735 c.3](#)

This is possibly the first book that Samson Occom owned. He likely acquired it used from Samuel Buell, a minister and friend. Occom has carefully inscribed the front “Samson Occom, His Book Novr ye 25 AD 1748,” and again wrote his name below that in Hebrew. Throughout the text, he inscribed his name and his identity as a Mohegan Indian writing in English, Latin, Greek, Hebrew and Mohegan. Here you see the most embellished of these inscriptions in Mohegan, written in 1751.

5. Samson Occom. *A Sermon, Preached at the Execution of Moses Paul, an Indian; Who Was Executed at New-Haven, on the Second of September, 1772; For the Murder of Mr. Moses Cook, Late of Waterbury, on the 7th of December, 1771. Preached at the Desire of Said Paul. By Samson Occom, Minister of the Gospel, and Missionary to the Indians. New Haven: Printed and sold by T. & S. Green, 1772.* [DC Hist E90.P3 O2 1772.](#)

Samson Occom. *A Sermon, Preached at the Execution of Moses Paul, an Indian, Who Was Executed at New Haven, on the 2d of September, 1772, for the Murder of Mr. Moses Cook, Late of Waterbury on the 7th of December, 1771: Preached at the Desire of Said Paul. Exeter [N.H.]: Printed for Josiah Richardson, the Lord's Messenger to the people, 1819.* [DC Hist E90.P3 O2 1819.](#)

Samson Occom. *Pregeth ar Ddihenyddiad Moses Paul, Indian, yr hwn a gafwyd yn enog o Lofruddiaeth. A bregethwyd yn New Haven, yn America, Gan Sampson Occom, Indian Genedigol. At ba un y chwanegwyd Hanes Fer o Lwyddiant yr Efengyl ymblith yr Indiaid, Ynghyd a Hanes ryfedd o Droedigaeth Indian, a elwir Pagey, ymha un y cynhwysir Desgrifiad ardderchog o'r anfeidrol Un yn Dri, a'r Tri yn Un, gan Iesu Grist. Caerfyrddin, Argraphwyd gan John Daniel, yn Heol-y-Brenin, 1789.* [DC Hist E90.P30219 1789.](#)

In 1771, a member of the Mohegan community, Moses Paul, killed a European-American man named Moses Cook while in a drunken rage. Condemned to death, Paul requested that Occom deliver his execution sermon. These sermons were common at the time, having been popularized in England in the seventeenth century. They were designed to bring empathy to the condemned for the conditions of their crimes, and to hold them up as exemplars. The sermons were often published along with the criminals' confessions. Occom's sermon for Moses Paul focused on the evils of drink. It was reprinted well into the nineteenth century, even appearing in a

Welsh edition. This sermon catapulted Occom's career forward and he found himself in great demand as a preacher.

6. Samson Occom, Journal, May 11, 1789 to January 10, 1790. [MS-1237](#), box 1, folder 25

In the years following his last contact with Eleazar Wheelock, Occom became increasingly disillusioned with European-American society. In 1787, he preached a sermon in which he railed against the hypocrisy of so-called Christian society, declaring, among other things, that those who owned slaves were not Christian. Eventually he came to the conclusion that Indians, Christian or otherwise, could not coexist with their European-American neighbors, and he devised a plan to move his family and many Christian Indian families to Oneida country. In 1789, just three years before his death, Occom and his wife finally moved to the new Brothertown community in upstate New York.

7. Samson Occom, Herbal Remedies, 1754. [MS-1237](#), box 1, folder 1

Despite his English education, Occom maintained ties to his native cultural roots, as can be seen in this small manuscript notebook he kept on various herbal remedies.