

Table talk

By Dana Cook Grossman

Anyone who's ever noticed ax marks on the beams of an 18th-century New England barn knows the feeling. As does anyone who's held a leatherbound book from the 17th century and marveled at its hand-tinted illustrations. Or anyone who's trod on a 16th-century granite threshold and felt the curve worn into its surface.

It's the feeling of being struck by the individual actions of our forebears rather than simply the result of those actions. For example, instead of just a cavernous barn, one suddenly has a vision of well-muscled arms swinging an ax in a smooth arc. Or instead of an age-spotted page, one sees a hand deftly applying color to vellum. Or instead of a well-worn stone, one is aware of the hobnailed boots that must have scuffed the doorsill smooth.

I had just such a feeling a few months ago, as I opened a large box that had come in the mail. I knew what it contained, for I'd gotten a phone call a few days earlier alerting me to its arrival.

The call came from Dr. Seymour Wheelock, a pediatrician who graduated from Dartmouth College in 1940, interned at Mary Hitchcock in 1944-45, was a member of the DMS faculty from 1962 to 1966, and is now a professor emeritus at the University of Colorado. He has always been interested in Dartmouth history—in fact, he's written a number of historical features for DARTMOUTH MEDICINE over the years—in part because he has a relative in common with Eleazar Wheelock, the founder and first president of Dartmouth College.

Anyway, back to the phone call. Seymour was calling to share a bit of history with me. Part of what he explained I already knew, starting with the fact that in 1809 Dr. Nathan Smith, DMS's founder, convinced the New Hampshire legislature to appropriate \$3,450 so he could build a proper home for the school he'd established 12 years earlier. His "New Medical House" was the very first building constructed in the United States specifically for the purpose of medical education, and on November 2, 1811, Smith gave the first lecture delivered within its walls. Sadly, the historic building was demolished in 1963 due to structural instability.

At that point, the story Seymour was telling me diverged from what I already knew. One rainy afternoon, he continued, he and a fellow member of the faculty, Dr. Phil Nice, were standing and watch-

ing the 152-year-old building bite the dust. When the bulldozers knocked off work for the day, he and Phil couldn't resist wading into the wreckage. As they clambered over the rubble, they came upon a couple of intact oak floorboards. Unable to bear the thought of every bit of the building's history ending up in the dump, they spirited the boards away.

When Seymour moved to Colorado a few years later, the oak boards went with him. And there they sat for more than 40 years—until earlier this year, when he enlisted a friend who is a woodworker to make the boards into two small tables.

Seymour concluded the call by explaining that he'd had the two tables packed up and sent to me. One was for me, he said, because he knew of my fondness for Dartmouth and its history. And he asked me to present the other one to Dr. Jim Yong Kim—Dartmouth's new president and the first physician to lead the College—in the expectation that he, too, would come to care deeply for Dartmouth and its history.

As promised, the box arrived a few days later. I opened it, and as I beheld the grain of the oak on the tops of the tables, I felt a chill. Suddenly I could picture Nathan Smith pacing back and forth on those very boards as he shared his wisdom with his students. And his wisdom was considerable. DMS's founder was a seminal figure in early American medicine, a man known as "the Johnny Appleseed of medicine" for his unsurpassed role in founding or helping to found four medical schools.

I told Seymour that I was truly touched to have such a tangible tie to this institution's roots. And it was clear, when I presented President Kim with his table, that he understood its import as well.

That import is especially meaningful right now, for Dartmouth is again facing budgetary challenges as we head into planning for the next fiscal year. If those two tables could talk, I think they'd urge us to put today's challenges in perspective by recalling the struggles, financial and otherwise, that Nathan Smith faced as he carved a medical school out of the wilderness.

Wooden beams and floorboards, stone doorsills, and even vellum pages can survive for centuries. We need to be sure the spirit and commitment of Eleazar Wheelock and Nathan Smith do, too. ■

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