JAY SATTERFIELD: Welcome back to *Hindsight is 20/19*, the podcast where we look at 250 years of Dartmouth’s history through 25 objects from the Library’s archival collections, one per decade. I’m Jay Satterfield. I’ll be your host for this episode.

At Dartmouth’s 1946 convocation, recently appointed College President John Sloan Dickey, urged a new sense of internationalism to students insulated inside their “Dartmouth Bubble” after World War II. “The world’s troubles are your troubles,” he told them. Then with Post-war American confidence, he said, “there is nothing wrong with the world that better human beings cannot fix.” With those words, Dartmouth entered a new era devoted to molding leaders capable of changing the world. It hadn’t been the case before. For most of its history, Dartmouth focused on creating religious leaders, doctors, lawyers and teachers—the primary outward impulse was the spread of religion, not international understanding. But… there was this one time early in Dartmouth’s history that anticipated Dickey’s calling, way back in 1804…

[Music—like you would hear in a flashback in a 1970s sitcom]

Dartmouth was still really small at the start of the 19th century. Only 41 new students enrolled in 1800, 34 of which made it to graduation in 1804. At that time, graduating students were expected to perform some sort of oration during graduation to prove their learning—kind of a ceremonial oral exam to mark the end of their Dartmouth experience and show the assembled crowd their learned brilliance. These could be orations in Greek, or Latin, occasionally in Hebrew, or, more often, debates on historical topics. The Classics were always in favor—taking up an argument that Cicero made and applying it anew really showed the crowd that you were an educated gentleman.

But in 1804, two brave students turned what normally would have been a common display of their rhetorical prowess into something a little dangerous. Instead of playing it safe, they took on a current event, one fraught with difficulties for Americans. Stephen Farley and Avery Williams stood in front of their class and all assembled to deliver “A Dialogue on the Revolution in St. Domingo between Toussaint and Dessalines.” I have their hand written script here. They wrote it themselves, of course, but to add to the sense of historical epic, they put it into verse.

Can you picture it? Two 22-year-old guys standing on a platform in a small New England town several day’s journey by horse from anything resembling a cosmopolitan city, one student taking on the role of the ghost of Francois-Dominique Toussaint Louverture, leader of a slave rebellion, and military mastermind of the Haitian revolution, and the other acting as Toussaint’s brutal successor, Jean-Jacques Dessalines. It is August 1804! Toussaint had died just year before and Dessalines began the year with a declaration of full independence for Haiti. That spring he had carried out what became known as “the massacre of the French,” an event that nearly eradicated the white population of Haiti.

And to Americans, how to react to the violence? It was a revolution, born out of the Enlightenment, throwing off colonial rule—that sounds pretty good. Hadn’t something like that recently happened more locally? But it was also a slave rebellion with black leaders. Uh oh, that might freak out a few people in the United States—north and south. Notably, Thomas Jefferson refused to establish diplomatic relations with the new nation. He was a bit of a Francophile, and slave owner as well. White slave holders in the U.S. read about the massacres, looked at their own communities and human properties and they fretted. Could this spread? Would the institution of slavery turn on those who benefitted from it? Would there be blood, *white blood*, in the streets?

Well, Dartmouth seniors Stephen Farley and Avery Williams were game to take it on, in verse no less. The world’s troubles? They made them their own.

We should probably read some of what they wrote to give you a flavor of their dialogue. But first, in case you are rusty on the Haitian revolution let me offer you this quick guide.

Saint-Domingo was a French colony devoted to plantation sugarcane production with the labor supplied by enslaved Africans. It was a region plagued by malaria and yellow fever that combined with an abusive, cruel slave system and unbearable conditions to kill off approximately half of all enslaved Africans within a year of their arrival. But in 1791, a slave revolt broke out, and soon Toussaint rose as its military and political leader. By 1800, he established the free state of Haiti—technically still a colony of France, but fairly autonomous. He named himself Governor for Life, defying Napoleon. He was captured by the French and died in prison in 1803. Upon his death, his chief lieutenant, Dessalines assumed control of the colony and declared independence on January 1st, 1804. The French sent more troops, and Dessalines ordered their massacre. The free and independent state of Haiti was established. It was the most successful slave revolt in history—at least going back to Spartacus—and the first of a succession of revolutions in the Caribbean that continued into the 20th century.

So, when Farley and Williams began their oration, Dessalines was the victorious leader of the new nation, the idealistic Toussaint was dead, and some people in the United States were feeling, well, a little let’s say *uneasy*.

The dialog opens with a soul-searching Dessalines alone on stage ruminating on how the institution of slavery begets violence:

Alas that human nature should be so

Debased. How weak the tenderest ties when vaunting

Pride and Avaricious lust the soul of man

Surchanges! With relish keen and brutal thirst

He’ll gorge on flesh of humankind and drink

His fellow mortal’s Blood. ‘Tis pride creates

This base desire to domineer and bind

In cruel chaines, whom nature first form’d free.

The monologue goes on for a while, then disguised Toussaint enters and begins:

Illustrious chief of Hayti’s independent

Sons. Thy virtuous aims and valiant deeds have

Stamp’d the seal of gratitude on ev’ry heart.

On fame’s fair wing thy name shall soar sublime

And…

The moody Dessalines has no time for this and breaks in:

Presuming flattering stranger. To me

Why now rehearse such words as these? Why greet

My ears with tones of praise so undeserv’d?

Surely some dark design insidious prompt

Thy tongue to speak applause to which thy heart’s

A stranger.

Oh my, Farley and Williams have been reading their Virgil! It goes on like this, page after page. I am not going to regale you with the whole thing. Toussaint’s ghost masks his true identity and enters into a debate with Dessalines. At first, they find harmony, celebrating the end of slavery in Haiti, but then Toussaint’s ghost faults Dessalines’ bloody vengeance.

Revenge of every shape strict justice knows not.

This reptile temper low degrades the man,

And stains with foulest hues him, who the robe

Of pow’r puts on. –My lord, take not offence.

Soon, Toussaint revels his true identity, relates the horrors of French prison, then implores Dessalines to form a just government that protects all, even the few remaining who one held power and enslaved. Overcoming Dessalines’ objections he concludes:

We must be free, but let our firmness be

By wisdom Guided. Let not a nation

Rising from inhuman woes, be found to

Impose oppression’s bands on those they’ve freed;

But let the mildest reign of peace succeed,

Where war and slaughter stalked their dreadful rounds.

Thus may our nation rise. Hayti supreme

Shall to oppress’d humanity, her rights

Proclaim, and to the trampling o’er such power

As God to man is ne’er vouchsafe to offer.

Astrea, the, fair Goddess from her throne

Shall shower propitious, heavenly justice down

Bid our fam’d realm from gloomy darkness hie

And ancient Greek and Roman worth out vie.

Clever ending. Slavery is bad, but let’s be good now and not kill those who imposed it upon us. Farley and Williams come off as liberal minded abolitionists offering comforting words for people in the U.S.—a hopeful view of the future born out of enlightenment thinking. But also, note the nod to the Greeks and Romans in the final heroic couplet written to show the orator’s learning. Reassure the audience (don’t worry, you won’t be slaughtered even if you own slaves), and soothe the faculty with your illusion to the classics. Most of all, they made the world’s troubles their own. Nicely done. You two get your degrees!

*Hindsight is 20/19* is a production of the Dartmouth College Library, and is produced as part of the celebration of Dartmouth’s 250th anniversary. This episode was written and directed by Jay Satterfield, and produced by Morgan Swan, our sound engineer was Peter Carini. Thank you for listening and we hope you will continue to enjoy *Hindsight is 20/19*.

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