PETER CARINI: 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 Peter Carini and I’ll be your host for this episode.

So, today’s object is different from any object that we have referenced so far. First, it’s not in the Archives at all, yet. And second, it’s not paper or vellum, wood or metal. In fact, it doesn’t really exist in a physical sense at all. Today’s object is a webpage. While most people think of paper when they think of the Dartmouth College Archives, we are actively engaged in the process of acquiring and preserving electronic documents as well. Webpages are just one example of this. The page we’re talking about in this episode is titled, “FAQ: Proposed Amendment to the Association of Alumni Constitution Regarding the Alumni-Nominated Trustee Balloting Process” and it dates all the way back to 2009. We’re looking at this item because the proposed change to the constitution was controversial. In fact, it was so controversial that, like so many things Dartmouth, it ended up boiling over onto the National stage.

The “troubles” all started in 1869 with the Alumni Association. It wasn’t really the Association’s fault, it had a lot more to do with the College and the state of the College at the time. You can probably lay the blame, if there is blame to be laid, at the feet of then President Asa Dodge Smith. Without getting too far down into the weeds, Smith had allowed the College to flounder a bit financially, and the Alumni had become increasingly concerned about the state of the institution. In addition, they had a number of concerns regarding the board of trustees whom they felt were too conservative and too old, the average age of the trustees at the time was, 67.

In 1869, the Alumni Association had gathered for a meeting to mark the centennial of the College, and to raise funds in support of their alma mater. They were talking about a figure in the range of $200,000, almost 4 million dollars in today’s money. At this meeting they requested that they be allowed to elect members from their own ranks to the Board of Trustees, and here’s where things began to get sticky.

After some consideration, the Board rejected this request, because they felt it would, in their words cast the College onto “the sea of politics.” Predictably, the alumni were less than pleased and the promised donations dried up. The board and the alumni reached a sort of compromise in 1875. The alumni would put forward a list of alumni as candidates for any open trustee positions, and the board would then select from that list. It wasn’t really the solution the alumni were looking for, but it was an acceptable compromise…at least for the time being. Over time a number of plans for creating better representation on the board were proposed, but none of them met with anyone’s full approval.

So, the issue of alumni representation on the board did not go away. Instead it festered. No one was happy with the scheme put in place in 1875.

The question of Alumni representation came up again in 1885. Once again, the topic was tabled, and once again it festered. Both sides expressed a variety of concerns. President Bartlett’s supporters feared the institution would fall into the hands of those who opposed him. Others were concerned about electioneering. But one of the primary problems was the fact that the Charter would have to be amended if additional trustees were to be allowed on the board.

Finally, in 1890, the Trustees sent word to the various alumni associations asking them to send a representative to “inspect the institution, examine its needs, and, later, to confer with the Trustees.” At this gathering the alumni were surprised when the Trustees sent word that they wished to set up a joint committee to examine the issue of alumni representation on the board. In the fall of that year the committee gathered, and the proposal was put forward to add five alumni trustees to the board for a limited time that could be renewed by a vote of the non-alumni, or charter, trustees.

I won’t beleaguer you with all of the details, believe me Leon Burr Richardson has documented the entire process, blow by blow in his history of the College. Suffice to say that independent of the Trustees, the New Hampshire legislature decided to pass legislation allowing for the expansion of the board by five members. While this caused everyone involved some consternation, since it harked back to State’s attempted takeover of the College in 1815, the end result was that in 1891 the alumni were granted their wish and were allowed to elect five members of their own body to the Board on a rotating basis, bringing the total number of trustees to 18 including the President and the Governor who is ex-officio.

And all was well, and everyone was happy.

That is until 1980.

That’s the year that John F. Steel, the third, class of 1954 mounted a petition bid to be elected to the Board as an alumni representative…and won.

Why was this a big deal? Well, as many of you probably know, Dartmouth’s mascot was formerly an Indian, the origin of which goes back to our episode on the 1780s and how Dartmouth created its historical narrative. When John Kemeny became President in 1970, one of his first actions as to recommit the College to educating Native Americans. As part of this, the College established a Native American Studies Program and began to actively recruit Native Americans to campus for the first time since the 18th century. The new students arrived and were faced with the Dartmouth Indian symbol everywhere they turned. It was even on the Safety and Security officers shoulder patches. In response to their objections to the symbol, the Board voted to discontinue its use. Steel was opposed to this decision and ran, in part, because his daughter, then a student at Dartmouth, had complained to him about the administration’s restrictions on use the Indian symbol on campus. Steel’s election was therefore contentious and there were accusations of voting irregularities and electioneering and misinformation thrown about. It took a little over 100 years, but the worries of the trustees back in 1869 had come to fruition and the alumni trustee issue had indeed tossed the College on to “the sea of politics.”

Steel’s bid was just the first of a string of similar petition candidacies each run by Alumnus who expressed similar concerns over the directions of the College. Wilcomb B. Washburn, Class of 1948, ran as a petition candidate and lost, in 1989. Among other things he criticized the College for its approach to diversity hiring of faculty and a curricular approach that deemphasized Western culture and traditions. *The Dartmouth Review*, the campus’s conservative periodical that was then in its hay day, ran a number of long interviews and articles supporting Washburn’s candidacy, and Washburn broke new ground by airing a campaign video. Too this point, the storm was pretty well contained within the College community, but the sea was about to get a bit rougher. After all, the internet hardly existed in 1989.

In 2004, T. J. Rodgers, Class of 1970, ran a petition campaign, and won. The following year, Peter Robinson, Class of 1979, and Todd Zywicki, Class of 1988, ran as petition candidates and won, and in 2007 petition candidate Stephen Smith, Class of 1988 also won. All of these candidates had the endorsement of *The Dartmouth Review.*

By now things had changed, the campaigns were contentious with conservative bloggers and columnists at the national level weighing in to support the petitioners. The editorial page of the *Wall Street Journal* is one example and the website for the American Council for Trustees and Alumni, an organization founded by Lynn Cheney and Sen. Joseph Liberman is another. *The New York Times* ran an article calling the Dartmouth Alumni Trustee elections a spectator sport.

There were grumblings and murmurings about an attempt to stack the board with conservatives and making Dartmouth into the conservative Ivy.

There were also concerns expressed with the voting procedure. The elections used a voting process known as approval voting where voters can cast ballots for any candidates that they approve. The flaw in approval voting, not very often discussed because it’s only likely in a tightly closed group, is that if a candidate were to mount a campaign and urge his or her supporters to only cast one vote for her or him, this would effectively split the vote and tip the ballot toward that candidate. This appeared to be just what was going on. Dartblog, a blog known for its support of the same issues the petition candidates were championing, stated that the petition candidates prevailed, quote, “Because alumni could vote for as many candidates as they wanted. And a whole lot decided to vote just for Peter Robinson and Todd Zywicki.”

The College officials were starting to feel a little ill as they were tossed about on the “sea of politics,” so they took action. Their first move, on September 8, 2007, was to vote to expand the Board of Trustees from 18 to 26 members. The new members would all be charter members, in other words chosen by the Board and not by the Alumni. This move would serve to ensure that the charter trustees would never be outnumbered by those elected by the Alumni, or perhaps more accurately by petition candidates.

The Executive Committee of the Alumni Association, dominated at the time by supporters of the petition candidates, brought a lawsuit against the College in an attempt to stop this move.

But the College was not done. The next move, in 2009, was a proposed change to the Alumni Association Constitution to alter the voting process. While this sounds radical, it was far from the first time that the voting process had been changed. The constitutional change passed, and the result was that they abandoned approval voting for a one person, one vote system.

The lawsuit initiated by the Association was voluntarily dismissed by the New Hampshire Superior Court in 2010 after a newly elected anti-lawsuit slate took over the Association’s executive committee. The anti-lawsuit slate was elected by a 60 percent majority, with a record 38 percent of Dartmouth alumni voting in the election.

And thus, storm on the sea of politics was calmed.

And all was well, and everyone was happy…well almost everyone.

Before I close, I want to acknowledge that the lens of history is in many ways still too close to this event to be able to look at it wholly and critically. For anyone who lived these events, particularly those actively engaged in them, this will seem like a very superficial and simplified examination of a complex and nuanced issue.

Thank you for listening and we hope that you continue to enjoy Hindsight is 20/19.

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, highlighting selected objects from Rauner Special Collections Library. This episode was written and directed by Peter Carini, and produced by Morgan Swan, our sound engineer was Julia Logan. Additional sound engineering was provided by Joshua Shaw.