PETER CARINI: Hi. This is Peter Carini from the Hindsight is 20/19 podcast team. This episode concludes this series where we look at 25 of the lesser known stories in Dartmouth’s history through objects in the library’s collection. Well it turns out our count was off there are actually 26 stories because there are 26 decades in Dartmouth’s history. While this wraps up the series as we conceived it, we are pleased to announce that there will be at least two additional bonus episodes, written and hosted by students inspired by the series. We have all enjoyed the process of creating this podcast and hoped you have enjoyed listening to it. And now, on with the show.

JAMIE EEG: Hi, and welcome back to Hindsight is 2019, in which we look at 250 years of Dartmouth’s history through 25 objects from the Library’s archival collections, one per decade. My name is Jaime Eeg ’18 an Edward Connery Lathem ’51 Special Collections Fellow and I will be hosting this episode.

Just two years after the founding of the college, a young man arrived at Dartmouth in a horse drawn sulky, ready to embark on his collegiate journey. However, it soon became very clear that a purely academic experience would not be enough to satisfy him, and together with two of his classmates, he penned the letter written in November of 1772 that will be at the center of today’s podcast. Addressed to Eleazer Wheelock, Dartmouth College’s “Worthy & ever dear President”, the letter was the students’ best attempt to appeal to his studious and devout sensibilities; they wrote to request a minor change to the fledgling institution, though they make sure to praise its virtues, saying that (pause) “according To the custom of our country’s most noble, most true and most Catholick Faith (pause) the institution of Nurseries of Learning (& especially of such as can be call’d Schools of the Prophets) hath & ever will be the Glory of our English Constitution (pause) & so long as evry & any branch of useful Literature- together with the smiles of Almighty God appear in them must make us the envy of evry other & declare us to be the Israel of Jehovah.”

They continue, making a fair play at flattery for good measure, by writing that Dartmouth is “from the nature of her Charter & the general disposition of her inhabitants envy’d by many.” Finally, our brave letter writers arrive at their request: they wish “to spend certain Leisure hours allotted us for the relaxation of our mind, -in such sort as, stepping the minuet & learning to use the sword.” Or, in more simple terms, they want less time required for schoolwork and more free time for dancing and fighting.

\*pause and let this sink in\*

The letter is signed, “your most obedient, humble Pupils & very greatfull, affectionate & dutifull **humble** servants, James Hutchinson, Sam Stebbins,” and, \*pause for more emphasis\* John Ledyard.

Now you may have heard of the name Ledyard before; maybe you’re thinking of the bank, the bridge or a certain college club…, or maybe you’ve even heard of the man himself‒he is something of a Dartmouth legend, after all. The original, quintessential Dartmouth Man, a renowned explorer, a non-graduate, “the patron saint of freshman who run away.” Whatever you may know of him, and especially if you don’t, his story is a fascinating one:

A member of one of the first classes at Dartmouth, and clearly unsatisfied with his rigorous theological studies, Ledyard travelled north of Hanover for months at a time, learning from the indigenous people he met in his travels and cultivating his wanderlust. When he couldn’t change Dartmouth to suit his varied interests (Wheelock rejected their petition- Dartmouth was a college for serious, religious men, future preachers and missionaries, not dancing swashbucklers), Ledyard simply left. But, ever the enigma, he did not leave simply. According to college Lore, he felled an old pine along the river and, using the skills he had learned from his time in the North, dugout his own canoe. He set off down the Connecticut, leisurely reading his Ovid as he drifted away from a college that was not yet ready for him.

Of course, the dramatic end to his collegiate journey was just the beginning of his life’s adventure. The river carried him to his family’s farm in Hartford, Connecticut, which he quickly left to enlist in the British Army and eventually their Navy, in constant pursuit of more. During his time in the British Navy he joined Captain Cook’s third and final voyage, which took him from England, South around the tip of Africa, across the Indian Ocean to New Zealand and the South Pacific, along America’s Pacific Northwest Coast, up to Siberia, down the coast of China and Indonesia, and eventually back to England. A few years later, Ledyard deserted and returned to his mother in America before he could be sent to fight against his fellow patriots in the Revolution. Taking advantage of the temporary quiet and restfulness of his home, he wrote a bestselling account of Cook’s voyage. The tales of his adventure caught the eye of a certain Thomas Jefferson, who encouraged him to travel through Russia, cross the Bering Strait to North America, and make his way from the West Coast of the continent back to the East- a daring plan that would have predated Lewis and Clark’s explorations by a decade.He made it about 4000 miles into his journey, before being deported from Siberia by Catherine the Great after being accused of spying on Russia’s fur trade threatening their monopoly. His next great adventure was to be in Africa, but he died unexpectedly in Cairo of a stomach bug.

\*womp womp pause\*

Now, you may be thinking, “sure this guy is pretty cool, but what is his life story doing in a podcast about the 2010’s”? And why did I use his letter, from 1772 no less, to jumpstart today’s discussion? We’ll get there, I promise, but to fully answer these questions, let’s first take a quick look at some Dartmouth students from the 1920s, and the result of yet another student request rejected by the powers that be.

In January of 1920, a group of students met with the goal of restoring the rowing team to Dartmouth’s campus. They secured pledges of financial support from interested alumni and procured an appropriate sum to reinstate the team early that spring. However, their plan hit a small setback in the form of the College Trustees, who rejected their proposal and effectively halted all plans for a renewed rowing team. Much like a certain John Ledyard, these students were bound and determined to realize their non-academic pursuits. Unlike Ledyard, they stayed at Dartmouth to do so. Luckily, these students realized that at the core of all their planning was the desire to create an organization that would help Dartmouth students take advantage of Dartmouth’s proximity to the Connecticut River. And so, with a clearer, more obtainable goal in their sights, they set about forming a club independent from the College, though founded, run and populated by Dartmouth students.

Now, these founding members were faced with one more choice, the name of their new organization. I bet you can see where I’m going with this. They bounced back and forth between a couple of options, and ultimately decided on naming the club after a certain legend with whom we are quite familiar by now, a man they had far more in common with than I think they ever realized. That’s right, they named their headstrong little organization Ledyard Canoe Club, endowing it in perpetuity with the man’s fierce sense of independence, determination, and desire for adventure.

To honor their namesake, the first Ledyardites recreated John Ledyard’s original departure from Dartmouth, paddling down the Connecticut from the club’s modest boat shed, and, in a move I believe would make Ledyard proud, continuing on beyond Hartford to end their journey all the way at the sea. This first voyage became part of a longstanding tradition, though it has evolved since 1921, from a modest group of Ledyardites, to a thrilling ‘downriver race,’ to the trip we know today, which sees a little over 20 Dartmouth seniors, many of whom are members of Ledyard Canoe Club, but, especially in recent memory, many not, who undertake the 220 mile trip over one week during their last spring at Dartmouth. See, I promised you we would get to the present, and albeit through a rather meandering route, we have finally arrived. As for the connection to Ledyard’s life and letter, well, without him and his resolute commitment to a life beyond academics, and subsequent paddle home, those first Ledyardites may not have canoed to the sea and we’ll never know what else this podcast might have been about.

But John Ledyard did come to Dartmouth, and he did abandon his studies for the sake of some adventure and so each year, a group of Dartmouth students sets out to do the same for a week in mid-May, as soon as the water and the weather are warm enough. At a college where graduation isn’t until June, this means that participation in “trip to the sea” requires missing classes for a full week to paddle the whole thing (and you can’t exactly do much in the way of class work when you’re on the water canoeing 5 to 8 hours a day and camping in tents- as you could imagine, trip to the sea is not the safest place to bring a laptop or important papers). So, all of the seniors who embark from the Ledyard docks each year miss all of their classes for the following week, and, I would argue, all of us are better for it. The experience outweighs any of the classes they may miss. Unfortunately, Dartmouth’s rigorous academics does bar some seniors from participating in this deeply special tradition, a week of adventure and comradery, fully unique to Dartmouth. Trip to the Sea as it exists now is composed of students from all over Dartmouth’s campus, united in their willingness to miss a week of classes, to miss one of their last weeks to be on campus with their closest friends, in order to paddle between 30 and 40 miles a day with a group of people they likely have never met.

The students who choose to go on Trip to the Sea know something now that John Ledyard knew long ago. Although Ledyard’s 1772 letter harkens back to a different time and a different Dartmouth, the sentiment lives on‒ a commitment to academics at Dartmouth should not necessitate a withdrawal from life. And academics, while important and unquestionably integral to the college, are not all that Dartmouth has to offer and certainly not the only thing a Dartmouth student should be seeking. After all, why come to this small college in the woods, if not to be in the woods?

In many ways, Dartmouth has learned to accommodate the spirits of the students it attracts. Perhaps, were he a student today, John Ledyard’s wanderlust could have been satisfied enough through the outing club, -I’m looking at you Ledyard Canoe Club-, foreign study programs, language study abroads or self-designed off terms, to propel him all the way to graduation. These kinds of opportunities, ones that nurture that spirit, have become part of the fabric of the institution. But Ledyard very well may have rejected that kind of structure, and the students who similarly want to challenge established boundaries, to push beyond them, are forced to paddle against a strong current. Dartmouth hasn’t fully realized that student spirit can’t always be channeled or structured, but rather thrives when allowed to grow unconventionally. To let student’s dreams grow too big, to let them strive for what may seem unimaginable, and then figure out the way to get them there without having to abandon the institution like John Ledyard. While Dartmouth College would be unrecognizable to Ledyard today, and while it is definitely a better, more inclusive and supportive place for its students than it was when he arrived, it is not a perfect place. Any progress Dartmouth has made does not condone its current shortcomings. There is more work to be done to support students who set out beyond the confines placed before them. Looking to our future, I challenge the Dartmouth community not to compare Dartmouth’s present to its past, or even to what we think it could be, but rather to raise our expectations to what we believe Dartmouth should be.

PETER CARINI: Hi this is Peter Carini, sound engineer for this episode. The following songs were used in this episode: “Surfing Day” by Marcos H. Bolanos , "Living in A Dream” by Twin Guns and “Droves” by Black Agnes. All songs were sourced from the Free Music Archive.