SARAH HOLSTON: Hi, and welcome back to Hindsight is 20/19. I’m Sarah Holston, class of 2017, and I’ll be your host for this episode.

Picture this scene: In the middle of a May night in the 1800s, a long rowdy train of young men in a colorful array of costumes comes caterwauling down the dark streets of Hanover and the Dartmouth of campus. The procession is lead by a student dressed up as the chief devil, with four others playing his fiendish cabinet, all on horseback. After this group, comes the entire Hartford marching band, contributing to the overall ruckus. And then another figure, who’s draped in the garments of a great high priest, and has his own clerical followers, proceeding in a stately manner and pace towards the Green, where they were to perform a funeral ceremony. They are followed by the rest of the sophomore class, escorting the speakers who will deliver the eulogies and lead the reciting and singing of odes to the departed, whose remains bring up the end of the procession, drawn by another four horses. Upon reaching the Green the students arranged themselves around a previously dug hole, heads bowed in solemn reverence to the memory of the dearly departed. C algebraicus machanicus, or, for those of today who are less familiar with old Latin names, mathematics. Yup, that’s right, mathematics. On that night in May, probably somewhere around 2 am, the Dartmouth men who had recently completed their sophomore year gathered to bury their now obsolete math textbooks on the Green in an elaborate funeral ceremony. And by elaborate, I mean the complete ceremony, including all of the song, hymns, solemn prayers, and eulogies proper to the occasion. The event was actually part of an annual tradition through march of the 19th century, back when Dartmouth still use the classical curriculum. This approach to education sets out a strict schedule of courses spanning four years, which covered the basic building blocks of academia and aimed primarily to train students in philosophy, theology, and classical languages.

Under this system, students finished their study of mathematics at the end of sophomore year. That’s it. Done. Forever. Or at least, for the remainder of their time at Dartmouth. So, the completion of the math course became a major milestone in the Dartmouth experience, marking not only the end of a significant chapter in student’s education, but also the halfway point overall. And if there’s one thing Dartmouth students never miss, it’s a chance to celebrate. And so, a few weeks before the end of classes, the students would circulate invitations. One of our favorites, which is the artifact that inspired this episode, is shaped like a coffin, with a skull and crossbones printed at the top. Written on the front is C algebraicus mechanicus obit ante diem tertium edis maie, and then 1882 in roman numerals for effect. For those of you without a classical education, the inscription translates to C algebraicus mechanicus died before the third day of May. Although, I have to confess, I am also not a product of the classical education so I’m relying on Google translate here. I could be wrong. When opened by rotating the top page so the middle becomes visible, the invitation lists the order of procession, the basic program for the ceremony and a funeral dirge, also in Latin of course. Invitations received, students would complete their sophomore year of schooling in great anticipation. Then, on the night of the ceremony, at around 10pm, students gathered in the old Dartmouth hotel for a sophomore supper, featuring a dinner of such culinary delights as mock turtle soup and scalloped oysters. After the meal came a read poem, described in the journal of William Howe, class of 1855, as “A rough uneventful sort of poem but well suited to the occasion. It touched on college life and various matters therewith connected. The poem lasted about half an hour.” After this already lengthy reading were numerous toasts, a few of which were quite good, according to Howe. We don’t have these speeches and poems still in the archive unfortunately, but we do have some of the odes that were printed in programs and invitations from various years. My personal favorite goes like this, “Come, friends, and drop a bitter tear, and join the mournful song. Let us to friendship, short and dear, the dolers day prolong. Oh Davey, who can speak thy worth, or span thy tangent line. Since Newton, toiling from his birth, could find of thee no sign. From truth and right, thou didst not swerve while breathing mortal air. True as the axis to the curve, we were thy constant care. But ah, how in one transient hour, our joy in thee has fled. For thou has gone on that long tour, a sign to all the dead. Then let thy spirit present thee, circling our heads above, as we distribute pay to the, in ratio of our love.”

While this ode certainly captures the playful and lighthearted humor of the event, the tradition also featured some heaving drinking and general destruction of the entire town’s evening, prompting the administration to try to put a stop to the ritual. Howe’s account of the event in 1853 described President Lorde himself arriving in the middle of dinner to insist the attending students return to bed. They sat without moving as he went up and down the length of the room, collecting the names of all the students involved. Though Howe never circles back to this incident to explain what, if anything, happened to those students. In 1869, the administration banned the burial of books on the Green. Not to be deterred, the determined students proceeded with their planned sendoff of the departed mathematics, adjusting for the new rule by substituting a cremation for the burial.

When I heard this story, the determination of these students to preserve their traditions resonated with me as a recent alumn. In the past few years, students responded to a cancelation of the official winter carnival snow sculpture by sneaking out in the middle of the night to build their own. The 19th century students, however, definitely went a few steps further than today’s undergraduates. The stubborn insistence on event a small, hastily constructed snow sculpture primarily consists of an attempt to maintain a beloved tradition in danger of disappearing. The 19th century students in responding to the banning of burial of books with a bonfire, were not just maintaining a tradition, they were outright escalating it. What had been a night of drunken and disruptive revelry focused on the burial of books in a pre-dug hole now became a night of drunken and disruptive revelry around a large fire. Whether it had been safety concerns or complaints about the disturbance, I don’t think addition of a bonfire satisfied anyone’s objections. But eventually the tradition did die, as anyone who’s lived in Hanover at the end of the spring term can gratefully attest, but not because of a lack of student enthusiasm. Perhaps one contributing factor in this divergence of response is brought on by a major change in the college since the 19th century, a change that is already been touched on this episode: curricular expectation. 150 years ago, under the classical curriculum, every student who graduate Dartmouth received a nearly identical education. They all took the same classes at the same time from the same professors. With the new elective system, begun around the turn of the 20th century, students choose which classes they are most interested in every term. Suddenly students in a given graduating class were no longer on the same track and studied each course alongside students from many different graduating years. So with significantly less unity among the student body, at least with regards to the educational components of the Dartmouth experience, there are not the major benchmarks to celebrate. Not everyone experiences the same landmarks of education together. Instead, other forms of communal bonding arose, some positive, some not.

Football and the Greek system dominated at various periods, and the sharing of Hanover’s winters has always been a meaningful experience. In each of these cases, the community comes together not as the members of a particular graduating year, but as Dartmouth, or as communities within the larger Dartmouth network that are delineated by something other than class year. Perhaps the best example of a modern class specific tradition would be the DOC trips, an introduction to college life and Dartmouth culture shared by nearly all students but experienced alongside members of an individual class year. But after trips, homecoming and arguably sophomore summer are the only other moments before commencement that most, but again almost never all, of a single class share common experience together. So today, this coffin represents not just the death of beloved mathematics, but also the collapse of an educational system. The modern university with its electives is fundamentally different. Many would say for the better, but certain old traditions can shed some light on the unexpected positives that the classical curriculum offered.

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 Sarah Holston, class of 2017, produced by Jay Satterfield and our sound engineer was Morgan Swan.

Music Credits:  
“[Surfing Day](http://freemusicarchive.org/music/Marcos_H_Bolanos/Unchained_Melodies_Vol2/Surfing_Day_master)” by [Marcos H. Bolanos](http://freemusicarchive.org/music/Marcos_H_Bolanos/)(from the [Free Music Archive](http://freemusicarchive.org/) [CC BY NC ND](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)); "[Living in A Dream](http://freemusicarchive.org/music/Twin_Guns/Live_on_WFMUs_Three_Chord_Monte_with_Joe_Belock_-_May_30_2016/Twin_Guns_-_07_-_Living_In_A_Dream)” by [Twin Guns](http://freemusicarchive.org/music/Twin_Guns/)(from the [Free Music Archive](http://freemusicarchive.org/) [CC BY NC ND](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/))