LAURA BARRETT: 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 archives, one per decade. I’m Laura Barret. I’ll be your host for this episode.

“Sirs: As a Dartmouth graduate, I wish to express myself concerning the recent publicity given to the college’s anti-Semitic policy.”

LB: These words open a letter written to Dartmouth’s Board of Trustees from an unnamed alumnus in 1945. The letter writer is referring to an article from *Time Magazine*, printed August of the same year, that publicized Dartmouth’s President Hopkin’s defense of “proportionate selection” in college’s admissions policies. “Proportionate selection” is a more palatable name for a quota system. Hopkins claimed that Dartmouth’s use of admissions quotas helped intentionally craft a diverse student body while preventing intolerance and prejudice that, he claimed, would result from “allow[ing] any racial group to gain virtual monopoly” of the student body. Hopkins openly acknowledged that Dartmouth’s admissions policies were aimed at limiting the number of Jewish students admitted to the College.

This conversation was happening during the final months of World War Two. The horrors of the treatment of Jews under the Nazi regime opened many Americans’ eyes to discrimination embedded in their own country’s culture and institutions. The letter, our object for today’s episode, can be read as the conscience of the time. The letter’s author puts words not only to his own perspective, but to those of many at Dartmouth and throughout the country.

“This democracy has just finished fighting World War II, of which one expressed object was racial tolerance, and Dartmouth has been given a striking opportunity to endorse the Peace personally, and in an influential and practical manner. However, to do so would require a kind of leadership and courage and sanity that has not as yet, it seems, appeared in Hanover.”

LB: He goes on to mercilessly rebut Hopkins’s public statements defending the quota:

“Perhaps President Hopkins actually does not realize that Dartmouth’s quota system is anti-Semitic. In leveling the enrollment from ‘East and West, and public and private schools, urban and agricultural areas’, the quota system is admirable; but to employ it against ‘racial groups as well’, and thus to maintain that ‘racial groups’ are similar to the others, is, if done unawares, a deplorable illogicality, and if done consciously, it is despicable.

LB: None but the most naïve will believe that the term ‘racial groups’ affects, in practice, anybody but the Jews. Imagine the nightmare of having to select each year just so many applications from American-English, and American-French, and American-Welsh,---and then pervertedly winnowing out from these a further quota of American-English-Jews, American-French-Jews, American-Welsh-Jews! Only a Gestapo-trained mind could endure such caprice.”

Whether or not they knew one another, the author had an ally in Alexander Laing, Dartmouth class of 1925. Laing spent his career at the College in a variety of administrative roles and, upon his death in 1976, was described as “a man of passionate conviction” and “an ardent defender of civil liberties.” Laing spearheaded efforts, in the fall of 1945, pressuring incoming President Dickey (Hopkins’ successor) to abolish the Jewish quota. Dickey ultimately, though begrudgingly, made a public statement promising “no such quota would be actively used in the future.”

While this decision, we can assume, would have pleased the letter writer, his concerns extended beyond the admissions policies, as we learn in his next paragraph:

“President Hopkins has stated that there is racial tolerance at Dartmouth, but surely he is aware that the fraternities, my own, Psi Upsilon, among them, are incorrigibly anti-Semitic. At the same time, the fraternities certainly are not restricted from the other groups mentioned: ‘East and West, and public and private schools, urban and agricultural areas’. This fact alone is sufficient to demonstrate the fallacy of his appeal to the quota system in excusing the anti-Semitic practices of the college.”

LB: The writer was, again, putting voice to a nationally growing awareness of discrimination and inequity. While the elimination of the admissions quota occurred shortly after this letter was written, action to remedy fraternities’ discriminatory practices took another decade. Just as Laing challenged discriminatory admissions policies despite the fact that he, an alumus, had benefitted from them, the change in the fraternities’ practices was also led by insiders—men whose religion and race had worked in their favor. One champion of *this* cause at Dartmouth was Frank Gilroy, Dartmouth class of 1950, an Army veteran who had served in World War II.

Gilroy, who went on to become a Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright, was a member of the Theta Chi fraternity and editor of the fraternity’s newsletter, *The Scroll of Theta Chi at Dartmouth*. In May 1949, Gilroy published several articles and a letter to his Theta Chi brothers in the newsletter to bring attention to racial discrimination in Dartmouth’s fraternities. Gilroy argued that discriminatory membership policies mandated by the national Theta Chi organization created a paradox for Dartmouth’s Theta Chi brothers. The Theta Chi motto, “Alma mater first, and Theta Chi for alma mater,” demands that loyalty to Dartmouth “is to transcend loyalty to the fraternity.” But, as we know, Dartmouth eliminated its discriminatory admissions policies earlier in the decade, while Theta Chi stipulated that membership was limited to, “any male belonging to the Caucasian race.” Other fraternities’ written policies limited membership to “white Christians only,” and some explicitly forbid membership by, in the language of the day, “Negroes,” “Jews,” and “Orientals.” Still other fraternities had no written clauses limiting membership to certain racial or religious groups, although many of them stipulated that membership was restricted by men deemed “socially acceptable” by all members of the fraternity. You can imagine the many problematic reasons a pledge might have been deemed socially unacceptable and denied membership to a fraternity and, thus, been excluded from the Dartmouth social scene.

Gilroy’s cause found its footing, and a November 1949 poll conducted by a group of student organizations revealed that three-quarters of the Dartmouth student body supported the elimination of discriminatory membership clauses in the College’s fraternities. In March 1954, something rather extraordinary happened at Dartmouth. The undergraduate council, led by future Dartmouth President David McLaughlin, then an undergraduate, put before the entire student body a referendum to end discrimination in the fraternities. 86.5% of the student body voted, and the measure passed by a thin majority of just four votes. The referendum required that by April 1, 1960, "any fraternity with a written or unwritten nationally imposed discriminatory clause that restricts, or can be interpreted to restrict, membership because of race, religion or national origin shall cease to be eligible to participate in fraternity activities on this campus." In other words, fraternity rules could no longer be used to reject prospective pledges based on race, religion or national origin. Around this time, numerous Dartmouth fraternities “went local,” meaning they broke ties with their national organizations in order to employ more inclusive membership practices. For some national context, the decision in the Supreme Court’s landmark school desegregation case, *Brown v. Board of Education*, was issued in May 1954.

A decade after Frank Gilroy graduated, the then student chairman of the Undergraduate Council Discrimination Committee, Thomas E. Green, credited World War II veterans such as Gilroy with bringing “to the campuses a broad cosmopolitan outlook which could not be reconciled with the snobbery and prejudice long prevalent among many national fraternities.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Let’s return to the letter that opened this episode. Midway through his letter, the alumus wrote:

“When one thinks of Dartmouth, one would like to think of the courage of honest, clear, informed reasoning, of brotherhood and decency, and, above all, of the advancement of man’s mind and the development of his spirit. If this were the best of all possible worlds, conceivably there would be no need for Dartmouth; but it is, rather, a world full of confusion and ignorance and hatred. It is a world in which the spiritual development of man lags dangerously, and perhaps fatally, behind technology and mechanics: the atom has been split, for example, but the filth of race-hatred remains encrusted on man’s spirit.”

LB: And he closed his letter with these words:

“Langston Hughes has said that ‘Democracy permits us the freedom of a hope, and some action towards the realization of that hope’. In this spirit, it is to be urged upon President Hopkins and the administrators of Dartmouth that they recognize and accept their obligations as leaders of a liberal institution in a nation still struggling towards a true democracy.”

LB: Without knowing the identity of the author, we can’t know if he lived to see the end of sanctioned segregation in Dartmouth’s fraternities. We can hope he was pleased with, the “honest, clear, informed reasoning,” shown by Dartmouth’s students as they took action “towards the realization” of the hope for a more inclusive Dartmouth.

*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 by Laura Barrett with contributions from Jay Satterfield, produced by Julia Logan, and our sound engineer was Morgan Swan. Thank you for listening and we hope you will continue to enjoy *Hindsight is 20/19*.

1. Thomas E. Green, “Fraternity Discrimination Faces a Deadline,” *Dartmouth Alumni Magazine*, March, 1960, 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)