Dear alums of the Amherst College Choral Society,

We are writing to you as a group of current and recent Choral Society members who are opposed to the continued singing of “Lord Jeffery Amherst”. We know many of you have expressed concerns about the song’s absence from this year’s Homecoming performance. We understand your reservations about the loss of one of our most long-standing Choral Society traditions, and we wanted to reach out to you to explain our reasoning.

College songs, like all traditions, serve a purpose. They unite us, both with our fellow students and with the many classes of students who came before us. They provide a wonderful continuity which stretches back for more than a century, allowing Choral Society alumni from decades long past to join the newest generation of Amherst’s choral singers on stage and in song at the end of our yearly Homecoming Concert. One of the most important functions of our long tradition of college songs, then, is community.

That being said, tradition for tradition’s sake is dangerous. There is value in our connections with our past, but in maintaining those connections we must continually examine the traditions we are upholding and ask ourselves: Is this tradition doing more harm than good? Does this tradition represent who we are today, and who we wish to be in the future?

We feel strongly that “Lord Jeffery Amherst” is doing more harm than good. It is a song that falls somewhere between praising and trivializing the legacy of Jeffery Amherst and the genocide and slaughter that he (along with an entire generation of colonialist settlers) inflicted upon the Ottawa people and other Native American tribes. When we sing it, we are saying to the audience: “This history of genocide and oppression is a punchline, not something to be taken seriously”; when we teach it to new Choral Society members and ask them to perform it, we are telling them: “To join us in song, you must endorse this racist joke.” Perhaps it was once a source of unity, but it is now a source of division and exclusion, alienating not only people whose Native ancestors and culture suffered at the hands of Jeffery Amherst and the colonialist invasion he represents, but also the many current, past, and potential Choral Society members with or without Native ancestry who, like us, are deeply uncomfortable with the idea of performing it.

Our removal of “Lord Jeff” from our concert programs, then, comes not out of disregard for our traditions, but rather from respect and care for their power to unite, rather than to divide. It is long past time to let this one song fade away, along with all of its divisive and hurtful implications. There will always be all of the other songs — “Paige’s Horse”, “Old Amherst’s Out for Business”, “Hand Me Down My Bonnet”, and all the rest — and we hope you will be singing them with us this year and in years to come.

Signed,
Michael Bessey ‘18E
Caleb Brooks ‘18
Alina Burke ‘17
Alexandra Burkot ‘15
Yariana Diaz ‘18
Lexie Freeman ‘19
Isa Goldberg ‘17
Asa Goodwillie ‘16
David Green ‘18
Shaunpaul Jones ‘17
Samuel Korntner ‘17
Rashid Kosber ‘17
Jia Liang ‘17
Zixi Liang ‘17
Fernando Liu Lopez ‘18
Brandon Medina ‘19
Nayah Mullings ‘17
Charlie Newman-Johnson ‘18
Yagmur Idil Ozdemir ‘19
Joe Park ‘15
Jayson Paul ‘16
Kalaya Payne-Alex ‘17
Tessa Peierls ‘19
Karla Rondon ‘18
Arielle Silbersweig ‘18
Savannah Sutherlin ‘18
Caryce Tirop ‘17
Kaitlyn Tsuyuki ‘18
David Wang ‘17
Gilbert Wermeling ‘19
Emily Willick ‘18
Lucia Minah Yang ‘15
Lumi Youm ‘18
Evan Young ‘19
Joshua Young ‘17