

## **Transcript: The Hill School Podcast**

### **S1E1: *From the Archives* | The History of the Alumni Chapel and Memorial Room**

Hi, I'm Maddie Csernica, Hills Arts and Athletics Information Manager, and I'm here today with Lou Jeffries, the Hills School's archivist. This is the first episode of the Hills School podcast where members of the Hill community will be having meaningful conversations about Hill history, curriculum, traditions, and more. In honor of the recent alumni Chapel renovation and rededication, we will be sharing insight into the origin and evolution of the Chapel and Memorial room.

Hi, Lou. How are you? Fine. Good. Good. Thank you for joining me today to talk about the history behind the Chapel in the Memorial Room. Yes. All right. Well, we can get right into it. All right. Let's take let's go all the way back to the beginning of the Chapel. So can you share the origin of the story? When was it built? And, you know, what did what inspired its construction?

Well, the Alumni Chapel, it is called that because the thirty thousand dollars that it apparently cost to build it in 1902-03 all came from alumni. I think in order to start the idea of where it came from, you have to go back to when the Hill School Alumni Association was first founded, which was 1894, February 1894. And they started having once a year a archives meeting of certain alumni who were interested in the school and came back once a year. They picked a president and a vice president and so on. So the Alumni Association started. Now without that Alumni Association, and then probably would have been a Chapel eventually, I don't think it would have been quite as soon as it was in 1902-03, because it needed the alumni to come together in a concerted and determined way to make it happen.

And of course, that's what the Alumni Association did. It brought these people together here and they came and they brainstormed and decided they wanted to build an alumni Chapel. So they did. And they started collecting money. The money came in reasonably well until they got to, I don't know what, \$20,000 or something, which today is nothing. But in 1902 or 3, that was a fair amount of money.

And finally, the president of the Alumni Association sent out a letter or something to all of the members and said the Hill School Chapel to be or not to be. And that brought in the remainder of that \$30,000 that went to the building of the Chapel. And the architect of the Chapel was a man named William Darrach was the first building built at the Hill School that was not built under either the direct advice, tutelage, and so on, of either Matthew Meigs or John Meigs. The Chapel is a really beautiful building. is. It is. And the stonework is beautiful.

It's beautiful. And the brickwork inside is beautiful. And you notice that very thin mortar between the bricks inside.

You see that on some of the buildings if you walk down King Street, these row houses on King Street, the facades of the buildings that face King Street have that very thin mortar, at that. But if you walk around to the side of the building, know, an alleyway or something, it's the thicker mortar that you see today in bricks and masonry. So they kind of liked that very thin mortar and I liked it too. So they used that. It's a beautiful building. And in fact, the construction that they did this past year to expand it, I didn't hear anybody really, you know, complain about the building and so on. They built that building for the \$30,000. They broke ground, I believe it was on June 17th, 1902, before they built the Chapel.



**Chapel Groundbreaking**

This was a new wing that was built, this was the first wing that was built or the first structure that was built after John Meigs gained ownership of the school in late 1884. you see it was a basement that had a swimming pool in it. And then there was a first floor that had a gymnasium. And then after they built a freestanding gymnasium, it became a kind of recreation center. And the second floor was this where the classroom building is, the

classroom school room right here on the second floor. And that is that building right there. wow. Well, that's right. And it is spectacular.

And if you look, I mean, you could when it was built in 1886 or so, you could get the entire student body into this area. Up here at the front is where they had an organ right there. And there was a choir, there's the organ and there's the choir. See, they were up here. So that was where they had the Chapel services prior to 1904, 1903-04. But you can see that it wasn't a particularly satisfactory place to have it. And they also anticipated

I think that eventually the school would grow to the point that you couldn't get everybody into that room. Right, that's beautiful. It's so cool to see the photos from all the way at its inception. We discovered these glass plate negatives like Matthew Brady used in taking the pictures of the Civil War. Right. And we scanned them and I remember the day that the first one of those glass plate negatives, they put it on the plate and it was scanned and the thing started printing out and I really gasped because I didn't think he was going to turn it as beautifully as that. clear. So clear and you know black and white photographs are great. They started construction on the Chapel. It took a year and a half to build it from of when they broke ground on June 17th, 1902. By the end of 1903, it was pretty much finished. And it was dedicated on Sunday, February 20th, 1904. And there's an exhibit over in the Student Center on the Chapel. I have the, there was a brochure, a program that was given for the dedication. That was very nice. I have that photocopied and in that display.

I was contacting Ann Conner Martins because I suggested that they play one of the hymns, The Church's One Foundation, which is in the Episcopal hymnal, because it was played at the very first dedication service on February 20th. Wow, so we still have the records from what hymn was sang first at the very first Chapel service. That's right.

That's incredible. So the building was built and you can see that on the Hill News, Hill School News, this is the very first, this is the issue of February 20th, 1904 with about the Chapel and so on. Now you notice there's no stained glass yet. The stained glass didn't really go in until the 1930s and 40s. I think by the early 50s, most of the building was stained glass.



**Chapel Interior - 1904**

There's some other things about the alumni dinner because the alumni all came back. When this building was dedicated on the February 20th, were 100 graduates and alumni who came back for it. And in fact, it's really one of the, both this and the building of the Mem Hall, Memorial Hall, which is now the library, brought back people more than.

Right. speaking of the Hill community, how do you think the Chapel has played a role in the spiritual life here with the students and with the faculty and staff? Well, I think it's played a huge part in it. After it was open, they received all of these gifts and things from different people to go into the Chapel. They received a large bust of John Meigs that was given by an alumnus.

The interior lights were given by William Darroch, who was the architect, in memory of his mother. The Chapel bell, which weighed 900 pounds. Sanctuary lamp in the chancel ceiling was given by the parents of this particular graduate. The altar and the Celtic cross were given in 1938 by the parents of another alumnus and so on. And so there was a tremendous amount of that. And also, for example,

Before this, they didn't have a large venue that could house 400 people. And of course, in those days, they didn't have 400 student bodies. So they could get most of the people in there, squeezing them in. But they didn't have something that big. And obviously, that schoolroom building wasn't going to hold them. So it enabled them to have concerts and choral, presentations and things like that. So that's something that is very big.



**Chapel – 1910**



**Chapel – 1915**

Well, speaking of concerts and performances, were there any notable figures that have come to the Chapel to perform, to give a sermon? Well, I suspect there are. I don't know if I

even have a list of those right now. But that's a very interesting question. I'm sure there were. I was here for the Sesquicentennial, the 150th anniversary of the school.

which was in 2001. And we played Hotchkiss School in 2001 for the first time since 1941. And that used to be one of our biggest rivals. Right. Comparable to, if not even more so, than Lawrenceville. Lawrenceville, yeah. Because it was the last football game played every year from about 1903 to 1941. So when you think about this building is this culminated the first 50 years of the Hill School from 1851 to 1901, it culminated that. That's a big honor just in itself. And it showed, obviously, when you think of how this school started, which was the Hobart Mansion and a wing onto the east of it, and then you have this 150 years later, and it was given by the alumni, it's really amazing what the school has accomplished and how much this school meant to the alumni, that they would give money to build this.

How have, you know, the services and the traditions or other events that are held in the Chapel, how have they changed over time? From the very beginning, what were the services like back then to the difference of what they are like now? I don't know if they've changed that much because I've noticed, for example, that, you know, they use the Episcopal hymnal and prayer book now. And they, since we have copies of some of the older prayer books, that they used back in the 1920s and 30s, I think the church service was pretty much the same kind of than it is now.

John Meigs and his wife gave the organ in the Chapel. They gave that. The one that's still there now? No, I think we're on the third one. What about vocal concerts? I know nowadays they have their winter instrumental concert there. They do. They have the candlelight.

Have they been doing that since? I've been here. And I know they must have done it long before that for two reasons. I mean, first of all, the CFTA was open in 1989. Right. So before that, they didn't have a concert hall like that. Right. Now they did have concerts in MemorialHall, which we'll talk about shortly. But they must have had them there because I can't think of a better venue to have them in. Exactly. Prior to the CFTA in the Chapel. Right, agreed.

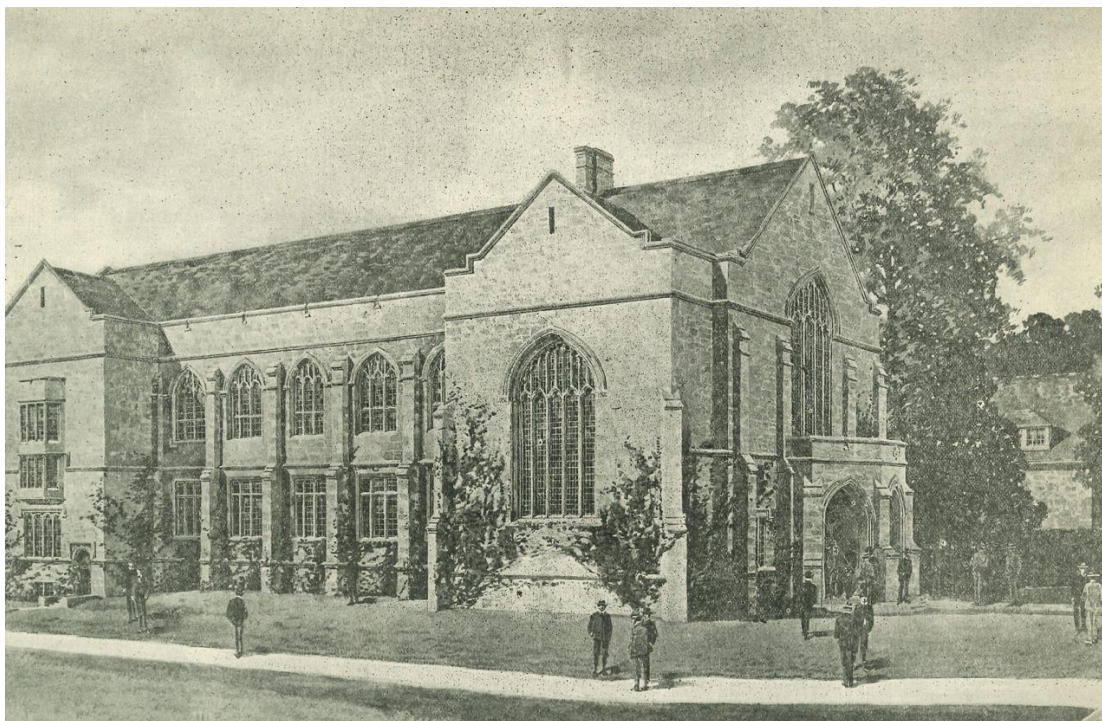
Thank you for talking about the Chapel. We're going to take a little leap forward to the Memorialroom, which is probably one of my most favorite areas on campus. It's a beautiful place, although it, you know, I feel like it has such a sad, encompassing feeling along with it because of what's inside of it.



**Memorial Room Interior - 1919**

So let's go from the beginning from there as well. So when was it established and how did the school to decide to honor the veterans in this way? think a lot of that was Dwight Meggs. couldn't have been, it couldn't have been John Meigs because he died in 1911, which is before World War I. So it couldn't have been him. It had to be Dwight Meggs. And I'm sure he had some of the best intentions in the world in doing that. Practically the entire student body from a certain point was in the military. There's 1,034 names on the panels around the room. And then you have the 40 deaths that are on the metal plaque between the two doors and so on. And you walk in there and you see that. And it's hard not to think, how can we do something to honor these people? I probably would have thought the same thing. He decided he wanted to build this Memorial Hall.





And so he approached certain alumni to see if they would give money. And whether they said yes when the answer was really no or what, I don't know. But anyway, the money came in initially enough that he proceeded forward with the construction of the building and going to Hewitt and Ash, I think is the name of the architecture firm that designed it.

I think they also designed the upper school building, but they did that. They probably would have done nothing at all rather than do that. so that was something that was kind of a problem with that. That's when Dwight Meigs decided seriously about selling the school. And I will say something else that, and I found something that somebody sent me. I didn't bring it over. I read somewhere that John Meigs, and I never read this anywhere else.

That he had toyed with the idea of eventually selling the school and going to this model, which all of our competitors are, know, this non-profit corporation run by a board of trustees. And I think that basically that was inevitable. So it just wouldn't have happened quite as soon as it did. When the board of trustees and the first man to be the chair of the board of trustees, which is a man named Chauncey Warden, who was an industrialist, somewhere in this Philadelphia area. And he was the chair of the Board of Trustees for like 24 years, from 1920 to 1944. Nobody's done it as long as that. And I think he ran the school very well. And I think that the school did recover, but they had a lot of money problems.

When they bought the school, and they bought the school apparently for \$1.3 million, and the assumption of debt, and apparently that a debt was almost equal to the 1.3 million. Which means if you subtract the debt from that, you've got to build a campus that's worth



like \$18,000 or something. Well, mean, now that's a ridiculous comparison. You know, it is. Because there's a lot more to the schools than that. And they also had access to money from alumni. I mean, if they go into the alumni and kind of know, open their hearts to them and say, we have some problems, we need.

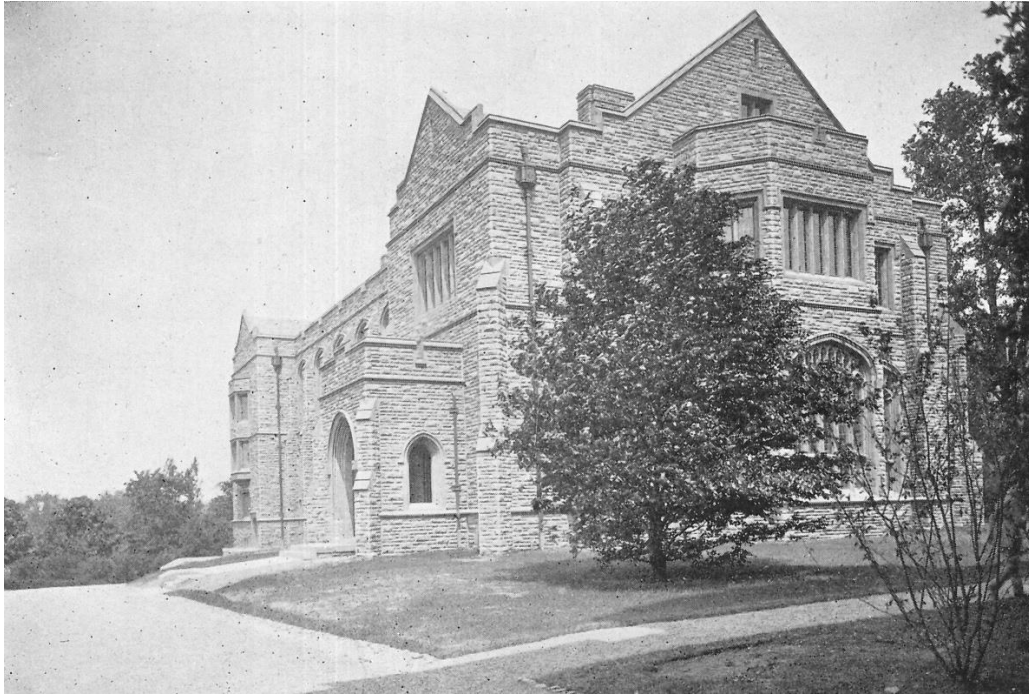
They wanted to do two things when the alumni bought the school that they wanted to do. They wanted to create a million dollar endowment fund, which they could use to do the things that you do with an endowment. You borrow from some of it to build a building. You do some of it to create some scholarships if you want a student that can't afford to go here but you know this really good. You know, you do things like that.

You want it for an emergency. If suddenly a roof of a building starts leaking or something, you can't just do nothing. And so they wanted a million dollar endowment. And apparently they raised it. And the other thing they wanted is they wanted to complete Mem Hall because it was already kind of a hole in the ground. And I can understand why they want to do that. And I can understand why they wouldn't want to just fill it in.

And they did that. They sold the school to the alumni, and they brought in Boyd Edwards as the head of school. And he was an insider-outsider because they used to have guest ministers who would come and preach on Sunday. And he was one of the people on that kind of rolodex of people that they had that came. So they picked somebody that was familiar with the school. I don't know how well he worked out or not, though apparently he was forced out in 1928 after just six years.

Alfred Rolfe, who had been essentially an interim headmaster from 1911 to 1914, though now they list him as a permanent headmaster. After Dwight Meigs stepped down as headmaster, I don't think he was forced out, but I would want to put a whole lot of money on that, but I don't think he was forced out. It would have been rather embarrassing to do that to him, especially with Mrs. John still alive and so on and living here on the campus. And before Boyd Edwards became the headmaster, and I believe he became headmaster before July 1, 1922. So while we were still in that school year of 1921, 22 and so on.

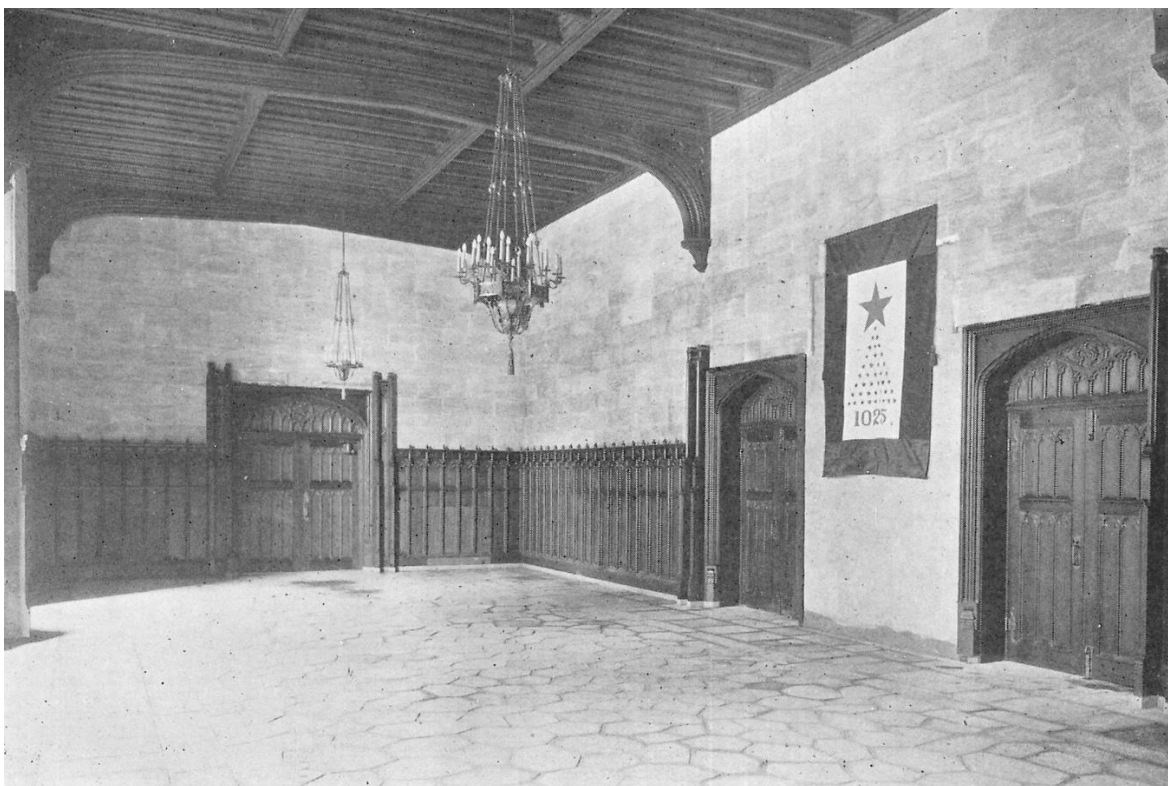
So they finished building the Memorial Hall. I'm a little sad about how they kind of, I mean, I know that the building became, I wouldn't want call it a white elephant, but it didn't serve as many purposes as it could have. And so they had to add onto it and so on. I still think that one of the big things about that building, there's the first floor, which was an auditorium. There's pictures of the auditorium in one of the yearbooks. And then there's that second floor, which is where your office is. But that was not really a second floor at that time because when that was an auditorium, those rooms were sort of open air into that room. And then you had this full second floor, and that was the library.



**Memorial Hall - 1921**

Originally, they were going to have the library on the first floor, and they were going to have the auditorium on the second floor. And the state came along and made a law that you could not have an auditorium that housed more than a certain number of people somewhere between 200 and 500, that was on a floor above the first floor because of fire laws, because they thought it might be a fire trap and so on. So that forced them to then redraw the plans and have the auditorium on the first floor and have the library on the second floor. And so that was a big thing. And now, of course, doing that probably cost them bit more. Originally, I told you that

They thought it was going to cost \$80,000. Almost before they broke ground, they realized it was going to cost \$140,000. And it eventually cost over \$400,000. That could have really seriously dented the school financially. But I think that, obviously some people came forward, didn't want to see that happen. And so they may have gone to a bank. I don't know whether they did that or not. I know that John Meigs did go to the bank to borrow money to do certain things when he was the headmaster. Of course, those sums were a lot smaller than \$80,000 or \$140,000.



**Memorial Room Interior - 1921**

Wow. That's interesting to hear the backstory of all that. Yeah, it is interesting. And they needed a building like that. used to have on Saturday nights, they used to have movies they showed in the auditorium on the first floor and they weren't 30 year old movies. You could watch on television.

They had movies that were in the theaters six months earlier. They really did. *Rebel Without a Cause*. My father was up here visiting my brother and they showed *To Catch a Thief*, an Alfred Hitchcock movie. Cary Grant was in it. So, yeah, they used to show those in the auditorium. That's so cool. Yeah. On Saturday night. Saturday night. Harry Price talked about that. yeah.

What about obtaining the information for the veterans. know that they have those almost like personal ID cards that are for public view. Do you know how they were able to get all of that information? I don't know how they were or not. That's a very good question. I don't know how they did. Obviously. And for example, I have that issue of the Hill School bulletin that honors Alfred Rolfe, who died in 1942. And this was published in 1943.

They only published the bulletin once a year during World War II because paper shortages and things. They had a list of all of these people who were in the military. So they kept track of these things very much so, probably for a lot of reasons.

What about the artifacts that are in the Memorial Room? Are there any, you know, there's the flags in there. Is there anything else? Well, they had those tapestries that they sold at Sotheby's. I don't know how I felt about them selling them. I didn't get as upset about that and sometimes I get upset about something else that maybe is valuable or represents something very precious to the school. were three people listed that died in Vietnam and then when the class of 1966 was going to come back for its 50th reunion, which would have been 2016, I discovered a person from that class who had died in Vietnam and who had not been listed with the other three. I don't know what happened there.

But he's now listed on there on both the panel and so on. And what I did is I did a Memorial for him when his class came back. anyway. What about the stained glass windows? Is there any significance with the scenes that play out on them to the At the same time that they added those stained glass windows in the Chapel. okay. I think so. I think most of them were in place by Ibrook 1951 or so.

Some of them may have been a bit later, but I get the feeling some of them were given by alumni. And I'm pretty sure of that because I've seen some of the things at the bottom where it honors somebody. you have any powerful, impactful stories from the Memorial Room? Any pieces of history that have been especially powerful or impactful? Not as much. I don't have anything like a folklore type of thing as much.

Well, that Willis P.S. story, I mean, I don't know why it's true, but he told me that. Right. And he knew what he was talking about, about the history of the Hill. But I don't have anything really to say about that. I know that they used to use it. They had plays in there and so on, because before the CFTA, they didn't have a venue for plays. Right. And you can see how they couldn't have gotten all that many people in there for a play. Now, the other place where they had plays was on the first floor of the library. I heard about that. what happened there is, you know, that was an auditorium. That was the auditorium. Right.

And I didn't bring it, but there's a very good picture of the auditorium in this 1971 dial yearbook, which is my least favorite yearbook of all. Because there's no information in it at all. And they also chose the horizontal yearbook for the first time since the break, 1906 or something. Yeah, no. And apparently it was a student in 1950 who set fire to the stage or something there and burns one of the paintings or something. They expelled him from the school and probably was problems or something. Probably. But anyway, so that they had that. It's a great building. Right.

Well, to wrap up the Memorial Hall questions, what as this is another Lou Jeffries question, so it's a personal opinion. Why is it important for the future generations to remember the

contributions that these alumni have made? And how does the school ensure that their legacy passes on?

I think it's important. I probably think it may be more important than some people do. But I've met students here, they tend to be the brighter ones to be honest with you, that believe it's important. I think it's important to know where you came from, where the school you went to came from, where the college you went to came from. I think it's important for later life. It's important to pass those things on to one's children. Especially if you care about the children going to the same school you did, and some people do, fair number of people do. So, I think that that's an important thing.

All right, everyone, thanks for joining Lou and I in our deep dive into the history of the Alumni Chapel and Memorial Room. To see the photos Lou mentioned today, please visit [thehill.org](http://thehill.org) or check out our Instagram at The Hill School. Stay tuned for more episodes coming out periodically throughout the school year. Next month, we'll hear from our team captains about our iconic Lawrenceville Week.

Thank you for listening and go Hill!