WHEREAS, the Wellbeing of a Society depends on the Education of their Youth as well as in great measure the Eternal welfare of every Individual by impressing on their tender minds Principles of Morality and Religion, instructing them in the several Dutys they owe to the Society in which they live, and one towards another, giving them the Knowledge of Languages & other parts of useful Learning necessary thereto, in order to render them Serviceable in the several Publick Stations to which they may be called;

As the graduates of the Class of 1987 turn their energies towards the challenges of career, it is useful to pause and reflect on the meaning of higher education. The quotation above is taken from the initial clause of the 1753 Charter of the Academy and Charitable School of the Province of Pennsylvania, the institution which through a series of maturing steps would become the University of Pennsylvania. While the author of this resolution is unknown, it may be safe to say that Benjamin Franklin had a hand in it for he had founded the Academy and sat as the President of its Trustees. The inspirational aims of the pronouncement of 1753 have often found expression in the lives of Pennsylvania's alumni. Viewed from this perspective the commencement of 1987 is an auspicious occasion, for it marks the anniversary of two of the most distinguished graduating classes in University history.

In 1787 events in Philadelphia were dominated by the Constitutional Convention. All eight Pennsylvania delegates were associated with the University as alumni, faculty or trustees. Benjamin Franklin, upon his return from France in 1785, was elected President of the Supreme Executive Council of Pennsylvania. That public office entitled him to the presidency of the Board of Trustees of the University, but as a delegate to the Convention he attended no meetings of the trustees. The immediate past President, John Dickinson, was a delegate from the State of Delaware. Likewise two other trustees—Jared Ingersoll and Thomas Mifflin—were Pennsylvania delegates. Still other trustees held high public office in Pennsylvania and were strong partisans in the intense debate between Federalists and Anti-Federalists. Commencement was traditionally held in July, but in 1787 it was postponed in deference to the press of national business.

The promulgation of the Constitution, on Monday, 17 September, has been the heralded event in anniversary celebrations. In 1787, however, it was only the first step in the national political process. On Friday, 28 September the Continental Congress called for state conventions to ratify the Constitution. The election of delegates to the state convention would, in effect, decide the outcome. In Philadelphia the slate of Federalists was headed by trustee Thomas McKean and included faculty members Benjamin Rush and James Wilson. Two other trustees, John Bubenheim Bayard and Charles Pettit, were members of the Continental Congress and active in the Federalist cause. Another trustee, George Bryan, was a leader on the Anti-Federalist side. The election was held on Tuesday, 6 November and the Federalists were chosen by a landslide vote. The Pennsylvania convention was directed to convene in Philadelphia on Tuesday, 20 November. The Board of Trustees, sensing a unique opportunity, scheduled commencement for Thursday, 22 November.

The minutes of the State Convention show that the delegates gathered at 10:00 a.m. on the 22nd and “proceeded in a body to the Commencement of the University.” A remarkable procession it must have been, this most diverse group of leaders, drawn from every corner of the state, walking the three blocks from Independence Hall to the old Academy building at Fourth and Arch Streets. Two hundred years later, it is to be hoped that the promise shown the youthful graduates proved an inspiration to those who carried the responsibility for uniting a youthful nation. Beginning in earnest the following day and led by Thomas McKean and James Wilson, the state convention ratified the Constitution within three weeks. Only the State of Delaware acted more expeditiously.

As the Pennsylvania delegates acted to affirm the Constitution, the Class of 1787, both arts and medical, embarked on lives worthy of the expectations of the 1753 Charter. A total of only twenty degrees were conferred in 1787—eight Bachelors of Arts, four Masters of Arts, five Bachelors of Medicine and three honorary degrees. The College graduates were led by Benjamin Franklin Bache, whose brilliant and controversial career in journalism served as counterpoint to that of his grandfather. Classmate Samuel
Harrison Smith also enjoyed a distinguished career in journalism, first in Philadelphia and then for two decades as founder and editor of the National Intelligencer in Washington, D.C. Evan William Thomas entered the field of law and was among the students of Professor James Wilson when he delivered the first law lectures at the University in the school year 1790–1791. James Mease and James Woodhouse became distinguished physicians and educators, the latter being elected Professor of Chemistry at the University in 1795.

The graduates of the Medical Department included two men, Thomas Chalkley James and Andrew McDowell, who later came to prominence, through in markedly different ways. McDowell had worked his way through medical school as a Tutor (or teacher) in the Academy. He would soon take up practice in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania and commit a long career to providing desperately needed medical care in what was then nearly a frontier town. James went on to graduate medical studies in London and Edinburgh, specializing in obstetrics. On his return to Philadelphia he established a highly innovative medical course in obstetrics and in 1810 was elected the University’s first Professor of Midwifery. James is generally recognized as the founder of modern obstetric practice in America.

The Commencement of 1787 was finally significant for the recipients of the University’s honorary degrees. The honorary degree of Master of Arts was conferred upon Benjamin Smith Barton, a twenty-one year old botanist who would pursue a medical education in Europe and return to the University for a quarter century of teaching in the Medical Department. Two degrees of Doctor of Laws were granted. One was to Hugh Williamson, scientist, physician and statesman, who had helped frame the Constitution as a delegate from North Carolina. Williamson, a graduate in the first class of the College, that of 1757, and a Professor of Mathematics from 1761 through 1763, was one of the magnificent Renaissance men of his age. The other honorary doctorate was granted in absentia to the French statesman and soldier, the Marquis de Lafayette. The trustees had conferred a similar degree on George Washington in 1783 and were pleased to honor another of the greatest Revolutionary War heroes, even at trans-Atlantic distance.

One hundred years later the Constitution of the United States again figured prominently in the life of the University. Under the direction of Provost William Pepper the University hosted a “Centenary Banquet” on Saturday evening, 17 September at which President Grover Cleveland was the principal speaker. Among those in attendance was Secretary of State Thomas Francis Bayard, Secretary of the Treasury Charles Stebbins Fairchild and former President Rutherford Birchard Hayes. In his annual report to the trustees for 1887 Provost Pepper described the event as “an exhibition of the progress and results of American education during the past century.”

The Centenary Banquet was held at the Academy of Music, Broad and Locust Streets in Philadelphia, where three months earlier the University’s commencement exercises had been held. Within a decade or two Philadelphians were calling these graduates the “famous class of ’87” and with good reason. The College Class of 1887 included United States Senator George Wharton Pepper, philosopher William Romaine Newbold, Old Testament scholar James Alan Montgomery, naturalist Witmer Stone, otolaryngologist George Fetterolf, lawyer David Werner Amram, and bankers George Harrison Frazier and Samuel Frederic Houston. Five of these eight became members of the University faculty; three became trustees of the University. Even as late as 1940 this distinguished group was described to aspiring undergraduates as “the perfect class.”

The organization of the University in 1887 was such that the courses offered in the Wharton School and the Towne Scientific School (now part of the School of Engineering and Applied Science) were administered as areas of concentration in the College Department. At commencement the College was joined by the Departments of Medicine, Law, Dentistry and for the first time, Veterinary Medicine. Like the College, each of these departments in 1887 produced graduates who would achieve uncommon excellence in their chosen profession. Though the language of the 1753 Charter was not invoked, its spirit could be found in every branch of a maturing university. Much more so than today, Anglo-American culture in the 18th and 19th centuries regarded the lives of great men as inspirational models for youth. In the observation of that practice the leading institutions of higher education played a consciously active role. In an age of heroic figures the University of Pennsylvania could claim among its alumni a fair share.