Commencement Notes

Commencement exercises at American universities and colleges are traditionally composed of three essential elements: the academic procession, the conferring of degrees and the commencement address. This practice has been codified since 1895, when a national conference on academic costume and ceremony was proposed and a plan known initially as the “Intercollegiate System” was formally adopted. The Trustees of the University of Pennsylvania incorporated this code in the statutes of the University in November 1896. Now under the aegis of the American Council of Education, the “Academic Costume Code and Academic Ceremony Guide” has been revised in 1932 and 1960. Throughout the 20th century commencement at Penn has, with minor modifications, followed the dictates of the code and its revisions.

By 1896, however, Penn had been granting degrees for nearly one hundred forty years. Like other American colonial colleges, Penn borrowed its 18th century commencement rituals directly from the English universities. In England the history of academic dress reaches back to the early days of the oldest schools. As early as the second half of the fourteenth century, the statues of certain colleges prohibited “excess in apparel” and required the wearing of a long gown. It is still an open question as to whether academic dress finds its sources chiefly in ecclesiastical or in civilian dress. It is often suggested that gowns and hoods were the simplest, most effective method of staying warm in the unheated, stone buildings which housed medieval scholars. In any case academic costume had evolved to contemporary familiarity by the time Benjamin Franklin was awarded an honorary Doctor of Laws by the University of St. Andrews in Edinburgh in 1759. A replica of what is thought to be his gown—plain black faille, without trimmings except for red buttons fastening the front and the bell shaped sleeves—his hood—solid red faille, lined with ivory silk—and his cap—soft black velvet in square-topped form—is on exhibition at the Penn Information Center.

Two hundred years ago the University of Pennsylvania was located at Fourth and Arch Streets in Philadelphia where it conducted both its arts and medical courses in just two buildings. The Commencement of 1788 (see accompanying illustration) conferred a total of just twenty-two degrees—seven Bachelors of Arts, five semi-honorary Masters of Arts, six Bachelors of Medicine, one Doctor of Medicine and three honorary degrees. The program was directed by the Provost, the chief University officer at that time, and included no less than seven student orations, the valedictory address being the most prominent among them. The degrees were awarded individually, each diploma signed by the entire faculty.

The ceremony was reported in the city newspapers as follows:

On Wednesday last, agreeably to regular appointment, a Commencement was celebrated at the University of Pennsylvania, with the customary solemnities. The trustees and faculty met early in the apparatus chamber, to adjust some preliminary business. A little after 10 o'clock passed in procession, followed by the graduates, into the public hall, where a very respectable assembly had already convened. Immediately after, the honorable the Vice President and members of the Supreme Executive Council [of the State of Pennsylvania], entered and took their seats. The Rev'd the President of New Jersey College, the clergy of the city, and many other persons of eminence, were also present.

After the performance of an anthem, vocal and instrumental music coalescing, the provost delivered a solemn prayer adapted to the occasion. Then the exercises took place in the appointed order. . . .

The university is under great obligations to Mr. Adgate, who conducted the music on this occasion, heightened much the entertainment of the day; and to the gentlemen who assisted him; but particularly to the young ladies.

This account of commencement makes it clear that then as now, the meaning and significance of the occasion was the same. It was an event of considerable public significance, attended by the highest ranking elected officers of the state and by distinguished guests invited from other universities. The day was filled with time honored ritual and joyful celebration. The only significant departure from modern practice was the lack of a commencement address.

Order of the Commencement,

AT THE UNIVERSITY, JULY 30th, 1788.

1. INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC; until the Trustees and Professors are seated.

2. MUSIC; vocal, in concert with instrumental.

3. Prayer suitable to the occasion, by the Provost.

4. Salutatory Oration, in Latin—Virtue the only Ground-work of Mental Progress in Literature; by Mr. James Robins.

5. An Oration on the Importance and Respectability of Agriculture; by Mr. Abraham Daw.

6. MUSIC

7. An Oration on the Pleasures and Advantages of Knowledge; contemplating the Creation, by proper Taste, and a philosophic Eye; by Mr. William Heaton.

8. An Oration on the Influence of Agriculture upon national Character—Its peculiar Accommodation to the Genius and political Circumstances of some Countries; by Mr. William Morris.

9. MUSIC

10. A Forensic metaphysical Disputation, on the Existence of a Material World;—Defended by Mr. James P. Willets; and affirmed by Mr. Nathaniel Harrison.

11. MUSIC, VOCAL.

12. CONFERRING OF DEGREES.

The Degree of Bachelor of Arts, on the young Gentlemen mentioned above, including the Valedictory Speaker.

The Degree of Bachelor of Physic, on the following young Gentlemen, Melissis: James Bost, Reverend Mr. Jones, John McCollan, William Parker, Francis Bowes Sayre, and Henry Stuber.

The Degree of Master of Arts, on Messrs. Robert Pattison Professor of Mathematics in the University—The Rev. Henry Waddell, Samuel Priorau, Joseph Miller, Philip Phyfe.

The Degree of Doctor of Medicine, on Mr. Nicholas Baker Waters.


13. The Valedictory Oration—The Institution of Colleges; History thence—Impor-
tance, &c. by Mr. Michael Keppele.

14. INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC.

15. Charge to the Students; by the Provost.

16. Valedictory Prayer;—by the Vice-Provost.

17. Select solemn Music, vocal and instrumental, by Mr. Adgate, with other Gentlemen, and a number of young Ladies.

18. The Benediction.

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One hundred years later Penn’s commencement exercises remained nearly identical. The Commencement of 1888 was held at the Academy of Music, Broad and Locust Streets. The program began at 11 a.m. with music by the University orchestra, followed by the academic procession, an invocation, two student orations, the conferring of degrees, the announcement of honors and prizes and a third student address, the valedictory. A benediction and a final orchestral selection concluded the ceremony. The number and variety of degrees, however, reveal a maturing university, one where the student could advance along any of several courses of study. The Towne Scientific School and the Wharton School had emerged within the College Department, which now conferred undergraduate degrees in arts, sciences (Towne) and philosophy (Wharton). Professional degrees were conferred by the departments of Dentistry, Law, Medicine and Veterinary Medicine. Recognizing the proliferation of faculties and degrees the Trustees had a year earlier instituted the first differentiation of academic costume.

In April 1887, on the recommendation of a committee of the faculty, the Trustees adopted the “Pennsylvania System of Academic Costume.” The colors and trimmings of hoods and caps were regularized according to faculty and degree. Beginning with the Commencement of 1887 the “Pennsylvania System” was published in each year’s program and adherence to its rules was expected of trustees, faculty and students alike. Beginning in 1896 the “Pennsylvania System” was superseded by the “Intercollegiate System,” which has continued in effect to the present time.

The order for today’s procession is as follows: the Candidates for Degrees by School; the Fiftieth-Year Alumni Class; the Mace Bearer; the President and Provost; the Candidates for Honorary Degrees; the Trustees and Deans; Associate Trustees and Officers of the University; the Faculties.

The University mace, the symbol of authority of the University, is carried at the head of the academic procession by the Secretary of the University. It was a gift of the family of William Morrison Gordon, M.D. 1910. It is adorned with the seal and arms of the University, the Penn and Franklin coats-of-arms, a depiction of the Rittenhouse orrery, and a thistle symbolizing the early ties of the University with Scotland.

The President wears as a badge of office a silver medallion of which one face is engraved, like the mace, with the University seal. The obverse of the President’s medal bears the “orrery seal,” designed in 1782 by Francis Hopkinson, A.B. 1757, a signer of the Declaration of Independence. The medal, suspended on a chain composed of silver links, was given by the late trustee Thomas S. Gates, A.B. 1928, LL.D. 1956.

The gowns used in American academic ceremonies vary according to the highest degree awarded to the wearer. The gown for the baccalaureate degree has pointed sleeves. It is designed to be worn closed. The gown for the master’s degree has an oblong sleeve, open at the wrist, like the others. The sleeve base hangs down in the traditional manner. The rear part of its oblong shape is square cut and the front has an arc cut away. Master’s gowns may be worn open or closed. The doctoral gown is a more elaborate costume faced down the front with black velvet and across the sleeves with three bars of the same; these facings and crossbars may be of velvet of the color distinctive to the field of study to which the degree pertains. The doctoral gown has bell-shaped sleeves and may be worn open or closed. Some institutions have authorized doctoral gowns in colors other than the customary black; holders of the Pennsylvania Ph.D. may wear red and blue gowns.

The hoods are lined in silk with the official color or colors of the college or university which granted the highest degree held by the wearer; more than one color is shown by division of the field color in a variety of ways, such as by chevron or chevrons. The binding or edging of the hood is in velvet, in width two inches, three inches and five inches for the baccalaureate, master’s and doctoral degrees respectively; the color of the border indicates the field of study to which the degree pertains. Pennsylvania graduates wear a hood lined in red with a blue chevron.

The mortarboard cap is standard, though soft square-topped caps are permissible. Recipients of doctorates may wear a gold tassel fastened to the middle point of the top of the cap; all others wear black.

Degrees shall be conferred today according to the following order: Arts, white; Science, golden yellow; Business Administration, mustard; Nursing, apricot; Education, light blue; Fine Arts, brown; Philosophy, dark blue; Medicine, green; Law, purple; Dental Medicine, lilac; Veterinary Medicine, gray; Social Work, citron.