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 statutes 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, as Americans inaugurated a new national order, the University was caught in the turmoil of political re-alignment in Pennsylvania. In March 1789, an act of the state Assembly expelled the Trustees and Faculty from the campus at 4th and Arch Streets. The old College of Philadelphia was re-instituted and the former Provost, William Smith, resumed charge of the buildings and equipment. The College of Philadelphia had no students, however, and the Trustees and Faculty of the University, undaunted by their eviction, continued to administer and teach. They soon entered into an agreement with the American Philosophical Society to conduct the University’s several departments from the Society’s building on Independence Square, Fifth Street below Chestnut. On 20 June 1789, the city newspapers advertised: “The trustees of the University having fitted up the rooms of the Philosophical Hall on Fifth Street, on the State House Square, for the accommodation of the several schools, the business of that Institution will be hereafter carried on at that place, and the Students are desired to attend their respective Professors and Tutors on Monday next at eight o’clock in the morning.” In this way Penn would continue as two separate institutions for the next two and one-half years.

The Commencement of 1789 (see accompanying illustration) was quite unusual as it required two days to complete! Nevertheless it was a magnificent, traditional affair, beginning at 10 a.m. each day with a procession of students, alumni, faculty, trustees and public officials from “the Hall of the University” to the German Reformed Church at 4th and Race Streets, a distance of four city squares. The program was directed by the Provost, the chief University officer at that time, and was doubtless extended to two days by the inclusion of no less than fifteen student orations. At the conclusion of the second day, the Provost conferred a total of thirty-two degrees—seventeen Bachelors of Arts, eleven semi-honorary Masters of Arts, three Bachelors of Medicine and one Doctor of Medicine—and the class valedictorian delivered the commencement address. The city newspapers were delighted, reporting: “A splendid and very large assembly were present each day, and in particular the Corporation of the city; The German Society, the Faculty, and some of the Trustees of the College of Philadelphia. The Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church now sitting did also honor the exhibition by their presence. The attention and complacency shown by such a multitude of citizens and strangers, among whom were many of the most

Order of Exercises,

At the Commencement for conferring Degrees on the Students of the University of Pennsylvania, to be held in the German Reformed Church, in Race-Street, on the 30th and 31st Days of July, 1789.

On the 30th.

1. MUSIC—while the procession is entering the church, and taking their seats.
2. PRAYER—by the Provost.
3. Sacerdotal ORATION, in Latin—by Mr. Samuel Miller, of Dover, Delaware State.
4. ORATION, on the disadvantages of faction and division, especially in republics—by Mr. William Boyce, of Philadelphia. Read by Mr. Boyce with great success.
5. MUSIC.
6. An orical ORATION, in favor of Spiritual Liberty—by Mr. George M. Boyce, of Philadelphia.
7. ORATION, on wit and humorous composition—by Mr. George Williams, of Chester, Pennsylvania. Read by Mr. Williams with great success.
8. MUSIC.
9. ORATION, on the advantages of living in a state of natural liberty—by Mr. Robert Frazer, of Chester county, Pennsylvania. Read by Mr. Frazer with great success.
10. ORATION, on the advantages of living in civil government—by Mr. George Lockman, of Philadelphia. Read by Mr. Lockman with great success.
11. MUSIC.
12. ORATION, on the necessity and policy of encouraging American manufactures—by Mr. Caesar A. Robey, of Dover, Delaware State.
13. ORATION, on the beauties of nature—by Mr. Samuel Heilbron, of Philadelphia. Read by Mr. Heilbron.
14. MUSIC.
15. ORATION, on the absurdity of distilling, to ferre in private affections—by Mr. Richard Racco, of Philadelphia. Read by Mr. Racco, with great success.
16. German ORATION, on the importance of education—by the Reverend Mr. Philip Buhl, one of the Tutors of the University.
17. MUSIC.
18. BENEDICTION.

On the 31st.

1. MUSIC—while the procession is entering the church, and taking their seats.
2. PRAYER—by the Vice Provost.
3. ORATION, on the importance of cultivating virtue in popular governments—by Mr. Marcus H. Newbold, of Philadelphia.
4. ORATION, on the disadvantages of orders of nobility in republics—by Mr. Andrew Ross, of Lancaster county, Pennsylvania. Read by Mr. Ross.
5. MUSIC.
6. ORATION, on the state of civil society at different periods—by Mr. McCulloch, of Philadelphia.
7. ORATION, on the regulation of public sports and amusements—by Mr. Benjamin F. Web., of Philadelphia. Read by Mr. Web.
8. MUSIC.
9. DIALOGUE, in verse, between Mr. George M. Boyce, of Philadelphia, and Mr. Samuel Miller.
10. MUSIC.
11. ORATION, on novelty—by Mr. Thomas T. Heron, of Philadelphia. Read by Mr. Heron.
12. German ORATION, in honor of the German nation, with a particular address to the German incorporated Society of Philadelphia—by Mr. George Lockman, of this city.
13. A VIOLIN and VOCAL SOLO—by Mr. Xemcc, a youth lately from Germany.
14. Concluding PRAYER and BENEDICTION—by the Vice Provost.
15. MUSIC.

Commencement of 1789

Broadside commencement program from the collections of the University Archives and Records Center.
Annotations made some years later by one of the graduates.
approved taste and understanding, gave a decided attestation to the high merit of the several young gentlemen
who spoke; and indicated their sentiments of the Institution in general."

One hundred years later Penn's commencement exercises remained nearly identical. The Commencement
of 1889 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 and the valedictory address. A benediction and a final orchestral
selection concluded the ceremony. The number and variety of degrees, however, reveal a maturing univer-
sity, 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 under-
graduate degrees in arts, sciences (Towne) and philosophy (Wharton). Professional degrees were conferred
by the departments of Dentistry, Law, Medicine and Veterinary Medicine. Perhaps most significantly,
the Commencement of 1889 conferred the first modern Ph.D. at Penn. Recognizing the increasing sophis-
tication of faculties and degrees, the Trustees had two years earlier instituted the first differentiation of
academic costume.

In April 1887, on the recommendation of a committee of the faculty, the Trustees adopted the "'Penn-
sylvania' 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 respec-
tively; 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; Philos-
ophy, dark blue; Medicine, green; Law, purple; Dental Medicine, lilac; Veterinary Medicine, gray; Social
Work, citron.