... it hath been thought proper to erect a large Building for a Charity School for the instruction of Poor Children gratis in useful Literature and the Knowledge of the Christian Religion; and also for a House of Public Worship, the Houses in this place being insufficient to contain the great numbers who convene on such Occasions; and it being impracticable to meet in the open air at all times of the year, because of the inclemency of the weather ... The Building is actually begun ... and the Foundation laid ...

copy for an advertisement in the Philadelphia newspapers, July 1740

The University of Pennsylvania traces its history to humble origins. George Whitefield, a twenty-four-year-old English evangelist, traveled up and down the Atlantic coast in the fall of 1739, preaching to thousands on the themes of sin, regeneration, and the new birth and attacking the complacency and dependency upon ritual of the orthodox clergy. He visited Philadelphia in November of that year and in just ten days of public speaking inspired a tremendous burst of religious revival among the working classes. He was the principal figure of the Great Awakening.

Whitefield's ministry came just as the "Charity School" movement reached its greatest popularity. The 1730s had seen hundreds of these free schools established in England, Scotland, Ireland, and Wales. They promised an elementary English education to the children of those oppressed by poverty, an offer of advancement which found full expression in the public schools movement of a century later. They were often administered by the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge, the mission arm of the Church of England, but more often were the work of the Methodists or another of the more evangelical Protestant denominations.

The founding of charity schools in the American colonies was one of Whitefield's great aims. While a student at Oxford in the mid 1730s, he had charge of two or three charity schools under the direction of the Methodists. In America he had set up a charity school in Savannah, Georgia and collected funds for it while in Philadelphia. The fulfillment of Whitefield's vision for Philadelphia required the establishment of both church and school.

Returning to Philadelphia in April 1740, Whitefield found that his followers had formulated plans to build a church for him. A desirable lot of land near the heart of the city had been chosen and negotiations with its owners were under way. So enthusiastic were Whitefield's supporters that the foundations were laid and construction begun before title to the property was obtained. Within a few weeks, however, financial problems arose and construction slowed. By July the Philadelphia newspaper American Weekly Mercury was publishing public appeals for "either Money, or any Goods that will suit Workmen. . . ."

The plan for a church and charity school was pressed forward. On 15 September 1740 the land on Fourth Street was deeded to four representatives of Whitefield's followers: John Coats, brickmaker; John Howell, weaver; William Price, carpenter; and Edmund Woolley, carpenter. These men were, in the words of the University's historian, Edward Potts Cheyney, "our first Trustees." They founded the educational mission which is now two hundred and fifty years old.

Two months later, on 14 November, a second deed was executed, naming Whitefield and eight of his adherents trustees of the building and its Charity School, with responsibility for the selection of charity teachers. This second group, known as the "Trustees for Uses," included two Englishmen and seven colonists: Whitefield himself; his English associate, William Seward; John Benezet, Robert Eastburn, and James Read, all Philadelphia merchants; Samuel Hazard and John Noble, merchants of New York; Edward Evans, a Philadelphia shoemaker; and Charles Brockden, a well-known Philadelphia real estate lawyer. Hazard, of New York, was the principal financial backer of the "New Building," as it soon came to be called.

In November 1740, on his third visit to Philadelphia, Whitefield preached from the still roofless meeting hall to crowded congregations every day. Renewed efforts were made to raise subscriptions and the prospects for completion seemed brighter. Nevertheless the structure was still unfinished in August 1743, when it was let to a group of dissenting Presbyterians who had formed a congregation under Reverend Gilbert Tennent. This was the Second Presbyterian Church of Philadelphia, which finally completed the "New Building" and then used it for regular services until erecting a new building at Third and Arch Streets in 1750–51.

By 1747 the creditors of the "New Building"—artisans who had never received their wages and individuals whose loans were not repaid—demanded settlement of the accumulating debts. In that year a petition was presented to the provincial Assembly, requesting the power to compel payment of bills by the trustees, or the right to sell the building. The Assembly took no action.

In the late summer of 1749 Benjamin Franklin published his landmark Proposals Relating to the Education of Youth in Pennsylvania, which called for the establishment of an Academy. The success of his plea was proved far greater than even he ever imagined. Twenty-four prominent Philadelphians met on 13 November 1749, adopted a set of "Constitutions" and agreed to serve as Trustees of the proposed school. One of the Trustees, James Logan, offered to donate a lot on Sixth Street for a new school building, but Franklin directed the Trustees' attention to the Whitefield building. Its sale price had been set at £775 18s 1ld, less than half the original cost of construction in Franklin's estimate, and he took the lead in negotiating a mutually advantageous exchange.

*This account has been condensed, for the most part, from The College, Academy and Charitable School of Philadelphia, by William L. Turner (1952).
"1740 June 14 . . . The Charity Scooll house . . . Dr. To Drawing and laying out the foundation of House . . . ." An early, anonymous account of the construction of the "New Building" at Fourth and Arch Streets. (Collection of the University Archives and Records Center)
The deed of September 1740 and the trust agreement of November of that year stipulated the purpose of the "New Building" in the same words:

[the building] should be appointed to the use of a Charity School for the Instruction of Poor Children "Gratis" in useful Literature and the Knowledge of the Christian Religion and also for a House of Public Worship.

In February 1750 the trustees of Franklin's Academy were able to obtain this magnificent structure at a very low price in exchange for assuming the terms of the 1740 trust. Over the summer of 1750 the interior of the building was altered to create classrooms on the first floor and an assembly hall on the second. In January 1751 the Academy was opened with great fanfare. In September the Charity School followed. The work of the University of Pennsylvania had begun. *

The later history of the Academy and Charity School should also be mentioned. Both were maintained by the University at the Fourth and Arch Streets campus for more than a century; in the 1870s the Academy was closed and the Charity School trust was amended to permit the University to offer full college scholarships in the place of conducting the equivalent of an elementary school. As the trust required the instruction of both male and female, however, its transformation in 1877 had the effect of opening the doors of the University to women. In the fall of that year, for the first time, women entered the University of Pennsylvania. The full significance of the Charity School trust was recognized in 1893, when Provost William Pepper agreed that the founding date of the University must be the same as the year in which the trust was established. Six years later a special committee of the Trustees recommended the adoption of 1740 as the formal date of the University's founding and the full Board concurred. Since 1899 the University has celebrated the humble origins of the Charity School as the earliest element of its multifaceted history.

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 Alumni Class Representatives; 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; and the Alumni Class Representatives.

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.