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 codes 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 source 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.

Two hundred years ago, as Americans celebrated the adoption of the Bill of Rights, the University still struggled to recover from the political turmoil wrought by the Revolutionary War. In 1779, in the midst of the conflict, public opinion demanded punitive measures against those who earlier had defended the interests of the Penn family proprietors and the British Crown. The Trustees of the College of Philadelphia included several of the most prominent officials under the colonial regime. The Provost was one of the proprietary government’s most reliable polemists. The state Assembly accused them of being “dangerous and disaffected men” and passed an act which removed them from the direction of the school.

In their place the Assembly established the University of the State of Pennsylvania, an institution funded and controlled by the state legislature. A new Provost and board of Trustees, chosen in part for their allegiance to the revolutionary cause, renewed the work of the college and medical departments on the campus at 4th and Arch Streets. The University was a far more open and diverse institution than the College had been and the student body and faculty of the 1780’s included many of the most notable figures in Penn history.

By 1789, however, public opinion had swung back in favor of those who defended the old College. Now dominated by a Federalist majority, the state Assembly again intervened. In March of that year the College was re-instituted and the former Provost, William Smith, and most of the former Trustees 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.

The restoration of the College in 1789 left Philadelphia with both a private college and a state university. Two institutions were more than even the new nation’s largest city could support. Neither was financially able to implement its programs and there was conflict between the two faculties, particularly between the medical departments. By July 1791 the schools had begun negotiations aimed at union. Agreement came rapidly and on 30 September the state legislature passed a bill which re-incorporated both under the name “The Trustees of the University of Pennsylvania.” In the meantime, however, both the College and the University were holding separate classes and separate commencements.

On 23 June 1791 the College of Philadelphia held its commencement in College Hall on the 4th and Arch Streets campus. Though no undergraduates were granted degrees that year, the Trustees and Faculty of the Medical Department conferred the Doctor of Medicine degree upon five young men—James Blundell of Delaware, Samuel Forman Conover of New Jersey, James Graham and George Pfeiffer of Philadelphia and Hast Handy of Maryland. The University apparently also conferred degrees upon its medical graduates in June—the names of three are known—but no record of the commencement appears in either University records or the Philadelphia newspapers.

The September commencement of the University was a grand, traditional affair, beginning at 10 a.m. on Thursday morning the 22nd and continuing through the day until each of the fifteen graduating seniors had given an oration. The city newspapers gave a full account, reporting, “The Professors and Students of the institution, having assembled in the Philosophical Hall [on Fifth Street, below Chestnut], walked thence in procession to the Presbyterian Church in Arch street [a distance of four city squares], where the two branches of the Legislature and a polite concourse of citizens and foreigners assembled.” The titles of the student orations describe topics of

as much interest in our own day as then: “On the Objections and Motives to the practice of Virtue”; “On the future Prospects of America”; “On Prejudice”; “On the Progress of Civilization, and its defects that remain yet to be amended”; “On the way to arrive at Usefulness and Eminence”; “On the Advantages of Money.” It is a great loss to historians that virtually none of these orations were published or survived in manuscript. The honorary degree of Doctor of Divinity was conferred on two prominent clergymen: Reverend Ashbel Green, senior pastor of the Second Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, and Reverend Isaac Stockton Keith, pastor of the Congregational Church of Charleston, South Carolina.

One hundred years later Penn’s commencement exercises remained nearly identical. The Commencement of 1891 was held on Thursday, 11 June at the Academy of Music, Broad and Locust Streets. The program began at 11 a.m. with music by E.D. Beale’s Orchestra, followed by the academic procession, an invocation, two student orations, and conferring of degrees and the valedictory address. A benediction and 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. Three honorary degrees were conferred: the Master of Arts to Talcott Williams, associate editor of The Philadelphia Press and later, founding Director of the Columbia University School of Journalism; the Doctor of Divinity to Reverend Robert Hamill Nassau, M.D., Presbyterian clergyman and medical missionary to Africa; and the Doctor of Philosophy to Professor Richard Green Moulton, professor of English literature at Cambridge University and later, the University of Chicago. In recognition of the increasing sophistication of faculties and degrees, the Trustees had four 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 “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.

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 Sovereign Gates, Jr., 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.