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.


Autograph letter of Provost John Ewing to the Trustees of the University, 3 December 1793, describing the terrible public trauma caused by the summer's yellow fever epidemic and recommending, on behalf of the Faculty, the cancellation of the planned public commencement and the substitution of a private ceremony. The Trustees, at a meeting held that same day, "Resolved that the recommendation of the Faculty be complied with, and that the several Degrees be conferred in the Hall of the University in a private manner on the 11th instant." (Collection of the University Archives and Records Center)
1793: Commencement “in a Private manner”

Two hundred years ago the University of Pennsylvania struggled through one of its most unusual and difficult years. The state legislature had granted the University a new charter in 1791 and as the Trustees reorganized the institution, they believed public funding was both necessary and proper for the implementation of their educational plan. In January 1792 a petition for financial support was submitted to the state House of Representatives. The House did not act upon this request and in January 1793 the petition was renewed, but though referred to “a grand Committee” again no action was taken.

Meanwhile, in April 1792, the Trustees appointed six professors as the standing faculty of the College and in October these men took up their work in the buildings of the old campus, on the west side of Fourth Street just south of Arch. The Medical Department, composed of seven faculty members, began classes in November of that year in rented quarters in Philosophical Hall, the building of the American Philosophical Society located on the west side of Fifth Street just south of Chestnut. The Medical Department also rented Anatomical Hall on the east side of Fifth Street, just north of Walnut, where it conducted its lectures on anatomy and surgery.

On 30 April 1793 the Medical faculty petitioned the Trustees to examine their students for graduation and 10 May the Trustees and Medical faculty held a commencement for the conferring of the degree of Doctor of Medicine. Those recommended for the M.D. had completed a two-year course, undergone both private and public examinations, and published and defended a thesis. Ten students were awarded degrees that day, one of whom, Adam Seybert, became a protege of Professor Caspar Wistar and went on to a distinguished career in medical chemistry.

The Trustees scheduled the University commencement for the second Wednesday in September, but in August 1793 Philadelphia was overwhelmed by the great epidemic of yellow fever. One tenth of the city’s population died, devastation far more severe than occurred during the British occupation of 1777-78. All public institutions were suspended; the Trustees of the University held no meetings from July until December.

When the Commencement of 1793 was finally held, on Wednesday, 11 December, the Trustees ordered “that the several degrees be conferred in the Hall of the University in a Private manner,” no doubt due to continuing fears of the contagion of yellow fever. No description of the program has survived. The degree of Bachelor of Arts was conferred upon twenty-one graduates and the semihonorary degree of Master of Arts upon fifteen graduates of the Class of 1790. As further testimony to the University’s low ebb, no honorary degrees were awarded.

The Commencements of 1793 — Medical and University — might best be seen as harbingers for the years which were to follow. The Medical Department, broken into factions in the 1780’s, now began to recover, graduating a larger class than it had a year earlier. The College, on the other hand, quite large and vigorous throughout the previous decade, graduated forty percent fewer students than it had 1792 and would continue to decline in size and prestige. Denied support by the state legislature and unable to provide adequate facilities from their own resources, the Trustees would grant only forty-five bachelors degrees in the coming decade and the student body would atrophy to the point that no University commencements would be held in 1796, 1798 and 1801. The Medical Department, on the other hand, organized on a proprietary basis, would graduate twice as many.

1893: Commencement at the Academy of Music

The Commencement exercises of a century ago were held on Friday, the 16th of June, at the Academy of Music, Broad and Locust Streets. They appear quite similar to those of today. The program began at 10:30 a.m., with music by the University Orchestra. At 11 the procession began, headed by the Provost and Trustees, who were followed by invited guests, the faculties and the graduating classes. Two undergraduates served as marshals to the procession. Rev. Dr. John T. Beckley, Chaplain of the University, delivered an opening prayer. The principal speakers of the program were students, who gave bachelor’s, law, and valedictory orations. The Provost, William Pepper, M.D., then moved to the conferring of degrees and the announcement of honors and prizes. A benediction and final orchestral selection concluded the ceremony.

In 1893 the University proudly conferred degrees in eight departments equivalent to today’s Schools. The College Department alone offered thirteen courses of study, leading to ten different undergraduate degrees. At the Commencement of 1893 seven of these degrees were conferred upon ninety-four graduates. The largest number of undergraduate degrees were Bachelors in Science, awarded to forty-one students who had successfully completed the four-year “General Course in Science” or the course in natural history. Twenty-two undergraduates were awarded the Bachelor of Arts, having completed the standard four-year course in arts or majored in American history or premedical biology. Three students, having completed a special three-year course, were awarded the Bachelor of Music degree. These are the only undergraduate degrees of 1893 which remain within the College today.

The Bachelor of Philosophy degree was awarded to seventeen students of finance and economy. In 1912 this course of study was reorganized under an independent Wharton School, with its own dean and faculty. Though the Bachelor of Science in Architecture was offered by the College, no students earned that degree in 1893. The College also offered five technical degrees, the Bachelor of Science in Chemical Engineering, Chemistry, Civil Engineering, Electrical Engineering, Mechanical Engineering, only three of which were awarded in 1893.

The Philosophy Department (as the arts and sciences graduate school was then titled) was still very young, having only awarded its first Doctor of Philosophy degree in 1889. Already, however, the Department offered graduate programs in twenty-one subjects. The college degree or “an equivalent preparation for graduate studies” was a prerequisite to admission. In 1893 the Ph.D. degree was granted to thirteen candidates, whose studies ranged from language and literature to the biological and physical sciences.
The professional departments of Dentistry, Law, Medicine and Veterinary Medicine graduated a total of 298 students in the spring of 1893. As was customary at that time, the Medical Department and Dental Department held their own commencement exercises, on 10 May, at which time the degrees of Doctor of Medicine and Doctor of Dental Surgery were conferred upon 190 and sixteen graduates respectively. The School of Veterinary Medicine graduated twenty-seven students from its three-year program (extended to four years in 1916) and the Law School graduated fifty-six of its students.

Honorary degrees were granted to five distinguished citizens, most notable of whom were Daniel Garrison Brinton, pioneer anthropologist and professor of American archaeology and linguistics in the Department of Philosophy; Charles Beylard Guérard de Nancréde, surgeon and professor of surgery at the University of Michigan; and Isaac Jones Wistar, lawyer, soldier, and benefactor a year earlier of the Wistar Institute of Anatomy.

Among the Class of '93, several graduates would later achieve great distinction. In the College, Thomas Sovereign Gates would become a successful lawyer and investment banker in the firm of J.P. Morgan and Company before serving as Penn's first President from 1930 to 1944. Those who earned the doctorate from the Department of Philosophy included six who would go on to distinguished careers in higher education, four of them as members of the standing faculty at Penn. Among the latter were John W. Harshberger, botanist and naturalist, and Emory R. Johnson, professor of transportation and commerce and from 1919 to 1933, Dean of the Wharton School. Another of the doctorates was granted to Edward Thomas Divine, later professor at Columbia and American University and often celebrated as one of the founders of American social work.

David L. Edsall became the best known of the Medical Class of '93, as he was deeply involved in the reforms in medical education which swept the profession in the aftermath of the Flexner report of 1910. He was promoted to the senior chair in medicine at Penn in 1910, but resigned a year later to take a post at Washington University School of Medicine. In 1912 Edsall received an appointment at Harvard Medical School, where he served as dean from 1918 until his retirement in 1935. The 1893 graduating class of the Department of Medicine was remarkable in that it contained five African-Americans and five international students. The Department of Dentistry, which had previously developed a strong reputation for diversity in its student body, graduated a class which was thirty-eight percent international, including students from Germany, Italy, Mexico, the Philippine Islands, South Africa, Switzerland, and Venezuela.

### 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 Twenty-Five Year and Fifty Year Alumni Classes; 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; Medicine, green; Law, purple; Fine Arts, brown; Dental Medicine, lilac; Veterinary Medicine, gray; Education, light blue; Social Work, citron; Philosophy, dark blue.