The Commencement for giving Degrees to the senior Class of Students in the College of this City ... is now fixed to be on Tuesday, the 17th Day of May next; which will be the first Commencement that has ever been had in this Seminary.
— Pennsylvania Gazette, 7 April 1757

The College of Philadelphia, awarded a charter in 1755 for the granting of degrees, was one of just nine American colonial colleges. The Trustees and Provost held its annual commencement program in the Hall of the original campus on the west side of Fourth Street, just south of Arch Street, in the oldest part of Philadelphia. In some years the ceremonies began with a procession from the Pennsylvania State House (now Independence Hall), about three city squares distant. The program itself was largely given over to the graduating students, whose orations in Latin and English often extended through much of the day. In the colonial period, however, the College's close ties to the Church of England and to the Penn family proprietors of the province were very much in evidence as the Provost and high provincial officials conducted commencement with prayers and sermons from the Anglican church service.

The American revolutionaries closed the College of Philadelphia, recast it as the University of State of Pennsylvania, and renewed its commencement traditions in 1780. The celebration of student achievement continued as the central aspect of the program, but in addition Penn was now a state school and the political upheaval of the time brought with it the presence of large numbers of public officials and the award of honorary degrees to the heroes of American Independence. In the early national period, the Continental Congress and Pennsylvania Assembly were often in attendance and the Trustees and Provost honored Thomas Paine (in 1780), George Washington (in 1783), Charles Thomson (in 1784), and the Marquis de Lafayette (in 1787).

In the 19th century, as Philadelphia rapidly grew westward, the University and its commencements kept pace. In 1802 the College and School of Medicine moved to a new campus: the "President's House," built by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania for the United States President on the west side of Ninth Street, between Market and Chestnut Streets. For fifteen years thereafter the commencement processions regularly marched through the city streets back to the old Hall of the University at Fourth and Arch. In 1817, however, the Trustees broke with tradition and initiated a series of moves, eventually taking Penn to four of the most respectable of Philadelphia's new showplaces. Washington Hall, designed in the inspirational Greek Revival style and located on the west side of Third Street, just north of Spruce, was the first choice. Here the students, faculty, and trustees paraded to the half-domed entrance, through a great portico, and into one of the largest auditoriums in the country. Six classes delivered their best oratory and received their degrees before a fire devastated Washington Hall in 1823. The Trustees next took commencement to the Masonic Hall, on the north side of Chestnut Street, west of Eighth Street. Masonic Hall was the work of the nationally prominent Philadelphia architect, William Strickland and architectural historians have called it "one of the earliest important American buildings in the Gothic style." Despite the great hall, high ornamental ceiling, and music gallery of this place, commencement soon moved again, to other, more permanent quarters.

In the early 1830s the Trustees settled on the Hall of the Musical Fund Society, Eighth and Locust Streets, as the regular location for University commencements. Constructed in 1824 to the specifications of William Strickland and soon famous for its excellent acoustics, Musical Fund Hall was one of the most prominent meeting places in America. It was the site, for example, in 1856, of the first Republican Party national convention. At commencements of one hundred and fifty years ago a procession formed at College Hall, on Ninth Street, and paraded three blocks through Chestnut, Eighth, and Locust Streets to the Hall. Distinguished guests and the awarding of honorary degrees played a much smaller role in these years; the Trustees, Provost, and faculty gave the program over to the graduating class, whose speeches, usually ten in number, alternated at regular intervals with orchestral music. In the order of precedence, even the traditional charge from the Provost and the conferring of degrees gave way to the valedictorian of the college, whose address was the program's finale. As celebrations of student learning and accomplishment, the commencements of the mid-19th century have
The Trustees and Provost Charles J. Stille moved commencement six blocks west in 1868, to the Academy of Music. Four years later they moved the entire University to West Philadelphia. By most measures, Penn became fully modern in the thirty years which followed. Formerly limited to graduates of the college and medical department, commencements now reflected a virtual proliferation of schools and academic degrees. The number of students grew by extraordinary proportions — a five-fold increase in the college, for example — through the century's end and beyond. The University graduated its first women and students of color.

In the second decade of the 20th century, Penn moved its commencement to one final center city stop, before relocating permanently to West Philadelphia. When the Metropolitan Opera House was opened on North Broad Street, at Poplar, the Trustees were pleased to announce that graduation ceremonies would be held there in 1912 and succeeding years. By 1922, however, the logistics of convening thousands of students, faculty, and spectators finally overwhelmed the feeling of prestige and splendor which accompanied commencement in the grand public halls. That year the Trustees moved the program to Weightman Hall fieldhouse and in 1927 to the new fieldhouse, the recently opened Palestra. The mid-winter convocation of University Council grew dramatically in the years after the opening of Irvine Auditorium in 1928, but it was the Municipal Auditorium, better known as Convention Hall, where University commencements were held from 1932 until their move to Franklin Field in 1986.

The Commencement Procession in 1901. The University of Pennsylvania faculty near the end of their twenty-block carriage ride from the steps of College Hall to the Academy of Music. The seniors walked. William H. Rau, photographer, 12 June 1901. Collections of the University of Pennsylvania Archives and Records Center.