Historical Notes

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 the 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 1780), George Washington (in 1783), Charles Thomson (in 1784), and the Marquis de Lafayette (in 1787).

Two centuries ago, however, the commencement of 1795 was a small, quiet event, indicative of a low period in the life of the University, which contrasted sharply with the national prominence it had formerly known and which it would reassert in the mid-19th century. The Medical Department held its commencement on Saturday, the 23rd of May and conferred degrees on just four candidates, three from Virginia and one a Philadelphian. Two months later, on Monday, the 20th of July, the College conferred the Bachelor of Arts degree on fifteen young men, almost all of whom were natives of Philadelphia. No honorary degrees were awarded and the Philadelphia newspapers took little notice of the proceedings.

In the 19th century, as Philadelphia rapidly grew westward, the University and its commencements kept pace. In 1802 the College and Department 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. After it was devastated by fire in 1823, the Trustees 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."

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. One of the most prominent meeting places in America, Musical Fund Hall was the site, 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 valedictory of the College, whose address was the program's finale.

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 Department of Medicine, commencements now reflected a virtual proliferation of schools and academic degrees. The number of students grew by extraordinary leaps and bounds — 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. The commencement procession, from 34th and Walnut Streets to the Academy at Broad and Locust, was a public spectacle of vast proportions. The Trustees, Provost, and faculty rode the twenty blocks in horse-drawn carriages, while the students marched in tight formation just behind.

One hundred years ago, the commencement of 1895 was notable for its inauguration of a new Provost, Charles Custis Harrison; for the distinction of the College's valedictory speaker, Owen J. Roberts, future special prosecutor in the Teapot Dome scandal and associate justice of the United States Supreme Court; and the celebration, among its awards of honorary degrees, of the first expedition of the University Museum to Babylonia. Daniel H. Hastings, Governor of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and ex officio President of the Trustees, installed Mr. Harrison by presenting him with the keys to the University. The three brass keys, presented on a blue cushion with red trim, would not be used again until the inauguration of Judith Rodin this past October. The earned degrees granted in 1895 included the bachelor of arts, science, architecture, engineering, and economics; the master of arts and science; the doctor of philosophy; and professional degrees in dentistry, law, medicine, and veterinary medicine. By the end of the 19th century Penn was essentially modern.

Commencement too continued to evolve, but its contemporary form was now clear. The student orators, already reduced to three, were soon taken from the program entirely. The award of honorary degrees and the presentation of portraits assumed renewed prominence. The Provost delivered an introductory address; one of the honorary degree recipients was chosen "Orator of the Day" and delivered the keynote address. The commencement ceremony of 1910 closely resembled the pomp and circumstance familiar today.

In 1912, Penn moved its commencement to one final center city stop, the Metropolitan Opera House on North Broad Street at Poplar, before relocating permanently to West Philadelphia. By 1922, 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 the Weightman Hall fieldhouse and in 1927 to the new fieldhouse, the recently opened Palestra. The mid-winter convocation of the 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 — with a few notable exceptions — from 1932 until their move to Franklin Field in 1986.