1996: A Centennial Year for Academic Costume

1996 is the centennial year at Penn for the use of the “Intercollegiate System” of academic dress at commencement and other public ceremonies. The system is a dress code of signals, which communicates through the caps and gowns the distinctions of bachelors, masters, and doctorates and through the caps and gowns the distinctions of bachelors, masters, and doctorates and through the hoods the faculty and institution granting the degree. The movement toward uniformity in American academic dress began in the 1880s, but it was a widely circulated and reprinted article in the December 1893 issue of the *University Magazine* entitled “The Cap and Gown in America” which was said to have been the impetus for the calling of an intercollegiate commission on the subject in 1895. President Seth Low of Columbia chaired the group, which included trustee representatives from Princeton, Yale, and New York University.

In May 1895 the commission offered to American colleges and universities a draft statute for those prepared to implement the recommendations of the conference. In November 1895, acting on the recommendation of trustee Charlemagne Tower, Penn was one of the first American institutions to adopt the “Intercollegiate System of Academic Costume.”

The winter and spring of 1895-96 were therefore filled with correspondence between the Provost’s office and the representatives of several companies competing to furnish the gowns and hoods required by Penn’s trustees, faculty, and students. Cotrell & Leonard of Albany and New York City soon emerged as the company best prepared to meet Penn’s needs for specifications, manufacture, and timely delivery. The problem of combining red and blue in the lining of the hood, for example, was resolved by noting “the effect of the blue chevron on a red ground as showing much better in the evening than red on blue as the blue will look almost black at night.” The hood would be lined in Japanese silk, but trimmed in velvet. There was considerable discussion before choosing the appropriate shade of green for the School of Medicine, the debate finally being settled with an appeal to “the consideration of this matter from the standpoint of system rather than from a local standpoint.” All the while the supplier spoke of “a rushing business at Columbia” and frequent travel to Princeton and Yale. Finally, at a meeting in mid-April, Penn placed its order with Cotrell & Leonard who immediately reported “the successful inauguration of the new system” in Philadelphia.
By late April Cotrell & Leonard's hood department was "turning out nearly two hundred fine hoods within two or three weeks" and its "trained corps of gown makers" was keeping pace. Putting the new system into practice, however, required an extra effort. An undergraduate, George L. Knipe (Class of 1897), was coordinating sales and rentals to students in the College and though "the orders are not coming very fast...Mr. Knipe is doing all he can in the matter." By the time the Law School placed its order in mid-May, the student body seemed well on its way to "making the Commencement the ceremony it should be." The faculty, on the other hand, protested the cost of the expensive new dress and formally advised the Provost through the Academic Council. The faculty also noted that the new system did not include all degrees and that some of its members were therefore unwilling to appear in the procession until further clarification. The Provost pointed out the thrift of renting the hood rather than purchasing it and suggested alternatives for those whose advanced degrees were not yet represented in the system.

Provost Harrison's plea for full participation and the extraordinary energy revealed in the correspondence and preparation of his staff were rewarded on Commencement Day. The Commencement of 1896, held in the Academy of Music, Broad and Locust Streets, on 9 June was hugely attended and a campus publication reported as follows:

The new Academic Costume, which had received the approval of the Corporation, and is designed to indicate by prescribed patterns and decorations for gowns, hoods, and caps, the several degrees...
and faculties to which they pertain, were worn for the first time by the Provost and other officers of the Corporation, the faculties and recipients of degrees. The bright colored hoods offsetting the black caps and gowns presented an imposing sight, adding dignity as well as brilliancy to the scene.

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 building 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 1759.

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. 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.

Contemporary Academic Dress

The gowns used in American academic ceremonies today 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, often suggested that gowns and hoods were the simplest, most effective method of staying warm in the unheated, stone building which housed medieval scholars. It is adorned 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

The Academic Procession

The order for today's academic procession is as follows:

- The Mace Bearer
- The President and Provost
- The Candidates for Honorary Degrees
- The Trustees
- The Deans
- The Officers of the University
- The Overseers
- 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, on the occasion of Sheldon Hackney's inauguration as President in October 1981.