Historical Notes

The wise lessons in government which he left us it will be profitable to heed. He seems to have grasped all possible conditions and pointed the way safely to meet them. He has established danger signals all along the pathway of the nation's march. He has warned us against false lights. He has taught us the true philosophy of 'a perfect union,' and shown us the grave dangers from sectionalism and wild and unreasonable party spirit. He has emphasized the necessity at all times for the exercise of sober and dispassionate judgment.

President William McKinley speaking on the life of George Washington at "University Day," 22 February 1898

Commencement is a day for pageantry and festivity; for congratulations and reflection; for satisfaction for accomplishments past and optimism for the future. For the graduate, it marks a passage into the future. For the institution, it is an opportunity to reflect on the past, to look back to a time that marked a passage of a different sort. At the University of Pennsylvania, 1898 was such a year.

One Hundred Years Ago

President McKinley — on the occasion of Washington’s birthday — delivered an address at University Day to a capacity crowd of Penn trustees, students, faculty, and guests at the Academy of Music at Broad and Locust Streets. Afterwards, at the invitation of Provost Charles Custis Harrison, the President visited the West Philadelphia campus and attended a luncheon in his honor in the University Library (now restored as the Fisher Fine Arts Library). President McKinley was the first sitting president to visit Penn since George Washington, who had attended several events in the years when Philadelphia was the nation’s capital. McKinley’s visit was a triumph for the University. His address on Washington was "published complete in nearly every newspaper in America" and his arrival on Penn’s campus was featured on the front page of Harper’s Weekly. In 1905 and 1909, Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft followed in McKinley’s footsteps, as they, too, accepted invitations to be University Day Orator. It was a time that marked the University’s ascent into national prominence.

Commencement 1898 — the Future Beckons

Just three months later, the foundation for the modern University was in place. In his year-end report for 1897-98, Provost Harrison describes an institution positioned to take its place in the national arena. In 1896 and 1897, the Trustees had erected Dental Hall at the southwest corner of 33rd and Locust Streets (restored today as Hayden Hall); by the spring of 1898, the Departments of Law, Medicine, Science, and Veterinary Medicine were developing similar teaching and research facilities, resulting in the Law School at 34th and Chestnut Streets (1900), the Medical Laboratories Building at 36th and Hamilton Walk.

Cover of Harper’s Weekly, March 5, 1898.
University of Pennsylvania Archives
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ies — the College, Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, which had awarded its 

The Legacy of 1898

The academic gains were accompanied by improvements in student life facilities. The first section of the Quads had been opened in 1896 and Harrison understood very well that, "[t]he new Dormitories, erected at a cost of nearly $340,000 — and without indebtedness — represent the beginning of a system, beautiful in its architecture, stimulating in its influence, and with room for great extension." Houston Hall, also opened in 1896, "has become the centre of the daily life of the students of the University..." Penn's embrace of "the collegiate lifestyle" extended as well to athletics. The first Franklin Field was constructed in 1895 — one of the largest stadiums in America — and Penn immediately became a leader in the world of big-time, intercollegiate sports. In 1897-98, the Trustees initiated plans for a great University gymnasium and in a few years Weightman Hall rose on 33rd Street (1904). As Provost Harrison observed, "[t]he University of Pennsylvania has, to use an unacademic phrase, 'struck its pace,' and nothing should either slacken or disturb it.... The changes which have been wrought make the University a place delightful to live at, and pleasant to think of in afterlife."

The Collegiate Lifestyle Emerges

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The Legacy of 1898

Commencement 1898 was celebrated by an entire week of activities leading up to Commencement Day. The Deans of six faculties — the College, Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, Law, Medicine, Dentistry, and Veterinary Medicine — presented graduates for degrees. The Department of Medicine, with nearly 200, was Penn's largest school, a position it had maintained throughout the 19th century. Dentistry and Law were next, each with more than 100. The size and vigor of Penn's professional schools would guarantee its inclusion, two years later, among the forty founding institutions of the American Association of Universities, the first organization of research universities in America.

By virtue of its outstanding faculty and academically accomplished student body, the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences in 1898 foreshadowed the University of today. That year, for example, Dr. W.E.B. DuBois, assistant in sociology (1896-97), completed his landmark study of African-Americans in Philadelphia's inner-city Seventh Ward, later published as The Philadelphia Negro. At Commencement, 24 Ph.D. degrees were awarded, the largest number of any Penn Commencement to date. Three of the doctors went to women: Elizabeth Allen Atkinson, whose degree was in chemistry, devoted her life to social service work in West Philadelphia; Edith C. Bramhall, who would become a professor of history and political science at Colorado College; and Margaret N.E. Fraser, later professor of romance languages at Randolph-Macon Woman's College. Pezavia O'Connell was awarded his doctorate in the Greek and Latin classics, the second African-American to do so at Penn. O'Connell became professor of history at Morgan State University. Sadajiro Sugiura was among the first international students to earn a Penn doctorate. After taking his third and final degree from Penn, Sugiura returned home, where he became a professor of English and philosophy at St. Paul's College, Toyko. The Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, which had awarded its first Ph.D. only nine years earlier, already possessed a very modern student body, which would reflect the values embraced in the last decade of the 20th century.

The ideal of a great seat of learning in America appears to be to take under its cognizance all that concerns the progress of civilization. Our University certainly, at present, covers a wide field of responsibility, and it seems to me that our immediate duty is to strengthen the departments which we now have.

Provost Charles Custis Harrison,
June 1898

At Commencement one hundred years ago, Penn celebrated its 1897 football team, which finished the season at 15-0 and was named national intercollegiate champion. In this view, taken on Saturday, 23 October 1897, Penn is playing against Lafayette at the original, single-deck Franklin Field, a game Penn won by 46 to 0. The most important game of the season came a month later, in which a strong Harvard team traveled to Franklin Field on Saturday November 20th. Twenty-four thousand fans gathered that day, the largest crowd that had ever seen a football game in Philadelphia. Penn fans were not disappointed, as Penn defeated the Crimson, 15 to 6.

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