Historical Notes

"Our Academy flourishes..."

Yesterday being the Day appointed for opening the Academy in this City; the Trustees met, and waited on his Honour our GOVERNOR, to the publick Hall of the Building, where the Rev. Mr. Peters made an excellent Sermon on the Occasion, to a crowded Audience. The Room of the Academy not being yet completely fitted for the Reception of the Scholars, the several Schools will be opened Tomorrows, in a large House of Mr. Allen, in Second street: Those who incline to enter their Children or Youth, may apply to the Rector or any one of the Trustees.

The Pennsylvania Gazette, 8 January 1751

After more than a year of preparation, Benjamin Franklin and the first Board of Trustees rejoiced on the day the Academy of Philadelphia enrolled its first students. The Founders had done their work well. Their appeals to the City Council of Philadelphia and the Penn family proprietors of Pennsylvania had achieved both financial and political support. They had recruited a faculty of four, three of whom were experienced and well-respected masters. By June of 1751 they had nearly 100 tuition-paying students. Franklin was delighted. "Our Academy flourishes beyond expectation," he wrote in September. "We have excellent Masters at present; and as we give pretty good salaries, I hope we shall always be able to procure such."

In that inaugural year the average age of the students was just nine. Those who were younger began their schooling in the classrooms of the Mathematical master and the Writing master. In the first they learned "Arithmetick, Merchants Accounts, Algebra, Astronomy, and Navigation" and in the latter, the rudiments of reading, writing, and penmanship. When these introductory subjects had been completed, most students expected to step up to the English School, where the master taught "the English tongue grammatically and as a Language," as well as "History, Geography, Chronology, Logic, and Oratory." The typical student completed his work in two or at most three years in each school. By the age of fourteen, even the well-educated young man was expected to enter the work place. The aim of the English School, in Franklin's words, was to qualify its graduates for learning any Business, Calling or Profession, except such wherein Languages are required; ... they will be Masters of their own, which of more immediate and general Use; and withal will have attain'd many other valuable Accomplishments; the Time ... being here employ'd in laying such a Foundation of Knowledge and Ability, as, properly improv'd, may qualify them to pass thro' and execute the several Offices of civil Life, with Advantage and Reputation to themselves and Country.

Benjamin Franklin, Idea of the English School, September 1751
Franklin's bold proposal for higher education in America — that a fully articulated liberal arts education could be acquired in English alone — parted ways with centuries of European practice. It also held little appeal for Franklin's fellow Trustees. Many of them intended to send their sons to England for collegiate or professional education. They hoped the Academy of Philadelphia, like prep schools throughout the British-speaking world, would serve to prepare its students for successful application to an English university. No other purpose justified the investment in an education beyond the age when most young people were expected to enter the work place.

Accordingly, the Trustees insisted that the Academy of Philadelphia be modeled on the traditional British grammar school. For more than 200 years, the purpose of the grammar school had been the preparation of its students for admission to the university or training in the professions. The chief academic administrator, or "Rector," was also master of the "Latin and Greek School" at the Academy. As the senior member of the faculty, the Rector would be expected to teach Latin, Greek and "higher mathematics." He would have charge of the oldest students — those generally between the ages of twelve and sixteen — who had either completed the English School course or received primary school education elsewhere. The curriculum began with vocabulary and grammar and soon advanced to writing exercises in Latin. Within two years the students were expected to "turn Latin into English, with great Regard to Punctuation and Choice of Words" and thereafter to compose and deliver speeches in both English and Latin, "with proper Grace both of Elocution and Gesture."

The Academy Becomes a College
In 1754 Franklin recruited an ambitious young Scotsman, William Smith, to teach "Logick, Rhetorick, Ethicks, and Natural Philosophy." These were subjects typically reserved for collegiate education in the British universities. Their combination in a single professorship revealed the profound changes sweeping across higher education in the 18th century, a rapid transition from the "old learning" to the new. Logic, rhetoric, and grammar were the three time-honored elements of the medieval "Trivium." For hundreds of years European scholars had combined them with arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy (the "Quadrivium") to form the seven liberal arts of collegiate education. Natural philosophy and ethics (or "moral philosophy"), on the other hand, represented the "new learning" of Bacon, Newton, and Locke. By bundling in a single portfolio both the ancient learning and the new, William Smith appealed not only to Franklin, but also to the most conservative of Penn's Trustees.

Within six months of his appointment, Smith petitioned the Trustees for an amended charter, one which would provide for the granting of degrees. Smith argued that if a college curriculum were not added soon, Penn would begin to lose students to other institutions, where they could earn
the bachelor of arts degree. The Trustees accepted Smith's advice and soon applied to the Penn family proprietors for a collegiate charter. In 1755 the Academy became the College and Academy of Philadelphia, and in 1757, Penn held its first Commencement.

Among the Academy's first students in 1751, nearly thirty eventually matriculated in the College of Philadelphia and fourteen of those earned the bachelor of arts degree. They formed a very distinguished first class. Three quickly became high-ranking public officials in colonial Pennsylvania; three were elected to the Continental Congress; one was a Signer of the Declaration of Independence; six served as Generals or Colonels in the American Revolution; one was a Signer of the Declaration of Independence; six served as Generals or Colonels in the American Revolution; one was a Signer of the U.S. Constitution; one was elected to the U.S. Congress; two were appointed U.S. Federal judges; one was elected Governor of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania; and eleven became Trustees of the University of Pennsylvania.

Penn in 1801: The College Surpassed by the School of Medicine

In 1779, in the midst of the American Revolution, the College of Philadelphia became the University of the State of Pennsylvania and thereby became the first institution of higher learning in British North America to take the name "University." In the years that followed, however, the College struggled to find its place in the University. Admission to the College remained open only to those who first mastered Latin and Greek, and very few Philadelphians were sufficiently interested to put their sons through several years' training in the classical languages. In 1801 only twenty-four students were enrolled in the Latin School and only six in the two-year College course. On the other hand, the English and Mathematical schools remained very popular, enrolling fully 80 percent of Penn's 150 students. The colonial College had graduated an average of seven in the twenty years between 1757 and 1776; the University of the State of Pennsylvania graduated an average of eleven; but in the fifteen years between 1795 and 1810, the University of Pennsylvania conferred fewer than five bachelor of arts degrees each year.

It was during the last of these three periods that Penn began to earn a national reputation as a great university for medical education. The Medical Department, as it was then known, had been small, graduating a total of 120 students in its first quarter century. Like the College, it was reorganized in 1792 under the University of Pennsylvania, but unlike the College, it thrived in its new environment. At the Commencement of 1796 the number of students who earned the M.D. degree surpassed the number who took the A.B. It was an unheralded signpost in University history. In the fifteen years that followed, the students who earned the M.D. degree became twice, then four times, then six times greater in number than those earning the A.B. By 1820 the University of Pennsylvania had firmly established itself as the first (and at that time, only) national school of medical education.

Penn in 1851: The Preeminence of Medical Education Leads to Schools of Law and Engineering

By mid-century, enrollment in the Medical Department annually exceeded 450 students, more than five times the enrollment in the College. There were two or three signature events which propelled Penn's reputation. In 1828 the faculty had...
financed a custom-built Medical Hall on the new Ninth Street campus, and in 1841 had established an outpatient dispensary for clinical education. Thousands of student physicians were introduced to profound advances in bedside examination and postmortem analysis.

In 1851 the Medical Department attracted students from twenty-six of the nation's thirty-one states and nine foreign states or countries. At the separately held Medical Commencement in 1851, the Trustees awarded the M.D. degree to 166 graduates. The Medical Class of 1851 included fifty-one from Pennsylvania, but also twenty-five from Virginia, twenty-one from North Carolina, and ten each from Mississippi and Tennessee. 1851 was fully representative of the entire 19th century: students came to Penn primarily to earn the M.D. degree. Not until 1904 would the M.D. relinquish its place as Penn's most popular degree.

During this same period, there were other Philadelphians, including several of the Trustees, who believed that a university was the proper place for professional education and training in many fields. George Sharswood, a Philadelphia judge, had prevailed upon the Trustees to permit him to open a Law Department at the University. The Department was an immediate and huge success. Sharswood enrolled sixty-six students in the first year and in 1852, not only graduated the first class, but also recruited two of Philadelphia's most prominent practicing attorneys to join him on the faculty. Systematic instruction in the "mechanical professions" also appealed to the Trustees and in 1852 a School of Mines, Arts and Manufactures was established. As Penn celebrated its centennial and looked ahead to the last half of the 19th century, it was clearly returning to the utilitarian ideals first proposed by Benjamin Franklin.

Penn in 1901: The Modern University Emerges

The modern university is a research institution, a place where learning is the foundation for the advancement of knowledge. The redefinition of Penn as a research institution began in 1882 when Provost William Pepper established the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences and it was confirmed in 1889 when Penn conferred its first Ph.D. Penn's Graduate School was one of the first to organize itself by "graduate group," that is by those subjects which belong to a common academic discipline. The supervision of graduate studies by "Group Committees" later became the model for American research universities generally and it continues to thrive today at Penn. In 1895, Pepper's successor, Provost Charles Custis Harrison, assisted by other members of his family, provided a half million dollar endowment for the Graduate School — one of the greatest gifts in Penn's history — an amount sufficient to fund eight graduate scholarships, nineteen graduate fellowships, and five post-doctoral fellowships. By 1901 the Graduate School had awarded doctoral degrees in no fewer than twenty fields of specialization: Astronomy, Botany, Chemistry, Economics, Education, English, Geology and Mineralogy, Germanics, Greek, History, Latin, Mathematics, Philosophy, Physics, Political Science, Psychology, Romance Languages, Semitics, Sociology, and Zoology.

It would nevertheless be misleading to describe the University of a century ago without noting the extent to which the educational enterprise was dominated by professional education. A brief look at the number and different types of degrees conferred at the 1901 Commencement provides ample documentation. The School of Medicine, as previously discussed, was Penn's largest. It awarded 160 degrees in 1901, a figure comparable to that of fifty years earlier. The School of Dental Medicine, established in 1878, was already close behind, with 157 graduates. The Law School was the third largest, with

Roxana Hayward Vivian (1871-1961), pictured here about 1930, was the first woman to earn Penn's Ph.D. in Mathematics in 1901. Photographer unknown. Collections of the University of Pennsylvania Archives and Records Center.
79 graduates. The College was fourth, followed by Engineering, the Graduate School, Wharton, Veterinary Medicine, and Fine Arts, in that order. Of the total of 565 degrees, 83.7%, or five of every six, were professional degrees. In this respect – the proportion of professional to liberal arts degrees – Penn in 1901 was virtually unchanged from Penn in 1851.

Penn in 1951: A Time for Change
Fifty years ago the University held Commencement in the Municipal Auditorium on South 34th Street. The late Harold E. Stassen, Penn’s first President of national stature, presided over the ceremonies. The Municipal Auditorium must have held bittersweet memories for Stassen. It was here, as the 33-year-old “boy wonder” Governor of Minnesota, that he was the keynote speaker at the Republican Party’s 1940 convention, but it was here too that Thomas E. Dewey, Governor of New York, deprived him of the Party’s 1948 nomination for U.S. President. Dewey, of course, was defeated in November, when Harry Truman delivered one of the most famous upsets in American political history.

The University of Pennsylvania had flourished in the half century since the days of Provost Harrison. Numbers alone seemed sufficient to confirm this view. At the Commencement of 1951, more than 2,400 degrees were conferred upon graduates of fifteen schools. Newspaper reports celebrated the event as the largest graduation ceremony in Penn’s history. Business had replaced medicine and dentistry as the most popular degree program, but training for the professions was still the principal work done on campus and accounted for more than two-thirds of the degrees awarded. Student life was still focused on Houston Hall, the Quadrangle, fraternities, and sororities. Penn was changing, however, and more rapidly than most realized. The nation was on the cusp of twenty years of uninterrupted and steadily expanding investment in higher education. Powerful new planning tools and enormous new sources of funding were already being made available to the Trustees for physical plant expansion. The Gates Pavilion was under construction at the Hospital of the University; the David Rittenhouse Laboratory for physics, astronomy, and mathematics would soon be underway at 33rd and Walnut Streets; and ground had been broken for Dietrich Hall, the new Wharton School building. Sponsored research was soon to transform the faculty and bring to Penn a greatly-enhanced reputation for academic excellence. In 1954 Penn would join in the founding of the Ivy League and commit itself to strengthening the intellectual environment on campus, particularly in undergraduate education. In these and many other ways the 1950s and 1960s were decades of extraordinary innovation and improvement.

Looking back over the past fifty years, a number of watershed events stand out, some better known than others. In 1954, under a new President, Gaylord P. Harnwell, the undergraduate classrooms of the Engineering School and the Wharton School were opened to women. With that decision, Penn made a long-term commitment, one renewed by each of Harnwell’s successors, to inclusiveness in the University community. Three goals stood out among the many efforts to transform Penn’s environment. The first was a firmly-held belief that no incoming student who applied for financial aid and demonstrated his or her need should be turned away from Penn. In 1965 the University proudly announced that every

Elizabeth Cecilia Berrang (1898-1987), a 1922 graduate of the School of Nursing of the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania, rose through the ranks of HUP administration to become Director of the Hospital in 1948. She is pictured here in 1951 receiving an honorary Master of Science degree from the President of the University, the late Harold Stassen, on the left. Photographer unknown. Collections of the University of Pennsylvania Archives and Records Center.
student who required financial aid had obtained it in the form of outright grants, loans, or work-study jobs. With that the modern era of need-blind admissions was born. The second was codified in 1967, when the University formally revised its admissions policy to increase minority presence on campus, a commitment which has been renewed and strengthened several times in subsequent decades. The third goal was realized in 1970, when the high-rise dormitories opened on Superblock. In that year, the student body, in still another historical first, became primarily residential rather than commuter.

Toward a More Diversified Institution

In the years since 1970, Penn has built on the achievements of the Harnwell administration. Among the most notable would be the establishment, in 1973, of the Penn Women's Center and its more recent move to Locust Walk; the merger, in 1975, of the College and the College for Women and the creation of the School of Arts and Sciences; the establishment, in 1984, of the Albert M. Greenfield Intercultural Center to serve the needs of Penn's student of color communities; the achievement, in 1996, for the first time in Penn's history, of the enrollment of more women than men in the undergraduate programs of the University; the establishment, in 1998, of Civic House, a central office for Penn students' community service activities; and the opening, in 2000, of Perelman Quad, an inspiring re-invention and rebirth of Penn's undergraduate student center.

In the long view of Penn's history, however, it might be said that the most remarkable event in the past fifty years occurred in 1960. At the Commencement of that year, for the first time since 1795, the University awarded more bachelor of arts degrees than any other degree. For more than a century and a half the honor of most-sought-after degree had been held successively by medicine, dentistry, and business. Not until 1914 did the College faculty drop its classical Greek requirement and not until 1930 its Latin requirement. Finally freed from its dependence on 17th century precedents, Penn's undergraduate liberal arts curriculum soon reflected the modern ideal of "imparting general knowledge and developing general intellectual capacities." In 1960 the value of that modern ideal finally found expression in the number of students earning the bachelor of arts degree, and in the forty years since then the bachelor of arts has only strengthened its position at Penn. At today's Commencement the bachelor of arts degree will be conferred on almost twice as many students as its nearest competitor.

The increasing popularity of undergraduate liberal arts education at Penn has also been accompanied by a growing recognition that Penn's undergraduate programs have become some of the nation's best. For the past decade and more, Penn has often been ranked among the top ten universities in America, a more prominent position than it had fifty or one hundred years ago. It is affirming testimony, it seems, that the commitment of three generations of Pennsylvanians to strengthening undergraduate education has paid extraordinary dividends, and it is a happy circumstance that would make Benjamin Franklin proud.

Mark Frazier Lloyd
Director,
University Archives and Records Center