Mid-Year Convocation, 12 February 1955. Graduates in cap and gown file into Irvine Auditorium over the snow-covered walk. Photograph from the March 1955 issue of The Pennsylvania Gazette. Collections of the University Archives and Records Center.

Historical Notes

The University of Pennsylvania in Five Parts

1755: The Collegiate Charter

PHILODELPHIA. In our last Gazette, we promised the Publication of that Clause in the additional Charter lately granted to the TRUSTEES of our College, &c. by which they are empowered to admit Students to the usual University Degrees; in order to enable those who may be desirous of the Honors of this Seminary to judge on what Terms they may expect them, and how far they may be considered as real Honors, on account of the wise and judicious Regulations, with regard to the Examination of Candidates, and Mode of Admission. The Clause is as follows.

WE DO FURTHER, for Us, our Heirs and Successors, Give and Grant to the Trustees of the said College and Academy, That, for animating and encouraging the Students thereof to a laudable Diligence, Industry, and Progress, in useful Literature and Science, they … shall have full power and authority … to ADMIT any the Students within the said College and Academy, or any other Person or Persons meriting the same, to any DEGREE OR DEGREES, in any of the Faculties, Arts and Sciences, to which Persons are usually admitted, in any or either of the Universities or Colleges in the Kingdom of Great Britain.

Thomas Penn, and Richard Penn
True and absolute Proprietaries of the Province of Pennsylvania

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250 years ago this spring the Trustees obtained from the Governor of Pennsylvania the corporate charter which empowered them to confer degrees. In that moment the dream of Benjamin Franklin was fulfilled: an institution of higher learning was established in Philadelphia. His 1749 pamphlet, Proposals Relating to the Education of Youth in Pennsylvania, had led first to the organization of the Trustees, then, in 1751, to the opening of the Academy and Charitable School of Philadelphia, and now, finally, to the College. In 1757 the Trustees and faculty graduated Penn's first class. In 1765 a member of that first class, John Morgan, founded Penn's School of Medicine, the first in British North America. Penn thereby became the first university in the thirteen American colonies, perhaps the most distinguished achievement among its many "firsts."

The College of Philadelphia and its School of Medicine flourished until the outbreak of the American Revolution. In the aftermath of the British occupation of Philadelphia, 1777-78,
the revolutionary government of Pennsylvania accused the Trustees and the Provost of being too closely associated with the Church of England and the British Crown. In particular, the new government charged that a 1764 change in Penn's by-laws effectively gave the Church of England permanent control of the Board of Trustees. This, the critics argued, was a flagrant violation of the explicitly nonsectarian aim of Franklin and the other founders. In 1779, the Pennsylvania state legislature re-organized the College of Philadelphia, giving it a new name – the University of the State of Pennsylvania – and installing a new Board of Trustees and a new Provost. Throughout the decade that followed, however, members of the old Board, led by the ousted Provost, protested and petitioned the state legislature for redress. As Federalists worked steadily to regain control of the state government, they encouraged these demands for restitution. In 1789, their efforts were successful. The state legislature re-established the College of Philadelphia, re-instated its former Trustees and Provost, and returned the campus and all other assets to the re-chartered College. The first meeting of the re-constituted Board of Trustees was held in Benjamin Franklin's house and he was re-elected President of the Trustees. Though he died in April 1790, just a year before the College became the University of Pennsylvania, Benjamin Franklin not only founded Penn and saw it through its first successful years, he also returned to its service at the end of his life, a span of more than forty years. No other colonial American college can claim such a distinguished Founding Father as its visionary and life-long patron.

1805: College, School of Medicine, and a Grand Commencement

Two hundred years ago the University of Pennsylvania consisted of two schools or faculties: the College of arts and sciences and the School of Medicine. Enrollment in the College was very low in the early nineteenth century and the faculty was forced to function for four years without a Provost. The Vice Provost, Rev. Dr. John Andrews, taught the senior classes in moral philosophy; Professor James Davidson, the underclassmen courses in Greek and Latin; and Professors Robert Patterson and William Rogers, the first year classes in Mathematics and English, respectively. Without a professor of physical sciences, however, the College faculty suffered a huge gap in its curriculum. The Trustees worked diligently to remedy this shortcoming, formulating a long-range plan for improving the income from the University endowment and appealing to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania for additional aid. Not until 1806 was a solution found. In that year the Trustees hired John McDowell as Provost and Professor of Natural Philosophy. The School of Medicine, on the other hand, flourished. Benjamin Rush, professor of medicine and physiology, stood at the head of the faculty. More than 100 students enrolled in his classes in the 1804-05 academic year, making Penn's medical school far and away the largest in the New World. William Shippen, in his fortieth year on the faculty, taught anatomy and midwifery. James Woodhouse was in his tenth year as professor of chemistry (predecessor to today's biochemistry and biophysics). Benjamin Smith Barton was professor of materia medica (predecessor to today's pharmacology). In 1805, the medical faculty petitioned the Trustees to create a new professorship and the Trustees appointed Philip Syng Physick the first professor of surgery at Penn. The Trustees held the University's annual Commencement on Wednesday, 5 June 1805, in the great hall of Franklin's original Academy building, at Fourth and Arch Streets in Philadelphia. Vice Provost Andrews presided over the event which featured seven undergraduate student "orations," ranging from a debate on "Whether Lotteries are institutions inconsistent with the principles of Religion and Morality" to an address on "The state of the Poor, compared with that of the Rich." It is greatly regretted that the texts of these student essays have not survived. In 1805 the Trustees and College faculty conferred just four degrees of Bachelor of Arts, the most prominent recipient of which was...
Rutgers University, in New Brunswick, New Jersey) named him President and Professor of Theology. He held that post for fifteen years, presiding over the re-naming of the College and a steady increase in institutional size and prestige. In 1840 he retired and returned to his native New York.

1855: College and schools of Medicine, Law, and Engineering

In the fall and winter of 1854-55, the Trustees wrestled with their decision to elect a successor to the vacant professorship of "Belles Lettres and of the English Language and Literature." It was a watershed decision, similar to their action of two years earlier, when they approved a new curriculum, one that provided for the Bachelor of Science degree for those undergraduates who did not wish to take courses in the classical languages. As the University's bicentennial historian, Edward Potts Cheyney, explained it:

Occasion was taken on [the vacancy in the chair] by some members of the Faculty and the Trustees who wished to see still more attention paid to the classics in the curriculum to propose the suppression of the chair of English literature, giving part of the salary attached to it to an additional teacher of Latin and Greek and dividing the work in English among two or more other members of the Faculty. There was much discussion and many successive reports during the years 1854 and 1855 ... but the final result was the retention of the English chair ...

For the successor the University turned, as it often did during this period, to the government academies. At Annapolis it found Henry Coppée, graduate of West Point, a soldier, an engineer, a student, and now a teacher of English.

The selection of Henry Coppée was an inspired choice. He was immediately productive in his academic discipline, publishing, in 1857, Elements of Logic: Designed as a Manual of Instruction. He was also a leader at Penn during the Civil War. In 1861 he organized and trained the undergraduates as the University Light Infantry. In 1864, six cannon were added to its portfolio, and the name of the student cadet corps changed to the Pennsylvania Light Artillery. Coppée drilled the students in the yard at the old Fourth and Arch Street campus and they "marched to various parts of the city for exercise, training, and show." Coppée was largely responsible for keeping Penn's morale high throughout the war. It was an extraordinary loss when he left Penn for the presidency of Lehigh University in 1866.

The appointment of Henry Coppée was just one example of a decade of great intellectual awakening at the University of Pennsylvania. The School of Medicine led the way, as it stood at the very forefront of its profession in America. In the academic year 1854-55 a total of 426 students enrolled in the medical school, drawn from 21 U.S. states, the Bahamas, Canada, Cuba, England, Germany, and Prussia. The School of Medicine was already an international institution.

In 1850, the Trustees re-established the Law School and in 1852 elected Philadelphia judge George Sharswood the first Dean of the Law School faculty. In 1854, Sharswood announced that the courts of Philadelphia had adopted changes in their rules providing that "the time occupied in [the Law School] is considered, with respect to admission to the Bar, as equivalent to a like term of regular clerkship in the office and under the direction of a practicing Attorney." Likewise the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania adopted a change in its rules admitting Penn Law School graduates to practice before the state Supreme Court. These were major challenges to the hegemony of the old apprenticeship method of training for the law and were the first steps in the eventual abandonment of that method in favor of the modern law school.

In 1852, the Trustees took the first steps toward the School of Engineering by establishing the School of Mines, Arts and Manufactures and by electing faculty in civil and mining engineering, in mineralogy and geology, and in "chemistry as applied to the arts." In the academic year 1854-55, a total of 15 students enrolled under these faculty, too small a group to carry the School forward. Nevertheless, James C. Booth, the professor of chemistry as applied to the arts, conducted classes in a laboratory on "College Avenue, Tenth Street above Chestnut" in center city Philadelphia. Here he followed a course of instruction "the same as that of the Experimental Laboratories now generally attached to European Universities." While less than robust, the fledging school of applied science played a significant role in moving Penn in the direction of modern professional education.

Henry Coppée (1821-1895), LL.D. 1886, portrait photograph, ca. 1860. He was Professor of Belles Lettres and of the English Language and Literature at Penn (1855-66) and Commandant and instructor of the University Light Infantry Corp during the years of the Civil War. In 1866, he was named first President of Lehigh University. Photograph by O.H. Willard's Galleries, 1206 Chestnut Street, Philadelphia, photographer. Collections of the University Archives and Records Center.