1757: Penn's First Commencement

The Commencement for giving Degrees to the senior Class of Students in the College of this City, formerly put off on Account of the Small-Pox, 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.

The Pennsylvania Gazette
7 April 1757

A PLAN OF THE COMMENCEMENT, to be held here on Tuesday next, in the College and Academy Hall.

Prayers by the Rev. Mr. PETERS.
A sermon adapted to the Occasion, by the PROVOST.
A salutatory Oration by Mr. JACKSON. And,
A Thesis to be defended – This closes the Forenoon.

In the Afternoon,
Three other Theses are to be defended.
Then the Degrees are to be conferred.

Some Orations are to be spoken by some of the Students who have been admitted to Degrees; and a valedictory Oration to be spoken by Mr. JACOB DUCHÉ.

N.B. To avoid Confusion, the Gallery Door will be opened at Half an Hour past Nine, and the Business of the Day will begin precisely at Ten in the Forenoon, and at Three in the Afternoon.

The Pennsylvania Gazette
12 May 1757

Penn's first Commencement, two hundred and fifty years ago, was cause for great anticipation and celebration. Seven and one-half years after Benjamin Franklin organized the Academy of Philadelphia, his leadership and tireless work had brought about the first institution of higher education in William Penn's Province of Pennsylvania, one of just six colleges then established in British North America. Franklin had purchased and developed Penn's first campus, located on the southwest corner of Fourth and Arch Streets in Philadelphia proper. He had recruited the first faculty, collected the first tuition, and gotten the Academy out of its initial debt. Then, in 1754 and 1755, he hired a brilliant young Scotsman, Rev. William Smith, as the first Provost and worked closely with Smith in transforming the Academy into the College of Philadelphia. Franklin retired from his presidency of the Board of Trustees in 1756 and turned the leadership of the College over to Smith. Smith proved very capable indeed, guiding Penn for a full quarter century, still today the longest provostial tenure in University history.

The first class of graduates, though just six in number, honored their Alma Mater with lives of professional success and distinguished public service. Jacob Duché, valedictorian of the class, became a clergyman in the Church of England. He served the colonial Philadelphia parishes of Christ Church and St. Peters and was chaplain to the Continental Congress. He was also part time Professor of Oratory at the College. Francis Hopkinson entered the profession of law, served as a delegate to the Continental Congress, and signed the Declaration of Independence.

250 YEARS AGO: The Provost's "Charge" to the Graduating Students. For the first half of Penn's history, the Provost concluded Commencement exercises with an address to the graduating students known as the "Charge." Pictured here is the title page of the very first charge, that of 1757, spoken by Provost William Smith. On the facing page are the handwritten names of those in the first graduating class.

Courtesy of the Schoenberg Center for Electronic Text & Image, University Libraries.
of Independence. Following the Revolutionary War, he accepted George Washington’s appointment as the first Judge of the U.S. District Court of Pennsylvania. James Latta became a clergyman of the Presbyterian church and rose to be the third Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America. In 1940, his descendant, also named James Latta, returned the 1757 diploma to Penn, where, from time to time, it has been proudly and prominently exhibited. Samuel Magaw became a clergyman in and a missionary of the Church of England. For more than twenty years he was rector of St. Paul’s Church, Philadelphia. In 1782 he returned to Penn as Vice Provost and Professor of Moral Philosophy. In 1785 he was one of the founders of the Episcopal Academy of Philadelphia.

John Morgan may have been the most historically significant member of the first class of graduates. Two years after earning Penn’s degree, he traveled to England and Scotland, where, in 1763, he earned his second degree, the Doctor of Medicine at the University of Edinburgh. He returned to Philadelphia and proposed the establishment of the first medical school in the British colonies. He was persuasive. In 1765, under the auspices of the Trustees of the College, he and others founded Penn’s School of Medicine. The Trustees named him Professor of the Theory and Practice of Physick and soon thereafter added William Shippen to the faculty, conferring upon him the professorship of Anatomy and Surgery. Three years later, in 1768, the School of Medicine graduated its first class of students and Penn became the first and oldest university in what is now the United States (though the title, University, was not taken until 1779). Hugh Williamson, like Morgan, studied medicine, earning his M.D. from the University of Utrecht in 1772. His fame, however, came in public service. Williamson was a delegate to the Continental Congress, a signer of the U.S. Constitution, and a member of the first U.S. Congress. Taken as a group, the Class of 1757 was as accomplished and famous as any graduating class in Penn’s history.

1807: College and School of Medicine

On Thursday the 23d [of July] the TRUSTEES, the FACULTY, the GRADUATES, and STUDENTS, met at the University at nine o’clock, A.M. and walked in procession to the Rev. Dr. Hey’s Church, the Independence Tabernacle, in Fourth Street, where a Commencement was held before a numerous, splendid, and respectable audience; after prayer, by the PROVOST, the following exercises were performed.

MUSICK

The Salutatory Oration, by Mr. JOSEPH HALL

A Forensic Dispute, on this question, “Whether it is more difficult to arrive at excellence in Eloquence at the Bar or the Pulpit?” by Mr. JOHN SOMMER.

The PROVOST’S Decision.

MUSICK

An Oration on the good effects of Education, by Mr. SAMUEL H. TURNER.

An Oration on the alternation of action and repose, by Mr. THOMAS I. WHARTON.

An Oration on Classical literature, by Mr. D. SCHAEFFER.

MUSICK

An Oration on Liberty, by Mr. JOSEPH HALL.

An Oration on General Hamilton, by Mr. BENJAMIN J. BOSTOCK.

History of a Graduate, an ironical Oration, by Mr. J. SOMMER.
An Oration of Patriotism, by Mr. JACOB GRATZ.
The degree of Bachelor of Arts was then conferred on Messrs. BENJAMIN J. BOSTOCK, JACOB GRATZ, JACOB GREEN, JOSEPH HALL, DAVID F. SCHAFFER, JOHN SOMMER, SAMUEL H. TURNER, and THOMAS I. WHARTON.
The degree of Doctor of Divinity was conferred on the Rev. HENRY WADDELL, of Trenton, New Jersey, the Rev. JAMES P. WILSON, and the Rev. JOSEPH PILMORE, of Philadelphia.
The Valedictory Oration, by Mr. JACOB GREEN.
MUSICK
The charge by the PROVOST.
MUSICK
An appropriate prayer by the Rev. Dr. ROGERS, Professor in the University, concluded the exercises of the day.
The Rev. Dr. Hey, and the Trustees of the Independent Church, are justly entitled to the thanks of the Trustees and Faculty of the University for the obliging manner in which they accommodated them with their elegant and convenient Building, and for a very agreeable concert of sacred music, which was given in the evening in honour of Commencement.


Poulson's American Daily Advertiser
25 July 1807
By 1807 the College of Philadelphia had become the University of Pennsylvania and the University had moved to a larger campus, located on the west side of Ninth Street, between Market and Chestnut Streets. Commencements had moved out of the old College Hall and into newer, more impressive facilities. In 1807 the Commencement procession made its way south on Ninth Street to Chestnut Street, then five blocks east on Chestnut to Fourth Street and lastly, north a short distance on Fourth Street to Ranstead Court. There stood the Independent Tabernacle, constructed in 1805-06 and immediately praised as perhaps the finest venue in Philadelphia for worship services and public ceremonies alike. The Commencement "exercises," described above, featured the graduating seniors, who displayed for Trustees, faculty, family, and friend alike the learning they had acquired at Penn.

While the College held its own in the early years of the American republic, the School of Medicine soared into national prominence. By 1807, in addition to medicine, anatomy and surgery, the School of Medicine had professorships in chemistry, midwifery, pharmacology, and physiology. The faculty was busy not only in teaching and practice, but also in overseeing the construction of the first Medical Hall on the Ninth Street campus, which was purpose-built for medical lectures and research. The School attracted students from all over North America, including, in 1807, seniors from Delaware, Kentucky, Maryland, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Virginia, and the Caribbean island of St. Croix. Thirty-one medical students graduated in 1807, nearly four times as many as the College graduates. The School of Medicine continued as Penn's largest school throughout the 19th century.

1857: College, School of Medicine, Law School and a School of Engineering

In 1857 the Trustees held Penn's Commencement in Musical Fund Hall, at the southwest corner of 8th and Locust Streets in Philadelphia. The academic Procession, accompanied by a professional orchestra, marched three blocks south and one east. The program, like its predecessors in 1757 and 1807, was given over to the graduating students, who spoke to the audience on learned topics, in Greek, in Latin, and in English. It is unfortunate, indeed, that these essays have not survived to the present day. The Provost conferred twenty-two degrees of Bachelor of Arts, twelve Bachelors of Law, and 151 Doctors of Medicine. He also awarded the Henry Reed Prize to the class valedictorian, the first Commencement honor in Penn's history.

The College had matured in several ways in the half century since 1807. The course in liberal arts was no longer directed by clergymen, but by a Provost who was a political economist and a Vice Provost who was a physical scientist. The Industrial Revolution and the advance of applied science had led the way to the establishment of a School of Engineering and the degree of Bachelor of Science. Student organizations had formed, including the Philomathean Society, crew and cricket teams, and four fraternities. The Law School was established in 1850, as the legal profession gradually pulled away.

150 YEARS AGO: Commencement in 1857. For many years in the mid 19th century, the University held its annual Commencement on the day before the national holiday, the Fourth of July. Imagine the heat under the traditional black gowns! The rare handbill pictured here shows that in 1857 the program featured no fewer than seven student speakers, beginning with a "Greek Salutatory Oration" and concluding with the "Valedictory Oration." For some reason, unexplained, the Provost did not give a charge. The festivities included the processional, the recessional, and six musical interludes, given by an "orchestra under the direction of Carl Bergman." Collections of the University Archives and Records Center.

150 YEARS AGO: Penn's Campus in 1857. In 1829 the Trustees built twin buildings on the 9th Street campus, replacing the "President's House" and the 1807 Medical wing. The campus pictured here – College Hall on the right and Medical Hall on the left – represented the University until its move to West Philadelphia in 1872. Collections of the University Archives and Records Center.
from the apprenticeship system. The School of Medicine continued as Penn's flagship, with enrollments and graduating classes numbering more than twice the total of the other three schools combined. Before the Civil War split the country in half, Philadelphia was the national center for medical education.

1907: The Professions at Penn

The Commencement of 1907 also demonstrated the extent to which Penn's professional schools had eclipsed the College in the University's public profile. The Provost conferred a total of 558 degrees, only sixty of which were in the College. The College faculty still required proficiency in both Latin and Greek for the traditional Bachelor of Arts, with the result being that only twenty students earned this degree. There was one Bachelor of Music and thirty-nine Bachelors of Science (that is, College students who did not take the courses in Latin and Greek). By comparison, there were 112 Bachelors in the School of Medicine, Law, Dental Medicine, and Veterinary Medicine, respectively. In terms of market share, seventy-eight percent of degrees were in the arts and sciences. The dominance of the University's reputation than a celebration of the graduates' accomplishments. The Provost had dropped student speakers from the ceremony after 1895; a Commencement speaker or "Orator of the Day," and then conferred earned degrees "in Arts, Music, Science, Philosophy, Law, Medicine, Dental Surgery, and Veterinary Medicine." All of which 100 YEARS AGO: 1907 Commencement Program. In 1899 the Trustees adopted 1740 as the founding date of the University and a year later, they adopted a new design for the seal of the University. In 1907 both were featured on the cover of the Commencement program. The program had become a pamphlet, with the printed names of the graduates extending to twelve pages and the lists of certificates, honors and prizes extending to still another eight. The audience was "requested to stand and join in the singing of [three] Hymns," one of which was the school song, "Hail! Pennsylvania." The University conferred honorary degrees, heard from the "Orator of the Day," and then conferred earned degrees in Arts, Music, Science, Philosophy, Law, Medicine, Dental Surgery, and Veterinary Medicine." All of which took place in Philadelphia's grandest public hall, the Academy of Music, at Broad and Locust Streets in center city Philadelphia. Collections of the University Archives and Records Center.

O ne hundred years ago the University held its annual Commencement at the Academy of Music, at the southwest corner of Broad and Locust Streets in center city Philadelphia. The Procession began at College Hall and the graduating students walked all the way down Walnut Street, from 34th to Broad, and then one block south to Locust. The faculty, Trustees, and honorary degree recipients followed behind in horse-drawn carriages. The program of 1907 is familiar to us today. It aimed more at the advancement of the University's reputation than a celebration of the graduates' accomplishments. The Provost had dropped student speakers from the ceremony after 1895; a Commencement speaker or "Orator of The Day" replaced them. The award of honorary degrees was moved forward, to a much more prominent place in the proceedings; the conferring of earned degrees was moved to the last. Nevertheless the new format was extraordinarily successful. Crowds clamored to hear the guest speaker and the print media gave great prominence to the entire event. In 1907 the Orator of The Day was the Honorable John A. Johnson, three-term Governor of Minnesota and in the words of the Provost, "the first western man invited to take the foremost part in our annual Commencement." Johnson exhorted the graduates to "look forward to success," which depended, he said, "upon your ideal of life, upon the life-work you have chosen, upon the life standards you hold before you, upon the heart, character, purpose and inspiration which guide your career and govern your destiny." His speech was reminiscent of the charge given to the graduates of 1757, in which the Provost spoke of the "principles of virtue and goodness." A challenge -- "responsibility" -- and an inspiration -- "success" -- were the continuing themes of Commencement.

100 YEARS AGO: 1907 Commencement's "Orator of the Day." In the last quarter of the 19th century the traditional Commencement program underwent fundamental change, as student speakers gave way to distinguished guests. By 1907 the modern form of Commencement had emerged. In that year the Commencement speaker was the Hon. John A. Johnson, Governor of Minnesota. The recipients of honorary degrees included Johnson; Hideyo Noguchi, of Japan, a research physician at what is now Rockefeller University; Leonard Pearson, veterinary surgeon and Dean of the School of Veterinary Medicine; Rudolph Hering, a clean water pioneer; Horace L. Wells, chemist and Professor of Chemistry at Yale University; Oliver Huckel, clergyman, poet, and teacher; and George Wharton Pepper, prominent Philadelphia lawyer and Professor of Law in the Law School. Collections of the University Archives and Records Center.

100 YEARS AGO: 1907 Commencement's "Orator of the Day." In the last quarter of the 19th century the traditional Commencement program underwent fundamental change, as student speakers gave way to distinguished guests. By 1907 the modern form of Commencement had emerged. In that year the Commencement speaker was the Hon. John A. Johnson, Governor of Minnesota. The recipients of honorary degrees included Johnson; Hideyo Noguchi, of Japan, a research physician at what is now Rockefeller University; Leonard Pearson, veterinary surgeon and Dean of the School of Veterinary Medicine; Rudolph Hering, a clean water pioneer; Horace L. Wells, chemist and Professor of Chemistry at Yale University; Oliver Huckel, clergyman, poet, and teacher; and George Wharton Pepper, prominent Philadelphia lawyer and Professor of Law in the Law School. Collections of the University Archives and Records Center.

100 YEARS AGO: 1907 Commencement's "Orator of the Day." In the last quarter of the 19th century the traditional Commencement program underwent fundamental change, as student speakers gave way to distinguished guests. By 1907 the modern form of Commencement had emerged. In that year the Commencement speaker was the Hon. John A. Johnson, Governor of Minnesota. The recipients of honorary degrees included Johnson; Hideyo Noguchi, of Japan, a research physician at what is now Rockefeller University; Leonard Pearson, veterinary surgeon and Dean of the School of Veterinary Medicine; Rudolph Hering, a clean water pioneer; Horace L. Wells, chemist and Professor of Chemistry at Yale University; Oliver Huckel, clergyman, poet, and teacher; and George Wharton Pepper, prominent Philadelphia lawyer and Professor of Law in the Law School. Collections of the University Archives and Records Center.

100 YEARS AGO: 1907 Commencement's "Orator of the Day." In the last quarter of the 19th century the traditional Commencement program underwent fundamental change, as student speakers gave way to distinguished guests. By 1907 the modern form of Commencement had emerged. In that year the Commencement speaker was the Hon. John A. Johnson, Governor of Minnesota. The recipients of honorary degrees included Johnson; Hideyo Noguchi, of Japan, a research physician at what is now Rockefeller University; Leonard Pearson, veterinary surgeon and Dean of the School of Veterinary Medicine; Rudolph Hering, a clean water pioneer; Horace L. Wells, chemist and Professor of Chemistry at Yale University; Oliver Huckel, clergyman, poet, and teacher; and George Wharton Pepper, prominent Philadelphia lawyer and Professor of Law in the Law School. Collections of the University Archives and Records Center.
1957: A Renewed Emphasis on the Arts and Sciences

Beginning in 1920 and continuing through 1961, the University held two annual Commencements. The traditional Commencement, held at the end of the academic year, remained the chief event, but during these years it partnered with a mid-year “Convocation of University Council,” held at the close of the first semester. In 1957 the University also celebrated the Seventy-fifth Anniversary of the founding of the Wharton School with a second Convocation of University Council, held in late April. The President and Trustees conducted all three in like manner.

George M. Leader, a Penn alumnus and Governor of Pennsylvania, delivered the mid-year convocation address to 504 graduates at Irvine Auditorium. In his address, the Governor stressed the importance of increased cooperation between higher education and government:

Higher education’s role in achieving an adequate public service has three elements: education, research, and service. Not only should our colleges and universities raise the standards of preparation for public service, they should also, I believe, lead the way in persuading public authorities to broaden the opportunities for educated people within the government service.

Government, he said, must learn to recruit superior, broadly-educated young people, supplementing their general knowledge through in-service training, rather than interesting only in specialists. The Governor also exhorted the graduates to keep informed about the activities and problems of local, state and federal governments.

How would you decide the major issues of your times if you were in the positions of immediate responsibility? You are in the position of ultimate responsibility.

At the special convocation honoring the Wharton School, the keynote speaker was William McChesney Martin, Jr., chairman of the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System from 1951 to 1970. He discussed the policies of the Federal Reserve, defining its purpose as

... endeavoring, at all times, to assure monetary and credit conditions that will foster high levels of business and employment, maintain the stability of the currency, and promote sustainable growth in the economy. It is a policy of combating, with equal vigor, the excesses of inflation and deflation alike.

The University conferred eight honorary doctorates on the occasion, but no earned degrees.

The Two Hundred and First Commencement took place on Wednesday, June 12, 1957, in the Municipal Auditorium on 34th Street, south of Spruce. The Procession gathered in Irvine Auditorium and at 10:30 a.m., began to move south on 34th Street. 2,096 candidates for degrees filled the center section of the great hall; family and friends were seated on the sides, at the rear, and in the balconies. The University Chaplain, the Rev. Edward G. Harris, gave the invocation and the assembly joined in singing the National Anthem. President Gaylord P. Harnwell introduced the guest speaker, Frank Cyril James, an alumnus of the University and Principal and Vice-Chancellor of McGill University. He spoke on the need for breadth of vision in the world, saying:

We confront a world that is tense with fear, a world divided by the aftermath of the cold war and, it would seem, irritably split by spasmodic frictions on both sides of the iron curtain. We have no clear aims for the world as a whole, and we are unwilling to cooperate with other nations, because we distrust them. We want to be left alone to enjoy our own way of life, and our prosperity, but this stasis is the one thing that is impossible. ... You have the chance to bequeath to your children a heritage such as no generation of young people has ever enjoyed since civilization first began ... You can use that opportunity in any way you like: only if you close your minds and ignore it are you in danger.
I propose a compact, a Penn Compact, that expresses our boldest aspirations for higher education—a compact based on our shared understanding that “Divided we fail. United we flourish.” By honoring this Penn Compact, we will make the greatest possible difference in our university, our city, our country, and our world. The Penn Compact that I propose encompasses three principles. The first is increased access. … The second is to integrate knowledge. … The third is to engage locally and globally. By putting our principles into ever better practice, our Penn family will rise from excellence to eminence in teaching and research as we become ever more accessible. I ask that you join me in uniting behind our Penn Compact. Let us make this new beginning at Penn worthy of our boldest aspirations. Together we shall rise, as together we serve.

Amy Gutmann
President of the University
Inaugural Address
15 October 2004

At today’s Commencement the University will graduate approximately 8,000 students, nearly four times more than it did in 1957. Befitting a major research institution, the School of Arts and Sciences and the Graduate Faculties lead the way. The Bachelor of Arts degree has emerged in modern times as the University’s most popular. Approximately twenty-seven percent of today’s recipients will be taking that degree. The Doctor of Philosophy degree is now the fourth most awarded. Approximately seven percent of the total will be the Ph.D. The second and third most awarded are Wharton’s Master of Business Administration and Bachelor of Science in Economics, representing sixteen percent and eight percent respectively. These four degrees account for more than fifty percent of all Penn degrees. The other professional schools, once Penn’s most populous, remain very prestigious, but much smaller in proportion to the rest of the University than a century ago. The professional degrees of the schools of Law, Medicine, Dental Medicine, and Veterinary Medicine combined will make up only nine percent of all the degrees the University will confer. In the 21st century, Penn is first an institution of teaching and research and second, a consortium of schools of professional practice.

In 2007, the Penn Compact “embodies Penn’s vision for making our University both a global leader in teaching, research, and professional practice, as well as a dynamic agent of social, economic, and civic progress.” Over the past fifty years, the University of Pennsylvania has certainly grown sufficiently large and influential to achieve these impressive goals. Penn’s faculty of 4,200 leads more than 23,000 students through the apprenticeship of higher education and on to lives of public and private service. The faculty also generates more than $789 million a year in sponsored awards and projects. Penn’s staff of 13,000 supports the academic enterprise; the University’s Health System has a work force of an additional 11,000. Penn is thereby the largest private employer in the City of Philadelphia and the second-largest in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Benjamin Franklin would be astonished … and very pleased.

Mark Frazier Lloyd
Director
University Archives and Records Center

The President and the academic officers of the University then conferred the degrees in course. Fifty-three different degrees from twenty-one different schools and divisions of the University were awarded to recipients representing forty-one U.S. states and thirty foreign countries. The total number of graduates was four times the number of fifty years earlier and more than ten times the number of a century before. The great difference in student population between 1907 and 1957 was the rise of the Wharton School. Wharton’s undergraduate school was Penn’s largest and its M.B.A program Penn’s third largest. More than twenty-eight percent of the 1957 graduates took Wharton degrees, substantially greater than the College’s eighteen and one-half percent. The Law School, School of Medicine, and School of Dental Medicine each contributed about six percent of the total, with the other professional schools trailing behind. More than fifty percent of all degrees were in the professional schools, both undergraduate and graduate, and in this sense Penn retained its 20th century identity as primarily an institution for training in the pragmatic disciplines. Nevertheless, the College’s share of the whole had nearly doubled since 1907 and its growth signalled the movement of the future.

2007: Franklin’s University Today

Whereas, the well-being of a society depends on the education of their youth, as well as, in great measure, the eternal welfare of every individual, by impressing on their tender minds principles of morality and religion, instructing them in the several duties they owe to the society in which they live, and one towards another, giving them the knowledge of languages, and other parts of useful learning necessary thereto, in order to render them serviceable in the several public stations to which they may be called, …

Benjamin Franklin
President of the Trustees
Charter of the Academy and Charitable School
13 July 1753