Historical Notes

TWO HUNDRED FIFTY YEARS AGO

The Commencement of 1759

To-morrow will be held a PUBLICK COMMENCEMENT, in the Hall of the COLLEGE and ACADEMY of this City, from Ten to Twelve in the Forenoon, and from Three to Five in the Afternoon, at which Time the Company of all that please to attend, will be very acceptable.

Pennsylvania Gazette
7 June 1759

The Vice Provost presented to the Trustees Samuel Powell, Samuel Keene, William Paca, Alexander Lawson, John Hall, John Beard, & William Edmiston, as Candidates for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts, informing them, that they had finished their Studies, had undergone a public Examination, and were well qualified; whereupon the Trustees issued the written Mandate, under their Hands & the privy Seal of their College, directed to the Provost, Vice Provost and Professors, requiring them to admit said Students to the Degree of Bachelor of Arts, and likewise they gave a like Mandate to admit the Reverend Mr. Hector Alison, now on Duty as Chaplain in the Pennsylvania Regiment; and the Revd. Mr. John Ewing, their present Lecturer in Natural Philosophy to the honorary Degree of Master of Arts.

After which the Trustees repair’d to the Academy Hall, preceded by the Candidates for Degrees, in their Gowns, and the Members of the Faculty in their Gowns, and were follow’d by the Masters and Tutors of the several Schools at the Head of the junior Classes and the Scholars, who walked in Procession, two by two; and having respectively taken their Seats, the Commencement was open’d by Prayer, performed after the Rites of the Church of England by the Reverend Mr. Peters, President [of the Trustees].

The honorable the Governor, several Officers of the Army, a great many Gentlemen of this, and the other Colonies & a Number of Ladies and Citizens were pleas’d to favor us with their Presence.

There was a great Variety of entertaining Orations and public Disputations in the Latin and English Languages, in which the Students, acquitting themselves with universal Applause, the said Mr. Alison, who presided, according to Charter, in the Absence of the Provost, conferred the several Degrees as directed by the two Mandates.

At the Close of this Ceremony, which was perform’d in a very solemn Manner, the Vice Provost made a serious Address to the Graduates, exhorting them to fear God, prosecute their Studies, and make it the whole Endeavor of their Lives to become as useful as possible in their respective Stations, and to consider this World as preparative for the Fruition of a holy God, in that glorious State of Immortality, which thro’ the Merits of our blessed Savior, was to succeed this transitory Life, And then concluded with a suitable Prayer.

It gave the Trustees a very sensible Pleasure to hear the Commendations that were given of the whole Performances by almost every Body present.

Minutes of the Trustees of the College,
Academy and Charitable Schools
8 June 1759

250 YEARS AGO: Penn held the Commencement of 1759 in its Academy building (1750) (at the left in this view). The 18th century campus, located at Fourth and Arch Streets, consisted only of the Academy building and the Dormitory (1762) (at the right). This sketch, by Pierre Eugène Du Simitière, ca. 1780, is the only surviving contemporary rendering of the Fourth Street campus. Courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia.
The academic year which concluded in the Commencement of 1759 was just the tenth in Penn’s history, but it was surely as astonishing and extraordinary as any year in the 250 since then. The Provost was the Rev. William Smith, a priest in the Church of England, but also a regular and strident writer of political essays. In the fall of 1757 he had printed a particularly harsh attack on the Pennsylvania state legislature. The legislature, finding him guilty “of promoting and publishing a false, scandalous, virulent and seditious libel against the late House of Assembly of this Province,” ordered him imprisoned. Penn’s Trustees, however, took Provost Smith’s side in the controversy and in February 1758 directed the undergraduate students to attend Smith’s classes “at the usual Hours in the Place of his present Confinement,” that is, in the county jail! The standoff continued for two months before the legislature adjourned and the Provost was released. In November, however, when the Assembly re-convened, calls again were made for Smith’s arrest. This time the Provost asked the Trustees for their permission to sail to England with an appeal to the King. The Trustees granted him that permission and in early December Smith left Philadelphia. Provost Smith taught the senior class and the Trustees, anxious to hold Commencement in June, scrambled to find a substitute teacher. It gave them great pleasure when they found a suitable candidate at Princeton and were able to recruit him in the middle of the academic year. The new member of the Penn faculty was Rev. John Ewing, a minister in the Presbyterian church and learned in both the liberal arts and the natural sciences. Rev. Ewing took hold of his responsibilities immediately; the undergraduate calendar remained on schedule. Seven students passed their examinations and formed the Class of 1759. The crisis eased (and Smith was successful in his appeal; he returned to Philadelphia in October with an exoneration from the King’s Privy Council and an honorary doctorate from Oxford!).

The Trustees’ minutes of the Commencement of 1759 provide one of the best accounts of an early commencement on record. The descriptive detail given to every step of the process – from the “public Examination” of the College seniors, to the grant of authority conferring the degrees, to the conduct of the graduation ceremony itself – testifies to the importance of the proceedings.
250 YEARS AGO: Henry Hollingsworth Smith (1815-1890), speaker at the Medical Commencement of 1859, was Professor of Surgery in the School of Medicine from 1855 until 1871. He was later President of the Philadelphia County Medical Society and President of the Medical Society of the State of Pennsylvania, as well as Chairman of the Surgical Section of the American Medical Association. Portrait photograph, photographer unknown.

Collections of the University Archives and Records Center, University of Pennsylvania.

UNIVERSITY COMMENCEMENT

The Commencement of the Medical Department of the University of Pennsylvania took place at the Musical Fund Hall at noon yesterday. The hall was packed full in every part and it was found necessary to close the doors some time before the commencement of the exercises. A great number of persons were unable to obtain admission to the building. The graduates, headed by the officers and faculty, walked in procession from the University to the hall. The exercises were opened with prayer by the Rev. Mr. Schaeffer, after which the degree of Doctor of Medicine was conferred upon the graduates by Henry Vethake, LL.D., Provost of the University.

Henry H. Smith, M.D., Professor of Surgery, delivered the valedictory. He gave a sketch of the duties of the physician to the public, and spoke of the high tone which every honorable medical man should maintain; alluded to the position of society to a physician; to the fact that the physician and philanthropist must not expect great rewards, but must be actuated by nobler motives; of the evils of quackery; and closed as follows:

“When, in after life, temptations assail you; when evil influences beset and assail your fair fame, may you recall the fact, to-day presented to you in words of kindly interest, that you are members of a noble profession, attached to a society of honorable men, and that, as such, honor forbids your yielding to the temptations of the enemy, and basely deserting the flag under which you are now enrolled. Wishing you every happiness, I, in the name of my colleagues, tender you our farewell.”

Philadelphia Press
18 March 1859

Penn’s Trustees established the School of Medicine in 1765 and it soon proved to be a profound innovation in American higher education. By 1800 the School of Medicine had grown larger than the College and by 1830 it was generally acknowledged as the premier American institution of medical education. In the 1858-59 academic year there were 409 students in the School of Medicine, representing twenty-three states, the District of Columbia, and six foreign countries. The School’s faculty had its own buildings on campus and conducted its internal affairs largely independent of the Provost and the Trustees of the University. Through most of the 19th century the unique status of the School was well illustrated by its academic calendar – considerably shorter than that of the College – and its stand-alone annual commencement.

The School of Medicine conducted its commencements in a manner more familiar to us today than did the College. The ceremony’s emphasis was not so much the academic attainments of the students – though the conferring of the M.D. degree certainly acknowledged that achievement. The emphasis was rather on the commencement speaker and the significance of his address for the newly-credentialed graduates.

In 1859 Henry Hollingsworth Smith was in just his fifth year on Penn’s faculty, but he was well known as a surgeon of unusual ability; a prolific scholarly author; and a powerful public speaker. Those qualities led his medical faculty colleagues to select him as their representative at commencement. The Philadelphia newspapers celebrated his address and called for its publication. His leadership in the medical profession was perhaps best demonstrated two years later, when, at the outbreak of the Civil War, the Federal government chose him to organize the hospital system of Pennsylvania and the state appointed him Surgeon-General of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Smith was the very model of the modern commencement speaker.

Adjourned Meeting
July 1, 1859, 9% [o’clock] A.M.

The Board met pursuant to adjournment to attend the Commencement and proceeded to the Musical Fund Hall, where the following degrees were, with appropriate ceremonies, conferred by the Provost, after prayer by the Rev. C.W. Schaeffer and Orations by Members of the graduating Class.

[The minutes then list the names of thirty graduates of the College, the twelve graduates of the Law School, four late graduates of the School of Medicine, and the twenty-five recipients of the semi-honorary degree of Master of Arts.]

The Provost announced the names of the gentlemen to whom the Henry Reed and other Prizes had been awarded and the exercises were concluded by a Valedictory Oration from a member of the Graduating Class.

Adjourned

Minutes of the Trustees of the University of Pennsylvania
Friday, 1 July 1859

350 YEARS AGO: Edward Blanchard Hodge (1841-1906) delivered the Greek salutary at the University Commencement of 1859. Following his graduation from the College at Penn, he enrolled in the Princeton Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1863. He was ordained a Presbyterian clergyman, served for thirty years as pastor of the Presbyterian Church of Burlington, New Jersey, and in 1893 was named Secretary of the national Presbyterian Board of Education. He held that position until his death. Photograph taken from the publication University of Pennsylvania (Illustrated).
Commencement of the University of Pennsylvania

The annual commencement of the University of Pennsylvania was held yesterday morning, at the Musical Fund Hall, in the presence of a large assemblage. At ten o’clock the procession, composed of the Professors and Graduating Class, entered the Hall, the Germania Orchestra performing meanwhile, one of their choice selections. Though, according to the programme, the Orchestra was to perform pieces at different periods of the exercises, there was no music after the introductory, owing to the serious illness of the Hon. Richard Rush, residing in the neighborhood. The opening prayer was followed by the Salutatory Oration in the Greek, by Edward B. Hodge. This was succeeded by addresses on the subject named “Eldorado,” by Edward P. Capp; “The Battle of Tours,” by Richard A. Coleman; “Historic Rivers,” by James B. Roney; “The Balance of Power,” by William McMichael; “Our National Literature,” by Ludovic C. Cleemann; and “Historical Effects of Eloquence,” by Charles E. Buckwalter. The speakers acquitted themselves creditably and were much applauded. Bouquets were thrown to some of them by their enthusiastic admirers.

The degree of Bachelor of Arts was conferred on the following members of the Senior Class by [Provost Henry] Vethake: -- [here followed the thirty names of the graduates of the College]

The degree of Master of Arts was conferred on the following graduates of three years standing: -- [here followed the twenty-five names of the recipients of this semi-honorary degree]

The degree of Bachelor of Laws was conferred on [here followed the twelve names of the graduates of the Law School]

The degree of Doctor of Medicine was conferred on [here followed four names of late graduates of the School of Medicine]

The valedictory address was delivered by J.H. Young, which closed the exercises.

On the stage was a fine portrait of Professor Vethake, painted by [Thomas] Sully, which is to be placed in the College Hall in commemoration of his services to the institution, with which he has been connected since 1836. He recently tendered his resignation, to take effect yesterday.

Public Ledger
Saturday, 2 July 1859

The most striking feature of the University Commencement of 1859 was its adherence to tradition. The ceremony of July 1859 was virtually indistinguishable from that of a century earlier. The public procession in academic garb, the entrance into a grand auditorium, the accompanying music, the initial student address in Greek, the six student addresses in English, the conferring of degrees, and the valedictory were all borrowed directly from Penn’s first commencements. Likewise, the undergraduate curriculum in 1859 was little different from its counterpart in 1759. While professional education – led by the School of Medicine, but by 1859 also including the Law School and the School of Engineering and Applied Science – was transforming the landscape of American universities, the liberal arts and sciences were mired in the past. Another generation would pass before this too would change.

50 YEARS AGO: The Commencements of 1959

During the middle years of the twentieth century, Penn held two, regular graduation ceremonies: the Mid-Year Convocation and the annual Commencement. The University typically conferred several hundred degrees at the Mid-Year Convocation, which permitted it to be held in Irvine Auditorium. The annual Commencement was much the larger of the two – the University typically conferred more than 2,000 degrees – and it was held in the Municipal Auditorium (where the Ruth and Raymond Perelman Center for Advanced Medicine, which opened in 2008, now stands on this site). The traditions observed at both events were similar in several respects to those held by the College a century and two centuries earlier – the participants still dressed in academic regalia; the procession, accompanied by music, was still an extraordinary parade; the conferring of degrees still symbolized the achievement of a lifelong credential of enormous importance – but the programs were now focused – like that of the School of Medicine in 1859 – on the inspirational leadership of the speaker and the recipients of honorary degrees. Student “orators” had given way to those who had been successful and become prominent in American and international life. In 1959, Penn’s Mid-Year Convocation and its annual Commencement adhered closely to this new statement of educational values.
Penn Honors Lawrence

The Commonwealth [of Pennsylvania] plans to utilize nearly $23,000,000 of Federal funds to improve instruction in Pennsylvania’s education program, Gov. David L. Lawrence said here yesterday. Speaking at the midyear convocation of the University of Pennsylvania in Irvine Auditorium, 34th and Spruce sts., Lawrence credited Russia’s scientific achievements as having aroused an intense interest in Government and public support of education.

“In what concerns education, the rockets and satellites became blessings,” he said. “An aroused public was the result, a public with an intense interest in education such as we have seldom seen before. In a matter of weeks, the public’s concern reached teachers, the school boards and administrators. They looked to government to take the initiative and display leadership.”

Pointing out that America was late in upgrading its educational program to the necessities of the times, Lawrence said Pennsylvania had moved forward as quickly as any State to bring education up to date. The Governor stressed that education today was “big business” and because of that America should not expect “sweeping improvements in all our classrooms overnight.” However, he said new requirements had been instituted in the study of English, science, mathematics and world culture.

“This is only the beginning,” Lawrence declared. “As other ideas for improving our schools are developed, we shall implement them as quickly and thoroughly as it is humanly and financially possible. Beginning this school year, the school term will mean 180 days of actual classroom instruction – not 160 days of teaching and 20 days for football, picnics, country fairs or teacher institutes. The qualifications for becoming a teacher are being raised to include more study in science, language, literature, philosophy and mathematics. More modern languages will be available for study in schools and interest is being revived in Italian, Polish, Russian, Lithuanian and Hebrew.”

Lawrence said the state was fortunate in that it has colleges for every academic pursuit. He pledged his Administration’s determination to assist as “fully as possible” State-aided colleges and universities.

About 700 students received degrees in course from Gaylord P. Harnwell, University president. Lawrence received an honorary Doctor of Laws degree for his “dedicated career in government affairs.”

U.S.-British Aid to Africa Urged at Penn Graduation

An English educator yesterday advocated a joint venture by the U.S. and Great Britain to help develop African nations through aid in education and science. Speaking at the University of Pennsylvania’s commencement exercises in Convention Hall, Dr. Robert S. Aitken, vice chancellor of the University of Birmingham, England, said that such a program “can work wonders in Africa in two decades.”

The speaker, originally a physician and later a medical educator, asserted that the need for higher education in Africa is so great and so urgent that only the combined resources of the two countries could meet it. Acknowledging that Britain had not done enough in higher education to keep pace with the African rush toward autonomy, he said that his country had done “what she could” alone.

The University conferred 2,325 degrees-in-course.

Philadelphia Inquirer

Thursday morning, 11 June 1959

The University Commencement of 1959 featured an international speaker, one who addressed notably controversial world issues. The end of colonialism across the globe, the rise of independent nations in Africa, and the responsibility of the former colonial powers to the newly-free peoples were all subjects of then-current political debate.

50 YEARS AGO: The Commencement of 1959 lauded both world and local leaders. In this view, Penn’s President, Gaylord P. Harnwell, hands the University’s diploma to Althea K. Hottel, former Dean of Women at Penn and an honorary degree recipient, and to Robert S. Aitken, the commencement speaker and also an honorary degree recipient. Jules Schick Photography, 10 June 1959. Collections of the University Archives and Records Center, University of Pennsylvania.
The role the United States should play in these matters was unclear and unsettled. The University existed not only to instill knowledge, but to advance knowledge. The University also believed that it had a responsibility to extend its core principles and its expertise to issues of public interest. Commencement was an opportunity to perform this responsibility, to teach and nourish creative thinking, to contribute to the democratic ideal of a well-informed citizenry. Though Robert Stevenson Aitken was not well known to the American public, his topic was an excellent match for the University’s Commencement requirement. He was able to help Penn perform its public service in 1959 and Penn rewarded him by conferring upon him an honorary Doctor of Laws. In addition, Aitken was not alone. The University awarded six other honorary doctorates, in law and in science. Commencement, in its modern form, was a rich intellectual experience, defined not just by the earned degrees of the day, but also by the individuals the University chose as role models for the graduates and the audience.

TODAY

Penn in 2009

Improving the Evolving World

Penn is in the vanguard of increasing access for high achieving students. We remain one of the few private “need-blind” universities in the nation, and, beginning this fall, we are replacing loans with grants for all financially needy students. In addition, we will fund an additional 400 new service opportunities for undergraduate students over the next four years.

This increase in support of service will build on the impressive achievements of the Civic House, the Fox Leadership Program and the Netter Center for Community Partnerships. Each year, more than 4,000 Penn undergraduates in all schools engage in a variety of service activities. Additionally, students in the School of Social Policy & Practice provide more than 150,000 hours of community service a year. The School of Dental Medicine’s PennSmiles program supplies children in West Philadelphia with dental education and treatment and the School of Nursing’s LIFE Program provides nursing, medical, and rehabilitative care for more than 350 local seniors. Notably, Penn Law was the first to require pro bono work as a graduation requirement and Penn Vet, in partnership with the Philadelphia Animal Welfare Society, affords veterinary students the opportunity to participate in a surgery rotation, increasing the number of adoptable dogs and cats each year.

We are proud of putting knowledge into practice, but we are not complacent. Over the course of Penn’s history, the challenges facing humanity have increased in quantity and intensity. One hundred years ago, teams of adventurers mounted expeditions to the South Pole during the Heroic Age of Antarctic Exploration. Today, expeditions to Antarctica are no longer an end unto themselves. Instead, scientists travel to the continent to study climate change, a new and evolving challenge that is sparking imagination and igniting bold pursuits.

New challenges also abound deep inside the human body. At Penn, neuroscientists explore the workings of the mind and brain, which remain largely unknown to us. The field of neuroscience is rich with opportunities for exploration and growth. Now more than ever, advances are critical as developmental disabilities and neurodegenerative diseases plague our population. Our new Penn Integrates Knowledge Neuroscience Initiative will help ensure that we are on the leading edge of new discoveries as the needs of society evolve. This initiative supports five new Penn Integrates Knowledge professorships, provides start-up funds for collaborative research, and strengthens interdisciplinary initiatives between the School of Medicine and other schools within the University.

The landscape of higher education and the greatest challenges of our time are constantly evolving. It is all the more fitting then that, on February 12, Penn and Philadelphia join communities around the world in celebration of the 200th anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin. Since last April, the campus has been abuzz with programs organized by Penn and local cultural organizations to celebrate the Year of Evolution. The Year explores evolution through a variety of approaches, including an interactive, multimedia exhibition at the Penn Museum entitled Surviving: The Body of Evidence.

Darwin’s contributions to science both continue to provoke debate and to spark research. His development of the modern theory of evolution enriches our understanding of the diversity of life and the development of both differentiated individuals and species. Just as biological adaptations over generations create new branches on the tree of life, the decisions we make—individually and collectively—alter the course of human history as we adapt (or fail to adapt) to a rapidly changing world. A key characteristic of evolution is that timely adaptation to change is essential to the survival of both individuals and species.

Long before Darwin’s birth or the publication of On the Origin of Species, Heraclitus said that, “There is nothing permanent except change.” As society and challenges evolve, Penn adapts and flourishes. With creative thought and innovative action, we will thrive in new environments and welcome the opportunity to tackle new intellectual and practical problems. This year, may we all broaden our horizons, attain our goals, and engage one another as members of a community of learning, growth, and fellowship.

President Amy Gutmann

“Improving the Evolving World”

Almanac

for 15 January 2009

In 2009, the Penn Compact with its threefold theme – increasing access, integrating knowledge, and engaging locally and globally – leads the University of Pennsylvania into the future. It does so in partnership with the campus building plan, Penn Connects, and the $3.5 billion capital campaign, Making History. Working together these three initiatives promise to achieve President Gutmann’s objective for Penn: from excellence to eminence. Today, as the University community celebrates the Commencement of 2009, it is useful to reflect on the institution’s oldest traditions and to recognize that Penn is keeping faith with the best of its past.

Mark Frazier Lloyd

Director

University Archives and Records Center

May, 2009