



THE EARLY YEARS:

*The Charity School,  
Academy and  
College Of Philadelphia*

Today's ceremony marks one of the historic sites in the nation as well as one of the most significant in the history of the University of Pennsylvania. Here stood the first building of the University, erected in 1740 originally to serve as a charity school and as a pulpit for the renowned English preacher, George Whitefield, initiator of the Great Awakening, America's first revival movement.

Nine years later, in 1749, Benjamin Franklin published his celebrated pamphlet, *Proposals Relating to the Education of Youth in Pensilvania*, which proposed the foundation of a public academy in Philadelphia. Soon afterwards, Franklin and some of his associates did indeed establish an academy on the basis of these proposals and the same year purchased the charity school building which to that point had been used only for occasional religious meetings despite the intent for which it was originally built. The building was admirably suited for its new purpose. At the time the largest building in Philadelphia, 100 feet by 70 feet, it was two stories tall and set back some distance from its frontage on Fourth Street. Upon its completion in 1740, the so-called New Building had become one of the show places of colonial Philadelphia.

As Edward Potts Cheyney, biographer of the University, has written: "Franklin had always spoken of the desirability of founding a college, and, as an ultimate plan, that was probably in the minds of all participants in [the Academy's] establishment." The year 1751 saw the Academy opened for classes; among the early students were two Mohawk Indian boys who had been enrolled to learn to read and write English. Four years later, the proprietary charter of the Academy, which had been granted initially in 1753, was amended to allow the institution to grant academic degrees: thus it was that the New Building became the home of the College of Philadelphia.

Six years later, the Trustees of the College, having become increasingly aware of the need for a dormitory on the order of Nassau Hall at the neighboring college in New Jersey, set about gathering the funds to construct such a building. Despite complaints about its inappropriateness, a lottery was instituted and enough funds were gained thereby to erect such a building just to the north of the College; the dormitory was opened by public



*Sketch of the Academy and College, and the dormitory, Fourth Street at Arch. The only contemporary view, by Pierre Eugene Du Simitière. Original in the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.*

announcement in January of 1765. (The accompanying illustration shows the relationship of these earliest buildings of the University.)

Here were housed and educated many of the future leaders of the Republic soon to be born. From those distant days when the University was new came 21 graduates who served in the Continental Congress. Nine signers of the Declaration of Independence, almost one-sixth of the total, were either alumni or trustees of the College: George Clymer (T), Benjamin Franklin (T), Francis Hopkinson (C,1757; H,1790), Thomas McKean (T; H,1763; H,1785), Robert Morris (T), William Paca (C,1759), Benjamin Rush (T), James Smith (T), and James Wilson (T; H,1766; H,1790). Five signers of the Constitution received undergraduate or honorary degrees from the University: Rufus King (H,1815), Thomas Mifflin (C,1760), George Washington (H,1783), Hugh Williamson (C,1757; H,1787), and, again, James Wilson; five Trustees were also signers: Clymer, Franklin, and Mifflin, as well as Thomas Fitzsimons and Jared Ingersoll.

Shortly after the British ended their occupation of Philadelphia, in 1779, the little college campus at Fourth and Arch Streets changed its name to the University of the State of Pennsylvania, the first degree-granting institution in the nation to bear that designation. During those early, chaotic years in the history of the

young Republic, the Old College on one occasion functioned as the Capitol of the new nation, serving as the meeting hall for Congress in 1779. Four years later George Washington attended commencement exercises in the building and received an honorary LL.D. degree. In 1787, the young French hero of the Revolution, the Marquis de Lafayette received an honorary degree in the Old College.

Other names destined to become famous in the history of the nation were associated with those early days of the University. Revolutionary War General "Mad Anthony" Wayne and Commodore Stephen Decatur studied on this site. Noah Webster of dictionary fame lectured in the Old College building. In this same building the first Unitarian Society in America was organized in 1796 under the influence of Joseph Priestley, co-discoverer of oxygen.

By the beginning of the 19th century, the University had grown to such a size that it felt constricted by its quarters at Fourth and Arch Streets. About that time the so-called President's House, which had been built originally as the official residence of the nation's president before the national capital was definitively moved to Washington, was put up for auction by the Commonwealth. The University bought the mansion for \$24,000 and soon afterwards the College and its classes moved to the new location at Ninth and Chestnut Streets. The University, however, continued to utilize the two buildings occupying its former site. The original building became the center of the Academy and survived until 1844. The dormitory was occupied by the Charity School, a school for poor boys and girls, and continued to be operated at that location by the University until 1877 when it was finally decided public education had become sufficiently ubiquitous that such a school was no longer needed.

The Old College and its dormitory stood at a point close to the center of the present Holiday Inn. At the corner of Arch Street, where the Inn's coffee shop is located, was the handsome brick house erected in 1774 for the first Provost, the Reverend William Smith, one of the nation's great Colonial educators. In Smith's day other houses, occupied by faculty members of the College, filled the area

now occupied by the garage of the hotel. Although Provost Smith's house remained on its corner until just two years ago, the other Fourth Street houses were succeeded as long ago as 1837 by the Merchants' Hotel, designed by the architect William Strickland. This hotel was noted for its pioneer use of speaking tubes instead of the noisy gongs which then characterized other hotels in the city. Later, on the site just north of the Old College fronting on Arch Street was erected Shoyer's, for many years one of Greater Philadelphia's most celebrated restaurants. It was only recently that it too gave way to make room for the present Holiday Inn. Sadly, the only reminder to survive from those early days of the University is the simple grave of Benjamin Franklin in the Christ Church burial ground, which in Colonial times adjoined the College campus.

And so it is that the little College founded on the Fourth and Arch Street site almost two score years before the Revolution has grown through two subsequent moves to its present location and world renown. Little did Franklin and his associates realize how well they had wrought when they paid £775.16s.1-3/4d. for the New Building in which "Logick, Rhetorick, Ethicks, and Natural Philosophy" were to be taught.

*Prepared for the ceremony conducted by Trustees and Officers of the University of Pennsylvania on January 13, 1972 to designate the site of the original buildings and to honor the birth date of the founder, Benjamin Franklin.*