Setting the Scene

Proper Philadelphia was ... the host to the New World's most sophisticated and talented leaders. A class of gentlemen, steeped in the classics as well as the political theory of Locke and Rousseau, reluctantly had taken the lead in rebellion against the British Empire, and subsequently wrote the new nation's constitution after lengthy deliberation on Philadelphia's Independence Square.

E. Digby Baltzell, Class of 1939
Philadelphia Gentlemen
and absolute Proprietors of the Province of Pennsylvania.

This Perspective View is humbly Dedicated by Nicholas Scull.
Philadelphia 1776: by the time the Declaration of Independence was signed there, the city was the metropolis of the American continent, the principal port of the colonies, and, with about 30,000 inhabitants, after London the second center of the English-speaking world. Sharing the spirit of enterprise of the New World, its citizenry attested to the qualities and range of the eighteenth century mind. Practicality and concern with civic and community affairs in no way prejudiced their keen receptivity to the arts and sciences as vocation as well as pastime. Ordinary men and women contributed to the vitality of the thriving commercial city, for these people were in many ways more literate and more politically sophisticated than their Old World counterparts. According to Edmund Burke, almost as many copies of Blackstone’s Commentaries were sold in the colonies as in England—some indication of the spirit of inquiry which was afoot, if not of the destiny of the United States to become a nation of lawyers. Colonial Philadelphia was at the peak of its political influence, at the heart of the intellectual ferment of the times.

Freed from the constraints of the Old World, and in an atmosphere of toleration unequaled elsewhere in the colonies, talented men were discovering an outlet for an ingenuity and creativity of a uniquely American kind. The most eminent example, Benjamin Franklin, along with his many technological and scientific contributions, was responsible for establishing the intellectual institutions of his adopted city. In large part a result of his ideas and energies, the Library Company of Philadelphia, the American Philosophical Society, and the College of Philadelphia all came into being during the middle of the century. Far from finding itself on the periphery of the intellectual world, Philadelphia was a focus of investigation on the American continent from which knowledge and ideas could be channeled to men of learning in London, Stockholm, or Padua.

The ties between those pursuing knowledge on both sides of the Atlantic were further cultivated through the steady influx of English and Scottish educators who were engaged to teach at the Academy and College of Philadelphia. Franklin played a leading part in establishing the “Academie and Charitable School of the Province of Pennsylvania” after a
plan in 1740 for a Charity School typifying the age of benevolence had run into difficulties. He headed the group of citizens who, in 1749, set up the Academy in the Charity School building, obtaining a charter for the College in 1755. During the Revolution, the College was reconstituted as the University of the State of Pennsylvania (1779), the first institution in America to receive the title of university. Ten years later, the colonial College was resurrected, only to be formally combined with the University in 1791. In recognition of its independent status, reference to the state was dropped from its title at that time. Just thirteen months before his death, Benjamin Franklin, the first president of the trustees of the College of Philadelphia, once again presided over the meetings of its reconstituted board.

Following the turn of the century, the ferment of colonial and early federal Philadelphia had abated. After being a hub of Revolutionary activity, the city suffered the indignity of occupation by the enemy, during which time the College of Philadelphia served as a hospital. A few years later, the population of the city was decimated by repeated outbreaks of yellow fever. A disappointment to Philadelphia and its institutions was the decision to move the capital of the new nation to Washington. The mansion constructed to house the presidents of the United States, purchased by the University trustees in 1800, became, instead, the second home of the University of Pennsylvania. In order to satisfy the institution's expanded needs, the stately building on Ninth Street was torn down and replaced in 1829.

Other famous places underwent similar change. Following an act of the Pennsylvania legislature in 1802, the halls of independence which had resonated with noble rhetoric were used to display live and stuffed animals, including Franklin's pet cat, and other natural curiosities. The famous Peale's Museum, founded by the portrait painter Charles Willson Peale and his family, occupied the second floor of the State House, as Independence Hall was then called, and included in its lease the East room, scene of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Peale's collection of live animals, including bears, monkeys, alligators, and parrots were housed in the State House Yard. In these years, Philadelphia's position as the outlet for the agricultural riches of Lancaster County and the area to the west continued, but the city struggled to compete when the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825 helped to make New York the premier port in the country.

If, in the early nineteenth century, Philadelphia lost some of its luster as the metropolis of the English-speaking colonies, unequaled outside of London, the arts and literary life continued to flourish in the city whose classic revival architecture was unsurpassed on the American continent. In the second decade, at a time when New York had seven daily papers and Boston two, Philadelphia had eleven. Forty American magazines were
received by the Athenaeum, a subscription library, along with fifty American newspapers, two from France, and three from England. The Philadelphia library had about two-fifths of all the books in public libraries in the nation. In the previous century, the Reverend Jacob Duché, first graduate of the College and its professor of oratory who became chaplain to the Continental Congress, observed that “for one person of distinction and fortune there were twenty tradesmen that frequented the Philadelphia library.” The libraries of the American Philosophical Society, the Academy of Natural Sciences, the Mercantile Library, and the Historical Society all had splendid collections. Books and papers were not only received and read in Philadelphia; they were also produced. In 1823 there were four times as many printers as clergymen and almost as many bookbinders as brickmakers. Although Philadelphia was the foremost manufacturing city of the nation, a magnet for European as well as American migrants (including blacks from the South), it had a very high proportion of professionals: more lawyers than bricklayers, more physicians than milliners.

Colonial and federal Philadelphia had produced the first American dramatist, Thomas Godfrey; the first American novelist, Charles Brockden Brown; and the early American composer, Francis Hopkinson, a member of the first graduating class at the College of Philadelphia. Peale’s Museum was the first of its kind, and Philadelphia had the oldest continuously used theater as well as the first art school—the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, founded in 1805. The Musical Fund Society of 1820 not only had the largest orchestra, with 120 members playing in a hall which could accommodate an audience of 1800; it also taught on a grand scale with 50 noted teachers for 200 students.

Such was the city, important first for its port, then for its industry and its extraordinary technological inventiveness, and always as a center of intellectual life in America. At all times, the College, and later the University, would be influenced by these urban and civic surroundings. “It is certainly more than a coincidence,” writes a modern commentator, “that the most comprehensive, and what might be termed encyclopedic, college curriculum of the whole colonial period developed in the city of Philadelphia, then the largest thriving commercial center in English America.” The only curriculum of its kind actually to be put into effect was the work of William Smith, the Scot who became the College’s first provost. His influence was also felt in the other institutions he helped to found—Washington College and St. John’s College, both in Maryland.

The plan of education which he devised differed substantially from the curriculum of the other colonial colleges, which were founded by religious denominations. Bearing in mind the actual conditions in the colonies in a work entitled Proposals Relating to the Education of Youth in Pensilvania, Franklin had already put forward a plan of practical study including the
recommendation for English to replace Latin as the most important language taught. In his writings on education, Smith reiterated Franklin's views, and the college curriculum he drew up as provost had a markedly scientific bias. Although neither of these early educational theorists rejected classical European traditions, they made the first serious attempt—and one which would come to be regarded as characteristically American—to graft a utilitarian form of instruction on to the hallowed classical curriculum inherited from the past.

One reason for the marked difference between Franklin's "seminary of learning" in Philadelphia and the colonial college of the type which has been described as "in many ways a blood brother to its English model" was the influence of Scots and the Scottish Enlightenment in the early days of the College. William Smith had studied at King's College, Aberdeen, and the first vice-provost, Francis Alison, although a native of Ireland, had received his education at the University of Edinburgh. James Wilson, who gave the first instruction in law in 1790, was born and raised in Fifeshire and completed his studies at the University of St. Andrews before emigrating. The three original professors in the medical department of the College—John Morgan, William Shippen, and Benjamin Rush—all went to Edinburgh for their medical degree. When John Morgan obtained the trustees' consent to the establishment of America's first medical school in 1765, his plans were inspired by his Scottish alma mater.

Another factor set the College of Philadelphia apart from the other eight pre-Revolutionary colleges: Franklin's alone was intended to be nonsectarian. In fact, "the purpose of training students for the Christian ministry is specified in all colonial college charters with the single exception, again, of the College of Philadelphia." In the medieval world, the preservation of learning had always been linked with training for the ministry. This bond was reaffirmed by the connection between the first colleges in colonial America and various Protestant denominations. The tradition lingered on in the custom of appointing clerics to head the learned institutions founded later in the nineteenth century. Since there was never a divinity school at the University of Pennsylvania, it furnished presidents for the new colleges and universities less often than other institutions.

In its early years, Philadelphia's college might be small in comparison with Harvard, Yale, and the College of New Jersey (Princeton), but it did attract students from the South as well as the North. It was not size, however, which gave the colonial colleges their strength. In fact, "the permanent significance of the colonial achievement in higher education . . . was all out of proportion to the size of student enrollments." And while the other colleges were primarily concerned with "training a special elite for community leadership" and what Cotton Mather described as "the collegiate way of living," "the forming of character" rather than "the fostering of research," the Philadelphia founders looked further ahead to
what would later come to be accepted as the main purposes of higher education: contemporary and scientific as well as ancient studies, professional as well as scholarly emphases.\textsuperscript{12}

In the early decades of the nineteenth century, the colleges and universities, created with such great hope in colonial times, entered the doldrums. They had lost the respect of the community as a result of a tendency for rowdiness and rebellion which had existed from the earliest days. Up to the Civil War, “constant warfare raged between faculty and students . . . and . . . the most outrageous pranks and disturbances were provoked by undisciplined and incredibly bold young men.”\textsuperscript{13} According to Francis Wayland, president of Brown, the few professors who had charge of these riotous student bodies received salaries far below those of other professionals and had small chance of increments or opportunities for supplementing their earnings on the side.\textsuperscript{14} Needless to say, it was often no easy task to recruit able people to the position of college professor. Nonetheless, throughout our first century as a republic and ever since, no people has prized formal schooling more than Americans.

During this period, there were frequent clashes between students and most faculty. Violence had, of course, occurred from time to time during the first century of the American republic and afterwards. A side effect of the concept of equality and democracy which is rarely, or reluctantly, acknowledged, although it is one to which de Tocqueville alludes, is the way an American dislike of authority and the emphasis on individual rights tend to encourage a certain lawlessness and a kind of license. This came to be reflected in the turmoil on the campuses and the regular baiting of “townies” on the part of students. Such behavior presented some problems at the University of Pennsylvania, although these tended to be resolved in a more pacific manner than was elsewhere the case—as, indeed, occurred again with the unrest of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Yet, despite the American expression “boys will be boys,” suggestive of a special license given to youth, such things as changes in curriculum, relaxation of discipline, and the introduction of sports, resulted in a reduction in rowdyism and destructive rebellion in the period after the Civil War.

By that time, there were over 180 permanent colleges and universities in the United States. Many more had been established but later went out of existence.\textsuperscript{15} In the years that followed the Civil War, a smaller proportion of those who took their seats in Congress had attended colleges and universities. The degree might still be a credential socially and a necessity for some occupations, but it was one which men such as Andrew Carnegie dismissed as evidence of a familiarity with “the barbarous and petty squabbles of a far-distant past.” In Carnegie’s opinion, “the future captain of industry” had no need for any such course of study since the enterprising entrepreneur would rather be “hotly engaged in the school of experience.”\textsuperscript{16} In other words, there were numerous roads to prosperity and
Plan of the West Philadelphia Campus in 1890
Landscape Development Plan, 1977
The first group of University buildings constructed on old pasture land included College Hall and the Furness Library. Townhouses were going up along newly paved roads, and the commercial area along Market Street and the railroad was expanding. The complex of buildings in the southernmost apex belong to the Blockley Almshouse, later Philadelphia General Hospital.

few of them led through the halls of academe. Proposals for reform and innovation had been put forward as early as the 1820s at some institutions, including the University of Pennsylvania, but these were firmly rebuffed at the time because they were perceived as an attempt to "Germanize" the American college. Steeped in tradition, few people had the foresight to realize that, if higher education was to flourish in an age of rapid social change and advancing technology, there would have to be a thorough rethinking of the university's position and goals.

Ironically, in their enfeebled state following on the Civil War, the American colleges became more receptive to change. The early reforms that had been advocated by people such as George Ticknor of Harvard, a graduate of Dartmouth who had gone in 1815 to study at Göttingen, did not gain immediate currency. Later in the century, these reforms received encouragement from a simple expedient: the newly inaugurated steamship services to Europe. It became less and less possible to ignore the qualities of Germany's universities when thousands of Americans were returning home
with graduate training. When the faculty of the scientific school at Yale successfully petitioned for the right to award the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, they naturally looked to the German universities for their model. The first earned Ph.D. in the United States was awarded at Yale in 1861. The idea of founding a "national university," as old as the nation, received a boost when James Smithson of London willed his property to the United States for "an Establishment for the increase and diffusion of knowledge among men." The dream of such a university was never realized, although the Smithsonian Institution came into being as a result of the bequest. But another project by those who had favored it, under the leadership of Alexander Dallas Bache—a Philadelphian, descendant of Franklin, and professor at the University—gained congressional approval. As a result the National Academy of Sciences was created in 1863.

In this same period, the American tendency to link intellectual with practical training resulted in a great expansion of higher education when the mostly new state universities were stimulated by the Morrill Act of
1862. According to this act, federal support was granted to states for colleges that would provide instruction in agriculture and mechanical skills. These were the very areas which both Franklin and Smith had wished to encourage by their writings prior even to the establishment of the College of Philadelphia. Over a century later, the University of Pennsylvania was the only eastern, private institution other than those new institutions, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Cornell, to attempt to qualify as a land grant college and to receive “a portion of the public land-scrip.” A “collegiate department of agriculture, mines, manufactures, and the mechanic arts” was established, but this bid to change the University’s character did not succeed.19

As the American university emerged, a break was made with the traditional emphasis on religious exegesis at places of learning. Clerics ceased to predominate on the boards of educational institutions, even though academic robes, reminiscent also of the courts of law, still harked back to the long-lived relation between the schools and the church. In spite of the nonsectarian origins of the University of Pennsylvania, a majority of its provosts had been from the clergy. Provost Smith, depicted in otherwise secular surroundings, was always painted wearing his robe as a divine. In the decades following the Civil War, a succession of energetic lay provosts oversaw the period of transition and expansion which occurred at the University as elsewhere. Charles J. Stillé moved the University to its present site in 1870–1872, and many of his proposals became a reality during the tenure of William Pepper. With his base established in the most reputed medical department in the country, Pepper energetically supported such departures as the development of the first hospital in the United States owned and operated by a university. Unlike those institutions, starting with Harvard, which established a strong presidency, the highest administrator continued to be the provost. Until well into the present century, the University of Pennsylvania was run largely by its trustees.

By the turn of the century, the student body in the colleges and universities of the United States was a quarter of a million—more than that of all of Western Europe combined, and almost as many as the United Kingdom has today. By the end of World War I that figure would more than double. It would double again by 1929, and more than double once more by the end of World War II.20 In 1900, the Association of American Universities was founded with fourteen original members, including the University of Pennsylvania. Six years later when the Congress of Arts and Sciences convened many of the best minds of the western world at the St. Louis World’s Fair, the European contingent still outshone the American. But from that time on, the contributions from the American side steadily gained ground. The influx of refugee scholars from German and other European universities prior to the Second World War reinforced this trend. Then, after the war, tremendous changes came about as federal funds were
made available for research. America began to dominate basic research of almost all kinds, a fact attested to in the year of the American Bicentennial when all the recipients of the Nobel Prize came from the United States.

And what of Philadelphia and the University of Pennsylvania two hundred years later? All through its history, the University has been located in the city, its growth and development reflected in the nature of the three principal sites it has occupied since the original Academy building was put up in 1740. The progression of structures which have housed it—including the Reverend George Whitefield's “New Building,” and the mansion built for the presidents of the United States, on to the present campus where undergraduate, graduate, and professional schools are all in close proximity to one another—provides material evidence of the evolution of higher education over a period of more than two centuries. During the same period, Philadelphia, having lost its position as first city in the new nation, began to appear as something of the Rip Van Winkle of American cities.

Its inhabitants, however, habitually regard this posture with amused equanimity. For, in Philadelphia, there tends to be a quiet acceptance of things the way they are which comprises every aspect of life in the city—from the superlative to the indifferent. To Henry James, who visited the city in 1904, Philadelphia appeared as “incontestably . . . the American city of the large type, that didn’t bristle. . . . Philadelphia then wasn’t a place but a state of consanguinity.” Something of the atmosphere evoked by James carries over to the University. The city and the University share a sense of modesty which can be both admirable and infuriating since Philadelphia is a national center with certain cultural characteristics unequaled in the nation. These are not exclusively the product of a past of which few other eighteenth century cities in the world can boast; they also bear witness to Walt Whitman’s dictum that “a great city is that which has the greatest men and women.”

There have been periods in its history when the University, with its modesty, seemed to mark time and others when it was exuberant. Yet, during each, the accompanying lack of pressure has been experienced as compatible by able individuals who, unhampered by an overbearing institutional presence, have used their freedom to get on with their work—and to excel. Each of these tendencies survives in the present University, and in particular our inclination to keep our light under a bushel. In the modern world, there is a welcome place for becoming modesty and, certainly, for the ability to goad oneself. These are among the many virtues, gentle and lively, left over from an earlier age, at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. They have had their part in creating an environment, both accomplished and compatible, for learning, striving—and achievement.