John Harvard's Journal

Icon

Harvard's oldest building at 300

Massachusetts Hall, for many people, is Harvard. It guides visitors through Johnston Gate into what is now Harvard Yard. Its compact design—pleasingly proportioned Early Georgian red brick with white trim, devoid of frills—defines the architectural idiom for much of the rest of this campus (and others).

Its history anticipates the University's, too. A growing student body ("ye Sons of ye Prophets are now so increas'd") had spilled over into "lodgings in the town," spurring "uncomfortable Views of Mischeifs impending." Accordingly, various building plans were drawn—literally—by Benjamin Wadsworth, a Fellow of the College (and later president), and by President John Leverett (a task modern presidents no longer need fulfill). Successive fundraising memorials to the General Assembly succeeded in extracting two tranches, for £1,500 and £2,000 (a chore very much on presidents' agendas today). The construction was sufficiently far along for Commencement visitors to see much of the building in the summer of 1720. A novel feature was the "Apparatus Chamber," the precursor to the vast scientific facilities today.

For all its welcome familiarity as Harvard's oldest standing building, Mass Hall has no more resisted change than the burgeoning academy around it. The clock was added in 1725. Lecture rooms and laboratories replaced housing during a gut renovation in 1870. At an affectionate, gala bicentennial celebration in 1920 (addressed by President A. Lawrence Lowell and Massachusetts governor and U.S. vice president-elect Calvin Coolidge, among others), more than one speaker recalled the tradition of students fleeing dull classes via the fire escape. Its past as a dormitory, "a place to sleep in," carried over as "that tradition of sleep remained after it was turned into a lecture hall."

The building has witnessed rougher circumstances, too. After the College removed to Concord in 1775, Continental Army troops quartered on campus; two years later, Harvard granted permission to house imprisoned British officers in Mass Hall. In 1778, Harvard sent the Commonwealth a detailed account of claims for damage to its properties and stores—including the theft of Mass Hall's metal fixtures—totaling £417.8.8. The still-solid building weathered the Civil War and World War I, but despite Lowell's encomium to its thick brick walls and "solidity," it suffered fire damage in 1924. The ensuing repairs restored the dorm rooms—until, emerging from the Great

Photograph by Jim Harrison

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Depression and with world war threatening again, a subsequent remodeling, in 1939, created administrative spaces: the forerunner of today’s Mass Hall, with offices for the president and senior staff, topped by a residual floor of freshmen.

In this sense, Mass Hall has symbolized the University’s enduring passage through internal change and external storm: anchored in tradition, restless in intellectual ambition, adaptable to an uncertain world. So it is today, in the pandemic year of 2020.

And so it was from its inception, three centuries ago. President Leverett visited the General Court in November 1720 “to give Thanks unto Almighty God, who has inclined and Led the Government into and thro so great and Noble a Work, and then also to make our acknowledgements to your Excellency and Honours for this great Benefaction to the College.” Sadly, the following June 23, before the first graduation and accompanying revelries since Mass Hall’s completion, the Overseers had to vote that “there be a private Commencement this year.” Why? “By reason of the present Spreading of the Small Pox.”

~JOHN S. ROSENBERG

Graduation, Socially Distanced

There’s nothing like a global pandemic and economic meltdown to concentrate the mind and focus the joyous celebration of graduation on the very hard work at hand. And so it was with Harvard’s condensed, online University degree-conferral ceremony (“Honoring the Harvard Class of 2020”) and its diverse schools’ class days and celebrations on Thursday, May 28, as Tercentenary Theatre lay vacant (see the cover) on an occasion when 32,000 happy people would normally be present. The community has known since March 20 that the 369th Commencement, as usually understood, was not to be. In response, among so many other pressing priorities, University leaders, arts and music staff members, and students themselves joined forces to invent a suitable procedure for transforming candidates into graduates (with that hard-won, Harvvardian credential officially bestowed)—and with the promise of proper festival rites in the future, when the pandemic loosens its grip on people worldwide.

The result was an innovation: an online morning broadcast, with President Lawrence S. Bacow hosting and conferring the aforesaid 8,174 degrees and certificates en masse, preceded and followed by online school events—some including high-wattage class-day speakers, and showing their newly minted alumni individually, and by name.

That bare outline does no justice to the emotions expressed, the very serious commentary on the nearly overwhelming issues of the day, or the community’s resilience in embracing both.

The depopulating of the campus on short notice in mid March left nearly everyone—and perhaps most poignantly, the College’s expectant seniors—bewildered and disoriented. Turning to the most basic indicators, a section of The Harvard Crimson’s senior survey on COVID-19-related matters found 35 percent of respondents reporting inadequate study space at home (or wherever); 21 percent struggling to schedule work from distant time zones; 17 percent having to juggle coursework and an obligation to help support their families; and 11 percent confronting illness (personally or within their families). One can only imagine how they felt.

Absent a Baccalaureate, Bacow sent a message to the seniors on May 27. “When we recruited you,” he wrote, “we offered you the opportunity to work with great faculty, and you did. But when we recruited the faculty to Harvard, we offered them the opportunity to work with extraordinary students, students who would challenge them like no other, and you did!... At times like this, I like to recall one of my favorite passages from the Talmud. It is the reflections of a great scholar. ‘I have learned much from my teachers,’ he wrote, ‘more from my colleagues, but most from my students.’ On behalf of all of us at Harvard, thank you for having taught us so well. It has been our joy to share this campus with you.”

The administrator closest to them, College dean Rakesh Khurana, told the seniors who tuned in on Thursday afternoon, “Even in the face of enormous losses we are experiencing on the global level, it’s okay to grieve for the smaller ways that your lives have shifted dramatically and unexpectedly...and to mourn what you have lost by missing out on these last few months at Harvard.” Beyond the moment, he reminded them, “[T]oday is a moment to think about what lies ahead, and to ask yourselves how you are going to move forward with hope into a world that looks so different from the one you were preparing to enter” (see harvardmag.com/comm-obrien-20).

Others found unique ways to articulate the prevailing sentiments. In their impeccably delivered undergraduate and graduate English...