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‘A Pleasure and an Honor’: Students’ Writing on Academic Dress at Columbia University, 1820–1950, and Updates on Previous Notes

By Stephen Wolgast

College records from centuries past tell us the rules that students followed when they put on their academic dress. Collections of engravings and photographs show us how they looked. When dressed for class, exams and chapel, how did they feel? That’s harder to say.

So when the archives of the student newspaper at Columbia University were digitized recently, I was hopeful that students had committed to ink their thoughts about the ancient costume in the years following the paper’s 1877 founding. I was happy to find that they wrote about cap and gown frequently. The search results filled several pages, providing new insights into students’ interest in academic dress, not to mention other students’ indifference and occasional disdain. The articles show that gowns, in particular, were used more often than the official record indicates, and that students, especially the graduating seniors in the decades before and after 1900, looked forward to wearing their gowns every day in the weeks before graduating.

They shared their enthusiasm in the pages of the *Columbia Spectator*. Student writing is valuable because it adds contemporary undergraduate opinion and reaction to the documents typically found in university files. The University Archives at Columbia hold important documents about the administration’s interest in academic dress, which I reported on in Vol. 9, but their records of the mid-nineteenth century come up the thinnest.¹ Getting to hear from students themselves places several scenes in our mind’s eye when imagining what we would have seen if we had stepped on campus in the nineteenth century. We are lucky that the editors of the *Spectator*, in its early years, asked alumni from decades past to recall their experiences as students. The newspaper’s own contemporaneous reporting records campus life through the eyes of students as they were living it.

The newspaper was originally published semi-monthly (more often than not) during the academic year and became a bi-weekly on a fairly reliable schedule around 1896. It is now called the *Columbia Daily Spectator* and of course is updated online whenever the editors see fit. It is the second-oldest continuously published college newspaper in the United States, after *The Harvard Crimson*. The *Spec*, as it is affectionately known, gained financial independence from the university in 1962 and is staffed by undergraduates.

This article looks into contemporaneous accounts during the time of greatest change to academic dress in the US, which started with the Morrill Act of 1862 that established public universities in the states, through to the first decade of the twentieth century, and continues with highlights from the steadily dwindling frequency of articles until the mid-

¹ ‘King’s Crowns: The History of Academic Dress at King’s College and Columbia University’, *TBS*, 9 (2009), pp. 80–137.

dle of the last century. Reading the articles, I looked for examples that added to the record I had previously found and especially watched for reporting that contradicted my earlier assumptions. I start with recollections published in the *Spectator*, describing academic dress in the decades before the paper's founding.

Memories

1827

Cornelius R. Disosway wrote in 1867 about student life in 1827. Like many of the recollected memories, high-jinks came up frequently, and occasionally a nugget or two of cap or gown. Disosway remembered: '[T]he students—I think every morning, but am sure on Saturday morning—used to assemble, wearing their gowns, in the chapel and listen to a piece'. He also wrote that students who had misbehaved received their punishment during the meeting, which recalls the 'misdemeanors' adjudicated by the Trustees in the 1770s. In the early years of the college, Myles Cooper, the president of Columbia's predecessor, King's College, punished at least one student by forbidding him to wear his cap and gown for one week.²

Disosway mentioned gowns but not caps, which fits into the historical record because 1827 was the year when students asked the Board of Trustees to permit them to wear caps. The Trustees referred the request to the faculty, whose record of the discussion, if any, is unknown.³

The request—or another very like it—came from Hamilton Fish, Class of 1827. Fish would serve as governor of the State of New York from 1849 to 1851 and delivered the valedictory oration on behalf of his class at commencement. The *Spectator* reported that an exhibit commemorating Columbia's bicentenary in 1954 included a petition signed by Fish on behalf of his classmates asking for approval to wear cap and gown, a document previously unknown to me. At the time, Columbia's statutes on academic dress dated to the eighteenth century, when in 1788 the Trustees gave permission to students to wear cap and gown. In 1789 they gave the professors the authority to require gowns; I have found no records indicating the events that required academic dress. Not until the petition in 1827 did the Trustees address cap and gown again, but in that instance they referred the matter to the faculty. The faculty's action, if any, is unknown.⁴

1840

Caps would continue to be omitted from Columbia's academic dress for several years. Moving ahead to 1840, commencement day was the 'morning of the year' for seniors. Writing as

2 C. R. Disosway, 'Columbia; or, 'Tis Sixty Years Since', *Spectator*, 17 Aug. 1887, pp. 97–99. Disosway graduated in 1820. Why his memory refers to 1827 is unclear, but he practised law in New York and may have visited the campus or simply had an office nearby; an 1888 letter of his states 'I still take great interest in COLUMBIA and its alumni'. Historical Biographical Files, University Archives, Columbia University. He died in 1889. Myles Cooper's record book in Milton Halsey Thomas, ed., *The Black Book; Or, Misdemeanors in King's College, New York, 1771-1775* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931), pp. 3–4.

3 *Resolutions Passed by the Trustees of Columbia College; With Brief Notices of the Action of the Board upon Important Subjects, from 1820 to 1868* (New York: D. Van Nostrand, 1868), p. 9.

4 Petition: 'Display John Jay Documents in Low' [and those of others], *Spectator*, 16 Feb. 1954, p. 4. Fish also received an AM from Columbia, in 1830. Trustees in 1788, 1789, 1827: 'King's Crowns', pp. 86–87. All other citations are to the *Spectator* unless otherwise noted.

S. R. W., a graduate recalls from four decades later that students were required to furnish their own black silk gowns ‘and to wear them on all public occasions’, and goes on to specify that ‘caps, or mortar-boards, were not in fashion in those days.’⁵ What were the public occasions he refers to, and how often did students attend them? No answer refers to this decade, though later examples describe events, open to the public, at which students gave speeches. It is my conjecture that other events were the celebrations and ceremonies marking the end of the academic year, which are mentioned frequently in the 1860s and later. In my earlier article, I quoted a student referring to the college president’s academic dress as ‘graduation gowns’ and suggested that the comment showed that gowns were worn only for that occasion.⁶ Unfortunately, S. R. W. doesn’t elaborate on usage, but he makes clear that gowns were worn outside of graduation events.

S. R. W. includes a note that degree candidates wore a ‘large black satin rosette fastened to each shoulder’ to distinguish themselves from the other students. The article offers no description of the rosette. Using a decoration to visually separate graduating students from underclassmen suggests that the same gown was worn by all students; had there been an undergraduate’s gown, no rosette would have been needed. The only article I came across that referred to an undergraduate’s gown was one proposing such a gown in 1881, a time when the fashion for students was to wear caps without gowns.⁷ No other article referred to the gowns of freshmen, sophomores or juniors as anything other than the standard gown worn by bachelors.

Student members of the two literary societies wore rosettes of their own. Peithologians wore a white satin rosette with gold tassels, while the Philolexians used a blue satin rosette with silver tassels. The Societies’ impact endures: Blue and white became the University’s colours. Their use at the 1840 commencement was similar to a description in an 1837 diary entry, noted in my previous article, when a student wore a blue ribbon and a white ribbon. From the modern perspective, we can see that Americans’ penchant for decorating their gowns started long ago.

1861

Were rosettes and ribbons a forerunner to modern students’ sashes, identifying allegiances? The *Spectator* reported in 1954 that shortly after the Civil War had broken out, Maj. John Anderson, a new hero of the North, took part in a flag-raising ceremony on the campus on 23 April 1861. ‘Attending students wore gowns with red, white and blue ribbons.’⁸

1866

Graduating seniors celebrated their approaching freedom in the days before the commencement ceremony. The festivities were formalized in 1865 as Class Day and variously featured speeches, luncheons, dances and seniors’ guests. Remembering his Class Day in 1866, a Mr Macbeth waxed poetic on the topics of merriment and music and the vast num-

5 S. R. W., ‘College Commencement Fifty Years Ago’, 19 May 1890, pp. 83–84.

6 Allan Nevins and Milton Halsey Thomas, eds, *The Diary of George Templeton Strong* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), Vol. 1: *Young Man in New York, 1835-1849*, p. 56, in ‘King’s Crowns’, at p. 89.

7 A. H., ‘Cap and Gown’, 25 March 1881, pp. 35–36 (p. 36).

8 ‘Columbia History: 1754–1954’, 11 Jan. 1954, p. 9. Maj. Anderson had led the defence of Port Sumter, in Charleston, South Carolina, against an attack from Southern troops who had fired the first shots of the Civil War. See, for example, Adam Goodheart, *1861: The Civil War Awakening* (New York: Knopf, 2011), Chapter 1.

ber of visitors taking part. 'All these people,' he wrote, 'came to see the four-year patriarchs, in their gowns and Oxford caps, smoking together the parting pipe.'⁹ We can presume that by Oxford cap he referred to a trencher.

1870s

We see from a letter to the editor that students chose to wear gowns for several weeks before graduating in the early 1870s, and that caps seem to have been included by then. One N. P. S. writes that in 1872–73 the costume of caps and gowns was worn by the junior and senior classes for 'a month or two', though whether at the beginning of the academic year or the end he does not say. He does, however, add to our understanding of what may have been a public exercise. '[D]uring that period I can recall no instance of an exercise in declamation in which all of the participants were not clad in this eminently appropriate, historic and classic garb.' The editors of the *Spectator* were moved to counter their correspondent's praise by bringing up the less enthusiastic use of gowns by more recent students. '[E]xperience has undoubtedly shown that the costume in question will never be generally and permanently worn at Columbia.'¹⁰

The final alumni memory mentioning gowns recalls 1876, which was also the year before the *Spectator* was founded. Written in 1901, the graduate, William B. McVickar (Class of 1880), shows that an earlier assumption of mine was likely incorrect. Quoting an 1869 article in a student magazine critical of rumours that gowns would be banned during exams because their voluminous folds gave cheating students a convenient place to hide notes, I wrote that because I had found no other reference to gowns' being banned that the action had likely never taken place.¹¹

McVickar's article, and a handful of other *Spectator* references suggest otherwise. Referring to the students of the Class of 1877, he wrote:

[T]hey were credited with having braved a member of the faculty, and of having come off victors over him before the Board, flaunting thereafter their flowing gowns in all examinations in spite of his—well-founded—suspicions that gowns were but cloaks for 'cribs.'¹²

Contemporaneous reporting

Popular topics in the *Spectator*'s pages in the late nineteenth century were sports, club meetings and decisions of the administration. Academic dress frequently appears in the paper in these years, much more so than it would after World War I. Readers who are already familiar with the history of American universities at the time will recall the growth in higher education after the US Civil War, leading to a tremendous surge in student populations at the newly established colleges and universities. As Americans of modest means enrolled, many of them wanted to adopt the outward signs of their university connections. Academic dress was one way to do so.¹³

9 'Class Day Exercises', 13 June 1906, pp. 1–2 (p. 2).

10 N. P. S., 'Caps and Gowns Once More', letter to the editor and editors' reply, 1 Dec. 1877.

11 McVickar also graduated from the Columbia Law School in 1882 and practised in New York. He died in 1901. Student article: David B. Ogden, 'Caps and Gowns', *The Cap and Gown*, Vol. 1, no issue or page number on clipping, 20 May 1869 (Columbia University, University Archives, CF, Box 33, Folder 2: Commencement). My comment: *TBS*, 9, p. 90.

12 McVickar, 'College Days', 19 April 1901, p. 3.

13 Wolgast (compiler), 'The Intercollegiate Code of Academic Costume: An Introduction',

Adopting the cap and gown became popular across the country, but reporting on it may have been overzealous, as the *Spectator's* editors allege at other college publications. The *Spectator's* editors were moved to report that suggestions from other campuses that Columbia had adopted the cap and gown for daily use was 'a lie made out of whole cloth.' The significance here is the reliability of a newspaper's reporting on a campus whose location hundreds of miles away prevented any sort of primary observation.¹⁴

We will hope that the *Spectator's* details of Columbia reflected a reasonable degree of reliability since its writers and editors were a part of campus life. So when the paper commented that gowns fit so poorly because there were hired out by a firm (instead of being owned by the students), we can easily imagine the tall fellows wearing gowns too short and short fellows trailing their hems. The event the writer described was a 'semi-annual', which appears to have been the series of student speeches (fourteen in 1878) in the mid-winter mentioned above. It's further evidence of gowns being worn at a public occasion other than commencement.¹⁵

Earlier we saw that the gown was in occasional use but the cap was unused. Modes had changed by 1881, when the *Spectator* reported that the sophomores (Class of '83) decided to adopt the mortarboard by wearing it on campus. Gowns, on the other hand, were not worn at the time, so the anonymous writer continues, "There is a possibility also, we understand, of their adopting the full academic garb." A few months later, in March 1881, an A. H. posits that faculty, students and candidates had 'in the old days' worn 'full regalia' to commencement but that he had been unable to find that academic dress had ever been in daily use at Columbia. He adds: "[The Class of] '80 endeavored to resuscitate the costume, and one man adopted, and manfully wore, through his whole course, a college cap."¹⁶As mentioned above, I found no mention of a gown specifically for undergraduates different from the bachelor's gown.

It's interesting to note that one reason A. H. advocates for cap and gown was to protect their clothes and to give a uniform appearance—arguments that Gardner C. Leonard would echo fifteen years hence when he promoted the scheme that became the Intercollegiate Costume Code.

The caps must have proved popular with the sophomores because by the autumn of their junior year gowns had been added to the class's wardrobe. *Spectator* editors recommended their adoption by all classes.¹⁷

For all the references to discussion about caps without gowns, gowns without caps, both or neither, notably absent is a mention of Columbia's first academic dress statute. It was approved by the Trustees in 1887 and included a master's gown with facing and sleeve

TBS, 9 (2009), pp. 9–37 (pp. 9–13).

14 'Current Topics', 1 Nov. 1877, p. 1. Another example of reporting that could be called disingenuous but nevertheless has a storied history was described in the 26 Oct. 1900 issue, pp. 2–3: A defunct Columbia student periodical from the late nineteenth century, *Acta*, was said to have as its managing editor a young man who answered letters to the editor that he himself had written—many of which were 'most abusive'—using 'as many as six "noms de plume"' including letters and editorial responses on our topic at hand. 'He would introduce from time to time the then worn-out question of the propriety of students wearing caps and gowns.'

15 Event in 1878: 'The Semi-Annual', 1 Feb. 1878. Ill-fitting gowns: Editors' reply to letter to the editor, 24 Feb. 1880.

16 A. H., 'Cap and Gown', 25 March 1881, pp. 35–36.

17 'About College', 2 Oct. 1881, p. 25.

stripes and for doctors a dress gown in crimson.¹⁸ The *Spectator* reprinted the statute, but offered no commentary other than pointing out that mortarboards were ‘more or less worn’ while gowns were saved for special occasions.¹⁹ When the university presidents approved the ICC in 1895—it met at Columbia, with its president as host—the student paper didn’t even reprint the text. It seems the students were more concerned with which class was wearing the cap or gown and on which occasions than the University’s rules about them.

The students were also concerned with how outsiders characterized their dressing habits. When the student paper at Dartmouth College reported in 1888 that Columbia students were now ‘obliged’ to wear cap and gown, the *Spectator* staff took umbrage. ‘We will freely pay any editor’s expenses who can find a gown regularly worn on our campus’, it offered. Another item in the same issue noted that ‘while mortar boards are seen occasionally, we have yet to see the first gown worn around our campus.’²⁰ Notable here is the switch from wearing only gowns to wearing only caps.

At about this time tailors and clothiers began advertising academic dress in the *Spectator*. One which placed an ad regularly was G. W. Simmons & Co. of Boston. A drawing of two young men illustrated the ads, each sporting a rakishly angled mortarboard with tassel, and wearing open their flowing gowns with an arched yoke on the back that reached to their ankles. (See Fig. 1.) Notable for modern readers was the line added in 1890 after the firm’s name: “Oak Hall”.²¹

Cotrell & Leonard, the Albany, N.Y., firm that would become the Depository of the Intercollegiate Bureau of Academic Costume, published ads in the *Spectator* after 1900. The ads were small—one column wide by about an inch and a half deep—and included a photographic bust of a woman in a gown and square cap. (See Fig. 2.)

The next important event drawing the editors’ comment was the inauguration of the new president of Columbia, Seth Low, on 3 February 1890. The *Spectator* published drawings of Low and scenes of the event, including an illustration showing grizzled professors watching the dais in their academic dress. (See Fig. 3.) Reporting on the inauguration, the editors had decided that the faculty ‘were arrayed in the academic gown (which, be it said, all things considered, was worn with a very creditable show of ease)’.²²

The commencement ceremony later that year was held at night, which was unusual for Columbia. Commenting on the change in time, the editors recommended dress suits for degree candidates because wearing gowns was no longer customary for students. Their suggestion did not apply to celebratory events leading up to commencement, evidently. In the issue after commencement, the editors tut-tutted about students who had worn light trousers under their gowns.²³

18 For a full description see ‘King’s Crowns’, *TBS*, 9, pp. 94–99.

19 ‘Academic Costumes in Columbia College’, 12 Jan. 1888, pp. 90, 95–99.

20 Expenses paid: Minos Rhandamanthus & Co. [the authors of a column written pseudonymously], ‘Our Exchanges’, 17 Oct. 1888, p. 12. Mortarboards and gowns: Editors, ‘About College’, *ibid.*, p. 7.

21 Today Oak Hall Inc. is one of two leading manufacturers of U.S. academic dress, having absorbed Bentley & Simon, E. R. Moore, Cotrell & Leonard and other storied names in American cap & gown. Its headquarters are in Virginia. The first ad I found appeared on 7 June 1889, p. 88. The Oak Hall name first appeared no later than the issue of 20 Nov. 1890, p. vii.

22 Drawing: ‘About College’, 29 Jan. 1890, p. 92. Arrayed in the gown: ‘Inauguration of our new President’, 14 Feb. 1890, p. 99.

23 Dress suits: [Untitled,] 11 June 1890, pp. 92–93. Light trousers: [Untitled,] 27 June 1890, p. 116.

FIG. 1



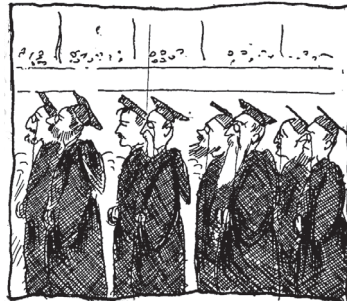
ACADEMICAL GOWNS & CAPS.
 Correct styles for UNIVERSITY & COLLEGE USE. Price according to Material and number ordered. Special prices for classes. For measurement send height, width of shoulder, size of neck, and length of sleeve.
 These gowns add grace and fullness to a speaker's form.
MILITARY EQUIPMENTS.
 Swords, Sashes, Belts, Boxing Gloves, Folls, Footballs, Jackets; everything that Students use in athletic sports, we supply.
C. W. SIMMONS & CO.,
 "Oak Hall," Boston, Mass.

FIG. 2



COTRELL & LEONARD,
 Albany, N. Y.
 472 & 474 BROADWAY,
 Inter-Collegiate Makers of
CAPS, GOWNS & HOODS.
 Class Contracts a Specialty.
 Particulars on Application.
 Official Makers to Columbia University,
 Office: Room 9, 54 East 49th Street.

FIG. 3



Images by permission of Spectator Publishing Company Inc.

FIG. 1 The Simmons advertisement appeared a half-dozen times in the winter of 1890–91. This one was published 20 Nov. 1890, p. vii, and mentions Oak Hall.

FIG. 2 A woman in a square cap was prominent in the Cotrell & Leonard ad published for many years in the *Spectator*. 27 May 1896, n.p.

FIG. 3 Professors at the inauguration of Seth Low, illustrated by a student member of the editorial board, and published 14 Feb. 1890, p. 92.

Over the next couple of decades, roughly until the beginning of World War I, most mentions in the *Spectator* about academic dress fell into one of three categories: use outside ceremonies, use during ceremonies, and either frustration when students ignored agreements to wear their gowns or approbation at gowns' absence.

Use outside academic ceremonies

As the nineteenth century wound down, student writing about academic dress increased as did, apparently, the types of occasions on which it was worn. In 1890, students applying to enter Columbia were examined by 'officers' in gowns, 'a custom which we would like to see introduced into all examinations'.²⁴

When a service was held in 1895 in the college chapel in memory of a professor of Greek archaeology and epigraphy, members of the University Council and the faculties of philosophy and arts attended in cap and gown.²⁵ By 1912, Columbia was holding an annual memorial service in St Paul's Chapel, on campus, to honour its dead, on the Sunday before the beginning of the Christmas holiday break. Among those wearing gowns that year were 'old graduates', a rare indication of alumni wearing academic dress on campus.²⁶ A decade later the *Spectator* noted that at a service for those who had honoured the University the faculty would attend wearing caps and gowns but would not wear their boards 'in deference to the dead ... one of the few occasions when such a practice is observed'.²⁷ What

24 [Untitled] 11 June 1890, p. 93.

25 'Memorial Service for Professor A[ugustus]. C. Merriam', 31 Jan. 1895, p. 269. The University Council was the forerunner to the University Senate.

26 'Columbia Honors her Dead', 16 Dec. 1912, p. 1.

27 'Will Honor Deceased with Special Chapel', 7 Jan. 1922, p. 2, and 'Dead Commemorated at Special Service', 9 Jan. 1922, p. 1.

were boards? If we agree that a hood resembles in some way a large flat object, we can see that in the context of the sentence a board may have been a hood: hoods are not worn for funerals and memorial services at Oxford, for example.²⁸ Hoods, however, appeared in a memorial role at the 1928 funeral of the former director of the School of Journalism. The service for Talcott Williams was held at St Paul's Chapel. At Williams' request, his coffin was draped with hoods representing his degrees. They numbered seven, though only his AB from Amherst was earned. He held honorary degrees from Pennsylvania (MA, LLD), Amherst (DHL), Western Reserve (DHL, LLD), and Hobart (LLD).²⁹

The trustees of Columbia and Barnard, the women's college associated with Columbia, planned to wear gowns to the 1897 dedication of a bronze table commemorating the Battle of Harlem, a victory for the Colonists in their Revolutionary War against Great Britain in 1776. It had taken place on the site of Columbia's current campus; the tablet remains in place on the east wall of the Mathematics Building, on Broadway between 117th and 118th Streets.³⁰

During exams, proctors wore black gowns as early as 1909 when a writer praised an addition to the proctors' outfit that made them more 'sweet' and less 'sombre'. 'A cord of light blue, with neat little loops at the corners, made the black gown fairer than all the scarlet and gray splendors we sometimes see.' The nature of the splendors, sadly, passes without explanation. Exam proctors were still wearing black gowns in 1929.³¹

Women students at Teachers College, the graduate school associated with Columbia, and at Barnard College wore their caps and gowns off campus to join parades promoting the suffrage movement in the pre-war years. In 1912 they marched in a parade on 56th Street, and in 1915 the *Spectator* published instructions to meet at Sixth Avenue and 11th Street for another parade. The demonstration moved home one week later. 'Fifty Barnard suffragettes took the Campus by storm yesterday afternoon, marching in caps and gowns with banners waving and drums beating.'³²

Barnard students decided to help raise money for relief efforts in Poland on 6 November of that year. They would wear their caps and gowns while selling Polish emblems.³³

28 Dictionaries of American and British slang from the period show that 'boards' had several meanings. The term referred to paintings sold on the street (painted on boards), playing cards when used by gamblers, tickets to a performance or a restaurant bill.

29 A DHL is a Doctor of Humane Letters, a title indicating the recipient's good works. Draped with hoods: 'Chaplain Conducts Funeral Services for Dean Williams', 27 Jan. 1928, p. 1. Degrees: 'Dean Williams Dies after Long Illness', 25 Jan. 1928, p. 1. Note that despite the *Spectator's* reporting, Williams' title was director. The school's first dean wasn't appointed until 1931.

30 'The Battle of Harlem Tablet', 13 Oct. 1897, p. 221. Information about the tablet is at <www.warmemorial.columbia.edu/war-memorial-tour-columbia#586> [accessed 9 May 2015].

31 Cords: 'Between Lectures' (column), 26 May 1909, p. 5; the writer also enthuses about exam books' coming in different colours. 1929: 'The Stroller' (column), 17 Dec. 1929, p. 2.

32 Compare to students at the University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, who marched on city hall in academic dress by the thousands in 1957 to protest against separate universities for non-whites. Wits students wore academic dress to protests through the 1980s. See John K. Lundy, 'University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg Academic Dress', unpublished dissertation for Burgon Society fellowship, 2002, pp. 5, 6, 9–11. 1912: 'Barnard and T. C. in Suffrage Parade', 11 Nov. 1912, p. 7. 1915: 'T. C. Girls to March in Parade', 22 Oct. 1915, p. 2. Barnard: 'Suffragettes Parade', 30 Oct. 1915, p. 4. Note the condescending diminutive used by the male editors in place of the preferred term, suffragists, which the Barnard students used on their banner. Teachers College, despite being a postgraduate institution for educators, eschews a possessive apostrophe, alas.

33 'Polish Speakers at Horace Mann', 28 Oct. 1915, p. 6. Horace Mann is a prominent grammar

Moving ahead to the Great Depression, jobless alumni took their caps and gowns to a conference in Washington where they would wear them to ‘march today in solemn academic procession through the streets’ to demonstrate their inability to find work.³⁴

Use in ceremonies

Columbia’s current campus is its fourth home since being founded in 1754.³⁵ When it moved from its third location, in Midtown Manhattan (on the site of what is now Rockefeller Center), to its current home in Morningside Heights (on the grounds of what had been the Bloomingdale Insane Asylum), the occasion was marked with a dedication ceremony in April 1896. Columbia’s president, Seth Low, asked all students to wear caps and gowns at the event—not a surprise considering that it was Low who had presided over the committee of university presidents who wrote the Intercollegiate Code of Academic Costume and passed it that spring. The *Spectator* endorsed his plan, in part because the dedication was a historic event for the city and the University, but also because cap and gown would keep students from dressing in any way they liked. ‘They would appear in all imaginable articles of apparel, from dress suits or “Prince Alberts” and “tiles” down to sweaters and trunks. That the effect would be incongruous is self-evident.’ Another article noted a different benefit. Dressed in cap and gown, the seniors, who planned to arrive in a coach and four, would attract the adoring gaze of the young women in the audience.³⁶

In every spring during the two decades that followed, the *Spectator* reliably reported on seniors’ plans to wear their gowns (and usually their caps too) all around campus during the last several weeks of the term. Articles advised seniors when to be measured for gowns and then where to pick them up. One article, in 1901, states that it would ‘be proper’ for graduates who already hold degrees to wear their hoods to commencement. Attending the ceremony in the hood of one’s current degree stands out for its rarity. Even today in the US, few universities allow their bachelor’s degree candidates to wear any hood; wearing hoods for masters is a mixed bag, and many universities hood their doctors in their ceremony. In 1909, when Columbia had already been a follower of the Intercollegiate Code for several years, and with Cotrell & Leonard its usual supplier, students entered the ceremony wearing the hood of the degree they already held. By 1928, an article refers simply to ordering caps, gowns and hoods, without indicating if the hood is for the degree one already holds or if it is for the degree about to be conferred. The instructions were made clear in 1941, when graduates ‘who are to receive advanced degrees will wear indicative colored hoods; baccalaureate candidates will wear unadorned gowns.’³⁷ The hoods’ colours were likely to match those of the Intercollegiate Code, of which Columbia was a founding subscriber.

school in Riverdale, The Bronx, founded by a Columbia president, Nicholas M. Butler, as a co-educational experiment unit of Teachers College.

34 ‘Jobless Alumni Off for Capital; To Sell \$4000 Diplomas for 40¢’, 2 May 1933, p. 1.

35 Its first classes were held in a room of Trinity Church, on Broadway at Wall Street in Lower Manhattan; in 1760 it completed College Hall, located a few blocks from Trinity.

36 A Prince Albert suit was ‘[a] kind of frock coat or tailcoat made fashionable by Prince Albert’ (OED); a tile was slang for a hat (it goes on your roof). ‘On the Bench’, 2 April 1896, p. 26. Women’s gazes: [Untitled] 29 April 1896, p. 60.

37 ‘Proper’ hoods in 1901: [Untitled item] 22 May 1901, p. 2. Hoods in 1909: ‘Commencement Instructions’, 24 May 1909, p. 2. 1928: ‘Seniors May Order Graduation Gowns’, 13 April 1928, p. 3. The cost that year to hire hoods for a week was \$2 for bachelors, \$2.50 for masters, and \$3 for doctors. 1941: Elliott M. Sanger, Jr., ‘187th Exercises Held in South Court’, 3 June 1941, p. 6.

Students hiring hoods along with their gowns in 1901 could do so from Cotrell & Leonard, which was advertising itself in the *Spectator* as 'Official Makers to Columbia University'. In three years' time that distinction would go to Cox Sons & Vining, of New York. By 1906, however, the contract returned to Cotrell & Leonard on account of its low prices. Students would continue to order their gowns from a robemaker until 1927, when the campus bookstore began hiring them out so that students would no longer have to endure the long lines when collecting their orders over only a day or two.³⁸

Low retired from Columbia's presidency in 1902. Pomp marked the inauguration of his successor, Nicholas M. Butler (AB, AM, PhD, Columbia), appropriate for a man who would initiate a plan to add crowns to Columbia's gowns (though they wouldn't end up there until almost two decades after he left office) and who would preside over future commencements in the bonnet, hood and gown from his honorary Cambridge LLD.

Many accomplished and celebrated men attended the event in cap and gown, sitting on the platform in front of the students. The dignitaries included Lord Kelvin, Sir Percy Sanderson (the British Consul General in New York), military officers, at least one ambassador, and another distinguished visitor: 'For the first time since Washington the President of the nation was the guest of Columbia.' He was Theodore Roosevelt, a near-Columbian himself, for he had studied law at Columbia but joined a practice before graduating, as was the custom for lawyers in nineteenth-century America.³⁹

As the twentieth century moved forward, references to cap and gown generally appeared only around commencement time in the spring. Judging by the frequency and urgency of the reminders in the *Spectator*, however, students seldom wore cap and gown. Two 1909 articles are typical. One refers to each senior class's choice to wear gowns and then to leave them in their closets as the 'annual Senior gown farce'. Another, printed after the spring commencement, noted: 'The colored hoods and gowns in the academic procession seemed the more brilliant and imposing because they are only seen once a year.' That reference, however, seems to be to the complete outfit, which students going to classes in the final weeks of the semester would not have worn—if they wore them at all. An article the next year hoped to correct errant ways. 'Every Senior ... should deem it not a duty but a pleasure and an honor, to do his share ... by donning the cap and gown. ... [W]e expect to see a noteworthy exhibition of Senior dignity.' The Philolexian Society apparently had a similar approach of adopting resolutions to wear gowns to meetings, then neglecting to wear them.⁴⁰

Even if they had not been invited to membership in Philolexian, Columbia men would have had good reason to own a gown. The paper reported in 1912 that seniors had

38 Advertisement: 27 May 1896, n.p. Hoods: [Untitled] 22 May 1901, p. 2. Cox Sons & Vining: 'Contracts Let for Caps and Gowns', 27 April 1904, p. 1. Contract returns to Cotrell & Leonard: 'Seniors to Order Gowns To-Morrow', 9 April 1906, p. 1. Bookstore: 'Bookstore to Rent Academic Costumes', 11 April 1927, p. 1. The campus bookstore continues to be the source for academic dress, as is customary in the US.

39 'The President is Installed', 22 April 1902, p. 24. George Washington attended commencement in 1789, a week after his inauguration. 'The Annual Commencement of Columbia College was held yesterday at Saint Paul's Church in this city', an article in the *New-York Journal and Weekly Register*, 7 May 1789.

40 Farce: 'Sailing under False Colors', 23 April 1909, p. 4. Imposing: 'Columbia Ends 155th Year of Her History', 2 June 1909, p. 3. Dignity: 'Senior Dignity and its Exemplification', 3 March 1909, p. 4. Philolexian: 'Philo to Have Quarters in West Hall', 28 Oct. 1910, p. 3.

'about ten class occasions' to wear cap and gown. All those occasions provided insufficient incentive to get measured to many seniors that year. The article begins: 'The Committee on Caps and Gowns for the Senior Class is utterly disgusted' because few senior were being measured for their kit.⁴¹

An exception to the continued acceptance of academic dress came in 1913, when a student at Teachers College sought to drop cap and gown from commencement. When he was asked at a meeting of the senior class for a reason, the student, a Mr Kelley, said he wasn't prepared. He requested a postponing of the matter as well as the appointment of a committee to submit a justification. Whether the committee presented a report is not recorded. Kelley's suggestion gained little support, however. When Teachers College students participated in festivities in advance of graduation a month later, they wore their caps and gowns.⁴²

During World War I, when the size of graduating classes was reduced, candidates for degrees continued to wear academic dress. By World War II, however, gowns fell to the wayside. In 1943 commencement was held for about sixty students in late October. The procession was cancelled and a decision about wearing cap and gown had not been made two weeks in advance. There was no ambiguity eight months later, when seventy men graduated. 'Because of wartime difficulties, academic dress will not be required at the informal reception.' *Spectator* references to gowns at commencement did not return for several years, but for Class Day in 1949, the seniors were to meet in the lounge of a dormitory and march to the quad together in caps and gowns.⁴³

Conclusion

Student enthusiasm at Columbia for cap and gown—and sometimes cap or gown—exceeded the University's own in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Acting on a statute from 1788 that gave permission to students to wear gowns, Columbia undergraduates took it upon themselves to use them at speeches, club meetings, towards the end of their senior year, and even at off-campus events such as political demonstrations. The University limited itself to simply requiring gowns when the faculty deemed them proper until 1887 when it first described academic dress. Even then, and after the ICC was adopted in 1895, Columbia seems to have left to the students when to wear the approved uniform.

The greatest interest in cap and gown at Columbia came at the time when interest in it was growing throughout the United States as universities were founded far from the nation's oldest and largest cities. The passion of some students' arguments lends itself, across

41 'Seniors Do Not Want Gowns', 2 April 1912, p. 8.

42 Kelley's request: 'Teachers College', 7 April 1913, p. 2. Gowns worn: 'Teachers College', 17 May 1913, p. 2. It would not be the last time a Teachers College graduate sought to have his fellow graduates go gownless. In 1969, the president of the College's student senate addressed graduates on convocation. The candidates were in cap and gown; the speaker exhorted them to remove their gowns as a protest against academic hierarchy. According to the *New York Times*, about six of the 2,000 present did so. Details in 'King's Crowns', p. 127.

43 1917: 'Says Christianity is Not a Failure', 4 June 1917, pp. 1, 4 [4]; it's unlikely the speaker would have chosen that headline. He was the president of Wesleyan University, and he sought to reassure the congregation at the baccalaureate sermon of the relevance of Christianity's spiritual values despite the destruction of the Great War. 1944: 'Graduation Of Seniors Set for June 30', 16 June 1944, p.1. Another wartime difficulty was in sourcing newsprint; the *Spectator* had become a weekly. 1949: 'Ahearn and Hawes Lead Class of '49', 12 May 1949, p. 1.

the years, to the impression that cap and gown was one of the topics students discussed in their off hours. Undergraduates' enthusiasm for wearing the bachelors' gown saw its zenith decades before gowns in the US were reclaimed by some universities as an extension of corporate branding.

We see from the pages of the *Spectator* the vibrancy of cap and gown use at Columbia, even if it wasn't universally popular. Students debated it in print, they promoted its use, admonished others when they didn't wear it, and ultimately let the significance of academic dress decline. The official record of the University reflects little of this discussion. Without the *Spectator's* record, very few student voices would be heard all these years later.

Appendix: *Spectator* notes about other universities

Editors at Columbia made occasional references to cap and gown use around the US, particularly in the northeast. Given their delight in pointing out errors when sister college newspapers reported on academic dress usage at Columbia, these notes should be taken as second-hand information at best. The dates that follow each entry refer to the date of publication in the *Spectator*, along with the page number.

1886

HARVARD Medical faculty 'wore red gowns and mortar-boards at the alumni meeting' on 8 Nov. 10 Nov. 1886, p. 25.

1887

VASSAR Students at the women's college 'attempted to introduce caps and gowns, but the faculty objected.' 11 May 1887, p. 54.

1891

RUTGERS The glee club discarded its 'swallowtails' and will appear in concert in cap and gown. 12 Feb. 1891, p. 152. (The academic dress was 'well-received'. 12 March 1891, p. 29.)

1894

'Caps and gowns will be worn by the graduating classes of nine New England colleges this year.' 15 Jan. 1894, p. 128.

1897

YALE Juniors voted to wear cap & gown 'on all the Sundays of senior year.' 8 May 1895, p. 96.

YALE Seniors in the Sheffield scientific school of Yale voted to wear cap & gown through the year instead of in the spring only, as heretofore. 7 Nov. 1895, p. 44.

1910

CHICAGO A visitor notes that the university 'requires academic costume for both examiners and candidates on the occasion of doctor's examination, which is not the custom elsewhere [in the U.S.], to the visitor's knowledge. 12 Jan. 1910, p. 6.

1914

SMITH Quoting the *Utica Observer*: 'By a vote of 208 to 83 Smith College Seniors have decided not to wear caps and gowns at any of their commencement exercises.' 15 April 1914, p. 4.