

— hidden — HISTORY

PENN HALL EVOLVED FROM WILSON'S PREPARATORY DEPARTMENT

By Amy Ensley

Penn Hall, the preparatory school and junior college for women adjacent to Wilson College, closed its doors in 1973. The remaining members of the Penn Hall Alumnae Association (PHAA) held their final reunion this past October. Prior to disbanding, the association decided to give their archives to the Hankey Center, along with a gift of \$20,000 for its care and to provide small stipends for interns to work with the collection. It is an appropriate home for the collection, since Penn Hall had its origins as the Preparatory Department at Wilson College.

“Our mission as a school, and later as an alumnae association, has always been to promote, encourage and broaden the education of young women,” said Bonnie Lee Kepner, PHAA board member. “It is particularly fitting, with our shared early school histories, that the legacy of the Penn Hall Preparatory School and Junior College will forever be an integral link in Wilson’s research into the history and importance of women’s education.”

The Penn Hall archives collection dovetails nicely with the Hankey Center’s mission to study the history of women’s education. The collection includes many items similar to Wilson’s archives, including yearbooks, catalogs, student newspapers and scrapbooks. Also included are Penn Hall’s maroon and white dinks, equestrian trophy cups, class rings and other jewelry.

Penn Hall’s photograph collection is distinctive for its series of “To the Sea Shore” class pictures. Every year the entire school closed up shop and moved to the Flanders Hotel in Ocean City, N.J., for three weeks in May. Lessons were conducted as usual, but the students were able to attend concerts, stroll on the boardwalk, enjoy horseback riding on the beach and bathing in the surf. The tradition ended during World War II.

Wilson and Penn Hall were intertwined from the start. From the very first year of Wilson’s operation in 1870, the Preparatory Department was essential to the College’s success. In 1860, there were only six public high schools in the entire state. As late as 1895, only 2 percent of the eligible population was enrolled in high school. The number of young women who were interested, let alone qualified, to do college level work was in very short supply. President John Edgar stated, “The Preparatory Department is sustained to give us in the higher departments, students who are better prepared for higher work than those who often come to us.”



Penn Hall students prepare to take the train for their “To the Sea Shore” session.

By 1905, enrollment was stable and President Matthew Reaser was able to make Wilson’s graduation requirements in line with the best institutions of the time. The Preparatory Department was no longer needed, so a committee of trustees recommended the College encourage the creation of an independent college preparatory school. Wilson entered into a lease agreement with the new school for space on the north end of campus and within a year, Penn Hall opened its doors to students.

The school grew rapidly and moved several times before building its campus next to Wilson in 1921. In 1927, Penn Hall began a junior college while still operating the preparatory school, and had the distinction of being the oldest private junior college in Pennsylvania. But by the 1970s, dwindling enrollment led to the school’s closure.

Once the Penn Hall collection has been processed, it will be open to researchers. Please contact Amy Ensley at amy.ensley@wilson.edu for additional information.