

Harvard Kirkland House



John Filios, of the Bedford Minuteman Company, Bedford, MA leads students into the Memorial Church for a senior class chapel service.

The Harvard Commencement Office looks forward to welcoming our degree candidates from the graduating class this year in celebrating their graduation from all our degree-granting schools. Our celebration is hosted, in person, in Harvard Yard, and

following the tradition with all the regalia, pomp, circumstance, processions, festive music and the like that we have come to expect from Harvard.

History of Commencement

The word 'Commencement' conveys the meaning of the Latin *Inceptio*, a term used in the Middle Ages to describe the ceremony that admitted candidates for the degree of Master of Arts and gave them license to begin teaching. The first 'Happy Observance of Commencement' at Harvard College was held in the autumn of 1642, with nine scholars in the graduating class. Throughout the seventeenth century the ceremony was celebrated at the beginning of the academic year; the change of Commencement to the end of the academic year recognized that not all graduates would become teachers, and that at Commencement recipients of degrees would leave the University to begin their professional lives.

Decorations in the Tercentenary Theatre



Members of the Bedford Minuteman Company, a marching and ceremonial unit, parade through Tercentenary Theatre during Commencement.

Tercentenary Theatre, the area between the Memorial Church and Widener Library, was first used in 1936 as an outdoor amphitheater for the College's three hundredth anniversary, and today is ablaze with the reds, blues, greens, and golds of the varied flags of

the University. Flags of Harvard and Radcliffe decorate the theatre for Commencement, while the three large crimson Harvard Veritas banners, bearing the ancient shield, billow above the long staircase in front of Widener. Also flying overhead are the brilliant colors of the thirteen undergraduate houses: Adams, Cabot, Currier, Dudley, Dunster, Eliot, Kirkland, Leverett, Lowell, Mather, Pforzheimer, Quincy, and Winthrop. Rounding out the heraldic display are the bright standards of the twelve graduate schools.

Academic Procession



The Bedford Minutemen play as they process with graduates past the John Harvard Statue. The group includes Peter Secor (left), John Filios (center), who has performed for Commencement for 20+ years, and drummer Bryan Nash.

The Commencement procession is formed in four divisions. Each meets in a prescribed area where, as President Conant noted, they happily “wander about, greeting friends and disobeying instructions” before starting on the walk into Tercentenary Theatre. As the processors pass by the west front of University Hall they doff their hats to Daniel Chester French’s imaginative statue of John Harvard — “imaginative” since there is no image extant of John Harvard and French’s statue is sculpted from an undergraduate model; John Harvard wasn’t ‘Founder’ but rather the College’s first benefactor, and the date of the College’s founding is 1636, not 1638. Candidates for advanced degrees from the far-flung graduate and professional schools gather in three divisions in Sever Quadrangle — until 1946 the site of the Commencement Exercises — for their march into the Theatre, having tinged the roads of Cambridge with color as they approached. The graduating class of seniors, the alumni/ae, and the President’s Division emerge from lively confusion to find their places in the Old Yard as the Harvard University Band plays the familiar college songs.



Members of the Bedford Minutemen raise the alarm and wake students at Kirkland House as Harvard celebrates Commencement 2011.

The President’s Division consists of several sections, the first led by the sheriffs of Middlesex and Suffolk counties. The president follows immediately behind, wearing a black front-buttoned cassock under a heavy full gown embroidered at collar and cuffs, which is derived from seventeenth century Puritan clerical dress and is the only such presidential regalia worn in this country today.

For over 40 years, the Bedford Minuteman Company has marched playing fife and drum around the courtyards of the Kirkland House waking students and inviting them to breakfast. After breakfast we lead Harvard’s Kirkland House seniors in a march to the Memorial Church Chapel on Commencement morning. In the Fall, we welcome the students back to Harvard, with fife and drum around the courtyards and then partake in the cookout, in the courtyard, which follows the parade.