Our First President
By A of A Historian, Susanne Czarnecki, G’82

Dr. Pauline Wolcott Spencer ’08, ’10, ’15
First President of the University of Pennsylvania Association of Alumnae

The first two generations of women students at Penn were true pioneers. The first women at Penn, Gertrude Pierce, Anna Flanigen, and Mary Lewis, were chemistry students in the 1870s. In a 1941 interview Gertrude Pierce Easby remembered:

“We used to work for seven or eight hours a day in the laboratory. During that time we never said a word to any of the boys working side by side with us and they never said a word to us. You see, it was outrageous enough in the first place that we should be allowed to attend a man’s class. But to talk to any of the students—well that wouldn’t have done at all.”

These women faced barriers, including isolation, but courageously persevered to be acknowledged as students and scholars. Their efforts were supported by the faculty and in particular by Provost Edgar Fahs Smith, a mentor to Penn’s first female students. Gradually the doors of Penn opened to more women, first through its graduate programs and then later through its biology and teacher programs.

Prior to 1914, the only regular undergraduate women were a small group in biology. As the number of women graduates grew, alumnae in Philadelphia recognized the need for an association, and in 1912 the Association of Alumnae was founded, and its first president, Dr. Pauline Wolcott Spencer was a teacher.
A native Philadelphian, Pauline Wolcott Spencer was born on November 26, 1864 and lived in Powelton Village at 3421 Race Street for many years. An 1881 graduate of Girls Normal and High School, Pauline began teaching at the Girls Normal School in 1889. After many years of teaching, she matriculated at Penn in 1906 and continued to teach while she studied for her degree. On Commencement Day, June 17, 1908, Pauline Wolcott Spencer and Zeta Berenice Cundey became the first women to be awarded bachelor degrees, Pauline an AB and Zeta a BS, through the College Courses for Teachers (CCT) program at Penn. Established in 1906, CCT admitted women from its inception and was the predecessor of the College of General Studies.

Pauline and Zeta were career public school teachers in Philadelphia. Pauline taught history, literature, and the principles of education at the Girls Normal School for 40 years. (Normal schools educated future primary and secondary school teachers and were the predecessors of the state teachers colleges.) Zeta taught for 25 years and was head of the English Department at William Penn High School for Girls (Franklin Learning Center) at 15th and Mt. Vernon Streets. Zeta began teaching at William Penn at its founding in 1909 and later served as president of the Association of Alumnae.

Pauline entered the graduate school at Penn in 1908 with education as her major and psychology and sociology as her minors. In 1910 she received a Masters of Arts in Latin. In 1915 she received her PhD in education, and her thesis, *The Contribution of Connecticut to the Common School System of Pennsylvania*, was published in 1915. Pauline was a member of the National Education Association, the College Club, the Philadelphia Suffrage Society, the City History Society of Philadelphia, the Congressional Union for Women Suffrage, the Academy of Political and Social Sciences, and was a member of the Mayor’s Scholarship Committee for almost twenty years.
Our founder, Catharine Wetherill Beekley, graduated first in her class with a BS in biology with honors in 1910. After graduation, Catharine began teaching at the Philadelphia High School for Girls as a second assistant in biology. Catharine and Pauline perhaps met as students at Penn or as faculty members as their two schools were affiliated. On February 7, 1912, on the invitation of Catharine, seventy women met at the College Club, 1300 Spruce Street, to form the Association of Alumnae, and Pauline served as chair.

Three months later on May 25, 1912, the Association of Alumnae elected its first officers and directors. The first officers were:

- **President**
  Pauline Wolcott Spencer

- **First Vice President**
  Dr. Sarah Miller

- **Second Vice President**
  Jennie R. Beale

- **Recording Secretary**
  Zeta Berenice Cundey

- **Corresponding Secretary**
  Eleanor F. Karsner

- **Treasurer**
  Elizabeth N. Woolman Pennock

Dr. Frances R. M. Hitchcock, Margaret C. Klingelsmith, Dr. Margaret Kollock, Josephine L.
Reed Hopwood, Marian Lape, and Louise H. Snowden were elected as directors. A constitution was adopted with this stated purpose:

“The object was to promote the interests of the University of Pennsylvania especially such as concern the education of women.”

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*Tune in next time to learn about our organization’s first year of existence!

The Association of Alumnae held its first annual meeting on June 19, 1912, Commencement Day, at 3:00 PM in the Botanical Gardens. Here, A of A members gather, on June 19 at the same spot, at the same time, 100 years later.
The Bio Pond - University Archives, Calendar 1911.

Want to learn more? Read this Penn Alumni Blog post about our founder, Catharine Wetherill Beekley, C’1910.