



# SKIDMORE COMMENCEMENTS: THE FIRST 100 YEARS

BY PROFESSOR MARY C. LYNN



above: Commencement procession in Saratoga's Congress Park, 1950; at right: President Val Wilson congratulates a new grad.

The renaming of Lucy Skidmore Scribner's Young Women's Industrial Club as the Skidmore School of Arts in 1911 signaled that the organization was determined to become a serious institution preparing young women for careers in teaching, the arts, and business. Changing the name and applying for a charter from the New York State Board of Regents helped to move the club in a more educational direction, but probably the most important move was the hiring of Charles Henry Keyes as president. A well-known educator who had been the founding president of California Institute of Technology, Keyes set out to transform the Skidmore School of Arts into a full-fledged college. The school held its first commencement in 1912, awarding 27 certificates.



In June 1919 the SSA and the regents jointly awarded baccalaureate degrees to 11 women. B.S. degrees were offered in fine and applied art, home economics, physical education, secretarial studies, music, and general studies; all students were required to participate in choral singing and physical education. The college was growing swiftly, as 160 freshmen entered in September 1919.

It was May 25, 1922, when the Board of Regents approved amending the school's charter and changing its corporate name to Skidmore College. The 27 women awarded bachelor's degrees a few weeks later were the first to graduate as Skidmore College students. Keyes had transformed the school into a college in less than 10 years. Sadly, he had only a short time to enjoy his success, as he suffered a fatal heart attack in 1925.

Keyes's successor, Henry T. Moore, would lead the college until 1957, contributing, among other things, the college's current alma mater, "Hymn to Skidmore," which he composed in 1928. Leading the college through the Great Depression and War World II, Moore presided over the expansion of its graduation exercises, which, by the mid-1930s, included Alumnae Day on Saturday, Baccalaureate on Sunday, Class Day on Monday, and Commencement on Tuesday. In 1937 Moore himself was awarded Skidmore's first-ever honorary degree.

Skidmore's commencements during the Depression reflected college growth despite the economic crisis. There were 572 students at Skidmore in 1929, 660 in 1932, and 739 in 1938. As the stock market fell, the value of Skidmore's endowment dropped, but since the endowment was very small, so was the loss of income. The vocational nature of many departments at Skidmore helped assure some parents that their daughters would be able to find jobs as teachers, nurses, and social workers.

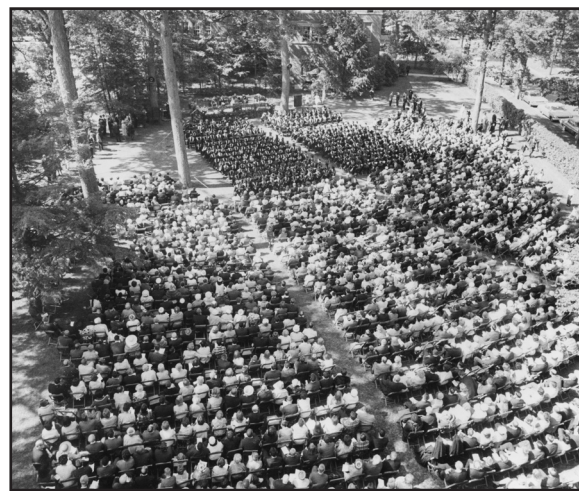
World War II threatened the young college as the Depression had not, as applications dropped off. Those who did enroll were required by the college to help replace staff by cleaning their own dorm rooms and waiting on tables at dinner. A few students also did airplane-spotting on top of the casino in Saratoga's Congress Park, provided child care for war workers, and grew victory gardens in nearby Schuylerville. Many students and some faculty enlisted in the military or worked in war industries. At the end of the war, the college celebrated 148 members for their war service as military nurses, physical therapists, or dietitians or as WAACs, WAVES, Marines, SPARS, or Red Cross workers. Commencements were thinly attended in the war years, in part due to travel restrictions and gasoline rationing.



Seniors form their procession in 2007.

After the war, New York State asked its women's colleges to open their classrooms to veterans wanting to use GI benefits to complete their educations. Not since 1918 had Skidmore enrolled male students, so the GIs cut a wide swath on campus. Saratoga Springs men lived at home and attended classes on campus, but the college also opened a branch in nearby Glens Falls. The men organized sports teams—Skidmore is famously undefeated in football, as its only game ended in a 0-0 tie. Several hundred veterans earned Skidmore degrees between 1949 and 1955.

Upon Henry Moore's retirement, his wife, Marie Blaine Moore, was awarded an honorary degree at commencement 1957. Around this time, though, commencements began to include honorary degrees for women with national reputations, including Lillian Moller Gilbreth, time-motion researcher and mother of 12, and Margaret Mead, anthropologist and ethnologist. In the 1960s the college honored Margaret Chase Smith, senator from Maine, and Ada Louise Huxtable, architecture and design critic. In 1974 it scored a trifecta, honoring in the same ceremony civil-rights activist Mary Parkman Peabody; her daughter, Marietta Tree, ambassador to the United Nations; and her granddaughter, Frances Fitzgerald, Pulitzer-winning writer.



Commencement 1965, under the trees on the old campus.

Moore was succeeded as president by Val Wilson, whose pride in his Scottish heritage began the tradition of bagpipes at Skidmore commencements and other occasions. In 1961 Texas industrialist and Skidmore parent Erik Jonsson offered the college an extraordinary gift by purchasing the Woodlawn Estate, adjoining Lucy Skidmore Scribner's Saratoga home, for the construction of a new campus. Wilson led the college in planning the move to Wood-

lawn before his untimely death in 1964. His successor, Joseph C. Palamountain, carried out the task, and in 1966 commencement was held on the still mostly empty "new campus." In 1967 Skidmore held its graduation ceremonies at the new Saratoga Performing Arts Center amphitheater, where they continue to be held today.



Nursing faculty bestow a pin and cap on a new RN.

In 1971, a time when many prestigious single-sex colleges were becoming coeducational, Skidmore's trustees approved a controversial proposal that Skidmore do the same. The first two male students since the GI Bill cohort came to Skidmore as part of an exchange with Colgate University and graduated in 1971 and 1972. The first coeducational entering class joined Skidmore in September 1971.

Starting in 1987 it was President David H. Porter's idea to seat faculty on the stage so they may bid farewell to their students, and during his administration the graduating seniors began the tradition of choosing a faculty commencement speaker.

Skidmore's first female president, US Education Department lawyer Jamiene S. Studley, led commencements from 2001 to 2003. And presiding over the ceremony since 2004 is President Philip A. Glotzbach, a philosophy scholar, who is just returning from sabbatical for commencement 2011.



# 100 SKIDMORE COMMENCEMENTS

2011 100th commencement exercises—May 21, 2011

1999 Saratoga-born actor David Hyde Pierce honored



1990 Jazz bassist Milt Hinton honored, performs "Old Man Time"

1981 Honorees include writer John Cheever and NAACP director Benjamin Hooks

1974 First UWW degrees conferred



1971 Ballet dancers Violette Verdy and Edward Villella honored, offer a dialogue instead of speeches; grads include Skidmore's first Phi Beta Kappa members

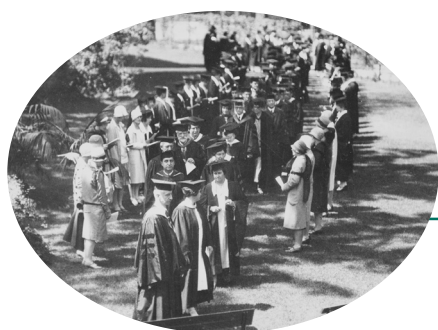
1966 Ceremony held on new campus, outside Field House



1949 Grads include two men, first of the returning GIs

1946 Class of 170 includes eight daughters of alumnae

1937 First honorary degree, to Pres. Henry T. Moore



1928 Ceremony held outdoors

1919 Skidmore co-signs its own baccalaureate degrees (with state regents); as women's suffrage is being adopted, Pres. Keyes urges grads to "take their conscience and their courage to the hustings and the polls"

1916 Commencement caps full week of related activities



1912 Skidmore School of Arts' first commencement awards 27 certificates

2009 Graduation of Skidmore's largest-ever class, numbering 694



1995 First master's degrees awarded

1987 Honorees include Saratoga folk-music impresaria Lena Spencer, poet laureate Richard Wilbur, and retiring Skidmore president Joe Palamountain

1976 Astronomer Carl Sagan honored



1972 Grads include first two men after coeducation began in 1971



1967 Ceremony held at Saratoga Performing Arts Center

1958 Anthropologist Margaret Mead addresses 193 grads, advocating new system of discipline in American education



1948 Ceremony moves to Convention Hall

1942 Radcliffe President Ada Louise Comstock addresses 147 graduates on women's roles in war

1930 Top achievers honored



1922 School's new name and status, Skidmore College, announced

1918 Commencement ceremony moves to College Hall

1913 Ivy-planting tradition begins, seniors ceremoniously pass trowel to juniors

