

# *A Brief History of Pomona College*

**T***he founding of Pomona College took place during a time*

of economic growth, immigration and cultural transformation. The arrival of the railroad, new industry and agricultural expansion in Southern California during the final decades of the 19th century brought a rush of new residents, many of whom settled in the inland valleys, setting the stage for the establishment of a range of new institutions, from churches to colleges. Pomona College was incorporated on October 14, 1887, by a group of Congregationalists who wanted to recreate on the West Coast “a college of the New England type”—one that would represent the very best of what they had experienced as students in the finest colleges of the Eastern and Midwestern United States.

Instruction began on September 12, 1888, in a small, rented house in the city of Pomona. The following January, an unfinished hotel (now Sumner Hall) in nearby Claremont—together with a considerable tract of adjacent land—was given to the College, which subsequently relocated there. Although this location was originally regarded as temporary, Claremont became the permanent home of the College. The name “Pomona College” however, had become so closely identified with the institution that it was retained.

Pomona awarded its first diplomas—seven Bachelor of Arts degrees, two Bachelor of Letters degrees and one Bachelor of Science degree—to the Class of 1894. In recognition of the College’s rapidly growing stature, Southern California’s first chapter of Phi Beta Kappa was established there in 1913. With the freedom characteristic of colleges founded in the Congregationalist tradition



(a distinguished list that also includes such institutions as Harvard, Yale, Dartmouth, Amherst, Smith, Wellesley, Oberlin, Carleton and Grinnell), Pomona was soon entrusted with its own governing board. Today, it stands as an independent college, with no sectarian affiliation.

Right from the start, Pomona was coeducational and—reflecting the 19th-century commitment of its Congregationalist founders to equity—open to students of all races. Pomona’s first African American student graduated in 1904, going on to Harvard Law School, but minorities remained very few in number at the College until the 1960s.

The College met a need for higher education in Southern California, and its growth over the years was steady and sure. In fact, by the mid-1920s, the growth of the College presented its leaders with a difficult choice: Should the College seek to retain its special character as a small college by limiting its expansion, or should it surrender the advantages of intimate size and allow growth to transform it into a university? Guided by President James A. Blaisdell, Pomona chose a third path. With the small colleges that make up the Oxford and Cambridge systems in England as a model, Pomona led the way in founding a consortium of institutions unlike any other in America. Over the next three-quarters of a century, two graduate schools and four other undergraduate colleges joined Pomona as members of The Claremont Colleges consortium, with all but one located on contiguous campuses and all allowing cross-registration and sharing such im-

portant facilities as libraries and student health programs.

Through the years, Pomona also became an academic innovator. Located on what would later be known as the Pacific Rim, Pomona became a leader in Asian Studies as early as the 1930s, long before such programs were common. Pomona was also an early leader among liberal arts colleges in preparing students to excel in the natural sciences. Today, Pomona continues to innovate with a range of interdisciplinary programs that bridge the traditional boundaries between academic fields.

From modest origins as a small college serving an undeveloped corner of Southern California, Pomona has grown into a college of national and international importance. In the mid-1980s, students from outside the state of California outnumbered in-state students for the first time. Since then, Pomona has firmly established itself as one of the pre-eminent liberal arts colleges in the nation, with a world-class faculty and a student body drawn from across the nation and around the world.

The College has seen enormous changes since its founders first looked out over a landscape of granite and sagebrush and envisioned “a college in a garden.” One thing hasn’t changed, however. Throughout its history, Pomona has maintained its dedication to both excellence and equity—offering deserving students, whatever their financial means or their backgrounds, a life-enhancing education through study of the liberal arts.