



# History

Columbia University was founded in 1754 as King's College by royal charter of King George II of England. It is the oldest institution of higher learning in the state of New York and the fifth oldest in the United States.

Controversy preceded the founding of the College, with various groups competing to determine its location and religious affiliation. Advocates of New York City met with success on the first point, while the Anglicans prevailed on the latter. However, all constituencies agreed to commit themselves to principles of religious liberty in establishing the policies of the College.

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Columbia's first home: Trinity Church schoolhouse

In July 1754, Samuel Johnson held the first classes in a new schoolhouse adjoining Trinity Church, located on what is now lower Broadway in Manhattan. There were eight students in the class. At King's College, the future leaders of colonial society could receive an education designed to "enlarge the Mind, improve the Understanding, polish the whole Man, and qualify them to support the brightest Characters in all the elevated stations in life." One early manifestation of the institution's lofty goals was the establishment in 1767 of the first American medical school to grant the M.D. degree.



The American Revolution brought the growth of the college to a halt, forcing a suspension of instruction in 1776 that lasted for eight years. However, the institution continued to exert a significant influence on American life through the people associated with it. Among the earliest students and trustees of King's College were John Jay, the first chief justice of the United States; Alexander Hamilton, the first secretary of the treasury; Gouverneur Morris, the author of the final draft of the U.S. Constitution; and Robert R. Livingston, a member of the five-man committee that drafted the Declaration of Independence.

The college reopened in 1784 with a new name—Columbia—that embodied the patriotic fervor that had inspired the nation's quest for independence. The revitalized institution was

recognizable as the descendant of its colonial ancestor, thanks to its inclination toward Anglicanism and the needs of an urban population, but there were important differences: [Columbia College](#) reflected the legacy of the Revolution in the greater economic, denominational, and geographic diversity of its new students and leaders. Cloistered campus life gave way to the more common phenomenon of day students who lived at home or lodged in the city.

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Columbia's third home: East 49th Street and Madison Avenue



In 1857, the College moved from Park Place, near the present site of city hall, to Forty-ninth Street and Madison Avenue, where it remained for the next forty years. During the last half of the nineteenth century, Columbia rapidly assumed the shape of a modern university. The [Columbia School of Law](#) was founded in 1858. The country's first mining school, a precursor of today's [Fu Foundation School of Engineering and Applied Science](#), was established in 1864 and awarded the first

Columbia Ph.D. in 1875.

When Seth Low became Columbia's president in 1890, he vigorously promoted the university ideal for the College, placing the fragmented federation of autonomous and competing schools under a central administration that stressed cooperation and shared resources. [Barnard College](#) for women had become affiliated with Columbia in 1889; the medical school came under the aegis of the University in 1891, followed by [Teachers College](#) in 1893. The development of graduate faculties in political science, philosophy, and pure science established Columbia as one of the nation's earliest centers for graduate education. In 1896, the trustees officially authorized the use of yet another new name, Columbia University, and today the institution is officially known as Columbia University in the City of New York.

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Columbia's fourth home: Morningside Heights

Low's greatest accomplishment, however, was moving the university from Forty-ninth Street to the more spacious Morningside Heights campus, designed as an urban academic village by McKim, Mead, and White, the renowned turn-of-the-century architectural firm. Architect Charles Follen McKim provided Columbia with stately buildings patterned after those of the Italian Renaissance. The University continued to prosper after its move uptown in 1897.



During the presidency of Nicholas Murray Butler (1902–1945), Columbia emerged as a preeminent national center for educational innovation and scholarly achievement. The [School of Journalism](#) was established by bequest of Joseph Pulitzer in 1912. John Erskine taught the first Great Books Honors Seminar at Columbia College in 1919, making the study of original masterworks the foundation of undergraduate education, and in the same year, a course on war and peace studies originated the College's influential [Core Curriculum](#).

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The construction of Low Memorial Library



Columbia became, in the words of College alumnus Herman Wouk, a place of "doubled magic," where "the best things of the moment were outside the rectangle of Columbia; the best things of all human history and thought were inside the rectangle."

The study of the sciences flourished along with the liberal arts. Franz Boas founded the modern science of anthropology here in the early decades of the twentieth century, even as Thomas Hunt Morgan set the course for modern genetics. In 1928, Columbia–Presbyterian Medical Center, the first such center to combine teaching, research, and patient care, was officially opened as a joint project between the medical school and The Presbyterian Hospital.

By the late 1930s, a Columbia student could study with the likes of Jacques Barzun, Paul Lazarsfeld, Mark Van Doren, Lionel Trilling, and I. I. Rabi, to name just a few of the great minds of the Morningside campus. The University's graduates during this time were equally accomplished—for example, two alumni of Columbia's School of Law, Charles Evans Hughes and Harlan Fiske Stone (who was also dean of the School of Law), served successively as Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court.

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The construction of South Hall (later renamed Butler Library)

Research into the atom by faculty members I. I. Rabi, Enrico Fermi, and Polykarp Kusch brought Columbia's Department of Physics to international prominence in the 1940s. The founding of the School of International Affairs (now the [School of International and Public Affairs](#)) in 1946 marked the beginning of intensive growth in international relations as a major scholarly focus of the University. The oral-history movement in the United States was launched at Columbia in 1948.



Columbia celebrated its bicentennial in 1954 during a period of steady expansion. This growth mandated a major campus building program in the 1960s, and, by the end of the decade, five of the University's schools were housed in new buildings.

It was also in the 1960s that Columbia experienced the most significant crisis in its history. Currents of unrest sweeping the country—among them opposition to the Vietnam War, an increasingly militant civil rights movement, and the ongoing decline of America's inner cities—converged with particular force at Columbia, casting the Morningside campus into the national spotlight. More than 1,000 protesting students occupied five buildings in the last week of April 1968, effectively shutting down the University until they were forcibly removed by the New York City police. Those events led directly to the cancellation of a proposed gym in Morningside Park, the cessation of certain classified research projects on campus, the retirement of President Grayson Kirk, and a downturn in the University's finances and morale. They also led to the creation of the [University Senate](#), in which faculty, students, and alumni acquired a larger voice in University affairs.

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Statue of Alexander Hamilton, Hamilton Hall



In recent decades, Columbia's campuses have seen a revival of spirit and energy that have been truly momentous. Under the leadership of President Michael Sovern, the 1980s saw the completion of important new facilities, and the pace intensified after George Rupp became president in 1993. A 650-million-dollar building program begun in 1994 provided the impetus for a wide range of projects, including the complete renovation of Furnald Hall and athletics facilities on campus and at Baker Field, the wiring of the campus for Internet and wireless access, the rebuilding of Dodge Hall for the [School of the Arts](#), the construction of new facilities for the Schools of Law and [Business](#), the renovation of Butler Library, and the creation of the Philip L. Milstein Family College Library.

The University also continued to develop the Audubon Biotechnology and Research Park, securing Columbia's place at the forefront of medical research. As New York City's only university-related research park, it also is contributing to economic growth through the creation of private-sector research collaborations and the generation of new biomedically related business.

A new student-activities center, Alfred Lerner Hall, opened in 1999 and features the Roone Arledge Auditorium and Cinema. Current building projects include major renovations to Hamilton Hall and Avery Library.

These and other improvements to the University's physical plant provide a visible reminder of the continuing growth and development of Columbia's programs of research and teaching. From its renowned Core Curriculum to the most advanced work now under way in its graduate and professional schools, the University continues to set the highest standard for the creation and dissemination of knowledge, both in the United States and around the world.

Clear in its commitment to carrying out such a wide-ranging and historic mission, and led by a new president, [Lee C. Bollinger](#), Columbia is proud to celebrate its 250th anniversary and look ahead to the achievements to come.

## The Columbia University Campus

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### Low Memorial Library

In 1897, the university moved from Forty-ninth Street and Madison Avenue, where it had stood for forty years, to its present location on Morningside Heights at 116th Street and Broadway. Seth Low, the president of the University at the time of the move, sought to create an academic village in a more spacious setting. Charles Follen McKim of the architectural firm of McKim, Mead, and White modeled the new campus after the Athenian agora. The Columbia campus comprises the largest single collection of McKim, Mead & White buildings in existence.



The architectural centerpiece of the campus is Low Memorial Library, named in honor of Seth Low's father. Built in the Roman classical style, it appears in the New York City Register of Historic Places. The building today houses the University's central administration offices and the visitors center.

A broad flight of steps descends from Low Library to an expansive plaza, a popular place for students to gather, and from there to College Walk, a promenade that bisects the central campus. Beyond College Walk is the South Campus, where Butler Library, the university's main library, stands. South Campus is also the site of many of Columbia College's facilities, including student residences, Alfred Lerner Hall (the student center), and the College's administrative offices and classroom buildings, along with the Graduate School of Journalism.

To the north of Low Library stands Pupin Hall, which in 1966 was designated a national historic landmark in recognition of the atomic research undertaken there by Columbia's scientists beginning in 1925. To the east is St. Paul's Chapel, which is listed with the New York City Register of Historic Places.

Many newer buildings surround the original campus. Among the most impressive are the Sherman Fairchild Center for the Life Sciences and the Morris A. Schapiro Center for Engineering and Physical Science Research. Two miles to the north of Morningside Heights is the 20-acre campus of the [Columbia University Medical Center](#) in Manhattan's Washington Heights, overlooking the Hudson River. Among the most prominent buildings on the site are the 20-story Julius and Armand Hammer Health Sciences Center, the William Black Medical Research Building, and the 17-story tower of the [College of Physicians and Surgeons](#). In 1989, The Presbyterian Hospital opened the Milstein Hospital Building, a 745-bed facility that incorporates the very latest advances in medical technology and patient care.

To the west is the New York State Psychiatric Institute; east of Broadway is the Audubon Biomedical Science and Technology Park, which includes the Mary Woodard Lasker Biomedical Research Building, the Audubon Business Technology Center, Russ Berrie Medical Science Pavilion, and the Irving Cancer Research Center as well as other institutions of cutting-edge scientific and medical research.

In addition to its New York City campuses, Columbia has two facilities outside of Manhattan. [Nevis Laboratories](#), established in 1947, is Columbia's primary center for the study of high-energy experimental particle and nuclear physics. Located in Irvington, New York, Nevis is situated on a 60-acre estate originally owned by the son of Alexander Hamilton.

The [Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory](#) was established in 1949 in Palisades, New York, and is a leading research institution focusing on global climate change, earthquakes, volcanoes, nonrenewable resources, and environmental hazards. It examines the planet from its core to its atmosphere, across every continent and every ocean.



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