

UNIVERSITY *of* PENNSYLVANIA



The University Archives  
and Records Center

A Guide to the  
WXPB-FM (Radio station: Philadelphia) Records  
1986-1990

16.0 Cubic feet

UPF 10

Prepared by Mackenzie S. Carlson  
August 2000

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**PROVENANCE**

Transferred to the University Archives by WXPN, June 2000 (Accession Number 2000:47).

**ARRANGEMENT**

The WXPN collection has been divided into three record series: I. Historical Accounts and Related Material, ca. 1917-1997; II. General File, 1986-1999; and III. Daily Station, 20 January 1997-31 December 1999. Series I extends to ten sub-series, covering relations with and events for station alumni; a planned book-length history of WXPN; and other miscellaneous material. The six sub-series relating to station alumni are generally arranged in reverse chronological order. The remaining four sub-series are arranged as they were at WXPN. Series II is organized alphabetically by subject, and individual subjects may be further arranged in alphabetical or reverse chronological order, depending on the nature of the material. Series III is ordered strictly chronologically. The original arrangement (i.e., that created at WXPN) of all material has been retained as much as possible, with a few corrections of obvious (and no doubt unintended) mistakes in chronological and alphabetical sequence.

### HISTORICAL NOTE

The history of radio at the University of Pennsylvania begins during the infancy of radio broadcasting itself. While experimental radio stations had been in existence in the United States since the early years of the twentieth century (indeed, Guglielmo Marconi had successfully transmitted amplitude-modified, or AM, radio waves across long distances in Europe beginning in the 1890s), radio broadcasting as we know it today can be said to have originated with station KDKA in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The Pittsburgh station was the first to receive a license for commercial broadcast from the federal Department of Commerce, and it initiated a regular daily schedule of transmissions on 2 November 1920. Throughout the country, entrepreneurs rapidly sought and obtained licenses for other stations and by 1922, Philadelphia had five licensed AM radio stations.

In May 1923, the University of Pennsylvania began to broadcast educational programming from a studio in Houston Hall, transmitting from the facilities of WIP, one of the first AM radio stations in Philadelphia. A contemporary newspaper described these broadcasts as "the first step by a large university toward utilizing the radio in the dissemination of learning." These broadcasts continued, intermittently, on both WIP and other local stations, for twenty years. The programming produced at the University included faculty presentations on literature, psychology, astronomy, history, government, business, archaeology, and other diverse topics; student debates; musical performances by Penn groups; as well as occasional sports contests.

As years passed, an increasing number of American colleges and universities were managing and operating their own radio stations, and several times in the first half of the twentieth century, the University considered, on an administrative level, the possibility of an official Penn station. All such propositions faltered, however, due partly to the cost and administrative effort that a station would require and partly to the perception that "educational" broadcasting was ineffective. In 1941, though, students who had grown up listening to the radio attempted to set up their own station in one of the freshman dormitories. The station, called WUOP (for University of Pennsylvania), was in operation for a brief period of time before its student-operators tired of the chores that broadcasting entailed. In the spring of 1945, however, a group of engineering students interested in the mechanism of broadcasting and a group of drama and other students interested in the content of broadcasting drew together to establish a new campus radio station. Consciously avoiding the call letters "WU\*\*," which they considered "phonetically dumb," the students decided to call the station WXPB (for Experimental Pennsylvania Network).

Working through the summer under the leadership of Richard Ridgeway, the students built the necessary equipment and installed it in Houston Hall, Penn's student union building. A series of test broadcasts beginning in the fall led to the first official broadcast on 14 November 1945, at a frequency of 730 kHz (WQHS, the student-operated AM station at Penn today, still uses the 730 kHz frequency). As with many other college systems at that time (including that of the earlier WUOP), WXPB's signal was transmitted across University power lines instead of through the air. Accordingly, its reception was limited theoretically to the Penn campus and practically to only those dormitories and fraternity houses nearest Houston Hall itself.

At first, WXPB broadcast for only a few hours each week, but its schedule gradually increased to several hours every weeknight. Early programming included live coverage of sporting events (including some "away" meets); campus news; classical music shows; live music; and dramatic presentations. These latter included works adapted from the stage, as well as a daily soap opera written by Harold (Hal) Prince, who went on to be a preeminent producer of Broadway musicals. Students were vetoed, however, when they tried to perform Oedipus Rex on the air, for the English translation of Sophocles' masterwork contains the taboo word "damn"!

Commercial messages helped to subsidize the cost of WXPB as it grew. In 1948, the radio stations at several prestigious colleges and universities in the eastern United States (including Penn) joined to form the Ivy Network. Programming produced and distributed through the Ivy Network was able to generate a substantial amount of revenue from advertising; the Ford Motor Company, for instance, sponsored a classical music program on the network. Helped by this increased income, WXPB was able to perform a major upgrade of its facilities in 1950, making the studios soundproof and installing a new control console in addition to partially relieving a problem of cramped quarters.

In 1956, WXPB applied for and received an educational-broadcast license for frequency modulating (FM) radio from the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). The FCC assigned the FM frequency of 88.9 MHz to the station, which also retained its on-campus AM broadcasts. WXPB-FM officially went on the air on 23 April 1957, with an output power of 10 watts. The first broadcasts extended outwards with a radius of seven to ten miles, reaching areas outside the campus for the first time. Three years later, in 1960, the station increased its FM power one-hundredfold to 1000 watts and installed a new broadcasting tower on the roof of the Gates Memorial Pavilion of the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania (HUP). With these improvements (which required an advance of \$10,000 from the University and a crew of volunteers working throughout the summer), WXPB-FM broadcasts could effectively reach areas up to fifty miles away.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, although programming on WXPB-FM was no longer geared mainly toward the University population, it hardly deviated from that on WXPB-AM. Both stations included educational lectures (though the FM broadcasts emphasized this to a greater extent), news and sports coverage, as well as programs devoted to classical, jazz, and folk music. The major difference between the two stations was that the AM station aired commercial messages, while the FM did not.

In February 1965, however, WXPB-AM began to air separate programming from WXPB-FM every weeknight. This programming focused on popular (i.e., "rock") music, which WXPB staff had previously excluded, following an unwritten law. The nightly "four-hour rock chaos" on WXPB-AM - a precursor to "progressive," underground rock radio - proved very popular with Penn's students. By 1968, WXPB-AM devoted nearly its entire schedule to rock music.

At the same time, WXPB-FM's focus seemed to be shifting from "educational radio" to "community radio." By the late 1960s, WXPB-FM was broadcasting alongside its traditional programs a daily program entitled "Phase II," which mixed rock with folk, jazz, blues, and even classical musics, and a program entitled "Rafreeba" (Radio Free Black America), which provided a forum for discourse on black nationalism. In addition, starting in 1969, WXPB-FM continued to broadcast to the community over the summer, when most students (and all University funding) were gone, by raising money from listeners in annual spring "marathons."

Other major changes occurred in this period, as well. In January 1969, WXPB-FM began to broadcast entirely in stereo, becoming the first non-commercial station in Philadelphia to do so. After twenty-five years with its headquarters in Houston Hall, moreover, the station was forced to relocate all of its facilities to a brick building at 3905 Spruce Street in the summer of 1970. (It was discovered that Houston Hall had become dangerously overcrowded, provoking a fire hazard, and that major renovations were necessary there.)

The transition between buildings was far from smooth. In the summer, rising costs and workers' strikes brought about delays in the necessary renovation of the facilities at 3905 Spruce. WXPB eventually had to move into the building while work continued so that broadcasts could resume in September. For several weeks, student-broadcasters faced the "catch-22" of operating with closed windows and oppressive late-summer heat or with open windows and the noise of construction outside. To add insult to injury, when renovations were nearly complete in the late fall, the Philadelphia Historical Society attempted to halt the work, claiming that the building's interior (designed by Philadelphia architect Frank Furness) must not be altered from its original state. Fortunately, the renovations had preserved the intricately carved woodwork on the building's

staircase, and the Historical Society was eventually appeased. At last, in January 1971, workers were able to complete the renovations, and WXPB gained control of the upper two floors of the building.

The station was growing increasingly dissatisfied with its FM signal, however. The University Hospital's Gates building, one of the tallest in West Philadelphia when WXPB placed its antenna there in 1960, stood by 1970 in the shadow of several buildings nearby. (A prominent example was "Superblock," a series of high-rise dormitories constructed in the late 1960s as part of Penn's great campus expansion.) These taller buildings obstructed WXPB-FM's transmission, and consequently the signal no longer reached certain areas in the Philadelphia region. After several years of requests, the station was at last permitted to relocate its antenna from the Gates building to the loftier High Rise South in 1973, regaining a radius of broadcast of about fifty miles.

The year 1973 also witnessed the beginning of an escalating series of troubles for WXPB. During a soccer broadcast late that year, a station engineer accidentally aired a prank advertisement promoting (in explicit detail) a fake drug for sexual enhancement. Several listeners complained to the University administration about the phony commercial, considering it obscene. Around the same time, a group of students active in WXPB accused other staff members of using alcohol, marijuana, and other illegal substances at the station headquarters. Then in December 1973, the station's business manager was impeached and removed from office for mismanagement of station funds.

In 1974, the University received additional complaints about "obscene" broadcasts from WXPB, such as readings from "erotic" literature, and the FCC began to investigate several allegations of misconduct by the station. Amid this controversy, in December 1974, a pre-dawn fire of mysterious origins scorched the inside of 3905 Spruce. Police suspected that it was a case of arson, and WXPB was forced to suspend broadcasts for a few weeks while the building was restored.

The controversy came to a head when WXPB returned to the air in January 1975. Two broadcasts of an early-evening talk show called "The Vegetable Report" (on which profanity and sexual talk were commonplace) aroused scores of listeners to complain to the University and the FCC. Within days, the FCC was looking into the matter. The University finally took action in March as President Martin Meyerson transferred control of the station to Jerry Condon, Director of Student Affairs, and ordered that a new station constitution be drafted by an ad hoc committee. To make matters worse, when WXPB's license to broadcast expired in July, the FCC declined to renew it until its own investigations were complete.



In December 1975, the FCC fined the Trustees of the University (who held the station's license) \$2,000 for obscenity and other violations at WXPB. The Trustees paid the fine but vowed to fight for the renewal of the station's license. After months of investigation, on 4 April 1977, an administrative judge for the FCC ordered WXPB off the air in fifty days because of the University's apparent lack of control. This marked the first time that the FCC had revoked a non-commercial broadcast license due to obscenity, and the case was soon considered a landmark in broadcasting law. Penn's Trustees appealed the decision immediately, claiming that more effective management had been set in place, and many listeners wrote to the University and the FCC in support of the station. One local musician asserted that WXPB's programming was "uniformly excellent, even if not in the mainstream of popular taste" and called the station "the only medium in the area that is truly committed to supporting local artists." Others argued that the FCC was unfairly penalizing the students currently operating the station for the poor conduct of their predecessors. During the drawn-out court battle between the Trustees and the FCC, WXPB continued broadcasting without a license through a series of temporary permits. Finally, in 1980, more than five years after the controversy started, the FCC approved a new license for the station.

Meanwhile, during the years when its license was in limbo, WXPB underwent great internal change. In January 1976, the Trustees of the University determined that a professional station manager should guide the station. For this task, they hired Jim Campbell, the former general manager of a college station in New York, in July 1976. A few months earlier, in March, a Board for Policy and Standards had initiated a series of meetings to examine the development of WXPB's operations from the station's inception to that time, so that it might recommend future improvements to the station. To the dismay of those working at the station, there were no student representatives on the Board, whose eight members were selected from the University faculty and the communications field at large. Several persons who served on the Board had worked at WXPB while undergraduates at Penn.

In December 1976, the University's Student Activities Council (SAC) approved a new constitution for the station which declared that only persons affiliated with the University could vote on WXPB's board but set no restrictions on who could work for the FM station. (The AM station, however, continued to be run exclusively by students at Penn.) As a result, many former students continued to work at WXPB after their graduation from the University, and an increasing number of community volunteers became involved in the station. By 1980, undergraduates comprised less than one-third of WXPB-FM's operating staff. Once "student-run," the station had become "student-participatory."

As student-involvement at WXPB decreased, the SAC, which distributed University money for student activities, began threatening to cut its level of funding for the station. Of WXPB's \$116,000 budget in 1980, \$17,000 (or about 15%) came from the SAC. In April 1981, however, the SAC allotted only \$1,000 for the station. Although it continued to stress its commitment to the student body at Penn, WXPB was forced to rely less on funding from the University and to find alternate sources of support.

In the late 1970s, under the leadership of station manager Peter Cuzzo, WXPB-FM began to take steps toward becoming a public radio station. In 1979, the station first applied for grants from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), with the avowed intent of becoming an affiliate of National Public Radio (NPR), a prestigious network of non-commercial stations. Though the CPB turned down these initial grant proposals, it had become clear that WXPB-FM was moving away from a focus on the University and, thus, away from its AM counterpart. As if to confirm the separate natures of the two signals, in the late 1970s WXPB-AM officially changed its name to WQHS, taking the new call-letters from the portions of Penn's campus that it principally served: the Quads, Hill House, and Superblock.

In March 1982, at the recommendation of the University Council, the composition of eight-member WXPB's governing body was altered to include representatives from Penn's student body and the listening community, as well as from the University's faculty, trustees, and administration. The Council, furthermore, encouraged the station to increase its level of student involvement. By late 1986, approximately half of the station's staff were students at Penn, and another quarter were former students. The importance of contributions from listeners increased as well, accounting for about two-thirds of WXPB's operating income in 1984. Throughout the 1980s, however, the station struggled with annual financial deficits and other internal problems.

By 1985, WXPB's governing board, after working with a hired consultant, had resolved that the station should work to meet the qualifications for annual funding from the CPB. With support from University administration, the station undertook improvements to its physical facilities and added one paid staff position to meet the CPB's minimum requirement of five. After these changes, WXPB officially qualified for and began receiving CPB funding in June 1986. Other changes also took place in 1986. In the fall, the station governing board was renamed the WXPB Policy Board and restructured to include ten members. In November, the Office for the Vice Provost of University Life led a search which resulted in the hiring of Mark Fuerst as the station's third professional general manager.

WXPB's programming in the mid-1980s had exhibited great diversity, a juxtaposition of classical music with "punk" rock and folk songs with avant-garde electronic music. Despite stiff opposition from many listeners and volunteer staff members, Mark Fuerst began as general manager to change the station's schedule, seeking to apply some structure and continuity. In addition to new local programming, WXPB began to import programs, ranging from news and analysis to "New Wave" music, from national and international public radio networks.

In late December 1987, "Kids America," an acclaimed call-in program for children that WXPB carried in the evenings, was terminated by its station of origination, WNYC in New York, after the CPB discontinued its funding for the program. With a large, temporary commitment from the University (and, later, a three-year grant from the William Penn Foundation), WXPB was able to hire the host of "Kids America," Kathy O'Connell, and create a local version of the program, all in ten days! On 4 January 1988, "Kid's Corner" made its debut on WXPB. The program continues to be one of the most popular on the station.

In May 1989, WXPB astonished the public radio community by winning three of the eleven CPB Public Radio Awards, in children's (for "Kid's Corner"), community service, and public affairs programming. Two years later, in March 1991, "Kid's Corner" won a prestigious George Foster Peabody Broadcasting Award, an honor which recognizes excellence in broadcast media, commercial or non-commercial. (Other winners that year included Ken Burns' acclaimed television series "The Civil War" for PBS.) At the same time, WXPB's listening audience had increased drastically, from an average of 40,500 in spring 1986 to an average of 78,100 in spring 1989. The station could reach even more listeners beginning in October 1990, when it was able to boost its power from 1.9 kW to 3 kW as a result of a change in frequency from 88.9 MHz to 88.5 MHz.

In the midst of this success, WXPB received a highly competitive \$305,000 grant in March 1990 to research and develop a program of contemporary world music for national syndication. With the help of several consultants, Mark Fuerst and others at the station established the framework of a daily, two-hour program that "reflects and anticipates trends in international popular music." In January 1991, the CPB approved WXPB's proposal and issued a second grant to begin production. Trial broadcasts of "The World Café," as the program became known, began on WXPB on 11 August 1991, and on 14 October 1991 the show premiered nationally on five stations. By the end of 1992, carriage of "The World Café" had increased to fifty-five stations. Today, over one hundred stations throughout the country carry "The World Café."

In the 1990s, WXPB has extended the scope of its broadcasts even further. In 1993, WKHS (90.5 MHz FM) in Worton, Maryland, a suburb of Baltimore, began to simulcast WXPB's programming

every weeknight and all day on the weekends. The following year, a similar arrangement began with a station in Allentown, Pennsylvania. In September 1995, moreover, WXPB began to broadcast remotely twenty-four-hours-a-day through WXPB (88.1 MHz) in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Under the leadership of Vinnie Curren, who succeeded Mark Fuerst as general manager in 1996, the station has continued to grow and thrive. Today, WXPB streams all of its broadcasts live over the Internet, enabling computer users anywhere in the world to hear its programming. From its beginning serving Penn's students with programming for a few hours each weeknight to its present status as a national leader in the "Adult, Album, Alternative" (AAA) format of radio, WXPB has fulfilled its creators' intent as a station willing to experiment.

### SCOPE AND CONTENT

Although WXPB's history begins in 1945, this collection covers in detail only the period from about 1986 (when Mark Fuerst became the station's general manager) to the present, with most of the material dating from after 1990. The Historical Accounts and Related Material series, however, includes much valuable information on the entire breadth of the station's history, with written reminiscences from people who had been involved with the station and with photocopies of WXPB-related material in newspaper clippings and past University of Pennsylvania yearbooks. Three audio cassette tapes of WXPB programming from 1968 and 1969 further capture the spirit of the station in that era. This series also includes information on the station's plans and preparations for alumni reunions in 1990 (as part of the University's 250th-anniversary celebrations) and 1996 (to celebrate the station's fiftieth anniversary), as well as other special events for those who had worked at the station in the past. The entire series extends to approximately one cubic foot.

The General File series, which extends to approximately four cubic feet, provides a wealth of detail on how WXPB has functioned and operated since 1986, when a professional staff began to direct most of the station's operations. Major subject groupings in this series cover information on the station's audience; financial records and information on the station's underwriting; and correspondence. Examples of material from this series include often fascinating correspondence with the station's listeners; Arbitron graphs of WXPB's and its competitors' audience size and demographics, etc.; internal memoranda relating to objectives for the station and plans for special events; budgets and audited reports for the station; and copies of XPress, the WXPB newsletter.

The Daily Station Logs, extending to approximately eleven cubic feet, show in detail when underwriting and promotional messages, news and health bulletins, and other special messages were broadcast on WXPB. This information, while perhaps not of earth-shaking importance, adds depth to an understanding of the nature of the station's programming. The Daily Station Logs are closed to researchers until 2024.

## INTRODUCTION

The University of Pennsylvania was introduced to radio in 1923, when it formed a partnership with one of Philadelphia's first commercial radio stations to broadcast educational programming from a studio located in Houston Hall. It was not until 1945, however, that a group of University engineering students established Penn's own AM radio station, which they called WXPB (for Experimental Pennsylvania Network). The student-directed station flourished and in 1957 added the necessary equipment to broadcast in FM to the greater Philadelphia area. By 1970, having outgrown Houston Hall, WXPB moved its AM and FM equipment to Wayne Hall, a great 19th century mansion house at 3905 Spruce Street, which had recently been acquired by the University.

WXPB continued as an enterprise managed and operated solely by students until March 1975, when the Trustees of the University intervened in its governance due to complaints lodged (FCC). In the following year, the University hired the station's first professional manager. This action initiated a gradual transition from a student to a public radio station. Beginning in 1986, WXPB both within the University and with the Federal Communications Commission WXPB received annual grants from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), decreasing its dependence on the University. In 1991, WXPB began to broadcast its flagship program, "The World Caf ," over five stations. Today, over one hundred stations carry "The World Caf " and both it and other WXPB programming have won numerous national awards.

In the summer of 2000, as this is written, the station employs twenty-nine full-time and two part-time professional and support staff, and its funding is obtained primarily from two sources: annual membership dues and contributions and financial support from business underwriters. Additional funding, amounting to about one-fifth of the annual operating budget, comes from CPB grants, University support, special fundraising events, and CD sales. Once reaching only a few dormitories on Penn's campus, WXPB's broadcasts can now be heard throughout the Delaware Valley,

Harrisburg and its vicinity, much of Pennsylvania's Lebanon Valley, and parts of Baltimore, as well as over the Internet.

The collections of the University Archives extensive files of news clippings and press releases on WXPB from 1945 to the present. They have not included, however, administrative and operational records of WXPB until, in the spring of 2000, discussions between the general manager of the station, Vincent Curren, and the director of the University Archives, Mark Frazier Lloyd, led to the transfer of the collection described in this guide. The bulk of the collection dates only to relatively recent years, primarily 1986 to the present.

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**INVENTORY**

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