HISTORY OF THE OHIO UNIVERSITY BOARD OF TRUSTEES

On June 30, 1800, Manasseh Cutler proposed a model charter of a university in the town of Athens, Ohio, to be governed by a Board of Trustees. General Rufus Putnam, a leader in the establishment of the Northwest Territory and The Ohio Company, wrote to a member of the territorial legislature and proposed Cutler’s document with a suggested list of charter trustees. On January 9, 1802, in the last session before Ohio became a state, the territorial legislature passed an act creating American Western University in the town of Athens and accepted Putnam’s nominations for initial Board of Trustee members.

Putnam organized a gathering of the Trustees on May 21, 1802. Succeeding meetings of the Trustees and other statesmen focused on creating a constitution for the state of Ohio. On February 19, 1804, the Ohio General Assembly passed an act establishing, “the President and Trustees of the Ohio University” to remain the “body politic and corporate” of the first university in the Northwest Territory. The Board of Trustees would include the Governor of the state of Ohio, the President and Vice President of the university, and 10 to 15 other Board members.

The Mahn Center for Archives and Special Collections, located in Ohio University’s Alden Library, preserve the original handwritten minutes of the Board of Trustees. The records indicate the Board initially convened under the direction of Gov Edward Tiffin in the home of Dr. Eliphaz Perkins on June 4, 1804. The Trustees proceeded to elect Dudley Woodbridge as Secretary, Edward Tiffin as President, and Dr. Perkins as Treasurer. The Board assembled the following day and again on June 6, 1804. The Board reflects discussion on attendance at meetings, formation of committee to create a seal for the university, and also surveyed and divided up lands to collect fees and leases from individuals residing on university property.

When Ohio University first opened its doors in 1808, Treasurer Perkins’ son, James Perkins, along with Joel Abbott and Brewster Higley were the first three students enrolled in the university. The Trustees governed Ohio University through both thriving and dire economic times. In 1845, Trustees voted to suspend the operation of Ohio University for three years due to financial constraints, low attendance, and other unfavorable circumstances. In 1863, Trustees voted to admit wounded veterans with full tuition benefits.

In 1885, John R. Blackburn was elected as the first African American to serve on the Board of Trustees and he served for six consecutive years. Prior to his service on Ohio University’s Board, Trustee Blackburn served on the Board of Wilberforce
University in Wilberforce, Ohio. Evelyn Luchs, a graduate of Ohio University and voted outstanding student upon her graduation in 1927, was the first woman appointed to the Board in 1950 and she served for two consecutive years.

On October 12, 1951, the Board of Trustees resolved that the President of the Ohio University Alumni Association would serve as an ex-officio member of the Board. In 1989, the first two Student Trustees were selected by the Governor of Ohio to serve in a non-voting capacity. On February 14, 2003, the Board approved the appointment of two National Trustees, also with non-voting capacity, to sit with trustees and participate in the deliberations of the Board. On January 24, 2009, the Board adopted a resolution to appoint two faculty members to serve as ex-officio non-voting representatives to the Academic Committee and the University Resources Committee.

Ohio University currently has nine voting Trustees, two National Trustees, two Student Trustees, one Alumni Representative, and two Faculty Representatives.

References
Minutes, Ohio University Board of Trustees