

History & Namesake

Who is Eliot?

There were actually many distinguished people in the Eliot family. John Eliot (1604-1690) published the first Bible in America in the Massachusetts Indian language. Samuel A. Eliot founded the American Unitarian Association in 1825. Charles W. Eliot was president of Harvard College for 40 years. Samuel A. Eliot II, Charles' son, spent time in Seattle as a theological student and instigated what became the First Unitarian Church of Seattle (presently in Des Moines). Later he became president of the American Unitarian Association. Frederick May Eliot became president of the AUA in 1937 and supported the fellowship movement, the religious education curriculum of Sophia Fahs, and minister-at-large to establish new churches.

Eliot Institute honors the Northwest part of the Eliot family---Thomas Lamb Eliot, first minister of the Portland church and founder of Reed College, as well as part-time superintendent of Multnomah Schools, and his son, William G. Eliot, who followed his father's example of civic leadership.

The Beginnings of Eliot Institute

When Unitarianism was getting started in the Northwest, most members participated in small fellowships. Summer meetings were held in the Northwest before World War II, but discontinued. Then in 1947, Unitarians of the Mercer Island Fellowship, remembering their childhood experiences at Star Island, a Unitarian Universalist conference center off the Maine coast, gathered several people from a few local congregations to plan a conference at Camp Wascowitz, an old civilian conservation camp near Seattle.

There they developed a strong sense of identity with other Unitarians, and called themselves the Northwest Unitarian Summer Conference. They made plans for future meetings and took the first steps in the formation of our present Pacific Northwest District-Unitarian Universalist District. Until our district was formed, the conference served as our official link to the American Unitarian Association and to the Pacific Coast Council.

The conference remained at Wascowitz until 1950, was moved to the University of British Columbia in Vancouver in 1951, was held at Lewis and Clark College in Portland 1952 to 1954, moved back to UBC again in 1955, and finally moved to Seabeck in 1956. Eliot Institute added a second conference in 1966. In 1984 a Spring Eliot was held in Menucha, Oregon, and the first Winter Eliot was held at Seabeck.

There were three conferences for several years until 1995 when Spring Eliot presented a fourth opportunity for people to attend Eliot conferences.

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