



looking back

St. Louis, first Unitarian outpost in the West

by Suzanne Meyer

WILLIAM GREENLEAF ELIOT WAS 23, slender, short of stature, and newly ordained as a Unitarian minister when he stepped off the steamboat *Metamora* in St. Louis, Missouri, on November 27, 1834.

St. Louis was a town of barely 7,500 souls with few of the civilizing amenities, but it was growing rapidly. A small group of transplanted New

Englanders was intent on planting a Unitarian church in their new home. They made inquiries back East and discovered that Eliot, a recent Harvard graduate, was eager to serve them.

Although their young missionary was full of zeal, establishing a new church was slow going. The First Congregational Society of St. Louis was officially organized on January 26, 1835, but three years later the congregation, meeting for worship in a borrowed classroom, had dwindled to as few as 25 people. Their annual budget was less than \$500. But Eliot had no intention of giving up and returning to New England.

The first Unitarian congregation west of the

Mississippi had been established and would grow along with the city. (This summer, several thousand Unitarian Universalists will gather for the UUA's first-ever General Assembly in St. Louis.)

The tiny, ambitious congregation raised \$4,000; congregations back east donated \$3,000 more; the Unitarians bought land and built a small but elegant church. Less than thirteen years later the congregation was able to build and dedicate a much larger building. They changed their name to Church of the Messiah.

St. Louis continued to grow even as fire, flood, cholera, and Civil War each threatened the city and

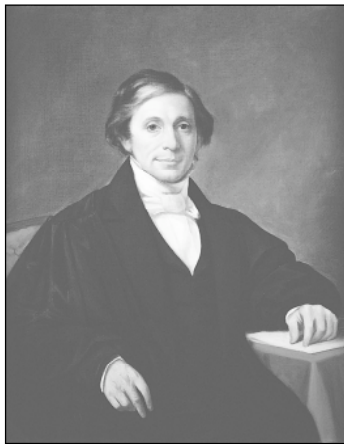
the church in turn. In the 1860s Eliot used his growing influence as a public moral leader to help keep Missouri from joining the Confederacy.

In 1868, ten members of his congregation, with Eliot's blessing, established a second Unitarian church, Church of the Unity, in the southern part of the city. Eliot continued to serve the church he had helped to found until 1873.

One hundred seventy years later it is virtually impossible to live in St. Louis and not experience the positive effects of Eliot's ministry and the progressive influence of the Unitarian leaders who followed him. Among the institutions Eliot helped to establish are Washington University, where he served as chancellor from 1870 to 1887, the public school system, the St. Louis Art Museum, the Mary Institute (a private school), and the Mission Free School (a day school for poor children).

Later St. Louis Unitarians were instrumental in founding South Side Day Nursery, the public library system, and the Urban League. Four thriving Unitarian Universalist congregations in Metropolitan St. Louis carry on this civic-minded legacy: First Unitarian Church (a merger of Church of the Messiah and Church of the Unity), Eliot Unitarian Chapel, Emerson Unitarian Universalist Chapel, and First Unitarian Church of Alton, Illinois.

Today First Unitarian Church is one of the anchor institutions in the Central West End—a diverse urban neighborhood that has been undergoing a renaissance in recent years. Directly across the street from the church is the Central Reform Congregation, a progressive synagogue with a strong commitment to social justice. The Jewish congregation met for worship at First Unitarian Church for twelve years before building its elegant modern campus across the street. The doors of these two religious institutions face each other to symbolize their commitment to the neighborhood, each other, and a progressive religious presence in St. Louis. ❖



KEMPERARTMUSEUM.UMUSTLE.EDU

Unknown artist (American),
Portrait of William Greenleaf
Eliot, 19th century. Oil on canvas,
36 1/4 x 29 1/4 inches. Mildred
Lane Kemper Art Museum,
Washington University in St.
Louis. Gift in memory of William
Eliot Smith from his family.



St. Louis hosts the UUA's annual General Assembly in June; see page 50. For online coverage, visit www.uuworld.org/news/ga.