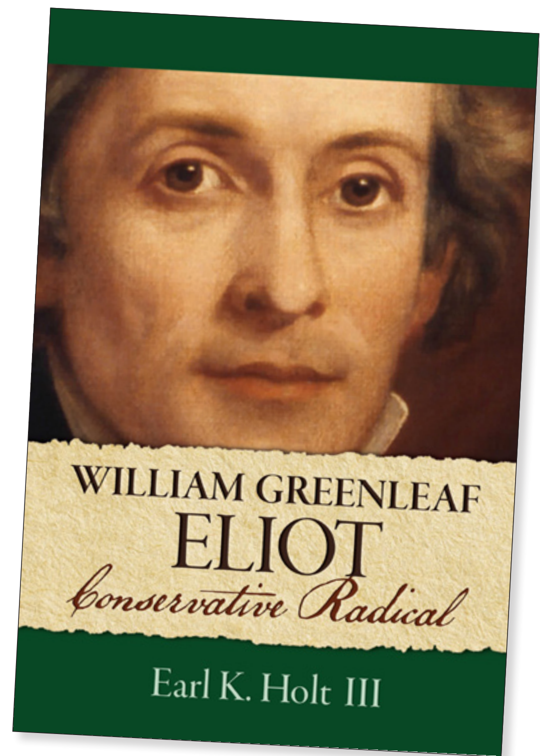
William Greenleaf Eliot
Conservative Radical

When William Greenleaf Eliot came to the "untamed West" from Boston in 1834, it was to establish the first Unitarian church in St. Louis, then a frontier town of 7,000. Yet Eliot's vision and efforts, and the generosity of his congregation, led to the founding of Washington University, Mary Institute, the Mission Free School, and indirectly the Saint Louis Art Museum.

Eliot was president of the St. Louis School Board and fought successfully for public funding of the city's schools. He helped keep Missouri in the Union, and he proposed and worked tirelessly for the Western Sanitary Commission (forerunner of the American Red Cross). All the while, Eliot preached and taught, visited his parishioners three hours each day, and founded several Unitarian churches in the West.

Earl K. Holt III, who succeeded to Eliot's pulpit at First Unitarian Church of St. Louis in 1974, brings to life this diminutive, frail minister—conservative radical William Greenleaf Eliot—who laid the foundation for what was, by 1900, one of the most dynamic cities in the nation.



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William Greenleaf Eliot, Jr., circa 1860

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William Greenleaf Eliot
Conservative Radical

Six essays on the life and character
of the nineteenth-century Unitarian minister,
educator, and philanthropist,
based on the 1983 Minns Lectures

by

Earl K. Holt III
Minister Emeritus
First Unitarian Church of St. Louis

With an introductory essay on Eliot's early life by

William A. Deiss
Winchester, Virginia

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Dr. William H. Danforth, Chancellor Emeritus, Washington University

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William Greenleaf Eliot, Jr., circa 1835

Portrait by John Cranch, his brother-in-law

Courtesy Saint Louis Art Museum

John Cranch, American, 1807–1891; *William Greenleaf Eliot, Jr., Third Chancellor of Washington University*; oil on canvas; 35 7/16 × 28 7/16 in.; Saint Louis Art Museum, Gift of the Descendants of William Greenleaf Eliot, Jr. 92:1944

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ONE

"St. Louis, Near Alton"

1834

If I come, I come to remain, and to lay my ashes in the Valley of the Mississippi.

On November 27, 1834, William Greenleaf Eliot, Jr. saw St. Louis for the first time. We may imagine him leaning against the rail of the riverboat that had carried him on the last leg of the long westward journey, straining for his first glimpse of the place, then little more than a frontier town in what was considered the Far West.

Except for his deep, soulful eyes, he was an unimpressive figure. Youthful—he had celebrated his twenty-third birthday in August—and slight of stature, it seems doubtful he made much of an impression on any who shared his journey, still more doubtful that he expressed to any of them either his doubts about himself or his dreams about the little city of 7,000 that he intended, even then, to make the locus of his life's work. St. Louis lay on the west bank of the Mississippi River, a little south of where it was joined by the Missouri and Illinois rivers, and also a little south of the then more prominent river town of Alton, Illinois.

Three years before, while working in the Post Office Department in Washington, D.C., his family home, Eliot had seen letters addressed to "St. Louis, near Alton." Intrigued, he had examined maps of the region, and of the whole Mississippi Valley.

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TWO

“The Whole City Was His Parish”

1849

This year everything sad is heaped upon us.

If I use the next year rightly it will be the best and richest of my life.” So wrote William Greenleaf Eliot in his journal on the day after Christmas in 1848. It was not unusual, at the turning of the year or sometimes in the fall, for Eliot to record in his journal his thoughts, plans, or ideas for the year ahead. These jottings not only give us the specifics of his objectives and goals; they also reveal a characteristically optimistic and hopeful spirit. Only rarely did he turn to reflection about the past; his orientation, and the orientation of the progressive era in which he lived, was toward the future. Typifying this spirit was the sentence with which he concluded an address written late in his life relating the remarkable history of the Church of the Messiah on the occasion of its fiftieth anniversary: “The past has much for which we may reasonably be grateful, but the future must and will have better things in store.”*

But more than just an optimistic, forward-looking spirit supported Eliot’s prophecy of December 26, 1848. The year 1849

*This sentence is inscribed on a time capsule, filled with memorabilia collected at the church’s 150th anniversary in 1985 and sealed in a wall just outside the sanctuary, in Eliot Hall, First Unitarian Church of St. Louis.

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would mark the fifteenth anniversary of his arrival in St. Louis. In that time, the population of the city had increased tenfold, from barely 7,000 to over 70,000. By following a maxim other young clergymen would do well to emulate—not to use their influence until they have some—he was gradually emerging as one of the leading citizens of this rapidly growing city and would eventually become generally considered its most influential minister. His church, likewise growing in numbers and influence, had already outgrown its original building at Fourth and Pine, built in 1837—even with a major addition in 1842 that had increased the seating capacity of the church by fully one half. One of Eliot's plans for the year ahead was the construction of a new church, a project that was fully launched by year's end despite the then-unforeseen calamities of the months ahead.

"My time is all broken in little pieces," Eliot wrote in his journal, a not uncommon ministerial lament. Though his activities and involvements outside the church were at this time minuscule compared to what they would become in later years, even at this point he was deeply concerned that "secular activities" occupied too much of his attention and energy, distracting him from his first purposes. Sunday newspapers were introduced in St. Louis around this time. Eliot declined to subscribe, however, because he said he felt it tended to "secularize" the day too much. Sundays, at least, he reserved for God. His journal meditation on the day after Christmas in 1848 reveals his state of mind as he looked ahead:

> What I must do in the coming year:
>
> Regularly have an hour, if I can, at least half an hour, in my study, before breakfast: For personal religious improvement.
>
> Sermons. Since I began to preach, I have never preached *one* that satisfied me, and generally the hour after preaching is one of commingled pain and mortification. Yet I fear there is more of *self* than of true humility in this. Let me *try harder and fret less.*

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> If I use the next year rightly it will be the best and richest of my life. I must now use, for more extended good, the influence which I feel myself to have acquired. As a *Citizen,* I must make myself known, through the state. But still more, in my society, a deeper religious influence must be expected—and this charity begins at home. There are causes that have turned me away from God and from Church, which have now ceased and must cease altogether. . . . If I know myself my first object in life is to make my own people religious—but the details of life, public schools, etc. engross too much time.

When Eliot first became a member of the St. Louis School Board in 1848, the public schools were at a primitive level. He spent some time visiting the various schools, and having found them generally substandard, he instigated the "importation" of a number of new teachers from New England. (Four of them lodged initially in the Eliots' home.)

Besides his considerable work as a member of the School Board and continuing pastoral duties, at this time Eliot received an appointment to a commission charged with investigating conditions at the county farm and city workhouse and initiating a proposal for a new correctional facility. "Those who are able to work all the time without painful weariness," he confided to his journal, "do not know what luxury they enjoy."

Nevertheless, his plans around this time, besides those already mentioned, included to preach on slavery; to approach members of the legislature regarding some consideration of emancipation laws; to preach strongly against the liquor trade; to deliver a series of lectures on his European travels of the year before, for the benefit of the church's charity fund; and to give a course of religious lectures for young men and women. Such were some of the "little pieces" of his life.

But a major focus of his energies was the public schools, and particularly his own idea for authorization of a city property

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tax—an authorization for a tax not to exceed one-tenth of one percent. The enabling legislation was approved by the Missouri state legislature on February 13, 1849, and would be submitted to the voters of St. Louis in June.

Eliot had been elected president of the School Board in October 1848. This may be seen as a symbol of his increasing influence and at least one basis for his confident expectation of "the best and richest" year of his life in 1849.

But what would prove to be a truer harbinger of the new year was Eliot's journal entry of January 21: "Tomorrow from the church will be buried James Henderson Haven, the first victim of the cholera from my society." In the weeks and months that followed, sickness and death were the constant companion and preoccupation not only of the minister and the doctor, but of all the citizens of St. Louis: A cholera epidemic swept the city and killed more than 10 percent of the city's population before it abated in late summer. Eliot's journal for these months is an almost constant record of deathbed visitation and funerals, interspersed with School Board meetings (support was needed for the school tax vote in June) and, of course, the unbroken routine of preaching and worship.

"Things are very gloomy and becoming worse," he wrote during this period, "but one subject engrosses all minds. In one family five persons have died since Wednesday, and like cases I hear of daily." Both days and nights were filled with calls to the dying. Week by week the number of deaths increased. On a Tuesday during this period he recorded for himself a "comparatively quiet day," yet the previous morning he had gone twice to visit an Edward Crow, who died at one o'clock. At seven in the evening he christened a baby whose mother had died, and then at eight o'clock went to a School Board meeting. At half past nine he received a message from a Mrs. Gates, whose husband he had previously visited. He found her alone with Dr. Gates, who was not expected to live through the night. The neighbors were all sick,

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and he persuaded the tired wife to sleep, while he remained during the night with the sick man. These people lived in a small, one-story brick house, on low ground, with a bed on the floor. With careful nursing, Dr. Gates got through the night very well, and when Eliot left him there was some hope of his recovery. He returned to his home in the morning and, sending a physician to the sick man he had just left, went to bed. He had slept for three hours when he was summoned to a Mrs. Holden and her child, both ill. At three in the afternoon, she sent for him a second time, and as soon as he saw her he "knew that she must die." He spent most of the afternoon with her and returned in the evening after attending a wedding. At midnight, he was again summoned to her bedside and remained there until three in the morning. On coming home, he was met at his door by a gentleman who told him that his "next neighbor," Mrs. Clark, was very ill. At seven thirty the previous evening she had been at Eliot's door. He had discouraged her from returning to nurse a cholera patient. At nine o'clock she was violently ill, and at four thirty in the morning, when he reached her bedside, she was in a dying condition.

And so the record continues.

As if the cholera were not enough, on the evening of May 17, a fire broke out on the 262-ton steamer *White Cloud,* which was tied up on the riverfront at the foot of Franklin Street. Fanned by a strong northeast wind, the blaze quickly spread to other boats along the river, and in about half an hour 23 steamers, three barges and one canal boat were destroyed. Embers carried across the levee to the wood frame buildings that began at Locust and Front streets, and before the fire was brought under control (by the drastic measure of blowing up a line of buildings along Second and Market streets), 400 buildings were damaged or destroyed along 15 city blocks. The total loss was estimated at $6.5 million.

In June, Eliot wrote in his journal: "This year everything sad is heaped upon us."

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Besides the personal tragedy that the epidemic and the fire entailed, they also seemed to ensure the defeat of the school tax measure. Even the normally sanguine Eliot confided to his journal, "I fear that all hope of a tax for the schools is lost by this fire." But he was wrong.

In later years, Eliot credited the successful passage of the tax largely to members of his congregation who went door to door canvassing voters. Eliot always referred to the fact that the vote was two to one in favor, and this is the statistic that is usually reported. It ought to be noted, however, that in a city with a population of about 70,000, there were only 6,000 voters in 1849, and only 786 of these voted on the school tax measure. But the measure was won, and Eliot recorded his satisfaction:

> now that the law is *passed & confirmed,* I feel as if this alone is a good and sufficient year's work. It is enough in itself to make me satisfied that I returned to St. Louis.

Eliot once said that the passage of the school tax marked the true beginning of the St. Louis public schools. Typical of the Unitarians of the period, Eliot felt that education was the primary and best means for the improvement of society. A school for the poor was one of the earliest charities of the Church.* And the importance of the St. Louis public schools on the future course of history was a theme in Eliot's Phi Beta Kappa address, delivered near the end of the Civil War:

---

*This was the origin of the Mission Free School, which became a significant institution of social welfare in St. Louis, supported primarily by the Unitarian church. In 1958, some of its funds were used to create the William Greenleaf Eliot Division of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at Washington University. The Mission Free School itself continues today as the St. Louis Unitarian Foundation for Children, supporting children's charities in the St. Louis area.

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June 5. 1849.

Last August I began the movement in favor of Tax for Schools. See vol. 1. p. 129. 137. 147. &c. Everything in relation to it since then has been either my own work or at my suggestion: and now that the law is passed & confirmed, I feel as if this alone is a good & sufficient year's work. It is enough in itself to make me satisfied that I returned to St. Louis. It will give to the public Schools some $ 30.000 pr. an.

TAX FOR THE SUPPORT OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS.—The election on Monday terminated with the following result.

	For	Against.
First Ward	42	96
Second Ward	80	26
Third Ward	203	42
Fourth Ward	105	23
Fifth Ward	79	37
Sixth Ward	33	21
Total	541	245
	245	...
Majority for the tax	296	...

Eliot records the passing of the school tax.

Eliot includes the newspaper clipping that shows the final tally of 541 for the tax, 245 against. In this entry on June 5, 1849, he notes, "Now that the law is *passed* & *confirmed,* I feel as if this alone is a good and sufficient year's work." (Notebook 2, page 108)

Courtesy Washington University Archives

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Correspondence between Eliot and James Freeman Clarke, 1852

On February 9, James Freeman Clarke signed a letter to Eliot: Yours, with wonderful love—(passing that of women).

Eliot, of course, recognized the Biblical reference. In his reply on March 2, he referred to Clarke's closing and commented: In the time of Jonathan and David, before women's rights were discovered, that may have been correct, but at present my wife demurs.

Notebook entry, April 14, 1852

Am elected President of the Institute for the Blind, in place of Dr. Potts who died two weeks ago.

Notebook entry, April 14, 1852

Called at Knoff's book bindery, and found them just beginning to letter back of my books Doctrinal Sermons; William G. *Elliot,* Jr.—just in time to correct it at expense of making a new die.

Notebook entry, May 1852

I have just bought a horse and carriage—$400. Which is almost wrong; but for sake of own health and that of family may be pardonable.

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