

Willamette University

By William F. Willingham

Willamette University, the oldest university west of the Mississippi River, was founded in 1842. Located in Salem, the university had its origins in a school for Native American children, operated by Reverend Jason Lee and his fellow Methodist missionaries from 1834 to 1844. Throughout its history, Willamette University has honored its historic roots in the United Methodist Church and has remained true to its mission of providing a sound liberal arts education for both men and women. Over time, it has educated many of the Pacific Northwest's business, professional, and cultural leaders.

In 1842, Lee and other missionaries established the Oregon Institute, a separate school for children of EuroAmerican settlers. After two years, the new school took over the three-story frame building of the discontinued Native American school, located on the site of the present-day Willamette University campus. The 1853 session of the Oregon territorial legislature, meeting in the Oregon Institute building, granted a charter to the school as Wallamet University. The university operated as a coeducational institution from its inception. In 1859, its first graduate, Emily York, earned the degree of Mistress of English Literature.

Willamette University grew slowly, as funds were difficult to raise in a frontier environment. In 1864, Reverend Alvan Waller began raising money for a new college building. Completed in 1867, the imposing new brick structure, initially known as University Hall (later Waller Hall) stood five stories high in the form of a Greek cross. That same year, the university started a medical college on campus, the first professional school established in the Pacific Northwest.

During the 1870s, Willamette expanded its offerings, adding an elementary school, a commercial department, and a music department. Total enrollment during the 1870s averaged 280. In 1883, the trustees established a College of Law; and in 1880, the medical school moved to Portland where there were better clinical facilities.

Willamette faced a new challenge to its existence in 1891, when a rival Methodist university opened in Portland and attracted the Salem school's students and faculty. It was a trying time for Willamette, as competition from the new Portland University diverted financial support and students, and the College of Medicine lost its clinical privileges at Portland hospitals and had to return to the Salem campus. By 1899, the Portland University had failed financially and united with Willamette.

In the first quarter of the twentieth century, Willamette's administration concentrated on raising the university's endowment and constructing new buildings, including a medical college (1906), a theological seminary (1906), classrooms (Eaton Hall, 1909), a women's dormitory (Lausanne Hall, 1920), and a large gymnasium (1923). In 1913, the medical school was closed and merged with the University Of Oregon College of Medicine in Portland. Even during the Depression, however, the university managed to add to its physical plant with a library (1938) and science hall (1941). The College of Law moved into the old Salem post office, which was relocated to campus in 1939.

During World War II, Willamette housed a College Navy Training Program (V-12), which helped keep the university healthy at a time of limited male enrollment. In the last half of the twentieth century, the university continued to expand its physical plant and increase its endowment. Most of the buildings were constructed of red brick and exhibited the stripped or modern interpretation of the Georgian architectural style. The buildings were set in a thoughtfully landscaped environment centered on a millrace, giving the sixty-one-acre campus a pleasing appearance and physical unity.

Willamette trustees and administrators developed new academic programs and educational relationships during this period of growth. In 1965, for example, the university began a sister-college arrangement with the International College of Commerce and Economics (now Tokyo International University). The George H. Atkinson Graduate School of Management opened in 1974, and the university launched a School of Education in 1995 (now the Graduate School of Education).

The university has an academically selective student body with an average of 1,800 undergraduate and 800 graduate students. Willamette's strong sense of community service is reflected in its motto:

"Not unto ourselves alone are we born." The university is recognized nationally for its commitment to environmental and educational sustainability programs and ranks third nationally among comparably sized colleges for its number of graduates in the Peace Corps. More than half of the university's undergraduates study abroad.

Willamette's notable graduates include long-serving United States Senators Mark O. Hatfield and Robert Packwood and Nobel laureate in economics Dale Mortensen.

Sources

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