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***Mystery Solved:
Arthur Eldred and
the First Eagle Scout Award***

WAY BACK WHEN

Mystery Solved: Arthur Eldred and the First Eagle Scout Award



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According to author Michael S. Malone's hypothesis in his nationally award-winning

history of the Eagle Scout rank, *Four Percent*, he suggests that although the Boy Scouts of America (BSA) published this honor in its 1911 *Handbook for Boys*, the probability of a Scout actually choosing to earn 21 merit badges was highly unlikely according to BSA managers. And therefore, the official Eagle medal was not manufactured by the time Arthur Rose Eldred was approved to be BSA's first Eagle Scout in 1912.

Curious thing, however; no researcher or historian ever has been able to pinpoint the actual day he sat for his official board of review (or *court of honor* as it was known then) until now.

As read in the *Muskogee (OK) Times-Democrat*, one of the earliest printed news articles on this event, Arthur Eldred obviously earned the distinction of becoming BSA's first Eagle Scout prior to that article's publication date of April 13, 1912. Another report followed the next day in the *Brooklyn (NY) Daily Eagle*, and again on April 15 in the *New York Times*. It's pretty clear that BSA had issued a national press release over the wire services regarding Eldred's astonishing accomplishment on or around April 10.

The content of this release was comprised of a litany of standard information regarding the facts surrounding his board of review; including those who were on the committee and quotable endorsements attesting to the significance of the award, the boy, and the Scouting program. Presumably, one would assume that it had just occurred, and that's precisely what happened. Unfortunately, those who would do so would be wrong because Arthur Eldred did *not* earn the Eagle Award sometime in the early spring [April] of 1912. And this article will put that issue to rest permanently.

Two Critical Data Sources

The first is the *Winston-Salem (NC) Western Sentinel* dated August 13, 1912. This article states: "In the first three months of 1912, 102



Arthur Eldred

merit badges, one Eagle Scout badge, and four bronze (honor) medals were issued to Scouts." With that one sentence, we now can exclude the whole of April from being the date of Eldred's board of review.

The second piece of evidence comes from *Burlington (VT) Free Press* with critical information that I will reveal later in this article.

So when did Eldred earn the Eagle award?

The Most Demanding Eagle Scout Board of Review in History

When examining the facts surrounding the first Eagle Scout board of review, we know it was a big deal—especially since no Scout was ever actually expected to earn it. Therefore, when Eldred's advancement application reached BSA headquarters, they had to scramble to figure out what to do next. BSA was, at the time, an years—still trying to make its way within the organization of choice for building the many character of the next generation. Its future was neither certain nor secure. And it would take a very special Eagle Scout to become its symbol, its *exemplar* of American boyhood. But to receive such adulation, 16-year-old Arthur Eldred had to pass all the official requirements, as well as the most difficult and intimidating Eagle Scout board of review in history—ever.

According to the current Scouting knowledge cited prior to this article, sitting in judgement of Arthur Eldred were several of the most important people in the history of BSA—BSA's co-founder and its Chief Scout, Ernest Thompson Seton; BSA's co-founder and one of its three National Scout Commissioners, Daniel Carter Beard; and BSA's first Chief Scout Executive, James E. West. With the addition of the National Court of Honor's secretary, Arthur R. Forbush, and Commodore Wilbert E. Longfellow (who was a principal at the U.S. Volunteer Lifesaving Corps and Red Cross), there were at least five examiners present.

But on that day, there was one more person in attendance that made this "very elite" group of Scouting examiners ever



Lord Baden-Powell

assembled in one room into “the most elite” group of Scouting examiners ever assembled in one room—in history. And that person appeared in the form of the worldwide Scouting founder himself, Robert S.S Baden-Powell, who had just arrived in the country only hours before having originated from jolly ‘ole England via his Caribbean island port of call aboard the steamship, S.S. *Arcadian*.

Why was he in New York? Surely Baden-Powell wasn’t called overseas for this event.

In fact, he wasn’t. But, as BSA was underwriting the American portion of his international Scouting inspection and speaking tour that year, it is safe to postulate that BSA managers probably held off the consummation of the first Eagle Scout board of review until he had arrived to witness it.

The Arrival of Baden-Powell

In the pre-dawn hours of January 31, 1912, Lt. Gen. Robert S.S. Baden-Powell steamed into quarantine in New York Harbor from his last port-of-call in Kingston, Jamaica, aboard the mail vessel S.S. *Arcadian* to the fanfare of the American public.

After being released for port entry by the local health officers in charge, the ship was towed into slip No. 42 North River, where “The Hero of Mafeking” (an accolade gained from his defensive command of a small British garrison during the 1899 Second Anglo Boer War in South Africa) received into his stateroom at least a couple dozen newspaper reporters and photographers.

As described in a letter written by one of the Scoutmasters present that day on the port-of-entry dock (and obtained from noted Scouting researcher Gary Twite of Seattle), “General Baden Powell said that his finest memory of his entire trip around the world was sailing up beautiful New York Harbor and seeing the long line of [tall-standing] Boy Scouts with the American flag on the right...and the British Cross of St. Andrew on the left... and the Boy Scout flag in the center.”

At the same time, now en route down the bay toward the *Arcadian* aboard the Revenue Cutter *Calumet* were Baden-Powell’s American speaking agent, Lee Keedick, Chief Scout Executive West, and a young Boy Scout, who was dressed smartly in his khaki uniform with a Bronze Lifesaving Medal pinned neatly over the left breast pocket of his tunic. His name was William Waller.

Master Waller, a New York Scout from Brooklyn’s Troop 26, boarded the vessel in possession of a Letter of Welcome having originated only days earlier from the Oval Office desk of U.S. President William Howard Taft in Washington, DC. Seeing Baden-Powell on the balcony overlooking the ship’s two-story dining saloon after breakfast, Waller marched up to the great man—and with photographers at the ready—gave a crisp salute with his right hand and extended the president’s letter toward the general in his left. A dozen flash bulbs instantly popped off and the image made national headlines—“William Waller, Brooklyn Boy Scout Hero, Greets Baden Powell on Arrival” announces the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*.

This introduction made such an impression on Baden-Powell that he line-itemed it in his personal diary: “Lee Keedick and [James] West of B[oy] Scouts met me. Also Scout with letter of introduction. Scout William Waller.”

Noting the Lifesaving Medal on his tunic, the general listened to young Waller’s heroic tale of rescue and blurted out, “Well done! Well done!” and patted him upon his shoulder. [**Note:** To read

the full details of William Waller’s lifesaving deed and those of 170 other heroic BSA members, check out Michael Malone’s new book on a century of Scouting heroism titled, Running Toward Danger.]

Also present that day on the pier were fifty Scouts from New York’s Troop 1 (led by BSA executive board member Lorillard Spencer Jr.) and Troop 1 of Rockville Center, Long Island, under the direction of Scoutmaster Hubert Eldred (the author of the previously mentioned “Scoutmaster letter”).

Hailing from the latter unit and marked as the last boy in a substantial greeting line was a Scout that stood out—the one with the sleeve of 21 merit badges in seven rows of three—Arthur Eldred, the Scoutmaster’s younger brother. Upon seeing that sleeve, it was reported that Baden-Powell stopped for some time and chatted with the lad. Although we don’t know for certain what was discussed, it is very plausible that Eldred might have mentioned (or perhaps West had on the ship) that young Arthur’s Eagle Scout board of review was coming up *later that afternoon* at BSA Headquarters. How do we know?

We know courtesy of a combination of facts revealed in two documents: first, from an obscure news report in the previously referenced *Burlington (VT) Free Press* and, second, from Baden-Powell’s own personal diary held in the collection of BSA’s National Scouting Museum currently in Irving, Texas.

With regard to the former: on page 2 of its February 2, 1912 issue, it states that “Arthur R. Eldridge [sic], 16-years-old, of Rockville



**Baden-Powell and William Waller
January 31, 1912**

Center, was examined for the Eagle Scout pin, the highest medal in the order.”

When combined with the next fact, we know definitively that January 31, 1912, is the long lost date of Arthur Eldred’s board of review.

Baden-Powell’s personal diary entry of that date states his summarized morning activities. It confirms that he was taken to his lodgings at the Waldorf-Astoria to check-in (diary entry: “Put up at Waldorf”), as well as to BSA’s Fifth Avenue offices later that morning (diary entry: “Went over [to] the H.Q offices of the Boy Scouts,” for which we have an image of him in James West’s office). Other newspaper articles report that the general was escorted to both locations by an honor guard of Boy Scouts. And we know that all this occurred in the morning because a subsequent entry states that he had lunch plans with Scouting executives at New York’s famed Aldine Club, originally formed in 1889 for “printers, publishers, authors, and artists,” at 20 Lafayette Place in Yonkers.

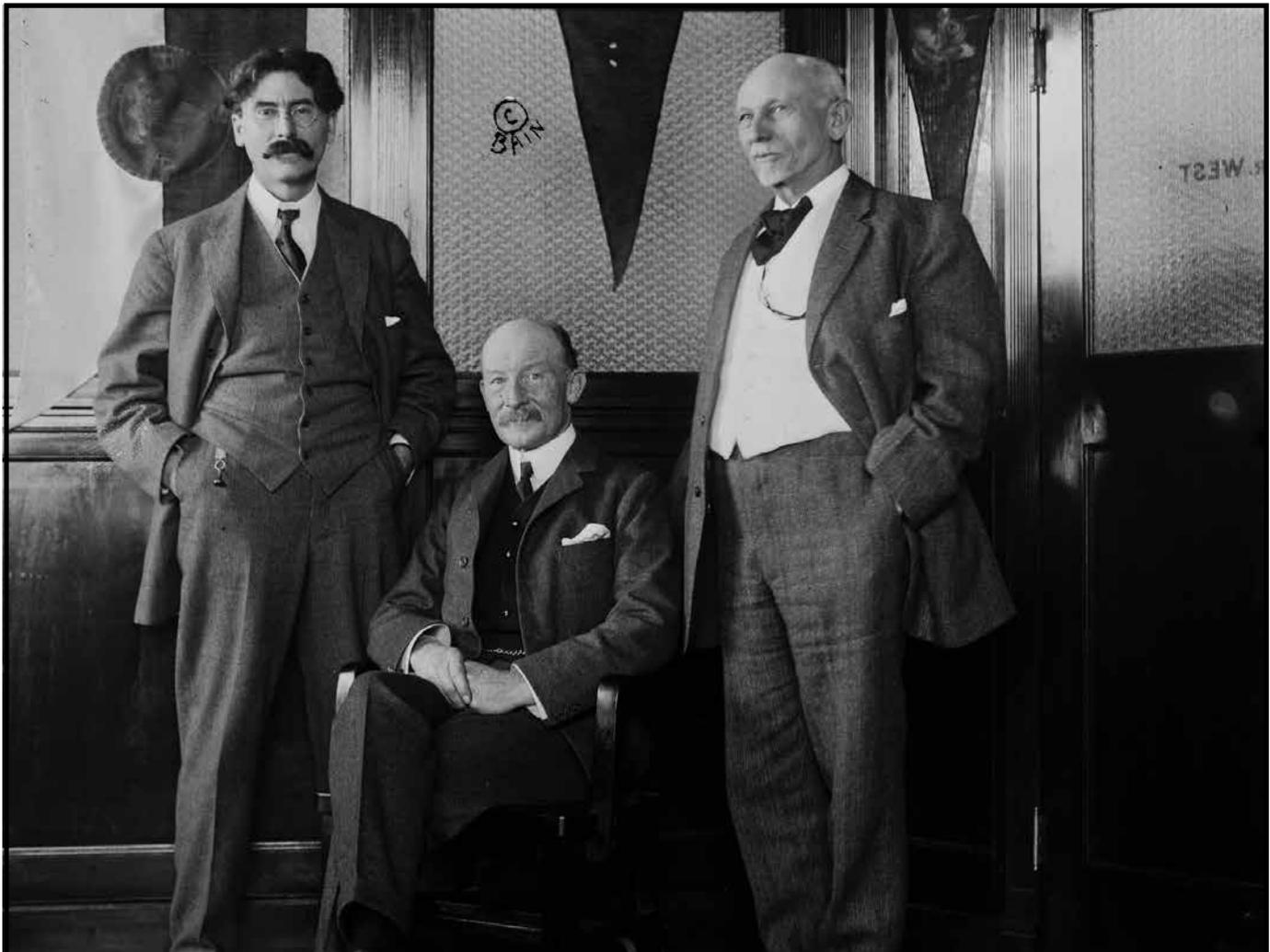
But the *Free-Press* adds, “After [lunch] he returned to the office of the Boy Scouts where Arthur R. Eldridge [sic]...” sat for his board of review on the afternoon of January 31, 1912. It also includes a fascinating bonus fact: Eldred had to perform and successfully complete at least one specific skills test in front of his distinguished review panel.

“[Eldred] was cross-examined on Scout work and ordered to produce fire, Indian fashion, without matches,” the *Burlington Free Press* reports. “With a bowstring and two pieces of wood, he soon had fire going. General Baden-Powell was delighted.”

Presumably, after several hours, Eldred was released from his duration in Boy Scout Purgatory and sent home. It also is presumed that the decision as to his fate was postponed until appropriate consultation could be obtained from attending members, in addition to the final, deciding vote by the officials of the National Court of Honor. As the National Court of Honor met only once a month, it is believed that the vote came either at its February or March meeting.

However, we now can confirm it was the March for several reasons. First, as stated previously, we know that the Eagle award was conferred upon Eldred in the *first three months* of the year and there had to be enough time for the National Court of Honor members and the board of review’s guest examiners to make their decision. And nothing of this gravity was going to take place rapidly—especially since they had not yet designed the Eagle medal.

Second, there were two major announcements issued to the public: one in the papers via press release over the news wires, and another in two prominent stories in *Boys’ Life* magazine.



**Seton, Baden-Powell, and Beard
Jan 31, 1912-Day of Eldred’s Board of Review at BSA Headquarters**

Third (and most obviously), a Scouting researcher has recently located “The Letter” that states the board of review’s exact date.

An Examination of the Boys’ Life Clue

As stated previously, from April 10 to April 20, numerous newspapers across the country published BSA’s press release that lauded the awarding of the first Eagle Scout award to Eldred, thus creating the confusion as to April being his official month of confirmation.

An examination of many early *Boys’ Life* issues reveal the following facts. The August 1912 issue (assembled the month prior in July) declares, “Some time ago [in the May issue] you no doubt read of Scout Arthur Eldred of Rockville Center, Long Island, the first Eagle Scout in the United States.”

So, clearly he’s an Eagle Scout in July. However, these published voting results are not from the National Court of Honor’s July meeting. These are the results from the month before that—the June meeting. In other words, there is a two-month lag from the month of an award’s vote until the issue’s cover date. That means that the August issue reports the National Court of Honor’s June vote. Now, we can officially squeeze down the possible timeframe—Eldred was an Eagle Scout no later than the first week of June.

Yet the editors of the May issue of *Boys’ Life* offer their congratulations to Eldred in a substantial article on the National Court of Honor’s page (which published the results of its March vote). Therefore, we can presume that Eldred’s elevation to the strata of the Eagle Scout occurred at the National Court of Honor’s regular meeting held during the week of March 3 or March 10. Right?

Not so fast.

As Baden-Powell was traveling around the nation inspecting American Scouting cities, the National Court of Honor was not able to meet as one unit in New York during that time. But after he left the country on March 15, they could. That occurred in Seattle, WA, after he boarded the steamship, *S.S. Minnesota*, a flagship vessel in the fleet of the Great Northwest Steamship Company, and departed for Manitoba, Canada.

Back in New York City on March 29, the National Court of Honor, now gathered in preparation for the evening’s Brooklyn Scoutmaster banquet dinner to be held in the Clarendon Hotel, voted to make Arthur Rose Eldred the nation’s first Eagle Scout. How do we know?

Well I have a copy of “The Letter”—the *silver bullet* that no one found—until only recently. It was scanned and sent to me by two of the most significant early Scouting history researchers in the country; ISCA’s own Dr. Terry Grove and Northern Star Council Scout Executive John Andrews based in St. Paul, MN.

In a stream of good fortune, John, laden with copies of early documents from St. Paul’s Ramsey Council, now in the collection of the Minnesota Historic Society, met with Terry in Tampa in late March 2017. In this dossier was a response letter from BSA’s National headquarters to the third official Eagle Scout Roy D. Young—answering his complaint dated May 4, 1912, as to why he was not the first one.

In it, BSA Field Secretary H.E. Shaffer writes, “On March 29, the National Court of Honor awarded the Eagle badge to Arthur Eldred of Rockville Center, RI. who is the only officially recognized Eagle Scout up to the present time in America.”

Let me repeat: Arthur Eldred became America’s first Eagle Scout after the official vote of the National Court of Honor on March 29, 1912. End of debate. <mic drop>

“I couldn’t believe it,” Grove says. “This is a huge discovery that confirms the authenticity of the original research in this article and definitively reveals the facts surrounding Eldred’s Eagle award.”

After a few moments of reflection, he adds, “And this is why the press releases were issued in early April. Now, we have the benefit of knowing Arthur Eldred’s exact Eagle Scout timeline and it makes perfect sense.”

Yet it isn’t until mid-August that Arthur Eldred gets BSA’s “official” notification of his stunning achievement from the Chief Scout Executive. So, why was there a four-month lag between BSA’s press release in April and his official notification?

The Latent Eagle Scout Letter of Congratulations

On August 21, 1912, Chief Scout Executive James E. West sent the following letter of congratulations to BSA’s first Eagle Scout Arthur Eldred. (It either was authored by or dictated to National Court of Honor Secretary Arthur R. Forbush). It reads in full:

My dear Arthur,

It gives me great pleasure on behalf of the Court of Honor of the National Council of the Boy Scouts of America to formally notify you that you have been awarded the honor of being the first Eagle Scout of the Boy Scouts of America. The Eagle Scout Badge itself, will be presented at a later date.

Congratulating you on behalf of the officers of the Scout movement in this country and wishing you continued success and progress in your Scout efforts, I am,

*Very sincerely yours,
James E. West
Chief Scout Executive*

It is as a result of this correspondence that the National Scouting Museum, *Time Magazine* in a 2012 article on Eagle Scouts, and other entities incorrectly cite August (or September when the medal actually was presented to him) as the month of the conferring of the first Eagle Scout award.

So, why was West’s letter of congratulations issued months later? It certainly wasn’t because the National Court of Honor’s approval was being withheld. In reality, West’s letter merely was a secretarial formality that ultimately began a century-old BSA tradition that every subsequent Eagle Scout would benefit from. (Another “minor” issue was that BSA had no medal to present him. Therefore, why rush it?) But, there were other side issues as well. One of those annoying issues had West pleading an overburdened schedule due to problematic matters going on behind the scenes at the national headquarters.

Ultimately, West chose to move this requisite letter down his lengthy “to do” list until it truly became an *actionable* item.

West’s Overburdened Schedule

As the whole of February and half of March had been consumed with Baden-Powell’s tour of major U.S. cities in the promotion of BSA and Scouting, West’s active travel schedule ended only



James E. West, Chief Scout Executive

with the general's departure. But during those hectic six weeks, he was tasked with performing a monumental and unexpected task—ego management.

“Robert Baden-Powell was a very difficult person to deal with in those days,” recalls John Andrews. “All that international adulation appears to have gone to his head. So, West had his hands full keeping him happy until he departed the country.” In other words, Scouting's worldwide founder (like it or not) was a *prima donna* of the first order.

After he left the country, the Chief Scout Executive turned his full attention to the negotiation and eventual acquisition of *Boy's Life* magazine from its founder and publisher, George S. Barton of Massachusetts. Final negotiations lasted for several months until the deal's agreement was announced on July 9. BSA's first issue would be published two weeks later with West serving as the magazine's editor-in-chief.

In the meantime, the Seton-Beard “I founded Scouting” feud that I detail in my book, *The Scouting Party*, was heating up—with both of them pleading to West to take each one's side

against the other. And like a good manager, West deflected their written arguments to diplomatic executive board members and employees throughout the organization to solicit their solutions.

And if these things weren't enough, just after the *Boys' Life* deal was consummated, Seton began corresponding with BSA's editorial board to get copyright permissions to publish his new *Book of Woodcraft*. BSA's problem with that book was that it trampled upon the organization's intellectual property by making specific reference to BSA, Scouting, and the woodsmanship skills he had published two years earlier in BSA's proprietary Original Edition *Handbook* (that confusingly Seton held the copyright to).

As these heated arguments lasted to August 15, 1912, somehow West found a moment to appoint subordinates to follow through with the design and production of the Eagle medal with the Thomas H. Foley Company in New York City. And on August 21, West turned his attention back to the Eagle award.

[**Of Note:** An exhaustive search of the thousands of patents approved by the US Patent & Trade Office from 1911 through 1913 reveals no patent issued to BSA for the final design of the Eagle medal design during those years. However, the scroll of the first medals produced by the T.H. Foley Company clearly are hallmarked with “PAT 1911.” This marking refers **only** to the scroll portion of the Eagle medal as that element of the BSA's First Class badge received a design patent on July 4, 1911, under the name of Inventor James E. West. Please refer to A Comprehensive Guide to the Eagle Award by Terry Grove for further information.]

Summary

Now over a century later, we can declare with certainty that not only did Ernest Thompson Seton play an extremely significant (and previously erased) role in the creation of the Eagle Scout award (as detailed in the March 2017 issue of the *Journal*), but

also that Robert Baden-Powell was present at Arthur Eldred's legendary board of review held on the afternoon of January 31, 1912. Furthermore, the official conferring of the Eagle award was made by a vote from the National Court of Honor on March 29, 1912, with James E. West's letter of congratulations being sent four and a half months later due simply to a lack of urgency to do so.

And this is why we research Scouting's fascinating history.

[**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** The author wishes to thank noted Eagle historian Terry Grove for his fact checking services and suggestions for the improvement of this article.]

Copyright 2017 by David C. Scott, who is the author of the nationally bestselling and award-winning books: *My Fellow Americans* (WindRush Publishers, 2014), *The Scouting Party* (Red Honor Press, 2010), *We Are Americans, We Are Scouts* (Red Honor Press, 2008), and the landmark centennial history of Dallas' Circle Ten Council titled, *Where Character is Caught* (PenlandScott, 2013). He can be contacted at d.scott@scottsales.com.



**Arthur Eldred,
America's First Eagle Scout**