

The History of the National Eagle Scout Association

Between 1911 and 1925, membership in the Boy Scouts of America swelled from approximately 61,500 Scouts to 756,857—a twelvefold increase. It would have grown even faster if more qualified leaders had stepped forward. Unfortunately, there were few programs in place to hold the interest of older Scouts. Many Scouts earned the Eagle Scout Award and then disappeared from the program.



The Knights of Dunamis

In 1925, 10 Eagle Scouts from California set out to reverse this trend. On April 19, they met in the office of Raymond O. Hanson, Scout executive of the San Francisco Council, to form an association that would retain the interest of Eagle Scouts, uphold the dignity of the Eagle Scout Award, and provide a base for continuing leadership in the Scouting movement.

Drawing on chivalric traditions, they called their association the Knights of Dunamis. (Pronounced “DOO-na-mis,” the word comes from a Greek word meaning “power” or “spirit.”) The group’s emblem consisted of an eagle perched on a sword resting on a shield. The sword was the sword of Sir Galahad, one of the famed knights of the King Arthur legends. The shield’s triangular shape signified the three parts of the Scout Oath—duty to God and country, duty to others, and duty to self.



Knights of Dunamis emblem

The Knights of Dunamis was a great success in San Francisco and resulted in a high percentage of members continuing their interest in Scouting. This success didn’t go unnoticed. Within a year, the neighboring San Mateo County Council organized its own chapter, followed shortly thereafter by the Atlantic City Council in New Jersey. On December 14, 1929, delegates from six chapters met in San Francisco to organize a national board.

At its peak, the Knights of Dunamis boasted 110 chapters across the country, but this number had dwindled to 37 by 1971. In the intervening decades, the group had become more inwardly focused, more caught up in ceremonies and degrees of knighthood than in service to Scouting. Older members enjoyed the Knights’ traditions and rituals, while younger members felt torn between their obligations to the order and to their own Scout units.



The National Eagle Scout Association Is Born

In August 1970, the National Chapter of the Knights of Dunamis, Inc., empowered its officers to take action to dissolve the corporation and consummate a merger with the Boy Scouts of America. In May 1971, BSA and Knights of Dunamis representatives met to plan a new organization of Eagle Scouts that would incorporate the best traditions of the Knights and of other local Eagle Scout associations around the country. In May 1972, the National Eagle Scout Association (NESA) was born.



One of NESA's first actions was to launch a vigorous membership drive at both the National Scout Jamboree and the National Order of the Arrow Conference in 1973. That same year, the organization created the NESA Scoutmaster Award to recognize noteworthy promotion of, and leadership to, the Scouting advancement program in general and exemplary development of Eagles in particular. (The award was replaced by the Scoutmaster Award of Merit in 1987.)



During the 1970s, NESA encouraged the development of local chapters, which came together at biennial national conferences. The first of these was held in Fort Collins, Colorado, in 1974. By the mid-1980s, however, NESA was focusing mainly on encouraging Eagle Scouts to support their local councils, not to be involved in an ancillary organization. National conferences were replaced by events at BSA annual meetings. NESA chapters gave way to council NESA committees. Today, these committees help carry out NESA's goal of identifying and involving adult Eagle Scouts. They also provide recognition to new Eagle Scouts and encourage them to enroll in NESA and stay involved in Scouting.

In 1978, at its third national conference, NESA instituted its life membership program. (The first went to Zenon C. R. Hansen, who had been involved in Scouting for 55 years.) Life memberships, which currently cost \$180, provide vital support for programs that seek to reengage adult Eagle Scouts in Scouting.



Scholarship winners are profiled in NESA's official journal, Eagletter, as are other Eagle Scouts who've made their mark in business, government, military service, and other arenas. All NESA members receive Eagletter three times a year.



Another key NESAs effort, its scholarship program, began in 1984. Six years later, NESAs member Larry Cooke endowed the Mabel and Lawrence S. Cooke Eagle Scout Scholarships, which provide awards of up to \$48,000 to 17 recipients each year. In 2002, the Hall/McElwain Merit Scholarships were added to NESAs scholarship portfolio, bringing the total number of available scholarships to 105.



Much has changed since 1925, when 10 young Eagle Scouts formed the Knights of Dunamis. However, one thing remains the same: NESAs commitment to retain the interest of Eagle Scouts, uphold the dignity of the Eagle Scout Award, and provide a base for continuing leadership in the Scouting movement.

