



THE ASPEN INSTITUTE

A Brief History

The Aspen Institute

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*"The history of Aspen is the history of American culture at the mid-century and after."-James Sloan Allen, **The Romance of Commerce and Culture, 1983***

Chicago businessman Walter Paepcke (1896-1960), chairman of the Container Corporation of America, first visited Aspen, Colorado in 1945. Inspired by its great natural beauty, he envisioned it as an ideal gathering place for thinkers, leaders, artists, and musicians from all over the world to step away from their daily routines and reflect on the underlying values of society and culture. He dreamed of transforming the town into a center for dialogue, a place for "lifting us out of our usual selves," as one visitor to Paepcke's Aspen would put it.

To make this dream real, in 1949 Paepcke made Aspen the site for a celebration of the 200th birthday of German poet and philosopher Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. The 20-day gathering attracted such prominent intellectuals and artists as Albert Schweitzer, Jose Ortega y Gasset, Thornton Wilder, and Arthur Rubinstein, along with members of the international press and more than 2,000 other attendees.

The next year, Paepcke created what is now the Aspen Institute. He was a trustee of the University of Chicago, and his participation in its Great Books seminar, led by philosopher Mortimer Adler, inspired the Institute's Executive Seminar. The seminar is a forum based on the writings of great thinkers of the past and present. Through reading and discussing selections from the works of classic and modern writers, leaders better understand the human challenges facing the organizations and communities they serve. "The Executive Seminar was not intended to make a corporate treasurer a more skilled corporate treasurer," said Paepcke, "but to help a leader gain access to his or her own humanity by becoming more self-aware, more self-correcting, and more self-fulfilling."

The Aspen Institute also gave rise to the Aspen Music Festival and the annual International Design Conference. In 1951, it was the sponsor of a national photography conference attended by the country's most accomplished photographers, from Ansel Adams and Dorothea Lange to Ben Shahn and Berenice Abbott. During the sixties and

seventies, the Institute added other new organizations, programs, and conferences in an effort "to extend the meaning of humanistic studies." They included the Aspen Center for Physics and a range of programs that concentrated on education, communications, justice, Asian thought, science, technology, the environment, and international affairs.

In 1979, Corning Glass industrialist and philanthropist Arthur A. Houghton, Jr. donated to the Aspen Institute a thousand-acre parcel on the Wye River on Maryland's Eastern Shore. The location now hosts the Aspen Wye River Conference Center. Its three distinct facilities near the Chesapeake Bay provide another setting for Aspen-style reflection and dialogue.

Aspen Institute events have attracted presidents, statesmen, diplomats, judges, ambassadors, and Nobel laureates over the years, enriching and enlivening the Institute as a global forum for leaders.

Today the Aspen Institute mission is twofold: to foster values-based leadership, encouraging individuals to reflect on the ideals and ideas that define a good society, and to provide a neutral and balanced venue for discussing and acting on critical issues. The Aspen Institute does this primarily in four ways: seminars, young-leader fellowships around the globe, policy programs and public conferences and events. The Institute is based in Washington, DC, Aspen, Colorado, and on the Wye River on Maryland's Eastern Shore and has an international network of partners.