



## REV. EDGAR JAMES HELMS - A BIOGRAPHY



Edgar James Helms (1863 – 1942), a man admired for his uncommon character and entrepreneurial vision, is credited as the founder of the movement that would grow into Goodwill®.

Helms was born near Malone, NY, on January 19, 1863. As a young man, he had tried his hand at law and newspaper publishing, but felt called to the ministry. In 1889, he enrolled in Boston University Theological School.

Helms and two fellow students requested that the City Missionary Society support them in opening a full-scale settlement house in the North End. Instead, Helms was offered a struggling inner city mission in Boston's South End, Morgan Chapel, established a generation earlier by Henry Morgan. The young minister was appalled at the conditions faced by immigrants who found themselves in a new country without jobs and sometimes desperate for food, clothing and shelter. Using burlap bags from Thomas Wood and Company, Helms went door-to-door in Boston's wealthiest districts asking for donations of clothing and household goods.

Helms' model differed from many charities of the day, emphasizing that donated goods could be sold for profit and that money would be used to pay workers who helped refurbish those goods. Helms hired people in need — many of whom were considered unemployable — to do this repair work. Employees were paid \$4 a day. When money was scarce, workers were given \$5 clothing vouchers.

Although it wasn't until 1915 that the term Goodwill Industries® was coined, 1902 became known as the year Goodwill was born. With the help of Methodist Church funding, Helms went on to help establish Goodwill organizations across the United States. By 1920, there were 15 Goodwill organizations established, including Morgan Memorial Goodwill Industries in Boston.

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Major economic and political crises like the financial crash of 1929, the Great Depression, and World War I solidified the need for an organization like Goodwill. An estimated 1,500 people thronged Boston's Morgan Memorial Church of All Nations to pay final tribute at his funeral on December 27, 1942.

Bishop G. Bromley Oxnam spoke these words in his eulogy: “[Helms] was blessed with a fine mind, a great heart and a strong will. His unusual business ability, passionate devotion and physical strength enabled him to serve his fellow man, who were uninterested in charity, but yearned for a chance.”

In 2002, during Goodwill's Centennial Celebration, a bronze medallion in Helms' honor was added to The Extra Mile — Points of Light Volunteer Pathway in Washington, D.C., the only national monument that honors individuals who selflessly championed causes to help others realize a better America.

Today, Goodwill sponsors two annual national awards that honor staff members in local Goodwill organizations who exemplify Helms' values of unselfish service, self-reliance and a strong work ethic.