

Witness Trees



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Let us begin the story with trees.

The Birthday Tree. Growing up in New York City, everyone had vastly different birthday parties. Some were at bowling lanes, American girl doll stores, pottery places, the list goes on. My birthday parties were at the same place every year – the oak tree in front of the Picnic House in Prospect Park. Not only was this the more affordable option for my family, but it was also an accurate representation of the outdoor appreciation that my parents instilled in me. Every August 6th, we would lug a little cart of watermelon, cupcakes, kickballs, and blankets and park in front of the oak tree, which soon became known as the Birthday Tree.

What does it mean for a tree to be a witness to our lives?

Definition

What is a witness tree?
Witness trees are defined by the National Park Trust as “trees that have stood for so long that they have been spectators to some of the most important events in U.S. history” (National Park Trust, 1).

Have you heard of the term “witness tree” before?
What does the term connote for you?

“...One tree, by being deeply wounded,
Has been impressed as Witness Tree
And made commit to memory
My proof of being not unbounded.
Thus truth's established and borne out,
Though circumstanced with dark and doubt
Though by a world of doubt surrounded.”
— From A Witness Tree by Robert Frost (1942)”





Where does the term “witness tree” originate?



The term of “witness trees” originated in landscape surveys completed in the 19th century in the US. The National Park Service established “The Witness Tree Protection Program” in 2006, as part of the Historic American Landscapes Survey. The first witness trees identified in the project were 24 trees in Washington DC that have been biologically or historically significant (National Park Service). A classic example of trees protected in the witness tree protection program are the row of cherry trees in the Tidal Basin in Washington DC. These trees were a gift from Japan as a symbol of friendship in 1912 and these two Yoshino cherry trees on the northern bank of the basin were planted by by Helen Herron Taft and the Viscountess Chinda, on 27 March 1912, which started the National Cherry Blossom Festival (Washington). The histories of each of these trees is now a part of the archives at the Library of Congress (American Forest Foundation).



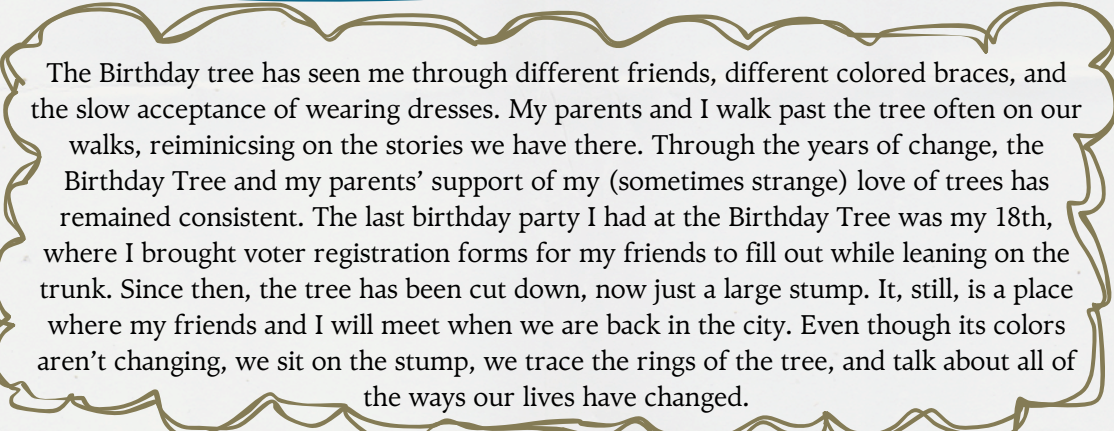
Cherry Trees in Washington (cherryblossomfestival.org)

“this will be a lasting record of the story a tree has to tell.”

Says Paul Dolinsky, Chief of HALS at the National Park Service about the Witness Tree Protection Program (American Forest Foundation)



If you can, take a moment to think about the Witness Tree Protection program. Do you have a witness tree in your own life? Use this space to jot down or draw your thoughts!



The Birthday tree has seen me through different friends, different colored braces, and the slow acceptance of wearing dresses. My parents and I walk past the tree often on our walks, reminiscing on the stories we have there. Through the years of change, the Birthday Tree and my parents’ support of my (sometimes strange) love of trees has remained consistent. The last birthday party I had at the Birthday Tree was my 18th, where I brought voter registration forms for my friends to fill out while leaning on the trunk. Since then, the tree has been cut down, now just a large stump. It, still, is a place where my friends and I will meet when we are back in the city. Even though its colors aren’t changing, we sit on the stump, we trace the rings of the tree, and talk about all of the ways our lives have changed.

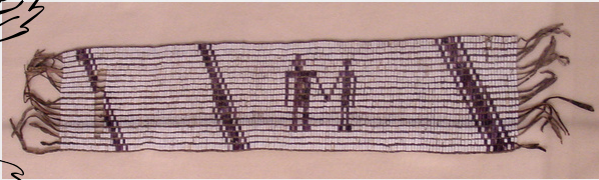
Witness Tree Site: The Penn Treaty Elm at Haverford College



Painting by Benjamin West, credit to The Penn Treaty Elm

This was not a written treaty, so its story has been passed down mostly by oral tradition, and largely understood with Benjamin West's depiction of the moment, which was created about 90 years later (Bueno, 1).

The Penn Treaty Elm has important historical significance in the tale of the founding of Pennsylvania. As the story goes, in 1682, William Penn and a Lenni Lenape community from Pennsylvania, with Chief Tamanend, met under the Elm tree to come to an agreement about living and sharing the land. It is said that Penn promised to live with "openness and love" and Chief Tamanend responded that they will live in love with William Penn and all his descendants (Bueno, 1).



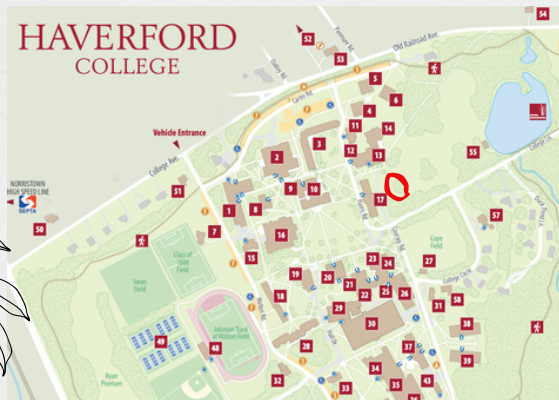
Courtesy of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania



One of the records of the treaty that we do have is a wampum belt (shown above), which depicts two men holding hands. The tale being passed down largely through oral tradition means that the Elm takes on a new role -- it is one of the only physical records of the treaty (Bueno, 1).

The Penn Treaty Elm was originally located on the banks of Shackamaxon, however, it fell over during a storm on March 5, 1810. People rushed over to gather pieces of the tree, and it is through these pieces that scions were saved and gifted to the Haverford arboretum, as well as Penn Treaty Park, and the Lenni Lenape tribe of New Jersey, as well as other organizations (Bueno, 1).

If you would like to find this witness tree on the Haverford College Arboretum, you can find it at Barclay Beach, which is outlined in red on the map.



Witness Tree Site: The Penn Treaty Elm at Haverford College



The Penn Treaty Elm is one of the only physical record keepers of the treaty. What would it look like to learn from and use the tree in lessons on the treaty and history of Pennsylvania? Use this space to brainstorm.



Witness Tree Site: Lafayette Sycamore at Haverford College



Photo by Scott Wade, credit to Longwood Gardens

The parent of the Lafayette Sycamore tree on Haverford's campus is depicted in the picture to the left. This is the Sycamore tree Brandywine Battlefield State Park in Chadds Ford and was originally planted in 1730. The tree stands next to the Gideon Gilpin House, which was home to a Quaker farmer, and is where Marquis de Lafayette, a soldier and founding father of the United States, used as his quarters (Wade, 1)

Lafayette was said to have nursed his wound from the September 11, 1777 Battle of Brandywine under this tree. This battle was the first in the British soldiers attempt to capture the capital city of Philadelphia in the revolutionary war (Mark, 1). The British won this battle, which then allowed them to capture the city on September 26 that same year. This was a short-lived win, though, as they evacuated the city nine months later (Mark, 1).

The tree Elm was witness to one of largest battles of the American revolutionary war.



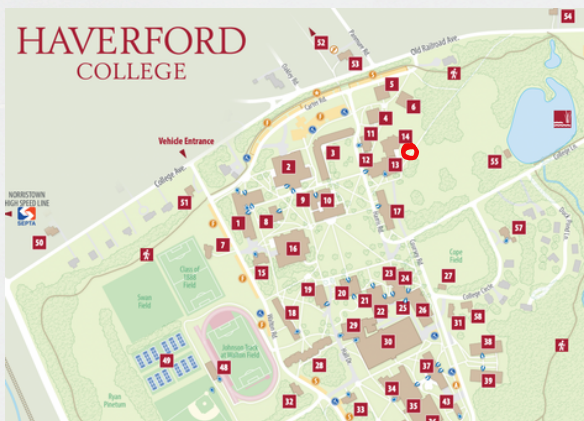
Andrew Wyeth's painting Pennsylvania Landscape, Credit to Brandywine Museum of Art

The Elm tree has had historical significance since that moment. It has been portrayed in Andrew Wyeth's painting of "Pennsylvania Landscape" (shown above), for example. The Gideon Gilpin House is also shown in the bottom left of the painting (Wade, 1).

A few scions were gifted to the Haverford College Arboretum and planted in 2019. They are direct descendants of the tree of the Battle of Brandywine (Wade, 1).



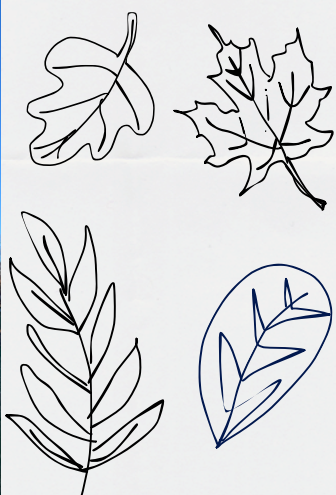
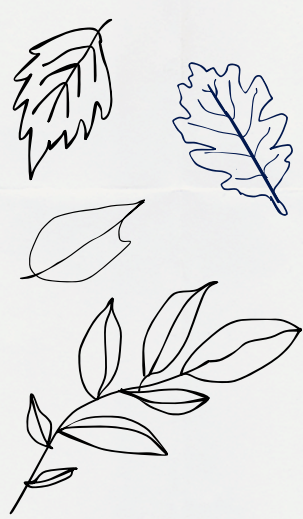
If you would like to find this witness tree on the Haverford College Arboretum, you can find it behind Marshall auditorium building, which is outlined in red on the map.



Witness Tree Site: Lafayette Sycamore at Haverford College



How do you think we can learn from and honor the Lafayette Sycamore trees on campus?



For my college applications, I could have written about growing up in a diverse, dense city. Instead, I wrote about trees. I grew up in a place where people come from around the world to look at skyscrapers. I, instead, am entranced by the trees that still exist alongside these tall buildings, evidence of the endurance of nature amid concrete and steel.

The Birthday Tree saw me through this growing understanding of the importance of nature in my own life. The Birthday Tree was witness to my own coming of age, each year, seeing me through all of the different phases of my life.

Witness Tree Reflection

Throughout the zine, I've been including excerpts from my reflections on a tree that I consider to have been a witness in my own life: The Birthday Tree.

Questions to consider:

- Can we extend this understanding of witness trees to our own lives?
- What are the implications of assigning human characteristics to trees?
- Should we think of all trees as witnesses? What would it mean if we did? What do you imagine the world looking like if that was the case?

Author's Note

I included these reflections on my own witness trees to extend this understanding of witness trees beyond just historical events of the founding of the country. If witness trees are trees that have been witnesses to history, then that must include personal history, too.

I think there is a lot of power that comes from acknowledging the role that trees play in our own world. If we value trees as witnesses, and even participants in society, then we have a greater responsibility to preserve and learn from them. I think this contributes to our ability to have a reciprocal relationship with the environment around us.

1. Let's come back to the brainstorming from earlier on a tree that has been witness to events in your own life. Where is this tree?

2. Can you describe it?

3. What events was this tree witnessing or a part of?

4. How does this influence your relationship with the tree?

5. How do you imagine honoring and celebrating the tree and the history it holds for you?

6. Can you imagine how our relationship with trees and nature would change if we thought of all trees as witnesses? Brainstorm this world below.

Do you remember what this tree looks like? Use this space to sketch and draw the tree.

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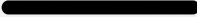
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