

Creating a Tree Culture

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My work as a consulting arborist often entails evaluating private property trees because the homeowner perceives them to be a nuisance. At times the tree is perfectly healthy, and I advocate for keeping it. For example, recently I examined a twenty-eight inch diameter swamp white oak (*Quercus bicolor*) in excellent health and structural condition. The residents, however, believed the tree was a hazard. Through reasonable discourse about the tree's merits, we came to a common understanding of the best course of action, which was to preserve the tree.

The importance of trees in terms of environmental and aesthetic benefits is well known, yet decisions about individual trees are vulnerable to competing priorities. Some priorities include municipal or private development and individual convenience and preferences. These dilemmas are particularly common in the United States. Alternately, I note a shared respect for trees by professionals as well as laypeople during my travels abroad, particularly in Europe and Latin America. It is apparent through their arboricultural practices and comments that this appreciation created a long-standing culture where trees link the present to valued history and heritage.

“Our chestnut tree is in full blossom. It is covered with leaves and is even more beautiful than last year.”

- Anne Frank
May 13, 1944

Many international cities and public spaces are tied to their communities through trees. Individual trees or groves serve as cultural reference points that are commonly known. These trees are associated with cultural events, historic landscapes, individuals, or literature. One example is the 170-year-old Horsechestnut (*Aesculus hippocastanum*) featured in Anne Frank's diary entries from the time that she hid with her family in Amsterdam. Another is a centuries-old Cedar of Lebanon (*Cedrus libani*) that dominates the historic Parco Massari in Ferrara, Italy. Moreover, the Nile Clumps are a series of beech tree groves that were planted in the 1830's near Amesbury, England. The groves are within the Stonehenge World Heritage Site and were planted to commemorate Nelson's 1798 defeat of Napoleon's fleet on the Nile River. Trees mark these events and raise community awareness of national history in local contexts. Certainly, the sentiments invoked mature over generations.

The United States is a vast nation, yet our examples of trees as cultural links are limited. There are, or were, a few national examples: the Wye Oak, the Treaty Oak, and Luna. Regardless of their initial notoriety, few people understand these trees in their cultural contexts today. Illinois provides a local example of this situation. While Illinois communities enjoy the presence of hundreds of oaks that predate European settlement, little effort has been made to communicate these trees' significance to the public. One

exception is the City of Lake Forest, which has preserved the beautiful, fifty-three inch swamp white oak that graces the yard of their former facility services building. Conservatively speaking, this tree could be 240-years-old and predate the signing of the *Declaration of Independence*.



Image 1 – The Lake Forest Swamp White Oak

The responsibility for sowing the cultural value of trees is, in many instances, that of the stewards. We have not met our obligation to define the importance of individual trees to our communities in regard to culture and heritage. Informing the public of a particular tree's history can only increase community interest in urban forestry programs as well as collective cultural heritage. For example, Alexander Robinson was a member of the Pottawatomie nation, who helped protect survivors of the Fort Dearborn massacre in 1812. Do we know the trees that surrounded Alexander Robinson's cabin along the Des Plaines River? Also, did Lincoln and Douglas debate under a tree in Alton or Quincy, Illinois in 1858? Did Jane Addams plant a tree when Hull House was first built in 1889? Were trees planted to commemorate the Eastland Disaster? Did trees survive the Chicago Fire? The answers to these questions have implications for local communities and international visitors.

Trees can and should transcend the current and past cultures and heritage of Illinois. This enhanced knowledge could over time help to create more verdant communities and heightened public involvement. Urban foresters and arborists play an important role in sustaining healthy tree populations and informing the community of the importance of trees, rather than their disposability.

Previously, the Village of Lincolnwood Arbor Day celebration relied on canned proclamations that lacked local significance. This has changed. The Village has a large Jewish population, a number of whom are survivors of the Holocaust. On May 13th, 2009, Lincolnwood planted a Horsechestnut, in Anne Frank's memory and commemorate the date of her last diary entry pertaining to the tree she viewed. The Arbor Day Proclamation reflects the importance of this particular planting and provides a historic record. The Village will maintain and preserve the tree to support future generations' understanding and reflection.

The cultivation of attitudes and values assigned to trees are the responsibility of their stewards. Help create a tree culture.