THE NEWSLETTER
The Colebrook Land Conservancy

"In Land We Trust"

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ARBOR DAY

Elm Trees: Gone Today, Here Tomorrow

NOT SO MANY YEARS AGO, Connecticut towns and villages were adorned with hundreds of elm trees. Early settlers had found wild elms growing along streambeds and in moist bottom land, but farmers soon prized them for the shade they provided grazing animals. And besides, elms were not good for carpentry due to their long cell structure, so felling these immense trees was an arduous task to be avoided. Occasionally large elms were found in a place settlers had determined to build houses. In Pittsfield, a village main street was curved to conform to the presence of an elm, and soon houses were allayed around it. At the time of this settlement in the early 18th century, the elm was thought to be all ready 200 years old. On a visit to the town in 1838, Nathaniel Hawthorne described it as "the loftiest and straitest stem that ever I beheld." For truly, the trunk rose 70 feet before its first branching. It was even depicted on Staffordshire pottery.

Elms found or placed in urban environments soon became monuments to local history or personages. New Haven had a Benjamin Franklin Elm. Cambridge had a 'Washington Elm' under which George Washington was supposed to have taken command of the Continental Army on July 3, 1775. It survived until 1920. The Cambridge 'Liberty' elm was well known to the British as the gathering place of revolutionary rabble rousers. It did indeed serve as a meeting place for mutinous colonists, and later figured on stamps and posters of the town. But the British destroyed the hated 'seditious symbol,' cutting it down as they left town.

Litchfield planted 13 elms to commemorate the founding colonies. And Sheffield had an ancient and huge elm capacious enough that the entire population of the town, nearly 500 people, could gather together under it branches. The tree was feted with parades and poems, children dressed in white circled the tree, singing. In Wethersfield, a colonial tree was still extent in 1924. These trees were not only important monuments, but also regarded as observers of local history, repositories of the experience of the locality, honored spectators to the shared experience of the local citizens, giving them an almost sacred aura.

Individual trees become beloved neighbors. When the "Gibbons Elm" in Winthrop Massachusetts was dying in 1912, 3,000 people attended the farewell ceremony. Much beloved "Herbie" of Yarmouth Maine, was regarded as the biggest elm in New England last year. He had a circumference of 20 feet, with a

110 foot umbrella and was more than 100 years old. Herbie had battled 15 bouts of Dutch Elm Disease and several hurricanes, but finally succumbed three months ago on January 19th.

The spark that ignited the vast elm planting phenomenon, changing the villages from the protector of a single tree to the parent of hundreds, was a social and environmental movement in the 1840's called "village improvement associations."

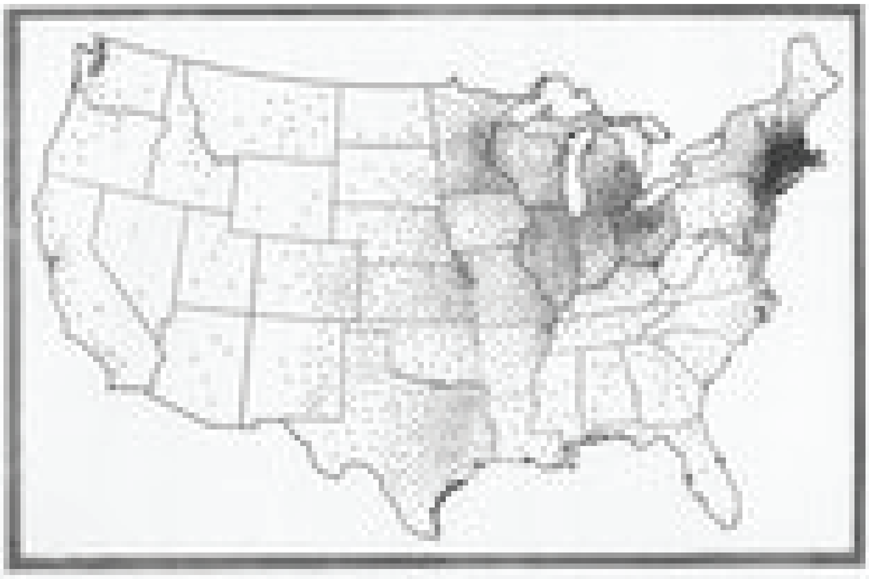
In the 1830's, "a new craving for spatial beauty" swept across the Yankee states, yielding to America's first environmental movement. Village improvement societies were organized, beginning in western Massachusetts, to beautify the civic spaces of town and village. These groups engaged in a wide range of activities to enhance the attractiveness of their public lands, but first and foremost they planted trees - elm trees. In doing so, they changed the face of New England, and forged one of the most powerful images of place in American – the elm-tufted Yankee town.

The crusade began in Sheffield, already known for its magnificent elm since its founding in 1733. In 1846 two citizens, one aptly named Root, organized a community effort much like a barn raising, to plant elms trees, called the 'Tree Bee.' It went on steadily for two weeks, with the entire community involved, and one thousand elms were planted. Even fifty years later the town commemorated this 'red letter day' with an elaborate celebration.

By 1852, Sheffield had an "Elm Tree Association," the first village improvement association. Stockbridge did not tarry to follow. In 1853, one Mary Hopkins posted a notice on one of the town's elms announcing an assembly to discuss "measures for the regular improvement of the Burying Ground, the street, the walks, the public grounds and the park on Laurel Hill." Shortly the association was named the Laurel Hill Association, and intended to work away until "every street shall be graded, every sidewalk shaded...in short, till art combined with nature shall have rendered our town the most beautiful and attractive in our ancient commonwealth." Its first action was an intensive three-year tree planting campaign. And it provided both carrot and stick: enlisting the effort of the community in setting 400 elm saplings 'not less than ten feet in height'; citizens were encouraged to contribute the young trees, and a silver cup was awarded to "the planter of the best 15 trees." A now-familiar naming opportunity: any boy who would undertake to watch and care for a particular tree could have the tree "called by his name." The labors of the committee transformed Stockbridge. Tree planting continued on every street, and the town became 'one of the gems of the Berkshires.'

From these hills, the village improvement associations sped across New England so that by 1880, 23 associations had been formed in Massachusetts and fifty in Connecticut.

Led by the Elm Tree and Laurel Hill associations, these improvement societies helped bring about a dramatic transformation of the New England village, one that set a lasting standard for environment design in America.



This map, dating from 1934 shows how the New England Elm quickly spread to the west. Each dot represents 10,000 elm trees.

Although elm cultivation started in New England, it soon spread across the country , borne by "the westward transit of New England culture that has defined so many of our national traditions." Sapling trees were carried on prairie schooners or even square riggers bound for Oregon via Cape Horn. The realm of the American elm spread across the entire country.

Alas, this widespread beautification effort contained the seed of destruction. For if the towns had not been over planted with only one species, a mono culture, perhaps the dreaded Dutch Elm disease would not have had such success in destruction. Reaching America in the 1930's, a first strain, and then a second more powerful version, rampaged across the land. The great hurricane of 1938 destroyed thousands of weakened trees. The huge effort in the 1950's to stop the onrush with DDT proved not only ineffective but also harmful to the environment. Eventually the wholesale destruction of entire trees was initiated; separation of infected trees from the healthy entailed expensive oversight. So did removing single limbs as they were diseased. There seemed no other alternative than to extirpate them all. Some 80 million elms have disappeared. By now only a small fraction of the original 19th and 20th century elms remain. Work on the derivation and treatment of the sickness discovered only in 1968 that much of the contagion "occurred below the soil, far beyond the reach of DDT or any other prophylactic aimed at controlling the elm bark beetle". Elm roots are 'promiscuous', and 'sap transfusion' via the roots can occur between trees as far as fifty feet away.” (Campanella)

Efforts to reclaim the elm, however, are vigorous. For 35 years research geneticists at the National Arboretum have been looking for varieties of elms resistant to the Dutch elm fungus. The growing of cultivars has blossomed: small tips of a branch are clipped in early spring then made to grow - a clone of the tree identified as resistant to the fungus. Some recent cultivars are ”New Harmony,” “Valley Forge”’, “Princeton”, and “Jefferson.” There is a vast nationwide effort named “the National Elm Trial” to assess the strengths and weaknesses of such cultivars. Hybrids are also being developed.

Tom Zetterstrom, a Canaan resident who spends much of his time furthering elm cultivation and protection, has proved that elms can be grown successfully. It entails careful choice of the site and the variety, careful planting, and good onward care. His organization, Elm Watch (www.elmwatch.org), has worked with 22 towns in our region, and has an active program with the Agriculture Department at Canaan Regional High. Elm Watch works with local historical societies, helps to set up urban forestry committees and has planted many elms in our neighborhood, among many others: 12 in Salisbury, one in Norfolk at the Music Shed, in Farmington in front of the Historical Society, at the Simsbury Town Hall, and 8 in the Stop and Shop parking lot in Canaan. He has also planted several elms on Elm Street and South Elm Street in Canaan.

Tom says there is one large old elm visible in Winsted across from the police barracks, between route 44 and the river. Colebrook never was over planted with elm, although there is a report from Adelaide Thompson in 1932 of 2 or three on the green. Perhaps, Zetterstrom explains, it is because Colebrook, more of an upland town, is inclined toward sugar maples. Presently our town presents truly grand views of ancient Sugar Maples; some of those on Smith Hill Rd appear to be well over 200 years old. There are, as far as we know, no old large elms here, only three young ones, none in the center of town. Colebrook town historian Bob Grigg reports that the last elm in the center of town, in front of the parsonage, was cut down two years ago.

You might ask Elm Watch about a map of their ”Majestic Elm Trail” – magnificent old trees identified along or close to Route 7, from North Adams to Lime Rock. These trees are “adopted” by citizen volunteers, measured annually, fed or treated with a fungicide, and pruned as necessary. Elm Watch will continue to plant, nourish, protect, and care for elms as well as work with local citizens to create their own elm plans. “The elm,” says Zetterstrom, “is the largest, most beautiful and seductive tree on the planet. We want to bring it back to its optimal growth pattern for the long term. An elm is a hundred year tree.”

For this article I quoted liberally from Tom Cappanella’s “Republic of Shade, New England and the American Elm,” from the Elm Watch website and brochure, the Elm Care website, The Connecticut Trust for Historic PreservationNews, and Wikipedia. —Sukey Wagner

The Linden Tree

In the depth of a frozen winter night, a merciless wind was beating against the north of the house. The wind came, as it always does, from across the open marsh, past the stone wall and up the sloping lawn. I awoke to the rattling of windows and shutters. Gazing out, I saw the old Linden tree, close at hand, its tall trunk and branch structure black against the sky. Behind the tree, a full moon, in a cloudless sky, cast a limpid glow that fell upon the snow and silhouetted the tree as it struggled bravely against the force of the wind, whipping back and forth with each new gust.

Several years past, a great arm of the tree had fallen, ripping from the main trunk from about the height of a man. It fell on the lawn close to the north porch, but there was no damage. Then, a year ago, on the opposing side, during an ice storm another large arm gave away. A chain saw cut these fallen branches from the trunk, leaving a gash on each side. The wood was bucked and stored behind the barn. The remaining tree was straight and tall, with a healthy foliage. But Stan had pointed out the open crotch, left when the first branch fell, was moldering away leaving a rotted section in the core of the tree.

So, we were worried. If the tree fell, most likely during a punishing ice or wind storm, where would it fall? The force of the prevailing wind might blow it towards the house, where there could be distressing damage to our clapboarded dining room, or the bedroom above.

In the springtime, because its leaves were the last coming in, we always wondered if our Linden had made it through the winter. But, its heart shaped leaves always came and offered us a resplendent foliage. The tree was then thick with flower bunches. Blown by the wind, the floral remains seemed to love clogging nearby gutters, water spilling out during the summer showers.

Later in the night, with the wind still howling, I got up again and peered out on the wintry scene. In the light of the moon, I felt I could almost touch the tree, as it continued swaying violently, back and forth This would be out last meeting together. In the morning, after breakfast, I called Ted Church and asked him to take down our Linden.

Goodbye Old Friend!

I thought back to the summer afternoons when we sat on the north porch, under the shade of the Linden and looked out over the lilacs, the barn and the gnarled apple tree near the stone wall. And, I thought back to the October mornings when grandchildren tumbled in raked piles from its falling golden leaves. This tree, with solitary majesty, graced our lawn for the score and seven years we had lived together.

Goodbye Old Friend!

Daniel B. Strickler, Jr. December 31, 2009

THE WHITE OAK

OUR ARBOR DAY NEWSLETTER must offer a note about Connecticut's state tree, the White Oak (Quercus alba L.).

In addition to all other attributes, the Oak family in general supports over 534 butterfly and moth species, according to the Housatonic Massachusetts based nonprofit nursery, Project Native. In addition, oak acorns are used by over 180 different kinds of birds and mammals as food, including squirrels, blue jays, crows, red-headed woodpeckers, deer, turkey, quail, mice, chipmunks, ducks and raccoons.

The White Oak is generally found throughout the eastern United States. It is a slow growing, but long-lived tree. Certain specimens have been known to live over 500 years.

Comments or Suggestions

If you would like to suggest topics or have questions for the CLC, e-mail us at

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