

THE GREAT OUTDOORS



New Jersey's 500-to-600-year-old Salem Oak shaded the Salem Friends Cemetery for many years. It was a long-time Historic State icon. Photo: Neil Fein, taken in 2012 (it fell in 2019).

The Mighty Salem Oak

It is spreading its limbs throughout the state with saplings borne of acorns collected in 2019.

By J. Morton Galetto, CU Maurice River

When people speak of trees, they speak about the stories trees might tell. Things like signings of treaties, stagecoach stops, a child's swing, lovers kissing or carelessly

carving initials into the bark. Maybe even horrific occurrences like a lynching. Human stuff.

But I suppose that trees could have more important memories and concerns, like droughts, windstorms, wildfires, welcome spring showers, sunny days, a bird raising its young, or a “dray” of squirrels huddled together in a leafy nest taking a long winter’s nap. As the trees mature memories might change – an owl, bees, a woodpecker, or a wood duck nest found in its old hollowed out interior. Some trees might remember great mast years when its seeds, like acorns, hung heavy on their limbs with hopes of progeny. Some seeds might escape being devoured by the forest’s many creatures and continue to grow and shade the forest floor.

There was once a great tree that stood in its place for many years, and that to people who headed to the Bayshore used to mark a choice. A decision, where one could head left to Downe Township’s villages like Newport, Gandy’s Beach, Money Island, or Fortescue Beach, or right if the intended destination was Lawrence or Fairfield Township – for Cedarville, Bay Point, Sayre’s Neck, West Point, Seabreeze, Husted’s Landing, or the Old Stone church. Yes, the tree marked an important confluence to people headed from

Millville on Cedarville Road – a fork in the road.

It was a great boon to travelers: “Well, when you get to the BIG OAK, go left to Newport or right on to Cedarville. Just remember the BIG OAK.”

And then, one day, we couldn’t rely on it for directions any longer. The tree died. Skip Bowman, Lawrence Township mayor, assured me, “Jane, we did all we could to save it. But people destroyed its cambium layer by continually nailing postings on to its trunk. We tried to discourage them, but in their careless pursuit to market their message they killed the tree.”

I had directed many folks over the years by using its stately presence: “You can’t miss it.” I took it for granted, it would always be there. And then it wasn’t...

I called out to my husband as he navigated the Y to Newport, “Stop.” I yelled it as if a big buck were on a collision course with our car.

“Oh my,” I said.

He braked as safely as possible, and said

“What?”

“The oak – it’s gone.”

"Yes. Remember, it was dying," he responded.

"No, no, it can't. It wouldn't."

"It could, and it did," he assured me with certainty and only a hint of reverence.

We drove on in marked silence. After speaking to many people about the tree over the past week I came to realize that I was not alone. People still mourn its loss even now, years later.

In recent times we use an alternate route to Newport: Dividing Creek Road. Could it be my husband was tired of hearing me lament the tree's passing?

Then about three weeks ago, leaving Shaw's Mill Pond for the Millville Army Air Field Museum, I noted four large yellow wooden bollards. It hadn't registered on past trips, but on this day I gave myself and my tree-hugging comrades a mild case of whiplash. It was a week before Christmas, "and what to my wonderous eyes should appear?" An early Christmas gift flanked by two professionally printed signs which sheltered a young oak sapling between them, they read:

"Salem Oak Tree

White Oak/Quercus alba

This tree was grown from an acorn from the famed "Salem Oak" that stood for nearly 600

years in Salem Township, NJ until it fell in 2019. White oaks typically live 150-300 years. The Salem Oak was the sole surviving tree from the original Forest that covered the land when Quaker John Fenwick, founder of Salem, first arrived in 1675. Tradition maintains that Fenwick signed a treaty with the native Lenni Lenape beneath its branches upon his arrival. Native Americans use the white oak to treat ailments and the acorns as food source, after proper preparation. Oak trees are the foundation of our forests. They act as host plants to over 200 insects and are important food sources for our fauna. Host plants provide food and substrate to organisms that few, if any other plants provide.”

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A Salem Oak seedling grows at the confluence of Newport and Cedarville Roads where there once stood a landmark white oak. Photo: Author.

I know I wasn't the only one getting a bit misty-eyed. What a wonderful New Year's story! We all shook our heads in silence. Then someone said, "Wow, that's really special." And another friend replied, "It really is."

Being a bit too big for my britches, I added, "In fact Douglas Tallamy, an entomologist at the University of Delaware, has identified 534 species of butterflies and moths and 54 species of birds that make use of oaks."

Furthermore, New Jersey has more species of oak than any other US state.”

The Back Story: Later Mayor Skip Bowman was able to give some further insight into how the progeny of the Salem Oak found its way to Lawrence Township’s fork in the road. He described the way the original tree had become a landmark; he suspected it to be over 100 years old and mentioned that the Township’s historical society kept a slice of the trunk on display.



At the Lawrence Township Historical Society, Carmella Walder shows off a slice from the trunk of the original Township landmark tree. Walder does not exceed five feet

but the 43-inch diameter of the tree is clearly large. Photo: Author.

Bowman is an octogenarian who has lived in the township for 70 years and never remembers the tree as a young oak, only large tree. Neither did my friend Richard Weatherby. Having established this, I expected it to be at least 150-200 years old. But after counting the rings I discovered it to be only 100-110 years old, with a diameter of 43 inches and a circumference of 144 inches! Rich Weatherby also remembered that there had once been a farm on the triangle where the road split in two, and farm workers sorted produce under the tree.

Skip further explained that it was Mike Rothman, the Mayor of Downe Township, who made him aware that the New Jersey Forest Service's Big and Heritage Tree Conservation program had been raising saplings from the Salem Oak in their nursery in Jackson Township. New Jersey foresters had collected acorns only months before the tree fell.

In November of 2019 the DEP released the news, in an announcement and video, that 1,200 seedlings had successfully sprouted and would eventually be available to all 565 New Jersey municipalities in April 22 of 2020, the 50th Anniversary of Earth Day.

Apparently, I missed this news when it first broke.



New Jersey DEP Commissioner Catherine McCabe shows off one of 1200 seedlings grown in 2019, all the progeny of the Salem Oak, in the New Jersey Department of Forestry Jackson Heritage Greenhouse. The trees were distributed in 2020 to commemorate 50 years of the NJDEP and to coincide with the celebration of Earth Day. "New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection- Salem Oak Seedling Gift." (Narrated by NJ Forester John Sacco can be viewed on YouTube).

In speaking to Rothman, I discovered that the townships had collaborated with the Cumberland County road department, who ultimately planted the tree and installed the protective bollards around it.

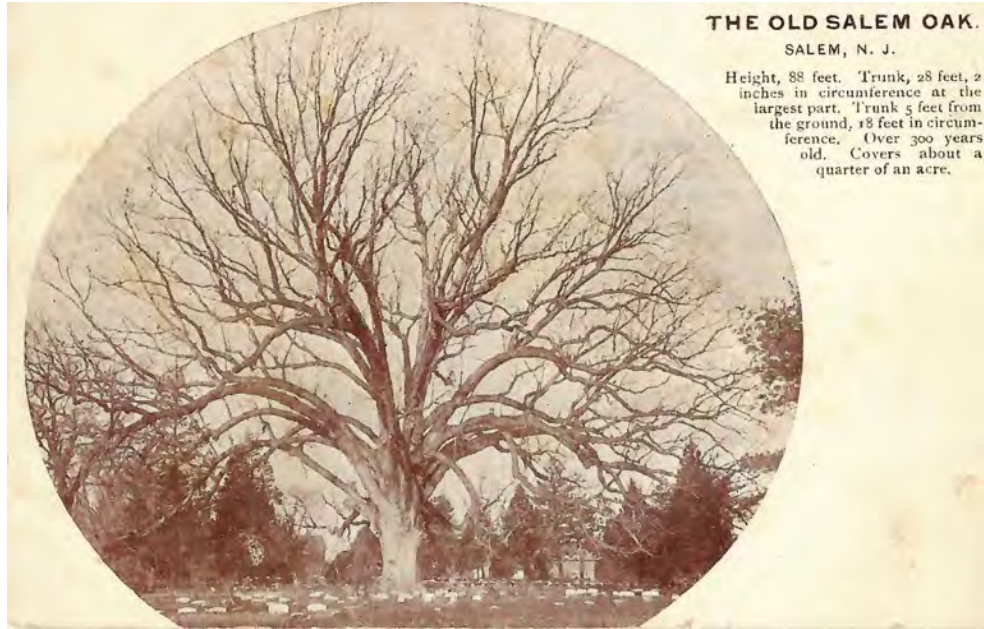
The Salem Oak had been dying for a number of years before it finally succumbed, although arborists braced its low, heavy

branches hoping to keep the inevitable at bay. Then on June 6, 2019, around 6 p.m., it fell to the ground. People in the neighboring 'Salem Oak Diner' heard its massive thud.



The 2019 fallen Salem Oak as depicted in a New Jersey DEP video. Photo Source- "New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection- Salem Oak Seedling Gift." (Narrated by NJ Forester John Sacco can be viewed on YouTube).

Aging the Salem Oak yielded dates from 500-600 years old. It was iconic for its size, longevity, and the history it saw. Its crown was recorded at 104 feet, its height was 100 feet, and its circumference was an astounding 22 feet. The New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) considered it the oldest white oak in the state, the sole survivor of the forest that stood in 1675 when Quaker John Fenwick founded Salem.



This 1906 postcard of the Salem Oak suggests this: "Height, 88 feet. Trunk 28 feet 2 inches in circumference at the largest part. Trunk 5 feet from the ground, 18 feet in circumference. Over 300 years old. Covers about a quarter of an acre."

The New Jersey DEP extrapolated some of the environmental benefits that 565 oak trees growing to 50 years old could provide: the sequestration of 2.1 million pounds of carbon dioxide, conservation of 1.2 million kilowatt hours of electricity (equivalent to 143 years of electricity for one home). The trees could conceivably absorb 27 million gallons of stormwater.

State Forester John Sacco addressed the value of the large "Heritage" trees, and how their offspring are grown in Jackson. "Big trees are prized for their size and provide

600 times the environmental benefits of typical trees.”

The beginning: This small sapling has only begun its journey on Planet Earth. It and its siblings have already had a marked impact on many New Jersey communities. Over the past week I have read numerous heartfelt stories of different municipalities coming together to commemorate the planting of “their” Salem Oak progeny.

I saw a great deal of interest in the welfare of Lawrence Township’s tiny new resident oak. At the Senior Center in Cedarville, referring to it as simply as “the Oak” was sufficient for folks to identify the subject tree either as the one that fell or the one that was planted in its place. At the young age of four it is already on its way to becoming a local and much-loved icon.

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Hopefully good fortune will follow this four-year-old progeny of the once massive Salem Oak. Photo: Author.

Sources

DEP Announces Seedlings Gift to Ensure Legacy of Famous Salem Oak lives on in Every New Jersey Municipality. News Release November 20, 2019.