

The
TREES
of
Princeton University

*An arboreal tour
of the campus*



The Princeton University campus might be viewed as a vast arboretum - carefully planned garden that, with his mix of exotic imports and native species, would never be duplicated in nature.

The verdant place we know today did not exist throughout Princeton history. Until 1766 the “college yard,” as the campus was called, had changed a little from the cleared land donated by Nathaniel FitzRandolph more than a decade earlier.

Those who passed along the King’s Highway (later Nassau Street) looked across bare lot at the imposing Nassau Hall, one of the larger stone buildings in the Colonies, and perhaps noted with pleasure the simple elegance of the President’s House. Still, Nassau Hall and the President’s House (now called Maclean House) sat as naked as Levittown crackerboxes on the treeless hill. Matters eventually improved, after a fashion, beginning with the planting of the so-called “Stamp Act trees.”

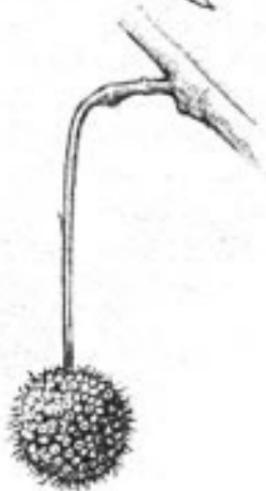


Stamp Act sycamores

Any tree tour should start on the front lawn of Maclean House, where you will find a weathered pair of sycamores ordered by the trustees in 1765. According to legend they were planted in commemoration of the Stamp Act's repeal in 1766.

These oldest trees on campus are barely past adolescence -the *sycamore*, or "buttonwood" (named for its buttonlike seed balls) may live up to 600 years. Native to lowland areas in the East, it is the most massive of our native trees, and Indians favored its trunk for dugout canoes.

Perhaps the trustees, preoccupied with all the details of keeping their college going, were just too busy to give much thought to landscaping. In any event, the Stamp Act trees may have been the only trees planted until the nineteenth century.



1.



American beech

Next to FitzRandolph Gate stands an *American beech*, a climax tree of the Eastern forests best known for its smooth gray bark, which proves an irresistible attraction for people with pen knives (Daniel Boone's "cilled a bar" inscription was done on a beech).

True to the species, the Nassau lawn beech has a high branching habit, and in winter, cigar-shaped buds almost an inch long. This specimen probably dates from the midnineteenth century. Another fine American beech stands at the east end of McCosh walk.



2.



White ash

The towering tree by the beech is a *white ash*. This is the tallest deciduous tree on campus and it may well date from 1825 replanting of the lawn in front of Nassau Hall. (At some point following 1800, the three parallel walks leading to the entrance of Nassau hall were planted with Lombardy poplars a stiff and spindly import. The poplars did not last long, however, and in the spring of 1825 the lawn was replanted with native species -elms, ashes, maples and tulip poplars- in the random fashion of the Romantic School of landscape architecture.)

The huge white ashes that line cannon Green were probably planted in 1836, when Joseph Henry laid out the quadrangle. With their five foot diameters and deeply ruttled bark, these are the most imposing trees on campus and among the best examples of the species found in the Northeast.



3.



London plane tree

In the courtyard north of Blair Hall stands the largest *London plane tree* in the area. In the eighteenth century horticulturists crossed the American sycamore (one seed ball per stalk) with the oriental plane tree (three balls per stalk) and arrived at the London plane tree (two balls per stalk), which as the name implies is often planted in cities. The plane tree, as the sycamore, can be identified by its variegated bark.



4.



Red oak

The *red oak* on the east side of the Architecture Building is the largest of its kind on campus and probably two centuries old or more. It is the state tree of New Jersey and related to the black oak, distinct by the jagged tips of its lobed leaves. Nathan Hale, a Yale man, was hanged from a red oak.



5.



English yew

At prospect, one can see exotic species, some dating back to the construction of the house in 1849 and earlier. These include a *giant sequoia*, a *Spanish fir*, a *tiger tail spruce*, and a *Himalayan pine*, some of which have identifying plaques. Along the west side of the house stands an *English yew*, an evergreen long regarded as a “tree of life” and associated with cemeteries in Europe. Yews are reportedly lived 1,500 years. Like the holly, they are either male or female, and only the latter produce berries. The bark, leaves, and berries of the yew are poisonous, and ancient writers warned against sleeping under them.



6.



Cedar of Lebanon

The *cedar of Lebanon* just down from the yew may be the best specimen of its kind in the United States.

This is the cedar of the Bible, vast numbers of which once grew in the Near East before lumbering reduced them to a remnant. They may live 2,500 years and are unusual in their tortuous, twisting limbs, the lowest ones forced to the ground below. The crown of the Prospect cedar spreads out in a flat meshed canopy.





Dawn redwood

Leaving the garden to the left of the driveway is a *dawn redwood* that towers 70 feet over the rhododendrons. When planted in 1948, it was only six feet high and barely as big around as man's arm. Before the dawn redwood was discovered growing halfway up the Yangtse River in 1942, this species had been known only from fossil specimens and was thought extinct. The Prospect dawn redwood was nurtured from seeds made available to colleges and universities by the Arnold Arboretum, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, after special expedition brought them back from China after World War II.

The species is unusual in its needlelike leaves that, unlike the evergreen's, turn a rusty red before falling from the tree. In fall the needles and bark share a similar hue.



8.

Other campus trees of interest include a fine *copper beech* just of the west of Jones Hall; *espaliered magnolias* on the west wall of Pyne Hall; *red, sugar, and Norway maples* along Wilcox Walk; hardy rubber trees in front of Macmillan Building (pull the leaves apart and see the latex spread); and, down along lake Carnegie, many *yellow willows*.

The University decided to commission a survey in 1964 to count its many trees. the survey recorded 1,917 trees on the central campus, representing 140 species, but because many had reached a state of “tottering old age” or advanced disease, it was recommended the University make a major replanting effort. In 1966-70, some 200 trees were planted according to the plan. Around this time, too, a group of anonymous alumni setup a special landscaping fund to help perpetuate the verdancy of Princeton’s campus. The fund has paid for the planting of many trees and underwrites the annual maintenance on the gardens of Prospect and Lowrie House.

Like the architecture it complements, Princeton’s landscaping is eclectic- seemingly casual mix of imported and native trees, hardwoods and evergreens that, taken together, invariably leaves an impression.

The trees are a living link to the past and future: the pair of sycamores standing on the Maclean House lawn were vigorous saplings when Washington’s troops scattered three British regiments at the Battle of Princeton. They may still be standing sentry centuries from now.

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