A VIEW FROM YOUR STUMP

BY HAYES BROWN

THE ENDURING SYMBOL OF TREES

What is it about trees that so capture the human imagination that they become more than a living thing but a symbol of a timeless ideal?

In 1646, when Boston was just 16 years old, someone planted a small elm tree on what was known as Orange Street, the only route leading out of town. This tree would become both witness and victim to some of the most formative events in American history.

More than 100 years later, after Back Bay Boston was filled to accommodate a burgeoning population in what was then known as the corner of Essex and Newbury Street, this elm was a noticeable feature. With growing resentment fueled by the quartering of over 10,000 troops in the city and the passage of onerous tax legislation known as the Stamp Act, the townspeople had reached a boiling point. And the convenient object of their wrath was Andrew Oliver.

Oliver was the local officer appointed by the crown to distribute colonial paper used to document transactions, publish newspapers and pamphlets, even playing cards. The Act required all such paper to be stamped to prove the proper tax was paid. On August 9, 1765, in a symbolic but unmistakable protest, Oliver's effigy was found hanging on the 119-year-old elm now known as the Liberty Tree along with a note reading, "What greater joy did ever New England see, than a stampman hanging on a tree!"

The effigy was taken down, placed in a coffin, and paraded through Boston. The colonists later damaged a building that Oliver had built and broke into his residence. By this time, Oliver had already fled and resigned his position.

After that, the Liberty Tree became recognized as a symbol of protest. The Sons of Liberty used it as a meeting place, new effigies appeared on its limbs, and a gallows was built below it.

In a 2016 issue of Smithsonian magazine, Eric Trickey wrote: "The tree's potency as rally site and symbol grew. Protesters posted calls to action on its trunk. Towns in New England and beyond named their own liberty trees: Providence and Newport, Rhode Island; Norwich, Connecticut; Annapolis, Maryland; Charleston, South Carolina. Paul Revere included the Liberty Tree, effigy and all, in his engraved political cartoon about the events of 1765."

Also, in the summer of 1765, a meeting was called to decry and punish those local merchants who did not comply with a boycott of British Tea. Several hundred townspeople gathered and insisted that the merchants come to the Liberty Tree and explain. When the merchants failed to comply, the Sons of Liberty dressed as an Indian party, boarded the English ships, and dumped the tea overboard.

As the Liberty Tree gained iconic status as a symbol of protest, in August of 1775, a group of British soldiers cut down the tree known as the Tree of Liberty. According to a newspaper account, the tree itself had so enabled the colonists to rebel that it presented such a provocation to the British. In a final irony, one of the soldiers involved in cutting the tree was killed when a limb fell and killed him on the spot.

In his book "American Canopy," Eric Rutkow noted that in 1776, Bostonians erected a pole atop the Liberty Tree's stump to show that the tree no longer was rooted in English soil. One month before, the nation's founders had signed the Declaration of Independence.

The Liberty Tree is not alone in its iconography. The white pines known as Kings Broad Arrow trees, the white oak known as Elliot's Oak, where William Penn signed the peace treaty with the Lenape Indians, the American sycamore that signified the agreement creating the New York Stock Exchange, the charter oak in Connecticut where the state's charter was hidden from King James II, have all added their names to the symbology that trees have in our imagination. Because trees live longer than people, they become a living witness to events long past.

Even today, when a family memorializes an event by celebrating an achievement or by mourning the loss of a loved one, it is often a tree that is planted in the earth, an enduring symbol of stability and permanence, one that will live longer than those who planted it. "You live under the shade of trees you did not plant" is a plaque one of my daughters made for me. It reminds me that trees sometimes inspire me and other times humble me. Either way, I am blessed to be in their presence.

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