# UW-Madison's President's Oak: Background Brief Chronology, media references and annotated photographs

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## **Chronology**

## 1715 ca.

Based on trunk diameter and extrapolated annual ring counts, the tree started growing around this date. It was impossible to make a precise annual ring count when the tree was cut because of extensive wood decay at the base of the tree.

### 1855 ca.

Observatory Hill Office building (current official university name) was constructed and occupied as a private residence.

### 1861-65

Nearby Camp Randall occupied as a Civil War training ground.

### 1867 ca.

The university purchased the house in conjunction with land acquired for the experimental farm.

#### 1867-78

House occupied by university presidents Chadbourne (1867-70), Twombly (1871-73), and Bascom (1874-78). Not known when the tree near the house received the name "President's Oak."

#### 1879-1959

House used by the Astronomy Department, including for a time use as the residence for the director of the Washburn Observatory.

### 2013

Michael Yanny takes a cutting from the declining tree. Grafts scion to oak root stock to establish new tree.

## 2015, Jan. 14

Tree removed by Wolfe Tree Service. Sections of the tree moved to WoodCycle, a local mill and woodworking shop for sawing and kiln drying.

#### 2018, Oct. 10

"New" President's Oak planted near northeast corner of Washburn Observatory.

## Media references

- Allison, R. B. *Every Root an Anchor*. Madison, WI: Wisconsin Historical Society Press. "The President's Tree," page 79, 2005. The 1982 first edition of this book was titled *Wisconsin' famous and historic trees*. Accessed: <u>https://dnr.wi.gov/topic/forestmanagement/everyrootananchor/documents/EveryRootAnAnchor.pdf</u>
- 2. Allison, R. B. *If Trees Could Talk*. Madison, WI: Wisconsin Historical Society Press. 2009. Accessed: https://shop.wisconsinhistory.org/productcart/pc/If-Trees-Could-Talk-p1013.htm
- 3. McMahon, Meg. "Preschoolers get sappy for oldest tree on campus." *UW-Madison School of Human Ecology* 18 Dec. 2014. Accessed: <u>https://sohe.wisc.edu/preschoolers-get-sappy-oldest-tree-uw-campus/</u>
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- 5. Simmons, Dan. "UW-Madison oak tree grew into a legend, now will be felled." *Wisconsin State Journal* 19 Dec. 2014 Accessed: <u>http://host.madison.com/news/local/uw-madison-oak-tree-grew-into-a-</u> <u>legend-now-will/article\_903b0adb-7afd-5b52-b6ac-839615746032.html</u>
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- 7. Tyrrell, Kelly April. "President's Oak follows time-tested pattern: rotted from the inside." *UW MadScience* 28 Jan. 2015. Accessed: <u>https://uwmadscience.news.wisc.edu/botany/presidents-tree-follows-time-tested-pattern-rotted-from-the-inside/</u>
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- 9. Allison, Bruce. "The Problem of Hollow Trees on Hallowed Grounds," Department Forest and Wildlife Ecology, UW-Madison. N.D. Unpublished report prepared in conjunction with students in the "New tools for tree stability analysis" class.

The report summarizes results of a "tree stability study" to assess tree health and risks of failure of the President's Oak. The class used a variety of assessment tools to analyze the tree's condition including: Fakopp 1D Microsecond Timer, PiCUS Sonic Tomography and an IML F400-S resistograph. The final recommendation was to keep the tree, but reduce the risk by removing limbs (crown reduction) and adding a warning sign stating the possible limb failure under high wind or ice and snow loading conditions.

The report repeats the legend that the tree was somehow involved in target practice by soldiers stationed at Camp Randall during the Civil War. This story, while colorful, is not supported by any physical evidence noted during the removal and subsequent milling of the tree (no bullets or cannon balls were found). Furthermore, the notion that soldiers were shooting at the tree during the period 1861-1865 would need to account for concerns that errant shots aimed at a tree located on a ridgetop might hit the adjacent President's house (constructed ca. 1855). The current official building name for the former President's house is "Observatory Hill Office Building. The current occupant is the La Follette School of Public Affairs.

## Annotated photographs



Fig. 1: In the foreground (mid-slope) is the Solar Observatory, informally known as "Watson's Mystery House." The structure was removed ca. 1949. The silhouette of the President's Oak can be seen directly behind the chimney of the Watson Mystery House. The image is in the UW Archives collection (S05883) and was taken ca. 1878. Note the proximity to the President's House directly behind the President's Oak. The building on the far right is University Hall, later renamed Bascom Hall. The first (original) dome is visible.



Fig. 2: This image (Annie Sievers Schildhauer, ca. 1893-99) is in the Wisconsin Historical Society digital collection (Image ID 67856). <u>https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Image/IM67856</u> The President's Oak is clearly visible on the right side of the image.



Fig. 3: This image was scanned from a private collection (CLP-W0092-Ann Waidlich). Date unknown, possibly 1940-1960.



Fig. 4: This view (1982, Wolfgang Hoffman) is in the Wisconsin Historical Society digital collection (Image ID 127867). The photo was used in the Allison book, *Every Root an Anchor*. https://www.wisconsinhistory.orgRecords/Image/IM127867

#### UW-Madison's Famous and Historic Trees

#### The President's Bur Oak Oldest Campus Tree (Tree 8 on Observatory Hill Walk)

Near the residence that once housed a succession of university presidents stands the oldest tree on campus: the President's Bur Oak. It is estimated to be 300 years old twice as old as the university. For well over a hundred years prior to European settlement, this tree was witness to the Native Americans who came to this ridge overlooking Lake Mendota to gather at the nearby ceremonial effige mounds. Legend has it that during the Civil War, soldiers stationed at Camp Randall used

Legend has it that during the Civil War, soldiers stationed at Camp Randall used the tree for gunnery practice. A resultant gaping hole wasn't repaired by a tree surgeon until 1915, but it is hard to distinguish the damage now. Look up the massive trunk on the west side of the tree and you will notice another wound bandaged with boards and iron strapping. Little is known about this early attempt at repair. As a further protection for the belowed tree, E.B. Fred, professor and former president of the university, had it bolted rogether with long steel rods.

This fine old tree appears to be in good health and it may well live another 100 years.

#### Discovering the Autumn Purple White Ash (Tree 43 on Observatory Hill Walk)

One autumn day while walking by the Human Ecology building (formerly Home Economics), G. William Longenecker, a well-known professor of horticulture at UW-Madison, noticed an unusual white ash tree. Instead of the yellow leaf color typical for this species in the fall, this specimen bore spectacular orange to maroon leaves. The tree had other valuable attributes: its leaves persisted well into the autumn season, it was a seedless male, and it displayed an exceptional branching structure. Longnecker propagated this unique tree and introduced it as a trademarked cultivar 'Autumn Purple' in 1956.

Today this cultivar is widely planted across the United States. The original Autumn Purple White Ash was removed several years ago due to structural weaknesses. A descendent of this original tree now grows nearby and is part of our walk. Unfortunately there is no record of who planted the parent tree on campus or where it came from.

So keep your eyes open; maybe someday you will notice a tree with unique features that will be worthy of propagation.



Emeritus UW-Madison President E.B. Fred (right) and the President's Bur Oak, 1977

Fig. 5: In 1998, as part of the university's sesquicentennial celebrations, Daniel Einstein and Martin Bailkey cowrote a self-guided campus tree walk pamphlet. The reference to the Civil War target practice legend in the pamphlet was based on Bruce Allison's earlier publications. This story is now considered a colorful myth (see figure 10).

In the photo E.B. Fred's hand is inserted into a small opening where a large cavity had healed over. When the tree was cut down, we encountered a three foot tall of column of concrete that was placed in the tree to "stabilize" the hollow base. It is estimated that this treatment must have occurred in the early 1900s given how the tree had subsequently closed over the opening. The trunk had continued to decay after the concrete was installed—so that after the tree was felled, all that remained on the stump was a perfect casting of the cavity (see figure 9). A portion of this concrete casting has been saved and is now in storage at the university's horse barn.



Fig. 6: By September 2014 the tree was in serious decline, due to drought stress, root disturbance and internal decay. Major lateral limbs had been removed. (Image by D. Einstein)



Fig. 7: Warning rope and flags were placed around the base of the tree in 2014 to discourage people from standing directly beneath the tree's limbs. (Image by D. Einstein)



Fig. 8: On Jan. 14, 2015. Butch Peschl, owner of Wolfe Tree Service, cut the tree down. Paul Morrison of WoodCycle then used a special 5-foot chainsaw bar to section the trunk. WoodCycle was able to mill quarter sawn lumber from the trunk. (Image by D. Einstein)



Fig. 9: A concrete pillar was revealed when the trunk was cut. Filling cavities in hollow trunks was a common "treatment" for decay in the early 1900s. The smooth surface of the pillar (visible behind the chainsaw) would have aligned with the opening in the trunk. The contours of the interior cavity are cast into the concrete. (Image by D. Einstein)



Fig. 10: All of the wood fiber that would have been present during the Civil War period had long turned to "sawdust." Only the most recent 75 years of annual rings remained at the base of the tree trunk. The decayed wood fiber at the base of the hollow trunk was sifted to determine if any metal bullets/cannon balls had been dislodged and fallen to the bottom of the trunk. No bullets or cannon balls were found-nor were any metal fragments encountered during milling (other than hardware associated with metal cables used to stabilize weak branches.) This would appear to disprove any legends associated with this tree being used for military target practice. (Image by D. Einstein)



Fig. 11: The UW Child Development Lab at the School of Human Ecology used a section of the trunk to create a "Bur Oak Elf House." The house is located on the school's playground.