

Tennessee's Famous Trees

By Tom Simpson

They are not always among the state's largest and oldest trees, although some of them certainly are. They are often the silent sentinels of Tennessee history and culture. They are living monuments to the past and provide a glimpse into events of our heritage and struggles. Who are these famous trees? They are members of the Tennessee Landmark and Historic Tree Register.

While many people are familiar with the Champion Tree program that documents the largest tree of each species and is administered by the Tennessee Department of Agriculture, Forestry Division. Currently there are over 216 champion and co-champion trees in 91 different genera within the state, of which 31 of these trees are national record trees. Not many people are aware of the Tennessee Landmark and Historic Tree Register. The largest of the trees make the Champion Tree List; the famous trees make the Landmark and Historic Tree Register.

The register was the brainchild of the Tennessee Urban Forestry Council, a non-profit organization established to help promote the state's urban forestry programs.

In 1997, the council designed a program to recognize and document the trees of the state that have contributed to the heritage of Tennessee. Gene Hyde, committee chair and city forester for Chattanooga, inspired the council to develop the register as a link to our culture and history. Since then, some 15 trees have been entered into the register statewide. Due to the success in Tennessee, the program has been recognized nationally and many other states have adopted similar standards of recognition.

Landmark trees are those trees that have been recognized in communities for 50 or more years, or were planted as living memorials to famous people. These trees are often well known in the communities in which they stand, sometimes over numerous generations.

In essence, the Landmark and Historic Tree Register recognizes the value that historic trees provide to a community, the state, and the nation, and the need to protect such living treasures. A crucial purpose of the L&HT Register is to encourage the protection of these significant trees for future generations. In more than one instance the recognition of one of these trees has resulted in local tree protection ordinances for a community.

McMinnville

Standing under one of these famous trees is almost a religious experience, for many have watched the events of a nation unfold. There is the Birthing Tree of McMinnville that silently observed parties of travelers from Kentucky and Virginia passing westward in the great migration known as the Manifest Destiny. Meeting under its branches, some tarried long enough for children to be born. Even Native Americans believed that a child born under the canopy of this majestic tree was slated for a life of good fortune.

Pall Mall

The Alvin C. York Wedding Beech Grove in Pall Mall is where the national hero, Alvin York, married his childhood sweetheart after returning from WWI. The famous ceremony was attended by the governor of Tennessee who traveled by wagon for two days just to get there.

Bristol

The King Oak of Bristol grew during the early settlement of the Watauga era and provided shade for Revolutionary and Civil War soldiers, farmers and even slaves before quietly observing the founding of that city. Most of the grove was removed for lumber to build Bristol, including King College, but the King Oak remains in the center of a city park.

Nashville

There is the Battle of Nashville Oak that received injuries during the epic Civil War battle for Nashville in 1864.



The Norris Elm was entered into the Tennessee Landmark and Historic Tree Register in 2007.

Photo by Regina Merritt.

The tree now stands over the monuments dedicated to that struggle in the Battle of Nashville Monument Park.

Dayton

The Scopes Trial Grove in Dayton is where the observers were shaded from the hot June sun of 1925 in one of the most famous legal trials in American history. Nine of the original trees in the courtyard still stand.

Jackson

The little-known Daniel Boone Beech is outside Jackson. It bears the signatures of Daniel Boone and his friends that were on a hunting party in 1776 during the bloody years of early Tennessee settlement.

History documents the journey of Boone's party from the Holston Valley to the early settlers in Middle Tennessee of that year to deliver shot and powder. Because of his carvings on the Madison County beech, historians now know that he and his companions ventured into West Tennessee to explore the hunting grounds of the Chickasaw Indians. The more famous beech with Daniel Boone's carvings existed in Washington County, near Johnson City, where Boone hid under a waterfall to escape an Indian raiding party. This beech was inscribed with the words "D. Boon killed a bar (bear) in year 1760." This tree fell in 1920 and removed with it all visible record of the adventures of Boone in Tennessee, that is, until the West Tennessee beech was found.

Still, there are many more such trees that are not documented. Some of those trees have passed from memory and history, undocumented and forgotten, casualties of development, storms, or natural pests. Some wait to be recognized for their contributions to our heritage, surviving in woodlots, parks and fields against the changes of time and fortune. Some of them still stand where early wagon roads were forged through the wilderness but have long since been lost to history and covered with asphalt. Some of them can be found in our front yards.

The Tennessee Landmark and Historic Tree Register is an ongoing program that accepts new nominations through June 1 of each year. The register may be visited by accessing the Tennessee Urban Forestry Council's Web site at: www.tufc.org. Pictures and narratives can be found there on each of these famous trees. Nomination forms may also be downloaded there.

While champion trees can be easily documented by careful measurement, Landmark and Historic Tree Register trees are much more difficult to verify. Careful research is the primary task. Sometimes the documentation is found in libraries or newspaper archives. In some cases, a land deed provides a record that substantiates the age and heritage of the tree. Family stories from the past, while important and entertaining, often become diluted with the passage of time. Accuracy is vital to the acceptance of register trees and is often challenging, but enormously rewarding when properly accomplished.

Recognizing that we are losing many significant trees, and the stories associated with them, the Tennessee Urban Forestry Council also formed the Heritage Tree List as a companion to the Landmark and Historic Tree Register. On this list may be found the famous trees that have passed from our presence. The trees may be gone but the significance to society is not. The stories are preserved for the future, along with pictures of the trees (when available). This list is also updated on an annual basis and includes such nominations as the Chickasaw Treaty Oak of Nashville; the Cherokee Toll Oak of Rockwood; and the Watauga Treaty Sycamore of Elizabethton, all famous trees of distant events. This is an ongoing work in progress for the Tennessee Urban Forestry Council.

An unintended benefit of the famous American Guide Series books, published in 1939 by the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Projects Administration for the state of Tennessee, found many of these famous trees. They can be found in the book Tennessee: A Guide to the Volunteer State, sponsored by the Department of Conservation, Division of Information and published by Viking Press, New York, N.Y. While the goal of the project was to document the state's history, geography and culture by means of written tours throughout the state, some famous trees were also mentioned in the local community discussions. The Tennessee Urban Forestry Council has developed a list of trees from this book to research and document. Many of these trees are now gone, but the search is on for those that still exist.

Because of the success of the Tennessee Landmark and Historic Tree Register, the council designed a pictorial display of some of these trees, as well as champion trees, which tours throughout the state. Called the "Notable Tree Exhibit," this display is available on loan to communities. Its premier viewing was in 2005 at the Legislative Plaza in Nashville. Since then, the exhibit has visited conferences and events across the state in more than 20 communities and is regarded as one of the finest of its kind. A team of masterful

photographers volunteered their talents to create this informative exhibit. Arrangements and schedules of the display are also available through the council's Web site.

The hunt for Tennessee's famous trees will continue with the help of the public. Perhaps there is a famous tree in your community that waits for recognition. History is still being written and the famous trees of our heritage will help us preserve those memories.

For more information on the Tennessee Urban Forestry Council, visit the Web site www.tufc.com or call 615-352-8985.

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