

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, February 22, 2016

The Copper Beech at Auburn Heights: The “famous” copper beech tree on the front lawn at Auburn Heights is supposed to come down today. It was extensively damaged by a sheering wind that went across the front of the property during a heavy rainstorm in the summer of 2011. The eastern 1/3 of the tree was torn off and toppled during that brief noon-day storm, and the remaining 2/3 has leaned precariously toward the front driveway since that time.

My Aunt Anna Mancill (my father's sister) told me she thought the tree was planted in 1912, the year she was married. If that is correct, it was 15 years younger than several trees still on the property, all planted the year the house was built in 1897. In the 12 x 20 photograph taken from the hillside across Creek Road in 1914, there appear to be several small trees in the location of the copper beech, and it cannot be definitely identified. From that time on, however, it must have grown rapidly, soon taking over much of the front lawn. In my first remembrance of the beech about 1930, it was a *big* tree even then and great fun to climb with its twisting limbs making it easy for short arms and legs to cling to.

My mother called it a purple beech, and only in the past 25 years or so have we preferred “copper beech.” I really don't know which is correct. The leaves are green when they first come out in April, but they soon turn to purple or copper-colored before midsummer. She would comment that she could not keep a nice green lawn in front of the house, as the shade from the big tree blocked out the sunlight. By the 1970s, we realized that we had a very special asset in our front yard, and I would have one of the tree companies feed it periodically. A few cables were also inserted to help support the weight of the far-reaching limbs. With no firm sod beneath, the soil close to the roots would erode, so in early spring each year we would rake the area and then spread grass seed. The seed would take hold and grass would spread over the area for one or two months before the shade from the foliage would kill it. While this was not ideal, at least it kept erosion under control.

Several of the limbs would twist and grow back into themselves, becoming attached at both ends. Shortly after 2000, the State Parks people told us we had a champion tree, the runner-up to the first-place copper beech in Delaware. It was spectacular, and when viewed through the porte co-chere near the front porch, it was framed perfectly for a photograph. We understood that the state champion, possibly in Bellevue State Park, was destroyed before the damage to our tree, so for a short time, ours was the State's #1 Copper Beech. (There is a nice stand of copper beeches at Longwood Gardens, along the drive between the Pierce House and the Conservatory.) The part of our tree that had remained after the wind damage seemed alive and reasonably healthy for a while, but its health deteriorated during the past year, and it's time for it to go. Gary Bryde, a Hockessin attorney and an accomplished wood carver, plans to preserve some of the wood. Good bye, old friend.