

Stately poplar tree removed

AFTER MUCH deliberation, and with no small degree of sadness, the Thomas Jefferson Foundation in June took down the 115-foot-tall tulip poplar tree that stood on Monticello's south side for more than 150 years.

Despite a number of preservation efforts, the tulip poplar's health had declined sharply in the past two years, its root system compromised by age, restricted space, and the root disease *Phytophthora*. The foliage of the tree had become so thin that the limbs were being scalded by the sun, and the wood of the tree was drying out and becoming increasingly brittle. Concerns about the structural integrity of the tree prompted the decision to have it removed.

The complex task, which involved the use of a 90-ton crane, was accomplished the evenings of June 25 and 26 by a crew of arborists from Bartlett Tree Experts of Charlottesville.

"We're grateful that this ancient tree lasted as long as it did," said Peter Hatch, Monticello's director of gardens and grounds. "We also need to be thankful that such an enormous living thing, with the potential to cause irreplaceable damage to life and property, was removed systematically by man and not recklessly by nature."

Exactly how old was the tulip poplar?

The age of trees can usually be determined by taking core samples from the trunk and counting the growth rings. With the tulip poplar, however, ring-counting was not possible because the trunk had been hollow for more than a century and live wood comprised only 17 percent of the trunk's circumference at the base of the tree.

The tulip poplar had long been considered an "original" tree dating to the lifetime of Thomas Jefferson because

of a notation in his Garden Book made April 16, 1807: "planted 1. *Laurodendron* in margin of S.W. shrub circle from the nursery." This places a tulip poplar in the vicinity of the recently removed tree, whose size also suggested a long existence. On the other side of the coin, arborist George Van Yahres wrote in 1926 that the tree was not "original," and restoration architects under the direction of Fiske Kimball in the early 1940s also discounted the tree's Jefferson connection. Early photographs of Monticello, taken in the late 1800s, offer no conclusive evidence. There is also the possibility that the tulip poplar that lived into this century was a "successor" to the tree noted by Jefferson in 1807 and dated from a later period in his life, perhaps the early 1820s.

During the 20th century, many efforts were made to preserve the tulip poplar. The tree was "topped" at about 40 feet around 1900. In the 1920s, Van Yahres pruned the tree to create the four "fingers" of limbs that defined its shape for more than 80 years. In 1978, Van Yahres' son Mitch Van Yahres directed the pruning of the tree's canopy to enhance its wind resistance by eliminating the "sail" effect of dense foliage. He cabled the tulip poplar and its "twin" on the north side of the house to other large trees in order to prevent them from falling onto the house in event of a powerful storm.

In 1997, concerns about the structure of the tulip poplar resurfaced. One consulting arborist recommended that it be taken down immediately. Instead, the tree was preserved through the installation of an internal system of flexible cables devised by Don Blair of the M.F. Blair Institute of Arboriculture in Big Pool, Md.

By mid-2008, though, no viable alternatives to removal remained.

Plans for replacing the tulip poplar are under consideration. Hatch said



A 90-ton crane was employed in removing the tulip poplar from the side of the house.

Monticello possesses small specimens – both grafted (or "cloned") trees and seedlings (saplings from seeds of the tulip poplar) – that eventually could be used for replacement.

As for the wood from the tulip poplar, some pieces were made available to members of the Monticello staff while other pieces will be used in the making of retail products for the Monticello Museum Shop.

Thomas Jefferson
MONTICELLO

Monticello is a newsletter published twice each year by the Thomas Jefferson Foundation, Inc. The Thomas Jefferson Foundation is the private, nonprofit corporation that has owned and operated Monticello since 1923. Its mission is preservation and education.

© Thomas Jefferson Foundation, Inc., 2008

COMMENTS?

newsletter@monticello.org