

Colebrook's Colonial Pine

Man has always had a close relationship with trees; references to them go back into the mists of time, such as the Cedars of Lebanon, the Great Oak under which King John of England was forced to sign the Magna Carta, stories concerning certain banyan trees in and near India. More recently, the white oak in Hartford known as the Charter Oak, was supposedly used as the hiding place for the colony's Royal Charter in 1687. At the time of its demise, due to a hurricane in 1856, the greatly revered tree, considered the symbol of liberty, not only by Connecticut residents, but residents of other states as well, was estimated to have been between 800 and 1,000 years old. The center had long since been hollow, preventing the establishment of an accurate age.

Colebrook also has a historic tree, recognized by the Connecticut Botanical Society as the oldest tree in the state to have been named, and which still grows. Arah Phelps named this white pine, located on the Phelps Research Area in North Colebrook, when he purchased the land in 1787, shortly after returning home from Washington's army.

At the time the first White man cast his eyes on this tree, it already had to have been a full-grown tree, as it had 13 major branches. The symbolism of this fact was immediately recognized by Arah, as the newly formed nation known as the United States of America was that year observing its 4th birthday as a recognized nation, after the signing of the Paris Peace Treaty in 1783. Not until the following year, 1788, did Connecticut ratify the Constitution of the United States.

A white pine of this stature must have been not less than 150 years old at that time, and quite possibly much older. The number of branches indicate that it began its life in an open field, not in a stand of trees as it is now located. How could a field have existed generations prior to the coming of the first European? The probable answer lies in the Native Americans' practice of creating and maintaining open areas, primarily by means of fire, to facilitate their hunting practices. The adjacent Town of Sandisfield, Mass. owes its name to this practice, and fields for which the township ultimately was named was derived from the open, or interval land, created by the native hunters. The bows, arrows and spears used by them were not accurate at very great distances, thus the use of fire to reduce brush and other obstructions in the woods, as well as open spaces where deer, turkeys, bear and smaller animals could be harvested.

The site of the Colonial Pine is two or three miles down Sandy Brook from the fields at Sandisfield and located on a level area of perhaps two acres, which overlook the swampy, treeless, boggy area formed by the confluence of Sandy Brook and Brummagem Brook from an elevation of about 35-40 feet. There is also a large spring at this site. These are the reasons why the tree might have gotten its start at a location other than a forest setting.

In 2007, when last measured, the circumference of the tree was 16 feet, three inches, giving it a diameter of 5 feet. At that time, it had a height of approximately 120 feet.

As large as this pine is, it is by no means the largest in the state; that honor goes to one in Morris on White Memorial Foundation land, which measures 18 feet in circumference, although their heights are the same.

Today, with all but three of its main branches lopped off by storms, the Colonial Pine is strong and reasonably healthy, standing proudly amidst a grove of its descendants. There it will continue to grow, safe on land owned and protected by The Nature Conservancy. The only threat is the forces of nature, which were so strikingly demonstrated in the destruction of the Cathedral Pines in Cornwall during the powerful tornado of 1991.

Colebrook experienced a tornado in 1975, which, while not being anywhere as destructive as the one that destroyed the Cathedral Pines, nevertheless destroyed a pine only 40 feet from the Colonial Pine. With luck, this monarch of the forest will continue to give us pleasure and pride for many generations to come.