

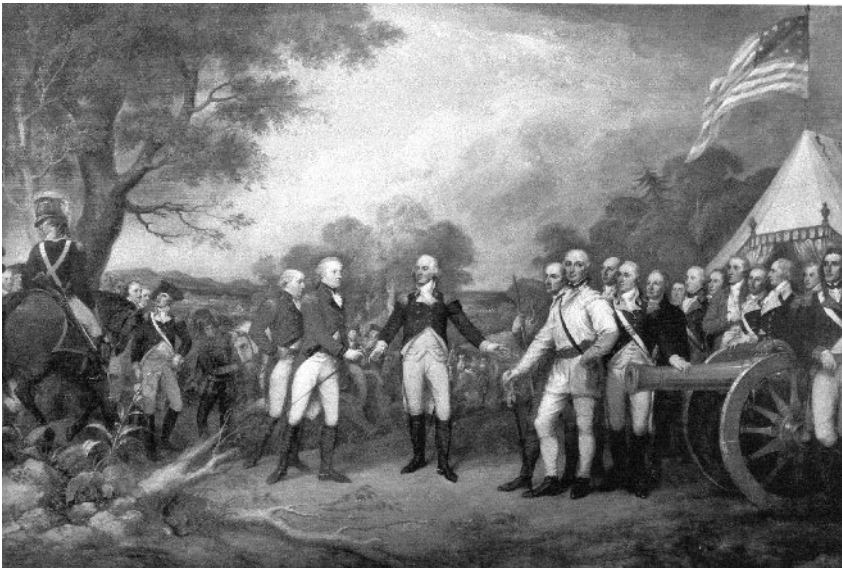
The Burgoyne Elm Do We Still Care?



British General John Burgoyne (1722-1792) (Courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration.)

The Burgoyne Elm stood on the south side of Boston Post Road just east of the Fiske Law Office. Until the death of the tree in 1967 and its removal in stages over subsequent years, the huge elm was a patriotic symbol venerated by local history enthusiasts for its age and link to the War of Independence.

General John Burgoyne was the British general defeated by General Horatio Gates at Saratoga on October 17, 1777. This battle marked a turning point in the American Revolution by giving hope to supporters of independence and convincing the French to enter the conflict as an ally of the United States. After the battle, Burgoyne signed the “Saratoga Convention,” as the British preferred to call the surrender. It stated that



This painting of the surrender of General Burgoyne at Saratoga, New York, on October 17, 1777, is by American artist John Trumbull and hangs in the U.S. Capitol Rotunda. The battle was a turning point in the Revolutionary War.

captured soldiers were technically not prisoners and were to be returned to Europe on the condition that they would never fight in North America again. The job of escorting the weary British, German, and Hessian soldiers to Somerville pending embarkation was assigned to General John Glover of Marblehead. The journey took about three weeks.

American troops and their captives suffered many hardships as they traveled along nearly impassible roads and crossed the Taconic Range in a heavy snow-storm. They left destruction in their wake, burning fences, destroying crops, and robbing houses. Little effort was spent in finding sleeping quarters for the enlisted men in either army. In contrast, Burgoyne, Glover, and other officers were entertained at fine houses along the way.

The poorly disciplined hordes, estimated to number in the thousands, arrived in “Westtown” on November 6. According to an article by Brenton H. Dickson III in the *Weston Historical Society Bulletin* of May, 1967, British officers were housed at the Golden Ball Tavern and American officers at Baldwin’s Tavern, which was located just west of the present Fiske Lane. The troops and their prisoners camped overnight wherever they could, some in the shelter of what became known as the Burgoyne Elm. It reportedly took days to restore order and cleanliness to Weston after they left.

It rained incessantly on the march from Weston to Cambridge. When the troops and prisoners arrived there, the wife of a Harvard professor described them this way:

I never had the least idea that creation produced such a sordid set of creatures in human figure. Poor, dirty, emaciated men, great numbers of women who seemed to be the beasts of burthen (sic), having a bushel basket on their back by which they were bent double. The contents seemed to be pots and kettles, various sorts of furniture, children peeping through gridirons and other utensils. . . (and) some very young infants who were born on the road.

Despite the Saratoga Convention, the captured soldiers were not allowed to return to England. The Continental Congress suspected the British would send them back into action. After a hard winter in Cambridge and Somerville, they were marched to a prison camp in Virginia and later to Pennsylvania, where they were finally released after the surrender of Lord Cornwallis.

The Burgoyne Elm Becomes a Patriotic Symbol

In his book *The Republic of Shade*, Thomas J. Campanella writes that “no tree loomed larger in American history” than the American elm. During the colonial period, elms took root in public squares, where historic events took place under their spreading branches. According to Campanella, New Englanders felt the

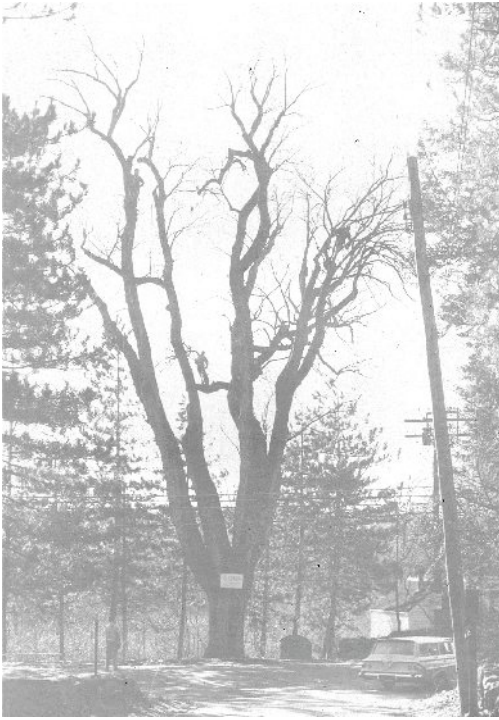


Historical re-enactments in 1932 and 1963 (above) featured speeches under the Burgoyne Elm. (Courtesy of Weston Historical Society)

loss of their European connections and turned to the American elm—a native tree—to bolster their identity. By the late 19th century, the elm had become a regional icon. Its uplifting branches were seen as a symbol of Yankee rectitude. The trees were systematically planted throughout New England, including Weston, as part of the village improvement movement.

Elm trees were often the oldest objects around and were redefined as beloved witnesses to important historical events and “repositories of memory” often linked with the Revolution. Weston was by no means the only town to revere a special elm. The Weston Historical Society owns a piece of the Washington Elm, the most famous of all. It stood in the Cambridge Common and by tradition, if not in fact, was said to have sheltered George Washington as he took command of the American Army on July 3, 1775. Thomas Campanella’s fascinating book includes pictures of the Lafayette Elm in Kennebunk and the Benjamin Franklin Elm in New Haven, among others.

In Weston, the Burgoyne Elm became the focal point for 20th century historical celebrations. In 1932, residents turned out to welcome a cavalcade on the first leg of a 115-mile trek commemorating George Washington’s 1789 journey through New England. Beneath the Burgoyne Elm, the costumed general greeted ladies in colonial gowns and gentlemen in long velvet coats and three-cornered hats. Local dignitaries presented state officials with a bronze plaque that was affixed to a



huge boulder under the spreading elm. This plaque is now in storage.

Speeches were delivered at the same site in 1963 as part of the town's 250th Anniversary celebrations. At that time the age of the tree was estimated to be 300 years old. Another source gives its life-span as 1740-1967.

The Fight to Save a Cherished Elm

The Weston Historical Society was founded in late 1963 as an outgrowth of the 250th celebration. The society adopted and fixed up the Fiske Law Office as its headquarters and championed the huge elm that shaded its diminutive new home. The society's first president, Harold G. "Red" Travis (1898-1981), energetically embraced the cause of preserving the Burgoyne Elm. He kept a scrapbook, now at the Weston Historical Society, with letters, newspaper clippings, and photographs of the elm during the period 1966 to 1975.



The first letter, dated August 16, 1966, to Weston Tree Warden John J. "Jack" Duffy, praises him for reviving the tree after it lost many of its leaves to beetle infestation and drought that summer. By pumping 3000 gallons of fertilizer into the ground around the tree, Duffy encouraged a second growth. Travis, on coming back from the Cape, wrote "last week

when in Weston, I rushed to the sacred spot and found to my delight healthy and fresh green leaves on every one of those countless branches. Our richest treasure is saved again. . . .”

While thanking Travis for his chairmanship of “Jack Duffy’s Mutual Admiration Society,” Duffy’s answering letter states bluntly “I have no magic powers.” He mentions the effort by Dr. Donald Wyman, retired horticulturist at the Case Estates, to take cuttings. In the October 1966 issue of the *Weston Historical Society Bulletin*, Travis writes that Wyman had reared a healthy scion, already six feet tall, and had agreed to propagate a few additional “children” to be ready for planting in a few years, to ensure that “There’ll always be a Burgoyne Elm in Weston.”

The following January, 1967, workmen removed one enormous limb. According to an article in the *Bulletin* that March, it was cut into seven logs varying in diameter from 26” to 34.” These were sawn into planks and pieces. Travis began to think about how to use the wood once it had been seasoned for a year. In a report of January 12, 1967, he wrote that local artist Henry W. “Waddie” Longfellow had volunteered to “study the possibility of creating artistic souvenirs of the tree, to be made from the solid wood pieces. . . .” Travis added “We must preserve forever as much as we can of this venerable landmark under whose shadow for three centuries walked so many of our forebears who helped to make Weston ‘The Exceptional New England Town’!”

That summer, with Harold Travis again out of town, Longfellow wrote to say that the elm had been cut down. A new Tree Warden, David Pollock, had ordered its immediate removal for safety reasons. Pollock left an 18- to 20-foot trunk, 25 feet around at the base, as a monument that he hoped would last five to ten years through the use of preservatives. Over the next years, the Weston Historical Society searched for ways to preserve the tree trunk, which was generally referred to as the “bole.” Three heavy steel bands of strapping kept it together for a time. Inquiries to chemical, horticultural, and mechanical experts yielded no solutions.

In the October 1971 *Bulletin*, Travis looked back on that sad day, more than four years earlier, when the tree had come down:

With block and falls, its giant, lifeless, still majestic limbs were removed one by one, and our hearts were heavy. Until then many had come to feel that as long as the old tree stood at 626 Boston Post Road nothing in today’s suburban explosion could ever rob this town of its quiet charm and dignity.

It seemed that for Travis and perhaps for others, this one special elm was a reminder not only of a British general soundly defeated but also of an old Weston fast disappearing.

The next phase in the Burgoyne Elm saga began in January 1975. As one of its contributions to the nation’s Bicentennial, the Rotary Club of Weston had agreed



Left: Harold "Red" Travis watches as the "Future Generation Slab" is carefully lifted, February 18, 1975. Below: This photo, labeled "Passing in Review before Weston Town Hall" shows the slab being transported to its "hiding place." (Courtesy Weston Historical Society)



to aid Harold Travis and the Weston Historical Society in turning the elm into a tool for teaching history. The new Tree Warden, Palmer Koelb, supervised reducing the height of the bole to four feet at the front and five at rear, creating a sloping surface. Rotary president Bruce H. Nickerson and his son Andrew took on the work of counting rings and locating important dates at the appropriate intervals on the preserved bole. Travis's initial idea of marking Weston's incorporation in 1713 turned out not to work, as the tree wasn't "born" until about 1740. The dates chosen were war-related: 1775, 1812, 1861, 1898, 1917 and 1941.

Rotarians and others who participated in the preservation project included Reynold Thompson (conceptual rendering); Bryant Spencer (excavating and stonework); Thomas Duffy and Palmer Koelb (sawing); Stanley Fabbri, Weston Highway Department (hoisting); Bruce H. Nickerson (wood treatment); Vernon Goddard (sanding); Brighton Iron Works, Ashland (branding irons); Charles Boyd, of Waltham (polyurethane treatment); Jack Richardson (sign painting); and Fred Mitchell (copper work).



Travis took photographs of each step in this process and labeled them in his scrapbook. Several pages show the tree being taken down in slabs. On February 18, 1975, the portion labeled “Future Generation Slab” was carefully lifted and placed in the town’s front-loader. Another photograph is labeled: “On Route to Posterity.” After passing the town hall and Josiah Smith Tavern, the severed slab made its way to its secret hiding place, which appears to have been the abandoned 1908 fire station on North Avenue. There, protected by a preservative, it was to be kept ready to supply a 21st century replacement for the newly created Bicentennial monument. In this way, wrote Travis, “well into the 21st century, and perhaps the 22nd, the venerable old tree would keep on teaching history to generations of Weston children.”



Harold Travis’s scrapbook includes a letter to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Products Laboratory in Madison, Wisconsin, on January 5, 1976, describing the project and asking for help with preservation of “an artistic fungus growth” that was carefully removed from the side of the bole. Travis was concerned

Above: Bruce H. Nickerson and his son Andrew work on the bole, counting rings in preparation for marking historic dates. Below: Harold G. “Red” Travis examines the finished monument. (Courtesy Weston Historical Society)

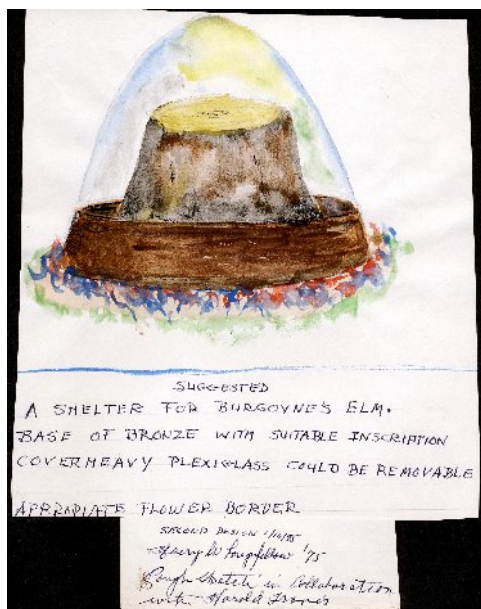
because maggots had begun to destroy the fungus piece and adjoining bark. He also asked for advice on preventing insect damage to the replacement slabs that were being saved.

By August, 1975, work on the monument was completed; but Harold Travis remained concerned about deterioration and vandalism. To that end, Henry W. Longfellow, before his death that year, made sketches of a bell-shaped wrought iron cage with an eagle on top and of a shelter with a base of bronze “suitably inscribed” and a removable dome of heavy plexiglass, the whole surrounded by an “appropriate flower border.” Neither idea was ever executed.

A second way to address these concerns was to insure the preservation of the replacement slab. In a letter to Harold Hestnes, Jr., Chair of the Board of Selectmen on January 31, 1976, Travis requested a conference to discuss “a safe reposing place for the extra slab during part of the next few centuries. . .” He added “To my mind this project is of such far-reaching potential that its implementation should be placed with discretion only in hands of the most reliable and stable parties.”

The winter of 1976-77 brought problems with heavy, wet snow plowed up against the aged landmark. By the summer of 1977, the plastic coating on the top was wearing off and the dates were getting hard to read. Carpenter ants had attacked the trunk, as had several types of mold.

Meanwhile, the six Burgoyne babies, now almost teenagers, were struggling. That fall, Red Travis sent six small samples from each of the trees to the



Above: Harold “Red” Travis removed and saved this “artistic fungus” growing on the Burgoyne Elm. Below: One of Henry W. Longfellow’s two designs for a protective cover for the Burgoyne Elm stump. (Collection Weston Historical Society, photos by Pamela Fox)

Shade Tree Laboratory at U. Mass Amherst. Three of the trees had died by then. In his letter of October 10, 1977, Travis expressed regret at not having given them special care: "Brazenly perhaps, we felt that if they were to be true and truly 'sons of the Burgoyne Elm' that had sheltered thousands of General Burgoyne's captured prisoners. . . they had to prove themselves worthy of their heritage by not getting twentieth century superior treatment." All six Burgoyne Elm scions eventually succumbed to fungus, Dutch elm disease, or unknown causes.

What happened to the wood of the Burgoyne Elm?

After the limbs of the tree were removed in 1967, a "Project Burgoyne Elm" committee was formed, comprised of Howard Forbes, Mrs. Daniel F. Viles Jr, and Galen Green. Their task was to supervise the utilization of the wood and the making of souvenirs by students in the Industrial Arts Department of the Junior and Senior High Schools. The first Weston Historical Society awards for excellence were made at graduation in June 1968. First prize for junior high students went to Christopher Arthur Larsen for the "monk's chair," and honorable mentions were presented to William Grant (Lazy Susan), David Farrell, Jr. (spoon rack), and Michael Zirpolo (hanging clock).

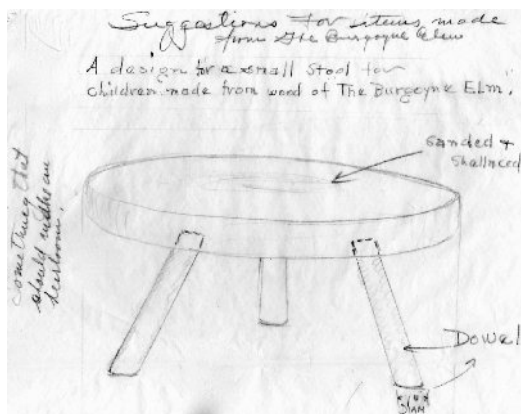


Weston Junior High School woodworking contest awards, June 16, 1968, l-r, Harold G. Travis, president, Weston Historical Society; Howard M. Forbes, judge; Chris Larsen, first prize winner, with his "monk's chair"; David Farrell and Bill Grant, honorable mention; and Galen Green, Industrial Arts instructor. (Courtesy Weston Historical Society)



Above: Connecticut organizers of the 1975 Great Trail Expedition used wood from the Burgoyne Elm to make at least 16 blocks given out to those who helped along the route. The above block was given to the Weston Historical Society by Jack Williams. Second from top: Weston artist Henry W. Longfellow designed this 3" X 3" X 2" paper weight with a facsimile of the Burgoyne Elm sign. Below: Longfellow's design for a child's stool. (Weston Historical Society collection, photos by Pamela Fox)

Above: Decoupage image of General John Burgoyne by W. Raynor on wood from the Burgoyne Elm. Below: Wall plaque by Harold Stevens (Weston Historical Society collection, photos by Pamela W. Fox)



Many Weston residents wrote to Harold Travis to obtain pieces of wood from which to make a souvenir or keepsake. Henry W. Longfellow designed a number of simple, practical items that could be made from the wood including a three-legged child's stool, paper weight, bookends, pen stand, candlesticks, letter rack, and book rack. The historical society owns an example of the paper weight, as well as objects pictured on the previous page and a large drop leaf table made by Howard "Mac" Forbes for the law office. The society's gavel was also made from the historic tree.

Some of the Burgoyne Elm wood was made into blocks about the size of a brick, which were presented as gifts to persons associated with the 1975 Great Trail Expedition from Fort Crown Point to Saratoga, New York, sponsored by the Connecticut-based Quinnipiac Council of the Boy Scouts of America. The Weston Historical Society recently received a gift of one of these blocks from Jack Williams, a former Weston resident who obtained the wood for the scout project.

A few questions remain. What became of the replacement slab that Harold Travis so carefully hid away for posterity?

Do we still attribute significance to the wood of this particular tree, so revered in the past?

Can we still use objects made from this wood to make a connection to the events of the Revolutionary War?

Do we still care?

by Pamela W. Fox



To find the approximate location where the Burgoyne Elm once stood, look for this historic marker affixed to a pine tree just east of the Fiske Law Office. (Courtesy Weston Historical Society)