
In *Urban Forests: A Natural History of Trees and People in the American Cityscape*, author Jill Jonnes presents stories from the early days of the urban tree movement on through the challenges that face urban forests today. Excerpted here is Chapter Seven from the book.

“A Poem Lovely as a Tree”: Cherishing Memorial and Historic Trees



A tree planting in honor of dead marines. In memory of the gallant marines who had “gone west,” mothers of the marines marked Mother’s Day in New York City by planting memorial trees in honor of the sons who gave their lives to their country in World War I. The trees were placed on the mall in Central Park with impressive ceremonies. (With permission from *American Forests*.)



When the brutal trench warfare of World War I came to an official end on Armistice Day, November 11, 1918, the grieving nation sought suitable ways to honor its almost shocking number of dead. All told, 117,000 young Americans had died in the Great War. As a way to pay homage to these lost lives, the American Forestry Association proposed planting trees to create a new kind of living memorial. As *American Forestry: An Illustrated Magazine About Forestry and Kindred Subjects*, argued: “The trees will be, in their very greenness and robust strength, reminders of the youths who gave their vigor to win the big war. There will be no gloom about them.”

American Forestry board member David Houston, Wilson’s secretary of agriculture, wrote in March of 1919 to the governors of every state: “We shall seek many ways to perpetuate the memory of those who made the great sacrifice. It has been happily suggested that we do this by adorning with young trees, each named for a fallen soldier, our waysides, our yards and our pleasure places. This can be done on Arbor Day. . . . Such an observation of the day will give it a meaning more profound, a purpose more exalted, than it ever had before.”

Officials at American Forestry were stunned by the fervent grassroots response to their idea of memorial trees: “Never before in [our] history,” they confessed, had they received “so great a number of inquiries in regard to tree care and tree planting.” By the spring of 1920 Arbor Day memorial plantings were sweeping the nation, as families, friends, and officials sought to assuage their sorrow and honor the dead with community tree planting on an unprecedented scale. In Middleton, Delaware, a huge throng, including uniformed soldiers, turned out for a ceremony as the high school students followed the prescribed American Forestry program: The students began by singing “The Planting Song” to the tune of “America,” which began: “Joy for the sturdy trees / Fanned by each fragrant

breeze, / Lovely they stand.” School superintendent Wilbur H. Jump followed with a brief tribute.

Then a student stepped forward to recite “Trees,” a poem written by Joyce Kilmer, who had died in France. Next fourteen children each declaimed two lines of Helen O. Hoyt’s “What the Trees Teach,” the first beginning with “I am taught by the Oak to be rugged and strong / In defense of the right, in defiance of wrong” and the last concluding with “The firm-rooted Cedars, like sentries of old, / show that virtues deep-rooted may also be gold.”

The high school students then helped plant three young trees. The Reverend F. H. Moore dedicated “the linden, to J. J. Hoffecker, Jr., of Company B, 9th Infantry, who was killed in battle near Soissons; the maple, to Rupert M. Burstan, of the marines, who died of pneumonia six weeks after reaching France; the catalpa, to David Manlove, who fought in several battles, went over the top safely—then, after the armistice was signed, was killed by an exploding shell while engaged in reconstruction work.” Then Dr. Moore and “a number of ladies went to the negro school where a maple was planted, dedicated to the memory of Jeremiah Jackson, the only negro boy from Middleton who died in the service.”

Each month *American Forestry* featured page after page of black-and-white photos showing crowds of children, uniformed soldiers, top-hatted dignitaries, and local citizens in suits and straw hats watching as a small child or a mayor or a governor’s daughter shoveled dirt onto a memorial tree, while all around American flags marked these solemn observances of lost lives. “Trees are being planted everywhere,” exulted the magazine, “in honor of the men of the war. Those men of war carried the message of freedom and now the trees will carry the message of the men through the coming generations. . . . [And] the trees will mark the remaking of the cities just as those men marked the remaking of the world.”

The American Forestry Association’s helpful Arbor Day program booklet launched Joyce Kilmer’s “Trees” to new status as one of America’s best-loved poems. When Kilmer had enlisted in 1917 in New York’s Sixty-ninth Infantry Regiment, he was a staffer at the *New York Times Magazine* as well as a sought-after lecturer and poetry editor at *Current Literature* and the *Literary Digest*. After Kilmer was killed by sniper fire on the western front on July 30, 1918, at the age of thirty-one, Charles Willis Thompson, a *New*

York Times colleague, wrote, “The German bullet that slew Joyce Kilmer at the Ourcq slew a brilliant promise.”

Kilmer, a 1908 graduate of Columbia University, first published “Trees” in the August 1913 issue of *Poetry* magazine. Listed in *Who’s Who* by the age of twenty-five, he was viewed by many as the leading Roman Catholic poet of his generation. He was married to Aline Murray, another well-regarded poet, and together they had five young children. While Kilmer had published four books of poems, his work—including “Trees”—though critically acclaimed, was not well known to the broader public until the *New York Times* first published “Trees” on December 26, 1918, in an article titled “Urge Memorial Trees” that mentioned Sergeant Kilmer’s tenure on the paper’s staff and *American Forestry’s* use of his “little poem” in its memorial trees literature.

In coming years, “Trees” would become not only the most famous such arboreal ode in the English language but also one of the most cherished and recognized of all American poems. Throughout America, citizens of every age were soon reciting, hearing, and reading its twelve lines of iambic pentameter:

I think that I shall never see
 A poem lovely as a tree.
 A tree whose hungry mouth is prest
 Against the world’s sweet flowing breast.
 A tree that looks at God all day
 And lifts her leafy arms to pray:
 A tree that may in Summer wear
 A nest of robins in her hair;
 Upon whose bosom snow has lain;
 Who intimately lives with rain.
 Poems are made by fools like me,
 But only God can make a tree.

Its first two lines were especially indelible, and in the ensuing decades American schoolchildren by the millions learned the verses by heart. In 1926 the New York City Board of Aldermen voted to name what had been Concourse Plaza Park, at 161st Street and the Grand Concourse in the Bronx, Joyce Kilmer Park.

In 1920 American Forestry Association president Charles Lathrop Pack, heir to a lumber fortune, proposed a far more ambitious vision of memorial tree plantings: “Roads of Remembrance,” mile after mile of street trees that would shade city avenues, the nation’s many new motorways, or the historic Lincoln and Jefferson Highways. In Washington, D.C., the American Legion whirled into action, planting 507 young Norway maples to honor the local war dead. As the *Washington Herald* reported on May 31, the Legion trees ran for “almost three miles, on both sides of Sixteenth street, from the north line to Webster street to Alaska avenue, the long line of sturdy saplings stand as an army in double file, looking to the north where stands their leader, the beautiful maple dedicated to Edward D. Adams, the first of the comrades to fall.” At the foot of each young tree, the Legion embedded a bronze plaque.

On April 30, 1921, new First Lady Florence Harding, as ever fashionable in bobbed hair, brimmed dark hat with white plumed feathers, and patterned long coat, arrived at American Forestry headquarters at 1214 Sixteenth Street to lend presidential glamour to a memorial tree ceremony. She planted a tiny tree from the Hardings’ home state of Ohio in a lilliputian Road of Remembrance fronting American Forestry’s yellow brick offices. After wielding a sturdy trowel to ceremonially dig a few clods of dirt, Mrs. Harding presented the tool to her hosts. Thus the First Lady Trowel began its long career (which continues to this day), lending presidential luster to tree plantings far and wide.

Whether Mrs. Harding loved trees or was just being politically astute has been lost to history, but several weeks after her appearance on Sixteenth Street she joined American Forestry’s board. President Warren G. Harding duly endorsed the Roads of Remembrance, telling the *Chicago Tribune*, “It would be not only the testimony of our sentiments, but a means to beautify the country which these heroes have so well served,” noting that tree-lined byways were “one of the useful and beautiful ideas which our soldiers brought back from France.” Not long afterward the First Couple attended a ceremony in New York’s Central Park, where the president was photographed shoveling dirt onto a large-caliber tree honoring the fallen soldiers. That year he also planted a southern magnolia at the east entrance to the White House, memorializing the tens of thousands of American horses who perished in the Great War.

On the fiftieth anniversary of Arbor Day in 1922, President Harding designated April 22 as the official golden anniversary. Tree lovers had come a long way since 1882 in Cincinnati, when, *American Forestry* acknowledged, “to be a ‘tree enthusiast’ was to be a ‘crank’ . . . in the same category with those persons who worked for women’s suffrage, prohibition, [and] believed in flying machines.” Now, however, with the entire nation united around these living memorials, “We are just awakening to the possibilities of tree planting. The trees are monuments with a meaning, for they live gloriously just as did those for whom they are planted. The glory is the thing to tell the world.”

In the fall of 1922 the *Bulletin of the Arnold Arboretum* weighed in on the issue of using trees as memorials, which it recognized had become a popular movement, “judging by the number of letters which come to the Arboretum on the subject. . . . Clearly the essential thing in a memorial tree is its ability to live long.” The arboretum (presumably reflecting Sargent’s opinion) had its own vision of such monuments: “If memorials are to be erected for soldiers and other men in the form of trees, the Redwood-forest offers the best opportunity in the beauty and permanency which can be found anywhere in the world.” As ever, the Arboretum’s *Bulletin* complained about the lack of real knowledge about trees and the consequent bungled plantings. “There is nothing more laudable than to plant a tree,” averred Wilson, “. . . provided the right kind of tree is planted.”

With Arbor Day so firmly established and Roads of Remembrance planted or planned in almost every state, the tree lovers at the American Forestry Association added yet another dimension to Arbor Day—the celebration of individual historic trees. The American Forestry Association so liked this idea that it established a nationwide arboreal Hall of Fame. “Zest is given to Arbor Day tree planting,” declared the *New York Times* as the holiday neared in the spring of 1926, “by the fact that famous trees of long ago still flourish and engage popular interest, especially in Washington, where there are more historic trees than in any other city in the world. Visitors may still behold Washington’s elm, Lincoln’s European hornbeam, the tree spared by Senator Simon Cameron of Pennsylvania, [and] the oak from the tomb of Confucius.”

When it came to designating trees with an illustrious enough pedigree to qualify for *American Forestry*’s Hall of Fame, those with a George

Washington provenance trumped all others. The Washington Elm at the U.S. Capitol rose in “majestic symmetry, the greatest in dimension of all the historic elms” on the Capitol grounds, even though it was uncertain whether the father of our country had actually planted the elm in front of the east entrance to the Senate Wing or just used it as his outdoor office when supervising the Capitol’s construction. Erle Kauffman, author of *Trees of Washington: The Man, the City* (1932), opted for the latter: “The story goes that the noon repast was often laid beneath the branches of this elm and that the First President would sit in their shade and talk with the builders.” An opposing view was taken in 1902 by the *Washington Post*, which reported that “the elm that once stood on Capitol Hill and which George Washington is said to have planted was cut down under order of the landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, in 1878, but Superintendent [William R.] Smith secured the roots and has since raised eight trees from them.”

Kauffman had made it his mission to track down every famous elm, oak, horse chestnut, and willow where Washington had sheltered, tied his horse, held meetings, or eaten breakfast, from Valley Forge to Charleston to Cambridge. Of all these none was more famous than the Cambridge Elm, “a mighty symbol of the dawn of the Republic” that Kauffman believed to be “undoubtedly dearer to the hearts of Americans than any other historic tree.”

It was under this spreading elm on July 3, 1775, that General George Washington had reportedly assumed command of the Continental Army. “Artists have painted it,” wrote Kauffman, “poets have sung its praise, and historians have recorded its association with the great Continental soldier and patriot.” And yet when roads needed to be widened near Harvard Square at Garden Street and Mason, local leaders thought nothing of confining this living monument to an isolated island of soil, fenced in against the traffic swirling all around, the earth above its far-flung roots paved over, depriving them of water and air.

Predictably, the Cambridge Elm began to die, and city authorities sent forth crews to minister to the revered tree. “More and more dead branches were cut off,” wrote one observer, “the wounds smeared with tar, the hollows filled with cement, the remaining limbs braced with iron bands and rods, until it became a truly pitiable object. Finally, on October 26, 1923, the whole wretched ruin was accidentally pulled over by workmen trying to

remove another dead branch, and it crashed against the iron railing surrounding it. Examination showed that the trunk was hopelessly rotted below the ground, a mere mass of punk: the wonder was that it had stood so long.” The carcass was cut into a thousand pieces and sent forth like so many holy relics to all the states, legislatures, and fraternal organizations. The following year, on Washington’s birthday, an offspring of the tree was planted, but it did not survive.

Today, almost a century later, the Cambridge Elm is still remembered in its former habitat. But only the cognoscenti will know to peer under the wheels of the passing vehicles on Garden Street to catch a glimpse of the large manhole cover–like plaque embedded in the road, all that remains to mark the fabled tree.

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