



# a witness tree reborn

HARVESTING HISTORIC TREES YIELDS LEARNING EXPERIENCES—AND A **NEW LIFE** FOR THE OLD MATERIAL

by Nancy Mann Jackson





**Opposite page:**

Items crafted from material primarily from Sagamore Hill National Historic Site at Oyster Bay, N.Y. The wood is from pin oak, silver maple and black cherry trees.

Clockwise from top left:

**Bench** by Felicia Hung • **Level** by Ming Yi-Wong • **Slave Stool** crafted from a pecan tree at the Hampton National Historic Site by Brittany Bennett • **Ceramic Vessels** crafted from a pecan tree at the Hampton National Historic Site by Rebecca Manson • **Platter** by Andrew Sawyer

**M**any of history's silent witnesses still stand on the battlefields and front lawns where the country's seminal events took place. They are the trees that have stood firm while generations of Americans have come and gone, and many of them have observed conversations, treaties and bloodshed that tell the story of America.

So what happens when one of these "witness trees," as the National Park Service (NPS) designates trees that have stood during significant moments or periods of history, falls or dies? That's the question Professor Dale Broholm asked when he first heard about witness trees from a friend who works as a historian for the NPS. As a senior critic in furniture at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), Broholm believed that he and his students could make something useful from fallen witness trees rather than allowing them to be destroyed, as was the NPS' former practice.



After meeting with colleagues about the possibility of working with downed witness trees, Broholm approached the NPS with a proposal to use the wood of fallen trees from national historic sites as material for education and study. “When we approached the people at the National Park Service with this idea, they were very excited because part of their mission includes educating the public,” Broholm says. “This project was a perfect way to do that.”

### Discovering the Historic Context

After learning that a pecan tree from Hampton National Historic Site, a former plantation in Maryland, was available, Broholm invited Daniel Cavicchi, associate professor of history, philosophy and social sciences at RISD, to join the initiative. Together, they developed a curriculum for a course that would include both a seminar on the historical context of the tree and a furniture studio course that

would work directly with the tree’s wood and make relevant objects from the material.

The tree had long been a witness to history: The plantation grounds even included an armory that built weapons for the Revolution. “So the tree had really witnessed the evolution of the United States as an industrial power,” Broholm says. “The students explored that through readings, writings and discussion, and then they went into the studio and created works in response.”

After that first project, “the National Park Service kept identifying new trees that we could work with, so we just kept going,” Cavicchi says. After starting with the wood from Hampton National Historic Site, the group worked with trees from Theodore Roosevelt’s home commemorated at the Sagamore Hill National Historic Site, Oyster Bay, N.Y., and the George Washington Birthplace National Monument, near Colonial Beach, Va. This fall, the Witness Tree Project is focusing on a

of history at Temple University and the author of *Here, George Washington Was Born* (University of Georgia Press, 2008); and Louis Hutchins, a regional historian with the NPS.

The information and research discussed in the seminar is then used as the basis of design and exhibition, Broholm says. “The students work with the tree to translate, deepen and give shape to their understanding,” Cavicchi adds. “The circumstance of working with the actual material of an historic tree is a powerful means for evoking the past and also for exploring historical practice.

“Students learn not only about the events radiating from a tree’s location—the rise of slave labor in antebellum America, for example, or Roosevelt’s reshaping of presidential power—but also about how a given tree poses questions of interpretation,” he continues. “To what extent can a tree serve as material evidence for American history? How might one assess the significance of place in his-

*Polyrhythmic Stool* crafted from pecan wood by Rebecca Manson



“As one sat in the stool, it wobbled in circles and rang bells; it was a wonderfully **creative interpretation of the status of slaves at Hampton** in material, sound and experience.”

historic elm from the Frederick Law Olmstead site in Boston, which was the home of the founder of American landscape architecture and the nation’s foremost park designer.

Broholm and Cavicchi begin each semester by leading a field trip to study the tree’s location. Last semester, for example, with a focus on studying the presidency, the group visited Sagamore Hill National Historic Site, as well as the John F. Kennedy Library in Boston. During the seminar, along with assigned readings and research, students heard about historic monuments from speakers including Ted Widmer, former speechwriter and senior advisor to President Bill Clinton; Seth Bruggeman, a professor

of history at Temple University and the author of *Here, George Washington Was Born* (University of Georgia Press, 2008); and Louis Hutchins, a regional historian with the NPS.

### Meaningful Design

Each semester, students participating in the project have created an array of meaningful items that resonate with the history of the tree. After studying the Hampton site, for instance, one student created a polyrhythmic, or sound, stool. (See object at left.) “She was very concerned with the site’s emphasis on the wealth of the Ridgley family in Hampton’s history, so she set out to create a rustic-looking slave stool out of the Ridgleys’ prized pecan tree, that might more fully interpret the slaves’ lives,” Cavicchi says. “In particular, she made the legs uneven,

Below left: The pecan witness tree at Hampton National Historic Site (NHS). Right: Paul Bitzel, chief of resources at Hampton NHS, standing next to the downed pecan tree.



so one could never be 'steady,' and she attached tiny bells, reminiscent of the line of bells in the mansion that called slaves to different rooms, to the bottom. As one sat in the stool, it wobbled in circles and rang bells; it was a wonderfully creative interpretation of the status of slaves at Hampton in material, sound and experience."

After studying Sagamore Hill, one student made a set of abstract geographic markers out of wood from the site. These markers would enable visitors to enact Roosevelt's famed "point-to-point" walks.

"Roosevelt used to like to play a game with his children and guests in which he would identify a distant point and ask everyone to make their way to the point directly, having to go over any obstacles in the path, including barns, trees, rocks, hills or buildings," Cavicchi explains. "The markers capture the spirit of the game, while also enabling visitors to exercise, experience nature and


appreciate Roosevelt's understanding of human beings' profound ability to both commemorate and manipulate the landscape."

Once the students' pieces are reviewed and juried, some are sent back to the historic site for exhibition, and some are sold to benefit the ongoing maintenance of the sites from which the trees came. The public exhibition offers a method for educating the public about the history of the site, which benefits both visitors and the NPS. "It's hard to get people engaged in our nation's history," Broholm says, "but this is a means that allows us to get students engaged and take that interest wider by returning their pieces to the site. Potentially, these items will start conversations that wouldn't happen otherwise."

Another benefit for the NPS is an intense examination of their interpretive program by students, which sometimes results in new interpretations that can challenge existing narratives, Cavicchi says. "Overall, the course aligns, to mutual benefit, the act of creating objects and the act of creating history," he continues. "Students' designed objects, from historic wood,

are shaped by historical analysis, and their historical interpretations are honed by questions that arise in the processes of design and critique."

For the professors, teaching about witness trees has been rewarding, too. "It has taught me the extent to which our understanding of history is almost always rooted in places and things," Cavicchi says. "The students have been quite astute in thinking through the ramifications of how we remember and commemorate history in our communities and in the nation as a whole."

The students, all future designers and architects, have learned just how significantly the study of humanities and the social sciences can deepen their design education. "Art and design students are not always excited about having to take history courses," Cavicchi says, "but in the Witness Tree Project, history and design are not separated. We have purposefully blurred those disciplinary lines. In fact, we try to show that they cannot be separated; creativity requires an understanding of the world and its past, and historical interpretation requires imagination, empathy and creativity." 

Nancy Mann Jackson wrote about Colonial Americans' attitude toward money for the September/October 2011 issue.