A gigantic white oak stands on the bank of the Stony Brook in the Hopewell Township Nature Preserve called Cedar Ridge. I have measured this tree to try to determine its age and concluded that it is about 300 years old—middle age for a species that lives to be 4-500 years old.

If that is right, this tree started its life at about the time that J. S. Bach was composing his sublime music (his first sonata was performed in 1704). In the New World, twenty people—most of them women—were executed for committing witchcraft in Salem, Massachusetts at about the time that this tree started growing.
The French philosopher of the Enlightenment, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, was born at about the same time as this tree.

This white oak reached the age of one hundred years as George Washington was ending his second term as President. W. A. Mozart’s great opera, Don Giovanni, had been performed for the first time and Beethoven (a young man of 30 in 1800) was captivating musical audiences. Napoleon Bonaparte became Emperor of France in 1804.

When the tree was two hundred years old, the last of the great flocks of Passenger Pigeons flew overhead. Automobiles were beginning to be seen on streets in America. The French Impressionists had just completed their revolution in painting. Thomas Edison, working in Menlo Park, New Jersey, had gotten a patent for the electric light. The great ocean liner Titanic sunk in the North Atlantic in 1911.

On July 21, 1969, before the tree could reach its three hundredth year, Neil Armstrong walked on the moon. What a life span!

For three hundred years this white oak has been part of the Sourland ecosystem. Its acorns have fed generation after generation of deer, raccoons, turkeys, mice, black bears, squirrels, and blue jays. Its cavities have provided a safe nest for chickadees, wrens and many other species of birds. Oaks are the quintessential supporter of Lepidoptera (moths and butterflies); at least 105 different species of Lepidoptera feed off parts of oak trees. This, in turn, has over the centuries attracted many species of birds that feed on the larvae form of the Lepidoptera. It is well known in birding circles that if you want to see a warbler in the spring you should look for an oak in flower.

This white oak does not stand straight; instead it leans away from the Stony Brook, reminiscent of the posture of Balzac in the great Rodin Sculpture. Like that sculpture, it gives the impression that it is surveying in a lordly way all that is before it. The Druids believed that old oaks could whisper prophecies to them. You will have to decide that for yourself, but I don’t think this tree is talking—either about the history it has survived or the future before us. Even in silence it is a rewarding destination. I seek its presence several times a year to sit under, walk around, and—of course—to touch.

White oaks are wonderful trees to plant in a big yard. There is only one problem. If you plant a white oak today, in four hundred and fifty years someone’s heart will break because it will die.