

**Republic of Shade:  
The Emergence of the American Elm as a Cultural and Urban Design Element in  
Nineteenth-Century New England**

*by*

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Submitted to the Department of Urban Studies and Planning  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in Urban and Landscape History

*at the*


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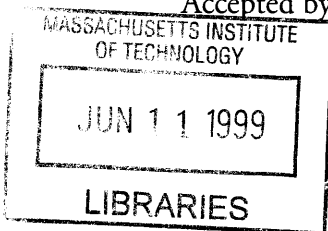
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**Abstract**

This dissertation is a cultural history of the American elm. It explores the transformation of a native tree into a major icon of New England culture in the nineteenth century—both as a multivalenced symbol of New England life, and a defining element in the spatial design of its villages, towns and cities. Drawing from a wide range of source material—traveler’s records, local histories, town and municipal records and contemporary newspaper accounts—the study traces the forces and events which made the elm a ubiquitous feature of the Yankee scene, and a core element in the identity and image of the region.

The historical narrative begins with a description of the tree in the pre-European era, and explains how cultural disturbance by both native Americans and colonists amplified the elm’s presence in the landscape. Subsequent chapters examine the tree first as a solitary or totemic artifact in the landscape, and then as a element which, following a region-wide “village improvement movement” in the 1840s, was planted in vast numbers in villages, towns and cities. The totemic elm endowed Yankee space with meaning, as a civic centerpiece, a relic of antiquity, or a monument to specific historical events or persons. Planted *en masse* as a street tree, elms changed the quality of that space itself, transforming the appearance of the common landscape, and forging one of the most powerful images of place in American history—the elm-tossed New England town.

The study culminates by examining the symbolic and spatial significance of the tree in the urban context, and argues that city elms were perceived by nineteenth-century observers as a mechanism of synthesis between *rus* and *urbe*. Long before the Olmsted park, planting elms on city streets placed the elusive ideal of a “pastoral city” within reach. As Charles Dickens observed of New Haven in his *American Notes* (1842), city elms brought about “a kind of compromise between town and country; as if each had met the other half-way, and shaken hands upon it.” In conclusion, the seminal influence of New England on American culture at large is considered, a factor which eventually made the elm a national icon, and “Elm Street” an American institution.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Abstract</b> .....	2
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	5
<b>List of Illustrations</b> .....	6
<b>Introduction</b> <i>“The Glory of New England”</i> .....	7
<i>A Death in Deerfield</i> .....	7
<i>The Yankee Elm</i> .....	9
<i>Beauty and Haste</i> .....	11
<i>Structure of the Work</i> .....	13
<b>Chapter 1</b> <i>A Prospect of Elms</i> .....	17
<i>Encounters</i> .....	18
<i>The “Magnificent Vegetable”</i> .....	22
<i>Triumph of a Weed</i> .....	26
<i>Intervale Elysium</i> .....	31
<i>Cultures of Wood</i> .....	33
<i>English Traits</i> .....	36
<b>Chapter 2</b> <i>Jacob’s Sylvan Ladder</i> .....	39
<i>Bridal Elms and Dooryard Trees</i> .....	39
<i>The Elm as Civic Totem</i> .....	46
<i>The Pittsfield Elm</i> .....	47
<i>Tree of Liberty</i> .....	52
<i>Sylvan Rolands and Central Trees</i> .....	61
<i>The Pleasures of Antiquity</i> .....	66
<i>“As a Witness Upon the Field of History”</i> .....	67
<i>The Autochthonous Elm</i> .....	69
<i>Relic on the Common</i> .....	70
<i>“The Remembrance of Our Fathers”</i> .....	78
<i>General Washington’s “Memorial Pile”</i> .....	87
<i>The Symmetry of Icons</i> .....	100
<i>Elegy</i> .....	105

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Chapter 3</b>	<i>The Verdant Village</i> .....	109
	<i>The Village Barren</i> .....	110
	<i>Early Models of Emendation</i> .....	111
	<i>The Environmental Awakening</i> .....	115
	<i>First Stirrings of Improvement</i> .....	117
	<i>The Romance of the Exotic</i> .....	120
	<i>Return of the Native</i> .....	125
	<i>The Great Sheffield “Tree Bee”</i> .....	127
	<i>Orville Dewey and the Elm Tree Association</i> .....	129
	<i>The Village Improvement Movement</i> .....	131
	<i>Broker of Beautification</i> .....	135
	<i>The Manufacture of Identity</i> .....	140
	<i>“Mistress of the Scene”</i> .....	143
<b>Chapter 4</b>	<i>City of Elms</i> .....	149
	<i>The Urbanity of Improvement</i> .....	152
	<i>Transformations</i> .....	154
	<i>Antecedents</i> .....	157
	<i>The Philanthropy of Elms</i> .....	162
	<i>Hillhouse of New Haven</i> .....	168
	<i>Early Municipal Action</i> .....	171
	<i>Birth of the Municipal Forest</i> .....	179
	<i>The Perfect Urban Tree</i> .....	185
<b>Epilogue</b>	<i>A Yankee Urban Pastoral</i> .....	189
	<i>Conflict and Accommodation</i> .....	189
	<i>The Quest for Synthesis</i> .....	191
	<i>“A City in a Wood, or a Wood in a City”</i> .....	195
	<i>Apotheosis at New Haven</i> .....	198
	<i>“The Gothic Thrust of Elms”</i> .....	201
	<i>Age of Elms</i> .....	208
	<i>The Westward Moving Elm</i> .....	211
	<i>The Toll of Ubiquity</i> .....	213
<b>Bibliography</b>	.....	214

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LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

1.	Elm on Potter Farm, North Conway, New Hampshire (Wilson, 1930) .....	16
2.	Virgin elm, Little Wabash bottom, Clay County, Illinois (Ridgway, 1922).....	21
3.	American or White Elm, from Michaux, <i>North American Sylva</i> (1810) .....	25
4.	Field elms, Connecticut Valley, from Bierstadt, <i>Mount Ascutney</i> (1862).....	34
5.	Old bridal elms, South Chelmsford, Massachusetts (Wilson, 1925).....	41
6.	Homestead elm. Conway, New Hampshire (Wilson, 1930) .....	44
7.	Old house tree near Newburyport, Massachusetts (Wilson, 1927).....	45
8.	Pittsfield Elm., c. 1807 .....	50
9.	Staffordshire pearlware depicting Pittsfield Elm, 1825 .....	50
10.	Pittsfield Elm, c. 1826 .....	51
11.	“Liberty Tree” .....	53
12.	Panel depicting the Liberty Tree, from Paul Revere’s Liberty Pyramid .....	56
13.	British cartoon depicting colonists under the Liberty Tree.....	59
14.	British cartoon depicting colonists in the Liberty Tree.....	60
15.	Wethersfield Elm, Wethersfield, Connecticut (Wilson, 1924).....	63
16.	Harvard Class Day festivities, by Winslow Homer, 1858.....	65
17.	“Ceremonies Under the Old Elm,” Harvard College, 1856 .....	65
18.	The Great Elm at Springfield, c. 1860.....	71
19.	View of Great Elm and Boston Common, c. 1790.....	74
20.	The Great Elm on Boston Common, c. 1813 .....	74
21.	The Great Elm on Boston Common, c. 1850 .....	76
22.	“The Old Elm Tree,” by John H. Hewitt, 1842.....	77
23.	Cushing Elm, Hingham, Massachusetts (Wilson, 1925).....	79
24.	Knight Elm, Newburyport, Massachusetts (Wilson, 1927).....	80
25.	Harrington Elm, South Lexington, Massachusetts (Wilson, 1924).....	83
26.	Lafayette Elm, Kennebunk, New Hampshire (Wilson, 1926).....	84
27.	Franklin Elm, New Haven, Connecticut, c. 1860 .....	86
28.	The Washington Elm in 1839 .....	89
29.	The Washington Elm, c. 1841.....	89
30.	The Washington Elm in 1868 .....	93
31.	Sculpture of Washington under the Elm, by Leonard Craske (1949).....	99
32.	Hatfield, Massachusetts town seal.....	102
33.	Town center, Petersham, Massachusetts, c. 1840 .....	102
34.	Gathering of Methodist ministers beneath the Great Elm, Boston, 1866 .....	104
35.	Deerfield, Massachusetts, c. 1840 .....	113
36.	Northfield, Massachusetts, c. 1840.....	113
37.	Lombardy poplars on Salem Common, from Ropes, <i>Salem Common</i> (1808) .....	123
38.	Lombardy poplars planted along west side of Harvard Yard, c. 1809.....	123
39.	Newly planted elms, Barre, Massachusetts, c. 1840.....	134
40.	Newly planted elms, Woburn, Massachusetts, c. 1840.....	134
41.	“The Street,” Deerfield, Massachusetts, before 1877 .....	146
42.	Central Square, Keene, New Hampshire. ....	156
43.	Street elms, Portland, Maine, c. 1880.....	163
44.	“Queen Elm,” Springfield, Massachusetts, c. 1860.....	166
45.	Portrait of James Hillhouse by John Vanderlyn.....	170
46.	Municipal elms, Cambridge, Massachusetts, c. 1865 .....	183
47.	Main Street elms, “Shop Row,” Northampton, Massachusetts, c. 1865.....	186
48.	Temple Street, New Haven, c. 1865.....	199
49.	Montgomery C. Meigs, proposal for a “sylvan temple,” 1870.....	206
50.	“Elm Arcade,” Temple Street, New Haven, c. 1870.....	209
51.	Elm-lined commercial street, Springfield, Massachusetts, 1935 .....	212

INTRODUCTION

*“The Glory of New England”*

“The Elms of New England! They are as much a part of her beauty as the columns of the Parthenon were the glory of its architecture.”<sup>1</sup>

On August 15, 1853, the *Gazette and Courier* of Deerfield, Massachusetts reported that “one of the majestic old elms in Deerfield street . . . had arrived to such a state of decay as to render its removal necessary.” This was no simple task, for it was an immense vegetable; moreover, the townsmen elected to give the tree a proper burial. A ditch was dug around the base, four feet deep, severing the roots and “leaving a ball of earth about twelve feet in diameter.” Then, rigging was fastened to the limbs, and “with powerful purchase” the mighty elm was pulled to the ground, its root ball now upended but still very much attached. The hole was deepened, the roots cut from the trunk, and the great stump “returned back to its mother earth for its final burial.”<sup>2</sup>

It did not go quietly. The burial drew a large crowd of Deerfield citizens, who gathered about “to commemorate this interesting event.” Before the tree’s remains were covered, leaders of the community arose and, standing on the stump itself, eulogized the sylvan deceased. Dr. Stephen West Williams remarked that he rarely gave public speeches, yet found that he could not “pass over the occasion of this event in silence.” He had for years instructed students under the elm, where “in the pleasant hours of summer,” scholars “conned over their lessons, and spent convivial hours.” For this civic role in the community the tree had become known as the “Literary Elm.” As one of the trees of the street, it was also an urbanistic element, and contributed to Deerfield’s verdant image. “I love trees in villages,” Williams proclaimed, “altogether with a greater love than any other objects in nature”—greater even than the artifacts they enhanced. “It may almost be considered wicked for me to say,” he ventured, “yet I can hardly refrain from saying that I should feel but very little worse to have every house in Deerfield street burnt to the ground than to have every tree in it destroyed.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Ward Beecher, *Norwood; or, Village Life in New England* (New York: Charles Scribner & Company, 1868), 5.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen West Williams, “An Ancient Settler Gone,” *Gazette and Courier*, 15 August 1853.

<sup>3</sup> Williams, “Ancient Settler”.

These were strong words; one of the bloodiest chapters of Deerfield's history involved an Indian attack in the seventeenth century which—amidst scalplings and general mayhem—left the town in flames. But in 1853 elms were profoundly important to Deerfield. They were its essence and identity. They also generated revenue; for the beauty of its elms placed Deerfield on many a tourist's itinerary. As Williams told those assembled, "I have heard many, very many, strangers and travelers speak of the beauty of this village, principally on account of these trees, as unsurpassed by any other village in the United States."<sup>4</sup>

Then, the Reverend Nathaniel Whitman rose and delivered a benediction. "I shall speak as moved by the occasion which has called us together," he began; "an occasion rare—peculiar—interesting." But he addressed his audience not as a preacher, but as a medium "through whom the spirit of the departed sends to you the counsels of age and the exhortations of experience." Speaking didactically through the tree—an "ancient settler" who witnessed all things—Whitman held forth on the history of the town and the manifold accomplishments of its founders. The elm, in effect, exhorted the gathered to uphold the high intellectual and moral standards of their ancestors; and to "go forth in the spirit of the olden times, to deeds of goodness—to enterprises of improvement." "I was sent to you on a mission of mercy," spoke the elm;

But now my mission is accomplished . . . and the spirit of the olden times is here to honor my exit. My earthly ties are severed, I am about to descend to my final resting place, amidst the benedictions of the grateful, the joys of the hopeful, and the songs of the tuneful. . . . I sink to rest with peace.<sup>5</sup>

How did this plant come to mean so much to the women and men of Deerfield? What factors—environmental, aesthetic, economic, social, religious—combined to transform this natural object into an artifact worthy of eulogy and praise?

In nineteenth-century New England, elms signified. From Maine to Connecticut, hundreds of equivalent "Literary Elms" endowed the landscape with meaning—trees which bore cultural freight for family, village, city, or even the American nation itself. How are we to account for the extraordinary cultural significance of the American elm in New England? What explains the tree's transformation from mere forest vegetation into a totemic icon of Yankee space? How—and why—did the American elm become so ubiquitous a feature of towns and villages, so integral to the image and identity of New England? What were the

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

specific symbolic roles of the elm and elm-lined streets in the broader context of American attitudes regarding nature and the city?

*The Yankee Elm*

“In the beginning,” writes Thomas J. Schlereth, “was not the word, nor the thing, but the plant.”<sup>6</sup> Linked with human life since the dawn of time, certain flora have come to bear a rich set of cultural associations. Trees, the largest and most physically imposing of the vegetable kingdom, have found particularly extensive service in this regard—and throughout the world. Like so many lesser plants, trees sustain us and yield a range of useful items; but in trees we also see ourselves. We appreciate the symmetry of human and sylvan life; in the seasons of the tree we find a mirror of our own. As Simon Schama has written, trees satisfy “one of our most powerful yearnings: the craving to find in nature a consolation for our own mortality.”<sup>7</sup>

Few of the world’s cultures lack an arboreal component, and in many, trees play a central role.<sup>8</sup> In America, no tree has held as powerful a grip on the native imagination as the American elm—particularly in the context of the nation’s Anglo-Saxon cultural origins. As Joseph Edgar Chamberlain wrote in 1934, “If one were to name a tree sacred to all our people, it would be the American elm.”<sup>9</sup> In no part of the United States was this more true than New England, a region that played a profoundly influential role in shaping American culture and identity in the nineteenth century. The story of the elm in New England is thus an American story; for New England was the fountainhead of a culture of trees which was later exported to nearly every other region of the United States.

Indigenous to the eastern half of the United States, and particularly prevalent in the region which became New England, *Ulmus americana* was favored by cultural disturbance—by both Native American use of fire and later agricultural clearing by European settlers. Safe from burning in their wet, bottomland habitats, elms were spared the axe by virtue of their immense size, the low commercial value of their wood, and their utility for shelter and shade. Even as cultivators cleared the forests, they often left elms behind, and the tree was thus allowed to gain a presence in the emerging pastoral landscape of New England. In time, the tree would accumulate a wide range of cultural and symbolic associations.

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<sup>6</sup> Thomas J. Schlereth, *Cultural History and Material Culture* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992), 38.

<sup>7</sup> Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (New York: Knopf, 1995), 15.

<sup>8</sup> The cultural history of trees is immense and largely unexplored terrain. James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough* is a good introduction, as is Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory*.

<sup>9</sup> Joseph Edgar Chamberlain, “To Arms for the American Elm,” *American Forests* 40 (May 1934): 195.

Early on, elms were planted as domestic ornaments, or to shelter a home from lightning and storms—real and imagined. The tree also found service as a civic element from the earliest settlement period. Relic trees left in the wake of forest clearing emerged as totemic centerpieces in many towns and villages—a late echo of pre-Christian tree-worship in a God-fearing land. Totemic trees such as the Pittsfield Elm and the Great Elm of Boston Common became civic icons of formidable power, which helped shape the very identity of their communities. Other elms gained specific historical associations, and were used to commemorate persons or events of significance. As in the case of the Washington Elm at Cambridge, these sometimes evolved into monuments of national and even international importance. Long before marble and granite graced Yankee commons, elm trees served as vessels of collective memory.

By the early nineteenth century, elms had achieved a looming presence in the New England scene. But they were still largely an occasional element. In the 1830s, however, a groundswell of interest in environmental design and a “new craving for spatial beauty” led to a region-wide village improvement movement.<sup>10</sup> Societies were organized, beginning in western Massachusetts, to improve or “emend” the civic spaces of town and village. Such groups—known as “village improvement societies”—engaged a wide range of activities to beautify civic space, but the first and most extensive was the planting of trees. And they planted almost exclusively elms. The village improvement societies (the first of which was known as the *Elm Tree Association*) planted elms on Yankee streets, greens and commons, systematically and by the thousands. In doing so, they changed the face of New England, and forged one of the most powerful images of American place—the elm-tossed Yankee town.

Cities, too, set out elms—though the mechanisms by which they did so differed, as did the meaning of the trees themselves. To the urban Yankee, elms were a keepsake of the countryside, a reminder of “rural values.” Nineteenth-century Americans sought to forge a “pastoral city” in which the dialectic of city and country, artifice and nature, could be reconciled. Planting columns of elms along city streets—in essence a simulacrum of the native forest—appeared to be a means of synthesizing *rus* and *urbe*, a way of making “city and country run agreeably into each other.”<sup>11</sup> As Charles Dickens observed at New Haven

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<sup>10</sup> John R. Stilgoe, “Town Common and Village Green in New England: 1620 to 1981,” in Ronald L. Fleming, ed., *On Common Ground* (Cambridge: Townscape Institute, 1982), 26.

<sup>11</sup> Nehemiah Adams, *Boston Common, or Rural Walks in Cities* (Boston: George W. Light, 1838,) 23.

in 1842, elms seemed to “bring about a kind of compromise between town and country; as if each had met the other half-way, and shaken hands upon it.”<sup>12</sup>

By the second half of the nineteenth century, the American elm had become so ubiquitous on the Yankee scene that no true portrait of its landscape—whether in verse, prose, on canvas or by photograph—could fail to acknowledge the tree. To ignore the elm would be, as the Reverend Henry Ward Beecher suggested, akin to neglecting the columns of the Parthenon. Oliver Wendell Holmes agreed; “Nobody knows New England,” he wrote in 1858, “who is not on terms of intimacy with one of its elms.” For this was a tree which “comes nearer to having a soul than any other vegetable creature among us.”<sup>13</sup> Throughout the nineteenth century, dozens of writers affirmed the importance of the American elm to Yankee culture and space. To naturalist Wilson Flagg, the tree was associated in the New England mind “with all that is delightful in the scenery or memorable in the history of our land.”<sup>14</sup> Naturalist Charles Sprague Sargent, writing toward the end of the century, remarked that “In no other part of the country is there a tree which occupies the same position in the affection of the people as the Elm does in that of the inhabitants of New England.”<sup>15</sup> The American elm was the “glory of New England,” visiting Englishman Charles Joseph Latrobe concluded; it was the arboreal expression of the Yankee soul, its spirit in sylvan form.<sup>16</sup>

### *Beauty and Haste*

Of the many reasons elms came to bear such deep cultural significance in New England, two appear again and again like a leitmotif: the tree was an object of great physical beauty; and it grew with astounding speed. Paeans to the grace and grandeur of the American elm are legion in the literature of—and about—nineteenth-century New England. Compared to its English cousins, Nathaniel Hawthorne concluded that the American elm was “a great deal more stately and beautiful.”<sup>17</sup> Anthony Trollope praised “the beautiful American elm, whose drooping boughs have all the grace of the willow without its fantastic melancholy.”<sup>18</sup> Henry Ward Beecher rhapsodized about elms when he wasn’t writing

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<sup>12</sup> Charles Dickens, “American Notes,” in *Works of Charles Dickens*, vol. 2 (New York: Sheldon, 1865), 78.

<sup>13</sup> Oliver Wendell Holmes, *Elsie Venner: A Romance of Destiny* (Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1891), 56.

<sup>14</sup> Wilson Flagg, quoted in *Report of the General Superintendent of Parks* (Cambridge: City of Cambridge, 1894), 76n.

<sup>15</sup> Charles Sprague Sargent, “The American Elm,” *Garden and Forest*, 11 June 1890, 281.

<sup>16</sup> Charles Joseph Latrobe, *The Rambler in North America* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1835), 44.

<sup>17</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Our Old Home, and English Note-Books* vol. 1 (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, reprint 1902), 422.

<sup>18</sup> Anthony Trollope, *North America* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1862), 52.

sermons; to him the elm was “a mighty meditation of grace and beauty.”<sup>19</sup> “Of all trees,” he wrote in 1868, “no other unites, in the same degree, majesty and beauty, grace and grandeur, as the American Elm.”<sup>20</sup>

Tall and shapely, a mature elm could rise more than 100 feet and spread across just as many. As a formal or architectural object, the tree was unrivaled in the Eastern forests. There were indeed other magnificent tree species in New England, but few combined so many excellent properties as *Ulmus americana*. The buttonwood or sycamore (*Platanus occidentalis*) was just as massive—at least in girth—but it lacked the height and exquisite proportions of the elm; the white pine (*Pinus strobus*) was often as lofty, but it failed to match the elm’s expansive crown and sheer bulk.

Generally, elms conformed to one of three structural types. The most common—and most praised—was the “vase,” “wine-glass” or “weeping” form. This type was distinguished by a bole which rose 15 to 25 feet before ramifying into several secondary limbs; these continued ascending to about 40 or 50 feet, at which point they began spreading gently outward, bearing aloft the crown. The lesser limbs and smaller branches coiled into the sky to a height often in excess of 100 feet, before plunging earthward again in a cascade of foliage. The magnificent structure of the wine-glass elm was most striking in winter, when, shorn of its leaves, the Medusan tangle of limbs was etched cleanly against the sky. There were many variations on this first type, which drew comparisons to parasols, Etruscan vases and classical lyres.

A second type of elm was the “oak form,” in which several stout branches spread laterally outward from the trunk. While not so lofty or as graceful as the first, the oak type suggested massiveness, longevity, and strength. The Old Elm of Boston Common was the most famous of oak-form elms in New England. The third formal type was that of the “plume” or “palm.” Such elms rose on a ramrod-straight stem, clean of limbs for 80 or 90 feet, before erupting into a single “parasol-like tuft of foliage.”<sup>21</sup> Elms attained this form when growing in dense forest conditions, as they strove to pierce the canopy and gain access to sunlight. After extensive forest clearing in the eighteenth century, such lofty

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<sup>19</sup> Henry Ward Beecher, *Norwood; or, Village Life in New England* (New York: Charles Scribner & Company, 1868), 542.

<sup>20</sup> Beecher, *Norwood*, 4.

<sup>21</sup> Frank J. Scott, *The Art of Beautifying Suburban Home Grounds*, 3d ed. (New York: American Book Exchange, 1881), 318.

woodland giants became rare. The archetypal elm of the “plume” type was the great Pittsfield Elm—itsself a relic of the pre-European forest.

If the elm was a tree of profound beauty, it was also one which grew with haste. Elms gained loft and amplitude quickly—a matter of no small value to a newly-settled people and a nation which, even as it declared its independence from the Old World, pined for the symbols of cultural maturity and long habitation which so endowed the European landscape. Elms afforded the New England scene those values of venerability and picturesque beauty that England’s principal signifying tree—the slow-growing oak—granted to its landscape, without a three-century wait. The combination of rapid growth and large size made relatively young elms appear, ironically, to be far older than they actually were.

An elm could attain respectable height and girth well within a person’s lifetime; in as little as 50 years, a whipstock tree could be as thick as a barrel of rum. The prospect of such hasty growth made the tree particularly appealing to the philanthropist, who could both indulge a desire to adorn the *civitas*, as well as enjoy the fruits of such largesse in his or her lifetime. But perhaps most significantly, the speedy growth of elms enabled those trees set out along village and city streets to impart aesthetic and spatial impact quickly. The mid-century village improvement societies fully understood that elm-planting was the fastest and most reliable means to transform the space of town or village—and in the process change dramatically its very essence.

### *Structure of the Work*

The dissertation is organized into four chapters and an epilogue. Chapter One (*A Prospect of Elms*) considers the position of the elm in the New England landscape on the eve of European settlement. It examines early descriptions of the tree by European naturalists and botanists, discusses the impact of cultural disturbance on the species, and examines its subsequent emergence as a dominant vegetation in the valley landscapes of the Connecticut and Housatonic. The low utility and commercial value of the tree is also considered, as is the role of a cultural familiarity with the genus *ulmus* among the English colonists.

Chapter Two (*Jacob’s Sylvan Ladder*) begins by examining the tree’s earliest cultural service in New England, discussing the first instances in which elms were planted about homesteads as an amenity. The chapter then turns to three ways in which these colonial-era trees, along with older legacy specimens from the pre-European period, gained cultural

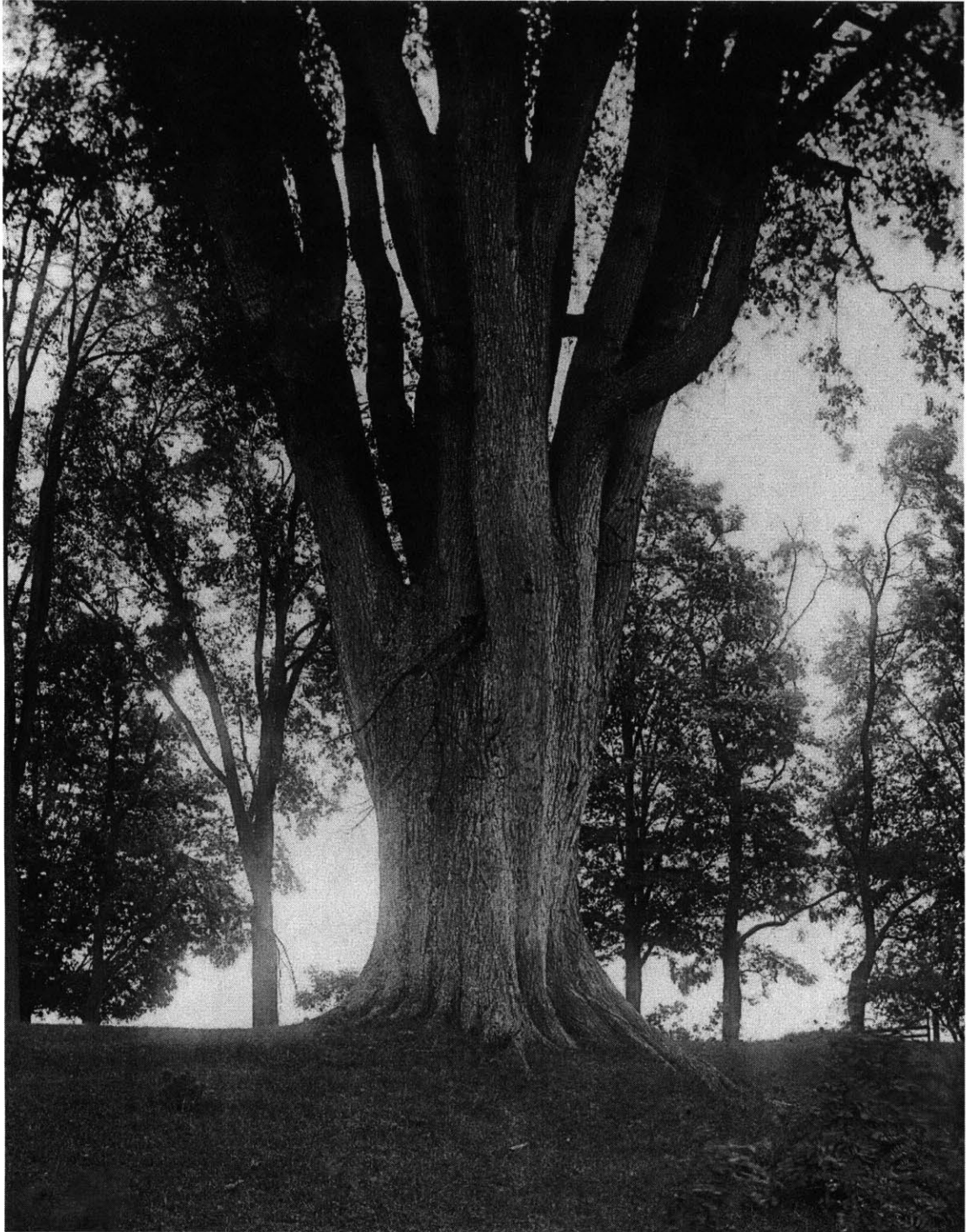
resonance in the New England landscape of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—as *civic totems*, as antique *relics*, and as historical *monuments*. Considered in depth are the Pittsfield Elm and Boston’s Liberty Tree (civic totems); the Great Elm of Boston Common (relic of antiquity); and the Washington Elm at Cambridge (historical monument). The chapter then discusses the symmetry of meetinghouse and elm, the twin vertiginous icons in the Yankee landscape, and concludes by examining an elegiac work published at the end of the nineteenth century which documented the dying totem elms of New England’s early settlement period.

Chapter Three (*The Verdant Village*) examines efforts to systematically plant elms as a means of beautifying or “improving” village and town. The “environmental awakening” of the 1830s is studied, which stimulated both a longing for spatial beauty and a new appreciation for native trees. The village improvement movement is examined at length, focusing on the first organized, community-wide effort to plant elms in a town street (the 1846 “Tree Bee” in Sheffield, Massachusetts), and the subsequent formation of the first village improvement society in New England—the Sheffield “Elm Tree Association.” The centrality of elm-planting to the village improvement movement is demonstrated, and the role of these plantings in transforming the face of New England emphasized. The chapter then considers the larger socioeconomic forces which spread emendation—and elms—throughout New England. Drawing on the writings of Henry James and Henry Ward Beecher, the chapter concludes with a discussion of differing interpretations of the “verdant village.”

Chapter Four (*City of Elms*) considers the planting of elms in the larger urban environments of New England. It begins by discussing the changing meaning of the elm in relation to the growth of a community from town to city. Antecedents to urban street tree planting—in both Europe and the United States—are reviewed. The role of philanthropy, the first mechanism by which city elms were planted, is treated at length, leading to a discussion of James Hillhouse of New Haven. Early municipal actions are examined, followed by an in-depth discussion of Cambridge and the processes by which the city came to bear chief responsibility for its urban forest. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the physical properties of the elm which so distinguished the tree for urban use.

The Epilogue (*A Yankee Urban Pastoral*) begins with a review of historical American attitudes toward cities, particularly in relation to nature and landscape. The ideal of “urban-rural synthesis” which preoccupied many intellectuals in the nineteenth century is next

examined, and the meaning of elms and the urban elm-forest interpreted in this light. New Haven, the “City of Elms,” is considered as the apotheosis of urban pastoralism. The Epilogue then turns to a discussion of Gothicism and the ecclesiastical dimension of the urban elm and the “cathedral aisles” formed by the trees planted along city streets. In conclusion, the various roles of the elm in Yankee culture are recounted. The nineteenth century in New England is described as an “age of elms.” The apotheosis of the elm there was an achievement in urban and spatial design that matched the equally profound literary and artistic attainments of a period Van Wyck Brooks called “the flowering of New England.” Finally, the westward transit of elm culture is discussed, along with the emergence of “Elm Street” as a national institution.



**Figure 1.** Elm on Potter Farm, North Conway, New Hampshire. Photograph by E. H. Wilson, 1930. Courtesy, Photographic Archives of the Arnold Arboretum, Harvard University.

CHAPTER ONE

*A Prospect of Elms*

“. . . the most magnificent vegetable of the temperate zone.”<sup>1</sup>

In the European imagination, the New World was Eden recovered, and Eden was covered with trees. To intellectuals during the Elizabethan age—not the least of which was William Shakespeare (whose allegorical *Tempest* explored the New World’s promise of terrestrial paradise)—North America was an unspoiled land slumbering beneath a deep green mantle of vegetation. Believed to be coeval with Creation, the New World appeared to promise spiritual redemption, a chance to begin the human project anew. With the Enlightenment, the New World—and America in particular—became the site of a collective prelapsarian fantasy; it shimmered on the horizon “as a providential adumbration of the millennium to come.”<sup>2</sup>

Of all the many wonders of the New World, the presumed immensity and breadth of the forests had a particularly profound effect on the European imagination. Reports sent back across the Atlantic greatly exaggerated actual conditions; John Josselyn’s account of Connecticut in the 1670s, for example, described a land “cloathed with infinite thick woods.”<sup>3</sup> These were often further embellished by European philosophers and intellectuals, who looked upon the New World and its forests with a mixture of lust and wonder. Edward Williams described them as “of so delectable an aspect, that the melanchollyest eye in the World cannot look upon it without contentment, nor content himselfe without admiration.”<sup>4</sup> Accounts of dark and impenetrable forests, and the storied age of the trees within, suggested that the wilds of the New World still bore the mark of the Creator. “Who can describe the feelings,” the Vicomte de Chateaubriand later wrote, “that

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<sup>1</sup> F. André Michaux, *The North American Sylva, or A Description of the Forest Trees of the United States, Canada and Nova Scotia*, vol. 3 (Philadelphia: Dobson and Conrad, 1819), 86.

<sup>2</sup> Antonio Pace, ed., *Luigi Castiglioni’s Viaggio: Travels in the United States of North America, 1785-1787* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1983), xii.

<sup>3</sup> John Josselyn, “New England Rarities Discovered,” *American Antiquarian Society, Transactions and Collections*, vol. 4 (1860), 139; quoted in Hans Huth, *Nature and the American* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), 5.

<sup>4</sup> Edward Williams, *Virginia . . . Richly and Truly Valued* (1650), quoted in Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 25.

are experienced on entering these forests, coeval with the world, and which alone afford an idea of the creation, such as it issued from the hands of the Almighty.”<sup>5</sup>

### *Encounters*

In reality, human hands had long shaped the New England landscape. What the European newcomers found—throughout New England and the Northeast—was not the “vast, silent, unbroken, impenetrable and dense tangle of trees beloved by many writers,” writes Michael Williams, but a park-like quilt of field and forest.<sup>6</sup> The landscape of New England, particularly in the coastal and southern regions, had been extensively altered by Native Americans, inhabitants of the land for many centuries prior to European arrival.<sup>7</sup> Fire left the most visible mark of their residency. Thomas Morton provided one of the earliest accounts of this practice. An Englishman who surveyed New England in 1622, Morton was moved by “the bewty of the place, with all her faire indowments”—and was particularly impressed by Massachusetts. There, he observed that “The Salvages are accustomed, to set fire of the country in all places where they come; and to burn it, twize a yeare, vixe at the Spring, and at the fall of the leafe.”<sup>8</sup>

Native Americans burned the woods for agricultural purposes, to make room for their encampments, and to improve hunting conditions. “The object of these conflagrations” Timothy Dwight later observed, “was to produce fresh and sweet pasture for the purpose of alluring the deer to the spots on which thay had been kindeled.”<sup>9</sup> By killing canopy and understory, burning opened up the forest and cleared ground for the cultivation of maize, squash, pumpkins and other crops.<sup>10</sup> What the newcomers found in New England was thus not a forest primeval unmolested since the biblical deluge, but an inhabited landscape. Dwight understood that here was no howling wilderness but a pastoral scene. “When one of these plains is seen at a little distance,” he wrote of similar landscapes in New York at the end of the eighteenth century, “a traveler emerging from the forest naturally concludes that it is the commencement of a settled country.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Le Vicomte de Chateaubriand, *Travels in America and Italy* (London: Colburn, 1828), quoted in Clarence J. Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 686.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Williams, *Americans and their Forests: A Historical Geography* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 33.

<sup>7</sup> Janice L. Fuller, David R. Foster, Jason S. McLachlan, and Natalie Drake, “Impact of Human Activity on Regional Forest Composition and Dynamics in Central New England,” *Ecosystems* 1 (1998): 79.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Morton, *New English Canaan or New Canaan. Containing an Abstract of New England, Composed in three Bookes* (Amsterdam: Jacob Frederick Stam, 1637), 60; 52.

<sup>9</sup> Timothy Dwight, *Travels in New England and New York*, vol. 4 (Cambridge: Belknap Press, reprint 1969), 38.

<sup>10</sup> William Cronon, *Changes in the Land* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983), 51.

<sup>11</sup> Dwight, *Travels in New England and New York*, 37-38.

The effect of native American fire on the visual and spatial structure of the landscape was indeed profound.<sup>12</sup> Fire created a mosaic of woodland and meadow, a quality which reminded Thomas Morton of the English parks. In Eastern Massachusetts, he found that repeated burnings had enlarged the scale of the landscape, and made “the Country very beautifull, and commodious.”<sup>13</sup> William Wood, writing a decade later, sought to correct what was already an erroneous notion among Europeans: “And whereas it is generally conceived that the woods grow so thicke, that there is no more cleared ground than is hewed out by labour of man,” he wrote, “it is nothing so”; for there were “divers Acres . . . cleare,” and a man could “ride a hunting in most places of the land.”<sup>14</sup>

Fire altered the ecological composition of the landscape as well—and at both a micro and macro scale. By definition, the patchwork of field and forest contained a multitude of boundaries. Fire promoted what is known as an “edge effect,” creating an extensive ecological zone which resembles the edge between forest and grassland—ideal habitat for a wide range of flora and fauna. In firing the land, native peoples were in effect cultivating an abundance of precisely those species most useful to them: game such as deer, rabbit, and quail; and gatherable plants such as blackberries and raspberries.<sup>15</sup> On a larger scale, the mosaic pattern of the fired landscape itself had profound ecological significance. Fire had a dramatic impact on some ecologies, and left others unscathed.

While the drier uplands burned readily, the moist bottomlands, where the ground was perpetually wet or even inundated for many months of the year, rarely succumbed to fire.<sup>16</sup> As Wood reported in 1634, such low grounds were preserved from burning “by the wetnesse of the soile.”<sup>17</sup> As a result of unequal combustibility, certain forest types—and in turn certain tree species—were favored in the landscape. Trees of the combustible uplands were decreased in age and number, while those of the moist bottomlands were protected and able to attain great age and scale. Thomas Morton had observed in Massachusetts “that hee that will looke to finde large trees, and good tyMBER, must not depend upon the help, of

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<sup>12</sup> See W. A. Patterson and K. E. Sassaman, “Indian Fires in the Prehistory of New England,” in *Holocene Human Ecology in Northeastern North America*, G. P. Nicholas, ed. (New York: Plenum, 1988): 107-35.

<sup>13</sup> Morton, *New English Canaan* (1637), 54.

<sup>14</sup> William Wood, *New England's Prospect* (London: John Bellamie, 1634), 16.

<sup>15</sup> Cronon, *Changes in the Land*, 51.

<sup>16</sup> Dwight noted that the Indians “burned such parts” of the forest cover “as they found sufficiently dry.” The principle fuel, fallen leaves, were “rarely dry enough for an extensive combustion except on uplands.” See Timothy Dwight, “Journey to Niagara,” in *Travels in New England and New York*, vol. 4 (Cambridge: Belknap Press, reprint 1969), 38.

<sup>17</sup> Wood, *New England's Prospect* (1634), 16.

a wooden prospect to finde them on the upland ground; but must seeke for them, (as I and others have done) in the lower grounds where the grounds are wett when the Country is fired.” The trees in such bottomland ecologies were safe from fire, Morton explained, “by reason of the moisture”; there, the flames “can have no power to doe them any hurt.”<sup>18</sup>

The soggy bottomlands, protected from fire, were heavily timbered. Here grew the dense primeval woods reported so breathlessly to Europe, a forest landscape which had “never been meddled with,” as the Swedish botanical explorer Peter Kalm put it (“We can almost be sure,” he wrote of the soil, “that in some places it was never stirred since the deluge”).<sup>19</sup> These timbered bottomlands came to be known as *intervalles*, and they were prime habitat of the American elm.<sup>20</sup> With an abundance of deep, moist alluvial soil, the intervalles offered optimal growing conditions for the species. Manasseh Cutler, one of the earliest American naturalists to study the flora of New England, noted in 1783 that the elm was associated with “loamy land” and was “Common in moist land and swamps.”<sup>21</sup> The French naturalist François André Michaux later confirmed this, noting that the American elm “delights in low, humid, substantial soils, such as in the Northern States are called *interval lands*.”<sup>22</sup> In the bottomlands of New England’s river valleys, protected from fire and growing under ideal conditions, elms flourished while other species were reduced in number. In Hatfield, Massachusetts, during the early colonial period, pine, chestnut and other upland species which “could not stand the ravages of fire” were scarce, while a “considerable quantity” of elm existed, “scattered about through the meadows, standing in clumps or as isolated trees” on the Connecticut floodplain.<sup>23</sup>

Of the many trees encountered by the early European settlers of New England, the intervalle elms would have been among the largest and most impressive in the landscape. Similar virgin trees documented later in Pennsylvania and elsewhere in the western range of *Ulmus americana* were commonly over 100 feet tall, five feet in diameter, with a ramrod bole and a

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<sup>18</sup> Morton, *New English Canaan* (1637), 64.

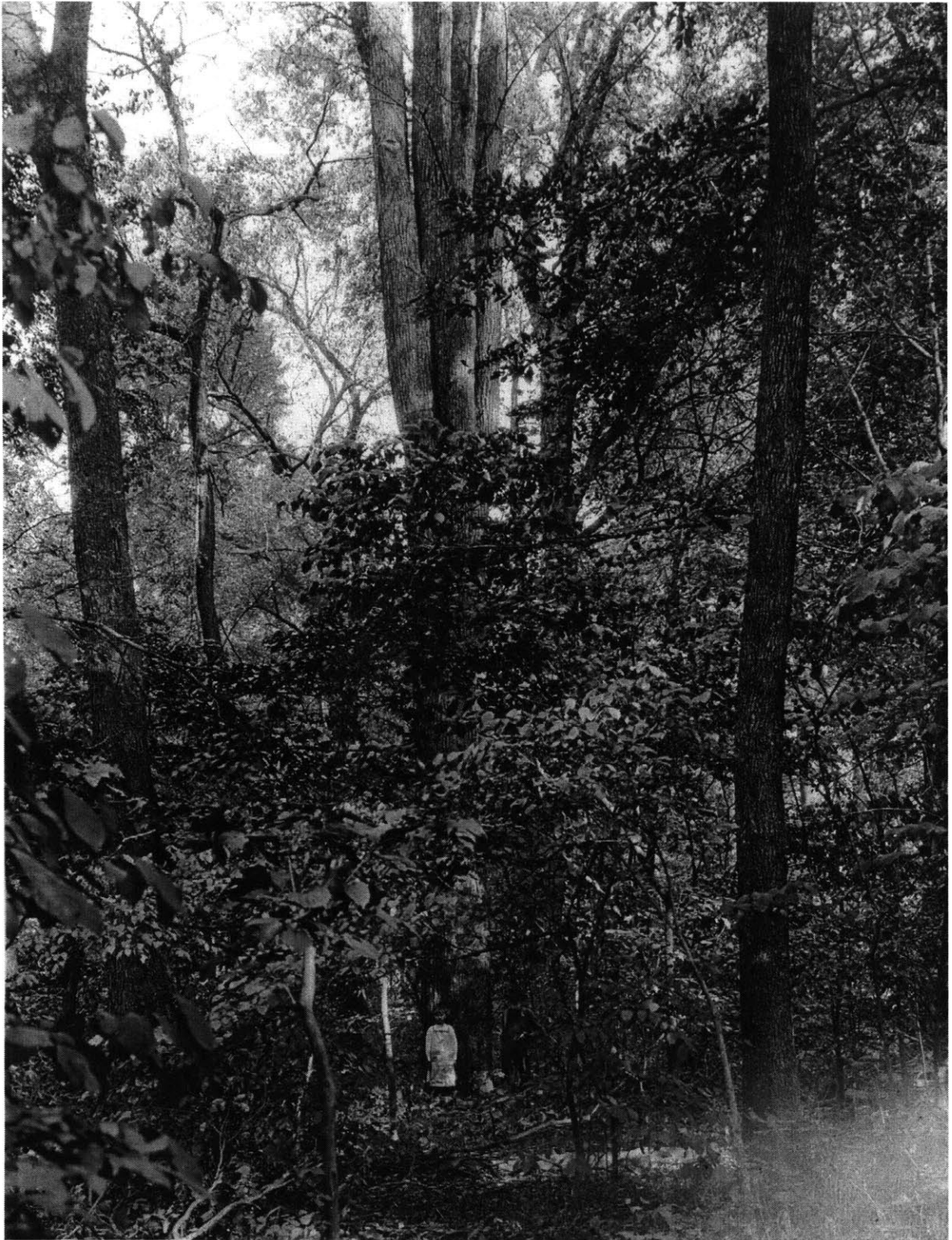
<sup>19</sup> Peter Kalm, *Travels into North America* (1772), quoted in Clarence J. Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 686.

<sup>20</sup> Dwight defined intervals as “lands, formed by a long-continued and gradual alluvion of a river. Such lands are universally formed by rivers, conveying slime, wherever sufficient space is furnished for their reception; and where falls, straights, points of land, or any other causes, check the current.” See Adam Hodgson, *Letters from North America* (London: Hurst, Robinson & Co., 1824), 272-273n.

<sup>21</sup> Manasseh Cutler, “An Account of Some of the Vegetable Productions, Naturally Growing in this Part of America, Botanically Arranged,” *Memoirs of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* (1783), vol. 1 (Boston: Adams and Nourse, 1785), 425.

<sup>22</sup> F. André Michaux, *The North American Sylva, or A Description of the Forest Trees of the United States, Canada and Nova Scotia*, vol. 3 (Philadelphia: Dobson and Conrad, 1819), 84.

<sup>23</sup> Daniel White Wells and Reuben Field Wells, *A History of Hatfield, Massachusetts* (Springfield: Gibbons, 1910), 36-37.



**Figure 2.** Virgin elm. Little Wabash bottom, Clay County, Illinois. Photograph by R. Ridgway, 1922. Courtesy, Photographic Archives of the Arnold Arboretum, Harvard University.

crown spreading 60 or 70 feet across.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, no native tree in New England would have matched a full-grown American elm in terms of height, bulk and sheer mass. Even buttonwood (*Platanus occidentalis*), another bottomland giant, rarely attains equal height or breadth. Virgin intervale elms would have dwarfed most surrounding vegetation; as Charles Sprague Sargent imagined, such a tree would rise above some streambank “like a great fountain of dark and brilliant green above its humbler companions of the forest.”<sup>25</sup>

### *The “Magnificent Vegetable”*

Such trees made a great impression on the early naturalists who explored the forests of New England. The botanical discovery of North America was one of the great events of the Enlightenment. There were many new species to reckon with; John Banister, a clergyman who collected seeds in Virginia for English patrons in the 1680s, encountered “a new world of plants, so strange and monstrose that I am affraide that they may be thought chamas to be found nowhere but in the brain that drew them.”<sup>26</sup> Others were more familiar, elms included. Europeans had long been acquainted with the genus *Ulmus*, and in England especially, elms had been part of the cultural landscape for centuries. But in spite of a general similarity, the New World elms were a different lot; and the species later identified as simply *American elm* gained early distinction by virtue of its size and physical form.

The American elm was first described for the European scientific community by John Clayton, a physician and amateur botanist in the Virginia colony who collected plant specimens for J. F. Gronovius, a close friend and patron of Linnaeus. Assisted by Linnaeus himself, Gronovius used this material to write the first North American flora, *Flora Virginica*, which he published with Clayton in 1739.<sup>27</sup> The *Flora* was structured according to the sexual system devised by Linnaeus, and was published in a second edition several years later.<sup>28</sup> In 1742 another treatise on North America flora appeared, *Plantae Coldengamiae*, authored by Cadwallader Colden, a Scottish physician who emigrated to Pennsylvania and eventually became lieutenant governor of New York. Colden, too, made

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<sup>24</sup> Henry H. Gibson, *American Forest Trees*, quoted in Donald Culross Peattie, *A Natural History of Trees* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1966), 244.

<sup>25</sup> Charles Sprague Sargent, *The Silva of North America*, vol. VIII (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1895), 45.

<sup>26</sup> John Banister, quoted in Howard Ensign Evans, *Pioneer Naturalists: The Discovery and Naming of North American Plants and Animals* (New York: Henry Holt, 1993), 3.

<sup>27</sup> H. O. Juel, *Early Investigations of North American Flora* (Uppsala: Almqvist and Wiksells, 1920), 66, 67.

<sup>28</sup> Juel, *Early Investigations*, 66. Also see Joh. Fred. Gronovius and Johannes Clayton, *Flora Virginica, exhibens plantas, quas nobilissimus vir D. J. Claytonius in Virginia crescentes observavit atque collegit* (Leiden: Cornelium Haak, 1739).

note of the American elm, and later introduced the Linnaean system of botanical classification to America.<sup>29</sup> The American elm was classified by Linnaeus in 1753, gaining its Latin nomenclature *Ulmus americana*.<sup>30</sup> As early as 1750 the species was being cultivated in England, in the gardens of James Gordon.<sup>31</sup>

Among the earliest documented *aesthetic* responses to the American elm by a European naturalist was that of Luigi Castiglioni, a Milanese patrician with a passion for botany who traveled extensively in the United States between 1785 and 1787. Castiglioni's account of his journeys, *Viaggio negli Stati Uniti dell' America Settentrionale*, was published in 1790 and included a botanical appendix describing many of the plants he encountered along the way.<sup>32</sup> Castiglioni's purpose in cataloguing the sylvia of the United States was utterly pragmatic, to identify species of potential commercial use to his native Italy. His arrangement of genera followed a simple alphabetical listing, for he intended the book to serve not the scientific community, but "the entrepreneur in Milan, alert to the expanding economy of his country."<sup>33</sup> Yet despite this prejudice, Castiglioni was not insensitive to the tree's aesthetic value. "It is," he wrote of the elm, "remarkable for the beauty of its branches, which are numerous, very wide-spreading and pendant almost like those of the African willow." Castiglioni was also among the first to identify the tree's potential for use along streets. Its unique architectural properties would, he reasoned, make the American elm "preferable to the European for making avenues and other ornamental plantings."<sup>34</sup>

Not long after Castiglioni, François André Michaux treated the elm at length in his *Sylva*, and he too was moved by the tree. Michaux was born in France in 1770, into a life of botany. His father, André Michaux, was an eminent botanist who had studied with de Jussieu and Lamarck.<sup>35</sup> In 1785 the French government sent the elder Michaux to North America to study its forest trees; with the endorsement of Jefferson—and often accompanied by his young son François—Michaux embarked on a remarkable series of journeys which took him from the Bahamas to Hudson Bay and west into the Spanish

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<sup>29</sup> "Ulmus Americana," Colden, *Act. Hort. Ups.* 1743, 99 (pl Novebor), quoted in Charles Sprague Sargent, *The Silva of North America*, vol. 3 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1895), 45; For a biography of Colden, see Albert TenEyck Gardner and Stuart P. Field, *American Paintings* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1965), 9-10.

<sup>30</sup> Gerald Wilkinson, *Epitaph for the Elm* (London: Hutchinson, 1978), 85.

<sup>31</sup> Charles Sprague Sargent, *The Silva of North America*, vol. 3 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1895), 45.

<sup>32</sup> Antonio Pace, ed., *Luigi Castiglioni's Viaggio: Travels in the United States of North America, 1785-1787* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1983), xi-xvi.

<sup>33</sup> Joseph and Nesta Ewan, eds., "Luigi Castiglioni's Botanical Observations," in Pace, ed., *Viaggio*, 343.

<sup>34</sup> Luigi Castiglioni, "Observations on Useful Plants," in Pace, ed. *Viaggio*, 459-460.

<sup>35</sup> Howard Ensign Evans, *Pioneer Naturalists: The Discovery and Naming of North American Plants and Animals* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1993), 8-9.

territory of Louisiana (where he became involved in an ill-fated intrigue to return the province to France). After André's death in Madagascar in 1802, François carried on his father's work, and published his own three-volume *Histoire des Arbres forestiers de l'Amérique Septentrionale* (translated into English as *The North American Sylva*) in 1810.<sup>36</sup>

The book included a detailed account of the American or white elm, which Michaux began by describing the tree's range. Adding to his father's notes, he determined that the tree was "found over an extensive tract of the North-American Continent"—from "Nova Scotia to the extremity of Georgia," and across the central section of the United States then known as the "Western States." In more arid country, the tree closely followed riparian corridors: "I have learned," Michaux added, "that [the elm] is common in the neighborhood of the great rivers that water Upper Louisiana and discharge themselves into the Mississippi." It was in the Northeast, however, that the tree reached its most spectacular development; there, "between the 42nd and 46th degrees of latitude, which comprise the provinces of Lower Canada, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, the North-Eastern *Section* of the United States, and the Genessee in the State of New York," the elm "appeared to be the most multiplied and of loftiest height." New England lay at the very center of Michaux's elm geography.<sup>37</sup>

Michaux devoted the requisite lines to leaf, petiole, flower and seed. But what most impressed the Frenchman was the tree's physical form, and its great beauty. Many of the elms Michaux encountered possessed trunks four or five feet in diameter, which rose 60 or 70 feet before ramifying into several primary limbs. These, he observed, "approach and cross each other 8 or 10 feet higher, and diffuse on all sides long, flexible, pendulous branches, bending into regular arches and floating lightly in the air." While he allowed that the buttonwood often matched the elm in girth and "amplitude of its head," Michaux concluded that the American elm possessed "a more majestic appearance . . . owing to its great elevation, to the disposition of its principal limbs, and to the extreme elegance of its summit." The elm was worthy of attention not for its commercial value—which Michaux understood to be minimal—but because it was a remarkable work of nature, a thing of beauty. In Michaux's estimation, the American elm was "the most magnificent vegetable of the temperate zone."<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed. *Travels West of the Alleghanies* (Cleveland: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1904), 11-15. *The North American Sylva* included an additional volume by Thomas Nuttall.

<sup>37</sup> F. André Michaux, *The North American Sylva, or A Description of the Forest Trees of the United States, Canada and Nova Scotia*, vol. 3 (Philadelphia: Dobson and Conrad, 1819), 83.

<sup>38</sup> Michaux, *Sylva*, 84-86.



**Figure 3.** American or White Elm. From F. A. Michaux, *The North American Sylva* (1810).  
Courtesy of the Library of the Gray Herbarium, Harvard University.

*Triumph of a Weed*

Long before the Europeans and Linnaean taxonomy, the elm was known—and used—by native peoples. While there is little evidence that elms served as “council trees” or as sacred objects in native American culture, it is possible that, given the tree’s imposing stature and size, elms were endowed with a symbolic or religious dimension. The tree certainly served a range of practical purposes. The tough, stringy bark of the elm—with a corky outer layer and a soft inner layer—found service among the Huron in Ontario for covering longhouses; they also crafted cups and bowls from its wood.<sup>39</sup> Elm bark was used to construct canoes, particularly by the Iroquois, and was used by both Indians and Europeans for making rope.<sup>40</sup> Among the Algonquin, green elm bark was used to store and carry food.<sup>41</sup>

Elm twigs, bark and leaves were used for a wide range of medicinal purposes by Native Americans throughout the tree’s range. The Mohegans used an infusion of inner bark for colds and coughs.<sup>42</sup> The Iroquois used mashed elm twigs to treat internal hemorrhaging, and an infusion of elm root bark to control excessive menstruation. They developed a compound of inner bark to facilitate childbirth, and to treat symptoms of “summer disease”—vomiting, diarrhea and cramps.<sup>43</sup> Among the Penobscot, an infusion of bark was useful as an antihemorrhagic, taken to cure “bleeding at the lungs.”<sup>44</sup>

American elm may have also found a place in the *materia medica* of the colonists, as did its close relative *Ulmus fulva* or *rubra*, the Slippery elm (which Linnaeus considered just another variety of *Ulmus americana*).<sup>45</sup> Dr. Joseph Strong of Philadelphia, who served as an army surgeon in the 1790s, experienced “the most happy effects from the application of poultices of the elm bark to gun-shot wounds, which were soon brought to a good suppuration, and to a disposition to heal” (a treatment he had a chance to experiment with after a bloody Indian battle in the summer of 1794). Strong also prescribed elm poultice for “old ill-conditioned ulcers and fresh burns,” and found that an infusion of elm bark

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<sup>39</sup> Michael Williams, *Americans and their Forests: A Historical Geography* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 37.

<sup>40</sup> R. H. Richens, *Elm* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 108; Charles Sprague Sargent, *The Silva of North America* vol. 3 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1895), 44.

<sup>41</sup> Richens, *Elm*, 108.

<sup>42</sup> Gladys Tantaquidgeon, “Mohegan Medicinal Practices, Weather-lore and Superstitions,” *SI-BAE Annual Report* 43: 264-270 (1928), 266.

<sup>43</sup> James W. Herrick, “Iroquois Medical Botany” (Ph.D. dissertation, State University of New York, 1977), 304.

<sup>44</sup> Frank G. Speck, “Medicinal Practices of the Eastern Algonkians,” *Proceedings of the 19th International Congress of Americanists* (1917): 311.

<sup>45</sup> Slippery elm was later identified as a separate species by the elder Michaux in 1803. See Gerald Wilkinson, *Epitaph for the Elm* (London: Hutchinson, 1978), 86.

alleviated diarrhea and dysentery—a treatment likely adopted, ironically, from native medical practice. One soldier treated by Strong, “who had lost his way,” survived for ten days on little more than sassafras and the mucous substance produced by boiling elm bark.<sup>46</sup>

But utilization of forest trees by the European settlers differed fundamentally from those of the native peoples. To the newcomers, trees were a resource to harvest, and forests were an impediment to agriculture and settlement in general. In the colonial period, much of forest cover which escaped burning by native Americans fell to the settler’s axe—mainly to prepare land for cultivation. At first, pioneers favored the fields opened earlier by native American fire, as these required relatively little effort to bring under cultivation. Many of the first New England villages, such as Plymouth, Massachusetts, were in fact located on such previously cleared land.<sup>47</sup> But such places had supported human occupancy for generations, and their soil was worn out and often quickly depleted. This, coupled with a burgeoning European population, forced settlers to acquire new land for cultivation. They did so by clearing virgin forest.

By the end of the seventeenth century, settlement began to spread outward from the first compact villages, and move into the river valleys of the Connecticut, Housatonic and Merrimac. To aid the search for good new land, settlers looked closely at vegetation, and trees in particular. Folk wisdom suggested that “the larger the trees and the more luxuriant the growth, the better the soil.”<sup>48</sup> Pioneer settlers in New England understood that elms, among the largest trees in the landscape, signaled deep, rich alluvial soil. Elms and good farmland were paired in the native imagination, a link which may well have been carried over from England. There, folk knowledge held that “a good elm never grew on bad ground,” and that “tall elms and fat cows” went hand in hand.<sup>49</sup>

Even with the increased risk of malaria presented by low forested ground, bottomlands became favored for cultivation.<sup>50</sup> In clearing the *intervales*, the settlers transformed and extended the field-and-forest mosaic created by native peoples. “The rotational clearing and widespread burning practiced by the Indians,” writes Michael Williams, “were not eliminated but were often replaced by more extensive and thorough clearing and burning,

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<sup>46</sup> “Pine Trees and Elm Trees,” *New England Farmer* 5 (15 September 1826): 58.

<sup>47</sup> Williams, *Americans and their Forests*, 57.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>49</sup> Quoted in Richens, *Elm* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 128.

<sup>50</sup> Williams, *Americans and their Forests*, 59.

so that areas never touched by fire . . . were now affected”—including the “wet bottomlands.”<sup>51</sup> In Hatfield, Massachusetts, white settlers cleared the heavily wooded swamps and “boggy meadows,” and continued the Indian practice of annual burning (until 1743, when a Massachusetts law was passed prohibiting such fires; for they “impoverished the soil, prevented the growth of wood, and destroyed fences”).<sup>52</sup> Clearing the bottomland forests, removing centuries-old trees, was a Herculean task. In New England the preferred method was to fell the trees with an ax, rather than girdle them by cutting around the bark (as was common in the South).<sup>53</sup> Felling a large elm required an immense investment of time and effort—one worth making only if the tree was truly an obstacle to cultivation, or of sufficient commercial value to make the labor of its removal pay.

Elms were neither. The commercial harvesting of timber and forest products often occurred in unison with agricultural clearing. Farmers, in the process of preparing land for cultivation, supplied much of the wood upon which the timber economy of New England was based.<sup>54</sup> In this economy, not all trees were equal. Elm had little commercial value because it was of limited practical use—though not entirely. Elm was used for crafting hubs for cart and carriage wheels, for yokes and saddle-trees, and for flooring and cooperage.<sup>55</sup> Occasionally the wood was used for shipbuilding, in the manufacture of blocks and keels. The bark of the tree was used for ox whips and chair bottoms, and “when macerated in water and rendered supple by pounding” could be twisted into rope.<sup>56</sup>

But elm wood, tough and fibrous, was no friend of the carpenter. It took forever to dry, and its elongated cellular structure made planing difficult. Elm was “not admitted into the construction of houses or of vessels,” noted François André Michaux, “except occasionally in the District of Maine for keels, for which it is adapted only by its size.”<sup>57</sup> Compared to oak, pine and other species, elm was a trash tree. Even in a later age, with improved woodworking technology, elms were still considered “the most useless piece of vegetation in our forests.”

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>52</sup> Daniel White Wells and Reuben Field Wells, *A History of Hatfield, Massachusetts* (Springfield: Gibbons, 1910), 36-37.

<sup>53</sup> Williams, *Americans and their Forests*, 60

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 82. See also Charles F. Carroll, *The Timber Economy of Puritan New England* (Providence: Brown University Press, 1973).

<sup>55</sup> Charles Sprague Sargent, *The Silva of North America* vol. 3 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1895), 44.

<sup>56</sup> George B. Emerson, *A Report on the Trees and Shrubs Growing Naturally in the Forests of Massachusetts* vol. 2 (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1878), 329-330.

<sup>57</sup> Michaux, *Sylva*, 86.

They cannot be used for firewood because they cannot be split. The wood cannot be burned because it is full of water. It cannot be used for posts because it rots in a short time. It can be sawed into lumber but it warps and twists into corkscrews and gives the building where it is used an unpleasant odor for years.<sup>58</sup>

Because big elms were hardly worth the sweat of felling them, farmers often let them remain in their fields and hedgerows as they prepared the land for cultivation. Elms “were allowed to escape the axe.”<sup>59</sup>

Elms escaped for other reasons, too. They were considered relatively inoffensive by cultivators, in spite of the great size, and even somewhat useful. While field elms were sometimes felled because they were thought to deprive nearby crops of moisture, such trees were often left standing as shelter for livestock—and were even planted specifically for this reason. Agricultural writers in the nineteenth century later verified the old wisdom of allowing pasture and field elms to remain. The *New England Farmer* urged husbandmen to leave such trees for the benefit of cattle. These not only rendered land “more congenial to the growth of grass and grain, and the health of pasturing animals,” but actually had a positive microclimatic effect. “It is, indeed, astonishing,” the *Farmer* reasoned, “how much better cattle thrive in fields, even but moderately sheltered, than they do in an open, exposed country.” Big field elms not only afforded livestock “protection from the keen winds of spring and autumn,” but were also thought to change the climate of the immediate area—by “communicating a degree of warmth, or softness, to the air.”<sup>60</sup>

Trees on farms threatened crops by blocking the sun, and of course the main reason for clearing land in the first place was to open it to the light. But elms were hardly offensive in this regard. The absence of low-spreading limbs and the great elevation of the tree’s crown allowed sunlight to easily reach the ground below; the shadow-pool cast by even a large elm swung quickly through its arc, and had relatively minimal impact on crops growing beneath. Moreover, the fine texture of elm leaves enabled considerable light to penetrate the crown, and rarely produced the killing shade of a maple or oak. An 1835 essay in the *New England Farmer* verified the folk wisdom of colonial husbandmen regarding tree shadows. After examining the relative crown densities of different trees, its author advised

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<sup>58</sup> C. A. Sheffield, quoted in Donald Culross Peattie, *A Natural History of Trees* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1966), 243.

<sup>59</sup> Sargent, *Silva*, 45.

<sup>60</sup> “Sheltering Farm Lands,” *New England Farmer* 8 (no. 19): 147.

that cultivators should avoid the opaque shade of oaks and chestnuts in favor of “trees with lofty stems, and large heads,” such as the elm.<sup>61</sup>

Elms—particularly large, old specimens which stood out in the landscape—were also used to mark property boundaries in the early agricultural landscape of New England. “Indian deeds” and other instruments of conveyance in colonial New England included precise descriptions of the land, and offer a glimpse into a long-vanished landscape. Property lines were perambulated or “bounded” using prominent natural landmarks such as rock outcroppings, bogs, streams—as well as such trees which spoke of durability and permanence.<sup>62</sup> In a typical document from Topsfield, Massachusetts, of 1674, a variety of trees—including elms—are used to demarcate the boundary between the lands of John Wilds and those of the town. Bounding would proceed from

. . . a great whiate oacke marked from thence to a Littell blake ocke marked and a heape of stones at it from thence to a heape of stones and two wallnuts trees marked from thence to a stake and a heape of stones and three Littell trees marked that stands neere to ye stake & . . . from thence to an *eleme tree marked in a swampe* neere the south side of the swamp . . . [emphasis added]<sup>63</sup>

Such trees were in effect legal instruments. As the molestation of boundary markers was a severe and punishable offense, these landmark trees gained protection from the axe, and were thus assured a lasting place in the landscape.<sup>64</sup>

Elms hardly required such legal assistance to be assured a place in the settled landscape. The fertile intervales favored by farmers were, after all, the tree’s native ground. Purging the elm from the Connecticut and Housatonic bottomlands would likely have been an impossible task, even if economics and other factors favored such action. For the tree germinated easily, sprouted vigorously and sped to maturity faster than a busy farmer could swing an axe in protest. In pasture, field and hedgerow, elms sped skyward, and quickly gained a presence in the pastoral landscape. Michaux observed such vigorous volunteers on a journey through New England at the end of the eighteenth century: “In New

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<sup>61</sup> See “Shade of Trees” *New England Farmer* 14 (5 August 1835); “Sheltering Farm Lands,” *New England Farmer* 8 (19): 147.

<sup>62</sup> See Edward F. Johnson, *Abstracts of Early Woburn Deeds* (Woburn, Massachusetts: The News Print, 1895), 71; Harry A. Wright, ed., *Indian Deeds of Hampden County* (Springfield: County of Hampden, Massachusetts, 1905); Walter A. Davis, *The Early Records of the Town of Lunenburg* (Fitchburg, Massachusetts: City Council, 1896).

<sup>63</sup> *Town Records of Topsfield, Massachusetts*, vol. 1 (Topsfield: Topsfield Historical Society, 1917), 17.

<sup>64</sup> See John R. Stilgoe, “Jack O’Lanterns to Surveyors: The Secularization of Landscape Boundaries,” *Environmental Review* 1 (Autumn 1976): 14-31. On the use of deeds to reconstruct colonial landscapes, see Stilgoe, “Documents in Landscape History,” *Journal of Architectural Education* 30 (September 1976): 15-18.

Hampshire, between Portsmouth and Portland,” he wrote, “a great number of young White Elms are seen detached in the middle of pastures.”<sup>65</sup>

The American elm—tenacious and fast-growing—was thus favored by the processes of agricultural development in early New England. Shunned by the timber cutter and left standing by farmers clearing the very intervale forests where the species reached its maximum development, the elm secured a privileged position in the landscape; it was left standing, in splendid isolation, as surrounding vegetation was cleared or harvested. Michaux took note of the elm’s amplified presence in the wake of agricultural development, and the manner in which the tree had become showcased in the landscape: “In clearing the primitive forests,” he wrote, “a few stocks [of elm] are sometimes left standing; insulated in this manner it appears in all its majesty.”<sup>66</sup> Cultural disturbance and environmental impact—by native American and European alike—benefited the elm, just as it led to the destruction of other species of flora and fauna. In time, the elm would itself emerge as one of the icons of the Yankee pastoral scene.

### *Intervale Elysium*

In few places did the American elm gain a greater presence in the landscape than in the fertile river valleys of the Housatonic, Merrimac, and, especially, the Connecticut. The floodplain of the Connecticut was among the most propitious elm habitat in North America, and in time it would become the heartland of elm culture in New England. A rich and well-watered land, its deep alluvial soils sustained, in the words of Oliver Wendell Holmes, “a race of giants.”<sup>67</sup> The Connecticut was settled early, and its venerated river towns—Deerfield, Northampton, Hatfield, Longmeadow and others—were later among the first communities in America to plant elms along their streets. The Arcadian valley, with its luxuriant elms, was early praised by men and women who appreciated the spatial beauty of cultivation. The poet Joel Barlow was among the first. In his 1787 *Columbiad*—a rhapsodic evocation of American destiny intended to evoke Homer’s *Illiad*—he wrote of the Connecticut: “No watery glades thro richer vallies shine/Nor drinks the sea a lovelier wave than thine.”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> F. André Michaux, *The North American Sylva, or A Description of the Forest Trees of the United States, Canada and Nova Scotia*, vol. 3 (Philadelphia: Dobson and Conrad, 1819), 85.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 84-85.

<sup>67</sup> Oliver Wendell Holmes, “Introduction,” Lorin L. Dame, *Typical Elms and Other Trees of Massachusetts* (Boston: Little Brown, 1890), 12.

<sup>68</sup> Joel Barlow, *The Columbiad* (Washington: Joseph Milligan, reprint 1825), 26.

William Tudor, writing a generation later for a European audience, related that in New England “you will not find . . . extensive districts of uninterrupted cultivation, which are so common in Europe.” But in spite of New England’s “predominance of forest . . . still there are situations which present a noble appearance of fertile soil and productive agriculture.” The Connecticut was his proof; “through almost its whole extent,” he found the river “bordered with fertile banks in high cultivation.”

These lands, those at least that are within reach of the river floods, have here the common appellation of *intervale*. This species of land . . . is the most valuable we possess, and gives perennially the most exuberant crops. There are some extended tracts of it near Northampton, for example, which rival the aspect of the richest plains in Flanders or Italy.<sup>69</sup>

Adam Hodgson, an Englishman who visited America in the 1820s, likewise concluded that the Connecticut was no less than “one of the finest portions of the cultivated regions of America.” Hodgson was, moreover, particularly impressed by “some of the finest American elms we have observed in the country,” and by the manner in which these trees stood like sentries “singly in the fields.” Liberated from the surrounding forest, the elms had “power to expand,” tossing their limbs over hedgerow and meadow.<sup>70</sup> Charles Joseph Latrobe, another Briton who toured the United States in 1832, had a similar reaction. “The valley of the Connecticut river,” he wrote in *The Rambler in North America*, “struck us as one of the most lovely we had ever beheld.” Ancient specimens of “weeping elm” were among the many “beauties with which nature has decked the verdant, fertile, and park-like shores of that pastoral stream.”<sup>71</sup> Margaret Hunter Hall, accompanying her husband on a trip through the United States in the 1820s, described a view of the Connecticut plains as “one of the most beautiful prospects I ever saw”; the river’s flanking meadows were made especially winsome by the “very picturesque trees . . . scattered over them.”<sup>72</sup>

Numerous artists sketched and painted the Connecticut and its elms. Thomas Cole, one of the founders of the Hudson River school of landscape painters, praised the Connecticut: “the imagination can scarcely conceive,” he wrote in *Essay on American Scenery* (1835), “Arcadian vales more lovely or more peaceful than the valley of the Connecticut,” where waters born in the wild mountains of New Hampshire descended into a “luxuriant valley

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<sup>69</sup> William Tudor, *Letters on the Eastern States* (New York: Kirk and Mercein, 1820), 269-270.

<sup>70</sup> Adam Hodgson, *Letters from North America* (London: Hurst, Robinson & Co., 1824), 263, 272-273.

<sup>71</sup> Charles Joseph Latrobe, *The Rambler in North America* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1835), 43-44.

<sup>72</sup> Una Pope-Hennessy, ed. *The Aristocratic Journey* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1931), 80.

Margaret Hunter Hall was the wife of Captain Basil Hall, a retired Royal Navy officer and a well-published travel writer who took his family on a tour of the United States in 1827 and 1828. See Jill A. Hodnicki, “The Connecticut Valley in Literature: A Delightful Excursion,” *Arcadian Vales: Views of the Connecticut River Valley* (Springfield: The Springfield Library and Museums Association, 1981), 16.

. . . glancing through the green expanse of elm-besprinkled meadows.”<sup>73</sup> Cole painted the elm-embowered flanks of the Connecticut in *The Oxbow*, one of the formative works in nineteenth-century landscape art. Albert Bierstadt was another artist who painted the Connecticut. His *Ascutney Mountain* featured a cluster of towering elms in the foreground, and is among the most compelling depictions of the valley’s sylvan landscape.

Well into the twentieth century, the image of the Connecticut as an elm-tossed elysium would be invoked again and again, establishing the spreading field elm as an essential fixture of Yankee pastoralism. In his *Green Trails and Upland Pastures*, Walter Prichard Eaton evoked

the picture of a green intervale, of browsing cattle, of a winding stream with vervain and wild cucumber on the banks, and now and then, rising like graceful green fountains or like great vases on slender stems, the noble elms—the wardens of the peaceful landscape.

Such a scene, where elms stood alone or in small groups, impressed upon Eaton a sense of the tree’s “complete and beautiful design.” A cluster of such elms on the banks of the Housatonic struck the writer as “figures by Botticelli arrested in a stately dance.” Viewed at dusk, “when the shadows are creeping like long amethyst fingers over the grass,” the trees appeared to rise above the interval “in radiant lightness against the west, every detail of their lovely symmetry outlined sharply against the sky.”<sup>74</sup>

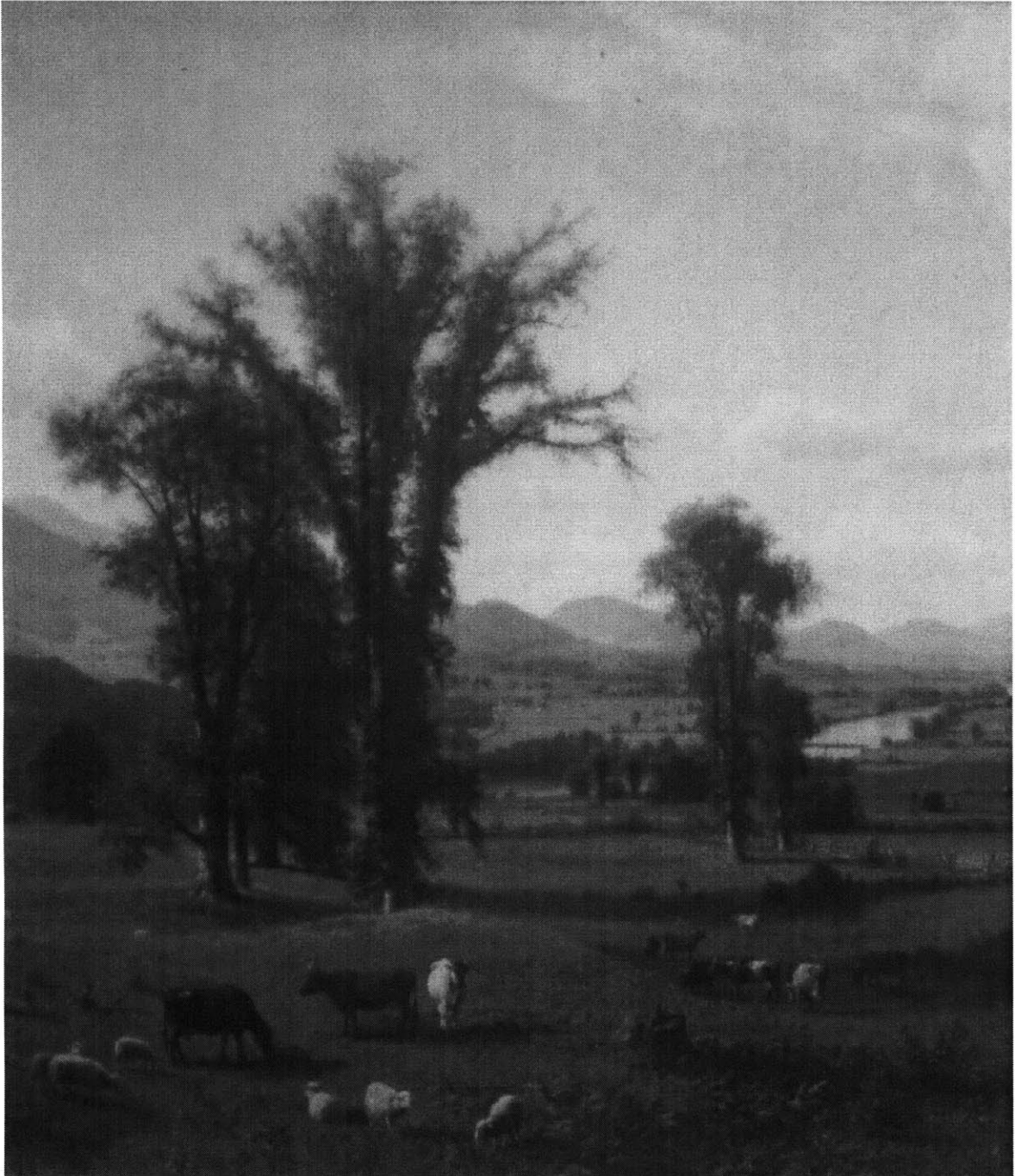
### *Cultures of Wood*

The emergent presence of the elm in the valley landscapes of eighteenth-century New England may well have also had an aesthetic dimension. As Michaux and others noted, the exceptional physical attributes of the elm were well displayed by the selective clearing of land for agricultural settlement. However, precisely what role a burgeoning appreciation of the tree’s beauty may have played in assuring its survival in the early settlement period is unclear. To be sure, the pioneer generation had little time to reflect on the poetics of the landscape as they struggled to survive. Looking back from the civilized prospect of the nineteenth century, many writers took it on faith that the elm’s beauty was the chief reason for its preservation in early colonial New England, and also for its subsequent role as a favored ornamental tree. Nevertheless, given the elm’s later

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<sup>73</sup> Thomas Cole, “Essay on American Scenery,” in John W. McCoubrey, ed. *American Art 1700-1960: Sources and Documents* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1965), 106.

<sup>74</sup> Walter Prichard Eaton, *Green Trails and Upland Pastures* (New York: Doubleday, Page and Company, 1917), 254-255.



**Figure 4.** Field elms, Connecticut Valley. Detail from Albert Bierstadt, *Mount Ascutney from Claremont, New Hampshire* (1862). Courtesy of the Fruitlands Museums, Harvard, Massachusetts.

embrace in New England, it is not unlikely that a nascent appreciation of the tree's beauty stirred among the first generation of settlers.

Moreover, a deep familiarity with trees—and elms in particular—may well have been a significant factor in the subsequent cultural embrace of the American elm. The early colonial settlers were predominantly emigrants from England and the forest-rich precincts of northern Europe, and an intimacy with trees ran in their veins. As Robert P. Harrison has written, Western civilization “literally cleared its space in the midst of forests . . . A sylvan fringe of darkness defined the limits of its cultivation, the margins of its cities, the boundaries of its institutional domain.”<sup>75</sup> In the culture and mythology of pre-modern Teutons, Saxons and other northern peoples, forests and trees played especially important roles. As Clarence Glacken has written, northern Europe in the Middle Ages was “a civilization of wood.” “One cannot read the history of the period without becoming aware of the pivotal importance of the forest and its close ties to town and country life.”<sup>76</sup>

That the early settlers of New England descended from a forest-dwelling people deeply influenced the place trees would occupy in its culture. As J. B. Jackson has written, northern Europe's “old vernacular culture of trees” was carried by the early colonists to North America.<sup>77</sup> Here, the Old World pagan fear of woods was transplanted, and even briefly flourished. In pre-modern Europe, the forest was the antipode of civilization, the bewildering domain of ogres, elves, and fairies.<sup>78</sup> The expanding umbra of Christianity in the Middle Ages encouraged the conversion of heathen forests into plowed fields and pious settlements, a transformation of landscape that implied an analogous transformation of the soul. In New England too, forested wilds were quickly cleared—for cultivation and timber, to be sure, but also because they were considered a threat to the moral order. Consuming the great mantle of trees was crucial to the spiritual welfare of the embryonic settlements.

Yet even as this wholesale clearing of the *forest* was occurring, an ethos for the individual *tree* was beginning to take form. The Indo-European peoples who settled the forested continent of pre-modern Europe brought out of Asia fruit and other trees, and established a culture of tree planting even as the woods themselves were looked upon as frightful places.

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<sup>75</sup> Robert Pogue Harrison, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), ix.

<sup>76</sup> Clarence J. Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 318

<sup>77</sup> John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *A Sense of Place, A Sense of Time* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 99.

<sup>78</sup> Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 11.

Trees were planted in medieval Northern Europe for a variety of practical purposes, and in time many species acquired symbolic value.<sup>79</sup> The early New England colonists carried with them this cultural legacy, in which the forest was an object of fear, but the individual tree a thing of great value and utility. And elms in particular had a long and rich history of cultural service in the Old World, especially in England.

### *English Traits*

Though it differed in important respects from the Old World species, the American elm was similar enough to have been immediately recognized by the English transplants. Indeed, Thomas Morton and others found much of New England to be hauntingly reminiscent of the English countryside, both in terms of its spatial composition as well as in its flora and fauna. As geographer Carl Sauer has written, “It would be impossible . . . to cross an ocean anywhere else and find as little unfamiliar in nature on the opposite side.”<sup>80</sup> This inherent similarity between the landscapes of New and old England facilitated the transference of many cultural practices, including the embrace of certain kinds of trees. By the seventeenth century, the “Atlantic landscape” of England and the Northern European countries had effectively been transplanted to North America.<sup>81</sup>

In many parts of the Old World, elms had seen cultural service for centuries, and were an important feature of the countryside long before the colonization of North America. In England, the elm was second only to the oak in terms of cultural significance. There are some 30 species of elm found in the British Isles, but only the Wych elm is native (*Ulmus glabra*). Of the non-native species, English elm (*Ulmus minor* var. *vulgaris*, or *Ulmus procera*) is most prevalent. Introduced to the British Isles during the Roman occupation, in time its foreignness faded as the tree evolved into one of the arboreal icons of England.<sup>82</sup> English elm was most common in the southern and eastern counties, and a close relative, *Ulmus minor* var. *minor* or Field elm, prevailed in East Anglia and eastern counties of Essex and Kent.<sup>83</sup> Elms were thus a feature in the landscapes of just those regions of the British Isles which produced many of the early settlers of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. East Anglia, in particular, was “the original source of much of the New England population.”<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Jackson, *A Sense of Place, A Sense of Time*, 96.

<sup>80</sup> Carl Sauer, “The Settlement of the Humid East,” *USDA Yearbook, Climate and Man* (1941: 159), quoted in William Cronon, *Changes in the Land* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983), fn173.

<sup>81</sup> Jackson, *A Sense of Place, A Sense of Time*, 95.

<sup>82</sup> Gerald Wilkinson, *Epitaph for the Elm* (London: Hutchinson, 1978), 106.

<sup>83</sup> R. H. Richens, *Elm* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1-4.

<sup>84</sup> Bernard Bailyn, *The Peopling of British North America* (New York: Knopf, 1989), 22.

In contrast to *Ulmus americana*, the English elm had great practical utility. Among the earliest known uses of elm in England was for archer's bows.<sup>85</sup> The foliage of the tree long served as animal feed, a practice dating back at least as far as ancient Greece; boiled elm leaves may have even been fed to children.<sup>86</sup> In the Medieval period, elm found numerous medicinal applications, and its wood was used for mouldboards, timber framing, floorboards, bell headstocks, coffins, gunstocks and bridge piles.<sup>87</sup> John Evelyn's *Sylva* of 1664, noted that elm wood served well for making pipes, ladles, rails and gates, "blocks for the hat maker," trunks, dressers, "shovelboard tables of great length," as well as "most of the ornaments appertaining to the orders of architecture."<sup>88</sup> The wood was extensively used for water mains in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, and the tree was often planted to furnish a supply of material from which to manufacture pipes.<sup>89</sup>

But its usefulness was just one facet of the elm's cultural role. The tree was also an established visual presence in the vernacular culture and countryside of England. Elms were objects of worship and veneration from the earliest period of English history. They marked the sites of May Day dances, fertility rites and other pagan rituals. Elms later became associated with early Christian cults, and may have even played a liturgical role. Suicides and executed felons were required to be buried with a stake of elm driven through their heart, and the tree acquired magical properties thought useful as a prophylactic against witchcraft.<sup>90</sup>

Elm was also "the main tree of settlements," planted about the domiciles of the earliest permanent habitations.<sup>91</sup> From the late Middle Ages the tree was also often planted as an amenity in villages. Specimen elms adorned many village crossroads and greens, a practice that would later be recalled in New England.<sup>92</sup> Elm groves, or spinneys, dating from the Middle Ages, were a common feature of English villages in Cambridgeshire and elsewhere.<sup>93</sup> Elms were a common hedgerow tree in the British Isles, particularly after the enclosure movement of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. As would later occur in the

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<sup>85</sup> Richens, *Elm*, 99.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 50-51; 101-102.

<sup>88</sup> John Evelyn, *Sylva; or, A Discourse of Forest-trees* (1664), quoted in Jackson, *A Sense of Place, A Sense of Time*, 97-98.

<sup>89</sup> Richens, *Elm*, 52-53.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 118-122.

<sup>91</sup> Oliver Rackham, *Trees and Woodland in the British Landscape* (London: Dent, 1976), quoted in Wilkinson, *Epitaph*, 110.

<sup>92</sup> Richens, *Elm*, 112.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

Connecticut and other river valleys, cultural disturbance favored elms in the English countryside: “The more land was enclosed,” writes Gerard Wilkinson, “the more hedges were made and the modern habitat of elms increased.”<sup>94</sup>

As the place of origin for many of New England’s early settlers was a place of elms, it is likely that English precedent played a significant role in the subsequent cultural embrace of the American elm in the New World. That certain similarities may be seen in the utilization of elm wood in England and the United States suggests that cultural transference was at work. It follows that aesthetic and even symbolic uses may have been similarly imported. Such cultural influences likely operated at a number of levels simultaneously, both conscious and subconscious. Little or no evidence remains to establish clear links of any kind, however. For example, no documentary material exists which proves that the practice of leaving field and hedgerow elms was informed by recollections of the English countryside or the remembered landscape of enclosure. But such may well have been the case.

In settling an alien land, artifacts which bore even a passing resemblance to those of home would have struck a resonant chord. As New Englanders began to set out trees, as adornments to their domestic environments, and eventually those of their villages and towns, English ghosts would guide their choice of tree. As Charles Sprague Sargent put it, “The people who settled the shores of Massachusetts Bay brought with them the remembrance of the Elm-trees which were such an important and conspicuous feature in the country where they had been bred.”<sup>95</sup> New Englanders possessed a natural affinity for the elm, a plant which recalled their ancestral landscape. In time they would come to favor it above all other trees.

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<sup>94</sup> Wilkinson, *Epitaph*, 112

<sup>95</sup> Charles Sprague Sargent, “The American Elm,” *Garden and Forest* (11 June 1890): 281.

CHAPTER TWO

*Jacob's Sylvan Ladder*

“Long, long has it stood in unbending might  
A noble and beauteous thing,  
And still it maintains its towering height,  
And its sway as forest king . . .”<sup>1</sup>

Cultural interference—the clearing and agricultural settlement of the land—favored the American elm, and amplified its presence in the landscape. Moreover, a cultural familiarity with elms, combined with certain properties of the tree itself—formal beauty and rapid growth—made the elm an early favorite among the Yankee colonists. New Englanders began planting the tree at an early date, so that the numerous elms which adorned the landscape by the end of the eighteenth century were an eclectic mix of autochthonous remnants from the pre-European settlement era, wayside volunteers, and trees purposefully planted. The elm emerged as a cultural artifact in New England first as a solitary *object*. Between the late eighteenth and the middle of the nineteenth centuries, specimen elms came to bear a range of meaning—as domestic landmarks, civic totems, relics of an imagined prelapsarian age, and as monuments to persons and events of historical significance.

*Bridal Elms and Dooryard Trees*

Among the first American elms set out intentionally were those planted in front of colonial homes for the purposes of shelter, decoration and sentiment. The association of domicile and tree began in the earliest settlement period, when large elms were often sought out as house sites—at least those sufficiently removed from the dangers of springtime flooding. One such tree gave shelter to Ephraim Foster, an early settler of Ipswich, Massachusetts, who was said to have built his home under the spreading limbs of a big elm in 1678.<sup>2</sup> The house sheltered the inhabitants, and the overarching elm in turn sheltered the house. The umbrageous form of the elm seemed to embrace and protect whatever lay beneath its limbs. “As a dooryard tree,” Donald Culross Peattie would later write, “it hangs above the roof

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<sup>1</sup> “The Old Elm Tree,” reprinted in Allen H. Bagg, “Former Mayor Bagg Tells Thrilling Story of the Old Elm; Its Place in Our History,” *Berkshire Eagle* (July 1927).

<sup>2</sup> This tree was later known as the Hubbard Elm, one of the celebrated specimens of nineteenth-century Massachusetts. See Lorin L. Dame, *Typical Elms and Other Trees of Massachusetts* (Boston: Little Brown, 1890), 36.

like a blessing—clean of branches under the crown but shading the roof like a second air chamber above it.”<sup>3</sup>

More commonly, sapling elms were planted to provide such shelter; tenacious and fast-growing, elms afforded value in a relatively short time. The practice of planting protective “house trees” was likely transferred from England, a point stressed by several nineteenth-century writers. Charles Sprague Sargent suggested that, following English tradition, sapling elms were placed by the domicile “to guard the roof-tree”<sup>4</sup>—the massive topmost beam “over which the roof bent its stiff back and stretched broadly away to the eaves.”<sup>5</sup> Domicile elms were also thought to offer protection from lightning. J. E. Strong, writing in the *New England Farmer*, reflected on this old folk wisdom in 1843. “The general impression among the community,” he observed, “is, that the elm is a very great protection to a building, if standing near it; some even consider it nearly . . . as good a protection as a well constructed lightning rod.”<sup>6</sup>

But colonial homesteaders also planted trees for purposes of amenity, too. Whipstock elms, “taken from the borders of a neighboring swamp,” were commonly set out as dooryard ornaments, to celebrate the establishment of a home, or to commemorate significant family events.<sup>7</sup> A pair of “bridal elms” was sometimes set out to mark a marriage. Naturalist Ernest H. Wilson suggested that this practice may have originated with the legend of Baucis and Philemon, who passed their lives “in love and concord” and wished that death would visit them both in the same hour. “The prayer was granted,” Wilson related, “by the two being transformed into leafy trees and as the bark closed over their bodies they bade each other farewell.”<sup>8</sup>

Many landmark elms of nineteenth-century New England began as bridal trees in the colonial era. The Pratt Elm of Concord, Massachusetts, well known to Emerson and Thoreau, was one of a bridal pair set out around 1700. For generations the two trees

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<sup>3</sup> Donald Culross Peattie, *A Natural History of Trees* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1966), 238.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Sprague Sargent, *The Silva of North America*, vol. 3 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1895), 45.

<sup>5</sup> E. B. Hornby, *Under Old Rooftrees* (Jersey City, New Jersey: Privately published, 1908), 11-12.

<sup>6</sup> Strong then went on to argue that no tree was reliable protection from a bolt of lightning, and he cited several gruesome instances where bolts had slipped down house-bound elms and struck innocents within. The fact that Strong was himself a manufacturer of “improved lightning conductors” makes his refutation somewhat suspect. See “Trees as Protectors From Lightning,” *New England Farmer* 22 (22 November 1843).

<sup>7</sup> The term “whipstock” simply refers to a sapling tree. See Charles Sprague Sargent, *The Silva of North America*, vol. 3 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1895), 45.

<sup>8</sup> Ernest H. Wilson, *Aristocrats of the Trees* (Boston: The Stratsford Company, 1930), 81.



**Figure 5.** Old bridal elms, South Chelmsford, Massachusetts. Photograph by E. H. Wilson, 1925.  
Courtesy, Photographic Archives of the Arnold Arboretum, Harvard University.

“grew in silence and obscurity,” wrote Lorin Dame, “till they overtopped their fellows and found themselves famous.”<sup>9</sup> In Northampton, the Jonathan Edwards Elm was said to have been planted by the eponymous theologian and orator on the occasion of his marriage to Sarah Pierpont. A small perch, complete with chairs, was later built in the crotch of the tree, a sylvan aerie in which Edwards himself supposedly composed his fiery sermons.<sup>10</sup> Another bridal tree was the celebrated “Old Elm of Newbury” Massachusetts. It was one of four baby elms transplanted in 1713 by Richard Jaques, from his sweetheart’s girlhood homestead to the couple’s new house. Only one survived, but it gradually passed into legend. “The twig took root; and as time flew by,” wrote the poet Hannah Gould

Its boughs spread wide, and its head grew high;  
While the priest’s good service had long been done,  
Which made the youth and the maiden one;  
And their young scions arose and played  
Around the tree in its leafy shade.<sup>11</sup>

Not all house elms were conjugal in origin. Trees were also set out to mark births—and deaths—or were planted as gifts or tokens of friendship. A pair of elms in Natick, Massachusetts, were a gift from Native Americans in 1722. As related by the *New England Farmer*, “a deputation of Indians . . . one bearing two Elm trees on his shoulder,” sought the permission of minister Oliver Peabody to be allowed to plant the brace of saplings before his house, “as a mark of their regard, or as the *Trees of Friendship*.” Years later, in 1753, a similar gesture was accorded Peabody’s successor.<sup>12</sup> The Natick trees survived well into the nineteenth century, longer even than the tribe which bestowed them. The Pierpont Elms of New Haven, planted in 1686 in front of the home of the Reverend James Pierpont, were similarly a gift, from a poor farmer named William Cooper. Having little to contribute toward the furnishing of the pastor’s house, he gave instead a vigorous pair of sapling elms. By the early nineteenth century the building had vanished, but the elms endured—”to speak forth,” as Charles Upham Shepard put it in 1838, “the humble charity of a poor but virtuous man.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Lorin L. Dame, *Typical Elms and Other Trees of Massachusetts* (Boston: Little Brown, 1890), 29.

<sup>10</sup> This is apocryphal, as the tree would never have been large enough for such a structure in Edwards’ lifetime. Clifford H. Lyman, “Northampton in the Days of Jonathan Edwards, 1727-1750,” unpublished manuscript (1937), Collections of Historic Northampton.

<sup>11</sup> Hannah Gould, quoted in Dame, *Typical Elms*, 47.

<sup>12</sup> John Welles, “Remarks on Trees,” *New England Farmer* 4 (24 February 1826): 242-243.

<sup>13</sup> Charles Upham Shepard (1838), quoted in Henry Howe, “New Haven’s Elms and Green,” a scrapbook of his articles from the *New Haven Daily Morning Journal and Courier* (1883-1884), Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University, 11.

Nathaniel Hawthorne evoked an old dooryard elm to create a setting of mellowed age in *The House of the Seven Gables*. “Of wide circumference, rooted before the door,” the venerable elm is coeval with the house it shelters; the “two antiquities,” are paired in the imagination. In front of the “weather-beaten edifice,”

just on the edge of the unpaved sidewalk, grew the Pyncheon-elm, which, in reference to such trees as one usually meets with, might well be termed gigantic. It had been planted by a great-grandson of the first Pyncheon, and, though now fourscore years of age, or perhaps nearer a hundred, was still in its strong and broad maturity, throwing its shadow from side to side of the street, overtopping the seven gables, and sweeping the whole black roof with its pendent foliage. It gave beauty to the old edifice, and seemed to make it a part of nature.<sup>14</sup>

In time, the aged house elm—hoary and pendulous—became part of the romanticized image of New England domestic life. Towering over a rural homestead, such elms imparted “an air of comfort and ease,” wrote the *New England Farmer* in 1825, “to the humblest cottage.”<sup>15</sup> The dooryard tree came to symbolize the tranquil pleasures of the home life; indeed, a homestead without a sheltering elm was like a parlor without a hearth. Few understood this better than Henry David Thoreau. Spying from afar the expansive dome of an elm near Carlisle, Massachusetts, Thoreau imagined the “quiet rural and domestic life passing beneath it.” For the bard of Walden Pond, a great elm was “the vignette to an unseen idyllic poem”;

Homestead telegraphs to homestead through these distant elms seen from hilltops. I fancy I hear the house-dog’s bark and lowing of the cows asking admittance to their yard beneath it. The tea-table is spread; the master and mistress and the hired men now have just sat down in their shirtsleeves.<sup>16</sup>

To many observers of Yankee culture, it was this domestic role that most endeared the elm in the native imagination. As Charles Sprague Sargent wrote of the New Englander, “No other tree is so associated in his mind with the idea of home,” than the American elm—“the most remarkable feature of the domestic New England landscape.”<sup>17</sup> So cherished was the companionship of elms that when an aged behemoth by the Champney House in Deerfield, Massachusetts, finally fell, the house itself was moved back on the property so “that it might hold the same relation to a younger elm.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The House of the Seven Gables* (Boston: Ticknor, Reed, and Fields, 1851), 9; 32-33.

<sup>15</sup> “Shade Trees,” *New England Farmer* 4 (5 August 1825): 10.

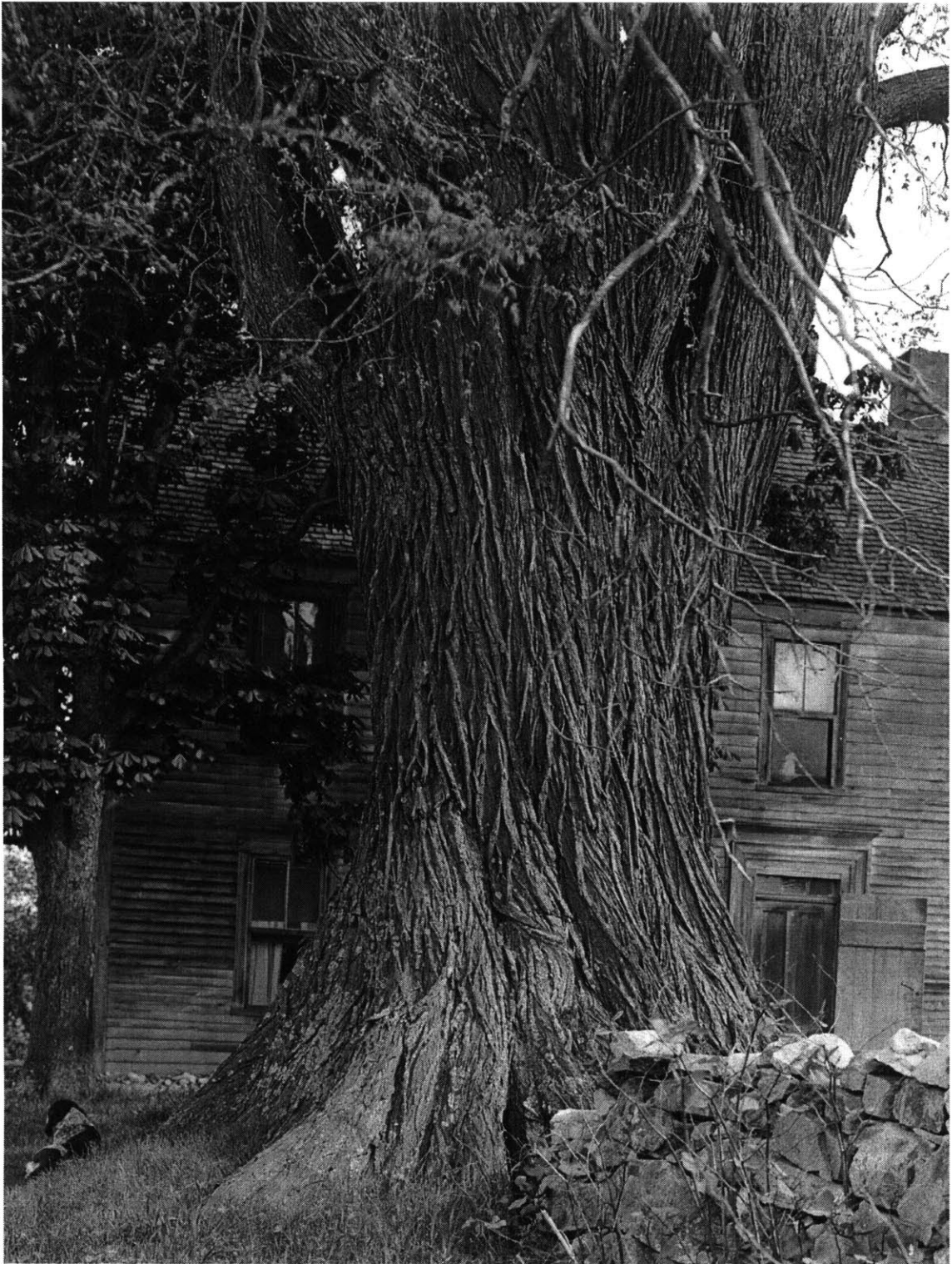
<sup>16</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *The Journal of Henry D. Thoreau*, 3d. ed., vol. 10, eds. Bradford Torrey and Francis H. Allen (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1949), 89.

<sup>17</sup> Charles Sprague Sargent, “The American Elm,” *Garden and Forest* (11 June 1890): 281.

<sup>18</sup> Emma Lewis Coleman, *A Historic and Present Day Guide to Old Deerfield* (Boston: [s. n.] 1912), 105.



**Figure 6.** The homestead elm. Conway, New Hampshire. Photograph by E. H. Wilson, 1930.  
Courtesy, Photographic Archives of the Arnold Arboretum, Harvard University.



**Figure 7.** Old house tree near Newburyport, Massachusetts. Photograph by E. H. Wilson, 1927.  
Courtesy, Photographic Archives of the Arnold Arboretum, Harvard University.

Evoking a tree-tossed picture of home, a writer in the *New England Farmer* suggested that “There is not a more lovely object than an ancient elm, with its glossy leaves stirred by the wind at eventide, with the hum of insects sounding from its branches, and the troops of children frolicking about its trunk.”<sup>19</sup> Recalling “summer days of youth under the lovely shade around the paternal domicile,” a later writer reflected that “such reminiscences of our purer days deserve to be fondly cherished, and should never be obliterated by the sterner pursuits” of later life. The sheltering elm exerted “a delightful moral influence,” he reasoned, and

thus becomes, as it were, a cherished member of an affectionate family. Its longevity renders it an abiding friend of succeeding generations—a silent but most interesting witness of the advent and departure of children, and children’s children—while its aged trunk remains an emblem and a precious memorial of a long line of venerated ancestry.<sup>20</sup>

### *The Elm as Civic Totem*

If elms stood as guardians of the domestic scene and memorials “of venerated ancestry,” they also early assumed a *civic* role in New England. This was particularly the case with large, indigenous trees close to the center of a village or town. By virtue of circumstance, these elder specimen elms often emerged as totemic artifacts, and came to occupy privileged positions in many New England communities. Such elms recalled Old World pagan rituals of tree worship, particularly the pre-Christian symbolism of the “great tree of life.” The totem elms of New England also harkened back to the *rolands* of early Europe. Rolands stood at the center of *landschaften*, the pattern of fields and clustered dwellings which distinguished the settled, agricultural landscape from the surrounding wilderness.<sup>21</sup>

Although commonly a stone or timber staff, the roland was sometimes a great single tree, about which pagans clustered their dwellings. In the British Isles these were often elms, and such specimen trees were, by the medieval period, commonplace on village greens or at the junction of roads.<sup>22</sup> May-day fertility rites would take place around these rolands, a practice which survived well into the Christian era. Early missionaries understood the power of such symbols, and often supplanted the roland with a crucifix, thereby pressing the pagan symbol into the service of Christ. In the pre-modern landscape of Northern

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<sup>19</sup> “Ornamental Trees,” *New England Farmer* 4 (19 May 1826): 341.

<sup>20</sup> “Plant Trees,” (“Dr. Darlington’s address before the Philadelphia Agricultural Society”), *New England Farmer* 23 (11 December 1844).

<sup>21</sup> John R. Stilgoe, *Common Landscape of America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 9; 17-18.

<sup>22</sup> R. H. Richens, *Elm* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 112.

Europe, writes John R. Stilgoe, the roland was the “objectified essence” of the settled landscape.<sup>23</sup>

The Old World roland was reborn in the totem elms of New England. In numerous towns and villages, an old elm stood at or near the center of settlement. Such trees were a symbol of order hewn out of wilderness chaos, and marked the hub of the settled landscape like an arboreal *axis mundi*. Totem elms became the focal point of ritual and celebration in a community, and often evolved into a symbol of the town itself. Like the pre-modern rolans, the Yankee totem elm epitomized spatial order and “a centripetal view of things.”<sup>24</sup>

### *The Pittsfield Elm*

The loftiest totem elm in New England was the great Pittsfield Elm of Massachusetts. By the time the Pittsfield area was occupied by Europeans in the early eighteenth century, the tree was well over two centuries old.<sup>25</sup> It was said to have been saved from the axe by Captain Charles Goodrich, who directed construction of a cart path around the tree in 1752.<sup>26</sup> In clearing the Pontoosuc intervalle, settlers likewise spared the elm, presumably on account of its “peculiar beauty and magnificent proportions.”<sup>27</sup> Moreover, they selected it as the site of their town. The Pittsfield Elm was indeed a spectacular vegetable, “fairer than any work of man’s hand.”<sup>28</sup> On a visit to the town in 1838, Nathaniel Hawthorne described the sylvan giant as having the “loftiest and straitest stem that ever I beheld.”<sup>29</sup> Its soaring bole rose seventy feet before parting into limbs, and held aloft a palm-like “leafy coronal” which brushed the sky 128 feet above the town.<sup>30</sup>

Both physically and in the collective imagination, the Old Elm towered over Pittsfield. It far out topped the meetinghouse steeple, and was unchallenged by any other building for its entire life. A ubiquitous presence in nineteenth-century views and literary accounts of the town, the Pittsfield Elm became its most famous landmark, and a celebrated attraction

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<sup>23</sup> Stilgoe, *Common Landscape*, 18. “Meters, scepters, and maces—perhaps even the patrolman’s nightstick—derive from the Christianized pagan symbol of imposed order that dominated the typical late medieval landscape.”

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>25</sup> When the elm was cut down in 1864, its growth rings revealed a life of 340 years, placing its origins well before European settlement of the area.

<sup>26</sup> Morgan Bulkeley, “The Old Elm,” *Berkshire Eagle* (17 December 1968).

<sup>27</sup> Allen H. Bagg, “Former Mayor Bagg Tells Thrilling Story of the Old Elm,” *Berkshire Eagle* (July 1927).

<sup>28</sup> J. E. A. Smith, *The History of Pittsfield* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1869), 439.

<sup>29</sup> Hawthorne quoted in Kirk Scharfenberg, “Time Runs Short for Park’s Elms,” *Berkshire Eagle* (13 September 1975).

<sup>30</sup> Smith, *History of Pittsfield*, 440.

throughout New England. The rolandic centripetality of the tree drew significance into its orbit. “All village affairs gravitated to the elm,” a later writer reflected; “public and business buildings circled it in homage.”<sup>31</sup> John Carver, writing in 1842, observed that the elm stood—literally and figuratively—“in the centre of the village, towering majestically far above every object around it.” The tree, in the mind of “every native citizen,” was associated with “the sunny hours and fairy visions of childhood.”

Beneath it boys play their games of cricket and bass, and have played them an [*sic*] hundred years; the swain whispers there his soft tale to the ruddy-cheeked lass he loves; the school-girls circle round it, in their soft-toned merriment; fourth of July brings to it crowds of mimic, noise-loving heroes, whose shots, and bruises, and unceasing crackings, the old tree, dressed in gay pennons and waving flags, receives upon his rough sides, like a hearty, hale veteran, as he is. The grave go there to meditate, and the gay to dance; strangers stand and admire the broad base and erect trunk of the unmatched elm; it is the hunting party’s rendezvous to count their game; the lawyer holds his petty court and the itinerant minstrel his gaping crowd beneath its broad branches; while its deep shadows are alike sought, and alike grateful, to the youth and the man of eighty years.<sup>32</sup>

An anonymous Berkshire poet, writing in 1845, paid homage to the Pittsfield Elm. His verse captured the tree’s multifaceted role in the civic life of the community:

Long, long has it stood in unbending might  
A noble and beauteous thing,  
And still it maintains its towering height,  
And its sway as forest king.  
Full many a race hath passed away,  
Tha cherish e’en as we,  
Who mourn at ought that tokens decay  
In our stately old elm tree.

The aged sire, as he creeps along,  
Views it with moistened eye,  
For it wakens thrilling memories  
Of years long since gone by,  
Of dear departed ones with whom,  
In their hours of boyish glee,  
He was wont to meet oft at noon  
‘Neath the lofty old elm tree.

The wanderer, who loved its shade  
In childhood’s sunny time,  
But now, afar his home hath made  
In transatlantic clime,  
When to his native home he sends  
A message o’er the sea,  
Fails not to ask ‘mong other things

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<sup>31</sup> Morgan Bulkeley, “The Old Elm,” *Berkshire Eagle* (17 December 1968).

<sup>32</sup> John Carver, *Sketches of New England*, (New York: E. French, 1842), 177-178.

For news of the old elm tree.

The village children at its foot  
Gamboling in delight,  
Speak proudly of its giant form,  
Its beauty and its height,  
And of their grandsires oft they ask  
For its early history,  
But none can tell, or its age, alas:  
Was it always an old elm tree . . .

The pride of the village it long hath been,  
And the voice of envy hath said,  
That clad in mourning we shall all be seen  
When our idol tree is dead.  
Be it so, methinks it unkind to mock  
Our worship, if such it be,  
For age hath made most venerable,  
That stately old elm tree.<sup>33</sup>

The Old Elm marked more than the axis of the quotidian landscape, as it hosted specific historic events, too. Tories were upbraided beneath its limbs before the Revolution, and there “Fighting Parson” Thomas Allen rallied the Berkshire Minutemen and planned an assault on Fort Ticonderoga.<sup>34</sup> It was to the trunk of the Pittsfield Elm in 1809 that Elkanah Watson tied a pair of Merino sheep, smuggled out of Spain. The strange animals attracted so much attention that Watson was encouraged to expand his idea to a larger scale, and thus inaugurated the agricultural fair in America.<sup>35</sup> A decade or so later, Lafayette was feted beneath the limbs of the Pittsfield Elm, during his much-celebrated tour of America in 1824.<sup>36</sup> It was in the shadow of the Old Elm that the 37th Massachusetts Regiment was blessed by the preacher John Todd before heading south to Civil War.<sup>37</sup>

The fame of Pittsfield’s totem traveled far and wide. In 1825 an English pottery maker, the James and Richard Clews Factory of Staffordshire, chose the Pittsfield Elm to decorate a series of platters and plates. English dinnerware intended for the American market in this period usually featured architectural or urban scenes from major port cities, natural wonders such as Niagara Falls, or technological feats such as the Erie Canal. Subject matter was calculated to flatter national pride, and appeal to the widest possible market.

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<sup>33</sup> “The Old Elm Tree,” reprinted in Bagg, *Berkshire Eagle* (July 1927).

<sup>34</sup> C. S. Hayward, “Pittsfield Plans Living Memorial to Men in Service On Site of Famous Elm That Grew in City Hall Park,” *Springfield Republican* (18 April 1943).

<sup>35</sup> Stilgoe, *Common Landscape*, 251.

<sup>36</sup> *A Handbook of New England* (Boston: Porter E. Sargent, 1917), 402.

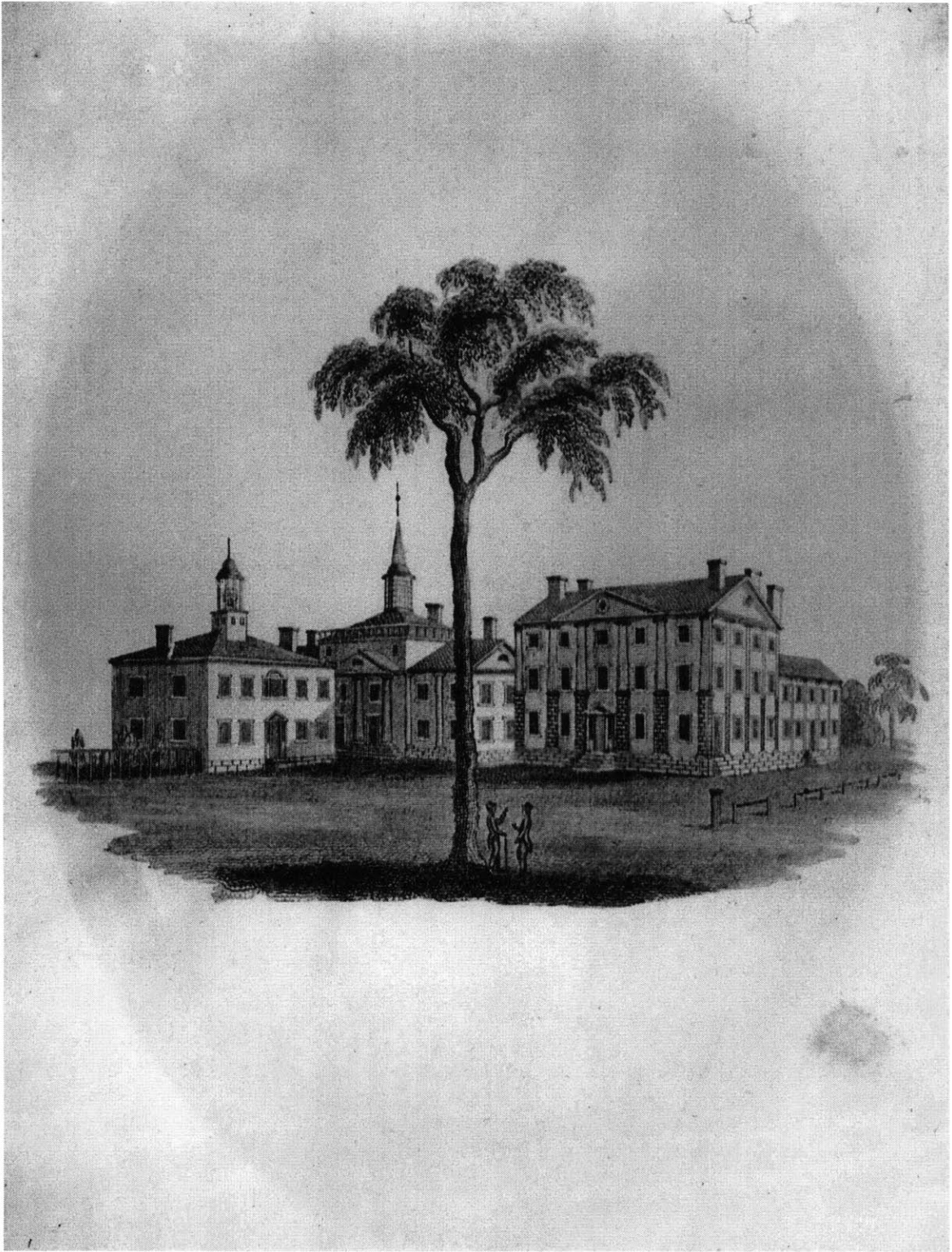
<sup>37</sup> W. R. Plunkett, “The ‘Old Elm’ Sun-Dial,” *Berkshire Eagle*(n. d.)



**Figure 8.** Pittsfield Elm., c. 1807. Courtesy Berkshire Athenaeum, Pittsfield, Massachusetts.



**Figure 9.** Staffordshire pearlware platter depicting Pittsfield Elm, by J. and R. Clews, 1825. Courtesy Historic Deerfield, Deerfield, Massachusetts.



**Figure 10.** Pittsfield Elm, c. 1826. Courtesy Berkshire Athenaeum, Pittsfield, Massachusetts.

That Pittsfield was selected is testament to the renown of the Old Elm, for images of small rural American towns were rare in Staffordshire pottery.<sup>38</sup>

By the 1830s, the Pittsfield Elm was in visible decline. Storms had begun to tear at it, and in 1841 a tremendous lightning bolt scarred the length of its trunk—“a stroke of the elements,” one writer described it, “which caused great sorrow in a multitude of hearts.”<sup>39</sup> Herman Melville, who worked on *Moby Dick* in Pittsfield in the early 1850s, evoked this scar in the “slender, rod-like mark, lividly whitish” on Captain Ahab’s face: “It resembled that perpendicular seam sometimes made in the straight, lofty trunk of a great tree,” Melville wrote, “when the upper lightning tearingly darts down it, and without wrenching a single twig, peels and grooves out the bark, from top to bottom, ere, running off into the soil, leaving that tree still greenly alive, but branded.”<sup>40</sup>

The “central gem” of Pittsfield, broken and shorn of limb, was finally brought to the ground in 1864, “amid the tears of the sternest men.”<sup>41</sup> Wielding the axe was a man named (ironically) Sylvanus Grant, an African-American woodsman whose labors made him something of a local celebrity (as late as 1943, long after Grant’s death, his 96 year-old widow was profiled in a local newspaper as the “wife of the man who felled the Old Elm”).<sup>42</sup> The wreckage of the Pittsfield Elm was auctioned off, and later carved into ornaments and bric-a-brac—including an armchair and picture frames to hold portraits of the elm itself.

### *Tree of Liberty*

Shortly after Pittsfield was settled, another Yankee tree emerged as a totem of profound civic and political power. Unlike the Berkshire tree, this was no autochthonous founding of the aboriginal forest, but a humble house tree planted in the seventeenth century. Its fame, however, would spread far and wide; for this was Boston’s Tree of Liberty. The site of early resistance to British imperialism, the plant was transformed into a symbol of the American Revolution, and an icon of liberty that would travel the world. Colonial firebrands in Boston had made good use of the printing press to spread the word of

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<sup>38</sup> June Sprigg and Paige Savery, “Pittsfield’s Precious Plates,” article (n. d.), Collection of the Berkshire Athenaeum; Amanda E. Lange, “The Story of the Pittsfield Elm Platter,” brochure, Berkshire Botanical Garden 36th Annual Antiques Show (July 1996).

<sup>39</sup> William H. Phillips quoted in Bagg, *Berkshire Eagle* (July 1927).

<sup>40</sup> Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*, eds. Harrison Hayford and Hershel Parker (New York: W. W. Norton, 1967), 110.

<sup>41</sup> Smith, *History of Pittsfield*, 35-36. Some accounts erroneously place its felling in 1861.

<sup>42</sup> Samuel Sass, “Sylvanus Grant and the Pittsfield Elm,” *Berkshire Eagle* (18 October 1984). Also Hayward, “Pittsfield Plans Living Memorial. . .” *Springfield Republican* (18 April 1943).



Figure 11. "Liberty Tree," From F. S. Hassam, *Liberty Tree, Liberty Hall* (1891).

freedom. But in the “department of silent propaganda,” wrote Arthur M. Schlesinger, “no single venture paid richer dividends than the Tree of Liberty.”<sup>43</sup>

The Liberty Tree began life inauspiciously, set out by Garrett Bourne in front of his house in 1646. Bourne (who “planted better than he knew”) was said to have specifically selected the young American elm “on account of its shape and vigor.”<sup>44</sup> The house, located on the old Neck by what is today Washington Street, later became a tavern, and a popular meeting place among the Sons of Liberty. As early as 1760 Bourne’s elm had itself become associated with the Sons, and was known as the Liberty Tree. Passage of the Stamp Act in 1765 triggered an avalanche of ill-will toward the British government. On an August night that year, a mob gathered under the “wide-spreading branches” of Bourne’s tree, to demonstrate against the tax and to harry Andrew Oliver into resigning his post as stamp officer.<sup>45</sup>

The next morning an effigy of Oliver was found hanged from a limb of the elm, along with a likeness of the devil himself, peering out of a huge boot and clutching a copy of the Stamp Act.<sup>46</sup> The King’s agent wisely resigned, and a symbol of resistance was born. Once a “harmless elm,” the tree suddenly acquired symbolic majesty; in one loyalist’s uncharitable view, it had become “consecrated as an Idol for the Mob to worship.” In September, 1765, this new status was confirmed when a copper plate bearing the words “The Tree of Liberty” was nailed to the trunk.<sup>47</sup> Not long after, the Sons ordered the elm pruned, and one newspaper subsequently reported that “the Tree is now become a great ornament to the street.”<sup>48</sup>

The Stamp Act went into effect, as planned, on the first day of November, 1765. Outrage among the patriots was renewed, and further demonstrations took place under the Liberty Tree. New effigies were hoisted into its limbs—of British Prime Minister George Grenville and the author of the Act itself, John Huske. A placard appeared, nailed to the trunk:

But if some Brethren I could Name,  
Who shar’d the Crime, should share the shame,

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<sup>43</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, “Liberty Tree: A Genealogy.” *New England Quarterly* (December 1952): 435.

<sup>44</sup> Frederick Fitch Hassam, *Liberty Tree, Liberty Hall* (Boston: Privately published, 1891), 1.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> The boot was “emblematic of the Earl of Bute, First Lord of the Treasury.” See Schlesinger, “Liberty Tree,” 437-438.

<sup>47</sup> Schlesinger, “Liberty Tree,” 437-438.

<sup>48</sup> Quoted in Hassam, *Liberty Tree*, 1.

That glorious Tree tho' big and tall,  
Indeed would never hold 'em all.<sup>49</sup>

When the Act was finally repealed that following May, a city-wide celebration was held and again the Liberty Tree played a central role. In preparation for the event, known as the “Great Illumination,” the tree was decorated with flags and bunting, and so many lanterns were hung on its limbs that “the sailors in charge,” reminisced one antiquarian, “could not find another twig to bear another light.”<sup>50</sup> An obelisk designed by Paul Revere had been specially constructed for the occasion. Covered with oiled paper and lighted from within, the glowing phallus was decorated with poems and illustrations about tyranny, freedom and love of liberty. One panel bore a likeness of the Liberty Tree, “with an eagle feeding its young, in the topmost branches, and an angel advancing with an aegis.”<sup>51</sup> Revere’s illuminated obelisk was intended to be placed beneath the Liberty Tree, a counterpoint to the sylvan totem. But it caught fire on the Common and was destroyed.

This symmetry of obelisk and elm was a subject of great interest to Joel Barlow—author of the celebrated *Columbiad* of 1787—who speculated on the pagan heritage of the Liberty Elm. Barlow argued that the Boston tree should be understood as part of a long tradition of phallus-worship dating back to antiquity. In an unpublished essay from 1796, entitled “Genealogy of the Tree of Liberty,” he recounted the legend of Osiris, the Egyptian god who was killed in a battle with Typhon, the victor tossing the genitals of the defeated into the Nile. The vanquished god’s organs endowed the river with supernatural power, and it thus became the source of all life—and vegetation—in Egypt. “To commemorate the tragical death of Osiris and the great benefit that resulted . . . from the posthumous power of his organs,” wrote Barlow, “a solemn feast was instituted in which the phallus in a posture of strong erection was carried in procession.”<sup>52</sup>

The story of Osiris, explained Barlow, made its way through the lands of antiquity, subtly changing form. In Greece, it emerged in the myth of Bacchus, whose memory was celebrated by “the procession of a Phallus” accompanied by “the most extravagant scenes of debauchery.” These nocturnal bacchanals became so associated with “freedom and

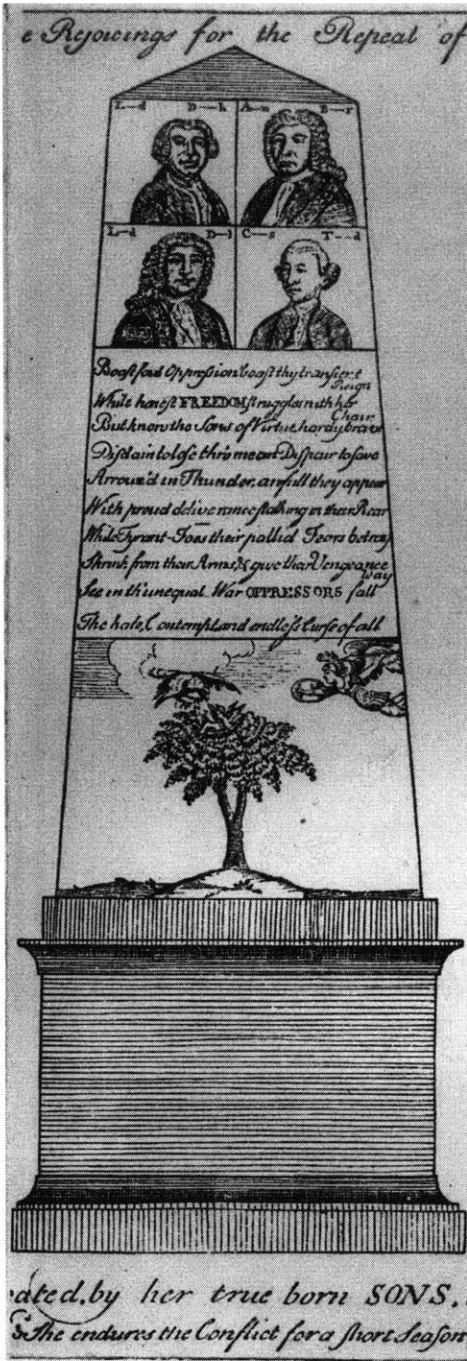
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<sup>49</sup> Schlesinger, “Liberty Tree,” 439.

<sup>50</sup> Esther Forbes, *Paul Revere and the World He Lived In* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1942), 101-102; 115-117.

<sup>51</sup> Inscription on obelisk by Paul Revere, quoted in Elbridge Henry Goss, *The Life of Colonel Paul Revere* (Boston: J. G. Cupples, 1891), 35-43.

<sup>52</sup> Joel Barlow, “The Genealogy of the Tree of Liberty,” unpublished manuscript (1796-97), BMS Am 1448, Notebook 13, Houghton Rare Book Library, Harvard University.



**Figure 12.** Panel showing Liberty Tree, from Paul Revere's Liberty Pyramid, erected to celebrate repeal of the Stamp Act (May, 1766). From Howe, *Boston Common* (1910).

licentiousness,” he speculated, that during the Roman era Bacchus himself acquired the name *Liber Deus*, or God of Liberty. Thus the phallus eventually became linked with *libertas* or freedom. To Barlow, the May-pole tradition in England was yet another manifestation of the ancient rite of penis-worship, though to the unsuspecting villagers it meant little more than “the liberty of a frolick.”<sup>53</sup> The poet concluded that the Liberty Tree itself was heir to this venerable legacy, a theory evinced by Revere’s illuminated obelisk. Barlow hardly seemed disturbed by the pagan sexuality of such precedent. The freedom bid absolved the Sons’ totem of such heathen parentage, for it was “planted in the ground as a solid emblem of *political Liberty*.”<sup>54</sup>

In the prelude to Revolution, neighboring towns and provinces adopted Liberty Trees of their own. These were not always elms, and sometimes not even trees. Braintree, Massachusetts, selected a buttonwood to bear the patriotic burden, as did Newport, Rhode Island. Nearby Providence chose a big elm. On the occasion of its consecration on July 25, 1768, an orator (speaking from a platform built among the limbs) invoked “that Liberty which our Forefathers sought out, and found under Trees, and in the Wilderness.”<sup>55</sup> Even Harvard College had a “rebellion elm.” About it students rallied to protest unpopular rules foisted upon them by their superiors—Stamp Act protests in miniature. According to Samuel Eliot Morison, students assembled at the tree in 1768 “to pass resolutions and organize resistance” against imagined acts of oppression.<sup>56</sup> “The spirit of Liberty,” remarked an ascerbic Thomas Hutchinson (then Lieutenant Governor of Massachusetts and a infamous Tory), has “spread where it was not intended.”<sup>57</sup>

Dedham, Massachusetts, became one of the first towns to erect an *artificial* elm, a “Pillar of Liberty” which consisted of a short timber column set on a granite plinth. Atop the log was set a bust of William Pitt, a member of Parliament popular in the colonies for having opposed the Stamp Act.<sup>58</sup> New York, too, substituted a stick for a tree, an urbane interpretation of Boston’s rustic symbol. A succession of Liberty Poles was erected near the present City Hall by New York patriots after 1766, most of which were quickly pulled down by the British troops.<sup>59</sup> A particularly massive timber was later raised, complete with iron hoops to prevent cutting; but in January 1770 the redcoats succeeded in removing

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Harriet S. Tapley, *Salem Imprints, 1768-1825* (1927), 14; quoted in Schlesinger, “Liberty Tree,” 444.

<sup>56</sup> Samuel Eliot Morison, *Three Centuries of Harvard* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936), 133.

<sup>57</sup> Schlesinger, “Liberty Tree,” 444.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 441-448.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 441-442.

that too, an action which touched off a series of drunken scuffles between citizens and soldiers. The fifth and final Liberty Pole was erected with great fanfare a month later—a tremendous pine mast decorated with a gilded vane inscribed “LIBERTY.” As in Boston, the patriots frequently gathered beneath the Liberty Pole, to commit—in one Tory’s uncharitable view—“*idolatrous and vociferous Acts of Worship, to a Stick of Wood . . .*”<sup>60</sup>

The Boston tree saw action again in 1773, when the flames of rebellion were fanned by the East India Company’s newly-granted monopoly of the American tea market. It was only after repeated failed attempts to intimidate local Company agents under the elm (by subjecting them to a “Tree Ordeal”), that the colonists resorted—famously—to dumping the herb into the harbor: the celebrated Boston Tea Party of December, 1773. The tea squabbles, and the punitive “Intolerable Acts” passed by Britain in response, produced a new crop of Liberty Poles. These “hated tokens of insurgency” appeared in rapid succession in towns across Massachusetts and Connecticut, and even as far south as Savannah, Georgia.<sup>61</sup>

In the end, such potent symbolism proved fatal for Garrett Bourne’s old dooryard elm. As fighting broke out in April of 1775, British soldiers and sympathizers set their eyes on the seditious symbol, and in a “vandal act” that August, succeeded in cutting it down.<sup>62</sup> One of the offending soldiers was reportedly killed as the great tree crashed to the ground (“one of those prophetic emblems,” a writer mused in 1838, which required “but little superstition to clothe with supernatural importance”).<sup>63</sup> Having stoked the flames of rebellion, the good elm was now reduced to fourteen cords of firewood; in parlors and kitchens around Boston, it would feed fires of a different sort.

No scion ever sprouted from the Liberty Tree’s hallowed root, but the spirit of the elm lived on, spreading far and wide. In France, the Liberty Tree became one of the symbols adopted by the Jacobins. This practice may have found its way across the Atlantic via Tom Paine, who had been in Paris on the eve of the French Revolution, and had earlier penned verse to the Liberty Tree (“A fair budding branch from the gardens above . . .”).<sup>64</sup> It may

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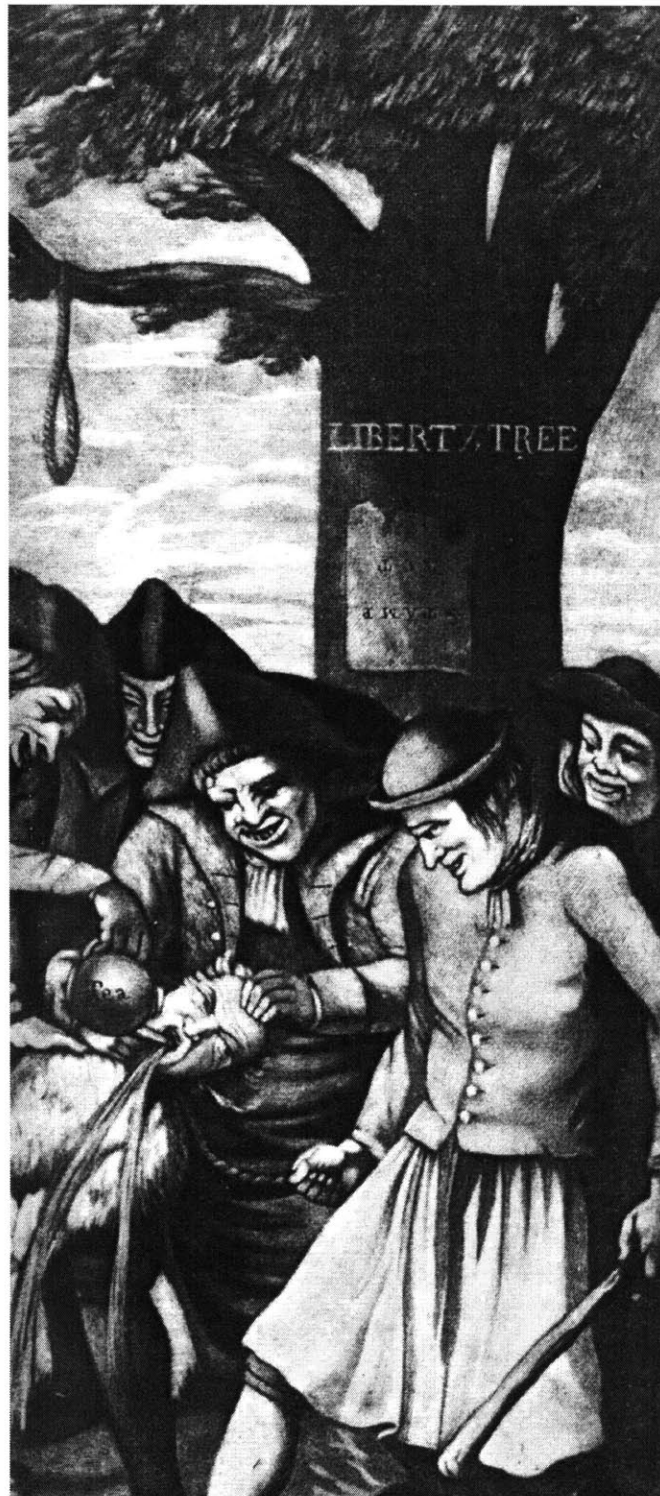
<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 445-446.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 448-449.

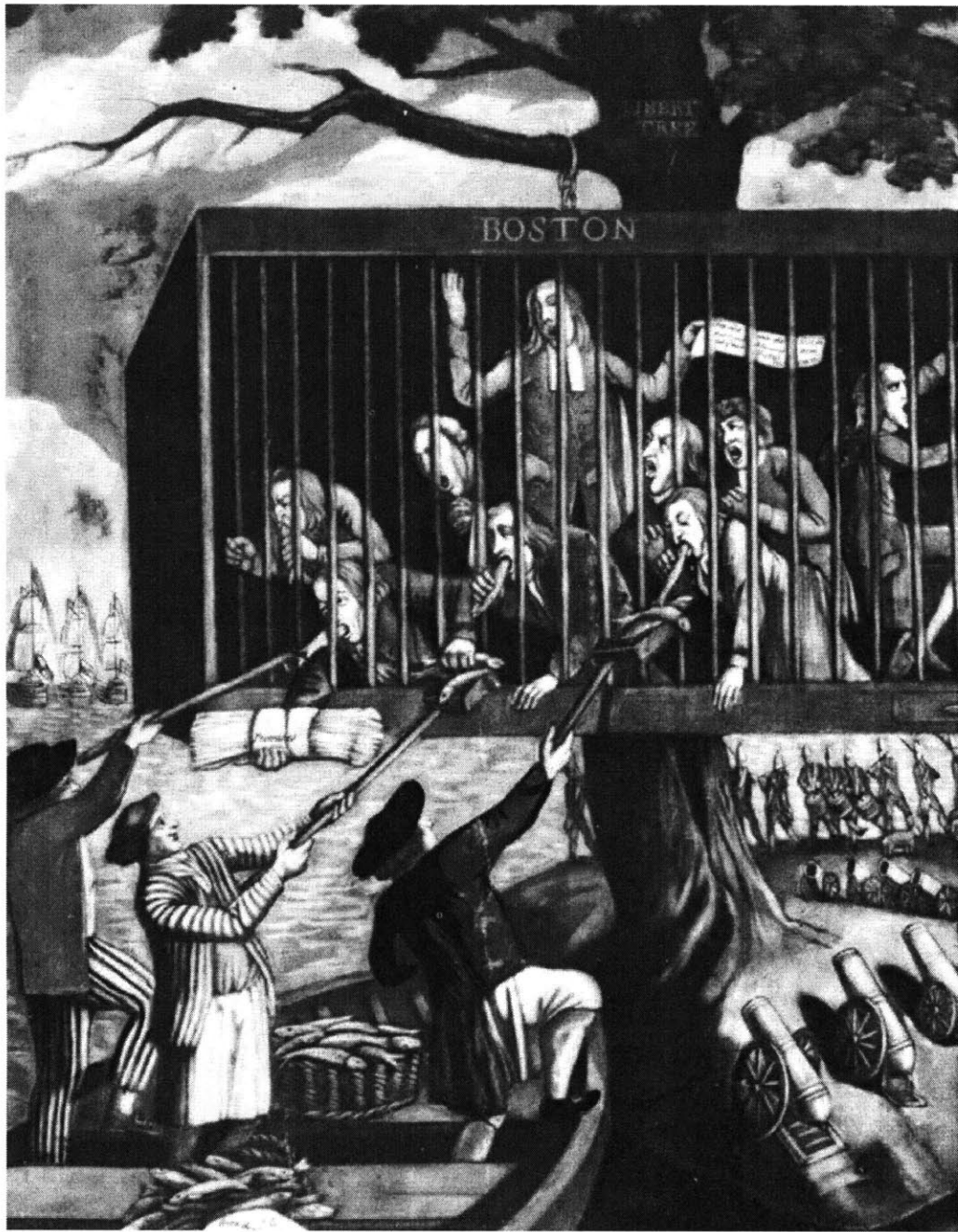
<sup>62</sup> Frederick Fitch Hassam, *Liberty Tree, Liberty Hall* (Boston: Privately published, 1891), 2.

<sup>63</sup> Nehemiah Adams, *Boston Common, or Rural Walks in Cities* (Boston: George H. Light, 1838; Bostonian Society edition), 13-14.

<sup>64</sup> Schlesinger, “Liberty Tree,” 453. For Paine’s poem (“Liberty Tree’), see Moncure Daniel Conway, ed. *The Writings of Thomas Paine*, vol. 4 (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1896), 484-485.



**Figure 13.** British cartoon depicting colonists administering tea to a tarred-and-feathered tax collector beneath Liberty Tree. From Whitehill and Kotker, *Massachusetts* (1976).



**Figure 14.** British cartoon featuring the Liberty Tree. Bostonians are shown in a cage after their port has been closed. From Whitehill and Kotker, *Massachusetts* (1976).

have also arrived by way of Lafayette, who was well acquainted with the Boston tree, and the cause of *liberté*. Lafayette's return to the site of the Liberty Tree was in fact one of the high points of his celebrated 1824 tour of America.

For the occasion, a new Liberty Pole and a grand ceremonial arch were erected, draped with French and American flags. The pillars of the arch were decorated with flowers, "elm garlands" and bunting in red, white and blue; and from its center hung a scroll bearing the gilded inscription: "WASHINGTON AND LAFAYETTE. A REPUBLIC NOT UNGRATEFUL." Tablets were affixed on either side, one of which bore Thomas Dawes' eulogy to the old elm:

Of high renown, here grew the tree  
Of elm, so dear to Liberty;  
Your sires, beneath its sacred shade,  
To Freedom early homage paid.

This day with filial awe surround  
Its root that sanctifies the ground,  
And by your fathers' spirits swear  
The rights they left you'll not impair.<sup>65</sup>

On August 23 the aged Lafayette made his way to the site, greeted by "the densest crowd ever seen in Boston." Among the many gifts presented to him that day were relics of the Tree of Liberty itself—a tiny piece of root, and a section of the trunk "showing the bark, the sap, and the heart."<sup>66</sup>

### *Sylvan Rolands and Central Trees*

The rolandic centrality of civic elms persisted well into the late nineteenth—and even twentieth—centuries. Wethersfield, Connecticut, came of age "in the shadow of the Great Elm."<sup>67</sup> The massive tree was a communal centerpiece, as well as one of the largest American elms in the United States.<sup>68</sup> It began humbly enough, stuck in the ground in the 1750s by a boy who yanked the tree from a nearby meadow as a whip to drive home his cows. By the end of the nineteenth century, the Wethersfield Elm was described as "perhaps the most magnificent tree east of the Rockies," and it drew admirers from around

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<sup>65</sup> Quoted in Hassam, *Liberty Tree*, 3.

<sup>66</sup> Hassam, *Liberty Tree*, 3-9.

<sup>67</sup> See Douglas Kendall, "In the Shadow of the Great Elm: Wethersfield, Connecticut in Transition, 1850-1940" (Ph.D. dissertation, Boston University, 1994).

<sup>68</sup> At its prime the tree was 26 feet in circumference and held aloft a crown 140 feet in width.

the country. More, it helped define the essence of Wethersfield both to its inhabitants and to the world outside; the identity of the town was intimately bound up with the totem tree.<sup>69</sup>

Like Wethersfield, the Massachusetts towns of Medfield, Unionville and Wrentham each possessed a “representative elm” at or near the center of town, as did Winchester.<sup>70</sup> Keene, New Hampshire, had an “Auction Elm” at its center, a functional totem not unlike Litchfield, Connecticut’s “Sign-Post Elm.” Legal notices were posted on the “calm flank” of this tree, while beneath it the sheriff’s office held sales of confiscated property.<sup>71</sup> For much of the nineteenth century an elm marked the center of Harvard Square in Cambridge. The geographic center of Massachusetts was itself marked by an elm—the famous Central Tree of Rutland, Massachusetts.<sup>72</sup> The great Hatfield Elm, a remnant of forest clearing in the 1670s, served as a centerpiece from the earliest days of that town’s settlement.<sup>73</sup> The tree was later incorporated into Hatfield town seal, where it has remained ever since.

A big totem elm at Sheffield, one of the oldest settlements in Western Massachusetts, likewise found its way onto the town seal.<sup>74</sup> The Sheffield Elm was said to have been spared by pioneer settlers for its great size and beauty, and it served in lieu of a meetinghouse in the 1730s. The elm later became a favored site of festivals and orations (so expansive was its crown that a crowd of 500 people—most of Sheffield’s population—was said to have once gathered beneath its canopy).<sup>75</sup> The grandeur of the Sheffield Elm was captured in a song written for a gala festival in honor of the old tree in 1896. In a remarkable scene evoking ancient rites of tree worship, a group of Sheffield children—dressed all in white—circled the base of the totem tree, and sang

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<sup>69</sup> *A Handbook of New England* (Boston: Porter E. Sargent, 1917), 309. Photographs of the tree were proudly displayed at both the Chicago and St. Louis world’s fairs.

<sup>70</sup> James R. Simmons, *The Historic Trees of Massachusetts* (Boston: Marshall Jones, 1919), 134. Henry Smith Chapman, *History of Winchester* (Winchester: Town of Winchester, 1936), 176-177.

<sup>71</sup> Alain C. White, *The History of the Town of Litchfield* (Litchfield: Enquirer, 1920), 171-172.

<sup>72</sup> Actually, two big elms competed for this honor, the “center of the state” being a rather imperfect geography. Both trees seemed to have each a set of adherents. See Simmons, *Historic Trees of Massachusetts*; also see Lyman P. Powell, *Historic Towns of New England* (New York: Knickerbocker Press, 1899), 103. Although the old Central Tree is gone, a young heir now grows in its place. The landmark is also preserved in the name of the street, Central Tree Road.

<sup>73</sup> Daniel W. and Reuben F. Wells, *A History of Hatfield* (Springfield: Gibbons, 1910), 37. The tree had apparently earlier played a role in the native American landscape; a cut in its trunk, several feet from the base, was said to have been made by Indians to record the high-water mark of the Connecticut River. See *New England Farmer* 4 (25 November 1825): 142.

<sup>74</sup> This was one of the largest elms in Massachusetts. In 1844, George B. Emerson measured it to be 22 feet in girth at the base. See George B. Emerson, *A Report on the Trees and Shrubs Growing Naturally in the Forests of Massachusetts* vol. 2 (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1878), 328. When finally removed in 1926, the age of the Sheffield Elm was determined to be 400 years. See Gerard Chapman, “The Great Elm,” *Berkshires Week* (13 September 1985).

<sup>75</sup> Gerard Chapman, “Sheffield’s Big Elm,” *Berkshire Eagle* (11 June 1985).



**Figure 15.** Wethersfield Elm, Wethersfield, Connecticut. Photograph by E. H. Wilson, 1924.  
Courtesy, Photographic Archives of the Arnold Arboretum, Harvard University.

Father of elms, we offer thee,  
The homage of true loyalty;  
Dear Sheffield, was but a baby sprite  
When first thy ranches met the light.

Cho.—We'll rally round the brave old tree,  
Emblem of all that's good and free.

You've known our woes, also our joys,  
Our winsome lassies, sturdy boys  
How well you know a lover's tread,  
Or silent anguish of our dead.

Dids't thou that gallant deed inspire,  
Which fills each breast with sacred fire;  
The deed we celebrate today,  
Whilst Nature smiles in sweet array.

Father of elms! long may you stand,  
A joy and wonder in our land;  
A rallying spot for meetings gay,  
With speech and song on a summer's day.<sup>76</sup>

The rolandic aura of elms was not restricted to towns. Long after the “rebellion elm” at Harvard disappeared, another took its place in the civic life of the college. Later known as the Old or Class Elm, the tree was a Harvard landmark for much of the nineteenth century. Bedecked with garlands of flowers, the tree was the hub of Class Day festivities, a tradition which began around 1800.<sup>77</sup> This rite of passage, during which the senior class invited faculty and public to celebrate their impending graduation, was a hearty bacchanal which preceded the formal ceremony of commencement. With punch and cider flowing freely, scores of students gathered about the Class Elm to hear poems and oratory, and to take partners for a cotillion.<sup>78</sup> In 1858 Winslow Homer sketched the scene—of well-oiled Harvard men tumbling about their collegiate totem—for *Ballou's Pictorial Drawing Room Companion*.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> “The Elms of Old Sheffield,” *The Berkshire Courier* (18 June, 1896).

<sup>77</sup> *Leslie's* (19 July 1856).

<sup>78</sup> Samuel Eliot Morrison, *Three Centuries of Harvard* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936), 249-250.

<sup>79</sup> *Ballou's Pictorial Drawing Room Companion* (3 July 1858); reproduced in S. B. Sutton, *Cambridge Reconsidered* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1976), 2.



**Figure 16.** Harvard Class Day festivities, by Winslow Homer, 1858.  
From Sutton, *Cambridge Reconsidered* (1976).



**Figures 17.** "Ceremonies Under the Old Elm," Harvard College. From *Leslie's* (19 July 1856).

*The Pleasures of Antiquity*

Elms such as the Tree of Liberty, and the Sheffield, Wethersfield and Pittsfield Elms served as totemic objects in the civic and political lives of their communities. But in the early years of the nineteenth century, these and other Yankee elms came to be increasingly celebrated for their age alone. Antiquity—particularly if it extended far enough back to antedate European arrival (and, therefore, history as the West imagined it)—was now a value in and of itself. Such a shift in attitude toward the past came as part of a larger quest for cultural validation in the early nineteenth century.

In breaking the chains of colonialism, America in effect unhitched itself from the Old World's burdened past, and from history itself. On the American horizon was self-reliance, a bright morning circumstance untarnished by the "catalog of errors" which occluded European skies.<sup>80</sup> To the Western mind, here was a fresh, new land; and here the human project could begin again. This was more than the boosterism of an upstart people. European intellectuals, too, believed that the New World offered freedom from the past, the chance to bring about a new Golden Age and restore "a prelapsarian state of grace."<sup>81</sup> In Elizabethan England, the popularity of pastoral poetry was due partly to florid accounts of the New World. Arcadia was suddenly more than just a literary conceit; as Leo Marx has written, it now gained "a note of topographic realism."<sup>82</sup> In Shakespeare's *Tempest*, Gonzalo envisioned an ideal society in which the sum total of "calculated human effort"—history itself—is denied. To Gonzalo, man was "happiest in the beginning," for the "record of human activity is a record of decline."<sup>83</sup>

Lacking cathedral ruins and crumbling castles, the American scene was unburdened by the shards of the past; or, as Goethe would write, "undisturbed . . . by useless remembering."<sup>84</sup> Mused William Tudor in 1819, "Our picturesque objects of an artificial kind are vastly fewer than those in older countries." While he admitted that the "total absence of ruins deprives us of what is an abundant source of associations in Europe"—a particular deficiency for artists—Tudor balanced this by arguing the inherent pathology of

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<sup>80</sup> This did not prevent, however, a certain longing for things European, and for the approval of European society in general.

<sup>81</sup> David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 109.

<sup>82</sup> Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 36-47.

<sup>83</sup> Marx, *Machine in the Garden* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 55.

<sup>84</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, "Die Vereinigten Staaten," English trans. by Stephen Spender, in Thomas Mann, ed., *The Permanent Goethe* (New York: Dial, 1948), 655; quoted in Hans Huth, *Nature and the American* (Berkeley: University of California, 1957), 49-50.

the Old World, and the detritus scattered in its wake. “The landscape,” he wrote of ruins, “is better without them.” For, “the sight of these grisly, hideous remains,

conjure up the ideas of baronial oppression, feudal slavery, and monkish delusion; that in those mouldering dungeons were formerly immured the victims of priestly or lordly tyranny; and those ruined walls once protected a few lawless despots, who carried on a petty but cruel warfare for personal revenge, and held a wretched peasantry in abject dependence . . . and awaken painful recollections in the midst of the most smiling scenery. . .

The American scene was a “happy region of freedom . . . encumbered with no mark or trophy of despotism” and unburdened by monuments to “a period of anterior degradation.” Indeed, “wherever the eye turns,” concluded Tudor, “it beholds the unpolluted soil of liberty.”<sup>85</sup>

But in spite of these florid assertions, Americans soon longed for just such keepsakes of their own. Before his ink had dried, William Tudor himself admitted that “if this ranting will not do, I must frankly give up the point, and acknowledge our want of this class of objects.”<sup>86</sup> The landscape, impoverished of relics and ruins, offered precious little evidence to affirm or validate the supposed grandeur of the American project. The lack of an artifactual past seemed to diminish native efforts, to render them transparent in the eyes of time. Americans feared that theirs was a hustling, superficial culture, one without depth or durability—and one which, moreover, was rapidly sweeping away whatever legacy it did possess. “The axe of civilization is busy with our old forests,” one critic lamented in 1847; “What were once the wild and picturesque haunts of the Red Man, and where the wild deer roamed in freedom, are becoming the abodes of commerce and the seats of manufactures . . . even the primordial hills, once bristling with shaggy pine and hemlock, like old Titans as they were, are being shorn of their locks, and left to blister in cold nakedness in the sun.”<sup>87</sup>

*“As a Witness Upon the Field of History”*

Indeed, if architectural ruins of great age were scarce in America, those of natural origin were in great abundance. Nature would supply the very “class of objects” necessary to endow the landscape with temporal depth. New England was among the first regions of America to be settled by Europeans, and it was one of the first to seek in the landscape

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<sup>85</sup> William Tudor, *Letters on the Eastern States* (New York: Kirk and Mercein, 1820), 271-272.

<sup>86</sup> Tudor, *Letters* (1820), 272.

<sup>87</sup> Quoted in Perry Miller, “Nature and the National Ego,” in *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1964), 205-206.

affirmation of its historical identity. In doing so, New Englanders turned to the elms which the founding generation had planted or spared when clearing the land. The young nation might have no piles of marble, but it certainly had its “old Titans”—trees of prodigious antiquity, or which at least appeared that way.

The wayside giants of New England, old elms left behind by the first settlers or planted as bridal pairs and dooryard trees, acquired new symbolic power in the early nineteenth century. Like marble scattered on the Appian Way, the aged elm served as a yardstick of cultural time; or as Orville Dewey wrote of the great Sheffield Elm, “as a witness upon the field of history.”<sup>88</sup> Aged elms became the Yankee equivalent of the Old World ruins, something the Reverend Nehemiah Adams understood in 1838, when he observed that an aged elm “is to antiquity with us what a pyramid is in Egypt.”<sup>89</sup> Andrew Jackson Downing agreed. “If we have neither old castles nor old associations,” he wrote, “we have at least, here and there, old trees that can teach us lessons of antiquity, not less instructive and poetical than the ruins of a past age.”<sup>90</sup>

Trees were ideal for such service. Not only were they grand and inspiring natural objects, but they also possessed a certain symmetry with the human cycle of birth, life and death. Unlike the shattered ruins of a temple, trees symbolized not the melancholia of twilight but the bright morning light of life itself. Moreover, though a tree might remain a relative constant for decades, it is also constantly changing. Usually subtle but often dramatic, processes of growth and decay are continually at work, transforming and in effect renewing the tree so that successive generations come to know it as a unique entity. By this process, each comes to possess a unique moment in the life of the plant. James Russell Lowell understood this aspect of trees, which he captured in a poem written about the Washington Elm in 1875:

Of our swift passage through this scenery  
Of life and death, more durable than we,  
What landmark so congenial as a tree  
Repeating its green legend every spring,  
And, with a yearly ring,  
Recording the fair seasons as they flee,  
Type of our brief but still-renewed mortality?

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<sup>88</sup> Orville Dewey, *An Address Delivered Under the Old Elm Tree in Sheffield, With Some Remarks on the Great Political Question of the Day* (New York: C. S. Francis & Co., 1856), 5.

<sup>89</sup> Nehemiah Adams, *Boston Common, or Rural Walks in Cities* (Boston: George H. Light, 1838; Bostonian Society edition), 16.

<sup>90</sup> Andrew Jackson Downing, *Rural Essays*, George W. Curtis, ed. (New York: George A. Leavitt, 1869); quoted in Jeanne Goode, “Andrew Jackson Downing on Trees,” *Arboricultural Journal* 12 (1988): 191.

We fall as leaves: the immortal trunk remains,  
Built with costly juice of hearts and brains  
Gone to the mould now, whither all that be  
Vanish returnless, yet are procreant  
In human lives to come of good or ill,  
And feed unseen the roots of Destiny.<sup>91</sup>

To Charles Joseph Latrobe, English author of the 1835 *Rambler in North America*, it was the senescent elm which endowed the Connecticut Valley landscape with “an air of comparative antiquity.” Such an arboreal relic—“sole survivor of the original forest, and boundary-mark of the first colonists”—was the hallmark of “long and steady cultivation.” Along the Connecticut, old elms helped “throw a degree of interest over the country,” wrote Latrobe, “which contrasts agreeably with that air of rawness and newness which is imprinted upon the works of man in other portions of the continent (and which, he added, “is so opposed to anything like poetry and sentiment”).<sup>92</sup>

As the general pace of life quickened—with the development of the telegraph, canals, and railroads—such keepsake trees became increasingly cherished. They should be honored—“beheld with due reverence,” one writer instructed in 1841—“as a bit of antiquity not to be slighted in these days of mushroom things.”<sup>93</sup> And indeed they were. In 1853 five hundred men and women petitioned the proprietors of the Amoskeag Manufacturing Company in New Hampshire to spare an elm which was in the way of a new mill building. The “beautiful and goodly tree” should be saved, they argued, because it harkened back to a time “when the yell of the red man and the scream of the eagle were alone heard on the banks of the Merrimack, instead of two giant edifices filled with the buzz of busy and well-remunerated industry.” The aged elm served as “a connecting link between the past and present.”<sup>94</sup>

### *The Autochthonous Elm*

As with the Amoskeag tree, the mystique of such relics derived in large part from their purported aboriginal origins. Such plants were thought to be *autochthonous*, with roots untouched by the hand of man. In the early nineteenth century, many old elms were in fact virgin growths. But just as often, trees presumed to be pre-European would later—in

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<sup>91</sup> James Russell Lowell, “Under the Old Elm,” *Poems* vol. 4 (Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1890), 74-89.

<sup>92</sup> Charles Joseph Latrobe, *The Rambler in North America* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1835), 43.

<sup>93</sup> The writer was referring to the ancient Endicott pear tree in Danvers, Massachusetts. From a letter to the *Boston Times* reprinted in the *New England Farmer* 20 (27 October 1841): 136.

<sup>94</sup> Quoted in Herbert Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), 29. Also see Michael Kammen, *Meadows of Memory: Images of Time and Tradition in American Art and Culture* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992), 143-145.

death—offer evidence of far more prosaic origins (the counting of annual rings embarrassed many an antiquarian). Antiquity amplified the mystique of an elm, and granted it a rich set of “associations.” To Nehemiah Adams, such trees were “like the pillars of Hercules, bounding the unknown ages which preceded the arrival of the Pilgrims.”<sup>95</sup> Old elms were looked upon as legacies of a mythic age, before the fall of man. Believed coeval with the biblical deluge, they had been planted, in effect, by the hand of God.

Even if an elm was no antediluvian relic, it could very well seem to be—and that was usually good enough. Elms achieved scale rapidly, and often looked far older than they actually were. An appearance of great age in an American elm was not long in coming. In as little as a century an elm could achieve such height and massiveness to be taken for a tree twice the age. In the early nineteenth century, the nation hungered for artifacts which appeared to grant historical legitimacy; the early maturity of the elm was particularly useful in this regard, imparting to the landscape an air of antiquity. Oliver Wendell Holmes understood the value of elms in endowing temporal depth to upstart Yankee villages. “A life of between two and three centuries seems a long one in a new country like ours,” he wrote, “and ‘the old elm’ is often the most ancient monument of a New England village.”<sup>96</sup>

### *Relic on the Common*

Relic elms were a presence in many New England towns and cities, and they were important features of the cultural landscape. The “Great Elm at Springfield,” among the oldest and largest trees in New England, towered over the southwest corner of Court Square and was considered autochthonous—“thought to be a natural growth in that place.”<sup>97</sup> It was the only Yankee elm whose ponderous size and antique bearing “dared to challenge,” wrote Oliver Wendell Holmes, “the great English elm I saw at Oxford.”<sup>98</sup> Winthrop, Massachusetts, was proud of its ancient Gibbons Elm. In 1912, a crowd of 3,000 people attended a farewell ceremony for the 300-year-old tree, an arboreal keepsake which had “witnessed so much of the history of the town.” A poem entitled “The Old Elm”

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<sup>95</sup> Adams, *Boston Common*, 16.

<sup>96</sup> Oliver Wendell Holmes, “Introduction,” Lorin L. Dame, *Typical Elms and Other Trees of Massachusetts* (Boston: Little Brown, 1890), 8.

<sup>97</sup> “The Elms of Court Square,” *Springfield Union* (Summer 1898).

<sup>98</sup> Holmes in Dame, *Typical Elms*, 8. In 1837 he measured the tree to be 25 feet 10 inches in circumference, three feet from the ground. Also see George B. Emerson, *A Report on the Trees and Shrubs* vol. 2 (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1878), 331n.



**Figure 18.** The Great Elm at Springfield, c. 1860.  
Courtesy Connecticut Valley Historical Museum, Springfield, Massachusetts.

was commissioned for the occasion, and the event itself described as “one of the most remarkable gatherings ever held in honor of a tree.”<sup>99</sup>

But it was nearby Boston that possessed the most celebrated antique elm in New England—the Great Elm of Boston Common. Its location in New England’s flagship city gained for the plant widespread fame. In the city itself the Great Elm occupied a visible spot close to the center of the Common; it dominated the space for decades, unchallenged by other vegetation. The Great Elm was a totem, and a much-loved landmark. It was the subject of tracts and poems, children’s stories and patriotic ballads—the most famous of which was “The Old Elm Tree” by John Hill Hewitt.<sup>100</sup> In 1825, artists competed for a gold medal offered for the best portrait of the tree. The Great Elm drew into its orbit events of great and small importance. Along with Bourne’s old house tree, the Elm was one of the spots “of constant resort” favored by the Sons of Liberty (according to one account, the patriots “frequently caused it to be illuminated with lanterns on evenings of rejoicing and on festal occasions”).<sup>101</sup> Later generations held elections under its canopy; soldiers were recruited in its shade, and it was a chosen spot for orators and firebrand preachers throughout the nineteenth century. As naturalist Lorin L. Dame described it in 1890, “whatever took place anywhere on the Common . . . gravitated into the history of the big elm.”<sup>102</sup>

The Great Elm served as a civic totem, but it was for its great age that the tree became legendary. Thought to have antedated the arrival of Winthrop’s party, the Great Elm was a vegetable patriarch in a city of Brahmins, the oldest living object in the urban landscape. “It is known by the most ancient surviving inhabitants of Boston,” wrote J. C. Warren in 1855, “as THE GREAT TREE.”<sup>103</sup> Certainly it looked the part. Even in the early nineteenth century, the tree was gnarled and picturesque, having “braved the storms and gales of centuries.”<sup>104</sup> Rumored to have sheltered Indian council-fires and spied the white sails of the *Arbella*, the Great Elm was “a witness upon the field of history,” a chronographic

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<sup>99</sup> James R. Simmons, *The Historic Trees of Massachusetts* (Boston: Marshall Jones, 1919), 133-134.

<sup>100</sup> John Hill Hewitt, “The Old Elm Tree: A Patriotic Ballad.” (Baltimore: G. Willig Junior, 1842).

<sup>101</sup> Nathaniel B. Shurtleff, *A Topographical and Historical Description of Boston* (Boston: Noyes, Holmes, and Company, 1872), 336; 334. Shurtleff suggested that after the Tree of Liberty was removed, the Great Elm may have even been called “Liberty Tree”; at least one map, from 1784, marked it as such.

<sup>102</sup> Lorin L. Dame, *Typical Elms and Other Trees of Massachusetts* (Boston: Little Brown, 1890), 51.

<sup>103</sup> J. C. Warren, *The Great Tree on Boston Common* (Boston: John Wilson and Son, 1855), 6.

<sup>104</sup> Shurtleff, *Topographical and Historical Description of Boston*, 332.

device which bridged the aboriginal era to that of the European.<sup>105</sup> “When first from Mother Earth you sprung,” wrote a nameless bard (with considerable licence)

Ere Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare sung,  
Or Puritans had come among  
The savages to loose each tongue  
    In psalms and prayers.  
These forty acres, more or less,  
Now gayly clothed in Nature’s dress,  
Where Yankees walk, and brag and guess,  
Were but a ‘howling wilderness  
    Of wolves and bears.<sup>106</sup>

“This tree,” wrote Warren, then presiding over the Boston Society of Natural History, “we must venerate as a visible relic of the Indian Shawmut; for all its other native trees and groves have been long since prostrated; the frail and transient memorials of the Aborigines have vanished; even the hills of Trimountain cannot be distinguished.” Indeed, only “this native noble elm” remained to link the present with the ever-receding past.<sup>107</sup> To John W. Hamilton, the tree was “a patriarch among all the trees of its kind on the coast.”

No citizen now living can remember when it was not venerable for its years and its history. No monument stands in the city that is older; no family Bible has a record of its age. Before Washington or Winthrop the tree was. And before Blaxton bought ground of the Indians, and Trimontaine or Shawmutt were the names of Boston; when Chickatabut was chief Sachem, and sat with his council in the shade of the trees, the great elm stood forth in the sun, hospitable then as now.<sup>108</sup>

The true nature of the Great Elm’s age and provenance was a matter of endless speculation among Boston antiquarians. While some accounts claimed that the tree was set out by one Hezekiah Henschman in 1670, it appears to have been even older than that.<sup>109</sup> The 1722 John Bonner Map depicted the Elm as a specimen of considerable size, hardly a tree only 50 years old (even an elm did not achieve such splendor so quickly). A limb which fell in 1860 was determined to itself be 190 years old, which would have made the tree decades older still. On the other hand, it is unlikely that the tree was alive much before than 1640, making it certainly old by American standards, but hardly a relic of the Deluge.

It is also impossible, then, that the Great Elm could have been used as a hanging tree by the Puritan oligarchy, as many antiquarians claimed. If witches and Quakers met their end

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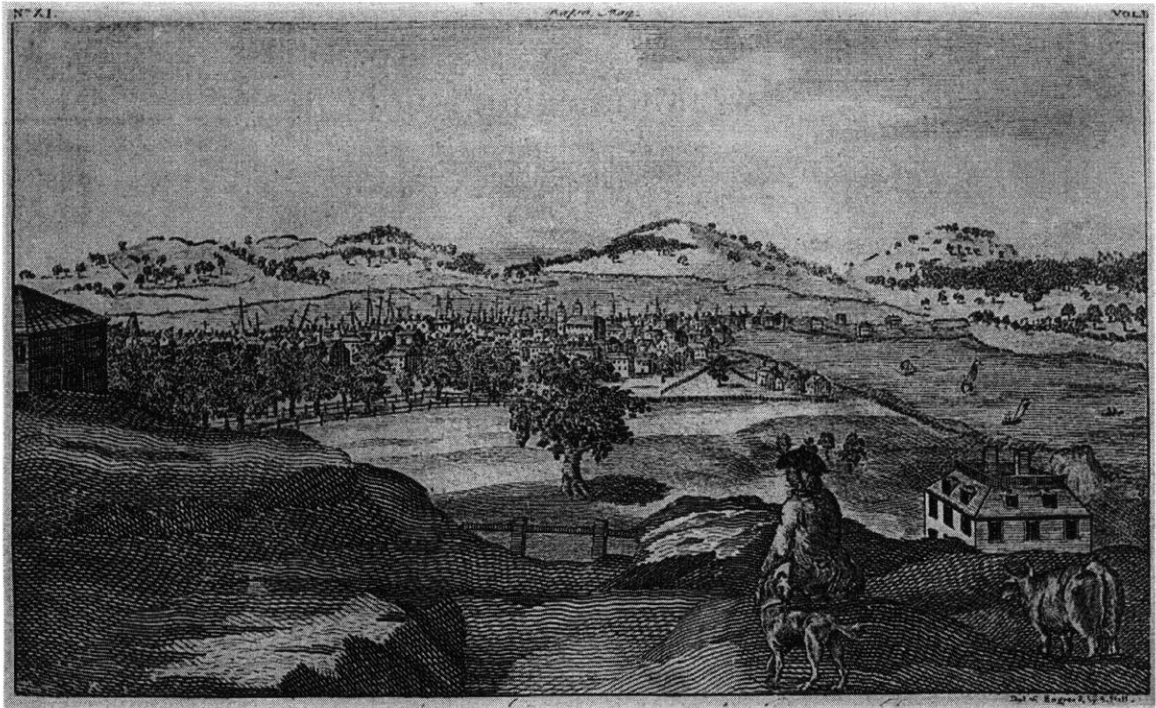
<sup>105</sup> Orville Dewey, *An Address Delivered Under the Old Elm Tree in Sheffield, With Some Remarks on the Great Political Question of the Day* (New York: C. S. Francis & Co., 1856), 5.

<sup>106</sup> Quoted in J. W. Hamilton, *Memorial of Jessie Lee and the Old Elm* (Boston: J. P. Magee, 1875), 49.

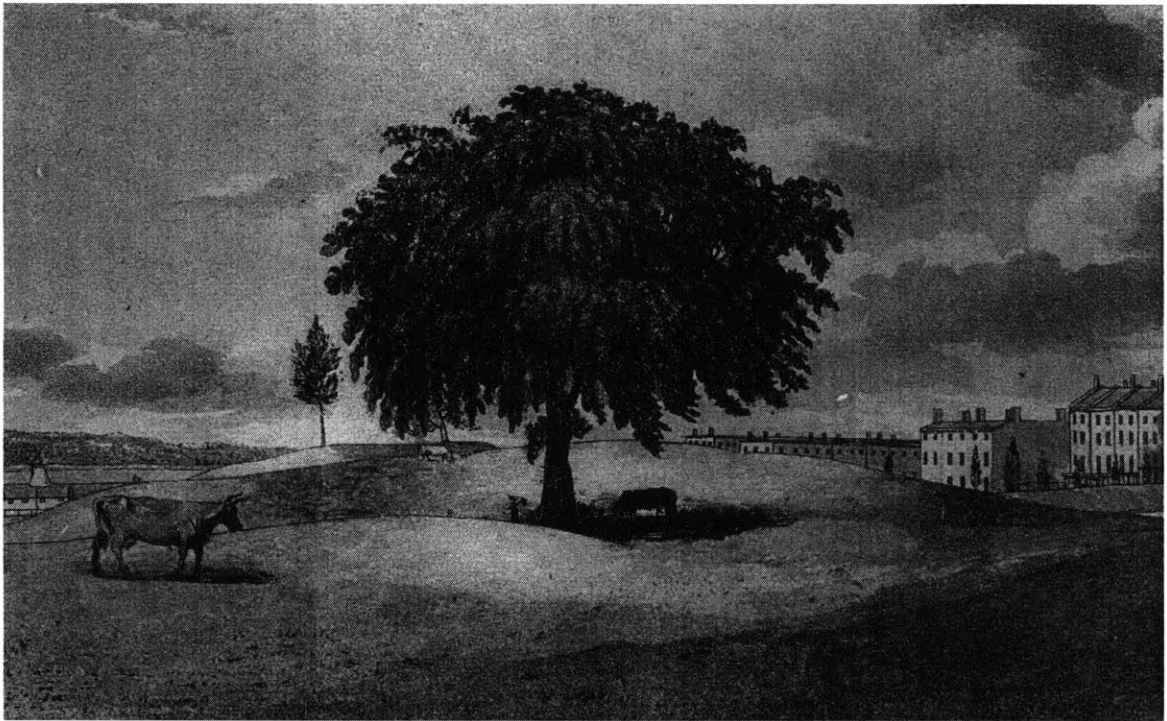
<sup>107</sup> J. C. Warren, *The Great Tree on Boston Common* (Boston: John Wilson and Son, 1855), 17.

<sup>108</sup> J. W. Hamilton, *Memorial of Jessie Lee and the Old Elm* (Boston: J. P. Magee, 1875), 47.

<sup>109</sup> For a refutation of the Henschman claim, see Warren, *The Great Tree*, 10-15.



**Figure 19.** View of Great Elm and Boston Common, c. 1790.  
From Hamilton, *Memorial of Jesse Lee and the Old Elm* (1875).



**Figure 20.** The Great Elm on Boston Common, c. 1813. From *The Polyanthos* (June 1813).

dangling from a tree on the Common, it was certainly not the tender whipstock that became the Great Elm. And a good thing too, M. A. DeWolfe Howe pointed out, as this “might have made the Great Elm and Tyburn Tree synonyms of shame.”<sup>110</sup> While it is probable that the Great Elm was autochthonous, it certainly was no more than a late child of the aboriginal landscape. The real miracle is that the sapling tree managed to escape the molars of the “Cattell” set loose on the Common each morning.

Decrepitude in later years magnified the aura of the Great Elm. The predations of storms pruned the tree into a living wreck, and with each limb laid low the tree truly began to evoke a classical ruin. The demise of the Great Elm actually began at an early date. A needlepoint work from 1755 depicted a hole in its trunk large enough to accommodate a small boy (the cavity was eventually repaired with clay and a canvas tarpaulin, and in time new growth erased all traces of the wound).<sup>111</sup> In 1832 a powerful storm knocked several principal limbs to the ground; still partially attached to the tree, these were then bolted back into place.<sup>112</sup> By the middle of the nineteenth century, the Great Elm’s days were numbered.

On the night of June 29, 1860, “a storm of no ordinary character” swept into the city, ripping several limbs off the Great Elm. Boston awoke the next morning to rumors that the icon had fallen. Scores made their way to the Common, scrambling for a fragment of the tree—“the choicest of the relics of the olden time.”<sup>113</sup> Yet the Great Elm had life in it still, and in the following weeks no expense was spared to save the battered relic. The end came on a blustery winter night in 1876. Gale-force winds on the evening of February 15 rocked its crown, and at precisely 7:17 the tree “fell with a crash, which sounded like the report of a cannon.” It came to earth with such force as to “splinter the trunk in every imaginable manner.” The next day, it was the scene of bedlam:

The news of its fall spread rapidly, and in a short time the place was crowded with relic hunters, who began an attack upon it. These “curious” people crowded upon the trunk, and, with knife in hand, were not long in gratifying their found desire by getting such souvenirs as they most prized. On the departure of each successive squad its place was filled by fresh arrivals.

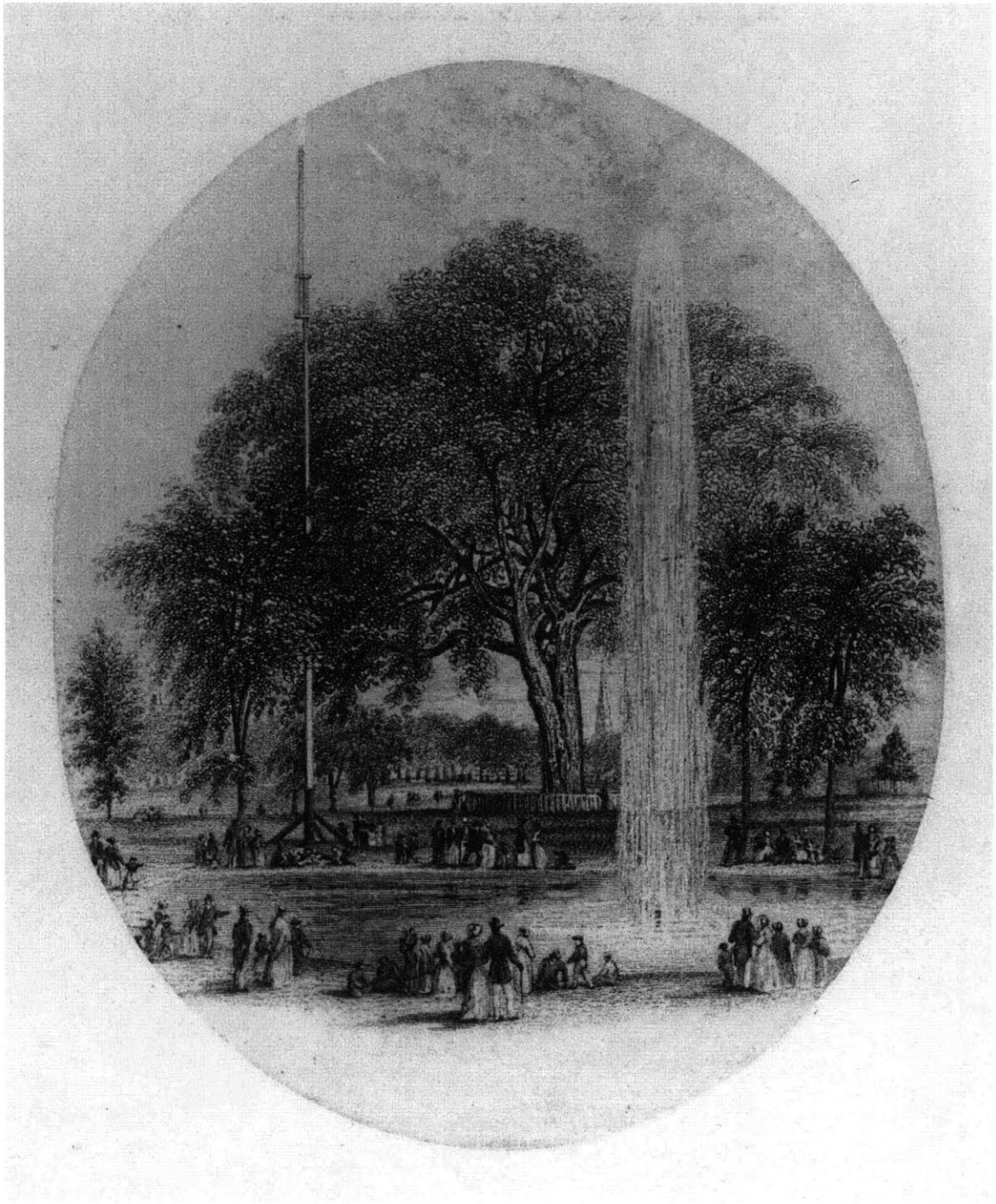
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<sup>110</sup> M. A. DeWolfe Howe, *Boston Common* (Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1910), 20.

<sup>111</sup> Warren, *The Great Tree* (1855), 7.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-9.

<sup>113</sup> Shurtleff, *Topographical and Historical Description of Boston*, 333.



**Figure 21.** The Great Elm on Boston Common, c. 1850. From Howe, *Boston Common* (1910).

# THE OLD ELM TREE\*

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\* Few who have visited Boston have not seen the ancient Elm Tree on the "Common;" With it are associated the most agreeable reminiscences of the American Patriot, it is still the scene of many a childish sport and "in the days that tried Men's souls;" beneath its branches gathered the Patriots and Heroes who achieved the liberties we now enjoy.

*Baltimore, Published by Geo. Willig Junr.*

*Entered according to Act of Congress in the Year 1842 by Geo. Willig Junr. in the Clerk's Office of the District Court of Maryland.*

Allegretto.

PIANO.

mf

dim.

p

8va

tr

Figure 22. "The Old Elm Tree," by John H. Hewitt (1842).  
Courtesy Special Collections Department, Alderman Library, University of Virginia.

In this way, “A good deal of the tree, in fact about all of the smaller limbs and branches, were taken away before the police could prevent it.”<sup>114</sup> It is not known whether Boston’s poet laureate Oliver Wendell Holmes was among those jostling for a fragment; but he did pen verse in eulogy:

The darkened skies, alas! have seen  
Our monarch tree laid low,  
And spread in ruins o’er the green,  
But Nature struck the blow;  
No scheming thrift its downfall planned,  
It felt no edge of steel,  
No soulless hireling raised his hand  
The deadly stroke to deal.<sup>115</sup>

In May of that year (1876), a new tree was planted on the site of the vanished relic—the “Centennial Elm.” Beneath it was buried a time capsule, a small metal box containing an “appropriate inscription,” a list of Boston luminaries of the day, and coins and sundry other articles.<sup>116</sup> The new tree found purchase in the soil, but it floundered in the mind of lineage-conscious Boston. Transplanted from a Dorchester nursery, the Centennial Elm lacked the requisite pedigree. Then, some years later, an offshoot of the Great Elm was revealed to be growing on the Common. It had been quietly set in the ground in 1873, by two policemen who removed “a small shoot growing from the roots” of the old tree. On Arbor Day, 1889, Mayor Thomas Hart officiated a ceremonious replanting of this tree, to a more honored spot closer to the site of the Great Elm. An inscribed tablet was to be placed nearby, but Hart left office shortly after, and “the whole matter was forgotten.” It was not until 1909 that an affidavit signed by the policemen was discovered in the offices of the city auditor, verifying that a “true scion” of the Great Elm indeed flourished on Boston Common.<sup>117</sup>

*“The Remembrance of Our Fathers”*<sup>118</sup>

In time, many aged Yankee elms—autochthonous trees as well as those planted by early settlers—came to acquire more fixed historical associations. If relics such as the Great Elm of Boston Common functioned as chronographic devices—keepsakes of antiquity—name-bearing “monument elms” recalled more specific events and persons of local, regional or even national significance. The great size, beauty and grandeur of an old elm—and its aura of durability and timelessness—made the tree an ideal candidate for the commemoration of

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<sup>114</sup> “The Boston Elm: The Famous Tree Succumbs to the Gale,” *Boston Herald* [?] (16 February 1876).

<sup>115</sup> Lorin L. Dame, *Typical Elms and Other Trees of Massachusetts* (Boston: Little Brown, 1890), 49.

<sup>116</sup> “The Boston Elm: The Famous Tree Succumbs to the Gale.”

<sup>117</sup> “Affidavit Tells of True Scion of Boston Old Elm,” *Boston Herald* (10 January 1910).

<sup>118</sup> “Trees,” *The Yankee* (20 August 1828): 270.



**Figure 23.** Cushing Elm, Hingham, Massachusetts. Photograph by E. H. Wilson, 1925.  
Courtesy, Photographic Archives of the Arnold Arboretum, Harvard University.



**Figure 24.** Knight Elm, Newburyport, Massachusetts. Photograph by E. H. Wilson, 1927.  
Courtesy, Photographic Archives of the Arnold Arboretum, Harvard University.

hale deeds and great souls. An affinity evolved between elms and the carriage of memory. As Donald Culross Peattie would later write, “If you want to be recalled for something that you do, you will be well advised to do it under an Elm.”<sup>119</sup>

Monument elms were important landmarks in many nineteenth-century New England villages and towns—and cities, too. They were among the first symbols of collective remembrance to occasion the landscape—“repositories of memory” which endowed the quotidian with historical depth and richness.<sup>120</sup> Long before granite or marble found a place on the New England common, elm trees bore Yankee memory. Indeed, some monument elms became so famous in their own right as to one day gain stone tablets of their own. The most celebrated monument elms were those connected with the Revolution. Such trees served to remind citizens of the men and deeds to whom they owed their freedom. “We need such monitors in our public places,” wrote Samuel Adams Drake, “to arrest our headlong race, and bid us calmly count the cost of the empire we possess.”<sup>121</sup>

Monument elms were saints of circumstance; they gained historical value serendipitously. Some were, albeit, uncontestedly linked to the person or persons whose memory they bore. Jonathan Edwards *planted* his sylvan monument, though he meant it to celebrate not himself but his marriage. At Litchfield, Connecticut, a group of young men “remarkable for their enterprise and known as the flower of the town,” had volunteered to serve the Union cause. Before departing in 1862, they planted a long row of elms along the Harris Plain—a “last gift to their home district” which, by the end of the Civil War, had sadly become their own memorial.<sup>122</sup> But most such trees were more tenuous in their association with a particular soul. An elm may have sheltered a passing Washington or Lafayette, or may have simply been in the vicinity. An imposing elm adjacent to a site distinguished by a great event or person was often later assigned the task of remembering it. In time, many such sylvan markers became objects of veneration themselves.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the New England landscape was endowed with scores of monument elms. Nearly every town or village could point to such a tree when queried about its local history or distinguished sons. The Cushing Elm of Hingham,

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<sup>119</sup> Donald Culross Peattie, *A Natural History of Trees* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1966), 239.

<sup>120</sup> The phrase is from Michael Kammen, *Meadows of Memory: Images of Time and Tradition in American Art and Culture* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992), 150.

<sup>121</sup> Samuel Adams Drake, *Historic Mansions and Highways Around Boston* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1906), 268.

<sup>122</sup> Mary Perkins Quincy (1901), quoted in Alain C. White, *The History of Litchfield, Connecticut* (Litchfield: Enquirer, 1920), 170.

Massachusetts, set out in 1729, was an old house tree which bore the name of its planter. The elm later sheltered a company of Cohasset soldiers, who offered prayers under its limbs during the siege of Boston. The big tree—"a marvel of strength and symmetry"—was ever after linked to the patriots, a living monument to "the illustrious dead."<sup>123</sup> The Harrington Elm of Lexington, Massachusetts, gained its fame for having been planted—in 1732—by the father of the last survivor of the Battle of Lexington. Nearby, at the old Monroe Tavern, another elm was distinguished for having served as a hitching post during the same skirmish (as late as 1919 the still-visible top of a hitching spike was a point of antiquarian pride in the town).<sup>124</sup>

Monument elms often gained their status in association with a house of historical significance; and sometimes the tree would even draw fame away from the building it complemented. The Marlboro Elm in Massachusetts was noted for its proximity to the house of a Tory sympathizer who had been shot at one night, musket balls lodging in one of the beams.<sup>125</sup> The house was later sold, and gradually the locus of historical significance migrated from the building to the tree. It was as if the kernel of association had been relocated to a more accessible spot—the elm was located on the street—and to an artifact judged more fit to bear collective memory than one man's house.

At Kennebunk, New Hampshire, an elm recalled Lafayette's celebrated American tour of 1824. It stood on the grounds of a house in which Lafayette had been a guest, and in time the tree became chief steward of the memory of the event. Deerfield, Massachusetts, had a surfeit of monuments both sylvan and stone, and often these were paired. As one observer described it, "there is hardly a spot in historic Deerfield marked by a monument which is not also marked, at no great distance, by an old tree." In time, the relationship between the two inverted. The Deerfield trees—"witnesses of the events commemorated by tablets"—drew attention away from the chiseled stone in their shadows.<sup>126</sup> As the eulogies of August 1853 demonstrated, elms loomed large in the Deerfield scene.<sup>127</sup>

Not all monument elms recalled heroes and events of the Revolution. The Boxford Elm of Essex County, Massachusetts, celebrated an historic encounter between colonists and local tribesmen. Near the site of the tree in 1701 a meeting was held in which the purchase of

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<sup>123</sup> James R. Simmons, *The Historic Trees of Massachusetts* (Boston: Marshall Jones, 1919), 27.

<sup>124</sup> Simmons, *Historic Trees*, 69-73.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 79-82.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>127</sup> See Introduction of this text.



**Figure 25.** Harrington Elm, South Lexington, Massachusetts. Photograph by E. H. Wilson, 1924. Courtesy, Photographic Archives of the Arnold Arboretum, Harvard University.



Figure 26. Lafayette Elm. Kennebunk, New Hampshire. Photograph by E. H. Wilson, 1926.  
Courtesy, Photographic Archives of the Arnold Arboretum, Harvard University.

town land was arranged. In a somewhat dubious transaction, the colonists acquired title to immense acreage in exchange for two shillings in silver and “Rum and vittles enouf.” The tree which later bore memory of the event was itself not planted for another fifty years. Yet, as the tree came to strike an appropriately senescent attitude, it emerged as the repository of the town’s genesis tale.<sup>128</sup> The Lakeville Elms, a hoary brace of trees which stood near Middleboro, Massachusetts, drew associative value from the field they grew upon, land that had been used as a mustering ground for Civil War troops.<sup>129</sup>

Lamenting the poverty of name-bearing elms in New Haven, antiquarian Henry Howe took it upon himself to thus christen some of the town trees. “At this late date,” he wrote in 1883, “we must try to make amends, and as we describe in course our most noble trees, we shall suggest names for each by which they shall hereafter be known.”<sup>130</sup> Prior to Howe’s project, New Haven had only one name-bearing elm—a giant which soared above the town pump adjacent to the Green. As Howe related its story, a poet and local eccentric named Jerry Ailing—“the Milton of Hamden Plains”—dragged the tree into town on the day of Benjamin Franklin’s death in 1790. In exchange for a spot of rum, he sold the whipstock tree to Thaddeus Beecher, a local shopkeeper who directed that Ailing plant the elm next to the village pump.<sup>131</sup> It is not known whether the act was one of intended commemoration or simple serendipity; in any case, the tree came to be known as the Benjamin Franklin Elm.

Henry Howe took great liberties in christening elms, and freely edited the broadcloth of history. A behemoth tree by the African Congregational Church was known locally as the “African Church Elm” (“We call it a good pious tree,” he wrote, “and after enjoying the Sabbaths of seventy-five years right under its wings, we presume it to be well grounded in orthodoxy”). Regardless, Howe renamed the tree in honor of Wesley, founder of Methodism, whose first flock in New Haven had earlier occupied the site.<sup>132</sup> Another elm—an “imperious, cloud-climbing individual” on Grove Street—Howe christened in the name of Nathan Beers, a patriot of the American Revolution who lived nearby; in Howe’s view, the tree perfectly manifested the “sweetness and moral grandeur” of Beers’s character.<sup>133</sup> Other memory-bearing elms were named after “representative men” in New

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<sup>128</sup> Simmons, *Historic Trees*, 61-62.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 32-33.

<sup>130</sup> Henry Howe, “New Haven’s Elms and Green,” a scrapbook of his articles from the *New Haven Daily Morning Journal and Courier* (1883-1884), Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University, 6.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-6.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.



**Figure 27.** Franklin Elm, New Haven, Connecticut, c. 1860. Collections of the Library of Congress.

Haven society—merchants, bankers, educators, and other luminaries of the local empyrean.

New England's monument elms were a patrician institution. Reflecting the gender dynamics of nineteenth century society, women were rarely represented by an elm. One of the few name-bearing elms dedicated to the memory of a woman was at Hatfield, Massachusetts. In 1852, the great soprano Jenny Lind—the “Swedish Nightingale” who took mid-century America by storm—toured Western Massachusetts, spending her honeymoon in Northampton, where she had earlier performed at the town hall. At nearby Hatfield she sang beneath an elm, a tree which forever after was known as the Jenny Lind Elm.<sup>134</sup>

*General Washington's "Memorial Pile"*

When it came to monument elms, none had greater purchase in the Yankee imagination than those associated—however tenuously—with George Washington. Under the Holliston Elms in Massachusetts, Washington allegedly rested on his return from Boston in 1789.<sup>135</sup> The Great Elms at both Wethersfield and Springfield were said to have sheltered to Washington, and were often referred to by his name. At Palmer, Massachusetts, stood a Washington Elm which, according to tradition, witnessed two passages of the great man—in 1775 and in 1789.<sup>136</sup> But none of these were a match for the Washington Elm at Cambridge, the greatest of all Yankee name-bearing elms, and the most famous tree in America by the end of the nineteenth century.

Until the tree's destruction in October 1923, the Washington Elm was among the most popular landmarks in the Boston area—a place with no paucity of historic shrines. Luminaries of every stripe—princes and presidents, senators, diplomats and orators—made an obligatory stop at the tree. Its image was carried on hotel chinaware, furniture upholstery, postcards, stereographs, and even a United States postage stamp. The Washington Elm was the subject of songs and rhymes, Decoration Day speeches, and patriotic verse—most famously James Russell Lowell's “Under the Old Elm.”

Historic town, thou holdest sacred dust,  
Once known to men as pious, learned, just,  
And one memorial pile that dares to last;

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<sup>134</sup> Daniel W. and Reuben F. Wells, *A History of Hatfield* (Springfield: Gibbons, 1910), 223.

<sup>135</sup> Letter from Thomas A. Dickinson in the *Framingham Tribune*, quoted in Simmons, *The Historic Trees of Massachusetts* (Boston: Marshall Jones, 1919), 54-55.

<sup>136</sup> Simmons, *Historic Trees*, 85-86.

But Memory greets with reverential kiss  
No spot in all thy circuit sweet as this,  
Touched by that modest glory as it passed,  
O'er which yon elm hath piously displayed  
These hundred years its monumental shade.<sup>137</sup>

As with many other Yankee totem and relic trees, the Washington Elm was thought to be autochthonous, an indigenous growth. The tree outlived its “peers of the greenwood” to bear witness, in effect, to the birth of the American nation.<sup>138</sup> Three months after gunfire at Lexington and Concord signaled the beginning of the Revolution, Washington was summoned to Massachusetts, where he was to assume command of the Army of the United Colonies. He arrived at Cambridge on July 3, 1775, and after reviewing the assembled troops on Cambridge Common, was placed in their command. Myth and fact have long been blurred regarding the true nature of the day’s events. The “traditional” version of the story suggests that Washington took command in an appropriately dramatic manner, “beneath the wide-spreading branches of the patriarch tree” that later bore his name.<sup>139</sup> Wheeling about on his stallion (“over which he seemed to have perfect control”<sup>140</sup>) Washington supposedly drew his sword, pointed it toward heaven, and “resolved within himself that it should never be sheathed till the liberties of his country were established.”<sup>141</sup> American independence, which stirred to life beneath the Tree of Liberty, took up arms beneath the Washington Elm.

This rousing event was not always associated with the Washington Elm, and for many decades the tree was accorded only passing interest. It was even frequently confused with a nearby tree, the Whitefield Elm. Indeed, the legend of the Washington Elm was a product of the mid-nineteenth century. The coupling of the tree to Washington’s historic actions at Cambridge was largely a manufactured one, what Eric Hobsbawm has called an “invented tradition.” Although based partly in truth, invented traditions seek to “establish continuity with a suitable historic past.” They are usually “responses to novel situations which take the form of reference to old situations, or which establish their own past by quasi-obligatory repetition.” Invented traditions commonly appear during periods of change, when a “rapid transformation of society weakens or destroys the social patterns for

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<sup>137</sup> James Russell Lowell, “Under the Old Elm,” *Poems* vol. 4 (Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1890), 74-89.

<sup>138</sup> Lorin L. Dame, *Typical Elms and Other Trees of Massachusetts* (Boston: Little Brown, 1890), 25.

<sup>139</sup> “Diary of Dorothy Dudley,” quoted in Samuel F. Batchelder, “The Washington Elm Tradition,” *Publications of the Cambridge Historical Society* vol. 17 (Cambridge: Cambridge Historical Society, 1931), 50.

<sup>140</sup> Daniel F. Secomb, quoted in Batchelder, “The Washington Elm Tradition,” 67.

<sup>141</sup> Sibley in “The Washington Elm, Cambridge,” *Old Time New England* vol. 14 (Boston: Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, 1924), 143.



**Figure 28.** The Washington Elm in 1839. From an engraving by John Warner Barber.



**Figure 29.** The Washington Elm, c. 1841. Courtesy of the Cambridge Historical Commission.

which ‘old’ traditions had been designed.”<sup>142</sup> In the case of the Washington Elm, the seeds of the tradition had long been planted, but did not germinate until a situation arose which appeared to destabilize the old order and the sanctity of the past itself.

In Cambridge—and Boston generally—that moment came along around 1840. Prior to this time, the Washington Elm was not a feature in local histories; it is absent from Revolutionary-era accounts, and makes no appearance in traveler’s descriptions—remarkable omissions given the tree’s subsequent importance. When Washington returned in 1789 he did not even pause by the tree, which was neither decorated nor made festive for the occasion.<sup>143</sup> Few maps published before the 1840s include any reference to the tree, while those published afterward clearly indicate its location and name. Indeed, for more than half a century, “the tale apparently had no recorded existence.”<sup>144</sup> The “discovery” of the Washington Elm—and its subsequent transformation into a memorial of national significance—appears to have been at least partly prompted by the metamorphosis of Cambridge from a quiet academic town into a booming manufacturing city.

The population of Cambridge, which remained below 3,500 from 1765 to about 1820, nearly doubled by 1830. The number of inhabitants then was 6,072, a figure which doubled again by 1845.<sup>145</sup> This was a period of heavy immigration, much of which was driven by extensive industrial development in East Cambridge. Culminating with the founding of the City of Cambridge in 1846, this era of convulsive growth threatened the Anglo-Saxon hegemony of “Old Cambridge”—an austere, intellectual community steeped in the legacy of the Puritan founders and proud of its role in the founding of the country. The Washington Elm tradition was invented, as it were, to provide continuity with a past under siege by the forces of modernity.

That the Washington Elm became venerated as a shrine far beyond Cambridge suggests that larger cultural forces were at work upon it. If Americans in the 1830s began to see value in seeking tangible evidence of their journey-in-time—an interest which brought about the veneration of such relics as Boston’s Great Elm—they also began to recognize the

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<sup>142</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, “Inventing Traditions,” in Hobsbawm and Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1-4.

<sup>143</sup> Sidney Willard, *Memories of Youth and Manhood* (1855), quoted in Batchelder, “The Washington Elm Tradition,” 66.

<sup>144</sup> Batchelder, “The Washington Elm Tradition,” 54.

<sup>145</sup> Lucius R. Paige, *History of Cambridge* (Boston: H. O. Houghton, 1877), 452.

importance of cultivating a sense of *national heritage*. The Jacksonian period saw the emergence of the United States into an economic and military power, and spurred a nascent sense of nationalism and national pride. This produced a new interest in the nation's own colonial past, a new piety for the founding generation, and a burgeoning interest in what one critic called "relics of our national infancy."<sup>146</sup> The fact that the colonial old guard—the founding fathers themselves—were fast vanishing from the scene created a sense of loss at just the moment when that past was being freshly appreciated. The glorified decades of the Revolution and early republic were receding too quickly. Americans now wished to recover aspects of that past, and sought artifacts to objectify that heritage.<sup>147</sup> Emerson, in the 1830s, reflected on the irony of such filial veneration in a land so fresh with possibility. "Our age is retrospective," he wrote in *Nature*; "It builds sepulchres to the fathers."<sup>148</sup>

Or it invented sepulchral elms. Though the origins of the Washington Elm tradition are obscure, the tree's transformation into a monument was likely the handiwork of an imaginative antiquarian named John Langdon Sibley. In an 1837 issue of *The American Magazine of Useful Knowledge*, Sibley related that under a "Glorious old tree, that had stood in sight of the smoke of Lexington and Bunker's Hill battles, and weathered the storms of many generations," Washington "drew his sword as commander-in-chief of the American army, for the first time." As a witness to this historic event, the Elm was "worthy of reverence"—it was a "sacred memorial of the past and the present" "Amidst the changes which have taken place in the world, and particularly in America and New England," Sibley reasoned, this tree "has stood out like a watchman; and if it could speak, it would be an interesting chronicler of events." Sibley lamented the "spirit of modern improvement" which had defaced the tree with signboards, and called for preservation of the Elm from the sharpened axe of progress: "May no unkind hand mar [this] last tree of the native forest."<sup>149</sup>

The great fabulist Washington Irving also labored on the Elm tradition, invoking the tree and its glorious associations in his 1855 *Life of Washington*.<sup>150</sup> During the Centennial in

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<sup>146</sup> Quoted in Perry Miller, "Nature and the National Ego," in *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1964), 205.

<sup>147</sup> Milton W. Brown, et al., ed. *American Art* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1979), 160.

<sup>148</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature," quoted in Alfred Kazin, *A Writer's America: Landscape in Literature* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), 50.

<sup>149</sup> Sibley in "The Washington Elm, Cambridge," *Old Time New England* vol. 14 (Boston: Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, 1924), 143-144.

<sup>150</sup> Washington Irving, *Life of George Washington* (New York: G. P. Putnam & Co., 1855), 318.

1876, the Washington Elm gained further fame when the alleged diary of a colonial woman named Dorothy Dudley was published. The document, whose author had purportedly witnessed Washington's doings on the Common, contained a breathless first-hand account of the day's events. The Dudley diary found its way into many a schoolbook and inspired numerous renderings of the scene before it was shown to be a complete fraud—the work of a creative soul who had imbibed too freely of Centennial sentiment.<sup>151</sup> Other writers contributed similarly fabulous embellishments; in an account from 1874, Washington had actually built a *platform* in his Elm, in which he was “accustomed to sit and survey with his glass the country round.”<sup>152</sup>

Whatever its provenance, and however dubious, the Washington Elm and associated events found purchase in soil and soul; and in time became part of national mythology. The installation of a protective iron fence in 1847—the gift of a local minister—testified to the Elm's growing status as a monument.<sup>153</sup> Appearing less than a year after Cambridge became a city, this act of enclosure literally and figuratively shielded the tree from the forces of urbanization. In 1864, in a surge in patriotism brought on by the Civil War, a stone tablet was placed at the base of the tree. The marker carried a simple inscription, said to be from the pen of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow: “UNDER THIS TREE WASHINGTON FIRST TOOK COMMAND OF THE AMERICAN ARMY, JULY 3<sup>RD</sup>, 1775.”<sup>154</sup> By 1875, the centennial of Washington's arrival at Cambridge, the Elm was firmly ensconced as a national shrine. A spectacular celebration in July of that year focused on the tree. Its lower limbs were adorned with bunting, and one intrepid soul managed to scramble to the top of the tree, affixing there an American flag.<sup>155</sup>

The Washington Elm retained its monumental allure well into the twentieth century. “In the heart of every American who loves the history of his country,” wrote J. R. Simmons in 1919, “there dwells a degree of respect and gratitude for this living representative of olden time.”<sup>156</sup> As late as 1936, a children's essay by Erle Kauffman could claim: “Of course every boy and girl knows that it was an elm tree at Cambridge, Massachusetts, that shaded General George Washington . . . when he took command of the Continental Army.” For

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<sup>151</sup> Samuel Eliot Morison, “Proposed Tablet Under Washington Elm,” unpublished manuscript, Cambridge Historical Commission (27 October 1949).

<sup>152</sup> Samuel Adams Drake, *Historic Mansions and Highways Around Boston* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1906), 268.

<sup>153</sup> The Reverend Daniel Austin. See Patricia H. Rogers and Charles M. Sullivan, *A Photographic History of Cambridge* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1984), 15.

<sup>154</sup> The tablet is extant, located on Cambridge Common adjacent to the former site of the Elm.

<sup>155</sup> Dame, *Typical Elms*, 27.

<sup>156</sup> James R. Simmons, *The Historic Trees of Massachusetts* (Boston: Marshall Jones, 1919), 15.



**Figure 30.** The Washington Elm in 1868.  
Courtesy, Photographic Archives of the Arnold Arboretum, Harvard University.

Kauffman, it was the Washington Elm that made the entire species “America’s tree of glory.”<sup>157</sup>

Under more critical eyes, however, the Washington Elm legend began to unravel. In 1923 a short piece published in the *Cambridge Tribune* showed that the tree was no relic of the aboriginal forest, but in fact had been planted by long-forgotten husbandmen. Studying its position relative to nearby trees, J. Gardner Bartlett determined that the Washington Elm was one of six elms of nearly identical age located at equal intervals of 500 feet along Garden Street—the old edge of the Common. The trees were apparently planted around 1700, part of “a methodical plan” to provide shade for livestock—and perhaps amenity for the town’s early inhabitants.<sup>158</sup> Poets and antiquarians who grew sublime over the tree’s supposed autochthony may simply have not known this fact. But it is very likely that they did, and that such an unlovely intrusion on the romance of the past was gently set aside. In any case, Bartlett’s revelation only slightly diminished the aura of the great tree, and did nothing to lessen its association with Washington.

Then, in a meticulously crafted essay published in 1931, Samuel F. Batchelder refuted once and for all the legend of the Washington Elm. He accused the “traditionalists” of overlooking a floodtide of evidence which proved that the story as handed down for generations was largely myth. But beloved traditions are not put to sleep so easily, and Batchelder was well aware that he was wrecking a piece of sacred patriotica. To upset the Washington Elm tradition “would be as painful a shock to our historic equilibrium,” Batchelder realized, “as to declare the truth that the Declaration of Independence was not signed on the Fourth of July.” Doing so would be looked upon as an act “not only unpatriotic but unfilial.” Not surprisingly, Batchelder chose his weapons carefully.

According to the legend, Washington took command of the troops on July 3, 1775, in the ceremony colorfully recounted by Sibley and others. But Batchelder could produce no

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<sup>157</sup> Erle Kauffman, “The Elm--America’s Tree of Glory,” *American Forests* 42 (May 1936): 222.

<sup>158</sup> J. Gardner Bartlett in *The Cambridge Tribune* (3 November 1923), reprinted in “The Washington Elm, Cambridge,” *Old Time New England* vol. 14 (Boston: Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, 1924), 145-146. The Cambridge Cow Common originally extended as far west as Linnaean Street. The Washington Elm, located at the present intersection of Mason and Garden Streets, was the first of the six elms. The second gained fame in association with George Whitefield, one of the firebrands of the Great Awakening. From its shade in 1745, Whitefield preached to a crowd on the Common, blasting the Harvard Unitarians as “close Pharisees, resting on head knowledge” (Van Wyck Brooks, *The Flowering of New England*, 33). Known as the Whitefield Elm—and often confused with its more famous neighbor—the tree was felled in 1871. Several of the other elms, located at 500-foot intervals along Garden Street, survived well into the twentieth century, becoming neighborhood landmarks as the area developed.

evidence to support either date or event. Washington was indeed in town on July 3, but evidently spent the entire day inspecting troops and fortifications at Brookline and elsewhere. Notes of a soul-stirring event at Cambridge are conspicuously absent from soldier's journals, and a Salem newspaper covering Washington's arrival (from a makeshift office in Harvard's Stoughton Hall) made no mention of pomp and circumstance.<sup>159</sup> Due to the threat of British attack, Cambridge had been deserted, making the presence of "enthusiastic ladies standing up in barouches"—as the Dudley diary reported—highly suspect.<sup>160</sup> As the troops themselves were busily constructing trenches from Malden to Roxbury, it is impossible that the entire army could have been summoned on the Common. The Provincial Congress had itself specified, on June 26, 1775, that the reception for Washington at Cambridge be "without any expense of powder, and without taking the Troops off from the necessary attention to their duty at this crisis."<sup>161</sup> Indeed, bringing in the army at such a perilous moment would have been military suicide—"a risky business," wrote Batchelder, "rather like calling off the ditchers at a forest fire to attend a political rally."<sup>162</sup> And as for Washington's wheeling about on a stallion, sword thrust heavenward, his own letters reveal a man in "poor health" and "a good deal fatigued."<sup>163</sup>

The role of the hallowed tree was equally suspect. As Batchelder reasoned, it is unlikely that Washington would have felt it prudent to seek shade in front of a lot of hardscrabble farmers whose respect he needed to earn. This was not the idolized *pater patria* of later decades. In 1775 Washington was still a Southern gentleman on Yankee turf, a man who had come to relieve a popular New England general—Artemus Ward—of his post. Retiring under an elm or any other tree would have been considered an act of "trivial self-indulgence," and no way for a new commander to appear before men he was to send into battle.<sup>164</sup> Indeed, the actual transfer of authority between the generals most likely took place across the Common at Artemus Ward's headquarters.<sup>165</sup>

But even Batchelder found himself attempting to reconcile the "persistent association" of the General and the Elm, and conceded that the story must contain some grain of truth. If

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<sup>159</sup> This was the *Essex Gazette and New England Chronicle*. See Batchelder, "The Washington Elm Tradition," 62.

<sup>160</sup> Batchelder, "The Washington Elm Tradition," 51n.

<sup>161</sup> Lt. Colonel E. M. Harris to John B. Atkinson, 4 May 1949, unpublished letter, Cambridge Historical Commission.

<sup>162</sup> Batchelder, "The Washington Elm Tradition," 57.

<sup>163</sup> Washington quoted in Batchelder, "The Washington Elm Tradition," 73.

<sup>164</sup> Batchelder, "The Washington Elm Tradition," 56-57. Washington was thus the *second* commander of the American Army—a point, Batchelder allowed, which was "not generally appreciated."

<sup>165</sup> Oliver Wendell Holmes was later born in this house.

Washington did not take actual command of the colonial troops in a ceremony under the wide-spreading Elm, he probably did *something* near or under the tree—even if it was no more than stop beneath it briefly, perhaps as General Ward rode out to greet him on the morning of July 2, in the pouring rain.<sup>166</sup> Irrespective of the actual role—if any—played by the Elm, it became the principal vessel bearing memory of the event. As with the Marlboro and Lafayette Elms, the kernel of meaning slowly drifted toward it, and away from those artifacts (the Common itself, for example, or Ward’s headquarters, later torn down by Harvard) which would have made more precise—if less poetic—monuments to the past.

In spite of Batchelder’s revisionism, the legend of the Washington Elm refused to die—even as the tree itself was passing on. Road realignment, and the enclosing of the Common in 1830, marooned the Elm in the middle of Garden Street; its only protection from carriages and horsecars was the diminutive 1847 fence. In 1872, a massive limb crashed to the earth, the wood of which was used to construct a pulpit for a nearby church.<sup>167</sup> By the end of the century the once-noble tree was surrounded by streetcar tracks and a sea of asphalt. Its great crown had been hideously pruned; iron rods and bands supported rotting limbs. Washington’s monument had been reduced to a geriatric stump on a traffic island.

The storied hulk—now but a mass of punk—finally succumbed to gravity in October 1923. A Parks Department crew had been dispatched earlier that week to remove a projecting limb. As they did so, the entire tree—waterlogged from recent heavy rains—toppled over, pulling down streetcar catenary and nearly taking out a pedestrian.<sup>168</sup> Word spread rapidly that the icon had fallen; reporters and a crowd of onlookers soon gathered. A anxious newspaperman from the *Cambridge Tribune*, claiming to be a “representative of various historical societies,” pounced on the arriving Superintendent of Parks. “I forbid you to put a saw on it,” he shouted, “I know an experienced tree surgeon who can save [the tree] by putting it back in the same position it formerly was in, placing a concrete wall around it and preserving it for future generations.”<sup>169</sup> As the crowd swelled, relic hunters scrambled for a piece of the tree, overwhelming the single patrolman on the scene. “Nearby residents and

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<sup>166</sup> Batchelder, “The Washington Elm Tradition,” 73-75.

<sup>167</sup> James R. Simmons, *The Historic Trees of Massachusetts* (Boston: Marshall Jones, 1919), 15.

<sup>168</sup> “The Washington Elm, Cambridge,” *Old Time New England* vol. 14 (Boston: Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, 1924), 143.

<sup>169</sup> “Some Interesting Work about the Famous Washington Elm,” [n. d.] unpublished affidavit, Cambridge Historical Commission.

Radcliffe girls,” reported the *Cambridge Chronicle*, “went to work with the saws and axes of the park employees to remove souvenirs.”<sup>170</sup> The site was later cordoned off and sentries posted to guard the wreckage through the night.

The fall of the Washington Elm made local headlines and national news. One newspaper intimated that the tree’s destruction was the work of Communists.<sup>171</sup> The *Cambridge Chronicle* was more sober, and sentimental. “In the recent death of the Washington Elm,” it eulogized, “the city and the nation have suffered an irreparable loss from our historic memorials.”

No other tree in all the world was so dear to American hearts. Thousands of pilgrims annually wended their way to the Cambridge common to see uplifted its venerable form whose spreading branches served to kindle anew the fires of patriotism in their pent-up souls. Indeed the passing of this precious relic has inspired thousands of Americans with a sense of almost personal human loss such as one might feel with the passing of a great figure in our country’s history.<sup>172</sup>

With the death of the Washington Elm, “the last surviving eye-witness” of the Revolution had passed. This was, to a society in the midst of a colonial revival, no small matter.

Its loss outweighs all other memorials of that period and some enduring reminder should mark the place whereon it stood. But greater than sculptured marble and more lasting than any tablet of bronze or granite is the memory of this tree in the hearts of the people of Cambridge and the nation to whom it has always typified liberty, justice and the invincible spirit of the American Revolution.<sup>173</sup>

A commission was appointed shortly after to determine the fate of the treasured remains—now under lock and key in a city warehouse—and to recommend an appropriate memorial to the Washington Elm.

Once a vessel bearing the memory of an historical event, the Washington Elm was now an object worthy of veneration itself. “Long-enduring monuments,” writes David Lowenthal, “acquire an antiquity that deserves its own recognition”; or as Crabbe put it, “Monuments themselves Memorials need.”<sup>174</sup> The Washington Elm came to overshadow the very event it was said to have shaded—and to which it owed its original significance. It very nearly led to the removal of another monument to Washington in Boston. Walter Gilman Page,

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<sup>170</sup>“Washington Elm Finally Topples,” *Cambridge Chronicle* (27 October 1923).

<sup>171</sup> Charles M. Sullivan to Gary Griffith, 25 September 1996, unpublished letter, Cambridge Historical Commission.

<sup>172</sup> “A Tribute to the Washington Elm,” *Cambridge Chronicle* (4 July 1925).

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>174</sup> David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 323.

chairman of the state art commission, caused no great stir (at least in Cambridge) by suggesting that the great equestrian statue of Washington in the Boston Public Garden “be moved to the site of the elm.”<sup>175</sup>

Concerned “that the traditional sentiment . . . not end with the death of the original,” Mayor James Michael Curley—Boston’s legendary “rascal king”—offered his municipal neighbor a young scion of the Washington Elm which had been raised from a cutting and was thriving on Charlestown Heights.<sup>176</sup> But efforts to properly commemorate the Washington Elm remained unresolved for decades, and produced little more than a medallion in the pavement marking the former location of the tree.<sup>177</sup> In 1949, Frank A. K. Boland, proprietor of the nearby Commander Hotel (whose stationary and chinaware carried an image of the Elm), initiated a campaign to commemorate the commemorative tree. Doing so re-opened debate over the veracity of the Washington Elm tradition. When asked to lend his authority to the effort, historian Samuel Eliot Morrison responded: “In my opinion, the ‘tradition’ of Washington taking command of the Army under the elm . . . had best be allowed to die.”<sup>178</sup>

Leonard Craske—a popular classicist who also created the sculpture of the fisherman at Gloucester—had already been commissioned to design a bas relief. He depicted precisely the scene of patriotic pomp that made Batchelder wince. After consultation with the U. S. Army’s Historical Division, the grosser inaccuracies of military protocol and regalia were eliminated.<sup>179</sup> With Morrison’s input, Boland and Craske edited the caption to read “General George Washington, having taken command of the Continental Army, reviews the troops on Cambridge Common from under the elm that grew near this spot, July 3, 1775.”<sup>180</sup> This too failed to pass muster with the eminent historian; in the final bronze casting, the good elm had been purged from the canon, remaining as little more than a mute companion to an equestrian Washington. The unveiling of Craske’s piece, on July 3, 1950, was itself a grand occasion, and included a parade, “Dress Retreat,” fireworks and

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<sup>175</sup> “Washington Elm is Cut Up and Stored,” *Cambridge Chronicle* (3 November, 1923).

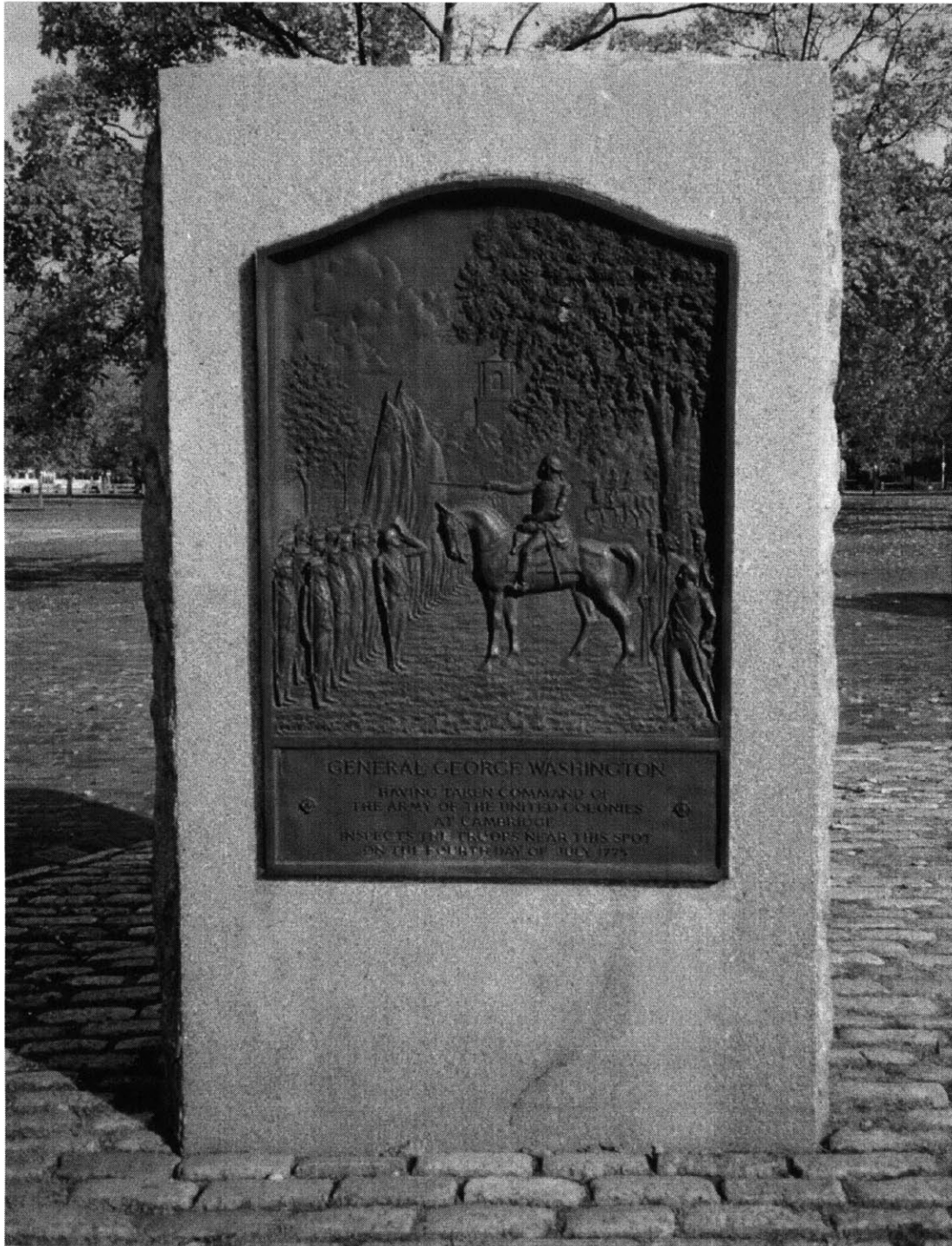
<sup>176</sup> “Mayor Curley Makes Offer to Cambridge,” *Cambridge Chronicle* (10 November 1923).

<sup>177</sup> A later medallion still marks the spot, though it is indistinguishable from a manhole cover.

<sup>178</sup> Samuel Eliot Morrison, “Proposed Tablet Under Washington Elm,” 27 October 1949, unpublished manuscript, Cambridge Historical Commission.

<sup>179</sup> Lt. Colonel E. M. Harris to John B. Atkinson, 4 May 1949, unpublished letter, Cambridge Historical Commission.

<sup>180</sup> Frank A. K. Boland to Hon. Michael J. Neville, 28 December 1949, unpublished letter, Cambridge Historical Commission.



**Figure 31.** Sculpture of Washington under the Elm, by Leonard Craske (1949).  
Photograph by author (1998).

banquet featuring “elm soup.” One of the honored speakers was a young congressman named John F. Kennedy.<sup>181</sup>

As for the tree itself, the Parks Department received hundreds of requests for fragments—from “people of all classes and conditions,” from colleges, genealogical associations, historical societies, fraternal lodges, women’s clubs, elementary schools, veteran’s organizations, and from the Mt. Vernon Ladies Association of the Union, the Sulgrave Institution (which owned the ancestral home of Washington in England), and even the august Smithsonian itself. One man—who claimed Washingtonian lineage—wished to craft a box for buttons said to be from the general’s coat. A sculptor offered to “carve a likeness” of Washington from the wood of the tree. A woman suggested that a pair of chairs be made for the President and Vice-President of the United States.<sup>182</sup> Hundreds of small cubes were cut from the limbs of the Washington Elm, each labeled with a brass plaque and sent to “individuals of prominence” around the country. At least one picture frame was made, to hold a likeness of the late tree. Pieces of the main trunk were sent to the governors of the various states and territories, and a polished cross-section was presented to the museum at Mt. Vernon—Washington’s former home in Virginia. Gavels were crafted, too, and a pair was presented to the senate and house of representatives of each state.<sup>183</sup> Smaller cuts of the historic wood were sent to the governments of 32 countries.<sup>184</sup> Freed from its post of two hundred years, the remains of the Washington Elm sped around the world.

### *The Symmetry of Icons*

In the iconography of New England, great solitary elms—whether civic totems, antique relics, name-bearing monuments or a combination thereof—were sylvan analogs to the meetinghouse and church, and in particular its lofty, white steeple. Thrusting heavenward, steeple and elm occasioned the Yankee scene with a “third dimension of height.”<sup>185</sup> The loftiness of the tree made it one of the few objects in the landscape which challenged the height and visual presence of New England ecclesiastical architecture. Moreover, as we have seen, totem elms possessed no small symbolic power of their own.

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<sup>181</sup> The bas relief was later stolen, and had to be recast from a plaster model now located in the lobby of the Sheraton Commander Hotel. Eliot B. Spaulding, “Stolen Bronze Memorial Recast for April 19,” *Cambridge Chronicle* (20 March, 1975).

<sup>182</sup> “Many Interested in Historic Elm,” *Cambridge Chronicle* (1 December 1923).

<sup>183</sup> “A Tribute to the Washington Elm,” *Cambridge Chronicle* (4 July 1925).

<sup>184</sup> Batchelder, “The Washington Elm Tradition,” 47.

<sup>185</sup> R. H. Richens, *Elm* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 135.

Henry David Thoreau understood the vertiginous presence of elms in the landscape, and their symbolic symmetry with meetinghouse and church. From a hilltop prospect, elms could be “distinguished further than any other tree.” Some of these were “so lifted up in the horizon,” Thoreau observed, that the trees appeared “like portions of the earth detached and floating off by themselves into space.” Spied from afar in this way, such lofty sylvia played tricks on his eye. One elm, several miles north of Concord, appeared to be closer and larger than it actually was; “Perhaps it looms a little,” mused Thoreau. Indeed, big elms—“dark masses against the sky”—could be seen “as far, at least, as a white spire,” even though the spires were often taller. From a Concord hilltop in 1857, Thoreau caught sight of a steeple some 14 miles distant (he deduced it belonged to the Baptist church in North Tewksbury); from the narrow edifice his eye traveled to a pair of big elms “in the horizon on the right of it.” Steeple and elm were, for this perceptive observer of the New England landscape, peers on the horizon.<sup>186</sup>

Like the meetinghouse or church and its white spire, New England’s totem elms were beacons of meaning in the landscape. Mircea Eliade has written in *The Sacred and the Profane* that we “found” the world by investing it with religious significance, and fix sacred space with signs and totems.<sup>187</sup> The embryonic settlements of the early colonial period were surrounded by vast tracts of wilderness; from the perspective of the newcomers, this “unknown, foreign, and unoccupied territory,” still shared “in the fluid and larval modality of chaos.”<sup>188</sup> Out of such disarray emerged the spatial—and moral—order of settlement, an order objectified by the meetinghouse and its upthrust steeple. “Like Jacob’s ladder,” writes John R. Stilgoe, “the New England meetinghouse existed as a hierophany, an axis linking earth with Heaven.”<sup>189</sup> Totems such as the Sheffield and Pittsfield Elms, or the Great Elm on Boston Common, were secular counterpoints to the meetinghouse, sylvan Jacob’s ladders which likewise endowed the landscape with significance in the “third dimension of height.” If the meetinghouse spire objectified spatial order architecturally, the totem elm was its arboreal counterpart.

Until very late in the nineteenth century, steeple and elm were the loftiest objects in the common landscape. In many New England villages and towns, they co-tenanted the skyline. Their symmetry was particular evident in Pittsfield, where the great Elm even

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<sup>186</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *The Journal of Henry D. Thoreau*, 3d. ed., vol. 10, eds. Bradford Torrey and Francis H. Allen (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1949), 88-89.

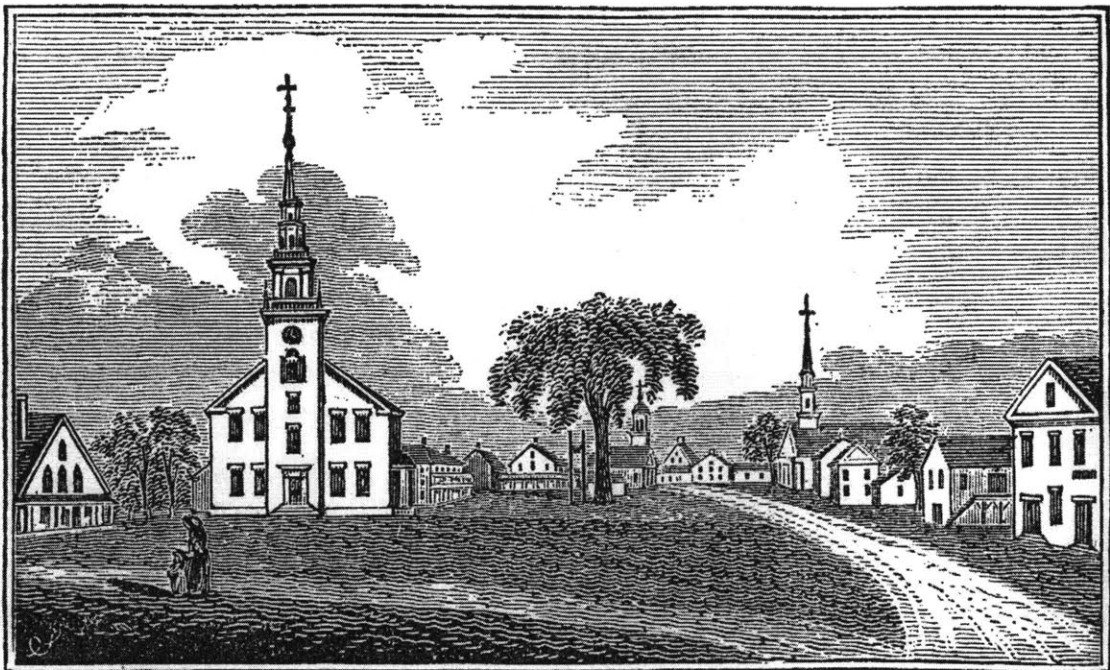
<sup>187</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1959), 20-31.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>189</sup> John R. Stilgoe, *Common Landscape of America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 57.



**Figure 32.** Symmetry of icons. Hatfield town seal. From Wells, *History of Hatfield* (1910).



**Figure 33.** Symmetry of icons. Petersham, Massachusetts. Engraving by John Warner Barber, c. 1840.

surpassed the meetinghouse as the dominant visual and symbolic element in the town. During Lafayette's visit in 1824, the icons were literally bound together. For the occasion, an immense American flag was draped from a rope secured at one end to the lowermost limb of the Pittsfield Elm (itself some 70 feet high) and the spire of the meetinghouse. In many depictions of New England towns by John Warner Barber—the Connecticut engraver who traveled the region in the 1830s to document its “smiling and prosperous villages”—elms and meetinghouses share the scene. They were the twin icons of Yankee space.<sup>190</sup>

Occasionally, totem elms themselves gained religious significance. The Great Elm of Boston Common consecrated space for the Methodists, a sect which traced its origins in New England to a period of fervent religious revivalism in the 1740s known as the Second Great Awakening. Methodists had a history of outdoor preaching, for they believed “that the world was their parish, and the poor their parishioners”; at Boston, the Elm became their first meetinghouse.<sup>191</sup> George Whitefield, a Calvinist-Methodist who opposed John Wesley on matters of predestination, was one of the most prominent figures in this period of heightened religiosity. His powerful orations were meant to stir the morally recumbent, and gained him renown as a “son of thunder.” Whitefield arrived at Boston in 1740, but was denied a pulpit and chose instead to preach beneath the Great Elm. On September 20 of that year, Whitefield held forth to a congregation of 8,000 souls, gathered in the “hospitable shade” of the tree—then the only one on the open Common.<sup>192</sup>

But this early Methodist flock soon became “a shepherdless sheep,” an historian later wrote, “and when [Whitefield] was parted from them [they] were scattered like chaff before the winds.”<sup>193</sup> But in 1790, again under the Great Elm, a new flock was gathered. That year, a Methodist minister from Virginia named Jesse Lee arrived in Boston to cultivate souls. Denied a pulpit as Whitefield had been before him, Lee elected “to go into God's first temples and preach under the trees.” With a borrowed table set beneath the Great Elm, Lee held forth to a large assembly of men and women, attracted “by the novelty of the circumstance.” The

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<sup>190</sup> John Warner Barber, quoted in Ivan Sandroff, *More Massachusetts Towns* (Barre, Massachusetts: Barre Publishers, 1965), ii. Born in East Windsor, Connecticut in 1798, Barber apprenticed with Abner Reed, the “father or at least the step-father of early American banknote printing.” See “The Eyes of New England,” in Barrows Mussey, *Old New England* (New York: A. A. Wyn, Inc., 1949), 126-127.

<sup>191</sup> A. B. Kendig, “Early Out-Door Methodist Preaching,” in J. W. Hamilton, *Memorial of Jessie Lee and the Old Elm* (Boston: J. P. Magee, 1875), 32-33.

<sup>192</sup> J. W. Hamilton, *Memorial of Jessie Lee and the Old Elm* (Boston: J. P. Magee, 1875), 12.

<sup>193</sup> Hamilton, *Memorial of Jessie Lee*, 12.



**Figure 34.** Gathering of Methodist ministers beneath the Great Elm of Boston Common, 1866.  
From J. W. Hamilton, *Memorial of Jesse Lee and the Old Elm* (1875).

positive response encouraged Lee to remain in Boston, and he eventually planted there the first permanent Methodist church in New England.<sup>194</sup>

The Reverend John William Hamilton also preached under the Great Elm, in 1875, during the 85th anniversary of Jesse Lee's sermon. Later that year Hamilton produced a small commemorative volume, entitled *Memorial of Jesse Lee and the Old Elm*, in which he provided a history of their sylvan meetinghouse, and emphasized the Great Elm's ecclesiastical significance. "Though it has a civic history," wrote Hamilton of the tree, "it belongs to Christianity till the end of time."<sup>195</sup> "Grand Old Elm!" he exclaimed; "May never a branch be broken, and never a root disturbed while the city looks on the sea. New and fresh every year may its leaves come forth in the sun, type of that new life that may bud and blossom and yield its fruit in all the churches perennially." Bound as a frontispiece into *Memorial of Jesse Lee* was a remarkable photograph of a gathering of Methodist ministers beneath the tree, taken during the sect's New England Centenary Convention in 1866. In it, the Great Elm looms above a solemn flock of shepherds—a keepsake of the pagan roland consecrated now to God.

### *Elegy*

By the late nineteenth century, many of New England's great totem elms were close to death, or had already vanished from the Yankee scene. The passing of such sylvan icons did not go unnoticed. The fall of the Great Elm of Boston Common produced widespread mourning in the community, as if a great beneficent spirit had departed; likewise, the dying Pittsfield Elm was felled "amid the tears of the sternest men."<sup>196</sup> Descriptions of old elms in this period often took on an elegiac tone, as if their imminent demise heralded the twilight of the century itself, and of a golden age. Such trees were especially appealing to writers of an antiquarian frame of mind—particularly those who were themselves elderly, who recognized in the creeping decrepitude of the elm a profile of their own mortality.

Among New England's men of letters, Oliver Wendell Holmes expressed a depth of affection for the Yankee elm that was matched by few writers. He was born in 1809 within sight of the Washington Elm in Cambridge, and elm trees were among his earliest memories. "When I first rolled my infant eyes toward the glare of the western sky," he wrote at the end of his life, "four green masses, each of them 'a forest waving on a single

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<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>196</sup> J. E. A. Smith, *The History of Pittsfield* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1869), 35-36.

stem' . . . printed themselves on my retina through my blinking eyelids." Elms "entered into my young life," recalled Holmes, "as truly as the milk that made its blood."<sup>197</sup> Holmes matured into a versatile man; trained as a medical doctor, he made an early name for himself as a poet, and later became a master of "occasional verse."<sup>198</sup> He was also a consummate man-about-town, a Yankee Dr. Johnson who relished the pageantry of urban life in Boston (the "hub of the universe," as he famously called it). But Holmes was no stranger to the countryside either; for it was there that he indulged a lifelong passion for elms.

In this man's view, no tree could match the America elm. Apple trees—which he also loved—were but lowly "fruit peddlers" next to the mighty elm; for the latter "dealt only with the sunbeams."<sup>199</sup> Holmes was clearly moved by elms, but he often struggled to express their lyric beauty, or to articulate his passion for the tree. He deplored the pedantic objectivity of the plantsman:

Just think of applying the Linnæan system to an elm! Who cares how many stamens or pistils that little brown flower, which comes out before the leaf, may have to classify it by? What we want is the meaning, the character, the expression of a tree, as a kind and as an individual.

"I shall speak of trees as we see them, love them, adore them in the fields, where they are alive, holding their green sun-shades over our heads, talking to us with their hundred thousand whispering tongues . . ." Holmes strove to unpack the "mother-idea" in each kind of tree, which he believed "if well marked, is probably embodied in the poetry of every language."<sup>200</sup>

But lacking the literary powers of a Thoreau or Emerson, Holmes found himself using the very methods of scientific quantification he deplored. The steel measuring tape became his way of knowing the great trees. Slipping it around the trunk of an elm became a gesture of possession, an act he likened to placing a wedding band on the finger of the betrothed (he even referred to his elms as his "tree-wives"). Holmes imagined that the elm shrank from this advance: "I have often fancied the tree was afraid of me, and that a sort of shiver came

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<sup>197</sup> Oliver Wendell Holmes, "Introduction," Lorin L. Dame, *Typical Elms and Other Trees of Massachusetts* (Boston: Little Brown, 1890), 8.

<sup>198</sup> "Old Ironsides" and "The Chambered Nautilus" were his more famous poems. Occasional verse was written, and read, for specific social occasions, such as weddings, commencements and funerals.

<sup>199</sup> Holmes in Dame, *Typical Elms*, 9.

<sup>200</sup> Oliver Wendell Holmes, *The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, reprint 1916), 318-323.

over it as over a betrothed maiden when she first stands before the unknown to which she has been plighted.”<sup>201</sup>

Tape in hand, Holmes scoured the Massachusetts countryside looking for big elms, measuring each and ranking them by circumference and spread of limbs. An “elm of the first class” was his holy grail. What constituted such a specimen?

Why, size, in the first place, and chiefly. Anything over twenty feet of clear girth, five feet above the ground, and with a spread of branches a hundred feet across, may claim that title, according to my scale.<sup>202</sup>

First-class elms were uncommon. Holmes encountered only a handful in his life—the Sheffield and Hatfield Elms, the Johnston Elm of Rhode Island and the Great Elm at Springfield were among them. Holmes often chased down trees rumored by townsfolk to be the largest in the land. All too often these turned out to be lesser trees. “Provincialism,” the urbane Holmes complained, “has no *scale* of excellence in man or vegetable; it never knows a first-rate article of either kind when it has it, and is constantly taking second and third rate ones for Nature’s best.” The “awful ribbon” strangled many a false pretension, and many a provincial’s pride.<sup>203</sup>

Holmes was a consummate patrician, a man who coined the term *Brahmin* to describe the Boston aristocracy of which he was integrally part. He judged the world with a fiercely discriminating eye, and once declared: “I go politically for equality, and socially for *the* quality.”<sup>204</sup> Holmes’ world view was parted down the center; on one side was gentility, on the other the common herd. It was a perspective he applied equally to trees and men. The men of record in Holmes’ world were the sons of Harvard with whom he dined at the Saturday Club. The trees he worshiped were the sylvan aristocracy of the Yankee landscape. To Holmes, mighty totems such as the Johnston, Hatfield and Sheffield Elms were “grand old patriarchs,” arboreal peers of the Cabots, Lowells and Adames. Before such “representative men” Holmes tipped his hat; before such elms Holmes would often bow his head, “and could without shame have knelt and kissed the turf at their feet.”<sup>205</sup>

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<sup>201</sup> Ibid., 322-323.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid., 326.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid., 323-324.

<sup>204</sup> S. I. Hayakawa and Howard Mumford Jones, *Oliver Wendell Holmes* 2d. ed. (New York: American Book Company, 1978), xx.

<sup>205</sup> Holmes in Dame, *Typical Elms*, 7.

In an 1858 number of *The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table*, Holmes proposed a systematic study of New England trees, something of a social register for the sylvan aristocracy. “I wish somebody would get us up the following work”:

SYLVA NOVANGLICA.

Photographs of New England Elms and other Trees, taken upon the Same Scale of Magnitude. With Letter-Press Descriptions, by a Distinguished Literary Gentleman.

There were no takers, and the project languished for thirty years. The 1880s, however, brought new interest in such documentation, spurred partly by the fact that so many old trees were vanishing. In 1886 two men—Lorin Dame and Henry Brooks—finally took up Holmes’ call for a *Sylva Novanglica*. Holmes, now an old man (and truly a “Distinguished Literary Gentleman”), was invited to write the introduction. His tone was elegiac from the start. “What changes have taken place in the generation of trees then on the stage!” he reflected of 1858. Where were the many colossal totems of that day?—the Great Elm of Boston Common, the Springfield Elm, the Johnston Elm near Providence, Rhode Island (the largest he ever measured). “All gone, and many another wrecked or prostrate or vanished that I have looked upon in its glory.”<sup>206</sup> “I hope the possessors of these portraits,” he apologized, “will pardon this prelude, which is almost a rhapsody”; indeed, in its writing he “found it hard not to break out in dithyrambic apostrophes.”<sup>207</sup>

Dame organized research for the volume; focusing on Massachusetts, he sent out circulars and more than 250 letters of inquiry statewide. He interviewed elderly men and women, and searched old conveyances and journals to determine the age of trees. The exaggerations of local lore had to be confronted: “All statements of great age must be sifted with care,” cautioned Dame, for “the imagination revels in round numbers, and when stopped by no barriers in its backward flight, makes nothing of an additional century or two.” Dame measured each of the trees he included in the book, but he stopped short of giving the work over entirely to scientific method. “The ‘cold tape’ must decide their physical proportions,” wrote Dame of the trees, “but it cannot measure their effectiveness in the landscape.”<sup>208</sup>

Photography would meet that need; but it proved a challenge. Lighting was a constant problem, and Henry Brooks, photographer of the volume, often had to wait hours to obtain

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<sup>206</sup> Ibid., 7-8.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>208</sup> Lorin L. Dame, *Typical Elms and Other Trees of Massachusetts* (Boston: Little Brown, 1890), 13.

the “fugitive slatches” necessary to expose the immense photogelatine plates. He was forced to carry out his work from a weatherproofed wagon complete with darkroom and sleeping accommodations. Shooting the trees at a fixed distance (as Holmes required, so that they could be compared at the “Same Scale of Magnitude”) proved nearly impossible. Intervening objects obscured the subject; a wide angle introduced too many “collateral features,” or left many a sizable tree “dwarfed to insignificance.” Instead, Brooks favored composition and artistic value, framing each tree from whatever distance necessary to capture its full glory. By the fall of 1887, the photographer had produced the first crop of negatives.

Holmes would have no part of it, insisting that some means of comparison must be employed. He then devised a “rod of reason”—a pair of white sticks which would be placed at the base of each tree as a consistent scale. Though the authors at first objected to this “scientific disfigurement,” they eventually submitted. The “rod of reason” was in truth a relatively unobtrusive innovation; it freed the photographer to produce the best portrait of the tree, while affording at least a rudimentary means of comparing the trees. During the summers of 1888 and 1889, Dame and Brooks photographed the trees a second time; before each immense specimen Holmes’ strange white wand may be seen leaning against the trunk.

Finally published as a quarto volume in 1890, *Typical Elms and Other Trees of Massachusetts* is a remarkable portrait of a race of sylvan totems on the eve of their passing. What Holmes originally proposed as an exercise in comparative silviculture in 1858 had become, a generation later, “a book of high elegy,” each photograph a “funeral monument” to a dying tree and a passing age.<sup>209</sup> Oliver Wendell Holmes, himself an “aging relic of Augustan New England,” departed only four years after his *Sylva Novanglica* was finally realized.<sup>210</sup> As one biographer put it, his death marked the fall of the “last leaf” on the New England bough of the “stately elm of American literature.” Evoking one of the Autocrat’s most famous poems, it was a reference he would surely have appreciated.<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>209</sup> Howard Mansfield, *In the Memory House* (Golden, Colorado: Fulcrum Publishing, 1993), 185.

<sup>210</sup> Hayakawa, *Oliver Wendell Holmes*, xvi.

<sup>211</sup> Edwin P. Hoyt, *The Improper Bostonian* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1979), 11-12.

CHAPTER THREE

*The Verdant Village*

“Friends, come let us aid our street to put on her beautiful garments.”<sup>1</sup>

Having gained a presence in the cultural landscape from the earliest settlement period, elms were eventually planted for reasons both sentimental and practical—as dooryard and bridal trees, for example, or to provide shelter for a domicile or a husbandman’s livestock. Circumstance and serendipity looked favorably upon certain elms—autochthonous trees as well as those planted by vanguard settlers—and such trees often gained a significant set of cultural associations. Many of these—the Great Elm of Boston Common, for instance, or the Washington, Pittsfield, Sheffield Elms—became venerated icons in Yankee folklore, landscape and life. But the *wholesale planting* of elms, as a means of spatial design and beautification, had yet to occur. In the first decades of the nineteenth century, elms were still largely an occasional element in the New England scene.

By the 1830s, New Englanders began to look with rekindled interest at their landscape. A new longing for spatial beauty stirred in the land, and produced the first systematic efforts to improve or emend village and town environments. Village improvement societies were organized, which eventually engaged in a wide range of activities to improve the appearance and civic life of their communities—from paving and street lighting to organized recreation. But from the start the focus of their activity was the planting of trees—along village streets, roads and commons. Planting trees offered the greatest return on investment, as their spatial impact was profound.

Elms were favored to the exclusion of nearly all other species—not only because the tree grew quickly and possessed magnificent physical properties, but because it already had purchase in the Yankee imagination—more than any other species. In effect, the great totem elm—a rolandic presence in both the civic and the domestic realms—sired the elm-embowered village. The great planting of village elms in the middle decades of the nineteenth century transformed the New England scene, as countless once-barren Yankee

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen West Williams, “An Ancient Settler Gone,” *Gazette and Courier* (August 15, 1853).

towns were made verdant with forest trees. By century's end, New England had become a republic of shade.

### *The Village Barren*

Even if the cultural practices of native Americans had removed vast areas of woodland, the early settlers of New England nonetheless encountered a surfeit of trees. Trees still covered much of the land, a condition William Tudor described in 1819 as “a redundancy of forest.”<sup>2</sup> The first generation of villages often occupied old Indian clearings, but as subsequent settlement pushed deeper into the wilderness, the clearing of large areas became necessary. Settlements were occasions of spatial order won at great cost; land for houselot, common, and civic and religious structures was carved out of the forest. At this early date, the last thing villagers wished to do was decorate their hard-won paths with the very forest tenants they struggled to fell. Oliver Wolcott, Jr., of Litchfield, Connecticut, one of the early advocates of sylvan emendation in New England, was berated by his townsmen on this very score. Around 1790, he set about planting elms along the village street. An elderly gentleman, said to have “remembered the early days of struggle against the forest,” complained of Wolcott: “we no sooner get the woods cleared than you start fetching them back.”<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, by the end of the eighteenth century most New England villages possessed neither trees nor spatial beauty; the shared, public domain—composed primarily of the streets and common or green—was for the most part unimproved. Carriageways were rutted and unkempt; the margins of streets were ambiguous zones where the boundary between public and private was often unclear. What trees did shade the carriageways were mostly wayside volunteers, or private plants which happened to reach out over the street from adjacent gardens. Greens and commons were equally impoverished. Although trees were sometimes set out to provide shelter for animals—as had been done at Cambridge around 1700—commons were generally overgrown and used mainly for pasturing livestock. One writer described the typical Yankee townscape of the 1840s as one of “unsightly structures on bare commons.”<sup>4</sup> Lenox, Massachusetts, in this period was “a pretty barren village, with so few trees that you could . . . look far and wide from the Courthouse steps.”<sup>5</sup> Even

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<sup>2</sup> William Tudor, *Letters on the Eastern States* (New York: Kirk and Mercein, 1820), 266.

<sup>3</sup> Alain C. White, *The History of Litchfield, Connecticut* (Litchfield: Enquirer, 1920), 168; Chard Powers Smith, *The Housatonic, Puritan River* (New York: Rinehart & Company, 1946), 302.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Perry Miller, “Nature and the National Ego,” in *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1964), 205-206.

<sup>5</sup> Walter Prichard Eaton, “Ancestral Shade,” *Berkshire Eagle* (29 May 1946).

at Boston, arguably the most progressive community in New England, most of the Common was “an unshaded field” well into the nineteenth century. Scattered perimeter plantings had occurred as early as 1723, but the interior remained barren except for the Great Elm and a handful of other trees.

### *Early Models of Emendation*

There were exceptions, however; almost all of which occurred in the valley towns of the Connecticut and Housatonic. Settled in the 1650s, these fertile vales gave themselves readily to agriculture, and a century later their flourishing villages and farmsteads possessed an air of maturity. Elm trees, long a presence in the rich intervalles, endowed the scene with an appearance of great age. As early as the 1750s, villages such as Northfield, Deerfield, Hadley, Northampton, Longmeadow, Stockbridge and Litchfield began planting the tree in town, typically along the main street or in front of public edifices. These vanguard village improvers simply introduced into the “urban” space of town a long-familiar element of the valley pastoral; though modest, theirs was the first utilization of the American elm as a means of civic beautification and spatial design in the United States. It was here in the quiet valley towns of the Connecticut and Housatonic that Elm Street was born.

Oliver Wolcott’s actions rendered Litchfield, Connecticut, a model for village planting as early as 1800. His first project was to plant thirteen buttonwood trees to commemorate the states of the new Republic. But the trees soon fell prey to disease, and subsequently died (all but one—the “Connecticut” tree, not surprisingly). From then on, Wolcott, assisted by his brother, set about planting elms, which “grew in many of the outlying swamps and could be brought into town on the shoulders.” The Wolcotts planted a number of such trees along South Street and elsewhere. They were later joined by John C. Calhoun, who set out elms at each of his several residences beginning in 1805. During the War of 1812, soldiers stationed on Bantam Road contributed to the greening of the town by planting a double row of elms along their camp.<sup>6</sup>

At Stockbridge, William Edwards set out a handful of elms along the main street in 1786, in celebration of the signing of the Constitution.<sup>7</sup> The Williard family initiated the planting of elms along the Deerfield Common in 1809.<sup>8</sup> Northampton’s early stock of elms was

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<sup>6</sup> White, *History of Litchfield*, 168-170.

<sup>7</sup> Margaret French Cresson, *The Laurel Hill Association, 1853-1953* (Pittsfield: Eagle Printing, 1953), 11.

<sup>8</sup> Emma Lewis Coleman, *A Historic and Present Day Guide to Old Deerfield* (Boston: Plimpton Press, 1907), 105.

due to the largess of John Hunt, a wealthy merchant who planted a row of trees in the 1750s, from which Elm Street later took its name.<sup>9</sup> At Northfield, Massachusetts, several rows of maples and elms had been set out around 1812 by Thomas Powers, a Northfield lawyer and man of record.<sup>10</sup> John Warner Barber's engravings of Deerfield, Longmeadow, Northfield and other towns of the Connecticut—drawn from life in the 1830s—verify well-established town trees.

The sylvan beauty of these older valley towns was early noted—particularly by foreign visitors. They were praiseworthy in comparison to the typically barren Yankee town, and paradisaical next to the ragged upstart settlements of New York's western frontier. Basil Hall, a captain in the Royal Navy who toured Massachusetts and New York in 1827, described the country along the Erie Canal as “spotted over with new villages, as raw and unpicturesque as if they had just stepped out of a saw pit.” Embryonic settlements huddled in pockets carved out of the forest, and newly-cleared fields were still studded with burned stumps, “seen poking their black snouts above the young grain, like a shoal of seals.” Although Hall admired the “certain degree of liveliness or finish” imparted by prim village churches, he found the townscapes of the New York frontier desperately wanting of spatial beauty.<sup>11</sup>

Those of Massachusetts, in contrast, struck him as gracious, mature and beautiful. The best of them, he found, were “embellished with ornamental trees.”<sup>12</sup> Hall was particularly moved by Stockbridge, on the Housatonic. In the fading light of a summer evening, deeply nestled beneath its verdant bower of elms, the town evoked another world. “The street, or rather avenue, through which we passed,” observed Hall, “was lined with double rows of tall trees, somewhat in the fashion of an Italian corso, or the beautiful Prado of Spanish cities, and I almost fancied that even in those picturesque countries I had never seen a prettier place.” In this state of reverie, Hall almost missed the many townsfolk quietly reposing in their gardens, or before houses “almost hid in the foliage or lost in the shadows of the trees.” “My imagination was carried away to the region of the tropics,” he recalled, “where alone I had seen such a picture before.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Solomon Clark, “The Henshaw Elms of Northampton—Something About Their Early History,” reprinted in C. H. Lyman, “C. H. Lyman Writes on the Henshaw Elms,” *Gazette* (7 August 1936).

<sup>10</sup> Arthur Percy Fitt, *All About Northfield* (Northfield: Northfield Press, 1910), 83.

<sup>11</sup> Basil Hall, *Travels in North America in the Years 1827 and 1828* vol. 1 (Edinburgh: Cadell and Co., 1829), 128-129.

<sup>12</sup> Basil Hall, *Travels* vol. 2 (1829), 92.

<sup>13</sup> Basil Hall, *Travels* vol. 1 (1829), 106-107.

To Hall, the Connecticut valley towns of Northampton and Hadley were similarly “impossible to overpraise.” Their beauty he attributed in part to well-adorned yards and the vines which sometimes engulfed much of a house. But the lushness of the scene was chiefly due to the “double row of trees” planted on either side of the main streets, under which ran “broad and agreeably shaded walks.”<sup>14</sup> Englishman Charles Joseph Latrobe, author of *The Rambler in North America* (1835), similarly concluded that the towns of the Connecticut owed their splendor and charm chiefly to the elms which, he noted, “not unfrequently line both sides of the streets, and cluster about the older mansions.”<sup>15</sup>

Nathiel Parker Willis, writing in 1839, found the Housatonic and Connecticut valleys “gemmed with beautiful rural towns, many of them among the first in our country for prosperity, neatness, and cultivated society.”<sup>16</sup> Like Basil Hall, he too was particularly impressed with Stockbridge. “Most small towns in America have traces of *newness* about them,” he claimed in *Life, Here and There* (1850); “The stumps of a clearing, or freshly-boarded barns—something that is the antipodes of romance—meets your eye from every aspect. Stockbridge, on the contrary, is an old town . . . the fields look soft and genial, the grass is swardlike, the bridges, picturesque, the hedges old, and the elms, nowhere so many and so luxuriant, are full-grown and majestic.” Indeed, Willis found the town “embowered in foliage.”<sup>17</sup>

But it would be decades before other towns and villages in New England followed the precedent set by such precocious communities. Though the spatial beauty which distinguished Northampton, Deerfield, Stockbridge and other towns was early appreciated by visitors from abroad, they inspired little or no emulation elsewhere in New England. In time, however, this began to change. A broad shift in values in the 1830s stimulated a new awareness of nature, environment, and the native landscape. This in turn brought about a new interest in native flora—particularly indigenous “forest trees.” It also led to the first organized agitation for the spatial beautification of villages and towns. The combination would bring about a remarkable era of community action—the village improvement movement—that would eventually change the face of New England. For guidance, the village improvers would turn again and again to the elm-tufted valley towns of the Connecticut and Housatonic—purveyors of spatial beauty to an entire region.

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<sup>14</sup> Basil Hall, *Travels* vol. 2 (1829), 92-95

<sup>15</sup> Charles Joseph Latrobe, *The Rambler in North America* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1835), 43-44.

<sup>16</sup> Nathaniel Parker Willis, “Connecticut Valley, From Mount Holyoke,” *American Scenery* vol.1 (London: James S. Virtue, 1857), 117.

<sup>17</sup> Nathaniel Parker Willis, *Life, Here and There* (New York: Baker and Scribner, 1850), 133-134.

*The Environmental Awakening*

Until about 1820, the dynamic between Americans and the natural environment was largely one of unchecked consumption; the land's rich bounty of flora and fauna was considered a bumper crop awaiting only the plucky harvester who could bring it in. Forests were seen as little more than an obstacle to be cleared away. With the rare exception of men like Thomas Jefferson, Hector St. John de Crevecoeur or William Bartram—each of whom early understood that America possessed a remarkable natural legacy—the prevailing attitude was that of exploitation. In the 1820s, however, this began to change; the adversarial stance of earlier generations gradually became one which looked upon the natural world with wonder and appreciation. To be sure, devastation of natural resources would continue through the nineteenth century. But now it was accompanied—and often checked—by an opposite set of attitudes.

A number of factors led to the new interest in nature, landscape and environment. In part it was a reaction against the speed at which the land was being developed, and the too-rapid advance of settlement across the Western frontier. The American landscape, which had long appeared limitless in extent and wealth, was by the early nineteenth century beginning to show signs of depletion. Nicolas Collin, a friend of Benjamin Franklin, warned of a coming shortage of timber if the wholesale destruction of forests continued. In a paper delivered at Philadelphia in 1789—"An Essay on Natural Philosophy and Its Relationship to the Development of the New World"—Collin argued that "Our stately forests are a national treasure, deserving the solicitous care of the patriotic philosopher and politician." "Hitherto," he pointed out, "they have been too much abandoned to the axes of rude and thoughtless wood-choppers . . ." <sup>18</sup>

The awakened sensibility toward nature and environment was also influenced by European Romanticism. Led first by Rousseau and Chateaubriand and later Goethe, Schiller, Herder and the German Romantics, this vision of the world flowered around the end of the eighteenth century—chiefly in the hands of the English poets Scott, Byron, Coleridge and William Wordsworth.<sup>19</sup> Romanticism was a reaction against the Enlightenment, and sought to temper its rationalism with an emphasis on the emotive, the spontaneous, the

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<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Hans Huth, *Nature and the American*, 17. Although Collin was primarily concerned with "timber for fuel and domestic uses," he also urged a "*treatise on ornamental planting*."

<sup>19</sup> Ironically, many of these poets—Coleridge and Byron in particular—had themselves been influenced by earlier accounts of nature in the New World, by the Bartrams, St. John de Crevecoeur and others. See Alfred Kazin, *A Writer's America: Landscape in Literature* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), 24-28.

irrational and the creative. To the Enlightenment mind, nature was a specimen to evaluate objectively, to measure and classify; to the Romantic, nature (often capitalized) was “a live vessel of spirit, a translucent source of mystery and revelation.”<sup>20</sup> Romanticism was channeled to America through writers such as James Fenimore Cooper, William Cullen Bryant, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. It also inspired the first generation of American landscape painters, among them Washington Allston, Thomas Cole and Asher B. Durand.

The Romantics venerated nature, and saw in the natural world traces of the divine. William Cullen Bryant was among the earliest of these voices, whose poems “Thanatopsis” (1817) and “A Forest Hymn” (1825) were among the first expressions of Romanticism on American soil. Emerson scaled even greater heights. He sought “an original relation to the universe,” and found it in the fields and woods of Concord.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, Emerson believed that in nature and the native landscape lay the true fountainhead of American identity. In his view, writes Alfred Kazin, “To possess Nature in America *thoroughly* was to confirm in every detail of life and thought America’s independence.”<sup>22</sup> What need had the young Republic for the crumbling remains of the past when it possessed a landscape of unimaginable beauty and richness? As Emerson reasoned in his seminal *Nature* (1833):

Embosomed for a season in nature, whose floods of life stream around and through us, and invite us by the powers they supply, to action proportioned to nature, why should we grope among the dry bones of the past, or put the living generation into masquerade out of its faded wardrobe? The sun shines today also. There is more wool and flax in the fields. There are new lands, new men, new thoughts. Let us demand our own works and laws and worship.<sup>23</sup>

The Romantic embrace of nature found, as it were, ample service in forging a bold new identity for the Republic. Following American victory in the War of 1812, a new spirit of nationalism swept the land, which grew stronger as the nation gained in military and economic power during the Jacksonian period. Americans no longer felt so beholden to the precedent and fashions of the Old World, and no longer felt its cultural inferiors. Europe might possess a remarkable legacy of music, literature, art and architecture; but, as Emerson suggested, America had Niagara, Lake George, the White Mountains, the Connecticut and the Mississippi. The paintings of Thomas Cole, Asher B. Durand and

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<sup>20</sup> Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind* (New York: Ballantine, 1991), 366-369.

<sup>21</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Nature,” quoted in Alfred Kazin, *A Writer’s America: Landscape in Literature* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), 50

<sup>22</sup> Alfred Kazin, *A Writer’s America: Landscape in Literature* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), 50.

<sup>23</sup> Emerson in Kazin, *A Writer’s America*, 50.

other landscapists brought many of these scenes to life on canvas. Such a profound natural legacy more than equaled the artifactual grandeur of the Old World, in American eyes at least.

### *First Stirrings of Improvement*

Central to the awakening of a sensibility toward environment in the Jacksonian period was a belief that the contemplation of scenery could produce positive moral and spiritual effects upon the observer. But this did not imply an absence of will. A person could indeed receive spiritual uplift by passively reflecting upon a woodland scene; but he could also derive similar value by distilling the *essence* of that scene in a simulacrum closer to home. In other words, by concerning himself with the emendation or *improvement* of his grounds, he could gain many of the same moral and spiritual benefits afforded by the contemplation of wild nature. “Taste,” offered Thomas Cole, “the perception of the beautiful, and the knowledge of the principles on which nature works, can be applied, and our dwelling-places made fitting for refined and intellectual beings.”<sup>24</sup> Moreover, this application of “taste” was just as effective in the civic realm as it was in the domestic; emendation could transform village space just as it transformed the home grounds, producing moral and spiritual benefit for all inhabitants. As a later advocate of village improvement put it, by affording to nature “the assistance of Art, its appropriate handmaid,” emendation would bring about “a most gratifying development of two kinds of beauty”: One “in the most outward aspect of the village itself,” and the other “in the interior life of the people.”<sup>25</sup>

The environmental awakening thus brought about not only an appreciation for wild nature, but a longing to impart some of its value to the domestic and—more important—the civic environment. It produced, as John R. Stilgoe has put it, “a new craving for spatial beauty.”<sup>26</sup> Americans were indeed ready for this new day. By the 1830s they had moved beyond what Susan Fenimore Cooper called “the first rude stage of progress.”<sup>27</sup> They now wished more of life, and longed for the comforts of cultivation and civilization. The rawness of the American scene, once taken as an inevitable part of the settlement epic, was

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<sup>24</sup> Thomas Cole, “Essay on American Scenery,” in John W. McCoubrey, ed. *American Art 1700-1960: Sources and Documents* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1965), 100.

<sup>25</sup> Stephen E. Burrall, quoted in Richard Berenberg, “Village Improvement Societies in New England, 1850-1900: The Rural Ideal in an Age of Rural Depopulation and Urban Growth” (Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1966), 18.

<sup>26</sup> John R. Stilgoe, “Town Common and Village Green in New England: 1620 to 1981,” in Ronald L. Fleming, ed., *On Common Ground* (Cambridge: Townscape Institute, 1982), 26.

<sup>27</sup> Susan Fenimore Cooper, “A Plea for American Tress,” reprinted from *Rural Hours* in *The Horticulturalist* 5 (1850), 138.

no longer acceptable. The dishevelment of farmsteads, village streets and town commons was now examined through a moral lens, and it appeared to present manifold moral hazards.

The new interest in spatial beauty and village improvement stirred to life early in New England, though it did not gain momentum until after 1820. From the start, trees played a central role. As early as January 1798 an article appeared in a Connecticut newspaper urging the planting of roadside trees: “Would it not be a regulation well deserving the attention of the General Court, to require every town to plant the sides of the public roads with forest trees?” Though its point was economic (fast growing species would “pay for their planting by their growth”), the anonymous author clearly articulated a new sensibility toward environment.<sup>28</sup> The Reverend Lyman Beecher sought a higher plane. In a sermon on July 17, 1824, he exhorted his Litchfield congregation to engage in acts of public spiritedness, which had the result of inspiring a party of townsmen “to transplant forest trees wherever they are needed through our streets.”<sup>29</sup>

The *New England Farmer* began publishing essays on the subject of improvement in the 1820s, and soon became a major advocate of sylvan emendation.<sup>30</sup> In August of 1825 a piece appeared noting that “the value attached to shade trees is by a great part of the community very improperly appreciated.” The writer appealed to the purse, arguing that “the value of most farms would be raised ten or fifteen per cent by the addition of shade trees about the buildings and along the public road.” Moreover, trees “give the country an appearance of wealth, that nothing else can supply . . . the most spacious and princely establishments without them appear covered with the most prison-like gloom.”<sup>31</sup>

The following year the *New England Farmer* published a longer appeal for tree planting. “In a young region, where all the disposable industry must be consumed in freeing the earth from those stately forests, whose leaves have alternately shaded and enriched the soil through the successive Springs and Autumns of many centuries, it is not surprising, that little attention should be paid to the preservation of those beautiful ornaments of a cultivated country, the green trees, which afford so luxurious a retreat from the Summer sun.” But where the “warfare with the original settlers of the country has eased,” the writer added (implicating New England), “it is remarkable that so little care should be best owed on the

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<sup>28</sup> *Monitor* (3 January 1798), quoted in White, *History of Litchfield*, 168.

<sup>29</sup> Catherine Beecher, *Autobiography* vol. 2, quoted in White, *History of Litchfield*, 168-169.

<sup>30</sup> The *New England Farmer* began publication in 1822.

<sup>31</sup> “Shade Trees,” *New England Farmer* 4 (5 August 1825): 10.

comfort of the traveler, or convenience of the resident, by planting trees along the wayside.” He implored readers to do so: “Would each individual bestow these in planting that portion of his land which borders on the public roads with trees, our highways, instead of being bleak, barren, and sultry, would seem like avenues of green, joining village to village, equally sheltered from the burning sun, and the driving storm.”<sup>32</sup>

Not only roads would benefit from emendation, but burial grounds and other spaces, too. In an 1827 tract from the *National Aegis*, a writer criticized the decrepit condition of “those inclosures appropriated for the sepulchres of the departed.” He found most New England cemeteries to be places “abandoned to every unsightly bramble that roots in soil,” a condition which he found to both “dishonor the dead” and “reproach the living.” With modest intervention, however, these could be transformed:

How much more fit to cherish the recollection of lost friends, and to inspire appropriate reflections would they become if the remains of those we have loved and respected, were placed in their last repose beneath the shadow of noble trees; if instead of exciting emotions of disgust by their rudeness, they ornamented the landscape with objects of loveliness.

The writer reproached the “wasteful neglect” which had turned burial ground and roadside into eyesores, and suggested that a remedy “might probably be found by our Agricultural Societies,” which, among other things, could “offer premiums to the individuals who would serve the public and themselves by planting their lands bordering on the highways, with suitable trees” (an action he believed would bring about no less than the “improvement of the face of the earth”).<sup>33</sup> Other appeals were aimed squarely at patriotic sentiment. In 1831 the *New England Farmer* wrote: “No pains and no reasonable expense should be spared by the farmer in setting out useful and ornamental trees around his house and the public road.” He should do so out of love for country. “Our fathers made sacrifices for our country with sword in hand,” the writer argued; “It belongs to their children to make them with the spade . . . “ Indeed, “the good of the country” required that a tree be planted “in every unoccupied corner.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> “Ornamental Trees,” *New England Farmer* 4 (19 May 1826): 341. In an age before enclosed vehicles, the microclimate of roads and highways was critically important to the comfort and safety of travelers.

<sup>33</sup> Reprinted in “Shade Trees,” *New England Farmer* (18 May 1827): 340.

<sup>34</sup> “Trees,” *New England Farmer* 9 (01 June 1831): 365. The precise line of demarcation between public and private was often vague. In this case, it is unclear whether setting out trees on the “public road” meant planting them on private land bordering the road, or in the shared common space of the corridor itself. In towns, the issue of public/private ownership of road margins was similarly vague. It would only be drawn into focus later in the century, as modernization introduced new infrastructure to the street corridor and forced a more systematic approach to its management.

Appeals for tree planting, earlier aimed chiefly at the improvement of farmstead and rural road, by 1835 began addressing the civic spaces of town and village. That year, the *New England Farmer* published a tract whose author began by quoting one of the English Romantics:

“There is a pleasure in the pathless woods,” says Byron, but there is none in the woodless paths. It must be confessed that naked streets are particularly uninteresting, and be there never so many of them, as broad and straight soever as you may please, still they add nothing to the beauty and picturesqueness of a town.

Indeed, the writer concluded, “A bald head is not comely, neither is a street seemly which is not well set with trees.”<sup>35</sup>

### *The Romance of the Exotic*

The awakened interest in environment and spatial design in the 1820s and 1830s looked favorably on the native “forest trees” of New England. Until then, however, this had not been the case. With the exception of those Connecticut and Housatonic villages which had set out elms in the eighteenth century, most of the town trees planted before the environmental awakening were imported “exotics.” In the decade following Independence, Americans remained reticent about their cultural prowess, and tended to diminish native products in favor of those of the Old World. This was ironic, particularly given that the nation had just emerged victorious from a war with the most powerful colonial power in Europe. But as we have seen, even as Americans boasted of their liberation from the Old World and its “catalog of errors,” they felt a sense of cultural impoverishment, and indulged a taste for things European.<sup>36</sup> Even into the Jacksonian period, an era of hale nationalism, such cultural dependency still obtained. As late as 1830, the *New England Farmer* wrote scornfully: “It is a trait in our patriotism to favor foreign productions and neglect better that we have at home . . . we dare not admire or praise a book till it has been praised in Europe.”<sup>37</sup>

Cultural self-deprecation extended to the landscape too, as well as to the flora which grew upon it. Before the environmental awakening, American space was considered rough and unfinished, not yet graced with the rich overlay of culture and memory that endeared the landscapes of the Old World to poets and painters. American trees were considered uncouth ruffians fighting for forest light. These too-virile rubes were nothing like the

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<sup>35</sup> “Ornamental Trees,” *New England Farmer* (6 May 1835).

<sup>36</sup> David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 109.

<sup>37</sup> “Trees,” *New England Farmer* 8 (25 June, 1830): 387.

refined artifacts which decorated the canvases of Lorrain and Poussin, or which occasioned the storied vales of Tuscany or the Roman *campagna*. When it came to decorative and ornamental planting, Americans chose imported sylvia over their own, even in New England. As Andrew Jackson Downing later lamented, “who plants an American tree—in America?”<sup>38</sup>

Native trees were not only shunned because they were “common” and lacked the gracious associations of antique lands, but because they carried the stigma of the forest, which in many parts of the United States remained a formidable obstacle well into the nineteenth century. Exotics, on the other hand, bore the stamp of cultural approval, and even an air of worldly sophistication. William Tudor observed in 1819—with some incredulity—that a farmer would often “cut down oaks that were near his house, and plant Lombardy poplars, as more ornamental” (the “example of better taste,” he added optimistically, “will gradually prevent the repetition of similar absurdities”).<sup>39</sup> Foreign trees were indulged like exotic pets. In an age when few people had the opportunity to travel abroad, such sylvan imports were indeed like emissaries from strange and distant lands.

Few exotics more thoroughly penetrated the American scene than the Lombardy poplar (*Populus nigra italica*). A species of columnar form and extremely rapid growth, the tree was among the first to be planted extensively in town and urban settings in the United States—so extensively that Downing would later look back on its heyday as an epidemic. The Lombardy rage was part of a general interest in classicism and the antique world which peaked around 1812. In this period, architects such as Thomas Jefferson, J. J. Ramée and Benjamin H. Latrobe turned to the architecture of ancient Greece and Rome as an appropriate building style for the new Republic. American painters like Benjamin West and Washington Allston traveled to Italy to paint its archaic landscapes—the very scenes absent in upstart America. The tree, a fixture in the pastoral landscapes of northern Italy, became associated in the American mind with the timeless allure of the Old World.

Just how the Lombardy rage began in America is unclear. It was claimed that William Bartram, the great Philadelphia botanist, unpacked the first specimens in America, which had been secured for him by William Hamilton on a trip to Europe in 1783.<sup>40</sup> A competing

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<sup>38</sup> Andrew Jackson Downing, “Shade Trees in Cities,” *The Horticulturalist* 8 (1 August 1852): 346-347.

<sup>39</sup> William Tudor, *Letters on the Eastern States* (New York: Kirk and Mercein, 1820), 280.

<sup>40</sup> Colonel Robert Carr, “Introduction of the Lombardy Poplar into America,” *The Gardener’s Monthly* (January 1861): 9. As William Bartram’s nephew, Carr (then “the oldest American horticulturalist”), had the

claim pointed to William Prince, a Flushing, New York, nurseryman, as the original purveyor. He certainly contributed to the tree's popularity. Prince had more than 100,000 poplar seedlings in cultivation by 1800, which were "disseminated far and wide" before propagation was attempted by others.<sup>41</sup> The Lombardy pedigree may have been even more distinguished. Samuel Eliot Morison claimed that the tree was introduced by none other than classicist Thomas Jefferson. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, he wrote, "it was a sign of unterrified democracy in New England" to plant Lombardy poplars, the "dendrological badge of Jeffersonian Republicanism." Of course, the Federalists turned the badge against its benefactor, pointing out that the Lombardy's "soft, pulpy wood and attraction for worms resembled the brain of the gentleman who introduced them."<sup>42</sup> The earliest introduction of the tree, in New England if not the United States, may have occurred in Cambridge; there, Benjamin Waterhouse reared specimens he brought back from Italy around 1779. He later planted a row of Lombardy poplars in Harvard Yard, the first formal planting of trees there.<sup>43</sup> The Waterhouse trees are clearly evident in a painting of Cambridge Common from 1809, in which an oxcart heads across the space loaded with a supply of sapling Lombards.

However introduced, the Lombardy poplar took the young nation by storm. Major port cities like New York, Boston, and Philadelphia—receivers of the first shipments of the trees—planted hundreds along their main streets. In 1803 Jefferson lined Pennsylvania Avenue with double rows, from the White House to the Capitol.<sup>44</sup> The Park Street Mall, along Boston Common, was similarly planted.<sup>45</sup> The perimeter of Salem Common bore a heavy burden of Lombardy poplars, a remarkable scene of sylvan excess captured by George Ropes in his 1808 *Salem Common on Training Day*. Portsmouth, New Hampshire, too, indulged the Federal rage for the columnar tree. Around 1792, Governor Langdon placed a number of the trees in the front of his residence, an act which set off a planting binge that transformed the city in the next several years. At first the "thrifty and elegant" trees were confined to front yards, but soon the citizens were "stirred up to give them place," one chronicler reported, "in all of our most public streets." The Portsmouth Lombards had been purchased in Boston, "at a high price"; no weedy elms from local

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credentials to back his claim. The *Monthly* described him as "the last living representative of the great Bartram family."

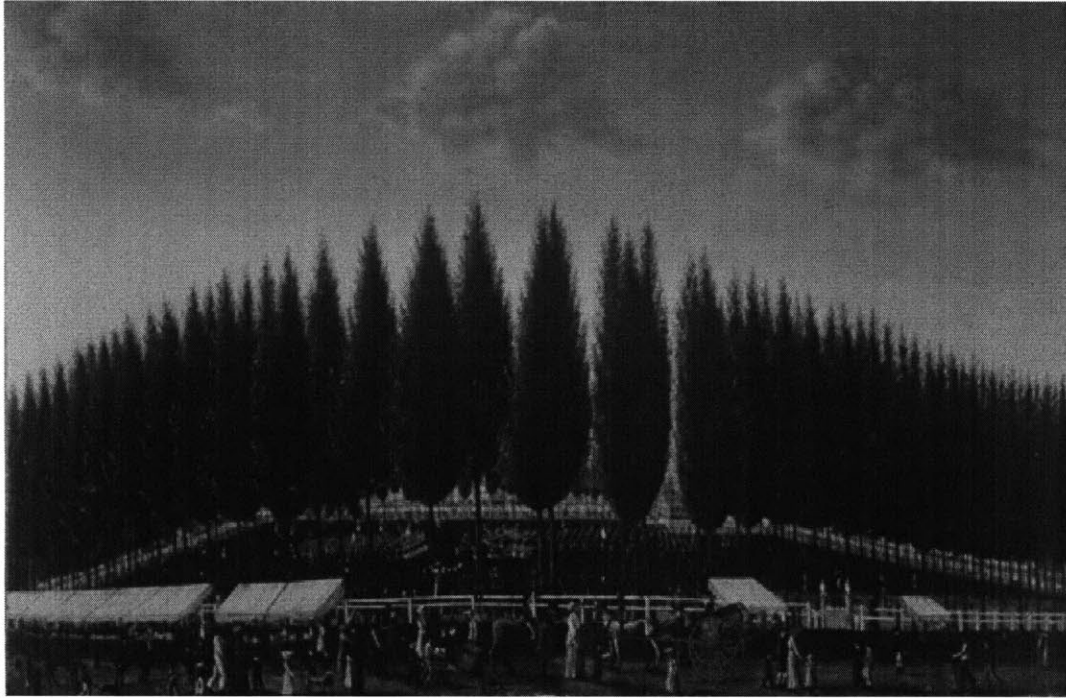
<sup>41</sup> W. R. Prince, "Introduction of the Lombardy Poplar," *The Gardener's Monthly* (March 1861): 80.

<sup>42</sup> Samuel Eliot Morison, *Three Centuries of Harvard* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936), 172.

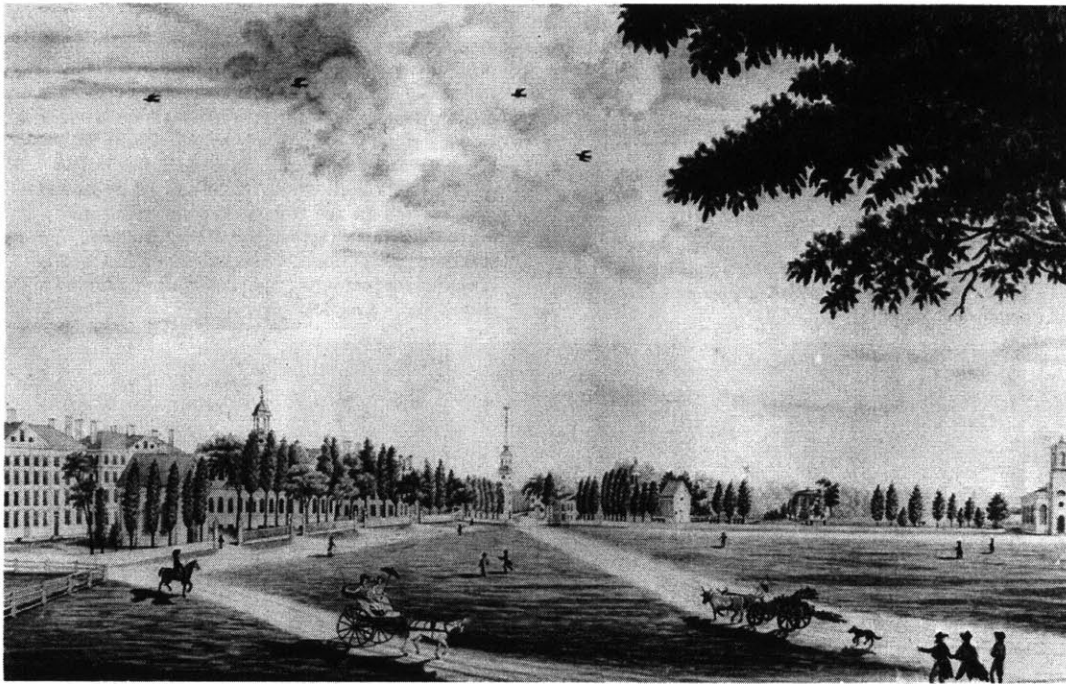
<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* Waterhouse also offered the first lectures in natural history at Harvard.

<sup>44</sup> Spiro Kostof, *America By Design* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 169.

<sup>45</sup> Nathaniel B. Shurtleff, *A Topographical and Historical Description of Boston* (Boston: Noyes, Holmes, and Company, 1872), 326.



**Figure 37.** Lombardy poplars, Salem Common,. George Ropes, *Salem Common on Training Day* (1808). Courtesy Essex Institute, Salem, Massachusetts.



**Figure 38.** Lombardy poplars planted along west side of Harvard Yard, c. 1809. Note oxcart with sapling trees. Courtesy Harvard University Archives.

woods, these costly artifacts were set out with great care, “well boxed” against the predatory nibblings of horses.<sup>46</sup>

Another popular exotic in the early nineteenth century was Ailanthus or Tree-of-Heaven (*Ailanthus altissima*). A native of Asia, seeds of the species were sent from Peking to the Royal Society of London in 1751 by Pierre Nicolas le Chéron d’Incarville, a Jesuit missionary whose chief project had been to convert the Chinese emperor to Christianity.<sup>47</sup> Ailanthus first appeared in North America in Philadelphia, where William Hamilton cultivated the species in 1784. By 1804 it had made its way to New England, first in Portsmouth, Rhode Island.<sup>48</sup> William Prince of New York was again among first to make the species available commercially, having had specimens sent him around 1820 by a London nurseryman. The plants were received under the homely name *Sicilian Tanner’s Sumac*, and distributed as such until “some importations of Ailanthus from France revealed its true title.” The revelation of this more exotic provenance propelled the tree into stardom. As W. R. Prince recounted in 1861,

... after the error in the name was corrected, and “Chinese Ailanthus” was substituted for Sumach, a potent charm came over the entire tree, and every one gazed on it with wonder and admiration, and for many years it was impossible to supply the demands at treble the former prices.<sup>49</sup>

By the summer of 1832 the Thornburn nursery in New York had several Ailanthus trees growing at their Liberty Street premises. “All who behold must admire them for their luxuriant growth and graceful oriental foliage,” wrote a correspondent to the *New England Farmer* (perhaps in the employ of Thornburn’s); “We should admire much to see those trees freely introduced in our streets; a work which can very easily be done, since their growth is very rapid.”<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Charles W. Brewster, *Rambles About Portsmouth* (Portsmouth, New Hampshire: C. W. Brewster & Son, 1859), 343-344.

<sup>47</sup> Walter T. Swingle, “The early European history and the botanical name of the Tree of Heaven, *Ailanthus Altissima*,” *Journal of the Washington Academy of Sciences* 6 (19 August 1916). D’Incarville also introduced golden-rain tree (*Koelreuteria paniculata*) and arborvitae (*Thuja orientalis*) to the West. See Richard Peigler, “A Defense of Ailanthus,” *American Horticulture* 72 (February 1993): 42.

<sup>48</sup> Allen Chamberlain, *Beacon Hill: Its Ancient Pastures and Early Mansions* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1925), 269. Andrew Jackson Downing claimed that the tree arrived in New England directly from China, imported under the name Tillou tree. See Downing, *Landscape Gardening and Rural Architecture* (New York: Dover Publications, reprint 1991), 204.

<sup>49</sup> W. R. Prince, “Introduction of the Lombardy Poplar,” *The Gardener’s Monthly* (March 1861): 80.

<sup>50</sup> *New England Farmer* 12 (9 October 1833): 101.

*Return of the Native*

But the groundswell of interest in American landscape stoked by the environmental awakening, and the rise of a nature-centered nationalism, led to a new appreciation of native American plants—and a backlash against the very exotics which had earlier been so coddled. Native forest trees, once considered *déclassé* and girdled and slashed with abandon, were now hailed as objects of national pride. What the fathers felled, the sons set out with care. The hale spirit of Nature's Nation demanded allegiance not to the effete offspring of foreign lands, but the "hardy and glorious sons" of the native woods.<sup>51</sup>

"There are trees in every American forest," observed the *New England Farmer* in 1830, "that are seldom transplanted into cultivated ground, which, if they were exotics, would be cultivated with great expense and care." Sassafras was an example, a native tree "almost unknown in gardens," yet which possessed many aesthetic and formal qualities; its growth, too, was "nearly as rapid as the Lombardy poplar." Yet, asked the *Farmer*, "who can find a grove of Sassafras, while there are so many tasteless avenues of poplar?"<sup>52</sup> Otis Turner, a New York farmer, expressed well the new sylvan parochialism in an 1832 letter to the *New England Farmer*. "I would choose for my trees those of my own country," he announced, "and the elm should hold the first rank."<sup>53</sup> Planting indigenous trees such as elm was "a debt which civilization owes to our native soil," suggested another contributor, a means of restoring to the land "some of those ornaments of which it once boasted a profusion." Indeed, the writer emphasized, the "genius of improvement" must now "cherish some representatives of the magnificent wilderness which it has spirited away."<sup>54</sup>

Jacksonian America thus embraced native American trees, and purged the alien sylvia which insecurity and an earlier generation had planted. Once praised by pen and spade, exotics now fell by the thousands. The Lombardy poplar—"meanest of all trees"—was the target of especially harsh treatment.<sup>55</sup> Those of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, planted in the 1790s, lost their appeal within a generation. The poplar's short life, and its increasingly ratty appearance as it aged, only accelerated the purges. As a Portsmouth chronicler later wrote, "Their decapitated trunks, shorn of every vestige of beauty, sending out a seven fold number of new shoots, had more the appearance of the fabled hydra than a product of

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<sup>51</sup> Birdsey Grant Northrup, *Rural Improvement* (New Haven : Tuttle, Morehouse & Taylor, 1880), 25.

<sup>52</sup> "Trees," *New England Farmer* 8 (25 June 1830): 387.

<sup>53</sup> "A correspondence from Otis Turner, Medina, Orleans County," *New England Farmer* 11 (21 November 1832): 150.

<sup>54</sup> "Ornamental Trees," *New England Farmer* (6 May 1835).

<sup>55</sup> "Trees," *New England Farmer* 8 (25 June 1830): 387.

Eden.” Everywhere the trees began to disappear—except in graveyards, “where they seemed left to show the downward progress of beauty.”<sup>56</sup> The inhabitants of Hadley, Massachusetts, having set out poplars in 1800, later wiped the town clean of the foreigner—elms and sugar maples went up in their stead.<sup>57</sup> In Salem, too, the Common which bristled with poplars in 1808 was shaven clean and planted to elm by the 1830s.

In Boston, the change in arboreal allegiance was led by Mayor Josiah Quincy, Sr. Early one morning in 1826, Quincy struck out for the Common—axe in hand—and unceremoniously felled “the old poplar trees which used to disfigure the Park street mall”; that same day he planted American elms in their place.<sup>58</sup> For others, pen was sharper than axe. Oliver Wendell Holmes ridiculed the Lombards which stood by his boyhood home in Cambridge. He associated the tree not with bright-morning America, but with tired Old World—and with death itself:

Whether, like the cypress, these trees suggest the idea of the funeral torch or the monumental spire, whether their tremulous leaves make us afraid by sympathy with their nervous thrills, whether the faint balsamic smell of their leaves and their closely swathed limbs have in them vague hints of dead Pharaohs stiffened in their cerements, I will not guess; but they always seemed to me to give an air of sepulchral sadness to the house before which they stood sentries.<sup>59</sup>

The Ailanthus came in for even harsher treatment. This was partly due to characteristics which made the tree unpleasant and difficult to manage—it was wildly invasive, and produced an offensive odor. But rejection of the Ailanthus also revealed the racist underbelly of Jacksonian patriotism, a nativism which became more and more vehement as foreign immigration escalated toward mid-century. If the Lombardy poplar was a foreigner, at least it was associated with Europe and the familiar lands of antiquity. The Ailanthus, a native of Asia, evoked peoples and lands profoundly alien to Anglo-European America. If the Lombards lost their appeal because their symbolism was exhausted, the Ailanthus was purged because it was the Other in sylvan form.

Leading this charge was the good tastemaker Andrew Jackson Downing. Downing had himself once championed exotic sylvia, though rarely to the exclusion of native trees. But he soon turned against the very imports he had recommended earlier. “Down with the

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<sup>56</sup> Brewster, *Rambles About Portsmouth* (1859), 344.

<sup>57</sup> Sylvester Judd, *History of Hadley* (Northampton: Metcalf & Company, 1863), 430.

<sup>58</sup> Shurtleff, *Topographical and Historical Description of Boston* (1872), 326.

<sup>59</sup> The house was his birthplace on the present site of Harvard Law School. See Oliver Wendell Holmes, “The Gambrel-Roofed House,” in Arthur Gilman, ed., *The Cambridge of Eighteen Hundred and Ninety-Six* (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1896), 43-44.

Ailanthus!” he proclaimed, echoing “the cry we hear on all sides, town and country.” Americans had indeed been “seduced by the oriental beauty of its foliage,” and now the tree threatened to overrun the land. The Ailanthus was, he argued, a “usurper in rather bad *odor* . . . which has come over to this land of liberty, under the garb of utility to make foul the air, with its pestilent breath, and devour the soil, with its intermeddling roots.” The suckers—rhizomes by which the tree propagated—Downing compared to “little Tartars that will beget a new dynasty, and overrun our gardens . . . without mercy.” For the Ailanthus “has the fair outside and the treacherous heart of the Asiatics.”<sup>60</sup>

Indeed, Downing rejected the tree for more than its invasiveness or offensive odor. “We confess openly,” he wrote, “that our crowning objection to this petted Chinaman or Tartar, who has played us so falsely, is a patriotic objection.”

It is that he has drawn away our attention from our own more noble native American trees, to waste it on this miserable pigtail of an Indiaman. What should we think of the Italians, if they should forswear their own orange trees and figs, pomegranates and citrons, and plant their streets and gardens with the poison sumac tree of our swamps? And what must at an European arboriculturalist think, who travels in America, delighted and astonished the beauty of our varied and exhaustless forests--the richest in the temperate zone, to see that we neither value nor plant them, but fill our lawns and avenues with the cast off nuisances of the gardens of Asia and Europe . . .

“Oh!” he lamented, “that our tree planters . . . knew and could understand the surpassing beauty of our *native shade trees*. [italics original].<sup>61</sup> For Downing, the righteous path was clearly marked, and it was embowered with American trees.

### *The Great Sheffield “Tree Bee”*

The new longing for spatial beauty, and its patriotic emphasis on native sylvia, produced a period of elm-planting in New England so extensive that it would transform the Yankee scene. As we have seen, prior to the 1840s a small number of New England towns had planted elms on their streets and commons—among them Northfield, Deerfield, Longmeadow, Litchfield and Northampton. So, too, had certain cities, as will be discussed in the next chapter. But such efforts were occasional and sporadic, the work of public-spirited individuals such as Oliver Wolcott, Jr. of Litchfield, or John Hunt of Northampton. As an *organized collective action* aimed to improve or emend the *civitas*,

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<sup>60</sup> Andrew Jackson Downing, “Shade Trees in Cities,” *The Horticulturalist* 8 (1 August 1852): 345-346.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 346-347.

elm-planting—and village improvement in general—did not truly begin until the middle of the 1840s.

It was at Sheffield, Massachusetts, that the village improvement movement began, and there that the American elm became established as central to its vision of spatial beauty. A small town along the Housatonic, Sheffield was already well known throughout the region for the great Sheffield Elm, a totem in the community since its founding in 1733. But beyond this forest giant (and a short row of Lombardy poplars set out around 1820) Sheffield had planted few town trees. Then, in the spring of 1846, two young men—Frank Ensign and Graham A. Root—rallied their fellow citizens and organized a “Tree Bee.” The event, something of an arboreal barn-raising, was met with great enthusiasm; it began in late May and lasted for two weeks. According to local histories, the entire community participated in the effort—men carrying saplings and driving spades, women furnishing the noonday meals (“and by other kind acts encouraging the men”), and children steadying the small trees as they were placed in the ground.<sup>62</sup>

That spring Sheffield planted 1,000 trees in all—every one an American elm. Starting from the Sheffield Elm, the column of verdure marched down the main street of town, as if issuing forth from the great totem itself. Along with the solitary tree, Sheffield’s elm-lined avenue became a touchstone of local pride, a feature that would “excite the attention and admiration of visitors” and distinguish the town as one of the most beautiful in Massachusetts.<sup>63</sup> What had been a barren, unkempt thoroughfare “much overgrown with tangled grass and burdock and large patches of mayweed” now emerged as an essay in spatial beauty, a corridor of limbs and leaves.<sup>64</sup>

The Tree Bee was a defining event in the evolution of Sheffield’s identity and consciousness. In 1896, the town staged an elaborate celebration to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the planting—a “red letter occasion” which drew back long-departed sons and daughters “to revisit old scenes” and sing praises to the trees. The elms, “in whose honor the people congregated,” reported the *Berkshire Courier*, “were decorated with flags, and beneath their green arcade a procession moved to the Old Elm.” Sermons and speeches lauded the civic spirit which so richly endowed Sheffield. “No costly granite shaft or stately pile can compare,” one orator proclaimed, “with the grandeur of this

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<sup>62</sup> “The Elms of Old Sheffield,” *Berkshire Courier* (18 June, 1896).

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> Mary Dewey to Chas. O. Dewey (Orville Dewey’s son), reprinted in “The Elms of Old Sheffield,” *Berkshire Courier* (18 June 1896).

magnificent avenue of elms”; it was a monument to “the public spirit and enterprise of any and everyone that participated in the Tree Bee.” Urging a renewal of that spirit, he remarked that “the old elms have in themselves a peaceful and suggestive force for every educated man and woman,” which would inspire future efforts to “continue the good work started so auspiciously 50 years ago.”<sup>65</sup>

#### *Orville Dewey and the Elm Tree Association*

Precisely what impelled Root and Ensign to organize the Tree Bee—an event unprecedented in New England—remains a mystery. But the event was clearly a response to the prevailing interest in environmental design and spatial beauty in New England. Moreover, it appears that Sheffield also had the benefit of a clear channel to some of the most influential intellectuals in the environmental awakening—including William Cullen Bryant, Thomas Cole, Asher B. Durand and possibly Andrew Jackson Downing. Their conduit was a preacher named Orville Dewey, one of Sheffield’s eminent sons. He was born there in 1794, and studied at Williams College and Andover Theological Seminary before joining William Ellery Channing’s Federal Street Church in Boston (where he befriended Ralph Waldo Emerson).<sup>66</sup> In 1835 Dewey moved to New York, where he became pastor of the Second Unitarian Church on Mercer and Prince Streets. The post put Dewey back in touch with an old boyhood friend, William Cullen Bryant.<sup>67</sup>

Bryant was part of Dewey’s congregation, and at the time the editor of the *Evening Post*. In New York the men developed a lasting friendship. Bryant, whom Dewey referred to as “our Magnus Apollo,” saw to it that the minister was elected to the Sketch Club; he was its first clergyman member.<sup>68</sup> Membership in the Sketch Club admitted Dewey into Bryant’s inner circle of friends, a diverse group of “artists and gentlemen,” including painters Thomas Cole and Asher B. Durand. Dewey discovered in this crowd kindred spirits, and came to relish its intellectual milieu. He would later write that the Club “was a kind of heart’s home to me while I lived in New York.”<sup>69</sup> Even after returning to Sheffield permanently in the spring of 1848, he remained close to his New York friends. Bryant,

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<sup>65</sup> “The Elms of Old Sheffield,” *Berkshire Courier* (18 June, 1896).

<sup>66</sup> Orville Dewey, *Autobiography and Letters of Orville Dewey*, Mary E. Dewey, ed. (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1883), 156-157.

<sup>67</sup> His daughter wrote: “Mr. Bryant and my father were about of an age. They had known each other almost from boyhood, and their friendship had matured with time. . .” See *Autobiography and Letters of Orville Dewey*, Mary E. Dewey, ed. (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1883), 53n.

<sup>68</sup> The Sketch Club was also known as the Club of the Twenty-one, Club XXI, or the Artists’ Club. It later became the Century Club of New York. See *Autobiography and Letters of Orville Dewey*, 86.

<sup>69</sup> Dewey, *Autobiography and Letters*, 76; 85-86.

who maintained a summer residence in nearby Great Barrington, was a frequent guest; and on one occasion Dewey invited the entire Sketch Club to his Sheffield home.<sup>70</sup>

Through his association with Bryant, Cole and other Sketchers, Dewey would have been steeped in the new nature-centered philosophy. Bryant himself had a tremendous impact on at least one fellow Sketcher. Asher B. Durand created several canvases inspired by Bryant's poems, and his "Kindred Spirits"—one of the masterpieces of the Hudson River School—portrayed Bryant and Cole in the Catskills.<sup>71</sup> Bryant used his editorship of the *Evening Post* to rally support for a public park in New York City, and in this way came to know well Andrew Jackson Downing. It is not known whether Dewey ever met Downing, but it is highly likely that, through Bryant, he had. It is also not clear whether Downing had any influence on the Sheffield minister regarding matters of village improvement. But it is probable that the combined influence of Bryant, Cole, Durand and possibly Downing had the effect of cultivating in Dewey a keen appreciation for the beauties of his native Housatonic landscape, familiarizing him with the early efforts to build Central Park (arguably the most important effort in environmental emendation in antebellum America), and perhaps encouraging him to seek ways in which he could supplement the spatial beauty of his Sheffield hometown.

Orville Dewey may well have already exerted an influence at Sheffield, as he was undoubtedly aware, if not involved with, the Tree Bee of 1846. Though Dewey was living in New York at the time, he returned to Sheffield frequently, and he was always in close contact with his family there. Graham Root, one of the Tree Bee organizers, was in fact his nephew. In any case, by the time Dewey returned to Sheffield in 1848, he had evidently cultivated more than a passing interest in the subject of village improvement. For in 1852 he founded an organization dedicated to improving the aesthetic and moral tone of his hometown—one which carried on the legacy of the Tree Bee, and which, in effect, institutionalized the American elm as a principal component of organized emendation in New England. He named his group the Elm Tree Association, and it was the first village improvement society in America.

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<sup>70</sup> See Orville Dewey to W. C. Bryant, 25 February 1850, in *Autobiography and Letters of Orville Dewey*, 215; also see W. C. Bryant to Orville Dewey, 29 March 1850, in *The Letters of William Cullen Bryant* vol. 3, William C. Bryant II and Thomas G. Voss, eds. (New York: Fordham University Press, 1975), 12.

<sup>71</sup> "Pastoral Landscape," exhibited at the National Academy in 1849, was inspired by Bryant's poem "Green River," as was "Landscape, Scene from 'Thanatopsis'." See *Letters of William Cullen Bryant*, 118.

The chief mission of the Elm Tree Association was to bring spatial beauty to Sheffield—and it did so by grooming the base of the Old Elm, grading the walks and generally improving “the appearance of the fields and public places,” and by planting elms throughout the town.<sup>72</sup> But Dewey charged the Elm Tree Association with a moral as well as aesthetic mandate; for him, spatial beauty and social justice went hand in hand. Deeply committed to improving human existence in the present, Dewey deplored the “anchorite’s dreaming of heaven.”<sup>73</sup> His improvement organization would cultivate elms, but also “a common interest and a common feeling” among his fellow citizens; it would seek “to remove prejudices, and bring us nearer together.”<sup>74</sup> For Dewey, this meant planting trees as well as speaking out against the inhumanity of man. It was at a meeting of the Elm Tree Association in 1856, beneath the Old Elm itself, that Dewey delivered a speech that gained him renown in the North and infamy in the South as a fiery opponent of slavery—a “ministry of error and evil.”<sup>75</sup> The speech became known as the “Elm Tree Oration,” and Dewey ended it by invoking the tree: “Long may its brave old arms stretch themselves over this humble spot, in a free and happy land! May the green sod beneath it, never be wet with fratricidal blood!”<sup>76</sup>

### *The Village Improvement Movement*

Sheffield’s Tree Bee and Elm Tree Association helped establish the elm as central to a vision of spatial beauty that would, within a decade, spread throughout New England. The influence of Sheffield on the village improvement movement itself was channeled through an organization founded a year later in nearby Stockbridge. At the second annual meeting of the Elm Tree Association, on August 12, 1853, a Stockbridge woman by the name of Mary Hopkins was elected an honorary member.<sup>77</sup> Hopkins had visited Sheffield earlier that year to learn more about the Association’s initiatives. Ten days after the Sheffield meeting, she posted a notice on an elm in front of the Stockbridge Post Office, imploring all citizens to attend an assembly on Laurel Hill. The purpose of the gathering was “to take measures for the regular improvement of the Burying Ground, the streets, the walks, the public grounds and Laurel Hill,” a park on a small prominence in town.<sup>78</sup> Stockbridge had

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<sup>72</sup> Gerard Chapman, “Sheffield’s Big Elm,” *Berkshire Eagle* (11 June 1985).

<sup>73</sup> Dewey, *Autobiography and Letters*, 184.

<sup>74</sup> Orville Dewey, *An Address Delivered Under the Old Elm Tree in Sheffield, With Some Remarks on the Great Political Question of the Day* (New York: C. S. Francis & Co., 1856), 3. Also see *Reply to Dr. Dewey’s Address, Delivered at the Elm Tree* (Charleston, South Carolina: Privately published, 1856).

<sup>75</sup> Dewey, *Autobiography and Letters*, 188.

<sup>76</sup> Dewey, *Address Delivered Under the Old Elm Tree* (1856), 25-26.

<sup>77</sup> Walter Prichard Eaton, “Second Fiddle?” *Berkshire Eagle* (13 August 1941).

<sup>78</sup> Margaret French Cresson, *The Laurel Hill Association* (Pittsfield: Eagle Printing, 1953), 14-15

already long been praised for its beauty; but little had been done in recent years, and its charms had faded.

According to the minutes of the August 24 meeting, “A determination was formed to organize a Society for the purpose of carrying out consistently and permanently the object of village improvement.”<sup>79</sup> The resulting organization, founded by Mary Hopkins, was named the Laurel Hill Association. “We mean to work,” one member proclaimed in an early meeting, “till every street shall be graded, every sidewalk shaded . . . in short, till art combined with nature shall have rendered our town the most beautiful and attractive in our ancient commonwealth.”<sup>80</sup> From the start, the Laurel Hill Association was better organized than its Sheffield predecessor, and more solvent. It thrived under Hopkin’s leadership, and became the immediate model for similar village improvement societies around New England and elsewhere in the United States.<sup>81</sup>

The Laurel Hill Association set for itself a number of objectives, and chief among these was the planting of trees. The American elm was its first choice. A town-wide improvement plan was drafted in the winter of 1853, for which a committee on tree planting was appointed. Following its recommendations, the Association embarked on an intensive, three-year elm-planting campaign, setting out more than 400 saplings “not less than ten feet in height” along the streets.<sup>82</sup> The Association enlisted the support of the entire community, investing citizens in their sylvan estate. Designated sites were made public, and townsfolk encouraged to donate the actual tree and set it in the ground. The Association provided incentives: a silver cup was awarded “to the planter of the best 15 trees,” and membership in the Association itself was promised “every person over 14 years of age, who shall plant and protect a tree . . . or pay the sum of one dollar annually in money or labor.” Even children found themselves part of the effort, as guards to protect the baby elms against demons real and imagined. “Any boy who would undertake to watch and care for a particular tree,” for two years was rewarded by having the tree “called by his name.”<sup>83</sup>

The purview of the Laurel Hill Association eventually extended well beyond the town proper, and it sought to plant trees “along every road leading out of town as far as our

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<sup>79</sup> Quoted in Cresson, *Laurel Hill Association*, 15.

<sup>80</sup> Quoted in Cresson, *Laurel Hill Association*, 16.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-16.

<sup>82</sup> Parris Thaxter Farwell, *Village Improvement* (New York: Sturgis and Walton Company, 1913), 18-19.

<sup>83</sup> Cresson, *Laurel Hill Association*, 16; 34.

geographical boundaries.” The minutes of an 1866 meeting reported: “It needs no prophets ken to portray the charm and beauty of drives in every direction beneath the shade and shelter of Nature’s canopy of verdure.” Pragmatism, too, advised the same; such a scene would bring about a “consequent enhancement of the reputation of our Town abroad. . .” The verdant splendor of Stockbridge would reach into the countryside itself; and “if our sister towns should be thereby provoked to emulate us in this behalf,” the minutes continued, “the next generation would be able to ride through the length and breadth of Old Berkshire during the heats of summer with all the comfort of pedestrians beneath the green and cool arcades of the forest, and dust and wheels alone distinguish the drive from the stroll.”<sup>84</sup>

The labors of the Laurel Hill Association transformed Stockbridge. A woman returning to her native town after a long absence, remarked, “Not with the utmost stretch of your imagination could you conceive what a remarkable change had been wrought by these forty years of well-directed effort. There was nothing particularly beautiful about the town when I moved away. Now it seemed like to me like Paradise.” The cemetery, once a disheveled browsing ground for cattle, was trimmed and enclosed by hedges. The streets were clean and level, the walks well-groomed, with neat grassy borders; the church green, “once a barren level,” was a tree-tossed park. But what most distinguished Stockbridge was its “magnificent, over-arching elms.”<sup>85</sup>

From Sheffield and Stockbridge, village improvement spread across New England. Encouragement also came in the form of an act passed by the Massachusetts General Court on May 10, 1853, just months before Mary Hopkins called her first meeting. The new statute authorized the formation of organizations dedicated to village improvement, directing that a group of “any ten or more persons” who assembled “for the purpose of encouraging agriculture, horticulture, *or improving and ornamenting the streets and public squares of any town or city by planting and cultivating ornamental trees therein*, may become a corporation by such name as they assume . . .” Such organizations would enjoy the same “rights, powers and privileges” accorded libraries and lyceums.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 34-35.

<sup>85</sup> Farwell, *Village Improvement*, 14-15.

<sup>86</sup> The italics are mine. See “Chapter XLI of the Revised Statutes of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts,” in B. F. Atkinson, *A Short History of the Amherst Improvement Association* (1937), unpublished manuscript, Jones Library, Amherst, Massachusetts, 18-19.

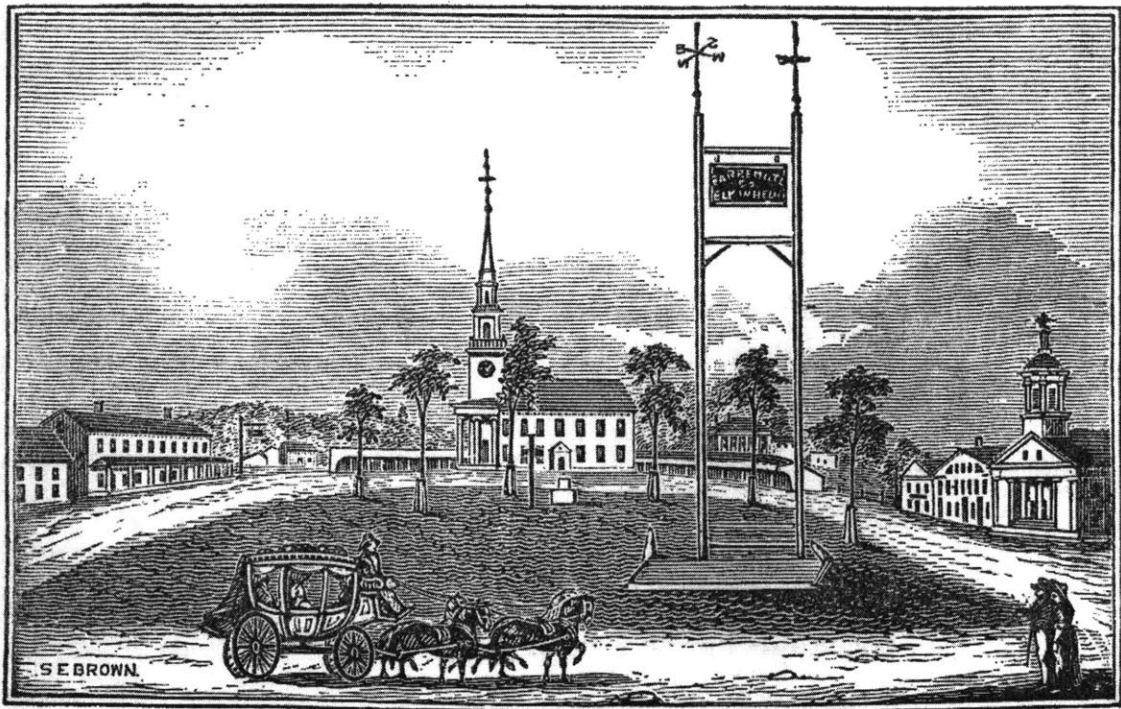


Figure 39. Newly planted elms. Barre, Massachusetts. Engraving by John Warner Barber, c. 1840.

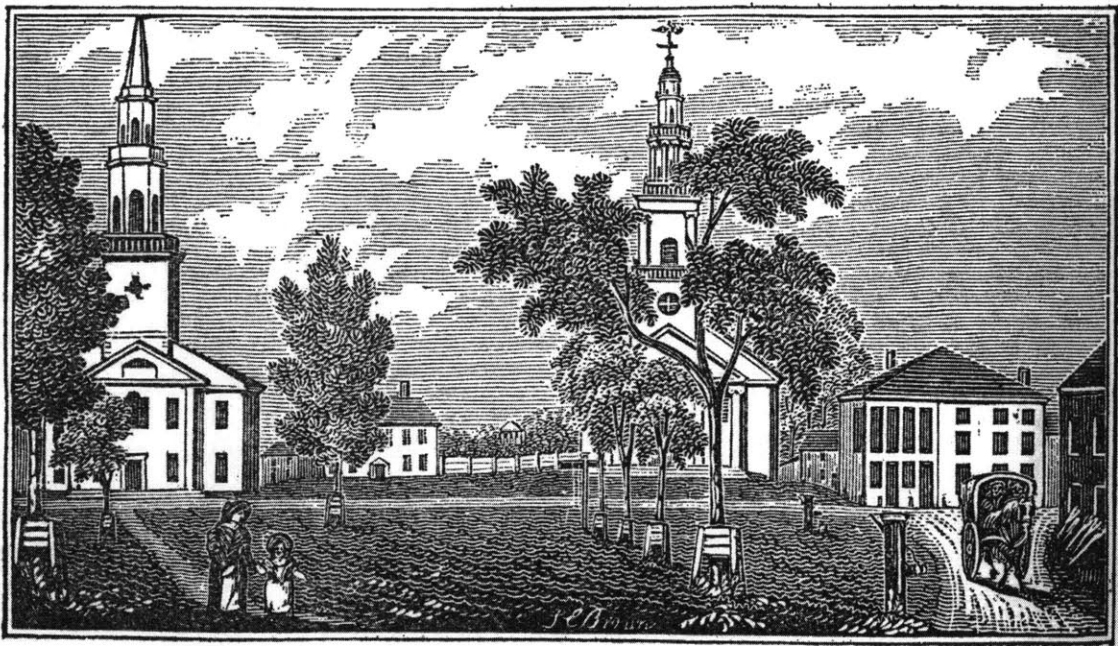


Figure 40. Newly planted elms. Woburn, Massachusetts. Engraving by John Warner Barber, c. 1840.

One of the first groups to explicitly take advantage of this new statute was the Amherst Ornamental Tree Association. Formed in 1857, its stated objectives included “laying out and ornamenting the public common, the general improvement and adornment of the various public walks throughout the village by grading, graveling, and lining with trees where there are any deficiencies, and to do anything which may render the public grounds and ways of our village more attractive and beautiful.”<sup>87</sup> Others followed suit, so that by the 1880s some twenty-three village improvement organizations had been formed in Massachusetts alone, another fifty in Connecticut, and well over one hundred in the New England and middle Atlantic states.<sup>88</sup> Led by the Elm Tree and Laurel Hill Associations, as well as the example of older, elm-rich towns such as Deerfield, Longmeadow and Northampton, Yankee village improvement societies effected a dramatic spatial transformation of their civic environments. They did so primarily by planting American elms.

#### *Broker of Beautification*

If emendation stirred to life at the grassroots, it spread far and wide with the help of Andrew Jackson Downing. Though a New Yorker, Downing was intimately familiar with the New England scene, and had on more than one occasion praised the early beauties of Deerfield, Northampton and other sylvan towns. Although much of Downing’s work focused on the domestic environment, instructing America’s emerging bourgeoisie to create tasteful and educative home grounds, he was also profoundly interested in the design and improvement of civic space. By the time he died in 1852, Downing had written extensively on the emendation of towns and villages.<sup>89</sup>

As we have already seen, Downing may have played a role in Sheffield’s improvement efforts; it is also possible that he exerted some influence in Stockbridge. Laurel Hill founder Mary Hopkins may have been familiar with Downing’s work through her brother Albert, a professor at Williams College who founded a Landscape Gardening Society among the students there several years earlier. As Downing was the leading figure in that field at the time, it is unlikely that such a group would have failed to read his work.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> B. F. Atkinson, *A Short History of the Amherst Improvement Association* (1937), unpublished manuscript, Jones Library, Amherst, Massachusetts, 7.

<sup>88</sup> Richard Berenberg, “Village Improvement Societies in New England, 1850-1900: The Rural Ideal in an Age of Rural Depopulation and Urban Growth” (Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1966), 49; Warren H. Manning, *The History of Village Improvement in the United States* (Syracuse: Mason Press, 1904), 9.

<sup>89</sup> Downing perished when the steamer *Henry Clay* burned on the Hudson River in 1852.

<sup>90</sup> Berenberg, “Village Improvement Societies,” 15-16. “No such group,” writes Berenberg, “would have failed to have read Downing, in those years.”

Indeed, the minutes of the Laurel Hill Association occasionally refer to Downing's work: an address delivered at the Anniversary Day exercises in 1855 included several references to his writings, and an address at a similar event two years later was summarized as "an interesting biography of the lamented Andrew Jackson Downing."<sup>91</sup>

Still, conclusive evidence linking either the Laurel Hill or the Elm Tree Association to Andrew Jackson Downing is lacking; it is only by inference that a connection may be drawn between him and these vanguard efforts. Moreover, caution must be exercised in attributing every stirring of village beautification in this period to Downing. In light of his later fame, it is easy to project backward his influence, and assume that he alone was responsible for any and all efforts toward improvement in the early nineteenth century. It is important to remember that Downing himself was as much a product of the new environmental sensibility as he was one of its most accomplished agents. As we have seen, ideas about improvement were "in the air" at a very early date in New England. The *New England Farmer* was publishing tracts on the improvement of domestic and village grounds when Downing was still a small boy.

Nevertheless, Downing's impact on his age—and on the village improvement movement—was profound. Few men in the first half of the nineteenth century better understood the new interest in spatial beauty, or were better equipped to give it direction. With his vivid prose, Downing was the first advocate of environmental design to reach a wide audience, and he did so at precisely a moment when the emerging middle class in America was casting about for guidance on the tasteful appointment of their grounds and those of their community. Possessed of an evangelism and moral certitude all but absent in the design professions today, Downing was an "apostle of taste" who exerted immense influence on the appearance of American space in the antebellum period.<sup>92</sup>

Born in 1815 to a Newburgh, New York, nurseryman, Downing took a keen interest in horticulture and landscape architecture at an early age. He studied the works of major British theoreticians and practitioners of landscape gardening, and was able to adapt their insights to the American scene. Still in his teens, Downing began writing for various agricultural and popular journals, including the *New England Farmer*. The essays led to a larger work, which was entitled *A Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape*

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<sup>91</sup> Berenberg, "Village Improvement Societies," 15-16

<sup>92</sup> See David Schuyler, *Apostle of Taste: Andrew Jackson Downing, 1815-1852* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

*Gardening Adapted to North America*. Published in 1841, the *Treatise* was an immediate success, establishing its 26 year-old author as an authority on matters of landscape design in the United States.

Downing wrote frequently on the subject of civic space. In a series of essays published between 1847 and his death in 1852, Downing implored his readers to look beyond the bounds of their own property and beautify the common environment of their towns and villages. The unimproved village was a needless blight on the national landscape, he believed, and one which could easily be transformed into a thing of beauty—by planting trees. “The first duty of an inhabitant of forlorn neighborhoods,” he wrote in the *Horticulturalist* (1849), “is to use all possible influence to have the *streets planted with trees*” [italics original]. The naked aspect of so many towns in America was not due to “want of means,” Downing pointed out, but “simply from a poverty of ideas, and a dormant sense of the enjoyment to be derived from orderly, tasteful and agreeable dwellings and streets . . .” Moreover, trees not only strengthened the streetscape but the moral fiber of the people. “Indeed,” he wrote, “a village whose streets are bare of trees, ought to be looked upon as in a condition not less pitiable than a community without a schoolmaster, or a teacher of religion; “for certain it is, when the affections are so dull, and the domestic virtues so blunt, that men do not care how their own homes and villages look, they care very little for fulfilling any moral obligations not made compulsory by the strong arm of the law . . .”<sup>93</sup>

In his evangelism for planting trees, Downing repeatedly invoked New England as the standard-bearer for spatial beauty—particularly the older valley towns of the Housatonic and Connecticut. “Show us a Massachusetts village, adorned by its avenues of elms,” he wrote, “and you also place before us the fact, that it is there where order, good character, and virtuous deportment most of all adorn the lives and daily conduct of its people.”<sup>94</sup> Deerfield, Northampton, Stockbridge and other towns became touchstones in Downing’s evangelism of the verdant village. In these places, “the verdure of the loveliest elms waves like grand lines of giant and graceful plumes above the house-tops, giving an air of rural beauty, that speaks louder for the good habits of the inhabitants, than the pleasant sound of an hundred church bells.”<sup>95</sup> The sylvan richness of New England valley towns more than compensated for an architecture that was often “meagre and unworthy of notice.” The

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<sup>93</sup> Andrew Jackson Downing, “On the Improvement of Country Villages,” *The Horticulturalist* 3 (June 1849): 545-546.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Andrew Jackson Downing, “Trees in Towns and Villages,” *The Horticulturalist* 1 (March 1847): 394.

glory of the main street was not its buildings, but its “avenue of elms . . . positively delightful to behold. Alas, New York did not fair well in comparison.

When we contrast with these lovely resting places for the eye, embowered with avenues of elms, gracefully drooping like fountains of falling water . . . some of the uncared for towns and villages in our own State, we are almost forced to believe that the famous common schools of New England teach the aesthetics of art, and that the beauty of shade-trees is the care of especial professorships.<sup>96</sup>

Downing duly noted the New England partiality for the American elm. The prescient Yankees had “perhaps accidentally” followed one of the most important principles of improvement: they avoided novelty in selecting trees for their streets, and chose a species “such as the soil and climate of the place will bring to the highest perfection.” In planting the American elm, New Englanders had heeded the spirit of the land, the genius of the place. This was, in Downing’s view, particularly the case in the Connecticut Valley:

The Elm is, we think, no where seen in more majesty, greater luxuriance, or richer beauty, than in the valley of the Connecticut; and it is because the soil is so truly congenial to it, that the elm-adorned streets of the villages there, elicit so much admiration. They are not only well planted with trees--but with a kind of tree which attains its greatest perfection there.<sup>97</sup>

Downing applauded (and thereby widely publicized) more recent efforts in New England as well. He noted the activities of improvement associations such as Northampton’s Ornamental Tree Society, “whose business and pleasure it is to turn dusty lanes and bald highways into alleys and avenues of coolness and verdure.”<sup>98</sup> He lauded the Rockingham Farmers’ Club of Exeter, New Hampshire, and reprinted a passage from one of its reports: “If you would prevent a restless spirit, if you would save him from that lowest species of idolatry, ‘the love of money,’ and teach him to ‘love what is lovely,’ adorn your dwellings, your places of worship, your schoolhouses, your streets and public squares, with trees.”<sup>99</sup> That a farmer’s club in New Hampshire should eloquently express the essence of village improvement suggests that Downing was often preaching to the choir—at least in New England.

Others he urged to become “apostles of taste,” to lead their own initiatives to transform “graceless villages.” He understood that doing so would not be easy; the crusader would need to endure the “sneers and derision from the ignorant and prejudiced.” But he was

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<sup>96</sup> Andrew Jackson Downing, “On Planting Shade-Trees,” *Rural Essays*, George William Curtis, ed. (New York: Da Capo Press, reprint 1974), 300.

<sup>97</sup> Downing, “Trees in Towns and Villages,” 396.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 395.

<sup>99</sup> Downing, “On the Improvement of Country Villages,” 548-549.

confident that once “the first half dozen trees” had been set out, others would join the effort—even if for no other reason than competitiveness (“the principle of imitation will never allow a Yankee to be outdone by his neighbor”). The trees, too, would evangelize; “it is quite extraordinary,” related Downing, “what sermons they will preach. . .”<sup>100</sup>

Their luxuriant leafy arms, swaying and waving to and fro, will make more convincing gestures than any member of congress or stump speaker, and if there is any love of nature dormant in the dusty hearts of the villagers, we prophecy that in a very short time there will be such a general yearning after green trees, that the whole place will become a bower of freshness and verdure.<sup>101</sup>

Forming an organization like those in New England was, of course, the most effective path to spatial beauty. Such a society could be more effective in compelling citizens to take up the task of tree planting than a solitary individual, however passionate and gifted. The society, backed by “the great weight of numbers” would convert--by peer pressure if need be--even those unconvinced of the benefits of emendation. And if the “zeal of the society” could not shame the philistines into action, the “silent and irresistible influence of sylvan beauty” would in time do the job. “We heartily commend,” wrote Downing in 1847, a “plan of *Social Planting Reform* [italics original], to every desolate, leafless, and repulsive town and village in the country.”

There can scarcely be one, where there are not *three* persons of taste and spirit enough to organize such a society; and once fairly in operation, its members will never cease to congratulate themselves on the beauty and comfort they have produced. Every tree which they plant, and which grows up in after years into a giant trunk and canopy of foliage, will be a better monument (though it may bear no lying inscription) than many an unmeaning obelisk of marble or granite.<sup>102</sup>

While Andrew Jackson Downing did not conceive village improvement in New England, he served as one of its most effective advocates. He helped marshal a series of isolated initiatives into a popular movement, spreading the message of emendation to a large and receptive audience throughout New England and the United States. By praising the earlier accomplishments of those verdant villages in the Connecticut Valley, he helped establish a vision of spatial beauty which placed the American elm at center stage. For Downing, no tree could match this for the beautification of towns. He agreed heartily with the conclusion reached by the Rockingham Farmers’ Club: “Above all others, for the street, the *Elm* is to be preferred. For beauty, gracefulness, *grandeur* even, it has no equal in New England.”<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 546.

<sup>101</sup> Downing, “Trees in Towns and Villages,” 394.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 395.

<sup>103</sup> “Report of the Rockingham Farmers’ Club,” in *The Horticulturalist* 4 (December 1849).

*The Manufacture of Identity*

After about 1850, other factors began influencing the spread of village improvement in New England, accelerating both the emulation of local “model villages” and the embrace of ideas about emendation preached by Downing and others. These had the effect of further spreading the ideal of the elm-tossed town throughout the region. Spatial beauty, once viewed solely through the lens of aesthetics and its attendant moralism, was now considered in the cold, hard light of economics. Emendation came to be understood as a potential antidote to powerful forces of socioeconomic transformation which had begun to batter rural New England in the mid-nineteenth century. By the 1850s, its agricultural economy had begun to decline. At first it affected chiefly the remote hill towns of northern New England, where the soil was thin and stony to begin with, and which were far removed from urban markets. These literally “went downhill,” as inhabitants moved closer to valleys served by the new rail lines.<sup>104</sup> But decline soon visited the venerable towns of southern New England too, including those communities in western Massachusetts long praised for their verdure.

The Jacksonian period witnessed unprecedented growth in the United States. By 1840, the line of settlement had pushed far beyond New England, opening vast tracts of land in Western New York, Pennsylvania and Ohio. The new territory’s fertile agricultural land was far superior to the meager New England soil, and even to the increasingly depleted soils of the once-rich Connecticut Valley. With completion of the Erie Canal in 1830 and the building of the railroads, Western farms began flooding Eastern markets with cheap and plentiful produce. The Yankee cultivator was faced with withering competition. If he could not quickly retool and find a profitable niche market—such as dairy farming and fruit growing—he would be ruined. Many of the younger generation chose to forgo farming altogether, and sought more propitious circumstances in the West.

Cities posed another challenge to the autonomy of rural and village New England. Lowell, Massachusetts, for example, with its burgeoning mills, was drawing thousands of young New England women and men away from family farms by the 1840s. The promise of opportunity in booming metropolitan areas such as Boston, Springfield, New Haven and New York similarly attracted large numbers from the countryside. Indeed, the flagging profitability of farming often left few options. What ensued was something of a “brain

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<sup>104</sup> H. F. Wilson, *Hill Country*, quoted in Dona Brown, *Inventing New England* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995), 138.

drain,” in which many of New England’s best and brightest departed the countryside for cities or the West. The outmigration, a trickle at first, increased steadily in the decade before the Civil War.

Decline baffled and worried the Yankee rural elite. Like an invisible parasite, distant forces seemed to be draining New England of its very life—its prosperity as well as its children. A richly-endowed landscape, cultivated steadily for two hundred years, was beginning to appear tattered and threadbare. In 1857, Orville Dewey was alarmed to detect evidence of this decline in the towns of the Housatonic: “What is it that is coming over our New England villages, that looks like deterioration and running down?” he asked; “Is our life going out of us to enrich the great West?”<sup>105</sup> Once considered simply a failure of “taste” on the part of the citizenry—however reprehensible—an unkempt or disheveled townscape now began to evoke something *pathological*. The absence of spatial beauty—particularly where it had previously existed—suggested gangrenous illness, even the onset of death itself.

Emendation, in this light, was configured as a tool with which to combat the effects of decline. Albeit, little could be done to change the realities of a shifting agricultural economy; but the evolving dynamic between the rural countryside and the emerging cities of the region did seem to offer possibilities. If a “graceless village” was transformed into a thing of beauty, then its youth might have a more compelling reason to stay put—and be less susceptible to the glamor and excitement of the city. As Richard Berenberg has written, emendation came to be seen as a mechanism which could “instill in the youth that love of beauty and morality which would enable him to withstand the attraction of urban wealth and vice.”<sup>106</sup>

At the same time, it was understood that the verdant village might have something to offer the citydweller, too—many of whom had themselves hailed from New England farms and villages, and were by now often quite wealthy. In other words, spatial beauty came to be seen as a *commodity*, something that could be used to attract affluent vacationers from the very cities that were draining the flower of rural youth. And city people did indeed wish to spend their summers in the shade of Yankee elms. By the 1860s, tourism to rural New England had begun in earnest. Successful middle-class residents of Boston and New

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<sup>105</sup> Dewey, *Autobiography and Letters*, 28.

<sup>106</sup> Berenberg, “Village Improvement Societies,” 72.

York, often impelled by a nostalgic pining for the places of their youth, began “summering” in Western Massachusetts, Vermont, and New Hampshire.

The cityfolk sought respite from industrial urbanization, as well as assurance that the lifestyle and landscape they once knew still survived. Extensive immigration to Boston, Providence and New York during this period—particularly of the Irish—seemed to threaten the old hegemony of Anglo-Saxon New England. That culture was thought to persist in the countryside; where it did not, it could be projected by imaginative city dwellers. As Dona Brown has written, a process of “sentimentalization” occurred, out of which emerged “a mythic region called Old New England—rural, preindustrial, and ethnically ‘pure’.” The city people sought places which matched an “imagined world of pastoral beauty” that sentiment and nostalgia had constructed—the ideal New England village of yesterday.<sup>107</sup> Towns—desperate for income—struggled to meet these expectations, often manufacturing an “historical” identity which never existed. This meant assuring that the church was gleaming white (regardless of what color it may have been), and making certain that the common was a manicured showpiece. In Rutland, Vermont, providing such an ensemble required outright fabrication: its village improvement society “exploited the image of the New England village so literally,” writes Berenberg, “that they dug up a church yard cemetery to create a village green, which, through the caprice of history, they had never possessed.”<sup>108</sup>

Even more central to the expected image of the archetypal Yankee town were elm trees. Those towns which had not planted elms for their own purposes earlier did so now—and with a vengeance. They had to in order to compete with places that had inherited a rich sylvan estate from prior improvement efforts. Villages embowered with elms such as Stockbridge, Deerfield, Northfield, Longmeadow, Litchfield and Northampton were again emulated—this time not as paragons of aesthetic beauty, but because such places were attracting the lion’s share of the summer vacation trade. Elm trees were understood to be essential to the “product” offered by the rural Yankee town. Without an elm-shaded common and bosky streets, such a village would be like a pub with no ale.

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<sup>107</sup> Dona Brown, *Inventing New England: Regional Tourism in the Nineteenth Century* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995), 8-9.

<sup>108</sup> Berenberg, “Village Improvement Societies,” 3.

*“Mistress of the Scene”*

Regardless of motivation, village improvement movement had, by the end of the nineteenth century, brought about a remarkable transformation of the New England scene. Although emendation involved many activities—from grading and enclosing commons, to restoring cemeteries and installing streetlamps—the single most important contribution of the village improvement movement was the planting of trees. In its wake, Yankee towns from Connecticut to northern Maine came to bear a deep mantle of verdure. The decades from 1840 to the 1870s constituted the most active period of village improvement in the region. It was also an era which witnessed a profound creative outpouring in the arts, architecture and literature. With more than its share of literate souls, New England did not fail to note the trees which brought such beauty to its towns and villages.

Elms moved Yankee pens. Henry David Thoreau wrote eloquently of the village elms of his native Concord, Massachusetts. In writing of trees and townsmen, he often found himself favoring the former. “I have seen many a collection of stately elms,” he confided to his *Journal* in January 1856, “which better deserved to be represented at the General Court than the manikins beneath—than the barroom and victualling cellar and groceries they overshadowed.”<sup>109</sup> Elms may have been set out by villagers, but they towered—literally and figuratively—above these mortal souls. “I find that into my idea of the village,” he wrote, “has entered more of the elm than of the human being.” Indeed, for Thoreau, the elms were “worth many a political borough”—and certainly more than most politicians.

The poor human representative of his party sent out from beneath their shade will not suggest a tithe of the dignity, the true nobleness and comprehensiveness of view, the sturdiness and independence, and the serene beneficence that [the elms] do. They look from township to township. A fragment of their bark is worth the backs of all the politicians in the union.<sup>110</sup>

The autumnal elm, with its “early and golden maturity,” made a particularly strong impression on the Concord naturalist. “It would be worth the while,” he wrote in *Excursions*, “to set out these trees, if only for their autumnal value.”

Think of these great yellow canopies or parasols held over our heads and houses by the mile together, making the village all one and compact--and *ulmarium*, which is at the same time a nursery of men! And then how gently and unobserved they drop their burden and let in the sun when it is wanted, their leaves not heard when they

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<sup>109</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *The Journal of Henry D. Thoreau*, 3d. ed., vol. 8, eds. Bradford Torrey and Francis H. Allen (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1949), 139.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 139-140.

fall on our roofs and in our streets; and thus the village parasol is shut up and put away!<sup>111</sup>

The great fall of elm leaves in October transformed Concord into “a scene of a great harvest-home” with its paths and walks strewn with the summer’s spent array. In their form and color, the great yellow masses reminded Thoreau of sheaves of wheat; it was “as if the harvest had indeed come to the village itself.” Now, he suggested, “we might expect to find some maturity and *flavor* in the thoughts of the villagers at last.” Would there be, he pondered, an “answering ripeness” in the lives of the men who lived beneath these glorious harvest-domes? He found it untenable that such beauty could accompany mean and illiberal thoughts. “Under those bright rustling yellow piles,” wrote Thoreau, “. . . how can any crudity or greenness of thought or act prevail?” As he watched a farmer disappear beneath the village elms, his wagon creaking with the burden of a bumper crop, Thoreau was tempted to follow the man to the granary, perchance to witness a “husking of thoughts, now dry and ripe, and ready to be separated from their integuments . . .” But he turned away, knowing it would be “chiefly husks and little thought . . . for, as you sow, so shall you reap.” For all his seriousness of purpose, however, Thoreau retained a playful, rhapsodic voice; the Concord “ulmarium” made him a child again. Standing beneath a cluster of October elms “warm from their September oven,” Thoreau imagined that he stood “within a ripe pumpkin-rind”; “I feel as mellow as if I were the pulp,” he quipped, “though I may be somewhat stringy and seedy withal.”<sup>112</sup>

Henry Ward Beecher was another New England man of letters who attempted to fathom the significance of the village elm, and its grip on the Yankee imagination. Beecher, whose father Lyman had long ago inspired tree-planting activity in Litchfield, could not imagine the New England village without the elm. One of the most influential clergymen of the nineteenth century, Beecher was also an amateur horticulturist, and authored in 1859 a small book entitled *Plain and Pleasant Talk About Fruits, Flowers and Farming*. In it he proposed that “The great main-street of every village should be lined with White [American] Elms, set at distances of fifty feet,” and further recommended planting locusts between the sapling elms. This was not in the interest of species diversity, but rather to gain immediate shade; the locusts would later “be removed so soon as the slower-growing elm has spread enough to dispense with them.” Like most village improvers, Beecher concurred with the prevailing practice to plant exclusively one species along thoroughfares.

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<sup>111</sup> Henry D. Thoreau, “Autumnal Tints,” *Excursions* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1863), 233-234.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

“It is better for *effect*,” he argued, “that each street . . . have *one kind* of forest tree, so that an avenue of similar trees be formed.”<sup>113</sup> And in Beecher’s estimation, no tree matched the American elm for this purpose.

It was for a later work of fiction that Beecher became famous as a writer—his 1867 novel *Norwood; or Village Life in New England* (the book was so popular that a town near Boston was actually renamed “Norwood”). In it he described a mythic village perched on a hill overlooking the “fat bottom-lands” of the Connecticut. Peering out from under its shade trees, “you will say,” Beecher urged his readers, “that no fairer village glistens in the sunlight, or nestles under arching elms!”<sup>114</sup> The “largeness of moral feeling” and “subtle sympathy with Nature” which characterized its people was manifest in its landscape, too; for the entire length of Norwood’s main street was lined with the “peculiar glory” of New England—the American elm.

For Beecher, the elm was so central to his construction of this ideal town that he spent the last quarter of the novel’s introduction discussing the tree and its contribution to the Yankee village scene. It is one of the greatest soliloquies ever penned to an American tree. “No town can fail of beauty,” Beecher proclaimed, “though its walks were gutters, and its houses hovels, if venerable trees make magnificent colonnades along its streets. Of all trees, no other unites, in the same degree, majesty and beauty, grace and grandeur, as the American Elm.” While there may be “single spots” more beautiful in other lands, wrote Beecher, “such a series of villages over such a breadth of country, amidst so much beauty of scenery . . . cannot elsewhere be found upon the globe.” It was a beauty largely borne of trees—and elms ruled the scene: “The Elms of New England! They are as much a part of her beauty as the columns of the Parthenon were the glory of its architecture.” Then, as if seized by a paroxysm of fear, he queried

What if they were sheered away from village and farm house? Who would know the land? Farm-houses that now stop the tourist and the artist, would stand forth bare and homely; and villages that coquette with beauty through green leaves, would shine white and ghastly as sepulchres.<sup>115</sup>

Not all observers were Panglossian in their estimation of elms and Yankee space. Henry James, writing a generation after Beecher and a far more discriminating critic, was not

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<sup>113</sup> Henry Ward Beecher, *Plain and Pleasant Talk About Fruits, Flowers and Farming* (New York: Derby & Jackson, 1859), 116-117.

<sup>114</sup> Henry Ward Beecher, *Norwood; or, Village Life in New England* (New York: Charles Scribner & Company, 1868), 3.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-5.



**Figure 41.** "The Street," Deerfield, Massachusetts, before 1877.  
Courtesy of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities.

swayed by coquettish towns, however lush and verdant. By the late nineteenth century, many New England towns had slipped quietly into decline, in spite of valiant efforts to attract tourism. The tell-tale signs of poverty and hardship were often obscured—by the very elms set out in a bid for beauty. So magnificent were these trees by the turn of the century—so superb a decoy—that they effectively concealed the squalor of their depleted communities. To James, the great columns were a seductive façade, a specious veil of verdure. Elms lend an air of Potemkin subterfuge to the New England scene. “Having spoke of the them as ‘elm-shaded’,” he wrote of New England’s villages in *The American Scene*, “you have said so much about them that little else remains.”

It is but a question, throughout, of the quantity, the density, of their shade; often so thick and ample, from May to November, that their function, in the social, in the economic, order would seem on occasion to consist solely of their being passive to that effect. To note the latter, accordingly, to praise it, to respond to its appeal for admiration, practically represents, as you pass beneath the great feathery arches, the only comment that may be addressed to the scene.<sup>116</sup>

*The American Scene* was written when Henry James returned, in 1904, to the United States after a twenty-year European hiatus. It recorded his impressions of a national landscape profoundly transformed in the interim. The upstart cities he knew as a young man were now great metropolitan centers, teeming with immigrants whose tongues and customs baffled him. But the once prosperous towns and villages of rural New England seemed to be moving in the opposite direction, vanishing into the deep shade of forest trees. In town after town, James encountered a solemn march of elms. “The scene,” he wrote, “is everywhere the same; whereby tribute is always ready and easy, and you are spared all shocks of surprise and saved any extravagance of discrimination.”

These communities stray so little from the type, that you often ask yourself by what sign or difference you know one from the other. The goodly elms, on either side of the large straight “street,” rise from their grassy margin in double, ever and anon in triple, file; the white paint, on wooden walls, amid open dooryards, reaffirms itself eternally behind them—though hanging back, during the best of the season, with a sun-checkered, “amusing” vagueness; while the great verdurous vista, the high canopy of meeting branches, has the air of consciously playing the trick and carrying off the picture.<sup>117</sup>

Of course, it was during summer that the subterfuge was most effective, when the elms were richly draped with leaves. The veil of verdure was at its peak, conveniently, when the towns of New England received their city visitors. Return in winter, however, during “the months of the naked glare,” and the façade was gone. Now the “white paint looks

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<sup>116</sup> Henry James, *The American Scene* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1946), 38-39.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

dead and dingy against the snow, the poor dear old white paint—immemorial, ubiquitous, save as venturing into brown or yellow.”<sup>118</sup>

James allowed that some of the wealthier towns in Massachusetts, and Connecticut did possess architectural distinction to match the splendor of the elms. He found Farmington, Connecticut, to have a certain aristocratic air, but stopped short of asserting that it “might brave undismayed the absolute removal of the mantle of charity”—the verdant screen of elms. Even with its confident old homes, standing proudly along the street (“in the manner of mature and just slightly-reduced gentlewomen seated against a wall at an evening party”) the “the great elm-gallery there struck me as not less than elsewhere essentially mistress of the scene.”<sup>119</sup> And the mistress betrayed few secrets, even to so perceptive an observer as Henry James. The New England village street, with its silent march of elms, remained inscrutable; and he found that, in the end, he had done no more than lift “the smallest corner of this particular veil.”<sup>120</sup>

Most observers were, however, content to leave the veil unlifted. In planting the American elm so extensively in its towns and villages (and regardless of motivation) New Englanders forged one of the archetypal and most enduring images of American place—town common resplendent with overarching elms, and “Elm Street” flanked with its sylvan loggia. What had once been an occasional feature in the landscape—a totemic centerpiece or a wayside denizen—had now become one of the most ubiquitous elements of the Yankee scene. As poet Nathaniel Parker Willis put it in 1850, New England had become a land of “ten thousand princely elms.”<sup>121</sup> The tree—and its eponymous street—had become the quintessence of Yankee space.

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<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 40-41.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>121</sup> Nathaniel Parker Willis, *Life, Here and There* (New York: Baker and Scribner, 1850), 130.

CHAPTER FOUR

*City of Elms*

“What a guarantee for health; what a magnificent embellishment for the palaces, and houses, and shops of a large town!”<sup>1</sup>

In the mid-nineteenth century, the muse of emendation visited larger towns and cities as well; and in places like Cambridge, New Haven, Portland and Springfield the pursuit of spatial beauty often antedated similar work in smaller communities. Here, too, the planting of elms was the principal means by which this was achieved. But the meaning of elms in the urban environment—and often the motivations for planting them—differed subtly from that of town or village, even in the context of a single community as it grew into a city. This was especially the case in the second half of the nineteenth century; for as cities began to wrestle with the forces of industrialization, rapid urban growth and unprecedented immigration, the act of placing a curbside fragment of nature took on a whole new meaning.

Challenging any analysis of trees in the urban environments of New England is the fact that *city*, *village*, *town* and even *country* are elusive categories at best, and particularly so when applied to nineteenth-century New England. Settlement in the region occurred along a fluid continuum, extending from remote hill town to major metropolis. Places were frequently in motion along this line as their fortunes waxed and waned. The retroactive imposition of such categories must also acknowledge the differences in perspective between the nineteenth century and the present, and account for vastly changed meanings of the words themselves. What may have been a respectable urban area in 1850 would today hardly qualify as a town. Indeed, with the exception of Boston and New Haven, few places in antebellum New England would qualify for contemporary definitions of “urban,” if—to paraphrase Lewis Mumford—urban is taken to mean the maximum amount of people on the least amount of land area.

Further complicating studies of city and town is the speed at which many communities developed in nineteenth-century New England. Development was, as we have seen, not

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<sup>1</sup> “Trees,” *The Yankee* (23 July 1828): 240.

distributed equally throughout the region. Even as hill towns and the more remote villages (particularly those bypassed by the railroads) entered precipitous decline, much of New England experienced great economic and spatial growth in the nineteenth century, specially after the Civil War. Those places blessed by geography and circumstance shot along the rural-urban development continuum in the blink of an historical eye. What may have been a tiny village in 1790 was a bustling town by 1830 and often a city by the 1880s.

Thus, elms in New England *cities* in the late nineteenth century could often be traced to earlier tree-planting efforts to improve a *town*, or to an even earlier epoch in which a thoughtful husbandman may have set out saplings along a rural *village* road. Relic trees and the folklored remnants of the aboriginal forest (including most of the great totem elms examined in Chapter 2), could be traced even further back in time. By the late nineteenth century, then, the stock of urban elms in cities like Cambridge, New Haven or Springfield represented a rich amalgamation of sylvan artifacts. While there were common threads which linked all efforts to plant elms in cities, the urban elm plantation was rarely the product of a systematic campaign to establish a forest-in-the-city, or the fruit of a single, unchanging ideal.

Another challenge for the historian is the relative transparency of street trees in the historical record. In spite of their imposing presence and seeming permanence, trees are fleeting artifacts. Unlike buildings, they often leave little or no paper trail. Trees eluded the pens of the most exacting chroniclers, and much has been lost. Springfield possessed a magnificent stock of mature elms as early as 1840; yet even nineteenth-century antiquarians well versed in the *sylva* of the city were stumped as to the original planters. “It is to be sincerely regretted,” opined one writer in 1891, “that the names of those benefactors of their race who for rising of a century have been consigned to the earth in the cemeteries of Springfield . . . and who have made their avenues and streets so beautiful by planting noble elms to cast grateful, luxuriant shade upon the coming generations, are unknown.” Yet, the author added, “their grand deeds, in the language of the Latin poet, are written on living ‘monuments more enduring than brass’.”<sup>2</sup>

As the verdant village was largely the fruit of private initiative, so were the earliest elm-plantings in New England cities. It was the private sector that pioneered the beautification of the city street, setting an example later institutionalized as an area of municipal obligation. “Tree societies” in the larger towns and cities emerged, in the 1830s and

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<sup>2</sup> “Arboreal Springfield,” *Progressive Springfield* 2 (June 1891): 12.

1840s, from the same new longing for spatial and environmental beauty that produced the village improvement movement. As early as 1844, Keene, New Hampshire, had a Forest Tree Society, organized to plant elms on its main commercial street. At Portsmouth, New Hampshire, a similar group was active before 1850; there, elms had been “extensively planted in all our principal streets,” reported a local historian in 1859, “by the public spirit of individuals in some cases, but more generally by the Portsmouth Tree Society.”<sup>3</sup> Citizens of Springfield, Massachusetts, in the 1840s organized to plant elms on Federal Street, reserving “special days in which to turn out and transplant them from the woods in the northeastern portion of the city.”<sup>4</sup>

Elsewhere, public-spirited individuals such as James Hillhouse of New Haven engaged in expansive acts of arboreal philanthropy. More commonly, city elms in this period were the cumulative product of numerous individual actions over the course of decades. In Cambridge, for example, an older stock of “legacy” elms bordered the streetscape, an eclectic, largely anonymous collection planted over the years by abutting property owners. The sum of such actions in time came to constitute a major civic benefit, even if such benefits were incidental to the improvement of private space (as we will see, such “civic” acts were sometimes driven by self-interest). Street elms were also the byproduct of speculative real estate development; as the first suburban communities were developed in places such as Cambridgeport, trees were often set out to sweeten the scene for the purpose of selling lots. Usually by a combination of these mechanisms, New England’s cities were well-treed by the 1860s.

In no city was elm-planting a *sustained municipal activity* until relatively late in the nineteenth century. Whatever city-sponsored actions did occur before this time were sporadic and limited in scope. Only after the Civil War did New England’s urban communities begin to systematically plant street trees, and accept management of the sylvan estate as a legitimate area of municipal concern. This implied a significant change in expectations regarding responsibility for the stewardship of the commons—a shift from the private sector to the public. On the streets themselves, doing so required clarification of the boundary between public and private space. Until then, street edges were ambiguous; precisely where private space ended and the commons began was not clearly demarcated. In both towns and cities, private citizens often planted trees in these unclaimed strips.

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<sup>3</sup> Charles W. Brewster, *Rambles About Portsmouth* (Portsmouth: C. W. Brewster, 1859), 345.

<sup>4</sup> “Arboreal Springfield,” *Progressive Springfield* 2 (June 1891): 12.

Such actions were generally considered an enhancement to the *civitas*; but they also resulted in private encroachment into the shared domain of the street. In the second half of the nineteenth century, growing concerns about municipal liability, and the arrival of new technologies such as gas lighting, the telegraph, electricity and the streetcar pushed cities to define more precisely the limits of municipal terrain—to reclaim the street edge, and to take a more active role in the management of the streetscape. Planting street trees became one of the mechanisms by which municipal authority was asserted. In the process was born the modern municipal forest.

### *The Urbanity of Improvement*

Although the first stirrings of spatial improvement in New England occurred at the grassroots, the village improvement *movement* was more cosmopolitan in its origins. For the smaller communities—including those which would later become cities in their own right—emendation was largely an urban impulse. The village improvement movement flowed from the same fountainhead of reform that produced efforts, in the 1830s and 1840s, to combat intemperance, improve conditions in prisons and insane asylums, champion women's rights, and abolish slavery.<sup>5</sup> Nearly all such initiatives first stirred to life among the progressive clerisy of the Northern cities such as Cambridge, Boston, Hartford and New York.

While village beautification chiefly involved planting forest trees of local provenance, the spatial and aesthetic values which guided such initiatives were clearly urban in origin, promoted by elites such as those to which Andrew Jackson Downing and Orville Dewey belonged. In spite of his rural pedigree and country seat on the Hudson, Downing was an urban man who actively participated in New York metropolitan culture, and reached his rural audience via books published in New York City. Orville Dewey, while himself a native of tiny Sheffield, Massachusetts, began his Elm Tree Association after a long sojourn as pastor of a New York church, a time during which he associated with other rurally-inclined city men such as William Cullen Bryant and Thomas Cole. And while Downing and others implored village improvers to consider elm-rich towns such as Stockbridge and Litchfield, they also pointed to more urban precedents; New Haven, a city which rivaled Boston as a cultural center in nineteenth-century New England—was

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<sup>5</sup> William E. Buckley, *A New England Pattern* (Chester, Connecticut: Pequot Press, 1973), 112.

repeatedly invoked as a model of emendation.<sup>6</sup> Litchfield, Connecticut, was just one of many villages where elm-planting was directly inspired by the example of New Haven.<sup>7</sup>

The urbanity of New England's burgeoning tree culture was expressed in an 1828 editorial that appeared in the *Portland Yankee*. In the essay, entitled only "Trees," publisher John Neal blasted those who would fell trees and clear the land of "its proud, and beautiful, and *protecting* growth." He took particular aim at those who lived closest to the soil, whom he expected to act as stewards of nature's bounty. If the husbandman and the farmer ("they who are bred up in the country") did not recognize the value of trees, asked Neal, "who should?"

Ans. They who do *not* live in the country—they who do *not* live among them—they who are *not* always at war with nature; in other words, the people of towns and cities. To them, there is no luxury like green trees—no wealth like the wealth of the overshadowing oak, the enormous elm. . . .<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, "If you could transplant a few of the forest trees of the neighborhood, into such a city as New-York, or Baltimore, or Philadelphia, or Boston," Neal suggested, "you would make it the most desirable place of residence on earth. "What a luxury" the trees would constitute; "What a guarantee for health; what a magnificent embellishment for the palaces, and houses, and shops of a large town!"<sup>9</sup>

The urban leanings of the improvement movement may be read at the village end as well. As we have seen, village improvement—particularly after 1850—was often a response to distant urban social, political, and economic forces. Little towns struggling to retain a sense of self respect in the face of growing urban power applied the new precepts of spatial beauty and improvement at least partly as a means of keeping their sons and daughters from wandering off to Boston, Lowell or New York. Once the main task of tree planting was accomplished, improvement societies even sought to provide a range of specific urban amenities, from paved streets and sidewalks to fountains and streetlights, in the hope that such accessories might at least partly dispel the temptations of the built city.

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<sup>6</sup> Van Wyck Brooks, *The Flowering of New England* (New York: The Modern Library, 1941), 64.

<sup>7</sup> Oliver Wolcott, Jr., the man responsible for planting Litchfield's elms in the 1790s, had spent time in New Haven as a student at Yale, and was greatly impressed by the elm-planting efforts of James Hillhouse. See Alain C. White, *The History of the Town of Litchfield, Connecticut* (Litchfield, Connecticut: Enquirer, 1920), 168.

<sup>8</sup> "Trees," *The Yankee* (23 July 1828): 240.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

In cities, improvement by way of elm-planting carried a different set of meanings. To the inhabitants of the larger towns and cities, the problem was not one usurpation by the “great world,” but rather lost contact with the natural world, and the diminution of those “rural values” considered vital to the health and moral equilibrium of the citizenry. If the village saw in the elm essentially urban values of grace, beauty and spatial sophistication, the city saw in the elm a fragment of nature and a keepsake of the vanishing pastoral countryside. Elms evoked the pastoral New England countryside, and promised to transpose its grace and charms to the heart of the city.

### *Transformations*

An example of the relative meaning of city elm and village elm may be observed in the case of Keene, New Hampshire. The perception of Keene, New Hampshire, by its citizens, as the community transformed from village to city in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, can be unpacked from accounts of local efforts to improve the town common and plant elms along the main commercial street. In each period of Keene’s development, elms represented different things, from rural regression to the quintessence of the city itself.

The first stirrings of organized improvement occurred at Keene as early as 1788, when elms were set out along Main Street. The fruits of this early collective action did not last long. That following May the *New Hampshire Recorder* lamented that “a number of the trees which were last year set out in Main-street were girdled by some unknown profligate”—an “outrage against good taste” which presaged later struggles over elms at Keene, and what the trees represented. Precisely why the trees were girdled is unclear, although a later episode suggests that it may have had to do with the way the trees were perceived as conveying a certain image of town to outsiders.<sup>10</sup>

In 1820 another stirring of improvement took place, but action at that time was limited to marking off the town square—until then simply a broad intersection of streets—and involved little or no tree planting. By the 1840s, the common had again degenerated into a “sandy waste,” and was cluttered with a signboard indicating distances to nearby villages. Partly in response, a Forest Tree Society was formed, “to fence in and ornament a small central portion of the Common,” and to plant elms on the streets of the nascent city. At its

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<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Salma Hale, *Annals of the Town of Keene* (Keene: J. W. Prentiss and Company, 1851), 117. The “unknown profligate” was supposedly an “instrument of feminine malice,” but the meaning of this is unclear. See *Annals*, 120.

annual meeting in September 1844, the Society reported having planted 140 elms on streets that previous spring, and had designs for the common and center of town.<sup>11</sup>

Not all agreed that planting elms in the business district of the growing city was a desirable action. Bitter objection to the tree-planting campaign came mainly from the merchant community, who feared that the elms would conceal their signboards, and result in a loss of trade. Others opposed the forestation of the common on the grounds that the trees and perimeter fence would limit its use as a training field by the militia, or as a marketplace by local farmers.<sup>12</sup> But even more revealing of Keene's evolving status and self-image was the objection that the trees would "give the town a countrified look," causing outsiders to "cease to believe that we were metropolitan in fact, or in aspiration."<sup>13</sup> No longer village and not yet full-fledged city, Keene, it was feared, would be hindered by elms in its march toward urbanity.

Faced with this storm of protest, the Forest Tree Society abandoned its work, and no further elm plantings took place. By 1850, however, Keene was rapidly becoming a city; its self-perception had changed, and so had attitudes toward elms. The new day did not come about without guerilla action on the part of the Forest Tree Society. At daybreak on a June morning in 1851, two men from the Society appeared on the common, and with oxen and plow began breaking the earth. Within several hours they had prepared a large circular area of ground for turf. At the center they placed a single elm, "as a test of the question whether an enclosure with trees would be tolerated or not." So certain were they that the sapling elm would soon be uprooted, that the planters made no effort to give it water. Yet, in spite of mumbled threats of uprooting, the next week found the vanguard tree unmolested.<sup>14</sup>

By the autumn of 1851, "there was almost universal demand that the Park should be enlarged and enclosed." Money was raised and more elms were set out on the common and surrounding streets. Merchants found that trade did not evaporate "on account of the leafy concealment of the signboards."<sup>15</sup> The old fears of being thought rubes by the outside world vanished; the elms, no longer a threat to metropolitan aspirations, were left in peace and flourished. Keene, now confidently urban, could afford a keepsake of the

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<sup>11</sup> Keene History Committee, *Upper Ashuelot: A History of Keene, New Hampshire* (Keene: City of Keene, 1968), 88.

<sup>12</sup> S. G. Griffin, *A History of the Town of Keene* (Keene: Sentinel Printing Company, 1904), 451.

<sup>13</sup> "How Our Park was Made," *The May Flower* (Keene: Sentinel Printing, 1873), 41.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*



**Figure 42.** Central Square, Keene, New Hampshire. Courtesy Historical Society of Cheshire County.

countryside in its business district. In time the very elms contested by an earlier generation became Keene's distinguishing mark. By the time it became a city in 1874, it was known throughout New England as New Hampshire's "Elm City."

### *Antecedents*

The planting of elms in New England cities must be situated within the larger historical continuum, and placed beside earlier efforts both here and abroad to vegetate the urban environment. In Europe, the practice of planting urban trees has a long, rich pedigree, though it was neither as ancient nor universal a practice as one might expect. Moreover, *sponsorship* of the urban forest was radically different. Where town-and-city trees in the United States were the eclectic handiwork of private initiative, the tree-lined boulevards and avenues of Europe were more aristocratic in origin. The Yankee urban forest was a democratic project; the trees which adorned Europe's great cities were, on the other hand, public improvements bestowed by king, pope or emperor—*noblesse oblige* in arboreal form.

Prior to the seventeenth century, few European streets or public squares were lined with trees. Christopher Tunnard has argued that there was little interest or need for city trees for a number of reasons. The countryside was relatively near, making the presence of nature within the city less critical. Buildings were close enough to the street to provide it shelter and shade (making the street too narrow to accommodate vegetation in any case). The nascent art of city planning during the Renaissance was based on a rediscovery of classical architecture; it celebrated "perfectly controlled forms" and had little use for trees as a scaling device in the creation of well-proportioned urban space. What nature did exist in the city was generally confined to enclosed private gardens and interior courts.<sup>16</sup> This first began to change in France in the early seventeenth century. There, the tree-lined allée of the Italian Renaissance garden became adapted for urban use. Allées first appeared in semi-public French royal parks such as the Tuileries, where they were used for promenade, strolling, and games. The Renaissance allée served as the immediate antecedent of the urban boulevards built in Paris in the seventeenth century.<sup>17</sup>

By 1615 Amsterdam's flourishing merchants enjoyed the shade of elm trees which lined the city's new canals, a form which was widely emulated throughout the Netherlands.

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<sup>16</sup> Christopher Tunnard, *The City of Man* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970), 240-243.

<sup>17</sup> Henry W. Lawrence, "The Origins of the Tree-Lined Boulevard," *Geographical Review* 78 (October 1988): 356.

Other European cities placed trees along riverbanks, quays and harbors. The emergence of new urban games among the aristocracy led to the development, in Italy, France and England, of tree-lined *malls* and *cours*—“recreational variants of the garden allée.” Known as *le jeu du mail* or *palmail* in France—*pall mall* in England—the new game involved hitting a ball with a wooden mallet across a open expanse of lawn, a playing field which was often adorned with rows of trees. At first, malls appeared within the confines of private estates, but in time they were built as quasi-public amenities. The first public mall in Paris was built alongside the city’s walls by 1600. Berlin’s Unter den Linden and Pall Mall in London, in place by the 1650s, both derive from this tradition.<sup>18</sup>

Another pastime among the European elite, pleasure riding in carriages, led to the creation of the Cours de la Reine along the Seine. Inspired by Italian precedent—the Corso of Florence—the Parisian carriageway was built by Marie de Medici in 1616, and featured a “new type of quadruple allée.” The form was emulated elsewhere, both within France (the Cours de Vincennes, also in Paris, was open to anyone who could afford a carriage), and in other European cities, such as Madrid, which built its Prado in the 1650s. The cours hold particular significance for the evolution of the tree-lined street, for as Henry W, Lawrence has argued, it “transformed the garden allée into a place for vehicles, albeit one not yet integrated into a city’s street system.”<sup>19</sup>

In the French countryside, the chief post roads were often lined with trees beginning in the sixteenth century, a practice which led to more formal planting of rural avenues on the peripheries of cities—often in association with large hunting estates or leading to rural chateaux. These “exterior avenues” served both as a model for later large-scale urban design interventions by Haussmann, Alphand and others, and themselves often became tree-lined urban thoroughfares as they were engulfed by subsequent development.<sup>20</sup>

As early as the 1580s, trees adorned the older medieval ramparts of a number of northern European cities, or were planted in place of the ramparts as the cities expanded. The origin of the term *boulevard* can itself be traced to the demolition, ordered by Louis XIV in 1670, of the old Parisian city walls. In place of the ramparts, tree-lined promenades were constructed, radically altering the meaning of “boulevard” (the medieval origins of the word—related to “bulwark”—referred to the elevated section of a city’s perimeter

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 358-360.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 360-361.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 361-363

defenses). Because they were on the edge of town, the sylvan *Boulevards* were little used at first; but by the late eighteenth century they had become among the most fashionable thoroughfares in Paris. Napoleonic conquest in the early nineteenth century distributed the promenade form; under the auspices of Napoleon I, promenades and boulevards were built in Brussels, Düsseldorf, Rome and Turin.<sup>21</sup>

In spite of such work, trees remained a rarity in the older central districts of European cities; the medieval fabric there was far too dense to accommodate vegetation. Efforts to plant trees on smaller, internal streets occurred only with new urban development—urban expansion into previously unbuilt or suburban districts, or in the layout of new towns. Louis XIV incorporated columns of trees in his plan for Versailles. There and in similar developments in Germany, internal tree-lined avenues were used principally as ceremonial ways or to frame vistas. New urban development in the 1750s at Toulouse and Lyon occurred along tree-lined streets, which were intended as armatures for expansion.<sup>22</sup>

The systematic planting of roadside elms in the countryside became common in eighteenth-century England, derived from French practice.<sup>23</sup> Similar use of the tree on estates, in formal columns flanking avenues, was introduced by the French landscape designer Mollet in the seventeenth century, although evidence suggests even earlier native efforts.<sup>24</sup> English landscape gardeners Henry Wise and Charles Bridgman favored the formal use of elm, and it was the latter who designed the great elm-lined radiating avenues at Kensington Palace Gardens. Batty Langley in 1728 offered advice on preparing elm “to transplant out in Avenues, Walks, Parks, Hedge-rows, etc.,” and he considered the “beautiful Verdure, and delightful Shade” of the English elm “Encouragement sufficient for us to propagate it as much as possible.”<sup>25</sup>

Regardless of species, the apotheosis of the tree-lined street in Europe occurred in France in the mid-nineteenth century. In this period, improvements such as new paving materials, street lighting, drains and sewers, mail boxes and sidewalks all contributed to a renewal of the street as both infrastructure and civic space. In Paris the Champs-Élysées and the *Grandes Boulevards* were rebuilt by the Comte de Rambuteau in the 1830s, a prelude to the

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 355-358; 365; 374.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 366-368.

<sup>23</sup> R. H. Richens, *Elm* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 112.

<sup>24</sup> The elm avenue noted by John Evelyn at Nonsuch Palace, and that at Longford Castle may have dated to the late sixteenth century. See R. H. Richens, *Elm* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 112.

<sup>25</sup> Batty Langley, *A Sure Method of Improving Estates* (London: Francis Clay and Daniel Browne, 1728), 52; 62.

more extensive interventions two decades later under Napoleon III. The motivations for providing trees on thoroughfares in the heart of Paris were only partly driven by aesthetics; they were primarily intended to improve health conditions by providing shade on the newly-widened streets, and by “removing harmful elements from the miasmas thought at the time to cause diseases.”<sup>26</sup>

With the rebuilding of Paris by Baron Eugene Haussman and Adolphe Alphand in the 1850s, the tree-lined street reached its highest development, becoming a model for similar urban renewal efforts elsewhere in Europe, and establishing the tree-lined boulevard as a major element of modern urban design. Even with the new emphasis on trees as a public amenity, the earlier autocratic element did not fully vanish. “The imperial rule of Napoleon III after 1852,” writes Lawrence, “found the tree-lined boulevard a fitting expression of both aspects of civic power for a benevolent despot.”<sup>27</sup>

In America, benevolent autocracy had little role to play in evolution of the urban landscape. But then again, so did trees. Trees were largely absent in American cities before 1850, but there were important exceptions. In 1807 a Territory of Michigan law specified that trees were to be planted on the streets and boulevards of Detroit. A commission charged with the selection of a state capital for Mississippi recommended that streets of the new city be filled every other block with native trees, in part as a means of reducing the threat of fire.<sup>28</sup> In Philadelphia and New York trees had been set out on streets from the earliest days of settlement. These were impressive enough to earn the praise of foreign visitors (though such attention may have derived in part from the novelty of such sights on American soil). Philadelphia, founded by William Penn in 1682, had an abundance of verdure from the start (the “green country town” was in fact founded beneath an elm later known as Penn’s Treaty Elm). Penn had incorporated a series of public squares in the layout of his town, and the earliest extant plan clearly indicates trees bordering each of these spaces. Houses were provided with sufficient space to accommodate “gardens and orchards,” while the main streets were embellished with trees.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Lawrence, “The Origins of the Tree-Lined Boulevard,” 370-371.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 373-374.

<sup>28</sup> Zube (1971), quoted in Robert W. Miller, “The History of Trees in the City,” *Shading Our Cities: A Resource Guide for Urban and Community Forests*, Gary Moll and Sara Ebenreck, eds. (Washington: Island Press, 1989), 33.

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Spiro Kostof, *The City Shaped: Urban Patterns and Meanings Through History* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1991), 145-146.

By 1818 street trees lined Philadelphia's principal thoroughfares.<sup>30</sup> In that year, John M. Duncan, an Englishman who visited the city on a tour of the United States and Canada, noted with irony how Philadelphia's streets were named after "the various kinds of timber with which the ground was formerly covered," including Chestnut, Walnut, Spruce and Pine. He also found an uncommon degree of "freshness and purity" in the city's atmosphere, a condition he attributed in part to wide and unencumbered sidewalks, many of which were "skirted with Lombardy poplars."<sup>31</sup> A decade later, William Newnham Blane, an Englishman who visited the United States (seeking to dispel a "cloud of prejudice" toward Americans among his countrymen) found Philadelphia a verdant, flourishing place. He was particularly impressed with Chestnut Street, "shaded by rows of fine trees growing at the edge of the pavement." Under this parasol on warm summer nights, he observed, "the beauty and fashion of the city make their promenade."<sup>32</sup> James Silk Buckingham, writing in 1841, found that Philadelphia's trees gave "the greatest beauty" to its streets. When in full foliage, these brought "a verdure, freshness, coolness, and shade most agreeable to the eye, and most delicious to the feelings of the passenger."

Scarcely anything can be imagined more beautiful, in streets at least, than the sight of one of these long avenues, reaching from the Delaware to the Schuylkill, a length of two miles, lined with trees throughout the whole way, and the termination of the vista at each extremity reposing on the opposite banks of the respective streams.<sup>33</sup>

New York had established a curbside forest even earlier in its history. "I found it extremely pleasant to walk in the town," wrote the Swedish naturalist Peter Kalm in 1748, "for it seemed quite like a garden." "In the chief streets there are trees planted, which in summer give them a fine appearance, and during the excessive heat at the time afford a cooling shade." The plantings displayed a certain degree of sophistication, for "one seldom met with trees of the same sort," noted Kalm; species were alternated street by street and block by block, both for variety and to prevent a monoculture susceptible to disease and

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<sup>30</sup> Exactly when Philadelphia received its first street trees is not clear. The Swedish naturalist Peter Kalm, who described the city in 1748, made no note of trees flanking the public thoroughfares. Since he recorded with considerable detail such items as the pavement and the presence of trees "planted about the houses and in gardens" (and having made careful note of the street trees in New York on the same journey), it may safely be inferred that Philadelphia had not yet planted trees on its streets in 1748. See Peter Kalm, *Travels in North America* vol. 1 (London: 1772), 24.

<sup>31</sup> John M. Duncan, *Travels Through Part of the United States and Canada* (Glasgow: Wardlaw and Cunninghame, 1823), 188-189.

<sup>32</sup> William Newnham Blane, *Travels Through the United States and Canada* (London: Baldwin and Co., 1828), 24.

<sup>33</sup> James Silk Buckingham, *America: Historical, Statistic, and Descriptive* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1841), 329. Buckingham was a keen observer; he noted that those trees on the north side of the street flourished, as they had the benefit of the sun throughout the day; those on the south appeared to lag comparatively, as they received "only the beams of the rising and setting sun, and that only when he is north of the equator . . ."

insects.<sup>34</sup> Andrew Burnaby, an Englishman who visited North America in 1760, was similarly impressed by New York's "spacious and airy" streets, in which rows of trees "form an agreeable shade, and produce a pretty effect."<sup>35</sup> In 1818, both Broadway and Wall Street were lined with trees "planted at the side of the pavement."<sup>36</sup>

### *The Philanthropy of Elms*

Long before tree planting in New England cities became a sustained municipal undertaking, the philanthropy of generous souls planted many a street-bound elm. Acts of sylvan magnanimity were an early fountainhead of elms for many New England villages and towns—and cities, too. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines philanthropy as "practical benevolence towards men in general; the disposition or active effort to promote the happiness and well-being of one's fellow-men." Of course, as with charitable actions in general, motivations for philanthropic elm-planting ranged from a genuine interest in the welfare of fellow citizens, to a selfish quest for recognition and a measure of immortality. Regardless of the motivating impulse, however, such acts bestowed on many urban environments a rich sylvan legacy, and often had the further benefit of encouraging formation of an improvement society or tree association—and in inspiring similar actions both locally and (in the case of New Haven) far beyond. Occasionally, philanthropy mingled more openly with self interest. Many elm-planting efforts later interpreted as acts of pure philanthropy in truth began as somewhat more self-serving projects involving the embellishment of a speculative real estate venture. Indeed, some of New England's greatest philanthropist elm planters were men with extensive interest in real estate, including New Haven's venerated James Hillhouse.

In Cambridge, Bangor, New Haven, Portland and other cities, some of the earliest street-bound elms were often set out by developers. These men were primarily interested in making their residential ventures more attractive to potential buyers, and planted elms as an enticement; they were also interested in beautification more generally, as they stood to gain if the ambient image of their town or city was raised, triggering a new demand for homes. But many of these individuals were also public-spirited souls who evidently possessed a genuine interest in improving the communities in which they lived. One of Portland's early arboreal benefactors was a clergyman by the name of Elijah Kellogg. Kellogg engaged in

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<sup>34</sup> Peter Kalm, *Travels in North America* vol. 1 (London: 1772), 193-194. The following year Kalm visited Albany, where he also observed tree-lined streets.

<sup>35</sup> Andrew Burnaby, *Travels Through the Middle Settlements in North America in the Years 1759 and 1760* (New York: A. Wessels Company, reprint 1904), 111-112.

<sup>36</sup> Henry Bradshaw Fearon, *Sketches of America* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1818), 11.



**Figure 43.** Street elms, Portland, Maine, c. 1880. From Elwell, *Portland and Vicinity* (1881).

activities ranging far beyond the pulpit, and his numerous dabblings in real estate eventually cost him his “popularity and influence.” But Kellogg was also credited with having “commenced the beautiful work, since so successfully followed, of planting trees for the ornament of the town.” In anticipation of a building boom in Portland, Kellogg acquired property on Munjoy Hill, laid out Washington Street and lined it with trees.<sup>37</sup>

But most acts of arboreal liberality had little to do with speculation, and took place on a more microscopic scale. Individual property owners would contribute, in a piecemeal and uncoordinated fashion, to the greening of public thoroughfares by setting out short rows of trees in that ambiguous zone between the public space of the street and the private property adjacent. As in towns and villages, the boundary between public and private along city streets in the early nineteenth century was frequently unclear; before sidewalks were commonplace, these marginal areas were often annexed *de facto* by abutting landowners. In most instances this “taking” of the commons was relatively innocuous; and, as it often involved the planting of trees in the neglected zone, such action generally conferred a public benefit. Indeed, given that municipalities themselves were doing little or nothing to beautify the streets, this private-sector activity was roundly applauded.

Examples of sylvan largesse abound in the local histories of nineteenth-century New England. Antiquarians praised these philanthropic souls, and recorded the measure of their contribution (often literally, noting the girth and height of the trees). Main Street in Concord, New Hampshire, accumulated its canopy of elms over the course of several decades, the fruit of contributions by a number of community leaders whose actions in turn inspired similar displays of generosity. This chain of giving began in 1764, when a short row of public elms was set out by the Reverend Timothy Walker, transplanted from a nearby interval. Three of the eight original trees survived into the twentieth century, long enough to become part of the urban landscape of the state capital. Soon after the Walker trees, another “noble row of elms” got its start in 1774, the handiwork of Dr. Ebenezer H. Goss. A generation later, Charles Walker planted a row of elms on the west side of Main Street, in front of the mansion he erected in 1802. Hazen Kimball, scion of another leading Concord family, continued the elming of Main Street, followed by Samuel A. Kimball, who added a stock of elms to the thoroughfare in 1818.<sup>38</sup> The piecemeal philanthropy of

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<sup>37</sup> At first these he Lombardy poplars, but these were later replaced by elms. See William Willis, *The History of Portland from 1632 to 1864* (Portland: Bailey & Noyes, 1865), 648.

<sup>38</sup> James O. Lyford, ed., *History of Concord, New Hampshire* (Concord: The Rumford Press, 1903), 50-51.

Concord's "representative men" had produced, by the 1860s, a Main Street shaded in its entirety by more than two hundred elms.<sup>39</sup>

Main Street in Springfield, Massachusetts, gained its first stock of elms through the action of Joseph Stebbins, a tavernkeeper and Revolutionary officer who, according to local lore, "brought the trees from the West Springfield meadows on his back," and with the help of his two sons, planted the stripling elms in a row in the middle of the town street. As one chronicler later recounted, the Stebbins elms were for generations "the pride and admiration of people entering the city."<sup>40</sup> Springfield's famous "Queen Elm," was praised by Oliver Wendell Holmes as one of the most beautiful in New England. A legacy from an early period of urban development, the Queen Elm was said to have been planted just after the Revolution by Dr. William Sheldon, on his own property. In time, the tree in effect "migrated" into the public domain, and became one the most magnificent artifacts to grace a city street anywhere in nineteenth century America. From a trunk measuring twenty-two feet in circumference, a "wilderness of branches" rode 100 feet above the traffic,<sup>41</sup> bearing aloft "a balloon top of beautiful proportions" 130 feet in diameter which dwarfed the adjacent schoolhouse.<sup>42</sup> The beauty and grandeur of the Queen Elm was said to have inspired the change of Meeting House Lane to Elm Street prior to 1827.<sup>43</sup>

Boston Common gained most of its early plantings through private initiative. The first formal tree plantings there occurred as early as 1723, when a row of English elms were set out on the southwest perimeter (along what is today Tremont Street); a second row was added in 1734.<sup>44</sup> In 1784, John Lucas and Oliver Smith raised funds to improve Boston Commons. They graded uneven sections, repaired fences, filled holes and raised the low-lying areas. But their greatest contribution was planting a third row of trees along Tremont Street ("liberty granted" to do so by the Selectmen), which eventually formed a grand promenade known as the Great Mall.<sup>45</sup> The mall along Beacon Street received its trees

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<sup>39</sup> Howard M. Cook, *Wayside Jottings; or, Rambles Around the Old Town of Concord, New Hampshire* (Concord: E. C. Eastman, 1910), 131.

<sup>40</sup> Flora Graves Phelps, "Living Room Tales—Springfield Justly Called a City of Trees," *Springfield Sunday Republican* (April 1924).

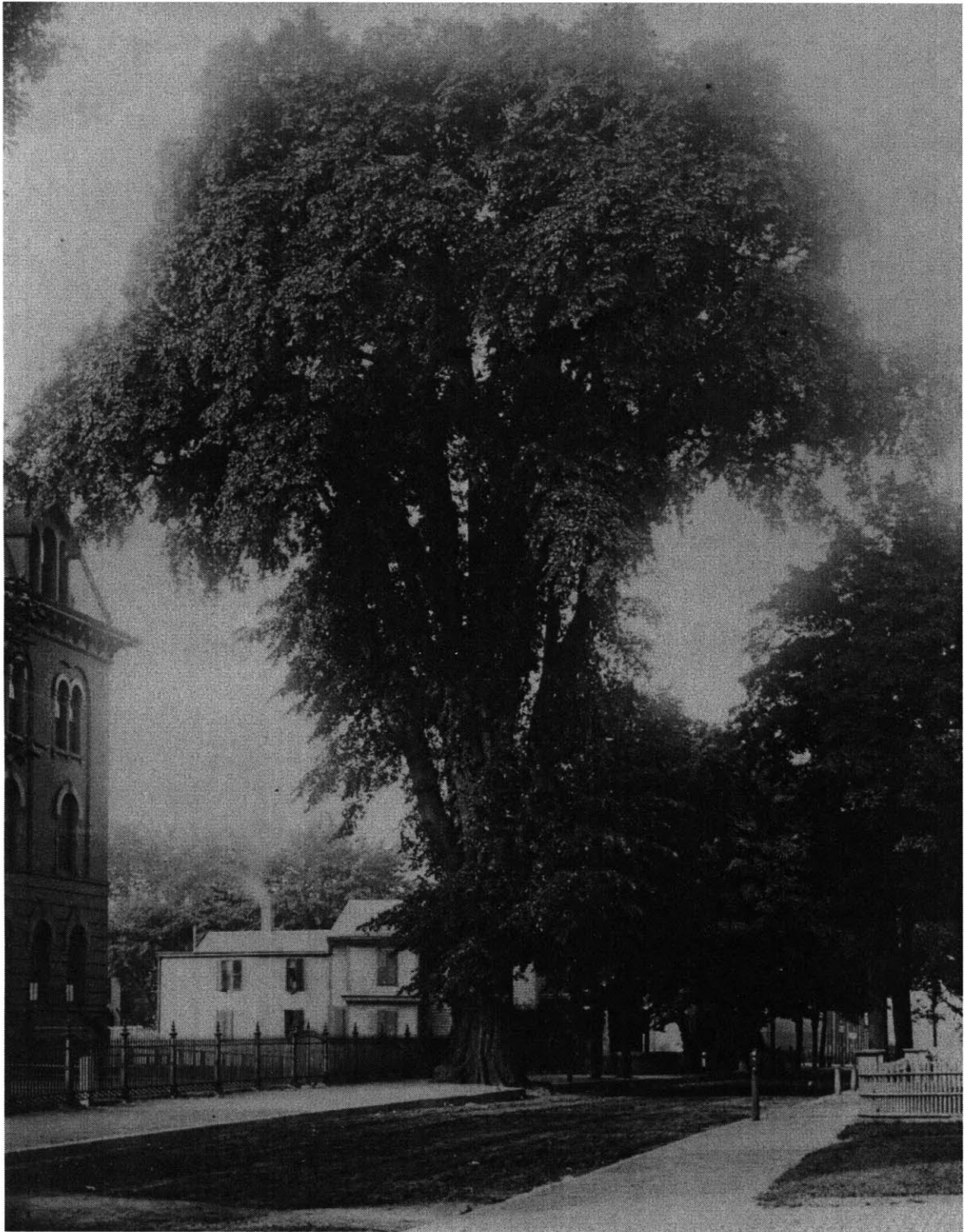
<sup>41</sup> Thomas D. Howard, "History of Elm Street," *Springfield Weekly Republican* (n. d. 1907).

<sup>42</sup> Quoted in "Arboreal Springfield," *Progressive Springfield* 2 (June 1891): 11. A cross section of the tree is on display at the Springfield Museum of Natural History.

<sup>43</sup> "The Elms of Court Square: Something About Their Growth," *Springfield Union* (Summer 1898); Thomas D. Howard, "History of Elm Street," *Springfield Weekly Republican* (n. d. 1907).

<sup>44</sup> M. A. DeWolfe Howe, *Boston Common: Scenes from Four Centuries* (Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1910), 29.

<sup>45</sup> Nathaniel B. Shurtleff, *A Topographical and Historical Description of Boston* (Boston: Noyes, Holmes, and Company, 1872), 326.



**Figure 44.** "Queen Elm," Springfield, Massachusetts, c. 1860.  
Courtesy Connecticut Valley Historical Museum, Springfield, Massachusetts.

shortly after the war of 1812, when public funds set aside to build harbor fortifications were used instead for improving the Common.<sup>46</sup> Outside of Boston Common, which had received some attention from the city fathers by the 1830s, the city's sylvan estate was largely a by-product of private interest. Beyond the Common, trees that adorned Boston's public thoroughfares did so incidentally, as they grew mostly in adjacent gardens. "The greater part of the trees which shade our streets," wrote Nehemiah Adams in 1838, "are within private enclosures . . . the fruits of individual wealth and taste."<sup>47</sup>

An enterprising philanthropist would often enlist the support of other community members, and such early public-private partnerships frequently led to the formation of a dedicated tree-planting organization or improvement society. In 1829, Major Ingersoll of Springfield led an effort to plant elms in Court Square, at the very center of the city; he circulated "a subscription to meet this expense" among Springfield's men of record, the signers comprising a compendium of local powerbrokers. The Ingersoll planting contributed to the assertion, heard decades later, that "on no plot of land of such small area . . . stand so many magnificent elms,"<sup>48</sup> and helped earn Springfield its appellation "City of Trees."<sup>49</sup> In a similar initiative at Concord, New Hampshire, a column of elms along the schoolhouse lot was set out by John D. Abbot in 1832, paid for by public subscription.<sup>50</sup>

Sylvan largesse on the part of the citizenry was often encouraged by community leaders, and sometimes the municipality itself. In Portsmouth, New Hampshire, in the 1790s, the citizens were "stirred up" by the governor to plant trees "in all our most public streets." Though poplars were planted at first, these were eventually replaced with elms.<sup>51</sup> In Portland, the *Eastern Argus*, one of the city's newspapers of record, urged its readers in 1831 to plant trees in "the front of their dwellings." "To us," offered the *Argus*,

there is no spectacle more cheering than to witness rows of trees, systematically arranged along the streets, throwing out their fragrance to the air. The expense which will enable the gratification of this commendable taste, is quite trifling; and, when we reflect upon the advantages which are known to be derived to the health, by trees taking up a portion of the deleterious gas with which the atmosphere is charged, we would think none, who can afford it, would deny themselves the luxury.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Howe, *Boston Common*, 45.

<sup>47</sup> Nehemiah Adams, *Boston Common, or Rural Walks in Cities* (Boston: George H. Light, 1838; Bostonian Society edition), 34-35.

<sup>48</sup> "Arboreal Springfield," *Progressive Springfield* 2 (June 1891): 12.

<sup>49</sup> Mason A. Green, *Springfield, 1636-1886* (Springfield: C. A. Nichols, 1888), 404-406.

<sup>50</sup> Lyford, ed., *History of Concord*, 51.

<sup>51</sup> Charles W. Brewster, *Rambles About Portsmouth* (Portsmouth: C. W. Brewster, 1859), 344.

<sup>52</sup> "Ornamental Trees," *Eastern Argus* 27 (17 May 1831): 2.

*Hillhouse of New Haven*

The philanthropy of elms could be expansive. In the case of New Haven, elm-giving transformed the face of the city, and at a relatively early date. No man would play a greater role in shaping the identity of New Haven, or contribute more to its emergence as one of the most celebrated cities in nineteenth-century America than James Hillhouse. A boyhood friend of the patriot Nathan Hale and a commander of the Governor's Guard during the Revolution, Hillhouse was one of Connecticut's leading men in early decades of independence. He had represented Connecticut in the United States Senate, and for fifty years was the treasurer of Yale College. But it was as a planter of elms that Hillhouse achieved a modicum of immortality.

American elms had been planted in New Haven as early as 1685, when William Cooper contributed a pair of elm saplings to the Reverend James Pierpont's new home. But it was not until 1759 that a more extensive planting effort took place. In that year, Jared Eliot observed that "in New Haven they have planted a range of trees all around the market place and secured them from the ravages of beasts." Eliot himself would have preferred mulberry trees to the elms and buttonwoods which were set out, as the former possessed economic value as the food source for silkworms. Nevertheless, he commended the effort as "an undertaking truly generous and laudable."<sup>53</sup> And although the identity of responsible party has been lost, the 1759 planting set an early example in New Haven. The trees grew rapidly, and granted sufficient stature by the Revolution that they may even have helped save the town. Apocrypha holds that during the British invasion of New Haven in July 1779, General Garth refrained from leveling the town because he was so moved by its sylvan beauty; "it is too pretty to burn," he concluded, and defied his orders to bring ruin upon the scene.<sup>54</sup> By 1781, the elms already had begun to distinguish New Haven as "the most beautiful town in New England if not in all America."<sup>55</sup>

But this was as nothing compared to the transformations that were to come. In the heady aftermath of the Revolution, New Haven strove to raise its stature as a center of commerce and culture, and sought parity with its competitors Boston, New York and Philadelphia. With incorporation as a city in 1784 came a renewed enthusiasm for public improvement,

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<sup>53</sup> Jared Eliot, "Essay on Tree Planting," in Franklin Bowditch Dexter, "New Haven in 1784" (1884), quoted in George Dudley Seymour, *New Haven* (New Haven: Privately printed, 1942), 82.

<sup>54</sup> Henry Howe, "New Haven's Elms and Green," a scrapbook of his articles from the *New Haven Daily Morning Journal and Courier* (1883-1884), Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University, 1.

<sup>55</sup> Samuel Peters, *General History of Connecticut* (London: 1781), quoted in Seymour, *New Haven*, 83.

and a general “consciousness that the place had entered upon a new order.”<sup>56</sup> Lacking the resources to underwrite projects, the upstart city appealed instead to the largess of its leading citizens. One of the new municipality’s first official acts was to urge “any gentleman who might agree to defray the expense” to oversee the fencing of the Green.<sup>57</sup> James Hillhouse had himself urged the city leaders to set aside money for improvement of the Green, but later realized that such funds would have to be raised from private sources. He did this by circulating a subscription in the spring of 1786. The document, signed by seventeen of New Haven’s leading men, raised funds for the planting of a “Row of Elms” on the lower part of the Green.<sup>58</sup>

Several years later, Hillhouse engaged in an even more ambitious planting campaign, this time focusing on the newly-built Temple Street. The building of this thoroughfare, which passed through the Green itself, had been authorized by the Common Council in the spring of 1787, at Hillhouse’s request. Following its completion in 1792, Hillhouse led an effort to plant elms, at 40-foot intervals, along the entire length of the 105-foot-wide thoroughfare.<sup>59</sup> The initiative was not entirely free from personal gain; the original northern extension of Temple Street, later renamed Hillhouse Avenue, ran through extensive Hillhouse holdings, much of which he later developed. Philanthropy here likely took place with a keen eye toward later speculative development. After he returned from Washington around 1810, Hillhouse had begun developing much of his property, and built Hillhouse Avenue into the city’s most exclusive residential street.

But Hillhouse also caused elms to be planted on streets far from land he owned, personally and by example. Collectively, his actions between 1786 and 1800 became known as the “Great Planting,” for they established the trees by which New Haven would one day achieve world fame.<sup>60</sup> Hillhouse rallied the citizenry and led a popular movement to plant elms around the city. “He set the little town . . . agog by his labors,” wrote Henry Howe; children were “aroused and helped him,” boys as well as girls. The children who assisted the Great Planting, many decades later, would themselves be celebrated within New Haven society for their small role in the greening of the city. The roster of young tree-planters included a future president of Yale College, and Henry Baldwin, who decades later as a

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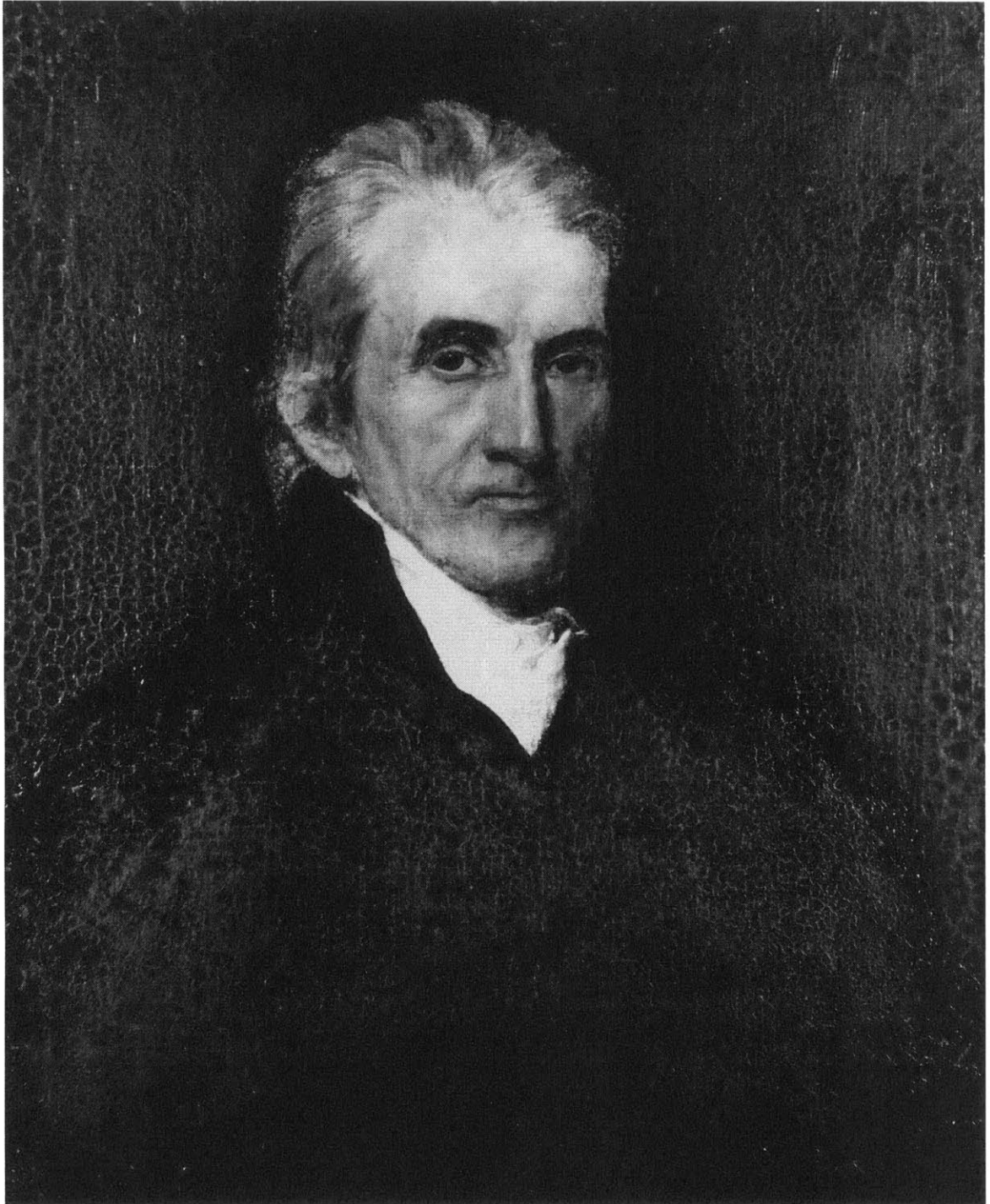
<sup>56</sup> George Dudley Seymour, *New Haven* (New Haven: Privately printed, 1942), 84.

<sup>57</sup> Quoted in Seymour, *New Haven*, 84. This motion was likely a response to appeals by Hillhouse himself.

<sup>58</sup> James Hillhouse, “Subscription to Set Trees—upon Green,” 6 April 1786, James Hillhouse MSS No. 117 Box 1 Folder D, New Haven Colony Historical Society.

<sup>59</sup> Howe, “New Haven’s Elms and Green,” 3.

<sup>60</sup> Seymour, *New Haven*, 84.



**Figure 45.** Portrait of James Hillhouse by John Vanderlyn. Courtesy Yale University Art Gallery.

United States Supreme Court Justice would boast “I held many an elm while Hillhouse shoveled in the earth.”<sup>61</sup>

In the decades following the Great Planting, Hillhouse continued to serve as a vigilant steward of the city’s elms, replacing saplings which had withered or failed to thrive.<sup>62</sup> Often he planted much larger specimens. In 1810 Hillhouse supervised the planting of a series of elms on the west side of Temple Street which were a foot in diameter, thirty to forty feet tall and shorn of branches—“in other words,” wrote Henry Howe, “huge forking poles with attached roots.” Remarkably, the unlikely transfers soon burst into verdure and, by 1883, had become “monarchs trees under whose grateful shades [we] are but too happy to walk.”<sup>63</sup> Hillhouse also contributed to the emendation of New Haven by initiating the development of Grove Street Cemetery in 1796, the earliest example of the rural cemetery movement that would produce such landmarks as Mt. Auburn in Cambridge, Massachusetts and Greenwood in Brooklyn, New York.<sup>64</sup>

### *Early Municipal Action*

It would be decades before a municipality engaged in such an expansive act of urban forestification as occurred at New Haven. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, town and municipal governments in New England did occasionally engage in elm planting, but examples are rare. Efforts sanctioned or initiated by the selectmen of a town or city officials were often substantially financed or carried out by private individuals. One of the earliest recorded instances of municipal involvement took place in Portland, Maine, and was itself a public-private initiative. In 1798, Portland silversmith Joseph Holt Ingraham purchased a large tract of land which he subdivided into houselots and sold. He presented a strip of land to the town for a new street, which the selectmen agree to build. On Ingraham’s petition (and “accompanied by the promise to rebate all claims for damage”), the selectmen “laid out for the use of the town of Portland a town or private way” to be called State Street.<sup>65</sup> The street was in effect a gift to the town, and the town in turn stepped forward to ornament the new municipal thoroughfare with elms.

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<sup>61</sup> Howe, “New Haven’s Elms and Green,” 7-8. Baldwin was nominated by Andrew Jackson in 1830 and served on the courts of John Marshall and Roger B. Taney. See “U. S. Supreme Court Justices: Historical List,” <http://norton3.wwwnorton.com/lowi/docs/hist-sc-justices.html>.

<sup>62</sup> Seymour, *New Haven*, 87.

<sup>63</sup> Howe, “New Haven’s Elms and Green,” 2

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 3. See also Stanley French, “The Cemetery as Cultural Institution: The Establishment of Mt. Auburn and the ‘Rural’ Cemetery Movement,” *American Quarterly* 26 (March 1974): 37-59.

<sup>65</sup> Portland Town Records (1799), in “A Street’s History” (1899), Post Scrapbook, Maine Historical Society, 187.

The entire process appears to have not rested well with some Portland citizens, for reasons which remain a mystery. The town's first effort to plant elms on State Street met with ruin one night at the hands of unknown vandals. A notice published by the selectmen in the *Portland Gazette* on October 18, 1800—entitled “TWENTY DOLLARS REWARD”—called for the arrest of the “evil minded person or persons” who “wantonly injured most of the Trees that have been lately set out in, and as an ornament to, State Street, by cutting round them.”<sup>66</sup> The girdled trees were presumably replaced shortly after; by the end of the century State Street was described as the pride of Portland, its elms “mighty monarchs” which arched over the street, “whose overhanging branches embower it in foliage.”<sup>67</sup>

Combined public and private initiative brought spatial beauty to Cambridge Common in Massachusetts. An initial attempt in 1823, “to make certain improvements on the Common . . . by setting out trees,” never got past a committee of selectmen appointed to mull the matter over.<sup>68</sup> A second effort several years later proved more successful. On June 5, 1830, a panel of private citizens were “authorized and empowered, at their own expense” to secure a number of physical improvements to the Common, including the installation of an enclosing fence and planting its perimeter with elms.<sup>69</sup> Though sanctioned and encouraged by the selectmen, the fiscal responsibility of this civic embellishment was clearly “met by private contributions.”<sup>70</sup>

There were instances of more purely municipal activity, too. The mayoral administration of Josiah Quincy, Sr., brought a flood of municipal verdure to Boston Common in the 1820s.<sup>71</sup> Tree-planting there was pursued with such vigor that by 1838 some complained that the space had become overgrown (“We do not need the whole Common as a mere *parasol*,” wrote one critic).<sup>72</sup> One of the first extensive municipal efforts to plant trees in New Haven occurred in 1839, carrying forward the work begun by James Hillhouse years

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<sup>66</sup> “Twenty Dollars Reward,” *Portland Gazette* (20 October 1800): 3.

<sup>67</sup> Edward H. Elwell, *Portland and Vicinity* (Portland: Loring, Short & Harmon, 1881), 60.

<sup>68</sup> Quoted in Lucius R. Paige, *History of Cambridge* (Boston: H. O. Houghton and Company, 1877), 236.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.

<sup>70</sup> Lewis M. Hastings, *The Streets of Cambridge: An Account of their Origin and History* (Cambridge: City of Cambridge, 1921), 27-28.

<sup>71</sup> Shurtleff, *Topographical and Historical Description of Boston* (1872), 330.

<sup>72</sup> Nehemiah Adams, *Boston Common, or Rural Walks in Cities* (Boston: George H. Light, 1838; Bostonian Society edition), 51. Adams went on to point out that “there is something repugnant in the figure which represents a common, or parks, as the *lungs* of a city; but it will at least be congruous (if this be any apology) with that figure, to say, that every superfluous tree in the centre of the Common is a *tubercle*.”

before.<sup>73</sup> In 1840, the selectmen of Manchester, New Hampshire, laid out that city's principal thoroughfare, Elm Street, which measured one hundred feet wide, with twelve feet reserved on each side for sidewalks and a ten-foot wide island in the center planted with a single column of elms.<sup>74</sup>

These were, however, isolated actions. It was not until late in the nineteenth century that municipalities began to assume full responsibility for the care and upkeep of street trees and the urban forest, superceding the earlier activities of philanthropic individuals, speculative developers, and improvement societies. In New Haven, the 1839 municipal planting was the last major effort to plant trees there for many decades.<sup>75</sup> In Cambridge, street tree planting gradually emerged as a municipal concern only in the 1880s, as part of a general broadening of municipal responsibility for the streetscape. But before it could concern itself with planting street trees, the city of Cambridge had to first wrestle back from private hands the edges of the streets themselves.

There was no shortage of elms in Cambridge, as the city was known both for the Washington Elm and streets and avenues well-endowed with trees. Cambridge became a city in 1846, and within twenty years would be among the forty largest cities in America.<sup>76</sup> Settled in the early seventeenth century, it was rich with architectural landmarks, sacred places, and historic trees. These were an eclectic collection. Some, like the Washington and Whitefield Elms, had inadvertently become street trees long after being set out on the Common to shelter livestock. The elms of Cambridge represented the accumulated actions of dozens of players, most of whom remain nameless, their deeds eluding scribe and antiquarian. For others, like Thomas Brattle, history has been kinder: upon returning from England after the Revolution, Brattle "planted a long walk of trees for the especial benefit of the students," along the street which would later bear his name; there the students "might take their exercise sheltered from the sun."<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Many of the 150 trees set out by the city that year were maples, a reaction to a canker worm attack on the elms the year before. See Seymour, *New Haven*, 87.

<sup>74</sup> Fifteen years later, the last of these trees died, the result of poisoning from leaky gas lines under the street. See *Manchester: A Brief Record of Its Past and a Picture of Its Present* (Manchester: John B. Clarke, 1875), 67-68.

<sup>75</sup> George Dudley Seymour referred to the 1839 action as "the last considerable planting." Seymour, *New Haven*, 87.

<sup>76</sup> Henry C. Binford, *The First Suburbs: Residential Communities on the Boston Periphery, 1815-1860* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 12.

<sup>77</sup> T. C. Amory, *Old Cambridge and New* (Boston: J. R. Osgood, 1871), 21.

As in other New England towns and cities, many Cambridge elms were planted by real estate developers, beginning with the early in-town “residential suburbs” such as Cambridgeport and East Cambridge. Between 1811 and 1873, a number of old Cambridge estates were subdivided into house lots for occupation and sale, creating more than 18 miles of new streets.<sup>78</sup> Elms were often set out in front of the new homes by speculative developers seeking to attract buyers; the streets they created and adorned were later accepted by the city as part of the municipal infrastructure. Broad new avenues were developed around 1810 by Andrew Craigie and the Lechmere Point Corporation. Considered “a great public improvement,” such arrow-straight thoroughfares as Cambridge Street provided quick access to the Charles River and Boston, and were likely also flanked by trees.<sup>79</sup>

On many Cambridge streets, just who owned this eclectic collection of trees, and the ground they were planted on, became a matter of dispute. The absence of accurate surveys and lack of enforcement on the part of the town encouraged, over the decades, “boundary creep” on many Cambridge streets. By the 1830s, private encroachment into the public space of the streets had become a serious matter, particularly given the rapid growth of the township and increasing traffic loads on its roads and streets. Battling encroachment became a central concern of the town, and would occupy the city’s stewards for years after 1846. Reclaiming the public rights-of-way was an issue for almost every mayoral administration in the city’s early years. The new city government literally entered a truf battle, and had to prove its ability to act on behalf of the public.

In 1836 the town of Cambridge authorized the selectmen to conduct a street-by-street survey and prepare “a plan with the streets properly defined as now laid out.”<sup>80</sup> The surveyor enlisted to carry out this work, James Hayward, made his way about town and took careful note of all encroachments, recording the names of perpetrators and the measure of their infraction. Needless to say, this won him few friends, particularly as it took aim at some of the wealthiest and most influential Cantabrigians. The truly public ways—streets laid out or adopted by the town as public thoroughfares—posed little problem. Another matter altogether involved those streets that were in actuality *private*, and had been “devoted by individual or associated proprietors” of the adjacent property to public use.<sup>81</sup> In some

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<sup>78</sup> Hastings, *The Streets of Cambridge*, 35.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 28-29.

<sup>81</sup> James Hayward, *Report of the Survey of the Roads in Cambridge* (Cambridge: Metcalf, Torry & Ballou, 1838), 3.

cases, a corporation was granted a temporary charter to develop a certain thoroughfare, and failed to restrict development from creeping into the public right-of-way. Causeway Street (now Main Street) in Cambridgeport, leading to the West Boston bridge, had been laid out in the 1790s by the proprietors of the West Boston Bridge. This corporation had been authorized to “take and hold this land for a road, and for no other purpose.” The broad thoroughfare, originally laid out 100 feet wide, was to revert to public ownership at the expiration of the charter. “It would therefore seem the duty of this corporation,” pointed out Hayward, “to preserve this road-way entire; to protect it from every encroachment.” Instead, he discovered that the “infidelity or remissness of this corporation” resulted in a thoroughfare hemmed in by accretions throughout its length; “in some places . . . there is not room for a suitable side walk.”<sup>82</sup>

Other streets were fully in private hands, laid out by developers such as Andrew Craigie. Medford Street was one—a thoroughfare which, in the 1830s, had not yet been officially accepted by the town. While free use of such ways by the public had been assured by the original proprietors, individual property owners who purchased land adjacent often challenged the authority of the town. The lingering perception of the street as entirely private space made enforcement of the easement difficult. In response, Hayward reminded the owners that the street had in fact been “. . . laid out and devoted to the public, by the *proprietors*, in the early arrangement of the streets in the lower part of Cambridgeport parish.”

Lots were sold bordering upon it, and giving the grantees a special interest or property in it, besides the general devotion of the street to public use, and the record to that effect placed in the public registry. There is little doubt that the right to have this street preserved from encroachment may be legally vindicated.<sup>83</sup>

Such private streets were, in Hayward’s view, “part of the public commons and the property of the town.”<sup>84</sup> By the turn of the century, most were in fact accepted or adopted by the city, and became part of the municipal street system—a move meant chiefly to eliminate potential municipal liability for accidents on private thoroughfares that were often in poor repair.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Hayward, *Report*, 6-7

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>85</sup> See City of Cambridge, *Mayor’s Address . . . [and] Annual Reports made to the City Council* (Cambridge: Allen and Farnham, 1862), 16.

Encroachment into the actual carriageways was a serious enough problem; but even more encumbered upon were the spaces flanking the main roadbed—the side paths or foot walks. This was contested soil. Responsibility for such space was unclear, and many property owners assumed that here lay free land for the taking. “There seems to be an opinion prevailing,” Hayward reported, “that the borderers on the public roads have an unlimited control over all that part of the highway which is not occupied by the carriage path.”<sup>86</sup> Owners of adjacent properties exploited these marginal zones, quietly augmenting their domains by erecting fences, porches, small out-buildings and other accretia. They also planted trees in the side paths, paradoxically embellishing the public thoroughfare while diminishing its actual extent. Again, Hayward found himself fighting for the public interest. “The truth is,” he remarked, “that the public, rather than the borderers, are mainly interested in the width, regularity, and suitable construction of the side path. And as the public have the right as well as the interest, it is proper that the subject should be under their control.”

Many people, on the contrary, seem to suppose that the side walk is the exclusive property of the owner of the bordering estate, and that if his neighbor is allowed to have a ten feet walk, he has certainly a right to a five feet walk, because, indeed, he takes but half as much of the highway.

“And, in pursuance of this notion,” Hayward added, the rogue borderer often set a row of trees “. . . in the very centre of what ought to be a public walk; as though the *sole* or *principal* object of a public way were the accommodation of teams and carriages, while the comfort and safety of men and women are entirely overlooked.”<sup>87</sup>

Hayward had no objection to the trees themselves; he only objected to their use as agents of privatization. Indeed, he understood the great value of street trees, and considered them essential to the good streetscape. Hayward had emphasized the importance of expansive streets to facilitate the smooth flow of traffic, check the spread of fire, and “afford a freer circulation and a purer state of the air in the warm season.” But he also argued for wide streets because they provided “opportunity for planting their borders with trees, which, being in themselves an ornament, and an additional security against the spread of conflagration, afford in summer a comfortable shade to the house which they adorn, and the passengers who walk the streets, and tend to the greater health of the community by their effects on the atmosphere.”<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Hayward, *Report*, 14.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>88</sup> Hayward quoted in Hastings, *The Streets of Cambridge*, 28-29.

Well aware that struggles for space on the streets of Cambridge could go one for years, Hayward also seemed to understand that the act of planting trees *by the town or municipality* would send a clear message as to who retained ownership and authority over the streetscape. An orderly column of elms would not only be “in themselves an ornament,” but scratch a sylvan line in the sand and clearly mark the limits of private encroachment. Toward this end he recommended that “an *agency* on the subject of the public roads,” be appointed—the “special discretion” or jurisdiction of which would be “the public commons, and the margins and side walks of the streets.” In to the hands of such a body—a “Board of Commissioners of Streets”—should be placed “the entire control of the roads generally, and all questions relating to their construction, and to the character and details of any improvements . . .” It “should keep themselves informed of the precise boundaries of the streets, and should be instructed to resist, in the beginning, every encroachment upon, or any irregular or inconvenient interference with, the public highway.” And finally, the Board would retain the authority—and be duty bound—to “prescribe, in any street where improvements of the kind were to be made, the *precise line* upon which trees might be planted . . .”<sup>89</sup>

The City of Cambridge inherited the town’s struggle for the streets, and sought to act on many of Hayward’s recommendations. In his inaugural address, the city’s first mayor stressed that “the subject of public roads is one of great importance, and will require no small portion of your attention.”<sup>90</sup> Prior to 1846, care of public thoroughfares rested in the hands of the Warden of the Almshouse, for no other reason than “much of the labor on the roads could be advantageously performed by paupers.” In the city’s second year of operation, it was decided that a Superintendent of Streets be “annually elected by the City Council.”<sup>91</sup> Even though for the first few years appropriations for streets would still be shared with the almshouse, creation of this office was a step toward Hayward’s vision of a discrete agency with broad responsibility for the city’s thoroughfares.

The annual *Reports* of the City of Cambridge from the municipality’s early decades reveal a gradual expansion of responsibility and action regarding street improvement. At first the city was concerned mainly with pragmatic issues of paving, drainage and lighting; but

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<sup>89</sup> Hayward, *Report*, 15.

<sup>90</sup> City of Cambridge, *Address of the Mayor, Upon the First Organization of the City Government* (Cambridge: Andrew Reid, 1846), 10-11.

<sup>91</sup> City of Cambridge, *The Mayor’s Address at the Organization of the City Government, and Reports of the Committee on Finance, and the School Committee of the City of Cambridge* (Cambridge: John Ford, 1847), 9-10.

eventually its interests broadened to include matters of aesthetic and spatial emendation. This also reflected a growing interest on the part of the citizenry. “If I mistake not,” observed the mayor in 1848, “there is one matter in which there is great unanimity in the wishes of the people; namely, a more thorough improvement in some of our streets, as well in the foot-ways, as in the carriage-ways.” He urged “every good citizen” to “readily restore to the public what he has temporarily enjoyed by its forbearance,” and removed whatever constructions they had built into the street.<sup>92</sup>

By mid-century, real progress was being made. Encroachments were being removed at a brisk pace, and the residents proved, for the most part, cooperative.<sup>93</sup> Restoration of the flanks of Broadway and Hampshire Streets was complete by 1849. In his annual address to the City Council that year, the mayor reported that the majority of property owners bordering these principal thoroughfares appeared to be “fully reconciled to the change”—even “those who thought they were called to make the greatest sacrifice.” In fact, the mayor added, “they have lost nothing in point of room about their buildings.” For “what has been taken from the yards in front of their dwellings, they enjoy in the ample foot-walks; and when these, extending, of equal width, in a uniform line, through the whole length of these wide streets, *shall be shaded by forest trees* [emphasis added], the alterations made will be pronounced not only public improvements, but private benefits; and every estate will be enhanced in value by the improvement of the whole.”<sup>94</sup> The municipal elm, an agent of the city’s burgeoning authority, was now also a gesture of reconciliation.

Municipal planting also responded to the same spirit of improvement which spawned the village improvement societies. The mayor himself challenged the city fathers and the citizenry to pursue the ideals of beauty which had in the past distinguished Cantabrigia, “our village city”; “the spirit of public improvement,” he urged, “has slumbered too long.”<sup>95</sup> In the following decades the city appropriated increasing amounts of money toward improvement of the streetscapes. Carriageways were paved, drainage was improved, and street lamps installed. Improvement focused on the street edges too. In 1851 it was reported that “a good beginning has been made in constructing side-walks for the convenience and safety of foot-passengers.” Indeed, “there is scarcely any class of

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<sup>92</sup> City of Cambridge, *Mayor’s Address* (Cambridge: John Ford, 1848), 4-5.

<sup>93</sup> City of Cambridge, *Mayor’s Address* (Cambridge: John Ford, 1849), 7.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-8.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 8-9.

expenditures where the same amount of money would benefit so many persons.”<sup>96</sup> Older informal side paths, once contested space, were upgraded into sidewalks of gravel or wood plank. Emphasis on the improvement of the street edge also meant planting trees. An increasing portion of money earmarked for sidewalk improvement went toward purchasing, setting, watering, pruning and trimming trees—line items which appear consistently in municipal budget reports after 1850.

Following the Civil War came new calls for tree planting and spatial beautification, as well as a growing appreciation for the progress made—and indications that the coming of industrialization could threaten what earlier generations had worked hard to achieve. Trees were called for the section of Main Street closest to Boston, “which in a few years would greatly improve this main entrance to the City.”<sup>97</sup> In 1869 the mayor called for “a certain number of shade-trees [to] be planted each year on the borders of such streets as are not so favored.”<sup>98</sup> Declared the mayor in 1871, “Our city is a magnificent park of itself, growing more beautiful every year by the embellishment secured by the combined and reciprocal influence of private wealth and public improvement.” He urged all Cantabrigians to “spare our ancient and historic trees” and “plant new ones in our streets.” In this way, “private enterprise will soon imitate our example, and make our goodly city, what it is fast becoming, the most desirable place for a residence in all our land.”<sup>99</sup>

### *Birth of the Municipal Forest*

The planting and care of street trees emerged as a legitimate municipal responsibility as part of a general modernization of the streetscape in the late nineteenth century. New England cities such as Cambridge, New Haven Portland and Springfield underwent rapid development in the wake of the Civil War, and their populations burgeoned with immigration from Europe and elsewhere. With the growth stimulated by industrial urbanization came increased traffic and a demand for urban thoroughfares that could withstand heavy use by new forms of transportation. The horsecar and electric trolley combined with other urban technological innovations to dramatically change the appearance and complexity of the city street.

The meandering path of the village and the dusty town lane was replaced by the modern street, an increasingly complex piece of infrastructure which carried the life lines of the

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<sup>96</sup> City of Cambridge, *Mayor's Address* (Cambridge: John Ford, 1851), v.

<sup>97</sup> City of Cambridge, *Mayor's Address* (Cambridge: Welch, Bigelow, and Company, 1868), 9.

<sup>98</sup> City of Cambridge, *Mayor's Address* (Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1869), 18.

<sup>99</sup> City of Cambridge, *Mayor's Address* (Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1871), 26.

modern metropolis. The antebellum street, with its vague boundary between public and private, grassy margin and unpaved surface, had become by the 1870s a machine in its own right, a conduit for buried wires, gas lines and sewer pipes, and rail trackage, with telegraph, power lines and street lamps overhead. Elms and oxcarts no longer ruled the scene.

The complexity of the modern street demanded intensive management. As the various urban infrastructure were owned and operated by numerous private companies (often in competition with one another) responsibility for overall coordination of the streetscape fell to the municipalities. The increasingly complex matrix of pipes and wires in ground and overhead—as well as new concerns over municipal liability—transformed the act of planting a street tree. What once required faith and a spade, now called upon the coordination of multiple urban systems. The earliest trees on town streets were simply placed on the margins of the unpaved thoroughfares. Images of city streets from mid century often show mature elms planted decades earlier growing in the carriageway itself, often several feet from the sidewalks (“street” trees in the literal sense). New construction in this period began to incorporate the tree into the sidewalk itself, moving it out of the roadbed, which were themselves beginning to be “macadamized.” In Portland in 1833, trees were already being “planted in breaks of the curbstone of the side walks—or in small openings left in the bricks.”<sup>100</sup> An image of Cambridge Street from 1865 shows newly-constructed sidewalk, with grassy berm and robust young elms; the once-contested street edge had evolved into a carefully managed strip of urban space.

Management of street trees, and care of the urban forest in general, had become, by century’s end, an expanding area of municipal activity. In the view of William F. Fox, author of an early manual on municipal forestry, “the planting and care of street trees belongs to the city government as much as street paving.” In Massachusetts, municipal control over the urban forest was codified by legislation passed in 1890. Chapter 196 of the Laws of 1890 in effect made all trees within the public domain part of a new municipal forest, stipulating that “the mayor and aldermen of cities and selectmen of towns are authorized to designate and preserve trees in highways for ornament and shade, not less than one tree in every thirty-three feet and of one inch or more” in diameter. Subsequent legislation, passed in 1899 and aimed at towns, stipulated that “every town shall at its annual meeting for the election of town officers elect a tree warden,” whose responsibilities would include “care and control of all the public shade trees” with the exception of those in

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<sup>100</sup> “Public Improvement,” *Daily Advertiser* (29 May 1833): 2.

public parks (which fell under the jurisdiction of the parks department).<sup>101</sup> The equivalent of the tree warden in the larger municipalities was the city forester.

In Cambridge, custody of the streetscape forest was the jurisdiction of the Street Department until 1894, when an ordinance transferred this responsibility to the Park Commissioners. The *Report of the General Superintendent of Parks* that year provided a retrospective on the city's street-bound trees, the first extended discussion in the municipal record of the Cambridge urban forest. It was a celebration of the resource, but also a call to arms and an appeal to secure more funding from the city for this new area of Park Commission responsibility. "How much our city is indebted to its trees," the author wrote, "not merely in the matter of adornment but for utilitarian reasons as well, it would be difficult to state."

Cambridge territory, in contrast to some of the neighboring cities and towns, has few natural opportunities for fine landscape effects; but in the extent and beauty of its foliage and in its magnificent specimens of native trees, our city, in the past, has offered an attraction to homebuilders which has been no small factor in the city's growth.<sup>102</sup>

"While we would search in vain upon the assessors' lists of public property for an inventory of the shade trees," the writer continued, "it would not be a difficult task to show that, collectively, these trees are among the most valuable of the municipal properties." But the urban forest inherited by the Park Commission in 1894 was in sorry shape. The report criticized past wardens of the city for having neglected so critical a facet of municipal management. That urban forestry "should have been made an adjunct of the strictly mechanical business of road building, shows that the governing powers in the past have been largely indifferent in the matter of shade tree cultivation. Indeed, the city corporation has done but little to foster our shade trees, and that little has been done without system." The Report acknowledged that the canopied streets of Cambridge owed no small debt to numerous individual spade-wielding citizens. It praised the "valuable services rendered in the past by the numberless citizens who, although without 'the power to charm a listening world,' have given individual effort to tree culture upon our public streets, and have never failed in voice or act, to come to the defence of our leafy inheritance."<sup>103</sup>

But times had changed.

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<sup>101</sup> William F. Fox, *Tree Planting On Streets and Highways* (Albany: J. B. Lyon, 1903), 206-207.

<sup>102</sup> *Report of the General Superintendent of Parks* (Cambridge: City of Cambridge, 1894), 71.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 71-72.

The hard conditions of ‘congested’ urban life are coming upon us. Gradually the surface of Cambridge is being encrusted with macadam and bricks; the lawns which separated the buildings from the sidewalks are disappearing in the yawning cellars of modern structures; apartment houses rise above the tree-tops; electric-light wires wither and kill the foliage above, while escaping gases suffocate the roots beneath. In the earth, on the surface, and above, the enemies of shade trees increase at an alarming rate, with the increase of city conditions.

Thoughtless owners of horses abound, who allow the appetite of a fifty-dollar animal to destroy a thousand-dollar tree. The axe of the road builder becomes more terrible than ever the ‘woodman’s axe,’ because directed by official hands; the change in the grades of streets, so often and so mysteriously decreed, is a sentence of death to many a mighty monarch of the ancient Cambridge forest. Ungainly telephone poles are substituted for living trees, and are planted with all the ceremony which city orders and ordinances can command . . . monuments of the trees which were removed without thought or care.<sup>104</sup>

The emergence of “city conditions” made it evident that “individual efforts, however manfully maintained” were no longer adequate to meet the needs of stewardship. “However valuable individual effort has been in the past,” the report argued, “it is evident that the time has come when the matter of tree culture upon our public streets . . . must be a municipal enterprise.” Care of this arboreal inheritance, and its perpetuation, required the “systematic effort of an organized department of the city works,” lest Cambridge, “noted for her abundance and beauty of foliage . . . descend to the list of nearly barren cities.”<sup>105</sup>

Philanthropy may have created a priceless inheritance, but it did not necessarily meet the aesthetic standards of modern urban design. In the past, uncoordinated private action led to a haphazard collection of street trees; however beautiful, the urban forest did not conform to new principles of order, symmetry and “good taste.” Systematic official effort was needed “to raise the standard of shade tree culture to the requirements of the more cultivated taste which now prevails in the art of urban forestry.” Indeed, “the rules of city street decoration no longer permit each individual property owner to plant trees how and where he pleases.” Rather, street planting must now be directed “with reference to the street as a whole.”

Already it has been suggested that all architectural work upon a street should be in harmony with a general plan, and that individual tastes would not be permitted to spoil the general landscape effects, by incongruous or eccentric efforts. But the public taste is not yet educated to this standard, and no doubt private rights will be urged long and vigorously before such a standard is reached. In the matter of shade

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 72-73.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 72-73.



**Figure 46.** Municipal elms, Cambridge, Massachusetts, c. 1865.  
Courtesy Cambridge Historical Commission

tree culture, upon the public streets, however, the question of individual rights, cannot reasonably be insisted upon.<sup>106</sup>

In Cambridge and other cities in the late nineteenth century, tree planting became institutionalized as part of the modern urban management enterprise. Urban forestry emerged as part of a larger movement toward scientific management and expertise in the nineteenth-century city, which produced reform movements in education, sanitation and recreation. Like the sanitary engineer and the playground supervisor, the unlikely hybrid known as the urban forester was a product of the modern industrial metropolis. Urban forestry was new area of municipal expertise, “an art requiring special knowledge, cultivated taste and a natural sympathy with plant life,” but also a scientific enterprise.<sup>107</sup>

The central precept of this new rational approach to the urban forest was to impose uniformity of species and spacing in streetscape plantings. In the past, the haphazard efforts of private citizens had favored elms, but often mixed these with other species, such as maples, catalpa, and oaks—some of which were remnants from distant generations. The trees varied widely in age, and were planted arbitrary distances from each other. In Figure 29, the Washington Elm shares the scene with youthful elms on the Common and along the street, and ancient Lombardy poplars in front of a house. While the antiquarian rhapsodized over such a scene, the rational eye of modern urban forestry judged it visually and spatially dissonant. It sought to impose a new standard of formality and rational order on the streetscape. “Good taste,” Cambridge insisted in 1894, “demands the observance of two rules as essential in street tree planting. First, that but one variety of tree be planted upon a street, and, second, that the trees shall be planted at uniform distances.” Craigie Street was praised for its “noble line of elms,” but others were rebuked for having allowed a motley assortment of species to detract from an overall design.<sup>108</sup>

When it came to what single species should be used, the American elm had little competition. In the 1894 report, the Superintendent of Parks recounted the long history of the tree in Cambridge, suggesting that the tree “has claims upon Cambridge above that of any other tree,” and pointing out (incorrectly) that the city still possessed “not a few specimens of native growth . . . whose roots have never been handled.” It recommended that “some of the main highways of the city, such, for example, as Harvard and Magazine Streets, should be devoted entirely to elms, and all the tree work done upon these streets

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 74.

from this time forth should be with the purpose of finally establishing well-matured specimens of *Ulmus Americana* at regular distances throughout their entire length.”<sup>109</sup>

### *The Perfect Urban Tree*

The American elm possessed a remarkable set of physical properties, which, combined, made the tree extraordinarily well suited for urban planting. This was something the visiting Milanese Luigi Castiglioni appreciated in the eighteenth century. Most of these qualities were not immediately evident. Planting an elm was an act of faith, for the sapling tree showed little promise of grace or formal beauty. As one advocate of improvement observed, “no other tree, when young, throws out its arms so free and wild,” a gangle of leaf and limb.<sup>110</sup> But in short time, the elm assumed loft and posture. Its formal and architectural qualities, combined with rapid growth and relative resistance to the strains of the pre-automobile urban environment, rendered it the perfect urban tree.

Elms were tenacious, and could grow in a wide range of soil types. In spite of its preference for the moist, wet soil of bottomlands, the tree tolerated drought and could withstand even prolonged deprivations of water. Elms were hardy, and withstood repeated attacks by insect pests. It was subjected to an increasing number of predators and parasites through the nineteenth century (elm-wilt, the tussock moth and the elm-leaf beetle were just a few of its tormentors), but was rarely killed. Like weeds, elms grew with astounding speed, particularly in a condition of ideal soil and abundant water. Elms afforded their manifold qualities rapidly, an attribute of no small value to an upstart nation perpetually short on time.

Within as little as 15 years a sapling elm could attain sufficient height to provide shade and influence the spatial qualities of a street. In 1847 Downing’s *Horticulturalist* took note of “a gentleman near Albany” who planted elms from seed and “had them twenty-one inches in circumference when only eleven years old.”<sup>111</sup> A later study confirmed that with the sole exception of silver maple, the American elm was the fastest growing of some 20 native trees recommended for street use. A young elm three inches in diameter could attain a diameter of 20 inches in as little as twenty years. Of course, the tree was also relatively short lived, but this was a price willingly paid for rapid maturity.<sup>112</sup> The elm attained

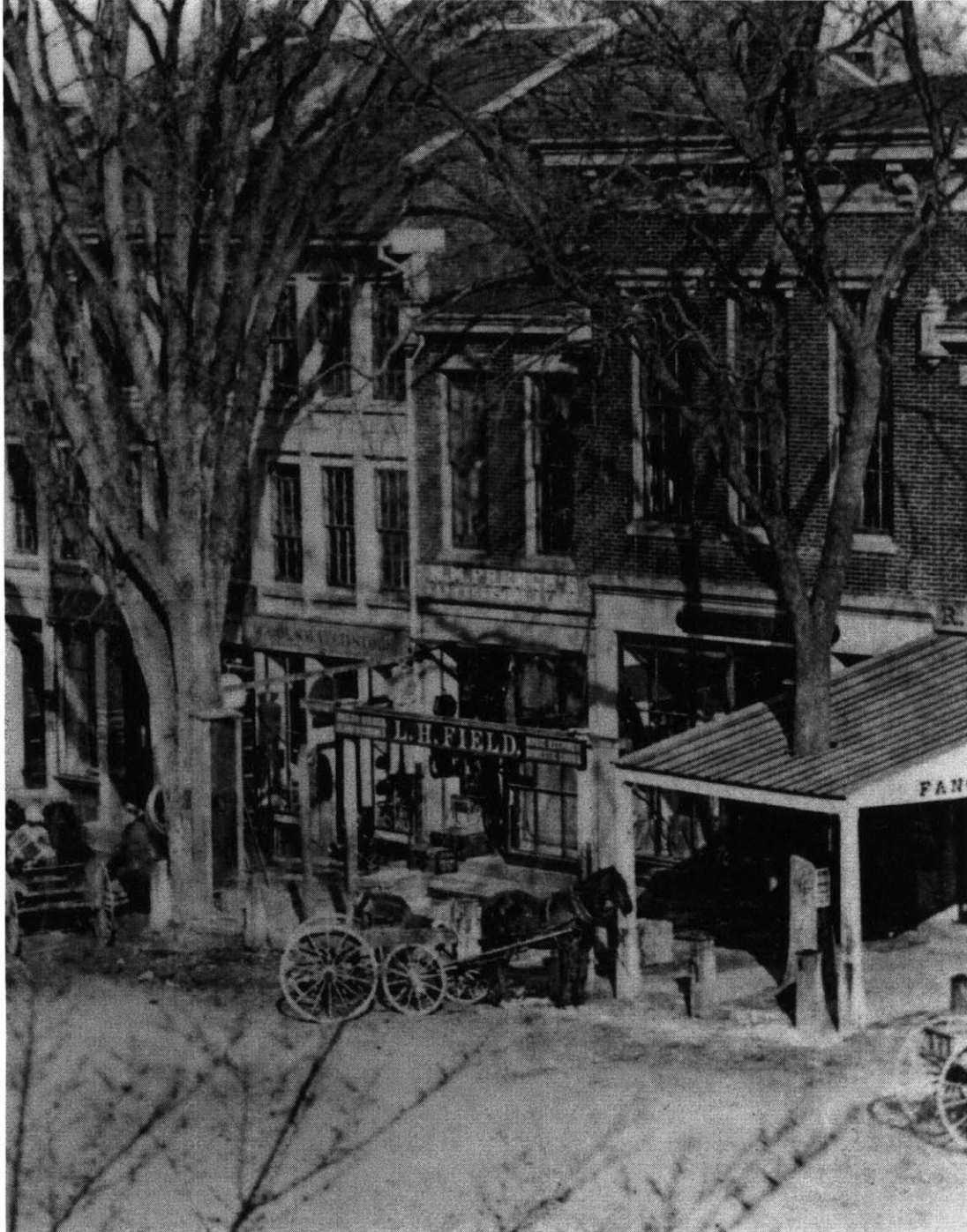
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<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 75-77.

<sup>110</sup> Frank J. Scott, *The Art of Beautifying Suburban Home Grounds*, 3d ed. (New York: American Book Exchange, 1881), 317.

<sup>111</sup> “American Elm,” *The Horticulturalist* 2 (September 1847): 117.

<sup>112</sup> William F. Fox, *Tree Planting On Streets and Highways* (Albany, New York: J. B. Lyon, 1903), 193.



**Figure 47.** Main Street elms. "Shop Row," Northampton, Massachusetts, c. 1865.  
Courtesy Historic Northampton, Northampton, Massachusetts.

presence and stature well within the lifespan of its human benefactor—even if that benefactor was an aging philanthropist.

The elm also possessed formal, architectural qualities which ideally complemented the streetscape. The trunk was erect and did not ramify or branch out until high above the street. The principal limbs and the crown itself was thus lifted well above the street corridor; traffic and building facades were unimpeded by the mass of the tree. Even massive elms on a busy thoroughfare were relatively unobtrusive, as the bulk of the tree rode high above the streetscape, clearing even the powerlines, telegraph wires and streetcar catenary of later decades. The canopy of elms produced not a dense, sun-blocking shade, but a dabbled, broken light. The crown was lifted high enough to allow ambient light to penetrate the space beneath, but the relatively small leaves allowed considerable sunlight to pass through to the ground. Elms provided shade and shelter, but were rarely claustrophobic. As Charles Sprague Sargent noted in *Garden and Forest*, “An avenue of Elms is never sombre, however cool and shadowy it may be. It does not shut out the light and air, but merely tempers them.”<sup>113</sup>

In the New England city, elms afforded a number of benefits. It was recognized that the trees helped purify the air, and were thought to combat “miasmas”; they shielded pedestrians and horses from the summer sun, and to some extent from rain and wind; they were thought to play a role in checking the spread of fire; they were seen as a visual amenity which raised residential property values, and were often planted by developers of the early “streetcar suburbs” to entice potential buyers. Municipalities, in the later decades of the century, understood that well-kept streets served as an indicator of a city’s economic vitality; as in the case of Cambridge, a clean and orderly streetscape also signaled authority on the part of the city, and symbolized a strong and activist government. Indeed, few improvements contributed as dramatically or as quickly to a sense of spatial civic order than columns of elms.

But like most cultural artifacts, elms were multivalenced in their meaning; they signified on a number of planes simultaneously. Even as city elms served eminently pedestrian functions, they also possessed deeper value. A column of elms, thrusting a Medusan fury of limbs high above the marts of trade, represented an interlude of almost sublime beauty in the nineteenth century city—a sight which moved many a pen to praise. Elms in the city

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<sup>113</sup> Charles Sprague Sargent, “An Avenue of Elms,” *Garden and Forest* (19 April 1893): 172.

Campanella, *Republic of Shade*

transcended the quotidian; and they came to symbolize something far greater than the sum of their shade.

EPILOGUE

*A Yankee Urban Pastoral*

“ . . . a kind of compromise between town and country;  
as if each had met the other half-way, and shaken hands upon it.”<sup>1</sup>

The act of planting a tree in the city held special significance in the American context. It did so because of the particular set of attitudes toward cities which had evolved in this country from the earliest settlement period. The relationship between Americans and cities has, throughout United States history, been a tortured and mercurial one. In spite of having built some of the world great urban environments, cities in America have long been regarded as something impure or morally deficient, and antiurban attitudes have proliferated among both intellectuals and the populace at large. Nor did *de facto* urbanization of America in the second half of the nineteenth century do much to change this; if anything, the rapid expansion of the metropolis between 1840 and 1900 seemed to encourage even more vehement reactions against it. As New York and Chicago swelled in size and started to dominate the economic, social and political life of the nation, Americans looked ever more longfully toward nature and their vanishing pastoral heritage. They mourned the passing of an age in which life was governed by the rhythms of the natural world, for a lusty engagement with earth and trees was thought to produce better citizens and more moral men.

*Conflict and Accomodation*

To the founding generation of Americans, cities were associated with the corrupt regimes of the Old World; they were considered a source of tyranny and despotism, prone to mob rule. To be sure, cities were emerging in America in the colonial age; but Philadelphia, New York and even Boston were but mushrooms in the night compared to Paris, London and Vienna. The great cities of Europe were indeed appreciated by educated Americans, who knew these to be the fountainheads of Western culture. Jefferson and Franklin were among the many American intellectuals who reveled in the literary and cultural life of Paris, even as they railed against emulation. American writers and painters, from Washington

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Dickens, “American Notes,” *Works of Charles Dickens*, vol. 2 (New York: Sheldon, 1865), 78.

Allston and James Fenimore Cooper to Nathaniel Hawthorne and Thomas Cole—made similarly appreciative journeys to the great metropolitan centers of Europe, to be tutored by masters and tour landscapes encrusted with the relics of antiquity that America lacked.

But if Jefferson appreciated the Old World metropolis, he also believed that it should remain in Europe. America, with its unspoiled natural splendors and magnificent landscapes, possessed, in the mind of Jefferson and many of his contemporaries, an inheritance far greater than any city. The American project would do well to avoid the dense conurbations of Paris or London, and favor instead an agrarian republic distributed across a vast expanse of virgin land. Jefferson believed that democracy in America would flourish best if the nation remained a republic of the soil, with a sturdy yeomenry tilling the earth, peopling a vast egalitarian grid etched across the land. Jefferson believed deeply in the moral superiority of husbandry and agrarianism. Cities, in the context of the American project, were to Jefferson anathema; they were engines of vice, inherently corrupt entities which produced conformity and suffocated virtue. With crowded streets and feverish mobs, cities added “just so much to the support of pure government,” he wrote in *Notes on Virginia*, “as sores do to the strength of the human body.”<sup>2</sup> In a letter to Benjamin Rush, written on the occasion of a yellow fever outbreak in the coastal cities, Jefferson calmly offered that the event “might at least have the advantage of discouraging the establishment of large urban centers in this country.”<sup>3</sup>

Even if Jefferson’s vision of an agrarian republic was never fully realized, America remained a largely rural nation through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (as late as 1860 more than 75 percent of the population lived outside cities). The cultural outlook of most Americans was, in this period, expectedly anti-urban; cities occupied a relatively minor position in the larger scheme of things, and urban life was completely alien to most people. Rural America was the seat of political power, a fact that was institutionalized in the placement of most state capitals in their geographic center rather than their largest cities—thus assuring that governance would stay out of the hands of urban mobs (the location of the national capital on the Potomac tidal flats rather than in urbane Philadelphia or New York was at least partly motivated by such concerns).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on Virginia*.

<sup>3</sup> Francis Rourke, “Urbanism and American Democracy,” in Alexander B. Callow, ed., *American Urban History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 374.

<sup>4</sup> David Schuyler, *The New Urban Landscape: The Redefinition of City Form in Nineteenth-Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 24.

The skepticism of cities born of Jeffersonian agrarianism gradually devolved into a “dichotomy in American thought” which positioned country and city as irreconcilable opposites.<sup>5</sup> As Perry Miller has written, “The health, the very personality of Americans” became identified with nature, and “therefore set it in opposition to . . . the city.”<sup>6</sup> Unprecedented urban growth beginning around 1840 only exacerbated this tension. Boston, New York, and Philadelphia were receiving thousands of new immigrants from Ireland and Germany, and in New England new industrial centers such as Lowell, Massachusetts, began drawing rural inhabitants away from farm and village. Immigration from within and abroad resulted in extreme congestion and severely crowded living conditions. By the time of the Civil War, it looked as if the “city of the dreadful night”—the Dickensian metropolis of the Old World—was no longer alien to native soil. American intellectuals began to see the emergent city in increasingly harsh light. Hawthorne, Emerson, Thoreau, Melville, and later Henry Adams and Henry James, are among the many American writers who contributed to an “antiurban roar in the national literary pantheon.”<sup>7</sup> Critics looked upon the nineteenth-century city as something of an “urban wilderness,” a realm which substituted artifice for nature, much to the peril of its inhabitants.

The old Jeffersonian antipathy toward cities—which was largely a sociopolitical objection—gained a new and somewhat more abstract dimension. As cities became increasingly crowded and densely built, they in effect drifted further and further from nature and the pastoral landscape, a parting which carried a heavy symbolic load not only from the Jeffersonian perspective, but because nature had become, following the neo-Romanticist environmental awakening, a source of great moral, spiritual and psychological value. If nature was so important for body and soul, then surely its *absence* in the urban environment was something of a liability—the source of “poor health, poor morals, and insanity.”<sup>8</sup>

### *The Quest for Synthesis*

With intensive urban growth after the Civil War, the emphasis on nature as a moral tonic for the urban dweller was joined by a more nostalgic longing for a “lost world” of pastoral

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>6</sup> Perry Miller, “Nature and the National Ego,” in *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1964), 207.

<sup>7</sup> Morton and Lucia White, “The American Intellectual versus the American City,” in Alexander B. Callow, ed., *American Urban History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 353.

<sup>8</sup> Schuyler, *The New Urban Landscape*, 28.

charms and rural life. As David Schuyler has written, “critics had begun to fault the city not only in Jefferson’s political and social terms but because it was not ‘the country.’”<sup>9</sup> This was particularly the case in New England, where large numbers of accomplished urban men and women traced their roots to rural New England farms and villages. As this generation aged and found themselves increasingly surrounded by immigrants from vastly different cultural backgrounds than their own, they began looking backward with moist eyes toward a rural past of simple virtues and cultural hegemony. Keepsakes of that vanished world became treasured. A generation which, in youth, had abandoned the villages of their ancestors, now looked backward with nostalgia, and possessed the means to regain fragments of that past. The popularity of Currier and Ives renderings of rural domesticity, and a surge of interest in tourism and vacation homes were among the manifestations of this longing; whole communities, such as Stockbridge, Massachusetts, reoriented themselves as suppliers of leisure and the charms of rural life. The popularity of the elm in the nineteenth century New England city can also be explained by the tree’s remembered place in the rural childhoods of so many urban New Englanders.

But even if the exclusion of nature and “rural charms” in the city did produce a visceral antiurban reaction on the part of men like Emerson, Thoreau and Adams, it also suggested that, with a calculated intervention, the dilemma might be resolved. The environmental awakening and the “improving impulse” of the 1830s and 1840s, which brought about the village improvement movement and enabled a fresh appreciation of environment and spatial beauty, also led to a conviction that cities could be made better—morally and otherwise—by introducing fragments of the natural world. If the absence of nature in the city was a source of spiritual and corporal impoverishment, then perhaps an infusion of nature into the city would set things right. The urban dweller, sallow-faced and slipping toward moral lapse, might be redeemed by exposure to green things and the edifying influences of rural life. A marriage of nature and the city could be arranged.

As Thomas Bender, David Schuyler, and James Machor have argued, this burgeoning faith in reconciliation has been masked by a scholarly overemphasis on the Manichean aspects of rural-urban dialectic. The traditional focus on country and city as oppositional values “has obscured the fact,” writes Machor, “that an equally significant strain of thought has conceived of the American scene as a place where that dialectic finally could be

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* A good example of this is Henry Adams’ comparison of childhood summers in Quincy, Massachusetts with the Boston of his later life. See Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1918).

synthesized.”<sup>10</sup> Indeed, antagonism toward the city on the part of American intellectuals “formed only part of the artistic response to urbanization” in the nineteenth century.<sup>11</sup> Even Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose writings are often regarded antiurbanist in tone, himself “tended to accept a dichotomy of city and nature not as a conclusion, but as a point of departure”<sup>12</sup> for “the development of an artistic strategy of reconciliation.”<sup>13</sup>

To the romantic urbanist in Jacksonian America, it appeared entirely plausible that an *urban pastoral* could be realized, that a city of artifice could be built in concert with nature—with both city and country mutually gaining from the union. Rather than condemn its burgeoning cities, the American “wished . . . to establish a balance between city and country.”<sup>14</sup> This emphasis on synthesis and reconciliation is to be distinguished from more purely pastoral impulses, which regarded the city as inherently less worthy than the countryside. Urban pastoralism considered city and country as equally necessary and important, and was a fundamentally progressive stance; it combined a nostalgic affection for rusticity and the rural life “with an energetic commitment to future development of the city.”<sup>15</sup>

In a Freudian analysis, the longing to fuse urban and rural is related to the competing forces which alternately repel and attract the individual to society. “To balance these polarizing impulses,” argues Machor, the individual “may choose an alternative” to the solipsism of complete withdrawal-toward-nature; that is, “he may desire to remold the existing society in a way that eliminates or mitigates its oppressive elements and replaces them with others consistent with his wishes.”<sup>16</sup> This struggle between individual and group, Herbert Marcuse has noted, often “generates the wish that the paradise be re-created on the basis of the achievements of civilization.”<sup>17</sup> In the context of nineteenth-century American city, it was understood that an approximation of paradise could be achieved by importing elements of rusticity and nature into the urban environment.

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<sup>10</sup> James L. Machor, *Pastoral Cities: Urban Ideals and the Symbolic Landscape of America* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 5.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 3

<sup>12</sup> Michael H. Cowan, quoted in Thomas Bender, *Toward an Urban Vision: Ideas and Institutions in Nineteenth-Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 14

<sup>13</sup> Bender, *Toward an Urban Vision*, 14.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>15</sup> Machor, *Pastoral Cities*, 9-13.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>17</sup> Herbert Marcuse, quoted in Machor, *Pastoral Cities*, 17.

This emergent faith in reconciliation, in the “ideal of an urban-rural society,” expressed itself through a variety of channels in both popular and high culture.<sup>18</sup> In New England, liminal in so many things, advocates of urban pastoralism arrived early on the scene. Nehemiah Adams, a Boston clergyman with a penchant for romantic prose, was one such champion. In 1838 Adams published a modest volume entitled *The Boston Common, or Rural Walks in Cities*. He signed the book only “A Friend of Improvement,” and included an apologia that implored readers to forgive the slimmness of his volume, and his unworthiness a scribe of such profound themes. He hoped that “limited means of information” would “not fail of performing some humble part in the work of inciting still farther attention to the subject of the improvement of cities with regard to health and enjoyment—the importance of which, he would gladly believe, is every day becoming better understood.”<sup>19</sup>

Adams urged his readers “to accompany us, at least in the imagination, to the Common, and engage with us in a little agreeable conversation as we wander along its noble avenues of trees.” “Let us forsake, for a while, the noisy streets, and the ceaseless hurry of business, for a more quiet sphere of thought; and as we are ourselves children of nature, let us here learn from her the pleasures and the advantages of yielding to her dictates.” On this imagined stroll, the Adams held forth on the spiritual delights of nature, particularly as an ameliorative to the growing density and congestion of the city. “The larger a city is,” Adams reasoned, “the more it ought to be interspersed with gardens and rural scenery”—for “a treeless city is too much like a desert. We feel oppressed, by the monotonous dominion of brick and mortar.”<sup>20</sup>

Man cannot bear to be always shut up from the inspiration of God’s works. He must gaze on green trees, and breathe the breath of fresh flowers; his brow must be fanned by gales that have sped over green forests and fields—or his spirit will be faint within him. Ay, he must bring away garden and grove, and plant them in the very midst of the marts of trade. . .<sup>21</sup>

Indeed, the “marts of trade” would themselves be greatly embellished by the union. “Nowhere is the magnificence of art more imposing than when surrounded by that of nature,” wrote Adams, “It is not degraded by the contrast; it is ennobled.” Boston Common, a “sacred inheritance,” was the gem at the center of his city. Its trees and still-

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<sup>18</sup> For examples, see Bender, *Toward an Urban Vision*, 12-17; Machor, *Pastoral Cities*, 3-16.

<sup>19</sup> Nehemiah Adams, *Boston Common, or Rural Walks in Cities* (Boston: George H. Light, 1838), 7.

<sup>20</sup> Adams, *Boston Common* (1838), 23.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 7; 11-12.

open fields struck an almost divine equilibrium with the built city. The object, then, was to forge a reconciliation, a synthesis of urban and rural.

Who would not rear temples amid groves, and palaces in gardens? Art is naked; but Nature clothes her with the richest drapery. Proud as she may be, she must needs be a borrower of beauty; and her grandest designs must be sculpted with imagery of Nature's more perfect workmanship.<sup>22</sup>

The means of bringing about “temples amid groves” would involve the planting of trees, in “All those streets,” he added, “which will admit of it.”<sup>23</sup>

The clergyman would have applauded the actions of Yankee elm planters like James Hillhouse. Indeed, what Hillhouse and others effectively achieved (for the most part unintentionally), was a regional urban pastoral in which the American elm functioned as the chief symbolic mechanism of concord between city and country. In an era preceding the rural cemetery movement, the Olmsted park, the romantic suburbs and other celebrated nineteenth-century efforts to achieve an urban-rural synthesis, the simple planting of forest trees on city streets was perceived—if not specifically intended—as “a means of bringing the country into the city.”<sup>24</sup> Elm trees came to represent a fragment of native woodland, a keepsake of *rus* domesticated and placed “in the very midst of the marts of trade.”<sup>25</sup> The city of elms seemed to offer hope that the old dichotomy of city and country could be overcome, and that here on Yankee soil a new kind of city—a pastoral city—could be built.

*“A City in a Wood, or a Wood in a City”*

Even if the planter of elms was guided by utterly pragmatic concerns, more transcendent values could—and often were—assigned *post facto* to city elms. As we have seen, in few places was elm planting a coordinated or sustained activity until relatively late in the nineteenth century. The New England streetside elm forest was for the most part an eclectic congregation of trees established by a host of actors, public and private, over the course of many generations. Similarly, in relatively few instances was the motivating impulse for setting out trees clearly stated as so lofty an objective as arranging a marriage of nature and artifice.

In the original subscription James Hillhouse circulated in 1786, inaugurating the elm-planting campaign which would transform New Haven, he proposed that it would “be Very

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 29; 33.

<sup>24</sup> Frederick Noble Evans, *Town Improvement* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1919), 173.

<sup>25</sup> Adams, *Boston Common* (1838), 7; 11-12.

Ornamental as well as Very Beautiful” to set “a row of Elms . . . in Front of the Public Buildings.”<sup>26</sup> Similarly, in his later efforts to establish Grove Street Cemetery—one of the first rural cemeteries in America—he sought to create a place of burial “better calculated to impress the mind with a solemnity becoming the repository of the dead . . .”<sup>27</sup> Such evidence clearly indicates that a certain aesthetic and even metaphysical dimension informed both interventions; and from such evidence it may be inferred that Hillhouse also envisioned a certain union of country and city.

Hillhouse’s own life encompassed both the rural and the urban. His New Haven legal practice and later political career in Philadelphia and Washington made him an urbane and sophisticated man; but for much of his active life his family seat remained a farm on the outskirts of New Haven. He maintained an extensive nursery, stayed abreast of developments in horticulture, and translated parts of François André Michaux’s *Sylva of North America*. Moreover, Hillhouse was keenly interested in agriculture, and could match Jefferson in his rhapsodic evocations of agrarian virtue. “In my Opinion,” he wrote in 1793, agriculture “is most certainly an honorable and useful employment, and in my Opinion more congenial with human happiness than any other in life.” No other pursuit, he argued, made men more independent of the “will and pleasure of our fellow Men,” for “the income of the husbandman seems to be a sort of creation, it grows up out of the earth, and does not lessen the store of our Neighbor, but adds to the common stock . . .” Wrote Hillhouse: “I have often lamented that my circumstances and situation in life did not enable me to devote myself wholly to agricultural pursuits,” an undertaking which he felt “would be . . . more gratifying to my feelings and I believe more conducive to my happiness.”<sup>28</sup> Given his affection for “agricultural pursuits” and his otherwise urban life, the elming of New Haven may well have symbolized for him a synthesis of these competing worlds. His initial effort in setting out elms, in the spring of 1786, itself came only two years after New Haven was declared a city, a change in status which may well have prompted Hillhouse to attempt to maintain a symbolic equilibrium by infusing an element of rural landscape into the nascent metropolis (the elms were pulled from his farm in nearby Meriden).

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<sup>26</sup> James Hillhouse, “Subscription to Set Trees—upon Green,” 6 April 1786, James Hillhouse MSS No. 117 Box 1 Folder D, New Haven Colony Historical Society.

<sup>27</sup> “Records of the Proprietors of the New Burying Ground in New Haven,” 1796, Grove Street Cemetery MSS No. 74 Box 1 Folder K, New Haven Colony Historical Society, 1.

<sup>28</sup> James Hillhouse, Philadelphia, to Henry Lloyd, London, 2 February 1793, Hillhouse Papers, Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University.

Yet even if metaphysics had nothing to do with the original act of planting the trees—in New Haven or elsewhere—reconciliation of city and country was, by the 1850s, a common *perception* of New England’s streetside elms. In other words, regardless of whatever practical reasons may have motivated their planting, many literate observers read in the elms of Cambridge, New Haven, Portland and Springfield a felicitous union of urban and rural. Men like Charles Dickens and Anthony Trollope reveled in the delightful incongruence of “forest giants” on city streets, and understood that these were the agents of a new and distinctly American kind of urbanism. Accounts of elms in New England cities—by Americans and visitors from abroad—make frequent reference to the manner in which the trees seemed to afford a union of landscape and city, and testify to the power and appeal such a union held in the nineteenth century mind.

Concord, capital city of the New Hampshire, was well-endowed with elms by the 1840s; the trees in the city, observed James Silk Buckingham, gave “a fine rural aspect to the whole.”<sup>29</sup> Northhampton, one of the larger towns of central Massachusetts in the 1830s, was described by Edward T. Coke as “the most delightful and enviable place I had ever seen; it is the very realization of a *‘rus in urbe,’* the streets being so thickly planted with trees of a primeval growth that their boughs are almost interwoven across the road, and the neat private dwellings and shops beneath them appear like a series of cottages and gardens.<sup>30</sup> Not far away, the burgeoning city of Springfield impressed A. M. Maxwell in 1840 as a “perfect paradise,” an appearance he largely attributed to streets planted with “rows of majestic and graceful elm-trees on each side.”<sup>31</sup> Springfield’s elms won it the title the “City of Trees.” The view of the city from the Springfield Arsenal provided so fine a prospect of urban-rural felicity that it was reputed to be among the loveliest sights in nineteenth-century New England.<sup>32</sup> As a child in the late nineteenth century, Flora Graves Phelps recalled her astonishment at the scene spread below the Arsenal tower; it seemed incredible “that sometime a bustling city might be located down there in the valley,” for “all that seemed visible . . . was a veritable woodland or forest.”<sup>33</sup>

Portland’s prodigious stock of elms—“the boast of our city and the admiration of strangers”—gave that city, too, an appearance of a *rus in urbe*, as well as the title “Forest

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<sup>29</sup> James Silk Buckingham, *America: Historical, Statistical, and Descriptive* vol. 2 (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1841), 286.

<sup>30</sup> Edward T. Coke, *A Subaltern’s Furlough* (New York: J. & J. Harper, 1833), 190-191.

<sup>31</sup> A. M. Maxwell, *A Run Through the United States* (London: Henry Colburn, 1841), 85

<sup>32</sup> “Arboreal Springfield,” *Progressive Springfield* 2 (June 1891): 11.

<sup>33</sup> Flora Graves Phelps, “Living Room Tales—Springfield Justly Called a City of Trees,” *Springfield Sunday Republican* (April 1924).

City.”<sup>34</sup> “In looking down . . . upon the central parts of the city,” wrote William Willis in the 1860s, “a stranger is surprised by the embowered aspect which is presented to his view—a city in the woods.” To Willis, the “tall and numerous trees” dwarfed the buildings, which seemed “to be nestling in the midst of a forest, through which the lofty spires, the dome of the new City Hall, and some other lofty edifices penetrate and give bold relief to the scene.”<sup>35</sup> The character of this urban pastoral was largely lost in 1866, when fire ravaged the Portland and destroyed hundreds of the city’s finest elms.<sup>36</sup> To David T. Pottinger, Cambridge, Massachusetts, “seemed much more like the country than the city.” Recalling his nineteenth-century boyhood in an essay entitled “I, Too, In Arcadia,” Pottinger described an idyllic pastoral in the very midst of the city—the very essence of an urban-rural synthesis:

One could walk among the aged elms . . . to the junction of Garden Street and Concord Avenue and look up in either direction through a green tunnel of magnificent elms toward the observatory. One autumn afternoon when the late sun shed a golden haze through the heavy trees, I came through the 1886-87 [class] gate and looked down the grassy sidewalks and along the dusty roadway. The only person to be seen in all this glory was a boy leisurely driving a cow ahead of him up Broadway.<sup>37</sup>

#### *Apotheosis at New Haven*

New Haven was the apotheosis of urban pastoralism in antebellum New England, for it was here that the urban elm-forest reached its greatest development. For most of the nineteenth century, New Haven was second only to Boston as a cultural center in New England; and no other city in America had a comparable stock of trees. The elms Hillhouse set out decades earlier had, by mid-century, achieved scale and grandeur, and made New Haven famous around the world. It came to be known as the “City of Elms,” and its fusion of rural and urban values attracted the pens of literate travelers.<sup>38</sup> As early as 1802 Jedidiah Morse, in his *American Universal Geography*, observed of New Haven that “many of the streets are ornamented with two rows of trees, one on each side, which give the city a rural appearance.”<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> John Neal, *Account of the Great Conflagration in Portland* (Portland: Starbird & Twitchell, 1866), 81.

<sup>35</sup> William Willis, *The History of Portland from 1632 to 1864* (Portland: Bailey & Noyes, 1865), 728.

<sup>36</sup> Neal, *Account of the Great Conflagration*, 81.

<sup>37</sup> David T. Pottinger, “I, Too, in Arcadia,” in *Cambridge Historical Society Publications* vol. 35 *Proceedings for the Years 1953-54* (Cambridge: Cambridge Historical Society, 1955), 113.

<sup>38</sup> Not all praise was unreserved. Edward T. Coke, writing in the 1830s, appreciated the beauty of the elms, but deplored the way their canopy kept the streets “exceedingly wet and dirty.” See Coke, *A Subaltern’s Furlough* (1833), 157.

<sup>39</sup> Jedidiah Morse, *The American Universal Geography* (Boston: Thomas and Andrews, 1802), 437.



**Figure 48.** Temple Street, New Haven, c. 1865. Courtesy New Haven Colony Historical Society.

Nathaniel Parker Willis, an 1827 graduate of Yale and one of the most popular literary figures in the first half of the nineteenth century, was effusive in his praise for New Haven. He attributed the profound beauty of the city chiefly to its elms, “grown at this day,” he wrote in 1839, “to remarkable size and luxuriance.”<sup>40</sup> “If you were to set a poet to make a town,” Willis speculated, “he would probably turn out very much such a place as New Haven.” Even the houses, built modestly of wood, were “as fair to the eye as marble” in the preternatural light of elm-shade.<sup>41</sup> Willis spent enraptured hours beneath the Hillhouse elms, and his descriptions of New Haven in *American Scenery* (1837) are a paean to urban pastoralism.

It has the appearance of a town roofed in with leaves; and it is commonly said, that, but for the spires, a bird flying over would scarce be aware of its existence. Nothing could be more beautiful than the effect of this in the streets; for, standing where any of the principal avenues cross at right angles, four embowered aisles extend away as far as the eye can follow, formed of the straight stems and graceful branches of the drooping elm, the most elegant and noble of the trees of the country.

Indeed, “the whole scene,” Willis concluded, “though in the midst of a city, breathes of nature.”<sup>42</sup>

With each passing year, New Haven’s elms gained in beauty and stature. “No one can have failed to hear of the beauties of our forest city,” rhapsodized the native author of *Sketches of Yale College* (1843); well-stocked with elms whose “beautiful green arches” embraced the streets, New Haven could be “truly described as ‘a city in a wood, or a wood in a city.’”<sup>43</sup> In the view of Emmeline Stuart Wortely, an Englishwoman who toured America in 1849, the “exceeding profusion of its stately elms” made New Haven “not only one of the most charming, but one of the most ‘unique’ cities I ever beheld.”<sup>44</sup> Charles Dickens, visiting in 1842, understood that New Haven’s elms forged a union of *rus* and *urbe*. Of the city he observed that “many of its streets (as its *alias* sufficiently imports) are planted with rows of grand old elm-trees.”

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<sup>40</sup> Nathaniel Parker Willis, “The Gothic Church, New Haven,” *American Scenery* vol.2 (London: James S. Virtue, 1857), 9.

<sup>41</sup> Nathaniel Parker Willis, quoted in W. E. Decrow, *Yale and “The City of Elms,”* (Boston: W. E. Decrow, 1885), 85.

<sup>42</sup> Willis, “The Gothic Church, New Haven,” 9.

<sup>43</sup> Quoted in Ezekiel Porter Belden, *Sketches of Yale College* (New York: Saxton & Miles, 1843), 67-68.

<sup>44</sup> Lady Emmeline Stuart Wortely, *Travels in the United States* (New York: 1851), quoted in George Dudley Seymour, *New Haven* (New Haven: Privately printed, 1942), 77-78.

Even in winter-time, these groups of well-grown trees, clustering among the busy streets and houses of a thriving city, have a very quaint appearance: seeming to bring about a kind of compromise between town and country; as if each had met the other half-way, and shaken hands upon it.<sup>45</sup>

Decades later, another Englishman, William Smith of Yorkshire, added that New Haven's "grand foliage-arched streets, squares, and avenues, are a striking feature in the city, and make a lasting impression on the casual visitor." The "noble elms, which rise grandly in stately rows in every direction," he remarked, "give a charming rural aspect to the academic city, and are its pride."<sup>46</sup> For the City of Elms, hand of *rus* firmly in its grip, the reconciliation of urban and rural was more than a matter of metaphysics or idle philosophy; it had become part and parcel of the city's identity around the world. It was the famed elm-forest-in-town which distinguished New Haven, according to the popular mid-century *Dinsmore's Guide*, as "the handsomest city in the United States."<sup>47</sup>

So important to New Haven's image and identity were its elms—and the ameliorative effects they wrought on the urban landscape—that an entire column was dedicated to the subject in the *New Haven Daily Morning Journal and Courier*. The column, entitled "New Haven's Elms and Green," ran for most of 1883 and 1884, and was authored by Henry Howe, a local antiquarian who had returned to New Haven after a long hiatus. Howe's worshipful essays addressed a wide range of subjects within the ambit of the elms and Green. "Many of those who were born here do not fully appreciate their heritage in our elms and Green," he began; "Let them live away from them for thirty years, as has the writer . . . and their indifference may vanish."<sup>48</sup> Well into the twentieth century, the ideal of urban pastoralism represented by the City of Elms continued to shape the identity of New Haven.

### "The Gothic Thrust of Elms"

If elms were a symbolic agent of union between landscape and the nineteenth-century metropolis, they also contributed to a profound *spatial* transformation of the streetscape.

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<sup>45</sup> Charles Dickens, "American Notes," in *Works of Charles Dickens*, vol. 2 (New York: Sheldon, 1865), 78. Dickens was immensely popular when he toured the United States in 1842, and his *American Notes* sold briskly in both American and England. His New York publisher sold 50,000 copies within two days, and the 3,000 copies sent to Philadelphia were gone in less than an hour. See Allan Nevins, *America Through British Eyes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1948).

<sup>46</sup> William Smith, *A Yorkshireman's Trip to the United States and Canada* (London: Longmans, Green and Company, 1892), 151.

<sup>47</sup> See George Dudley Seymour, *New Haven* (New Haven: Privately printed, 1942), 78.

<sup>48</sup> Henry Howe, "New Haven's Elms and Green," a scrapbook of his articles from the *New Haven Daily Morning Journal and Courier* (1883-1884), Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University, 1.

The American elm possessed architectural properties which distinguished it among American trees. This was something Luigi Castiglioni had observed as early as the 1780s, when he noted that the elm's "wide-spreading and pendant" branches suited it particularly well "for making avenues and other ornamental plantings."<sup>49</sup> Many later writers affirmed this assessment. Walter Prichard Eaton understood well the inherent architecturality of the American elm; in his view, the tree possessed a "formal structure, and a consequent dignity," which rendered "remarkable fitness to comport with architectural lines, with geometrically designed vistas."

We all know the type—the noble trunk of massive girth, tapering very gradually upward to the first spring of branches, and then dissolving in those branches as a water jet might dissolve in many upward and out-curving streams, till the whole is lost in the spray of the foliage. Like many trees which grow alone, it develops an exquisite symmetry, but with the elm this symmetry is not only one of general contour but of individual limbs. Not only is the silhouette symmetrical, but the skeleton, branch balancing branch.<sup>50</sup>

These effects were multiplied magnificently when the tree was planted in long, parallel rows. Street elms produced "an architectural effect of permanent beauty," wrote Charles Sprague Sargent, "by the arched interlacings of the great bending boughs."<sup>51</sup> Forming a sylvan-architectural structure complete with columns and high ceiling, the trees brought about a remarkable spatial transformation of the streetscape. Good urban design, like good architecture, is measured by its successful definition of volumetric space; for, as Bruno Zevi has written, space is the protagonist of architecture—and urbanism, too.<sup>52</sup> The young cities of America possessed little of the urban architectural fabric which so distinguished European urbanism, and which created such memorable spaces in cities such as Venice and London.

But the elms well made up for the paucity of colonnades and loggias; they created positive urban space out of the often amorphous container of the street. In situations where the carriageway was excessively wide, or the flanking buildings too far apart or too meager and insubstantial to create a satisfying sense of enclosure, elms re-scaled the volumetric envelope of the street into proportions expansive yet human in scale. Indeed, Henry Ward Beecher was not far off the mark when he compared the elms to the columns of the Parthenon. In the nineteenth-century New England city—as in its towns and

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<sup>49</sup> Luigi Castiglioni, "Observations on Useful Plants," in A. Pace, ed. *Viaggio*, 459-460.

<sup>50</sup> Walter Prichard Eaton, *Green Trails and Upland Pastures* (New York: Doubleday, Page and Company, 1917), 253.

<sup>51</sup> Charles Sprague Sargent, "An Avenue of Elms," *Garden and Forest* (19 April 1893): 172

<sup>52</sup> Bruno Zevi, *Architecture as Space* (New York: Horizon Press, reprint 1974), 24.

villages—these trees were a profoundly important urbanistic device; more even than its architecture, elms were the essence of Yankee urbanism.

The feeling of spatial delight imparted by the elm-lined street—with its rhythmic procession of trunks and lofty canopy—may well have drawn from deep within the collective unconscious. Referring to the work of ecologist Eugene P. Odum, Robert Geddes has argued that, rather than grassland or deep forest, it was the boundary between the two which provided ideal habitat for early humans; this zone—the “forest edge”—enabled *prospect* as well as *refuge*. Recollection of the forest edge may explain why architectural and urbanistic elements evocative of this space—colonnades, loggias, arcades, verandas, even porches—are such appealing, comfortable places. The forest edge, Geddes writes, evolved into “an elementary source of . . . ideas and images of landscape and architecture.” If the loggia or porch replicated the spatial conditions of the forest edge at the architectural scale, the colonnade of elms on city streets did so on a larger, urbanistic scale. As with the former, elms offered both openness as well as enclosure, outlook and shelter. The appeal of the elm-lined street may well have been linked at least partly to a subconscious recollection of trees from the deep evolutionary past.<sup>53</sup>

The primitive psychological appeal of the elm-lined street, as a memento of the forest edge, was joined by even more potent cultural symbolism. The plume-like architectural form of the single elm, when paired, formed something of a green Gothic arch; the mingling tangle of limbs themselves evoked a kind of tracery against the sky. In number, the effect was amplified. A parallel column of elms was a veritable Gothic cathedral in sylvan form. Again, this was less a matter of intention than it was of signification after the fact. Elms had been planted in urban situations long before Gothic revivalism stirred on American soil. With the flowering of this architectural style around mid-century, elms planted earlier—and for whatever quotidian reasons—gained an ecclesiastical dimension. In time, evocations of Gothicism and Gothic religious architecture were among the most common tropes used to describe—and impart meaning to—New England’s elm-lined thoroughfares.

To Nathaniel Hawthorne it was this Gothic dimension which so distinguished the American elm from its English cousins. On a visit to Greenwich Park in 1856, the writer concluded that the English elms were “scarcely so beautiful . . . nor so stately, as an avenue of American elms, because these English trees have not such tall, columnar trunks, but are

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<sup>53</sup> Robert Geddes, *The Forest Edge* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1982), 13-16.

John Bullish in their structure—mighty of girth, but short between the ground and the branches, and round-headed. Our trees, ‘high over-arched, with echoing walks between,’ have the greater resemblance to the Gothic aisle of a cathedral.”<sup>54</sup>

Hawthorne’s judgement is ironic, given the origins of Gothicism. The Gothic mode, which evolved in the Middle Ages, was revived as an historical style in England around the middle of the eighteenth century, the result of a burgeoning “scholarly interest in archeology, followed by a sentimental delight in decay.”<sup>55</sup> Although there were expressions of the style in America during the colonial and Federal periods—most notably by Benjamin Henry Latrobe—it was not until the 1830s that Gothic architecture became a popular building style in the United States. Its acceptance was driven by a number of factors, including the popularity of the Gothic novels of Sir Walter Scott, a growing interest in Romanticism and its emphasis on the melancholic and sublime, as well as the perennial desire to emulate English fashions.<sup>56</sup>

But it also appealed to the emerging emphasis on nature and landscape that came with the environmental awakening. For Americans in the 1830s and 1840s, the Gothic mode seemed to articulate well the new role of nature as a fountainhead of moral and spiritual value, and national identity. Indeed, Gothic architecture possessed an inherent sylvan dimension, as its primitive origins were thought to have derived from forest vegetation. None expressed this more colorfully than William Cullen Bryant in his “Forest Hymn” (1825):

The groves were God’s first temples. Ere man learned  
To hew the shaft, and lay the architrave,  
And spread the roof above them,—ere he framed  
The lofty vault, to gather and roll back  
The sound of anthems; in the darkling wood,  
Amidst the cool and silence, he knelt down,  
And offered to the Mightiest solemn thanks  
And supplication . . . <sup>57</sup>

If the ill-fated Lombardy poplar was the sylvan expression of classicism, the elm was Gothicism in arboreal form. “When their limbs are bare,” wrote Nehemiah Adams of the

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<sup>54</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The English Note Books* (ed. Randall Stewart, reprint 1962), 390. Hawthorne was quoting from Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, IX, 1107.

<sup>55</sup> Kenneth Clark, *The Gothic Revival: An Essay on the History of Taste* 3d. ed. (London : John Murray, 1995), 11.

<sup>56</sup> Calder Loth and Julius Trousdale Sadler, Jr., *The Only Proper Style: Gothic Architecture in America* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1975), 42-43.

<sup>57</sup> William Cullen Bryant, “A Forest Hymn,” *Poems* (Philadelphia: A. Hart, 1850), 130.

elms on Boston Common, “a perspective view of them gives as good a representation of Gothic architecture as man ever copied. A traveller might almost fancy himself again in York cathedral.”<sup>58</sup> Henry Wadsworth Longfellow made a note in his *Journal* of a pre-dawn December walk “under the leafless arches of the elms . . . the trees themselves more than ever like columns and ribbed ceilings of churches.”<sup>59</sup> His poetical evocations of elms where themselves often Gothic in tone: “. . . the great elms overhead/Dark shadows wove on their aerial looms/Shot through with golden thread”.<sup>60</sup> At New Haven and other towns and cities, Gothicism became arborealized, and the arboreal was made Gothic.

The elm-lined street was thus transformed into something far greater than the sum of its trees; the value of the elm as a moral tonic was now underscored by its architectural and ecclesiastical symbolism. Elms transformed the quotidian street into a sylvan cathedral, and in turned rendered the city, too, more sacrosanct. This was something Henry Ward Beecher understood; for him city elms were “tabernacles of the air” which transformed the lowliest street into a verdant, *American* temple. “We had rather walk beneath an avenue of elms,” he wrote, speaking broadly for his fellow citizens, “than inspect the noblest cathedral that art ever accomplished.”<sup>61</sup>

Indeed, if the cathedrals of the old world were carved of stone, those of “Nature’s nation” would be borne heavenward on the limbs of elms. In the opening chapter of *Elsie Venner*, Oliver Wendell Holmes claimed that no Gothic arch “compares, for a moment, with that formed by two American elms, where their lofty jets of foliage shoot across each other’s ascending curves, to intermingle their showery flakes of green. When one looks through a long double row of these . . . he beholds a temple not built with hands, fairer than any minister, with all its clustered stems and flowering capitals, that ever grew in stone.”<sup>62</sup>

Montgomery Clement Meigs took this metaphor literally, and proposed building—or planting—just such a cathedral of elms on the banks of the Schuylkill in Philadelphia. Meigs was no neophyte when it came to building in bricks and mortar; the West Point

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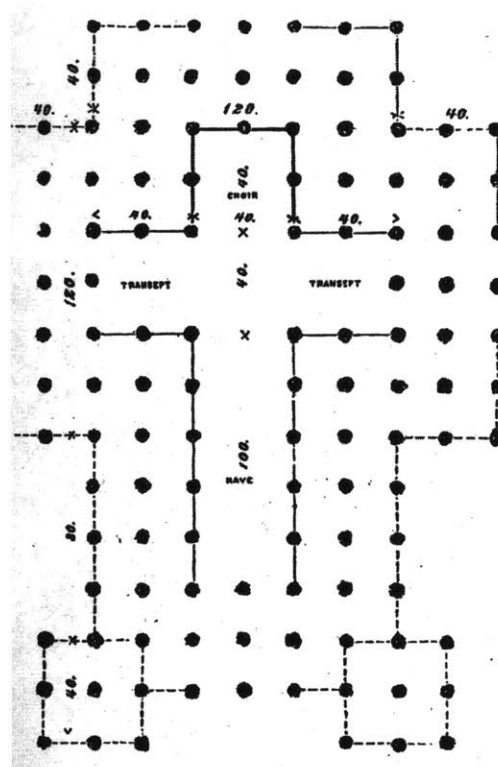
<sup>58</sup> Nehemiah Adams, *Boston Common, or Rural Walks in Cities* (Boston: George H. Light, 1838; Bostonian Society edition), 14-15.

<sup>59</sup> Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *Journal* (12 December 1849), quoted in *Report of the General Superintendent of Parks* (Cambridge: City of Cambridge, 1894), 77n.

<sup>60</sup> Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, quoted in Walter Sullivan, “The Vanishing American Elm,” *New York Times* (18 August 1968).

<sup>61</sup> Henry Ward Beecher, quoted in *Report of the General Superintendent of Parks* (Cambridge: City of Cambridge, 1894), 76f.

<sup>62</sup> Oliver Wendell Holmes, *Elsie Venner: A Romance of Destiny* (Cambridge: Riverside Press, reprint 1891), 55-56.



**Figure 49.** Montgomery C. Meigs, proposal for a "sylvan temple," 1870.  
 From *Architectural Review and American Builder's Journal* (August 1870).

graduate constructed Washington's water supply system, served as Lincoln's Quartermaster General during the Civil War, and later designed the great Pension Building (now the National Building Museum).<sup>63</sup> But in an 1870 letter to *Architectural Review and American Builder's Journal*, the architect exchanged trowel for spade, and suggested that a "noble sylvan temple could be constructed in less time than the great cathedrals of Europe have taken to build, by planting the graceful New England elm in positions of the piers or pillars of a Gothic cathedral." Accompanying the letter Meigs included a plan for a 200 by 260 foot "structure," complete with transept, nave and choir. "The plan of Notre Dame at Paris, or the cathedral of Ulm could thus be planted," Meigs reasoned, "and in a few years, a temple of unequaled gothic tracery would rise into the air like Solomon's, without sound of hammer or tool of iron."<sup>64</sup>

But the epitome of sylvan Gothicism—and possibly the source of Meigs's inspiration—was New Haven, whose elms matured in almost perfect synchrony with the arrival and flowering of the Gothic in America. Founded as the New Jerusalem, its nine-square plan inspired by the biblical city of Ezekiel, New Haven was renewed in its allusions to providence by its great columns of elms<sup>65</sup> "I call it New Heaven," remarked the Reverend Swormstedt of Ohio.<sup>66</sup> "Nowhere in the States did I see a more beautiful arrangement of trees," wrote William Smith at century's end, "for in many of the avenues the branches had united, forming Gothic aisles of rich green and sunlit interlacing bows."<sup>67</sup> If the City of Elms was a cathedral of elms—a vast "leafy temple," as Richard Upton Piper put it in 1855—Temple Street was its central transept.<sup>68</sup> Surveyed and planted by Hillhouse in 1792, the thoroughfare passed through the Green, adjacent to the principal houses of worship. By the 1860s, Temple Street was described as "the grandest arch of trees on the globe," and it literally and figuratively overshadowed the nearby churches.<sup>69</sup> It was the city's most imaged feature; etchings and photographs of its great mantle of elms were distributed around the world, the *pièce de résistance* of the City of Elms.

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<sup>63</sup> John Maass, "'Sylvan Temples,' Dead Ends in the Gothic Forest," *Landscape Architecture* 61 (October 1970): 50.

<sup>64</sup> M. C. Meigs, letter, in *Architectural Review and American Builder's Journal* August 1870. Published for only three years (1868 to 1870), this was apparently the first architectural magazine in America. See Maass, "Sylvan Temples."

<sup>65</sup> On the ecclesiastical origins of the New Haven plan, see John Archer, "Puritan Town Planning in New Haven," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 34 (May 1975): 140-149.

<sup>66</sup> Quoted in Howe, "New Haven's Elms and Green," 1.

<sup>67</sup> William Smith, *A Yorkshireman's Trip to the United States and Canada* (London: Longmans, Green and Company, 1892), 151.

<sup>68</sup> Richard Upton Piper, *The Trees of America* (Boston: William White, 1855), 6.

<sup>69</sup> Henry Howe, "New Haven's Elms and Green," 4.

Poet Nathaniel Parker Willis understood the religious symbolism of New Haven's high Gothic canopy of elms, particularly those of Temple Street. To him, New Haven was "a vast cathedral with aisles for streets."<sup>70</sup> His *Elms of New Haven* is a melancholic appeal to lost youth, itself a Gothic paean to the "unhewn cathedral."

From every Gothic isle my heart fled home,  
From every groined roof, and pointed arch,  
To find its type in emerald beauty here.  
The moon we worshipp'd through this trembling veil,  
In other heavens seem'd garish and unclad.  
The stars that burn'd to us through whispering leaves,  
Stood cold and silently in other skies.  
Still'er seem'd alway here the holy dawn  
Hush'd by the breathless silence of the trees;  
And who, that ever, on a Sabbath morn,  
Sent through this leafy roof a prayer to Heaven,  
And when the sweet bells burst upon the air,  
Saw the leaves quiver, and the flecks of light  
Leap like caressing angels to the feet  
Of the church-going multitude, but felt  
That here, God's day was holier—that the trees,  
Pierced by these shining spires, and echoing ever  
"To prayer!" "To prayer!" were but the lofty roof  
Of an unhewn cathedral, in whose choirs  
Breezes and storm-winds, and the many birds  
Join'd in the varied anthem; and that so,  
Resting their breasts upon these bending limbs,  
Closer, and readier to our need they lay--  
The spirits who keep watch 'twixt us and Heaven . . .<sup>71</sup>

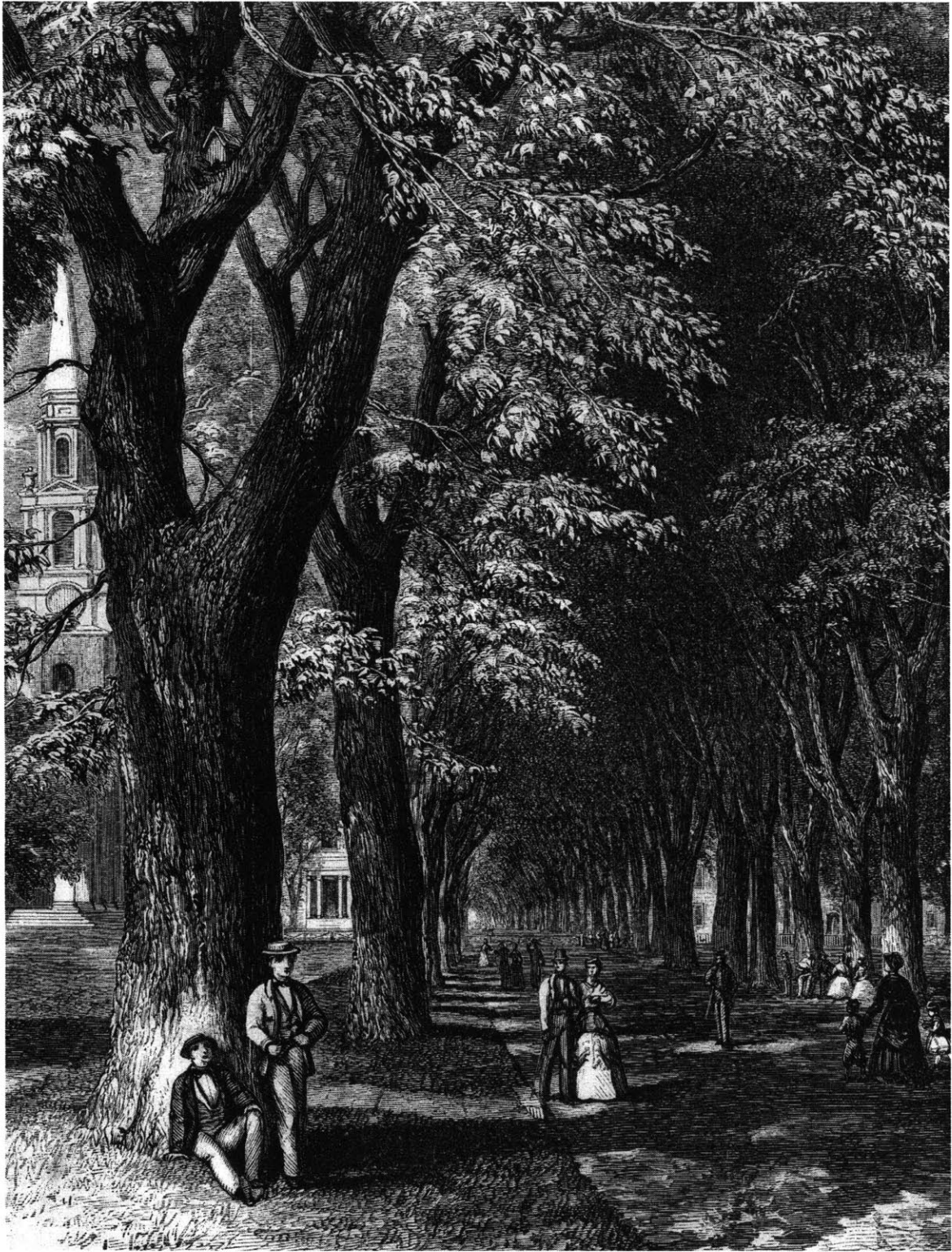
### *Age of Elms*

The Gothic cathedral-of-elms represented the tree's pinnacle of symbolism in nineteenth-century New England. The elm had, over the course of more than a century, accumulated a great range of significance. As an icon of the pastoral landscape, a harbinger of domesticity, a civic totem of communal resonance, an relic of pre-European settlement, or a sylvan monument marking great events and persons, elms bore extraordinary cultural freight. With the village improvement movement and the later extensive planting of elms in cities, the tree came to play a defining role in shaping the spatial and visual aspects of the New England urban and small town landscape. Elm-lined streets were understood as a mechanism of urban-rural synthesis, a means of bringing the country into the city. The metaphor of the Gothic cathedral added an ecclesiastical dimension to the varied symbolism of the tree, which, in the Romantic eye, was already divine.

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<sup>70</sup> Nathaniel Parker Willis, quoted in Henry Howe, "New Haven's Elms and Green," 1.

<sup>71</sup> Nathaniel Parker Willis, "The Elms of New Haven," *Sacred Poems* (New York: Clark, Austin & Smith, 1860), 233-235.



**Figure 50.** "Elm Arcade," Temple Street, New Haven, c. 1870. From *Appleton's Journal*.

Equally significant was the elm's great presence in the Yankee landscape. By the end of the nineteenth century the tree was ubiquitous element in New England, a commonplace of wayside, village, town and city street. It is a rare portrayal of Yankee space—whether on canvas, by photograph or in literature—that fails to refer in some manner to elms. By virtue of its presence, ubiquity and depth of cultural significance, the elm emerged as a definitive icon of Yankee regional identity, an arboreal symbol of a land and its people. This was something Sargent well understood in 1890, when he wrote: “In no other part of the country is there a tree which occupies the same position in the affection of the people as the Elm does in that of the inhabitants of New England.”<sup>72</sup> Or, as Oliver Wendell Holmes put it earlier, “Nobody knows New England who is not on terms of intimacy with one of its elms.”<sup>73</sup> Nowhere in America would a tree acquire such deep cultural resonance as the elm in New England. Indeed, so powerful was this mingling of man and tree that elm culture would eventually be exported to nearly every region of the United States, until the elm was not only a Yankee icon, but an American one.

The apotheosis of the Yankee elm came as part of a larger “flowering of New England,” as Van Wyck Brooks called it, a period of profound literary and creative achievement in the region which peaked in the decades between 1815 and the Civil War. In the wake of the Revolution, New England—with Boston at its center—found itself on the verge of an age of dazzling expectations. It was newly independent, possessed a wealth of natural resources, and had begun to develop inland manufactures as a result of the boycott of English goods during the war. Boston would soon flourish as a center of commerce, but also of learning, the arts and sciences—it would be the “Athens of America.” The patrician leaders of Boston saw no reason that theirs should not be a model town, and New England a model region—a New Jerusalem on American soil.<sup>74</sup>

The “flowering of New England,” in Brooks' assessment, was chiefly one of literary accomplishment; it was an age that produced such voices as Emerson, Longfellow, Lowell, Ticknor, Holmes, Hawthorne, Bancroft, Thoreau, the Alcotts and Fuller. But it also produced a new creative spirit in the plastic and spatial arts, one which nurtured the environmental awakening and the village improvement movement, and that would eventually produce a Henry Hobson Richardson and a Frederick Law Olmsted. In countless villages and towns, and on the streets of New Haven, Springfield, Cambridge,

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<sup>72</sup> Charles Sprague Sargent, “The American Elm,” *Garden and Forest* (11 June 1890): 281.

<sup>73</sup> Holmes, *Elsie Venner*, 56.

<sup>74</sup> Van Wyck Brooks, *The Flowering of New England* (New York: Modern Library, 1941), 4-7.

Keene, Hartford, Augusta, and Portland, the “flowering of New England” was manifest in the flourishing elms—the “magnificent vegetable” of the American woods which had become firmly rooted in the Yankee soul.

### *The Westward Moving Elm*

The “westward transit of New England culture” carried the cultivation of elms across the United States, and eventually made Elm Street a national institution.<sup>75</sup> New England was the chief arbiter of taste throughout the eighteenth century and well into the nineteenth, leading the nation in the arts, sciences and education. Oliver Wendell Holmes’ invocation of Boston as the “hub of the universe” was, despite its hubris, largely true. Out of the cultural hearth of New England spread Yankee standards of spatial beauty, building styles and town planning ideals. The elm-embowered streets of the townscape New England became a model of urban emendation exported to every region of the country. Settlers pushing westward across the treeless “American desert” planted sapling elms as keepsakes of the verdant land they left behind. Yankee minister George Atkinson and his wife carried an elm with them around Cape Horn in 1848, on their way to become missionaries in the Pacific Northwest; the long-traveled tree, planted in their yard “amidst the giant firs,” was said to be the first American elm in Oregon.<sup>76</sup>

By the end of the nineteenth century, the elm-lined street stretched from coast to coast. The natural range of *ulmus Americana*—more or less the eastern half of the United States—had been vastly extended. Elms now flourished where they had never been seen before, from New Mexico to the Hawaiian Islands. By the 1920s, Julia Ellen Rogers could write that “The elm is familiar to everybody—its vase-like form is in sight whenever we look out of a window.” Ignorance of this American icon was, in her view, “a mark of indifference or stupidity,” something akin to ignorance of the Constitution or Bill of Rights.<sup>77</sup> It was, after all, atop an elm that the American flag was first raised, on August 6, 1776 at Rome, New York.<sup>78</sup>

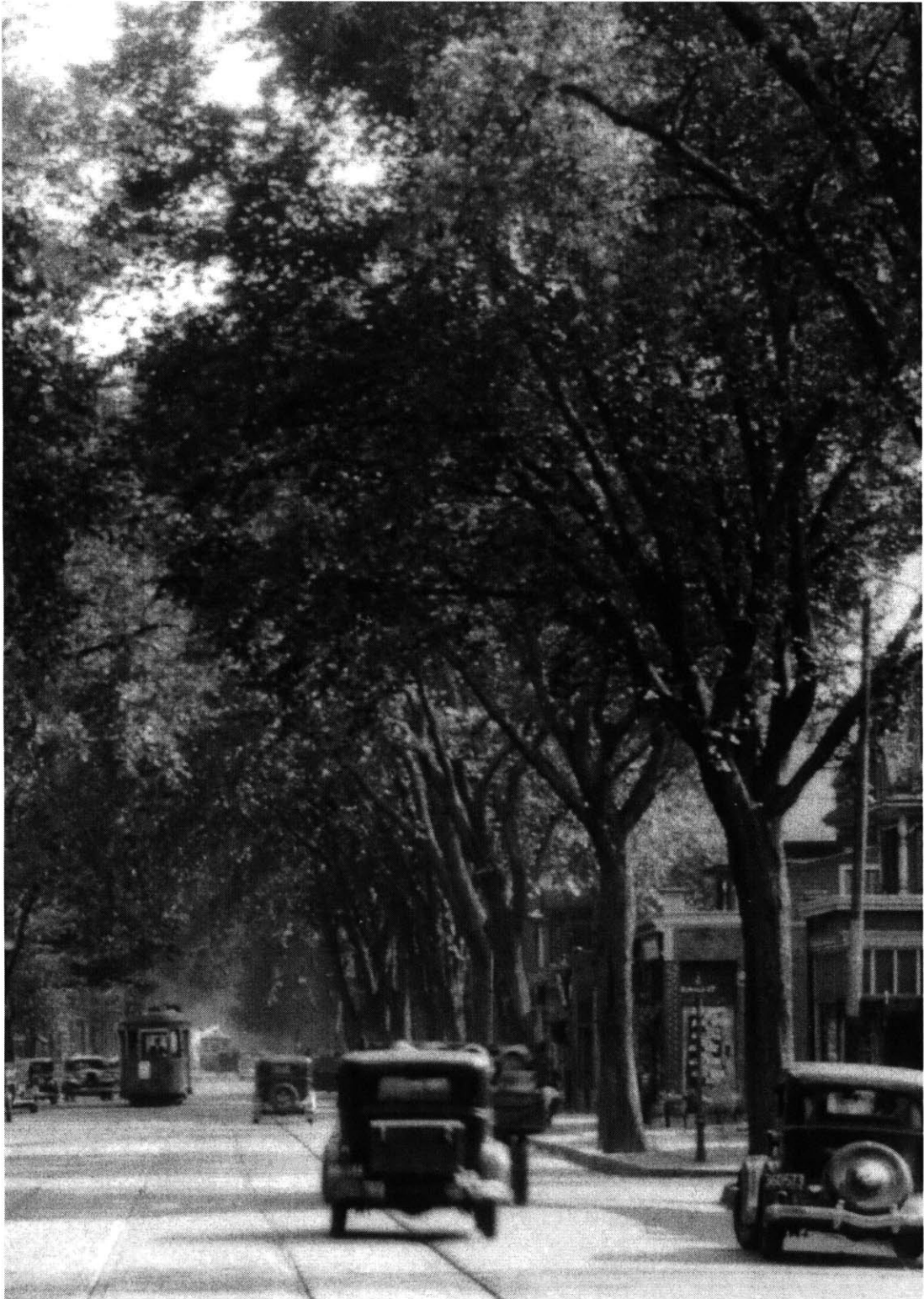
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<sup>75</sup> The phrase is from Whitney R. Cross, “The Burned-over District,” *The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800-1850* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1950), vii.

<sup>76</sup> Michael Kammen, *Meadows of Memory: Images of Time and Tradition in American Art and Culture* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992), 141.

<sup>77</sup> Julia Ellen Rogers, *The Tree Book* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1906), 231.

<sup>78</sup> Berton Roueché, “A Great Green Cloud,” *The New Yorker* (15 July 1961).



**Figure 51.** Elm-lined commercial street, Springfield, Massachusetts, 1935.  
Courtesy Connecticut Valley Historical Museum, Springfield, Massachusetts.

*The Toll of Ubiquity*

The elm became the most planted tree in American history. By the 1930s, it was estimated that 125 million elms shaded the streets of America. This was, of course, a highly artificial creation. Elms rarely occur naturally in pure stands, and the dense monoculture of the urban elm plantation was a tragedy waiting to happen. The popularity of the elm was its sword of Damocles. The tree was literally loved to death, a victim of its own ubiquity. Catastrophe came in the form of Dutch elm disease, a beetle-borne fungus first identified in Holland in 1919. It was not until the 1930s that Dutch elm disease was detected in the United States, but it spread rapidly. The catastrophic hurricane of 1938 helped the disease gain a foothold; the great storm plowed up the Connecticut River Valley—the heartland of the Yankee elm—wrecking century-old trees and severely weakening others, priming them for infection. Early suppression efforts were effective, but were all but called off during World War II. By 1945 the disease had escaped its handlers. For the next thirty years, Dutch elm disease spread like wildfire, destroying millions of trees across the United States, and leaving in its wake a wreckage of urban beauty.

In no part of the country had the American elm achieved deeper cultural penetration than in New England, and no region suffered more with its passing. The passing of the American elm was the single most devastating ecological event to affect New England, and it dramatically transformed the character and appearance of its landscape. Elmer Ekblaw, writing in 1935, on the eve of both the Great Hurricane and Dutch elm disease, understood what the passing of the elm would mean for New England. “Picture, if you can,” he cried, “our New England without our elms! Imagine the loneliness of our streets, the nakedness of our gardens, the dreariness of thousands of our farmsteads . . .”<sup>79</sup> It was a premonition all too true.

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<sup>79</sup> W. Elmer Ekblaw, *New England Fancies* (Worcester, Massachusetts: Acille J. St. Onge, 1935), 36.

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