

A DIFFERENT KIND OF EARTH DAY: 2023

by George F. Thompson



The champion white ash tree on Oak Ridge Circle in Staunton, Virginia.

A year ago, 19 beautiful white ash trees (*Fraxinus americana*) provided shade and habitat on our residential property in Staunton, a historic town in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. One, in particular, was likely a champion tree by any measure. Squirrels nested in it, and a countless array of birds, including an occasional red-tailed hawk, would grace its branches. It was immense, at 75-80 feet tall, and its canopy provided welcome shade to an understory of eastern dogwoods. Our daughter, Haley, played beneath it as a kid, as did grandson Coleman, who would always find an Easter egg or two or three at its base and crevices on those special Easter Sundays.

The ash trees were also attractive to the emerald ash borer (*Agrilus planipennis*), native to northeastern Asia, which found a kind of paradise in American forests. First identified in Canton, Michigan (near Detroit), in 2002, though it likely arrived during the late 1980s, this exotic creature has created widespread havoc and destruction to one of the nation's most revered and utilitarian tree species. In Staunton alone, conservative estimates suggest that at least 20,000 to 30,000 ash trees have already died due to the voracious appetite of this small insect. One ash borer alone can kill a tree.



The arborist and his skilled crew needed four full days in order to fell the champion white ash tree.



The diameter of the champion white ash tree was four feet at the base and 3.5-3.75 feet at breast height.

In 1873, Ulysses S. Grant began his second term as President; Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer had just engaged the Lakota people for the first time as the nation continued its Indian Wars out West; P. T. Barnum's circus, "The Greatest Show on Earth," debuted in New York City; the Woman's Christian Temperance Union was founded in Fredonia, New York; Puerto Rico celebrated its Emancipation Day in which its enslaved peoples were set free; and the Panic of 1873 triggered the first Great Depression in the U.S.

This will be the first Earth Day of living in Staunton without our beloved ash trees, and their loss is a true lament. Especially the big champion tree. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the dbh (diameter at breast height) of a fully mature 70-year-old ash tree is approximately 1.5 feet. The dbh of our big tree was 3.5-3.75 feet and its base 4 feet! The arborist and his skilled crew had never seen an ash tree as large as ours, and a careful count of its tree rings resulted in 150 years. That puts its birth at circa 1873.



A crew member carefully counts 150 tree rings for the champion tree.



Of course, in 1873 our big ash tree was just a tiny seedling in a large forest. It did not know that, around a century later, it would be a prized tree in a new residential neighborhood. It did not know that, in old age, it would be stricken by a tiny insect from half way around the world. It did not

know that our family would love that tree as if it were a member of the family, did not know that we would celebrate its majesty as we would grieve its loss. As for the bachelor squirrel who made a home high up in the big tree's canopy, it has moved to a silver maple, as Nature continues to provide in its own mysterious way.



Grandson Coleman measuring the base of the tree.



The felled champion white ash tree has created a big hole in the sky.