

The Waverly Oaks

Charles S. Sargent

The impetus to preserve Beaver Brook, which in 1893 became the first of the reservations of the Metropolitan Park Commission, was the desire to save the Waverly Oaks. The founding director of the Arnold Arboretum advocated their preservation in this editorial in *Garden and Forest*, February 19, 1890.

There is in Belmont, one of the suburbs of Boston, and formerly a part of the ancient town of Watertown, a group of Oaks which has come to be known in recent years as the Waverly Oaks, from the village near which they stand. These Waverly Oaks are, all things considered, the most interesting trees in eastern Massachusetts, and although there are larger Oaks in New England and in the Middle States, a group containing so many large trees is not often seen now anywhere in eastern America. There are in this group twenty-three large Oaks and one large Elm growing on an area of two or three acres. The Oaks are all White Oaks, with the exception of a single Swamp White Oak. They occupy mainly the slopes of a terminal moraine, along the base of which flows Beaver Brook, the "Sweet Beaver, child of forest still," sung by Lowell. The Waverly Oaks are well known to all Bostonians interested in nature, and strangers not infrequently make the pilgrimage to Belmont to look upon these venerable products of Massachusetts soil. . . . The Committee on Grounds of the Massachusetts Horticultural Society visited the Waverly Oaks on the 28th of June, 1884, and the chairman, Mr. J. G. Barker, joined to its report printed in the transactions of the society for that year . . . a timely suggestion for their preservation.

This suggestion we desire to repeat and enforce. . . . The age which these trees have attained and the vicissitudes they have survived entitle them to respect, and the people of Massachusetts might wisely secure their preservation through the purchase and dedication to public use of the land on which they stand.

The age of these Oaks can only be surmised. One famous naturalist is said to have declared that the smallest of them had existed through more than a thousand years. It is probable that this statement is greatly exaggerated. The largest tree in the group girths seventeen feet three inches at three and a half feet from the ground. The principal tree in our illustration is smaller, with a girth of only thirteen feet four inches, measured at the same distance from the ground. An actual examination of the wood of this tree shows that it has increased three inches in diameter during the last twenty-four years. Had it made the same rate of growth during the whole period of its existence, it would have been 408 years old, and the largest tree in the group would be, with the same rate of increase, 508 years old. It is probable that they are both younger than these estimates make them. They may have grown less rapidly for several years at the beginning of their life, but there must have been a number of years, probably several hundred, when they increased more rapidly in diameter than they have during the last quarter of a century. The appearance of the trees justifies this supposition. They are still healthy, and are growing with considerable vigor;



In 1892, Sylvester Baxter wrote of the oaks in *Garden and Forest*, "The proposition to secure the preservation for public enjoyment dates something like twenty years back. Some of the painters connected with the Boston Art Club then urged their purchase by that institution as a sketching-ground for Boston artists, as Fontainebleau serves for Paris. Fontainebleau, however, is not comparable with the Waverly Oaks in any of the elements of landscape-beauty." Photograph by W. H. Rollins, from *Garden and Forest*, 1890.

but there can be no doubt that their period of most rapid development has passed, or that, while they may continue, with proper care, to live and increase slowly for centuries perhaps, they will grow less rapidly now that they did one or two hundred years ago. But after making all due allowance for differences in the rate of growth at different periods in the existence of these trees, it is safe to surmise that the youngest of them had attained to some size before the Pilgrims landed on the shores of Massachusetts Bay, and that the oldest was at that time a tree of some size. . . .

The Waverly Oaks grow within a few hundred yards of the station at Waverly, on the Boston & Fitchburg Railroad, on a piece of ground directly opposite the property of the trustees of the Massachusetts General Hospital, occupied by the country home of that institution. The whole region is undergoing rapid development, and houses are springing up on every side. The establishment of a small public park at this place, which need not exceed three or four acres in extent to accomplish this object, would protect the trees from the dangers which now threaten them, and would make a valuable and interesting public resort within walking or driving distance of the homes of a very large number of people.

As fate would have it, the oaks survived only a few decades beyond the establishment of the Beaver Brook Reservation. By the 1920s they had succumbed to ice storms and old age.



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