

83 Farewell to an Old Friend

The Blawenburg ash stood like a silent sentry along Georgetown-Franklin Turnpike for over a century and a half. She survived rugged winter snow and ice, summer droughts, wind, and storms of all descriptions. Along the way, she housed many birds, racoons, and countless insects. All the while, she provided shade for our lawn and house built by Cyrenius Voorhees in 1843.



The mighty ash in healthier times.

It isn't clear when the seed from which she came germinated. We attempted to learn her age before she was removed by measuring her circumference and applying a growth rate formula for ash trees. That measurement put her age at over 200 years; however, the ring count of the stump told a different story. According to the more accurate ring-count method, she was between 160 and 170 years old. To put that in perspective, she germinated between 1852-1862, just before or at the startup of the Civil War. She could have emerged when Millard Fillmore (13th president), Franklin Pierce (14th) or James Buchanan (15th) were presidents and was likely a sapling when Abraham Lincoln rose to power.

The road she stood beside was an old Lenni Lenape trail later used by Dutch farmers to travel east and west along the ridge between two valleys. The old road, filled with ruts and gullies borne of heavy rains and winter weather, had been improved to become Georgetown-Franklin Turnpike about 30 years before the ash tree's germination. The village of Blawenburg had completed most of its early development just a few years before.

A silent time capsule of history

So many things happened while the old ash stood on duty.

Generations changed and the old Dutch farms that began in the mid-18th century, flourished, transitioned to new ownership, and continued to prosper until the 1970s. Imagine how much farm equipment and loads of hay passed before the old ash.

The Voorhees family may have planted her and watched her grow for her first 50 years. Then she was watched over by others: the Reid, Dorey, and Cochran families.

Right across from the tree, the old Covenhoven farmhouse that later became the Greenflash Inn burned down right before her after a still explosion near the end of Prohibition in the early 1930s.

The ash stood silently as people meandered to the outhouse behind the Voorhees house until the 1920s when indoor plumbing arrived.

She was undoubtedly fertilized by the many horses that rode before her, and she maintained her silence when motor cars spewed their effluence beneath her leaves.

She saw builders come and go as two additions were made to the Voorhees house, one for indoor plumbing and another to accommodate aging parents and a growing family.

Just across the Turnpike, the tree watched as part of the Covenhoven property was sold and three houses stood where once there was an old inn.

She witnessed the construction of a garage/barn made from parts of other barns sometime in her early years.

She watched our nation grow and fight to protect the rights of people during the Civil War, World War I, World War II, Korean War, Viet Nam, Kuwait, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

Countless dignitaries, celebrities, and politicians could have passed before her not noticing her vigilant stance.

Brides and grooms on their way to weddings, and hearses bearing folks on their final ride before their internment all rode by her while she stood at attention.

She provided a place for children to hide behind as they played games of hide and seek or tag at dusk.

And the old ash provided a place for many birds to nest and bear their young or rest along their journey. In her later years, racoons found a good home in the holes where aging limbs once had grown. Her last racoon took up residence in the spring of 2022, just before her demise.

Such a long history all borne in silence.

For everything, there is a season

Alas, every life has a beginning and an ending. Alpha and omega. It was sad to see how quickly the stately old Blawenburg ash succumbed to a small insect that robbed it of her life-sustaining fluids. The loss of such a magnificent tree is a reminder that life is fragile. In just a year the Blawenburg ash tree went from healthy to terminally ill. All the while, she continued her silent vigil as life went on around her.

As with people, we mourn the loss of such a wonderful part of our lives. So many people have commented on size, shape, canopy, and elegance of the tree, and some have said they miss her and are sad about her loss. But just as with humans, we can choose to dwell on the loss of the tree or celebrate the important part she played in many lives over many years. I am choosing to celebrate the longevity the tree and the joy, even if unrecognized, that it brought into our lives.

So, farewell old friend. We miss you, but we plan to replace you with one or more young trees with hope that they will carry on your work, bringing joy to future generations as you did for those in the past.



The mighty ash in her final days.

Facts

1. The dismembering of the old ash was a sight to behold. One operator sitting next to the boom atop the truck secured the branches with large claws attached to a knuckleboom. When the branch was secure, the operator engaged a grapple saw mounted on the boom just below the branch and cut it off. He then lowered it to the ground to be trimmed or chipped.

When all the large branches were removed, the trunk was cut off close to the ground and laid on the lawn. A new truck arrived, and the trunk filled the back of the truck as one large, heavy piece.



The claw and saw work high in the tree with the operator atop the truck.



The limbs and trunk were carted away, while the stump remained to be removed another day.

A second team arrived a few days later to grind the stump down, remove the debris, fill the holes with top soil, and seed the areas that were disturbed.



A new lawn is growing where the historic ash once stood.

2. The Blawenburg ash is not the only ash tree to be killed in a short time. The nasty emerald ash borer (EAB) is wreaking havoc on ash trees throughout Blawenburg, New Jersey, and the United States. It seems that wherever you see ash trees in the northeast, many of them are dead or dying. There are many standing dead ash in Blawenburg with over 20 being removed recently from the Blawenburg Church property. The EAB, as the borer is called, is an invader from northeastern Asia, where it also thrives on ash trees. The EAB larvae kill the tree by gnawing their way around the outer layer of the tree. This cuts off the supply of nutrients and water to the tree and causes its death.



EAB

One example of how devastating this borer can be comes from the park commission of the National Capital Region, the area around Washington, DC. Between 2010 and 2013, there were an estimated 334,820 live ash trees in the region. By 2017-2021, that number dropped to 80,460 or a drop of 76%. Said another way, when the EAB attacks ash trees, there is nearly a 0% survival rate. The only ash trees that seem to survive are those in swamps that get flooded. While insecticides can kill the EAB, they are often applied too late.

3. We aren't sure if the Blawenburg ash was the oldest or largest tree in Blawenburg, but she certainly was a contender for these honors. She was on the old tree registry in Montgomery Township.

Sources

Information

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emerald_ash_borer

<https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/ash-tree-update-2021.htm>

Pictures

Tree before her demise – Bruce Daniels

Emerald Ash Borer - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emerald_ash_borer

All other pictures – David Cochran

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