

A Short History of Trees in Portland

Excerpted from: *Green Spaces Blue Edges: An Open Space Plan for the City of Portland*.

Portland has been long known as the "Forest City". It is estimated that there are roughly 20,000 trees in the City today, not to mention the many stands of trees in parks and public lands. In addition, trees along drainage ways and streams, and on undeveloped lots are also part of Portland's community forests. These trees are an important resource that cool the streets and neighborhoods in the summer; help alleviate air quality problems by producing oxygen and absorbing pollutants; act as buffers to screen views; delineate and define spaces; and add identity.

Forests in the Portland area were considered to be a valuable resource by early settlers. The native old growth tree stands included red and white oak, beach, hickory, hemlock, spruce, pine, fir and American Chestnut. Lumber was an early export product that helped establish Portland as a major trading area in the 1700's. The King of England was so impressed with the long and straight oak trees that thousands of trees were marked with the king's "broad arrow", an old symbol of Royal Navy property. Such trees were cut and sent back to England by the Royal Navy for their ship masts.

Portland's native forest was largely intact until the early 1800's. Around that time settlers cleared the land for farming and turned much of Portland into pastures and meadows. Although the waterfront was a hub for trading activity, early Portland was primarily an agricultural community. A map of the 1850's shows Munjoy Hill as an open meadow with small orchards, cleared of trees for grazing and dotted with very few residences.

Deering Woods was purchased by the City from the Deering Family in 1879 as a park. Later known as Deering Oaks, the 'crowning glory' of the park was the magnificent, ecologically significant stand of White Oak. Today, there are 1,000 trees in Deering Oaks Park with the predominant stands of Red and White Oak along with a mix of introduced exotics such as Yellowwood, Catalpa and Horsechestnut. The park contains three trees on the State of Maine 'Big Tree' list all located in the Rose Circle lot near State Street. They include: Pin Oak, Siberian Elm and Yellowwood. Mayor Baxter Woods park was purchased by then-former Governor Percival Baxter. The woods represent some of the best examples of Portland's original forest. Huge specimens of White Oak, Ash and Hemlock are found in Baxter Woods. Other woodland parks include: Riverton Trolley Park and Pine Grove Park.

Deering Center has several old-growth oaks that were preserved in private yards when houses were built at the turn of the century. These remnants of the original forest are prized trees that contribute substantially to the neighborhood's character.

The first documented tree planting in the City took place in 1793 on Washington Avenue. More substantive tree planting was initiated on the peninsula as early as the 1850s. In the early 1900s, City tree planting continued in the off-peninsula neighborhoods. Most of the trees planted were maples.

Although there were a few streets - including Carlyle, Gleckler and Wellington Roads and Riggs, Warwick and Wessex Streets - planted with silver maples, the Norway maple became the dominant street tree.

Tree planting along Baxter Boulevard was initiated in 1921. Four hundred lindens were planted and they remain an essential element of one of Portland's most enduring designed landscapes. In 1905, the Olmstead Brothers Landscaping firm proposed a tree-lined green belt, connecting the Eastern Prom with Deering Oaks, Baxter Boulevard and the Eastern Prom. Baxter Boulevard, as the only connecting element of that plan that was completed, illustrates the strength and vision of the Olmsted plan.

In the 1960s, Portland's elm trees, like those throughout the Northeast, were devastated with Dutch Elm disease. The peninsula was particularly hard hit. Twenty thousand trees were lost. Portland learned a hard lesson about the need to diversify the tree stock. Today, approximately 100 elm trees remain in Portland. During the 1970s, a massive tree-planting program was begun using a mix of tree species. Up to 2,000 trees a year were planted at one point.

The islands were and are more rural, thus tending to have more substantial tree cover than the mainland. When settlers first came to the islands, they typically cleared the land for grazing. When agricultural uses were abandoned for cottages, trees grew back. In Peaks Island's Pond Cove Cemetery, remnants of the original forest persist. Little Diamond has a old stand of Shagbark Hickory.

Portland's park spaces preserve important forestry resources that have dwindled over time as development has occurred in the community. A summary of the most significant forestry resources follows:

* Deering Oaks Park, (mentioned above)

- Evergreen Cemetery - Evergreen features the largest stand of Sugar Maples in Greater Portland, with ages of approximately 100 to 150 years. The cemetery has over 1,000 trees.

- Baxter Woods - This park, donated by Governor Baxter, has 32 acres of forest. It is the largest undisturbed forest in the City and contains valuable stands of White Oak and groves of Hemlock. An important section of this "old growth" forest is on land owned by the Sisters of Mercy (Catherine McAuley High School) and the Deering Pavilion. This part of the forest was likely cut at one point over 150 years ago. A plantation of Red Pines was planted in 1947 by Governor Baxter at the same time as Deering Pines.

- Baxter Boulevard - The boulevard was planted with 400 linden trees that were dedicated in 1921 as a memorial to World War I veterans. They remain an essential element of one of Portland's most enduring designed landscapes. The boulevard demonstrates the landscaped arborway proposed by the Olmsted Brothers in the 1905 plan for Portland's park system. The boulevard is a difficult environment due to the permeability of soils and the resultant salt-water intrusion from Back Cove, coupled with the relative saline intolerance of the Linden Trees. Concern has been expressed about the lack of tree diversity at this location.

- Riverton Park - Former Trolley Park contains mature stands of White Pine, Red Maple, Oak and Beech. The stand has been colonized by invasive Norway Maples once planted near View Street which have now become the dominant tree in some areas.
- Capisic Pond Park - This area includes fields and some woods with Alders, Elms and White Pines.
- Forest Avenue near Castine Avenue - A small stand of mature pine trees exist in this area. The trees are clustered very close to Forest Avenue and are a delight for passerby.

The Presumpscot and Stroudwater Rivers also have a variety of trees along their corridors including Red Oak, Red Maple, White Pine, Black Willow, Alders, Shadblow or Anelanchier. Vegetation along stream corridors includes large Black Willows (*Salix nigra*, not be confused with Asean or Weeping Willows) that grow in the bottomlands of many drainage ways. This tree helps slow floodwaters and its vast root system helps minimize erosion.