

## RED OAK



Good day to you! I am a red oak. I'm named for the color of my wood. I am one of the largest trees in the forest and I grow up very quickly. By age 10, I can be 18 feet tall!

Can you find one of my acorns? They were used extensively by Native Americans, who dissolved the tannins that caused the acorns to have a bitter taste. They buried my acorns in the mud of a swamp for a year, stored them beneath sand in fresh water, and pounded them into meal.

I must confess that I am weary of being compared to the white oak. How can any tree measure up to the king of the forest? Even though the settlers found me to be a little difficult, I still provided them with plenty of rough timber for construction, clapboards, and barrels for dry storage. We can't all be super trees!

## WHITE OAK



No need to be shy! Although I may be the most magnificent tree in the woods, I am pleased to meet you. I am a white oak. Have you noticed the impressive width of my trunk? You should see how big my relatives can grow in an open field! Farmers appreciated the shade that we provided. I am the most valuable of all oak wood because I am most resistant to water and decay. There is one serious problem for me, though. The dreaded gypsy moth has attacked many members of my family in our area recently. Sadly we have not all survived.

If you have already met the hickory tree, disregard his boasting about firewood. I am actually the best firewood, long-lasting and hot. I'll keep you very cozy throughout the winter!

My acorns are deliciously sweet. Native Americans boiled the nuts, then ground them into meal used to bake bread. Acorns from some white oaks are sweet enough to eat out of hand.

My wood was prized for house frames and fences. My story is intertwined with the shipbuilding industry which consumed vast amounts of my wood. I was once plentiful here in Westport until they discovered how well suited I was to the construction of whaling ships and for barrel making. My wood was chosen for the USS Constitution (also known as Old Ironsides, thanks to her white oak hull that deflects cannonballs!). Shipbuilders looked for specific naturally occurring shapes of my branches to use as components of a ship.

I was such an important tree to the history of this country, I served you well in the USS Constitution.

## Eastern WHITE PINE



No need to curtsy! My days as king of the forest are over. I am a white pine, once chosen by the king of England for Royal Navy war ships. The early settlers were amazed by the size of my ancestors, some of whom were at least 200 feet high (that's as tall as a 16-story building) and seven feet around my trunk. I stand straight and tall, so I was ideal for masts, and my wood was sought after by the British and fought over by the colonists. My image appeared on the flag of colonial troops at the Battle of Bunker Hill.

Early settlers found me useful for house paneling and trim, doors, window sashes, shingles, matches, and boxes. I was one of the first trees to grow up in abandoned farm fields, only to be cut down and made into boxes.



**HANDY HOUSE HERITAGE TRAIL**

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# TREE TALK



We welcome your suggestions. Submit your comments by email to [westporthistory@westporthistory.net](mailto:westporthistory@westporthistory.net) or visit <http://wpthistory.org/handy-house/handy-house-heritage-trail/>

**WESTPORT HISTORICAL SOCIETY**

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## How Old Am I?

If you count all my growth rings, you can find out my age (I am 80 years old). See how many rings you can count. Trees are historians too! I am a giant organic recording device. My tree rings record information about past changes in climate and ecosystems and their effects on human civilization. Each growth ring stores data about droughts and heat waves, as well as events such as hurricanes or solar flares. These rings can also help you find out when an old house was built -- a technique known as dendrochronology. Architectural historians used dendrochronology to discover the age of the Handy House. The earliest timber dates from 1712.

## RED MAPLE



Hi there! I am a red maple. How could you fail to notice me? In the fall, I am bright scarlet and in the spring, I am pink! I love to move into new environments and can adapt well to all kinds of conditions. I am not bothered by drought and I do well in wetlands too.

Here's a little known fact for you: porcupines really love to perch in my branches and munch on my flowers.

The early settlers thought I was quite useful for firewood, furniture, and clothespins!

You have probably seen a kind of wood called bird's eye maple, but I am not going to disclose how I form it. That's TOP SECRET information! It was all the rage in the 18th century. In fact, it was common practice to paint a "faux" (that means false) bird's eye maple pattern on doors, to impress the neighbors without paying the expense of the real thing. You can see this technique inside the Handy House.

# TREE TALK

## YELLOW BIRCH



Hello! I am a beautiful yellow birch. Surely you have admired my lustrous, pale silver-gray bark? Did you know that I glow in the moonlight?

You can also recognize me by the small shredded bark curls that peel from my trunk. I am tall and straight, although sometimes my trunk divides into several stems close to the ground.

I am also very hardy and can survive in frigid temperatures as low as -50 degrees Fahrenheit. Try crushing some of my leaves -- they have a pleasant odor that I think you will like.

I was very valuable to the early settlers. They discovered that my wood is harder than that of other birches. They used it to make ox yokes, sledge frames, and wagon wheel hubs. They crafted brooms by splintering the ends of saplings. They also brewed a beverage similar to root beer from my sap. And, if all that weren't enough, my bark contains combustible oils, so it is a handy fire-starter.

Apart from being such a useful tree, I am sure you will agree that I am also the most beautiful tree in the forest!

## TUPELO



Not many people recognize me. I have many names: some call me a tupelo tree, while others know me as a black gum or sour gum, a confusing name as I do not possess even an ounce of any sort of gum.

I am special! My wood is cross-grained, making me exceptionally tough. The early settlers used to complain how hard it was to split my wood lengthwise. I am so twisted and contorted that many people do not like me at all. But I do have some very special uses. My wood is perfect for maul heads, tool handles, plowshares wagon, wheel hubs, and rolling pins.

Did you know that hollow black gum trunks were used for hives for bees and storage bins?

## HICKORY



Hello! I am a hickory tree! I'm the best tree in the forest! You can recognize me by my shaggy gray brown bark. Did you know that I am stronger than wrought iron? In fact, they say that no other American wood compares to my strength and hardness. My timber was favored by early settlers for tool handles, wagon hubs and a type of hammer called a maul.

I also provide tasty nuts that have a subtle sweetness. They are excellent in cakes or cookies. Native Americans pounded my hickory nuts and boiled them, straining the liquid and keeping the oily essence, which they added to cornmeal cakes. And as I am sure you already know, if you want a really good hot fire, use my wood! A cord of my timber releases as much heat when burned as a ton of coal. I really am the best!

## SASSAFRAS



How are you feeling today? I am a sassafras, otherwise known in the 18th century as a wonder drug! Try crushing my leaves or twigs -- you'll love my pleasant spicy scent. Did you know that I am closely related to cinnamon trees of India and camphor laurel, common in China and Japan. My wood was one of the first cash crops shipped back to Europe.

Back in the day, the early settlers considered me to be a cure-all for all kinds of ailments. I was used to treat malaria, lameness, kidney stones, and venereal disease. I was made into a popular drink. Native Americans used me to make tea and poultices for sickness. Some people believed my wood warded off evil spirits. In fact, they thought that a ship with enough sassafras in its hull would never be wrecked! But seriously, I must confess to you that I do not have such powers. My wood does not rot readily in the ground, so I am good for fence posts and rails, buckets, and small boats. Native Americans used my bark and wood to make dugout canoes (also known as mishoons).

I burn with a quick, hot flame but watch out for shooting sparks!