

The Majestic Trees of the Upperville Colt & Horse Show as Witnesses to History

By

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Long Version

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In the 1500s, there were white oaks, chestnuts, black gum and black walnut trees in a dense forest covering the present-day grounds of the Upperville Colt & Horse Show. Indigenous peoples of the Monacan and Manahoac tribes hunted game and planted corn along with the other 50,000 of their people in the area that would become Virginia. The forest floor was probably dark and the trees grew slowly as sunlight was limited. These trees were the grandparents of the “Witness Tree” white oak that was an acorn in 1773 and lived 235 years. Today its fine wood is incorporated in Upperville Show trophies and the show’s Wall of Honor recognizing outstanding commitment to the historic horseshow.

This is the story of the trees, how they changed over time and what they witnessed along the road that lies between the old and new sections of the show grounds.

By the 1600s, the settlers from Europe came to the Piedmont area and found good soil for cultivating wheat and pasture land for cattle. They fought and pushed aside the native Americans and established farms and towns. These settlers traveled by horseback and rode along trails that traversed the area leading up to the lower passes through the Blue Ridge mountains. They cleared trees for pasture and crops and most likely cut down most of the original forest. The trees became fences and houses and barns and farm equipment. The settlers left a fine grove of mature trees standing along the road. Estimates are that the long-live black gum trees in the forest grove today are 400 years old so they stood as the early settlers arrived and thrived.

The show ground trees were witness to the excitement of the founding of the United States of America in the 1700s. The road by their grove was traveled by farmers, soldiers, surveyors, merchants, slaves, wives, husbands, children and workers on horseback, in carriages, aboard wagons and walking along. The road was the main route between the booming towns of Winchester and Alexandria. Tobacco, livestock, wheat, oats, fruits and vegetables were traded for merchandise and farm needs along this route, often with a stop in what would become Middleburg as it was half way between these towns and a great place to rest the horses.

In 1749, a teenage George Washington began his work as a land surveyor and most likely traveled by the tree grove as he surveyed the extensive lands of Lord Fairfax. In 1754, as a British officer, Washington traveled north to Pennsylvania to lead a failed attack during the French and Indian wars. He may have traveled along the old road coming or going home to Mount Vernon. According to his journals, he liked to travel at a brisk trot, averaging five miles per hour, admiring the countryside. He would have been well-aware of the tensions mounting between the British and the American colonists over higher taxes and trade restrictions.

In 1773, a little acorn dropped into the fertile soil of the grove. The “Witness Tree” white oak sprouted and began its long life. Three years later, in 1776, Washington shed his British redcoat, declared independence, and led the revolutionary army which defeated the British in 1781. He became the first president of the United States of America.

In 1781, the town of Middleburg was officially founded and became a famous coach stop up the road from nearby Upperville. The grove of white oaks, the five-year-old “Witness Tree”, and their ancient companions, the black gum trees, saw the local farms transformed into plantations with extensive crops of tobacco, wheat, corn and oats and large herds of cattle. The population of enslaved people in Virginia grew enormously, mainly to work the labor-intensive cultivation of tobacco. They would travel by the grove and perhaps cut timber and tend livestock on the farm acres.

In 1820, Richard Henry Dulany was born in Unison, Virginia, ten miles by road from Upperville. When he was ten years old, his father purchased the farm land which included the ancient grove of trees and extensive acreage along the road. He was a prosperous land owner and his son benefited from a good education, including learning the family business of managing a plantation, and developed a keen appreciation for a good horse. In 1840, he established the Piedmont Fox Hounds which continues today as one of America’s preeminent fox hunts. By the time he was in his early thirties, Dulany had come to the conclusion that the average horse in the region surrounding Upperville was not well-suited for either good farm work, transportation or the thrilling sport of fox hunting. We can imagine him riding on his well-bred horse through the countryside admiring the rolling fields and the lovely Blue Ridge mountains and wondering what he could do about this problem. Perhaps he stood his horse under the spreading branches of the white oak and black gum trees in their grove next to the well-traveled road and daydreamed.

The summer in Virginia is hot and often humid. A pleasant place to be would be on a shaded porch or under the canopy of leaves of mature trees. In 1853, the catalyst Dulany needed was a dispute between two friends over which one had the better colt. Dulany was a recognized judge of quality horses and was asked to choose the better colt. And so began his efforts to organize a small breed show with judging of confirmation to help establish a higher standard in the local horse population. He needed a shaded and accessible place to hold the show. The grove of trees with its white oaks, chestnuts, black gums, and black walnuts on his father’s farm provided the perfect venue. The trees were tall and provided an open space with shade for the men and horses to gather. He promoted the show and held two classes, fillies and colts. About one hundred people came to watch the show under the trees. The festive character of the Upperville Colt & Horse Show began at its inception.

The focus of the horse show was breeding. Dulany wanted to promote a better work horse and a better sport horse. He offered stud services at no fee to local mares with a Morgan stallion named Black Hawk and a Cleveland Bay stallion names Scriverington. The breed show under the trees was held each year in June and succeeded in raising the standard of equine confirmation and in establishing a must-attend event on the local social calendar. During these show days, the trees roots were trampled, their trunks held horse ropes and their thick leaves were admired. The rest of the year was quiet and peaceful.

This peace was short-lived as the bloody Civil War swept through Virginia. Richard Henry Dulany joined the Confederate army and served from 1861 to 1865. He was a military leader and rose to the rank of Colonel. The life of the Piedmont was in turmoil as Virginia was a border state between the

Confederacy and the Union and many battles and family disputes were fought. The farms were raided and crops destroyed. Horses were commandeered for cavalry for mounted soldiers and to pull wagons and cannon. Many died. And the Upperville Colt & Horse Show was not held from 1861 to 1869. Our white oak "Witness Tree" saw the first eight years of the show at its age of eighty to eighty eight. During the Civil War days, traveling armies marched along the road and rested under the trees. In 1863, at the white oak's 90th birthday, the Emancipation Proclamation was signed to end slavery. The Piedmont was entering another transformation.

In 1870, the horse show was held again. And continued for the next 36 years under the watchful eye of Coronel Dulany. Its prestigious as a premier horse show with highest standards of judging grew as did its importance as a summer meeting place for prominent families and friends. Carriages arrived and house parties and picnics were arranged to accompany the horse show. Certain spots under the trees spreading branches were reserved for elaborate picnic luncheons. The Carter family established a tradition of meeting each year under a white oak bough. Performance classes joined the breed classes for the first time in 1902, adding excitement and new sport. In 1906, Coronel Delany passed away. The white oak "Witness Tree" reached its 133rd year.

The turn of the century brought a major change to the economy of the Piedmont. The introduction of cars and mechanized farm machinery altered the role of horses in the community forever. Their importance shifted from work animals to more purely sport and recreation animals. The Upperville Colt & Horse Show evolved with this change with added classes for sidesaddle, hunter classes on the flat and over hunter courses, with horses jumping out of the ring and around natural fences on the show grounds. Spectators arrived in cars from farther way, including Washington, DC and Richmond to see the famous horse show. Riders and horses traveled to participate in the famous classes, adding value to their mounts for having been shown at Upperville. As in the previous century, war suspended the show and during the First World War the show was not held in 1917 and 1918.

When the show resumed rode in classes for the first time and, in 1920, they got the right to vote. The white oak "Witness Tree" celebrated its 147th year. In 1926, the little trail by the grove that became a well-traveled turnpike was added as a major road to the Route 50 interstate system the crossed the country. Traffic sped by the grove. The grove and lands around the show grounds were left to nature and field trees such as black cherry, willow, Osage orange and other native trees grew, joining the ancient white oaks and black gums.

In 1937, Nina Carter Tabb, of the Carter family who had attended the show for generations, wrote, "The horse show that was held Friday and Saturday, June 11 and 12th this year, was one of the most successful shows that had been held on the famous old grounds for many a year. Both days the weather was perfect, the attendance was large and the quality of the horses the best that could be seen anywhere. The countryside filled with prominent people from many parts of the United States who had come to visit here, pay homage to "King Horse" and attend the many delightful parties given on days and nights of the horse show. All the classes were well filled and competition ran high."

The Second World War halted the show from 1942 to 1945. In 1946, when the horses and horse lovers gathered again under the trees, the white oak "Witness Tree" was 173 years old and had lived through the Revolutionary War, the Civil War and both World Wars. The ancient trees of the grove still silently provided shade as the horses went through their paces and the crowds cheered them on.

During the second half of the 1900s, the show evolved to include more performance classes and, in a major and important change, began to hold show-jumping classes. Show jumping, where horses and riders jump rounds against the clock, is an international sport and the Upperville show received its certification from the international show jumping organization in recognition of the quality of the courses and the application of international rules.

The Vietnam War ended in 1973. Perhaps during its long years, returning veterans and their families took solace in a trip to a beautiful horse show under the old trees in a place that seemed timeless and peaceful. The white oak “Witness Tree” saw one more war end as it marked two centuries – 200 years of life.

By the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, the trees were given serious attention. New rows of pin oaks and sawtooth oaks were planted as well as new white oaks and swamp white oaks. The managers of the horse show grounds worked to add some fast-growing trees and the add to the inventory of slow- growing, long-lived trees like the white oak and the black gum. The ancient trees and their replacements are what give the Upperville Colt & Horse Show its distinctive look and connect it to its long, proud history as the first horse show in the United States.

In 2008, the Witness Tree finally came down. The little acorn that sprouted before the United States became a nation had stood quietly as history marched below its spreading branches. The current grove of trees includes many white oaks that grew from the acorns dropped by the “Witness Tree.” The liminal vision of time marching on and time standing still is captured in the annual meeting of the horse show and the perpetual shade of the ancient trees witnessed by this magnificent tree.

Today, the Upperville Colt & Horse Show is as vibrant as ever. The land is now owned by the horse show’s non-profit organization. A tree committee oversees care of the older trees and carefully plans the addition of new trees on both the hunter side and the jumper side of the show grounds. The long-time friends of the show are careful to maintain the traditional look of the original show grounds under the old-growth trees while adding new features and international appeal to the jumper rings and hospitality tents. Unfortunately, the Corona virus caused the 2020 show to be suspended but the time was well-used to improve the show-ground footing, provide upgrades to the buildings and fencing and, of course, to care for the health of the trees.

And for the future? Environmentalists are touting the benefits of trees for carbon fixing and water filtration. The younger generation want a planet that is verdant and alive with nature. Our horses are a link to the natural world and bring new people out of doors to enjoy beautiful rolling fields and the swaying branches of trees. And the trees of the Upperville Colt and Pony Show are in good hands. The future looks both bright and well-shaded! And new witness trees will mark the passage of time over the centuries to come.

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