

# NOT BORING MEDIA

## THE TREE THAT OWNS ITSELF

High-Interest Nonfiction Reading Passage

### WHAT'S INCLUDED

- ✓ Reading Passage ✓ Comprehension Questions
- ✓ Answer Key ✓ Teacher Guide

GRADES 4-6 • LEXILE ~750L • DOK LEVELS 1-4

*Reading they'll actually do.*

## NOT BORING MEDIA — TERMS OF USE

### TERMS OF USE

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### WHAT'S INCLUDED

- ✓ High-interest nonfiction reading passage (300-400 words)
- ✓ 6 comprehension questions spanning DOK levels 1-4
- ✓ Complete answer key with explanations
- ✓ Teacher guide with standards, pacing, and extensions

Questions or feedback? Leave a review or message us through TPT!

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Reading they'll actually do.

# THE TREE THAT OWNS ITSELF

In Athens, Georgia, there stands an oak tree that legally owns the land it grows on. According to local legend and historical records, the tree was granted ownership of itself and the eight feet of land surrounding its trunk by its original owner, William Henry Jackson, sometime in the early 1800s. Jackson apparently loved the tree so much that he wanted to protect it forever, even after his death.

Jackson supposedly drew up an official deed transferring property ownership from himself to the tree itself. The document reportedly read: 'I, William H. Jackson, of the county of Clarke, of the one part, and the oak tree of the other part, convey unto the said oak tree entire possession of itself and of all land within eight feet of it on all sides.'

Legal scholars have long debated whether a tree can actually own property under any interpretation of law. Most legal experts believe the original deed, even if it genuinely existed, would be technically invalid—property can only be owned by legal persons, which includes humans, corporations, and certain other entities, but not trees. However, the citizens of Athens have treated the arrangement as real and binding for nearly two centuries, regardless of its technical legal status.

The original tree, sadly, died in 1942, brought down by a combination of wind damage, root decay, and old age after standing for several hundred years. But the people of Athens weren't willing to let the tradition end. They planted a new tree grown from one of the original's acorns in the exact same spot. This 'Son of the Tree That Owns Itself' continues the tradition today.

The tree has become a beloved tourist attraction and an enduring symbol of Athens. Whether the deed was ever technically real, and whether it would survive a legal challenge, matters far less than what the tree represents: a community's deep desire to protect something they value from forces that might otherwise destroy it.

The Tree That Owns Itself raises fascinating questions about property, legal personhood, and how far people will go to preserve what they love.

Word Count: 350 | Lexile: ~750L | Grades 4-6 | Source: Atlas Obscura

## COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**1 Who gave the tree ownership of itself?**

- A) The mayor
- B) William Henry Jackson
- C) The president
- D) No one

**2 What happened to the original tree?**

- A) Still alive
- B) Cut down
- C) Died in 1942 from damage and age
- D) Moved

**3 Why do legal scholars doubt the deed?**

- A) Jackson didn't exist
- B) Trees are not legal persons and can't own property
- C) Deed was written incorrectly
- D) Georgia didn't allow ownership

**4 How did the community respond when the original died?**

- A) They gave up
- B) They planted a new tree from its acorn
- C) They paved over the spot
- D) They sued someone

**5** **What does the tree represent to the community?**

- A) A legal precedent
- B) A desire to protect valued things regardless of technicalities
- C) A valuable lumber source
- D) A traffic hazard

**6** **What broader question does this raise?**

- A) All trees should own land
- B) Whether legal categories should expand to protect natural entities
- C) Property law is useless
- D) Trees are smarter than humans

## ANSWER KEY

### The Tree That Owns Itself

- 1.** B) William Henry Jackson

*DOK 1 — Recall.*

- 2.** C) Died in 1942 from damage and age

*DOK 1 — Recall.*

- 3.** B) Trees are not legal persons and can't own property

*DOK 2 — Inference.*

- 4.** B) They planted a new tree from its acorn

*DOK 2 — Inference.*

- 5.** B) A desire to protect valued things regardless of technicalities

*DOK 3 — Analysis.*

- 6.** B) Whether legal categories should expand to protect natural entities

*DOK 4 — Extended Thinking.*

## TEACHER GUIDE

The Tree That Owns Itself

### STANDARDS ALIGNMENT

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.4.1 — Refer to details and examples in a text
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.4 — Determine meaning of words and phrases
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.8 — Explain how author uses evidence
- NGSS — Connections to scientific practices
- C3 Framework — Historical thinking skills

### PACING OPTIONS

- Quick Read (10-15 min): Passage + questions 1-4
- Standard (20-25 min): Full passage + all questions
- Deep Dive (35-40 min): Add discussion + extension

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Should nature have legal rights? What would this mean practically?
- The deed is probably legally invalid, but the community treats it as real. What does this suggest about the power of stories?
- How should we protect things we value that don't fit legal categories?

### EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

- Research the 'rights of nature' movement and examples of legal personhood for natural entities.
- Write a deed transferring ownership of something to itself.
- Create arguments for and against giving legal rights to a natural landmark.

### DIFFERENTIATION

- Struggling: Pre-teach vocabulary, partner reading
- Advanced: Add research, compare to related events
- ELL: Visual supports, pre-teach context

### SOURCE

- Atlas Obscura / National Geographic