

= Webster Sycamore =

The Webster Sycamore ( alternatively known as the Webster Springs Sycamore and the Big Sycamore Tree ) was an American sycamore ( *Platanus occidentalis* ) in the U.S. state of West Virginia . Long recognized for its size , the Webster Sycamore was the largest living American sycamore tree in West Virginia until its felling in 2010 . The tree stood approximately 4 @. @ 5 miles ( 7 @. @ 2 km ) east of Webster Springs in Webster County , in a moist flood plain along the banks of the Back Fork Elk River , a tributary stream of the Elk River .

The Webster Sycamore reached a tree height measurement of 112 feet ( 34 m ) , a tree crown measurement of 90 feet ( 27 m ) , and a circumference of 25 @. @ 75 feet ( 7 @. @ 85 m ) at breast height . In 1955 , the American Forests Association declared the tree the largest of its species in the United States . It only held the title for three weeks , before the association identified a larger American sycamore in Maryland . Despite losing its national title , the sycamore remained the largest American sycamore in West Virginia . Following a 1963 survey of large trees in West Virginia , the Webster Sycamore was named the second @-@ largest tree after a white oak ( *Quercus alba* ) in Randolph County .

The land upon which the Webster Sycamore was located was owned by the Purdee and Curtin Lumber Company , which spared the tree during its lumber operations in the area during the 1950s . West Virginia University biologist W. H. Gillespie averred that the tree stood as " a memorial of the original virgin forest " . The Purdee and Curtin Lumber Company preserved the land surrounding the tree as a park , known as Big Sycamore Park . During the annual events Webster Wildwater Weekend in April and the Webster County Nature Weekend in May , hiking excursions were led to the Webster Sycamore .

On September 3 , 2007 , a malicious fire was set in the base of the Webster Sycamore 's trunk . The tree survived the blaze , but suffered irreparable damage . The West Virginia Division of Forestry performed a safety and risk assessment of the tree , and determined that structural mitigation was not feasible , and that the Webster Sycamore was to be " considered an extreme hazard " . In January 2008 , a 17 @-@ year @-@ old suspect from Bergoo was formally charged with a felony count of arson for setting fire to the tree . Following the fire , experts recommended that the Webster Sycamore be felled or fenced off as a safety measure . According to the Division of Forestry , the tree was finally brought down during the summer of 2010 . At the time of its death , the tree was estimated to be over 500 years old .

= = Geography and setting = =

Prior to the arrival of European American settlers and explorers , the Allegheny Mountain Range of the Appalachian Mountains was overlaid with old @-@ growth forests consisting predominantly of deciduous hardwood trees , which were characterized by individual trees of enormous size and girth . The American sycamore ( *Platanus occidentalis* ) was one of the species of trees that proliferated throughout these old @-@ growth forests . American sycamores can grow at least 100 feet ( 30 m ) in height and the species is distributed throughout the Eastern United States . It usually thrives in moist soils along streams , especially in sandy loam soils . American sycamores are a dominant species in bottomland and riparian forests . The species is present throughout every county in West Virginia , and is most abundant along the state 's streams .

Formerly West Virginia 's largest American sycamore , the Webster Sycamore ( alternatively known as the Webster Springs Sycamore and the Big Sycamore Tree ) was located in a moist flood plain along the banks of the Back Fork Elk River , a tributary stream of the Elk River , in Webster County . The tree was located approximately 4 @. @ 5 miles ( 7 @. @ 2 km ) east of Webster Springs .

= = Dimensions , age , and recognition = =

= = = Dimensions and age = = =

Various measurements were taken of the tree during the latter part of its lifetime ; however , measurements of the circumference differ . In 1955 , the tree 's circumference at breast height , when measured 4 @. @ 5 feet ( 1 @. @ 4 m ) from the ground , was 24 feet 8 inches ( 7 @. @ 52 m ) . At a tree fork 45 feet ( 14 m ) from the ground , its trunk measured 4 @. @ 33 feet ( 1 @. @ 32 m ) in diameter . The trunk stood to a height of 82 feet ( 25 m ) , where it had been decapitated by a previous windstorm . The tree 's horizontal canopy spread measured approximately 75 feet ( 23 m ) in width . The lowest limb of the sycamore was 23 @. @ 5 feet ( 7 @. @ 2 m ) from the ground , and measured 2 feet ( 0 @. @ 61 m ) in diameter . According to official measurements in 1963 , however , the diameter at breast height of the Webster Sycamore , when measured 4 @. @ 5 feet ( 1 @. @ 4 m ) from the ground , was more than 7 feet ( 2 @. @ 1 m ) and its circumference measured 23 feet ( 7 @. @ 0 m ) . The sycamore was estimated to be at least 120 feet ( 37 m ) in height . Its trunk measured approximately 5 feet ( 1 @. @ 5 m ) in diameter when measured 90 feet ( 27 m ) from the forest floor .

According to the West Virginia Division of Forestry and West Virginia Humanities Council in 2002 and the West Virginia Big Tree Program in 2011 , the Webster Sycamore was the largest American sycamore in West Virginia , with a height of 112 feet ( 34 m ) , a tree crown measurement of 90 feet ( 27 m ) , and a circumference of 25 @. @ 75 feet ( 7 @. @ 85 m ) at breast height .

By the time of its felling in 2010 , the Webster Sycamore was estimated to be over 500 years in age .

= = = Other physical characteristics = = =

In 1955 , an eastern hemlock ( *Tsuga canadensis* ) measuring 5 @. @ 5 feet ( 1 @. @ 7 m ) in height grew from a rotten knothole in the tree 's main south fork . By 1963 , the hemlock that had taken root in the tree 's south fork remained . In describing the growth of the hemlock from an upper tree fork of the Webster Sycamore , writer William C. Blizzard referenced the idiom of Pelion piled upon Ossa . No tree hollows or visible outer blemishes were reported on the sycamore at that time ; however , by 2007 , the tree 's trunk had developed an opening into its hollow center at its base , which allowed visitors to step inside of it .

= = = Recognition = = =

The Webster Sycamore had long been a local landmark on account of its age and size , and was known locally as being the world 's largest American sycamore . By 1920 , author Edwin Lincoln Mosely had included an image and a brief description of a similar American sycamore near Webster Springs ? probably the Webster Sycamore ? in his book *Trees , Stars and Birds : A Book of Outdoor Science* .

It was in 1955 that the tree won recognition from the American Forests Association as the largest tree of its species in the United States . It only held the title for three weeks before a larger American sycamore in Maryland was discovered and recognized by the association . Despite losing its national title , the sycamore remained the largest American sycamore in West Virginia .

During the West Virginia Centennial " big @-@ tree contest " of 1963 , the honorific of the state 's largest tree went to a white oak ( *Quercus alba* ) near Huttonsville in Randolph County , thus beating out the Webster Sycamore . The white oak measured 11 @. @ 25 feet ( 3 @. @ 43 m ) in diameter . An elm ( *Ulmus* ) tree in Putnam County also bested the Webster Sycamore at 8 feet ( 2 @. @ 4 m ) in diameter .

During a speech to the United States Senate in honor of West Virginia Day on June 20 , 2004 , U.S. Senator Robert C. Byrd mentioned the Webster Sycamore while boasting of " the biggest and best of West Virginia " .

= = Preservation = =

The land upon which the Webster Sycamore was located was owned by the Purdee and Curtin Lumber Company of nearby Webster Springs . The company spared the tree in the 1950s , during its lumber operations in the area . According to West Virginia University biologist W. H. Gillespie in Castanea , the tree stood as " a memorial of the original virgin forest " . The Purdee and Curtin Lumber Company preserved the land surrounding the tree as a park , known as Big Sycamore Park . The park was utilized by campers , and by tourists visiting the tree . A swinging bridge across the Back Fork of Elk River provided access to the tree and the park .

In 2002 , the Webster Sycamore was one of five trees nominated by the West Virginia Humanities Council to the National Register of Historic Trees , a registry of historic trees maintained by the American Forests Historic Tree Nursery .

During the annual events Webster Wildwater Weekend in April and the Webster County Nature Weekend in May , hiking excursions were led to the Webster Sycamore , in addition to the nearby Three Falls of Back Fork .

= = Vandalism and death = =

On the afternoon of September 3 , 2007 , a malicious fire was set in the base of the Webster Sycamore 's trunk . The fire burned up through the hollow center of the tree 's hollow bole . The Webster Springs Fire Department , Webster County Sheriff 's Department , and the West Virginia Division of Forestry provided a joint response to the fire , and remained on the scene for several hours until the flames were out . The tree survived the blaze but suffered irreparable damage .

Initially following the fire , the tree 's vicinity was closed for the investigation and for an assessment of the extent of damage and safety risk . On September 27 , 2007 , the West Virginia Division of Forestry 's urban forestry coordinator Bob Hannah and technical specialist Jennifer Brashears engaged in an inspection and evaluation of the tree to provide recommendations . In their report , Hannah and Brashears assessed that the tree 's " severe structural weakness " was not caused by the fire , and instead highlighted the tree 's " size , age , and severity of defects " as the cause of its instability . They did , however , assess that the fire may have caused further mortality of the tree 's cambium . They used various measurements developed by the International Society of Arboriculture and the United States Forest Service to formulate a tree risk assessment . At the time of their investigation , the tree 's diameter at breast height was 8 @. @ 42 feet ( 2 @. @ 57 m ) , with 27 % of the trunk consisting of open space . Hannah and Brashears also found that one @- @ third of the lower trunk and root crown demonstrated callus formation and no new growth , but instead severe decay and peeling bark . Hannah and Brashears further determined that structural mitigation was not feasible , and that the Webster Sycamore was to be " considered an extreme hazard " and the public should be " excluded from its striking zone through fencing and signage " .

The investigation into the fire was led by the Division of Forestry 's chief investigator , Sam Butcher . The investigation lasted four months , and once a suspect had been identified , the case was turned over to the Webster County prosecuting attorney 's office . Butcher credited Art Yagel , a Division of Forestry investigator , for bringing the investigation to its conclusion . In January 2008 , a 17 @- @ year @- @ old suspect from Bergoo was formally charged with a felony count of arson for setting fire to the tree , while a second juvenile was also charged with a misdemeanor for providing false information to investigators . The suspect was also charged with misdemeanor counts of providing false information to conservation officers , possession of marijuana , and underage consumption of alcohol . The second juvenile was not involved in the setting of the fire .

Following the fire , experts recommended that the Webster Sycamore be felled or fenced off as a security measure . According to the Division of Forestry , the tree was finally brought down during the summer of 2010 .

In recognition of the tree , the Health Policy Division of the Office of the West Virginia Insurance Commissioner considered the name " Sycamore Healthcare Exchange " as one of the naming options for West Virginia 's health insurance marketplace in 2011 , following the passage of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act .