

## The Wilson Oak —1720-2020

*In memoriam*

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BOLAR — The sturdy Wilson swamp oak, age 300 years, toppled over last month, in a meadow in Bolar, where it had stood stately behind the Midway Grocery store.

A member of the birch family, it was born in the early 1700s, the acorn of another swamp oak, on a forested farm, growing in a marshy area next to a stream feeding the burbling Jackson River nearby.

It grew to 80-90 feet, untouched, becoming a landmark at the border between Bath and Highland counties along U.S. 220, and witness to remarkable, sometimes tragic, events that unfolded in that valley.

Its early years were unremarkable, growing fast as American Indians came to the area. Its bark was similar to regular white oaks. Every autumn, its leaves turned yellow-brown, sometimes red, and it bore its fruit, penduncled acorns, which matured about six months after pollination but never quite took root.

The early Americans didn't take the oak down for wood while they built forts in the area. The land where it stood was still in Bath County then, as Highland hadn't been formed yet.

Like the early people, the swamp oak was also a pioneer — few of its kind put down roots this far south. But it found the perfect broad stream valley and low-lying field where it could flourish.

The tree was in full glory by the time the Wilson family settled there in the 1750s and built a cabin in its shade.

It was standing there in 1770, when descendant William Wilson, Highland's first Presbyterian elder, settled near the mouth of Bolar Run on the river.

By the time the Wilson family planted their own roots near the tree, it had become a strong, safe protector, loved by the children, and admired by adults, especially when its full crown bloomed in glorious beauty each fall.

It saw heartache, too. It was witness and sentinel when tragedy struck the Wilson family in 1763, as they prepared to build a new home. That day, an infamous one in this area's history, members of the Shawnee tribe, led by Chief Cornstalk, approached the Wilsons' son, Thomas, who was down at the stream grinding corn.

The Wilsons were preparing a big meal for a barn-raising. Two sisters were washing linen by the riverbank, and two others, Susan and Barbara, were in the cabin under the oak, ironing and cooking.

Mrs. Wilson walked down to the river to check on her daughters when the Shawnee attacked, striking her with a tomahawk and severely wounding her arm. Young Barbara ran toward the sturdy oak, but the Shawnee knocked her down at the base of the tree, fracturing her skull. John, the oldest son, arrived with help and drove off the tribe, but found his mother, three other sisters, and younger brother all missing.

A search party following a trail of blood found his mother the next morning. Later, he learned brother Thomas was taken to Ohio, and died in captivity, never to enjoy the oak's

shade again. Sisters Margaret and Elizabeth escaped and hid in the woods, and the family remained on the farm, but never recovered from that day's events.

In 1814, the oak stood proudly as Stony Run Church became loosely organized as a missionary outpost of Windy Cove Presbyterian.

More tragedy struck the area when Civil War erupted, which delayed the completion of the new Stony Run Church that had been under way. The oak stood patiently, and the church was finally erected in 1856, where Bolar Ruritan Club now stands, and those gathering for services could admire the grand tree from the knoll across the road for another century.

Barbara Wilson, who had escaped toward the tree as a young girl, died in 1825. But in 1822, three years before her death, she freed all the slaves in her possession who had also loved the tree, including a five-month-old white slave named Sarah Jane.

In addition, Barbara conveyed 698 acres of the Wilson homestead to the Eagle brothers. A suit was filed by John Stephenson, the husband of Barbara's niece, Jane, to set aside that conveyance; it was decided in 1831, giving John title to the property, including the massive oak. In November 1841, the parties formally conveyed their interests to Jane Wilson Stephenson, who was born in the Wilson homestead under the tree.

The oak stood when Adam Stephenson, constable in Bath County, helped establish Highland County in 1847.

It was still standing strong in 1850 when they came to bury Highland's first sheriff, Washington Stephenson, at the church cemetery across the way.

When Jane died in March 1853, all of the real estate went to five Stephenson sons, including the homestead where the oak remained. The tree had been there when the Wilsons completed their new house, and was still standing when the home was dismantled in 1895.

In its old age, the mighty oak stood as diphtheria ravaged families up and down the valley; the Stephenson family was hit especially hard in 1903. Two of three young sons, Wallace and Robert, died at the home on the same day, survived by their six siblings, who recovered. As reported in these pages that year, "Owing to the distressing situation, hurried preparations were made for the burial, and in the solitude and fading twilight of the Sabbath evening, the two little brothers were carried from the stricken home and placed side by side in one grave."

They were six and three years old.

In its later years, under ownership of the Bratton family, the grandfatherly tree was there when the Lexington Presbytery donated the church and land, except for the cemetery, to the Bolar Ruritans, at the family's request in 1968.

Then it stood every year of the Maple Festival, as throngs of visitors drove along U.S. 220, many of them stopping across the street at the Ruritan Hall to enjoy pancakes and enjoy the valley view from the front yard.

While scientists from several universities had studied the tree's great stamina over the years, it was in 2008 that fame came to the old oak.

Photographer Robert Llewellyn of Charlottesville came to document it for a beautiful book, "Remarkable Trees of Virginia," by Nancy Ross Hugo and Jeff Kirwan, a Virginia Tech forester.

Kirwan declared it a "superlative" example of a swamp white oak — the state champion, the largest of its species in Virginia.

While some old county lore claimed the tree had been used for hangings, those rumors were never true. It provided nothing but sweet shade and color, and a reliable landmark for weary travelers north and south.

As the book stated, “Although now hollow and in decline, the tree still commands attention and dominates the land around with the authority of a tree that has owned its spot for centuries, and outlived events more numerous and historic than memory can recount.”

While there were various threats in the form of disease, lightning, and the value of its wood, none seemed more dire than when a gas pipeline was proposed to run through its meadow, surely putting an end to its deep root system, if it were allowed to remain standing at all. It was in the “blast zone,” as citizens pointed out, erecting a sign nearby to warn people of the threat.

In the last years of its life, when the oak belonged to the Bratton family, the late Sandy Bratton was its biggest fan. Sandy nurtured and protected it, often spreading a tarp under its branches to collect its few remaining acorns for re-planting to assure its progeny could endure on the Jackson River Valley farmstead. All but one of those little shoots did not survive.

Last month, when a vicious windstorm blew through the Highlands, the weakened tree collapsed into the wet field.

It is survived by one sapling, age 4, now about 10 feet tall, still protected by the Bratton family.

Those desiring are urged to send memorial donations in honor of the tree to the Bath County Historical Society or Highland County Historical Society, as these two nonprofit organizations continue to preserve the legacy of this area, documenting the 300 years of history as witnessed by the Wilson oak.