

Connection with the Past

If Trees Could Talk

By Malcolm Tibbetts



Woodturning inspiration comes from many different sources. The classic shapes reproduced here were inspired by George Washington himself. And what a tale it is.

William Jewell, founder of Historical Woods of America, recently invited me to use some of his historical stock. Over the last few years, Bill has preserved the historical legacy of many of America's "witness trees" that grew at the sites of government state houses, local and national landmarks, and colonial mansions.

Much of his wood has a presidential connection with locations such as Washington's Mount Vernon and Jefferson's Monticello. Because of age, disease, or storm damage, lumber and turning stock from these trees become available.

The results of my efforts are shown *above*; the water pitcher (known as a guglet) and the washbasin were assembled from woods that have a connection with our first president.

Woodburning artist Don Worden (woodburningsbydon.com) created the pyrography designs.

Tree planted in 1788

The majority of wood used is horse-chestnut (*Aesculus hippocastanum*), but it's not just any horse-chestnut. There is abundant documentation that this tree was actually planted by dear old George. An April 2, 1788, entry in Washington's diary reads, "Transplanted from a box in the garden, thirteen plants of horse-chestnut into the shrubberies by the garden walls."

After approximately 219 years of life, this horse-chestnut tree in Fredericksburg, Virginia, was brought to the ground in 2006 for safety reasons. Bill Jewell was right there directing its removal and reclamation.

Tree tales

If those logs could only tell stories, we would hear about how Benjamin Franklin, one of our founding fathers, brought horse-chestnut seeds to Pennsylvania from England. And we would hear how Washington acquired seeds from America's foremost botanist, Philadelphian John Bartram. The timber could tell us how this tree shaded our president's mother as she strolled from her

Fredericksburg home to her daughter's home down the road.

At a relatively young age (70-plus years), what did this horse-chestnut tree observe as Civil War soldiers marched into battle beneath its spreading branches?

When asked about the wood that he rescues, Bill Jewell said, "These national treasures that I reclaim are an extremely important connection to America's past—not to mention being a very valuable resource that can be utilized and enjoyed by future generations."

In 1931, Martin L. Davey, a well-known horticulturist and U.S. congressman, came to the tree's rescue. Davey and his team removed the



Dawn Bonner of the Mount Vernon Ladies Association supplied this photo of a Chinese ceramic guglet and basin believed to have been used by George Washington.

fungus-infected tree core and injected two tons of concrete, which provided structural strength, thereby giving the tree 65 years of additional life (see photo at *right*).

Rescue efforts in 1930s

This was around the time of Washington's bicentennial (1932), and there was great interest and effort put forth toward preserving this national treasure. Indeed, the stories that we would have heard.

As part of the effort to save the tree, the Rev. Forrest J. Prettyman, an ex-chaplain in the U.S. Senate, wrote a poem about the horse-



A 1930s postcard shows the last surviving horse-chestnut tree planted in Fredericksburg by George Washington.

Own a Piece of History

This pair of turnings, along with several other pieces by well-known artists using historical woods, will be offered at the Richmond banquet auction to benefit the AAW Education Opportunity Grants program.

For more about Bill Jewell's efforts, visit historicalwoods.com.



A 1931 newspaper clipping shows Rep. Davey inside the horse-chestnut tree.

chestnut in Fredericksburg. The last verse of his poem reads:

*Cherish this tree, ye people
of his boyhood's home;
For it through circling years
of history has grown;
And still through stormy blast
and shining sun
Keeps ever fresh the memory
of Washington.*

In 1932, many events paid tribute to Washington on the bicentennial of his birth, but undoubtedly the most lasting was a nationwide tree-planting effort. Millions of trees were planted in his honor, and school children were educated about our country's roots.

In every period of Washington's life, trees played an important part. His diary is full of his farming and gardening activities, as well as his tree planting and experiments at fertilization.

Additional historic timber

In addition to wood from this famous horse-chestnut tree, Bill Jewell provided cherry from Ferry Farm, George's boyhood home and the site of the famous (and now debunked) cherry-tree-chopping story. Maybe the cherry in this newly turned piece could pass on the real story surrounding young George's newly acquired hatchet.

The dark brown wood in the segmented pieces is walnut salvaged from the property of Washington's whiskey distillery.

The bottom of the washbasin includes a woodburning of Washington's gristmill on a piece of sycamore from the site of Washington's historic mill. It's likely that Washington routinely tied his horse to this tree as he made his frequent visits to the mill. Can't you just imagine the local farmers relaxing under this tree after unloading their wagons of wheat and awaiting the great stone wheel to do its thing?

A mystique surrounds the experience of turning historical woods. I hope my effort pays proper tribute to our country's first superhero.

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Another famous horse-chestnut tree

As I researched this article, I discovered that there is another famous horse-chestnut tree. It still stands (barely) outside the window of the house in Amsterdam where Anne Frank wrote her diary. Anne Frank and her family suffered more than two years of hiding before being captured by the Nazis. Anne wrote numerous entries regarding how this tree had provided comfort and a connection to the outside world. What kind of stories could that tree tell? The Dutch people are currently doing everything possible to keep this tree alive, just as Americans fought for Washington's horse-chestnut tree more than 70 years ago.

—Malcolm Tibbetts