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Barstow, Josiah Whitney

The trees of Flushing

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The Trees of Flushing.

By Dr. J. W. Barstow.

[An address delivered before the Good Citizenship League May 9th, 1893.]

I HAVE been asked by your committee to say a few words to the ladies of the "Good Citizenship League," who have so resolutely and so ably devoted themselves to the cause of public improvement and to the protection of the best interests of the town which we all love so well.

My subject is one not only of great interest to myself, but it is one of vital interest and importance to every one of our citizens. It is "The Trees of Flushing," and if I can, by any words of mine, show our citizens what treasures they possess, if I can encourage a greater interest in studying and enjoying and in protecting the glorious inheritance which our fathers have given us, I shall be most glad of the privilege which you have afforded me.

Certainly, the material afforded for study here is abundant; the opportunities for such study are exceptional—and these advantages belong to every lover of nature in Flushing and especially to those who believe with Bryant, that "The groves were God's first temples."

There can be no doubt that Flushing is remarkable for its trees—their vast numbers, their rare beauty and their unusual variety. I think I shall not exaggerate when I say that not more than one in ten of our Flushing residents are aware that this very town is more remarkable for its tree treasures than any other town in the United States, and probably more so than any of its size and population in the civilized world.

The nurseries, of course, have given it this pre-eminence.

I have taken some pains to establish a correct estimate of the actual tree growth of Flushing. The result has been astonishing to myself and I know it will be equally so to every member of the League.

I find represented within the town limits of Flushing one hundred and forty genera of trees. From three to twenty and even more species belong to each genus, and thus we have on a careful computation nearly 2,000 individual varieties of trees standing today within the limits of the town of Flushing. We include, of course, in this estimate not only our native varieties, but those which have been introduced and acclimated, and which are represen-

tatives of every continent and nearly every corner of the globe.

The Huguenot emigrants who settled in Flushing in 1685, brought with them from France many choice varieties of fruit trees, and finding the soil and climate congenial engaged to a moderate extent in the cultivation of fruit trees for sale, and thus, even at that early day, Flushing became noted for the good quality of its fruit and for the excellence of its trees. As late as 1839 a few of the French fruit trees were still standing, but the families of the French planters had long before become extinct.

Thus, for more than two centuries, has Flushing been a nursery garden and a centre from which has radiated a supply of choice trees, shrubs and plants which have been distributed throughout the length and breadth of this and other lands.

Until about 1840 Flushing had almost a monopoly of the tree growing interest, but in these later years nursery gardening as an industry has grown immensely, and has been widely extended over other states, both north and west.

Five generations ago, in 1732, the first regular nursery in Flushing was established by the ancestor of the Prince family, on ground now occupied by Clement & Bloodgood's store. Here William Prince and his brother Benjamin planted their first trees and laid out their first garden. This comprised a tract of eight acres which gradually grew in extent until in 1830 it covered sixty acres of what is now the greater part of Flushing village. The original Prince homestead was a house which (until it was torn down in 1879) stood in Lawrence street near the stables of Walter B. Lawrence. That was a historic mansion, occupied during the Revolution both as American and British headquarters successively, the temporary home of General Washington, and also many years later as the resting place of William IV., then Duke of Clarence, while visiting Flushing.

This garden was named by the elder Prince "the Linnean nursery" in honor of the Swedish botanist Linneus, and grew speedily in fame and value. That its merits as a choice collection were recog-

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nized even by our national foe is shown by the fact that during the British occupation in 1777, the commanding officer, Lord Howe, placed a guard at the gates with strict orders that the Linnean nurseries should not be invaded or disturbed.

Prince's nursery was thus the pioneer. Then followed early in the century the establishment of the Bloodgood nursery, about 1798, by James Bloodgood, part of which is now the nursery of Murray & Keene, near Broadway station. Then followed, in order of time the Parsons' nursery, established in 1838 by Samuel Parsons. Mr. Parsons died in 1841, and his sons, the well-known Parsons brothers, have since made their nurseries famous in two hemispheres. Parsons' nursery is as well known today in Kew and in Versailles as in the City of New York.

To the intelligent forethought of the elder Prince, and to the generous liberality of the Parsons brothers, Flushing today owes her grand avenues of shade trees and also her fame as the chief arboretum of the Atlantic coast.

The other nurseries, which we may mention as part of the tree growing history of Flushing, are the Higgin's nursery, which was on the road to Bayside and at one time was one of notable merit, and the Kimber and the Winter nurseries, all of which have long since disappeared.

It is interesting to know and to remember when and by whom our different streets were planted with lovely shade trees which we are today enjoying.

Nearly all the trees in lower Main street and all those in Bridge street and Linneus street were planted early in the century by William Prince or came from his nursery. The trees in Bowne avenue and adjoining streets were planted by the Parsons brothers in 1848 to 1852. The specially fine shade trees (many of them specimen trees) in Broadway, State street Brewster avenue and Parsons avenue were also planted by the Parsons brothers. The two rows of tulip trees in Parsons avenue were planted by Mr. Samuel B. Parsons 40 years ago. The trees in Lawrence street, it is understood, came from Prince's nursery, and were planted by the late John W. Lawrence and by his father.

All honor to the noble citizens who planned for posterity, and whose names are thus associated with the improvement and adornment of the well shaded streets of Flushing!

Of specimen trees we have many notable instances. By specimen trees I mean examples of fine growth, development and shapeliness in any individual tree of whatever kind.

Of tulip trees we may mention two magnificent specimens in the grounds of

Mr. Robert Parsons, which give the name to his residence, at once appropriate and sonorous. These trees are seventy-five feet high, three feet and more in diameter at the base, and they are, without doubt, the finest tulip trees on Long Island. This noble pair did not come from any nursery, but "were to the manor born."

The European Linden.—The finest specimen of this familiar tree is to be found in the grounds of Mr. Joseph K. Murray. It is a perfect cone, a beautiful object to the eye and a striking feature of the landscape. In the adjoining nursery of Messrs. Murray and Keene we may mention a cut-leaved drooping birch of exceptional size and beauty. This is without doubt the finest specimen of the kind in Flushing, perhaps in the United States.

The Beeches.—The many varieties of this tree in Flushing are mostly imported from England and Norway, though some of our native beeches are standing and growing where nature planted them, on the hillside beyond the creek and in rear of the old Remsen place. The finest specimen of the English beech is found on the grounds of Mr. S. B. Parsons. A cut-leaved beech also standing near in the same grounds, is a noteworthy specimen and a very beautiful tree. Also a drooping beech, in the same enclosure, is to be mentioned as a very choice specimen. But of the drooping beech the largest and most perfect specimen to be found in the United States is in the grounds belonging to Mr. Jackson and in the rear of the residence of Mrs. Leavitt. Twenty years ago, Sir Joseph Hooker, director of the Kew Gardens, pronounced this tree the finest of its kind, probably in the world.

Another very perfect specimen of the same kind, though much smaller, can be seen in the grounds of Mr. James A. Renwick.

The maples, in all their many varieties, constitute a large part of the shade trees of Flushing. Of these varieties six are native and some of them are very desirable, affording a dense shade in their summer growth and the chief source of the wealth of autumnal color which dazzles the eye of the stranger who visits the town in October. Of the imported maples the Japanese is the most conspicuous. Under the skillful Japanese culture, innumerable hybrids have been developed, and though dwarfed in size, the exquisite shapes and colors of the foliage have rendered the Japanese maples most popular and valuable. These were first imported by the Parsons brothers in 1854.

The English Elm.—The best specimens of this beautiful tree, next to those on Boston Common, were growing in Flushing until nine years ago, when they were all attacked by the elm beetle, *Galerucua*, and have now substantially disappeared

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from Long Island. The American elm shows some good specimens around the park and in Broadway, but the planting of elms has been much less common on Long Island than in the towns of New England, where the growth is more spontaneous and more vigorous, probably from differences of soil and climate.

There are also certain trees in Flushing which are interesting from their rarity. Of them we may note the Southern cypress, a very beautiful row of which is now standing in Broadway opposite the residence of Mr. Littlejohn. They were planted by Mr. S. B. Parsons forty-five years ago.

I wish especially to call attention to a double row of the Chinese *Taxodium* on Parsons avenue, corner of Broadway, which were planted by Mr. Robert Parsons in 1850. This rare tree belongs to the cedars and it is remarkable for its symmetry of form and feathery foliage. No such group of this uncommon tree is to be found, as far as I know, in the United States, and it is hoped that such a unique collection may be cherished and protected with the utmost care.

The Cedars of Lebanon.—Two majestic specimens of this rare tree are standing in Flushing, one in the grounds of the Prince house and another in the old Bloodgood nursery, in the field opposite Mr. Wickham's, on the road to Bayside. These were planted about the same time and doubtless came from Prince's nursery. Their estimated age is 90 years.

Of nut trees, Flushing can also boast of a great variety. Besides our own native chestnuts, walnuts and hickories we have the Spanish and Japan chestnuts, the butternut, the Madeira nut, the pecan nut, the bitter almond, and the English filbert. Nearly all these produce their fruit in Flushing from year to year.

To the infinite variety of fruit trees which are to be found in Flushing both in the nurseries and in private grounds we may add two rare and native fruits, the pawpaw and the persimmon. Both these are of southern origin, but both are hardy in this latitude.

Of the rare and beautiful flowering trees in Flushing the list is not small. Aside from our own native dogwood and the exquisite Japanese flowering apple, peach and cherry, the chief glory belongs to the magnolia, of which five are native varieties and the others are chiefly Chinese and Japanese. These latter were originally imported by the Parsons brothers and distributed from their nursery.

Of the vast and bewildering variety of evergreen trees which may be counted by hundreds in the private grounds and in the nurseries of Flushing, I have not time to speak, I can only refer those who are interested in this wonderful department

of Nature's handiwork to the Kissena nurseries, where these exquisite trees may be studied and enjoyed as representatives of nearly every section of the globe from Maine to Oregon and from the Colorado canons stretching around the world to the slope of the Himalayas; a marvelous display of Nature's resources which can hardly be matched by any similar collection on earth.

But any description of the "Trees of Flushing" would be incomplete without an allusion to what is one great arboreal feature of the town, and historically at least one of our greatest treasures—our primeval trees. By primeval trees, I need hardly say, are meant prehistoric trees which antedate the settlement and in this case even the discovery of this continent; trees that were standing and flourishing long before Columbus caught the first sight of this western world.

Of primeval trees we have still standing in our village three magnificent specimens; three sturdy white oaks, contemporaries of the once celebrated "Fox oak," and doubtless once a part of the same group. Of them the largest stands in the middle of Parsons avenue opposite the residence of Mr. Eadie. This was spared years ago by the noble conservatism of Mr. S. B. Parsons father, when certain vandal trustees and ignorant roadmasters were bent on its destruction, because, as they said, "That old tree is in the way!"

This grand old veteran was critically examined in 1873 by the late Professor Asa Gray, who then estimated its age to be 640 years. If Dr. Gray's great experience in such estimates may be accepted as reliable then the acorn from which sprang our venerable friend was dropped in the reign of Henry III, of England, about a score of years after King John met the barons at Runnymede and signed the Magna Charta of England's liberties.

It is necessary to ask the ladies of the Good Citizenship league, is it necessary to ask the boys of Flushing, who must shortly be our citizens and trustees, the question: "Is such a tree worth cherishing?"

The other two primeval oaks stand not far from their stately brother above described, but are less conspicuous. One is in a dooryard in State street and the other in the rear of the old Hicks mansion on Whitestone avenue.

Long may these three noble relics of a bygone age stand in their rugged majesty, cherished and venerated by generations of admirers, who shall in the coming years linger in their shade and worship at their shrine!

One word of tribute may be allowed here to the memory of the old "Fox oak" which stood in Bowne avenue, opposite

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the "Bowne house," and disappeared in 1863. This tree with its twin which fell in 1841, was the rallying point of the Quakers in 1678, when George Fox, the companion of William Penn, preached under its shade and defied the authority of Gov. Peter Stuyvesant. Fox returned to London and died about 1680. Penn, being in London at the time, preached Fox's funeral sermon. Fox was buried in Bunhill Fields, where his grave may still be seen near those of Richard Cromwell and John Bunyan.

The "Fox oaks" in Bowne avenue, I may add, were probably sacrificed to the spirit of progress which laid out that beautiful street. The grading of the surface doubtless disturbed the roots and led to their premature decay.

Thus of Flushing's primeval trees only three now remain. And shall their ancient dignity and their majestic endurance appeal to us in vain? Shall the paltry spirit of modern innovation ever lift a sacrilegious hand to deface or destroy them? Shall the fiend of "progress," falsely so-called, disturb the peaceful old age of these earliest inhabitants, whose life is a connecting link with the past and whose very presence is a benediction?

Such are some of the arboreal treasures which are in the possession of the citizens of Flushing today, to be enjoyed and admired by us, but which are also to be protected and cherished for the enjoyment of future generations. And herein lies a duty as well as a privilege. The care of these glorious trees involves the most judicious pruning, the protection from abuse and injury, and in short the most respectful handling and management. Remember

that the duty goes with the heritage. Teach your children to reverence and cherish these priceless treasures, for if once destroyed they cannot be duplicated or replaced. Teach them to respect and venerate a tree, for it is one of Nature's grandest miracles.

Each season of the year supplies its lesson. We can watch the buds bursting in the spring sunshine, after the long winter's rest. We can lie in the summer shade and study and compare the varied leaf-forms, "Each after his kind," we can peer into the mysterious chemical changes which presage decay in the dazzling colors of autumn, and even in the nakedness of winter we can mark the delicate tracery of branches and twigs which outline the tree form and determine its species and its type.

Is such occupation idle? Is it not at once an elevating and educating influence? "To him who in his love of Nature, holds communion with her visible forms"—how charming the study and how rich the reward!

There can be no undevout tree-student or tree-lover. We cannot slight Nature's everyday miracles. We cannot turn our back on the lessons which they teach.

"Oh how canst thou renounce the boundless
store
Of charms, which Nature to her votary yields;
The warbling woodland, the resounding
shore,
The pomp of groves, the garniture of fields;
All that the genial ray of morning gilds,
And all that echoes to the song of even,
All that the mountain's sheltering bosom
shields
And all the dread magnificence of heaven;
Oh, how canst thou renounce, and hope to be
forgiven!"

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