

Maryland **BIG TREE** Program

Written by: **Dan Whetzel**

Maryland's Big Tree Program has been a big deal for nearly a century. Residents across the state have enjoyed the program by identifying and documenting their favorite trees in useful and productive ways. It is also interesting to know that Maryland lays claim to the first Big Tree Program in the country—no small matter. As the 100th anniversary of the program approaches, we celebrate a century of forestry stewardship by reflecting on the origins and future of “Big Trees” across the state.

Fred W. Besley, Maryland's legendary state forester and father of Maryland's Big Tree Champion Contest, organized the first event in 1925. He noted that Maryland's forests were exceptionally rich in trees with more than 250 identified species. Besley's passion for the forest led him to organize a volunteer event designed to measure and photograph distinguished trees in all counties. Apparently, prior to 1925 Besley attempted to accomplish the momentous task without assistance.

A formal program grew from Besley's idea when the Maryland Forestry Association announced a statewide Big Tree Champion contest. Besley published rules and standardized methods of measurement which were divided into three categories—circumference, height, and crown spread. Entries were to be judged according to species, so that small trees would not have to compete with larger ones.



Maryland's most exceptional tree, the Wye Oak in Talbot County, was recorded as a champion in the 1925 contest and later as the largest White Oak ever recorded.

COURTESY STATE OF MARYLAND BIG TREE PROGRAM

Publicity from the forestry association spread word about the Big Tree event. The forester realized that public involvement was crucial if the competition's goal of “obtaining a complete description and registration of all the beautiful trees of the state,” was to be realized.

The premier Big Tree Champion Contest proved to be successful as 450 entries identified 155 species from across Maryland—only one county failed to participate. Besley later noted that he also acted in the role of umpire during the initial event by certifying the measurements of competitive trees. This required extensive travel by the State Forester who personally inspected and

photographed the prize winning entries. Maryland's most noteworthy tree, the Wye Oak in Talbot County, was recorded as a champion in the 1925 contest. The tree would later be recognized as the largest White Oak ever recorded.

Besley expanded Maryland's Big Tree contest by seeking partners on the national level who would implement the program. His enthusiasm proved to be inspirational, as additional entries were realized in 1940. The national contest not only challenged Maryland's winners, but also simultaneously enhanced the nation's knowledge of its forests. Over the years, Besley's system of measurements became the standard for all competitions, thereby establishing his reputation on a national level.



Above: Volunteers and officials measure a Pin Oak tree on Ella Avenue in Cumberland, Maryland, for nomination to the Big Tree registry in Allegany County on a very cold February, 2022 morning.

Top right: Matt Voithofer measuring the circumference of a Sawtooth Oak tree on Mary Street, with Dan Hedderick, Andrew Roman and author, Dan Whetzel.

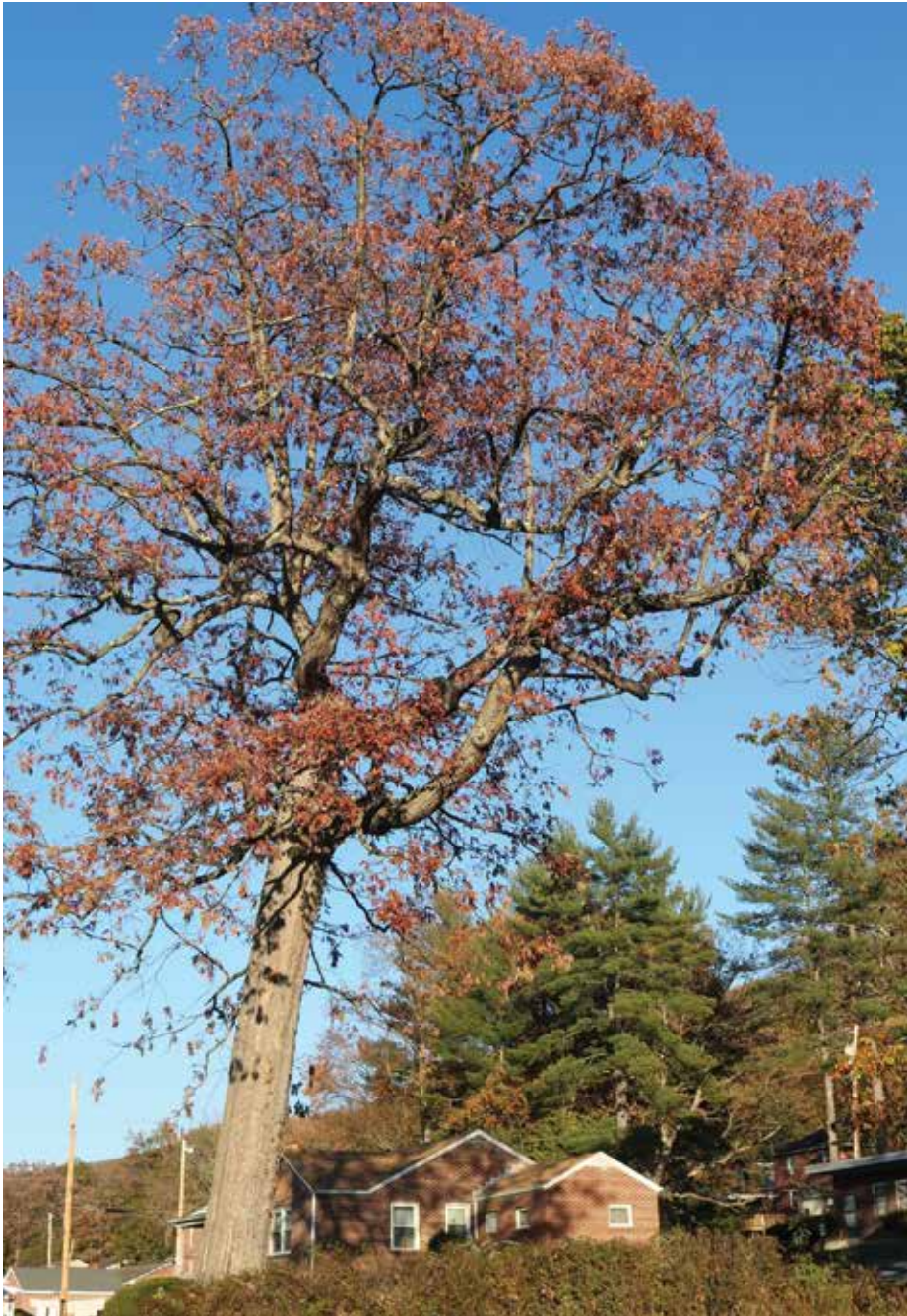
Inset (left to right): Harold Hipsley, Cumberland Shade Tree Commission; Anita Simmons, City Forester; Dan Hedderick, MD DNR Forester; Heather Haines, another Ella Avenue “big tree” owner; Andrew Roman, Cumberland Shade Tree Commission; Matt Voithofer, Big Tree Program volunteer; and Champ Zumbrun, Allegany County Forestry Board member and retired Forest Manager of Green Ridge State Forest. Property owner, Monica Wilt, was unavailable for this photo.

PHOTOS BY MIKE CALHOUN

Residents may build on the tradition started by Fred Besley by looking about their neighborhoods for exceptional trees. Probably the first thought that comes to mind when discussing big trees would not be local sites, but rather possibilities found in remote forests—the farther from development the better would seem to be a good recommendation. Surprisingly, that is not necessarily the case as many state champions are located in urban settings, sometimes in back yards. According to John Bennett, Volunteer Coordinator for the Maryland Big Tree Program, “About

90% of our registered trees are ‘backyard’ trees, as opposed to forest-grown trees.” Mr. Bennett concludes that backyard trees are likely to have less competition and receive more nutrients and water from property owners than trees found in dense forests. So, looking for a champion may be easier than you think.

The City of Cumberland welcomed the program about two years ago under the direction of Anita Simmons, City Forester, and Cumberland’s Shade Tree Commission. Anita explains, “I have been contacting property owners when



This Black Oak tree, owned by Roger Robinette, near Jolly Roger Liquor store along National Highway in LaVale, MD, is estimated to be between 300 and 380 years old. PHOTO BY CHAMP ZUMBRUN

I see a possible Big Tree Champion. We provide information on the background and benefits of the program and assist in getting it listed on the registry. I have been amazed at the number of big trees that are found within the city limits.”

“Since we just started advertising the Cumberland Big Tree Program Contest early in 2020, we have only three trees (Sawtooth Oak at 137 East Mary Street and two Pin Oaks at 1315-1317 Ella Street) to date that have been nominated

for the contest. However, there are a couple more trees in the city which may be records for the city and possibly the county.”

Cumberland has organized its Big Tree Contest for 2022. Winners will be honored at the City’s Arbor Day Celebration in April 2023. Information can be obtained from the Shade Tree Commission at 215 Bowen Street in Cumberland. See anita.simmons@cumberlandmd.gov

Dan Hedderick, Executive Secretary of the Allegany Forestry Board and Maryland Department of Natural Resources Forester, works closely with the volunteer members that oversee the local program. According to Dan, “We have a group of dedicated volunteers that are enthusiastic about the Big Tree Program. Many of them have a background in forestry and wildlife—retired teachers and others who want to stay engaged in providing stewardship to forestry programs. In Allegany County, we currently have 10 volunteers on the Forestry Board.”

Matt Voithofer, an Allegany County volunteer, became involved in forestry programs after purchasing a cabin and 24 acres of forested land. “The previous owner was involved in managing the forest, so trees remained healthy. My

property had a lot of tall oak trees and I continued to take an interest in them. After researching the Maryland Big Tree Program I started submitting entries—some of them made the county list. John Bennett sent me additional information and invited me to meetings, and one thing led to another. Big Trees became a hobby.”

He now certifies Big Tree entries for Allegany County—a task that begins after entries are submitted by property owners.

Matt notes, “I enjoy the outdoors, promoting stewardship and conservation in Maryland’s forests. Last year, 32 trees were added to the state list, so it is a rewarding and fun activity for me.”

The Big Tree lists referred to by Matt now include county, state, and national champions—a giant leap from the first contest nearly one hundred years ago. Maryland is well represented on the national registry with 19 trees and Allegany County has 59 registered trees on the state list.

Additionally, Allegany County has four state champions, while Garrett and Washington counties have one and nine respectively.

An enthusiastic local supporter of Big Trees and environmental programs is Francis “Champ” Zumbun, retired Forest Manager of Green Ridge State Forest and Forestry Board member. “I volunteer to measure trees for the Big Tree Program. Most of us on the board have a background in environmental work and all are supportive of the program.”

Champ also has an interest in local history that blends uniquely with his forestry background and searching for exceptional trees. Champ recalled, “I noticed a Black Oak tree near Jolly Roger Liquor store along National Road in LaVale that we estimated to be between 300 to 380 years of age. It is a survivor of the virgin forest that witnessed General Braddock pass by, and anyone else who has traveled the historic road since the French and Indian War days. A nearby tree of the same size was sheared off by a wind storm and had to be removed. I approached the land owner and received permission to cut a “tree cookie” (i.e. small slice of a tree) that was later examined by scientists who



This Cottonwood tree at Woodmen of the World on Virginia Avenue in Cumberland, MD, was also measured for nomination in the Big Tree Program.

PHOTO BY DAN HEDDERICK

dated it. That is how we are estimating the living tree’s age at the Jolly Roger site.”

Another related event promoting recognition of trees is also sponsored by the county forestry board in partnership with the Allegany Arts Council. According to Dan, “We hold a photo contest every year and it is for a single tree in Allegany County. Photos are entered in the contest as part of the Allegany County Fair and that week is when the judging takes place. Although separate from the Big Tree

Contest, the photo competition is great fun and promotes an awareness of our forests.”

Identifying historic or champion trees in your neighborhood makes for a topic of conversation and source of pride. In addition to the aesthetic and intrinsic value of enjoying trees, it has been noted that in a landscaped setting trees may also significantly increase the value of a dwelling on the retail market.

Trees have also come to the forefront in the effort to mitigate climate change and promote biodiversity because they shelter birds and a variety of other species while removing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. To the home owner, trees offer the financial benefit of reducing energy costs during the summer heat.

Fred Besley’s Big Tree Program continues to generate interest as current environmental challenges confront our way of living in the 21st century. It is also interesting to realize that Besley’s contest created nearly a century ago continues to grow and highlight a number of relevant environmental, aesthetic and economic purposes. But perhaps the best reason to experience Maryland’s Big Tree Program is the fun in doing it. Look around your neighborhood and talk with neighbors—a Big Tree Champion may be waiting.

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