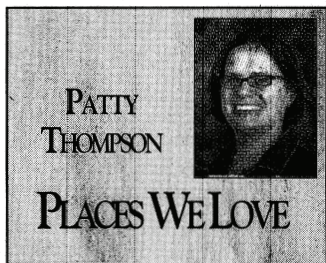


### On Bala Cynwyd's giant Overcup Oak

The last few times I've been to meetings at 401 City Ave. (near St. Asaph's and Monument roads in Bala Cynwyd) I found myself parking just a little farther away from the building just so, I could be near an enormous tree in the parking lot. It's unusual to see a tree of this size in such a developed area. This tree is stunningly gorgeous and clearly the parking lot was designed in such a way to accommodate this giant. On my walk back from a meeting last week I decided I needed a closer look and discovered a plaque indicating that this is an Overcup Oak, *Quercus lyrata*, and this specimen is a bicentennial tree. The plaque was installed in 1976, suggesting that this tree is 236 years old this year!



A tree that clearly directed the design of the parking lot must have a great story to tell and it does. The site was developed in the 1980s going from Motor Inn to office high-rise. It was recognized early in the development process that this was a specimen tree and was given the utmost accommodation by the builders and Lower Merion Township alike. Healthy and an outstanding example of its kind, this tree got the royal treatment. The pavement for the lot begins well past the tree's drip zone (where the ends of the branches extend). Since the roots of the tree extend to this distance as well, this thoughtful accommodation ensured the least amount of disturbance to the tree during development.

This tree is described in a number of places that talk about some of Pennsylvania's giants. The 1981 edition of "Penn's Woods" describes it as the lone survivor of the original woods that grew on the old Roberts estate. John Roberts came to Merion in 1683 and lived there until his death in 1724. Roberts was one of the original Welsh Quakers settling Lower Merion, purchasing the land as a part of the Welsh Tract purchased from William Penn by Quakers seeking religious freedom in the New World. His property known as Pencoid (his spelling), meaning "head of the woods" in Welsh, extended from Conshohocken State Road to the Schuylkill River and quickly became a successful farming dynasty.

This Overcup Oak is also described on a fabulous website that raises awareness and shares information about Pennsylvania's oldest and biggest trees: [pabigtrees.com](http://pabigtrees.com). A quick look there indicates that it is the largest Overcup Oak in Pennsylvania. Scott Wade, certified arborist for Longwood Gardens and volunteer state coordinator managing the database of Pennsylvania's biggest trees, offered a few more insights about this tree. It's clear that this tree is significant to Pennsylvania's heritage but its story may be a little more complex than originally thought.

Determining a tree's age can be done fairly accurately with modern techniques but you can also consider all of the history of an area to give further insights. From the scientific perspective Scott noted that the

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original technique that was used to date the tree has been shown in recent years to overestimate a tree's age. From a historic perspective, there are other indications that the tree may be a centennial tree now in 2012 but it may be a bit younger than originally described.

When Roberts arrived at his new land in what is now Bala Cynwyd he would have likely removed many of the trees for construction and fuel. It is not likely that this tree would have been saved. Other clues indicate that this may have been a specimen tree planted after Roberts' lifetime. The late 1700s and early 1800s was the golden age of Victorian plant collecting. Tree expert Michael Dirr's definite work on American trees indicates that the Overcup Oak was first described in 1786, 62 years after Roberts' death and 10 years after the American Revolution. Perhaps the Philadelphia plant collectors of the day brought this specimen to the Roberts family. Another clue indicating this may have been a specimen tree is the branching structure – many low, wide-reaching limbs rather than a compact form that would have

resulted from a tree growing within a forest. The final indication that this may have been a specimen tree perhaps planted by a Victorian tree enthusiast is the habitat. This species is found from Florida to New Jersey in back-water, swampy areas. It also thrives in sunny locations – something that would have been at a premium in the early heavily forested Roberts estate. The closest place the Overcup Oak thrives in nature is New Jersey.

Whether planted by a Victorian plant collector or cultivated by John Roberts himself, this Overcup Oak has a significant story to tell. Preserving our trees is an important part of preserving our heritage. As development proceeds in our region it is my sincere hope that significant trees will be accommodated just as this Overcup Oak was. Planting native trees is also one of the most simple and important ways we can preserve the places we love. Perhaps in 200 years curious tree lovers will be combing the archives to find out who planted a tree you placed in the ground.

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