



BY MELANIE CHOUKAS-BRADLEY

The Cameron Elm, more than 130 years old, was removed in July.

On This Historic Day, Hail to the Leaf

Capitol Hill Trees Fall to Age, Security and Construction

By MELANIE CHOUKAS-BRADLEY
Special to *The Washington Post*

When George W. Bush raises his right hand today to take the oath of office for a second term, one stalwart witness of inaugurations past will be missing. The U.S. Capitol grounds' most historic tree—an elm that has seen presidents, senators and members of Congress pass beneath its arching boughs for more than 130 years—was taken down last summer.

The so-called Cameron Elm, deemed unsafe in old age, predated the makeover of the Capitol grounds in the late 19th century by America's foremost landscape architect, Frederick Law Olmsted.

As with New York's Central Park, Olmsted brought the country to the city, surrounding the Capitol with gracefully curving paths and trees arranged in idyllic clusters, not as formal avenues.

"The grounds are informal, picturesque and parklike in character," said Matthew Evans, senior landscape architect of the Capitol. "The notion of what was prevalent—freedom of access for all people to come to the Capitol, enjoy the Capitol grounds and Capitol building, and petition their government—was very much symbolized by the [Olmsted] plan."

Visitors may have to use their imaginations to find traces of the designer's legacy today.

Terrorist threats have changed the atmosphere on the Hill from a people's park to one that is more heavily policed and fortress-like. The east side of the Capitol grounds is fenced off and torn up, with a multi-year construction project for a new underground visitor center underway. The Mall side has been temporarily cordoned off for today's inauguration.

Twenty-five years ago, I researched the trees of the Capitol grounds for a book on Washington's landmark trees ("City of Trees," illustrated by Polly Alexander, Johns Hopkins University Press). At the time, botanists at the National Arboretum de-

See TREES, Page 6

- 2 What's coming up
- 3 Rocker on
- 7 Cellars to root for
- 8 How to get rid of it

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THURSDAY, JANUARY 20, 2005

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Auto, Classified

EXTRA
INSIDE

Community news

41 10 15 MS 2005

For Tree Lovers, the Spotlight on the Hill Brings Bittersweet Sentiments

TREES, From Page 1

scribed Capitol Hill as "one of the finest arboretums in the world."

Several hundred trees from four continents, including 33 official state trees, graced the Capitol, Library of Congress and Supreme Court grounds. I have been back on Capitol Hill recently preparing a revised edition of the book, and the experience has been bittersweet. As I greet many old arboreal friends, I discover that many others are missing.

For the visitor center, 68 of the 346 trees on the East Front were removed, many of them tulip poplars along East Capitol Street. Of the 14 memorial trees in the way of the construction, eight were transplanted and six were felled, including a hickory planted in 1918 by Vice President Thomas Marshall.

According to the official Web site of the architect of the Capitol, www.aoc.gov, many of the trees that were removed were reaching the end of their life spans and will be replaced once construction is completed, with a net gain in numbers.

The Cameron Elm was on the specimen-rich south side of the Capitol and, ironically, almost fell victim to Olmsted's transformation more than a century ago.

The elm was originally saved from destruction by a tree-loving senator from Pennsylvania named Simon Cameron, who saw a crew about to remove the tree in favor of a walkway. He rushed to convince his Senate colleagues and the architect of the Capitol to save it.

Olmsted was asked to reroute his walkway, and the elm commanded its imposing spot on top of a small rise for well over a century, with the broad path winding politely around it.

Until last July, the famous American elm stood near a new post-Sept. 11 visitor screening center. Arborists said it had a significant cavity in its trunk and was considered a safety threat.

The loss of the Cameron Elm comes at a time of transition on the Hill, and the landscape is poised to regain its sylvan character.

Soon the inauguration fencing will be removed to open the west side, and when the visitor center opens in 2006 the East Front will be landscaped close to the Olmsted plan of the 1870s.

"Some change is inevitable," said Evans, "but the flavor of the Olmsted plan is still apparent. The visitor center is being built underground so as not to compete. The ramps will be gentle and the steps, too. The appearance will bear in mind the design principles that Olmsted used consistently."

Fountains and walls will be reinstalled, two formal avenues will mark the gentle descent to the new, below-grade entrances, and the teardrop-shaped panels of lawn and trees off East Capitol Street will be restored.

In the meantime, Capitol Hill visitors can look through the dust, and over the fencing where necessary, to enjoy what is still a world-renowned tree collection. Winter is a wonderful time to admire the bark, buds and overall shape—or growth habit—of trees. A dusting of snow enhances the living architecture of the Hill's grand old specimens. You can take in the trees of the Capitol grounds in less than an hour. (If you linger,



BY BILL O'LEARY—THE WASHINGTON POST

Pockets of old trees have been preserved during the building of the new visitor center, but nearly 70 trees were cut.

though, you may be approached and questioned by security personnel, as I was.) Many species are labeled, in a tradition begun by Olmsted.

The onion-shaped buds of flowering dogwood and furry gray buds of several native and exotic magnolias are a prelude to the dramatic flowering that occurs each spring at the Capitol. The Kentucky coffee and Japanese pagoda trees are among shade trees in the pea family, marked by their distinctive flat seedpods. The Capitol's evergreens—southern magnolia, American holly, Japanese red pine, Chinese fir and giant sequoia among them—are at their winter best for the inaugural.

The surviving trees around the visitor center construction site are being pampered with an irrigation system providing moisture to the roots and canopy, including such noteworthy specimens as the Sullivan Brothers crabapples (planted to honor the five broth-

The landscape is poised to regain its sylvan character.

ers who were killed during World War II when their ship was sunk), and a kousa dogwood honoring Lady Bird Johnson. Looking over the construction site fencing, visitors can see large ginkgos, lindens, oaks, pines and an old English elm.

Today, as George W. Bush officially begins his second term, not much attention will be paid to the trees of Capitol Hill. But for any botany-minded viewers on the grounds or watching on television at home, a massive willow oak (Thomas Jefferson's favorite tree species), a large pecan, uniform rows of Japanese zelkovas, and an evergreen backdrop of southern magnolias

and American hollies will provide an arboreal frame for the swearing-in ceremony on the Capitol's West Front.

The tree legends of Capitol Hill and their associations with legendary leaders still cast their own remembered shadows. The "Humility Elm" (loved by Senator and later President John F. Kennedy because it forced senators to duck under a low-lying limb), was removed from the northeast grounds in 1978, but it is still remembered by his brother, Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, who has paid tribute to the tree on the Senate floor.

Meanwhile, Olmsted's walkway has been rerouted over the former site of the Cameron Elm. Both the tree and the knoll on which it stood are gone, and Olmsted's walkway follows its originally planned route. A slight change in the color of its pebbled concrete is the only indication that progress was interrupted by a tree for more than a century.