

The Future of Whitewater's Territorial Oak Tree

On October 24th, 2023 Whitewater's historic Territorial Oak was taken down. Since the 1800s, it has been located at the intersection of what became Franklin and Main Streets. Unfortunately, the tree had been in decline for a long time, but in the past few years had stopped producing acorns and produced only a few leaves as is common for dying trees. Unlike its sister tree located just across Franklin Street in a front lawn with plenty of soil to live in, this tree has struggled to thrive in its confined quarters between a cement sidewalk and a street and had become a hazard to drivers and pedestrians as it had started to drop chunks of branches, some landing on cars. It's time had come.

When this tree sprouted from its acorn, this was still Indian country. The squirrel who probably planted this tree nearly 250 years ago was just doing its job. When the area was surveyed, this tree's diameter at breast height was 16 inches and was used as the "witness" tree from which much of this area was platted. On October 23rd that measurement was 169 inches. Just imagine all that this tree has been witness to! The Urban Forestry Commission along with the Landmarks Committee and city staff decided that we can't just say good-bye to this historical treasure.

The City of Whitewater and its Urban Forestry Commission intend to honor this tree by keeping it as an active part of this community. When the Arboretum at Starin Park was proposed a few years ago, the designs included a natural play area that will be adjacent to the existing playground. When we started this project, we had no idea that the Territorial Oak would be coming down at this time. Next summer, parts of this tree will be used to create a natural playground at Starin Park.

Sections of the tree will be used to create different kinds of play spaces and signage will be located throughout the area to explain why these logs and "wooden boulders" have come to live in the park. There will be safe and interesting climbing, jumping and educational opportunities for many, many years to come as this tree continues to be a living part of Whitewater's community.

Slices of the trunk will be used to create historical tree ring maps that will show the life of this tree from its beginning until now. They will chronicle historic events in line with the rings of the tree, showing its size at various points of its history and the history of our town and the world. These will be on display at Starin Park and also at the Walworth County Historical Society. Other slices will be used for signage at the Generac Welcome and Education Center at the Arboretum to honor the donors who've been essential to creating this Arboretum, and at the local Historical Society at the Whitewater Depot.

The Whitewater Urban Forestry Commission is always grateful for volunteers who have skills that would be useful to our efforts both at continuing to build and maintain the plantings at the Arboretum, this playground project, or for other ideas that you have and would like to share. Contact the Park and Recreation Department to get involved in our great community!

October 25, 2023