

STORM TOPPLES WYE OAK

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Editor's Note: Material for this article was taken from the Maryland Department of Natural Resources Forest Service web page (<http://www.dnr.state.md.us/>). A quote from the Editor of American Forests Magazine is also included.

*On June 6, 2002, Maryland's oldest living tree, the majestic 460-year-old Wye Oak, was felled during a violent thunderstorm on the Eastern Shore. The massive tree, which stood almost 100 feet (31 m) tall, and had a crown spread of nearly 120 feet (36 m), and a trunk diameter of close to 10 feet (3 m), was a National Champion — the largest recorded living white oak (*Q. alba*) known — and one of the most famous trees in the United States. It came down across Route 662 in the tiny village of Wye Mills, Talbot County, Maryland. Work crews immediately began to remove the huge limbs and clear the road.*

The tree had been growing in Wye Mills since the 1500s, nearly a century before Europeans came to Maryland. It had survived countless storms, disease, insects, air pollution and road paving and had witnessed the birth of a nation. Early in its life Native Americans lived and hunted in the area and an ancient path called the Choptank Trail passed close by. Later, the tree's branches provided shade to early settlers who were traveling through. In the 19th Century it was called the Russum Oak. By the early 1900's that name was changed to the Wye Oak, after the village of Wye Mills.

In 1909, the then gigantic tree was first officially distinguished for its size. Maryland's first State Forester measured and photographed the tree and many people began to consider it the largest white oak in the state and, for the first time, visitors came to view its sweeping boughs. Ten years later, the American Forestry Magazine honored the Wye in its Tree Hall of Fame and launched what would later become a national search for Big Tree Champions. Until it fell, the Wye Oak held the title of largest white oak in the United States. It was one of only two trees to remain national champions since the American Forestry Association began its contest in 1940.

In 1939, the State of Maryland purchased the Wye Oak from its last private owner "in accordance with our desire to preserve places of historical and outstanding interest," said Governor O'Connor. Soon after, the Legislature declared the Wye Oak the living symbol of the State Tree, the white oak. The Wye Oak State Park was established — the smallest State Park in Maryland — and marked the first time a government purchased a single tree for preservation.

In spite of efforts to save the tree by pruning, cabling, and installing lightning rods, the Wye Oak's time had finally come. Reactions were swift and deeply felt. "It's like a little piece of everybody's life went down with it," said Gail Dadds, who grew up less than a mile away and went to view its remains the night it fell. "I've lived around this tree for most of my life. It's so sad to see it like this." State highway workers roped off the area with yellow crime-scene tape. But dozens of people came to view the fallen giant and collect souvenirs and take photographs. Jennifer Reburn, a local second-grade teacher, stooped to gather sticks, twigs and leaves. She was already thinking how she would explain the death of the tree to her students who had visited the Wye Oak last month. She was sure they would be devastated by the loss.

Frank Gouin, a retired former chairman of the horticulture department at the University of Maryland, produced the first successful clones of the tree two years ago. After hearing the news, he indicated how much he loved that old tree. He promised that he would collect bud wood and produce as many clones - genetically identical oak saplings - as possible. Some of the clones that are currently growing will be planted in the same tiny park where the old tree went down. Already, Wye Oak clones have been planted at Mount Vernon, George Washington's home in Virginia.

State officials said they were unsure whether the Wye Oak was struck by lightning, succumbed to high winds, or both, as the band of severe storms raced through tiny

Wye Mills. "One guy said he saw lightning, somebody else thought it was the wind," said Stark McLaughlin, a Department of Natural Resources forester. "Either way, it's totally gone now. It even had acorns this year. But we've known for a very long time that, even doing everything humanly possible, we couldn't save it."

Maryland Governor Parris N. Glendening issued a statement: "For more than 450 years the Wye Oak has stood strong and tall, surviving winds, drought and diseases of nature, and even more remarkably the human threats of chain saws and global warming. 'Someone once wrote that 'a tree is a child of the earth, and to the earth it must inevitably fall.' There is some comfort tonight that in the case of our beloved Wye Oak, nature has had the last say."

Editor's Note: After the Wye oak fell, Michelle Robbins, Editor of American Forests Magazine wrote the following:

"Everybody thinks about the change of skyline with the WTC, but no one seems to mention it when it comes to landmark trees. The Wye Oak had special meaning for me — I grew up on the Eastern Shore and it's hard to describe just how important that tree was to people from there. I remember being taken on a bus trip in elementary school to see it. I used to tell people around here that if you're from the Eastern Shore, you put your hand over your heart when anyone mentions the Wye Oak. We have one of the offspring in our backyard, planted just after our oldest (now 8) was born. It still breaks my heart to see it gone. The difference in the skyline at Wye Mills now, well . . ."



An historic photo of the Wye Oak, taken in its prime, its branches shining with ice.

Photo courtesy of Michelle Robbins, Editor, American Forests.