

Oaks as Native American Trail Marker Trees

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The eastern half of the United States was once laced with a vast network of trails used by numerous Native American Tribes during their travels. These trails were narrow and travelers moved along them in single file toward their destinations. These trails became difficult to follow in certain terrain, so trail markers were developed to make the routes easier to follow. These trail markers were strategically located trees that were mostly oak species.

There are many reasons why oaks were selected for use as trail markers. They are among the most common trees in the eastern half of the United States. However, abundance alone is not a primary reason for their selection. Most oak species bend easily without breaking when they are saplings. This is a very important trait because any tree being manipulated for use as a trail marker will require a considerable amount of bending.

Oak species, particularly those within the white oak group which includes white, bur, and post oaks, are very resistant to heart rot. Oaks in general also have the capacity to heal readily and compartmentalize wounds. This is another valuable trait because wildland fires were common during occupancy by Native Americans. Their thick bark also makes them highly resistant to wounding due to fires.

White, bur, or post oak trail marker trees can persist for 300 or more years. Live oaks in southern states may live for as much as 800 or more years. Frequent use was made of white and bur oaks in the upper Midwest in states such as Illinois, Michigan, Ohio, and Wisconsin. Post oaks (*Q. stellata*) were used on the dry, rocky ridges in southwestern Missouri and Texas, and live oaks (*Q. virginiana*) and southern red oaks (*Q. falcata*) were the trees of choice in southern states such as Georgia.

Several methods of forming marker trees evolved among Native American tribes with the passage of time. Some tribes also had their own distinct way of making marker trees. In general, oak saplings were bent and tied to stakes using a rope or strings of animal skin or rawhide. The form of the tree would be firmly set by the time the rawhide deteriorated. The direction of the bend indicated the correct course for the traveler. Sometimes rocks were placed on the ground to provide additional emphasis on the right direction to follow.

Cutting the leader or central branch of the tree about three feet above one to three lateral branches altered this general method of form trail marker trees. The sapling was then bent over and tied down. Moss or other material would sometimes be packed around the cut leader, hoping to form a “nose” that would serve as a pointer toward the correct direction. With the passage of time, the lateral branches that were now vertical because of the bend would grow upright, becoming the “secondary trunks of the tree. From certain angles, these types of trees sometimes resemble a letter or number. There was a white oak near Loami in Sangamon County, Illinois in the 1950s known to local inhabitants as the “Old 4 Tree” because of its unusual branching that resembled the number “4”.

In another method of forming trail marker trees, the leader was not cut. The entire sapling was bent to the ground and tied to stakes. With the passage of time, the leader would turn back up toward the sun and continue growing. The bend in these trees tended to be rather dramatic and lengthy, causing these trees to be called “treasure trees.” This term fostered legends of buried treasures at the point where the leader was tied to the ground.

There were also trees shaped by Native Americans that were not trail markers. Instead, these trees marked tribal boundaries. In contrast to trail marker trees, their trunks were upright, not horizontal. These trees were manipulated so two or three main branches developed from the same location on the trunk, much like a candelabra or a football goal post.

Despite their former abundance and widespread use, considerable controversy exists regarding trail marker trees. Some people believe that their forms are due to reasons other than manipulation by Native Americans, such as ice from a winter storm or another tree that pinned them down when they were saplings. There is relatively little information on trail marker trees, and much of this controversy and confusion is likely due to this lack of information and knowledge.

Our forests do contain trees that are growing at odd angles, including some that have been incorrectly labeled as trail marker trees. Fortunately, there are guidelines that individuals can use to determine the authenticity of any trail marker tree. Any trail marker tree in the eastern United States has to be between 200 to 800 years old,



Oak Society member Dirk Benoit of Belgium in the crown of the Trail Marker White Oak (*Quercus alba*) near Athens Illinois. This tree was core dated to 1730 and was bent in a high arch after horses were introduced to the area. Following it from tip to base leads to a natural gravel ford at the confluence of Rock Creek with the Sangamon River. (Photo courtesy of Philippe de Spoelberch)

considering that the practice of shaping these trees was likely discontinued when most Native Americans were forced from the area in the 1830s. Known trail marker tree ages verify this age range. A white oak in central Illinois was determined to be nearly 300 years old, and a live oak in Georgia is known to be 800 years old.

The tree's location can also be helpful in determining authenticity. Trail marker trees were on high ground or in open country where they could be easily seen. Travel was easier here and the vantage points offered by the high ground enabled travelers to see game or enemies at great distances. Strong winds also kept the high grounds free of leaves during autumn and snow during winter.

The location of the bend can also be used to identify trail marker trees. In any authentic marker tree the bend is always in the trunk, not one of the branches. During the early years before horses trees were bent so they were only a few feet from the ground. With the widespread use of horse the trees were bent so the main trunk was eight feet or more above the ground.

Most trail marker trees present today are also likely to be oaks. These were the most common trees in the eastern United States, but their longevity was a primary factor in their selection for use as a trail marker. Most trail marker trees that persist to this day are oaks.

Trail marker trees have been known by a variety of names throughout the years. Some were called "message trees" because their hollow "noses" were used by Creek Indians as places to leave message sticks for travelers. The term "thong trees" has also been used due to the use of a rawhide rope or thong to hold the tree to stakes during the initial years of formation. When horses became widely used in the eastern United States, the term "horse and rider" trees was applied to those formed during this time. The bend in these trees tends to be high, approximately eight feet from the ground, enabling riders to see them from a distance.

Pioneers called them "water trees" because many directed travelers to springs. A white oak trail marker tree still directs visitors to a spring in a Wisconsin state park. Though less commonly used, pioneers also called them "buffalo trees" because Native Americans apparently aired out buffalo robes by hanging them on their low-lying trunks.

Despite their former abundance, few of these trees were ever given names. One exception is a tree that probably was a trail marker was along a Sauk trail in Rock Island County. It became known as the "Lincoln Tree" because Abraham Lincoln passed by it with the militia in 1832 on his way to the Black Hawk War. This tree was located on a point along a bluff and was described as old, ill formed, and scarred by numerous wagons that had passed over it. It remained a few years after the war, but was eventually grubbed out so potatoes could be planted. Its low trunk suggests that this tree was formed prior to the widespread use of horses.

A bur oak marker tree stood along the Ottawa trail in Ford County for many years until it died in the 1950s. Two other bur oak marker trees were present in a pasture along this same trail a few miles to the north, but they were lost one day when the new landowner decided to clear the land. A bur oak marker tree once stood on Elkhart Hill in Logan County near the Edward's Trace. This trail, named after Governor Ninian Edwards, lead from Cahokia to Peoria, the sites of a major Peoria Indian village. Vestiges of this trail remain on Elkhart Hill that was high ground in a region of low, wet prairies and sloughs before the days of drainage ditches and tile lines.

Trail marker trees were once relatively common in Winnetka in Cook County along the “North Shore Trails”. Some even served to guide pioneers for several years following their arrival. As late as 1975, marker trees were still present in Kenilworth in Lake County. Some believe that these trees guided Indians from Lake Michigan to villages and others believe they guided travelers to the portage around the south end of Lake Michigan.

Trail marker trees are now rare. Many have simply grown old and died with the passage of time. Others probably were cut when forests were cleared for agriculture by pioneers. Some were probably regarded as “wolf trees” and removed in timber management practices. However, not all loggers were willing to cut a trail marker tree down. Destroying these trees was thought to arouse the spirits of the ancients, resulting in some very bad luck.

While many have perished, a few living marker trees remain. One still stands on a high bluff in Adams County, Illinois and another stands alone in a Menard County, Illinois pasture. One is present in a Wisconsin state park and others are present in Georgia and Missouri. Consider yourself very fortunate and privileged if you get to see one. They are the last living things touched and formed by Native Americans in some states, making them culturally and historically significant.

These trees will not last forever, not even the live oaks of the south. Despite their historic and cultural significance, little effort has been made to catalog trail marker trees within most states. Some preservation efforts have been by individuals or garden clubs. This lack of interest and information is a tragedy nearing completion as these trees perish.

They were important markers along major travel routes for centuries before fading into the obscurity of the modern world. Besides old age, disease, and storms, the few trees that remain face destruction through development and general habitat destruction. A legacy will be lost when they are gone.