

**THE GREAT TREE ON
BOSTON COMMON**

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The great tree on Boston Common by J. C. Warren

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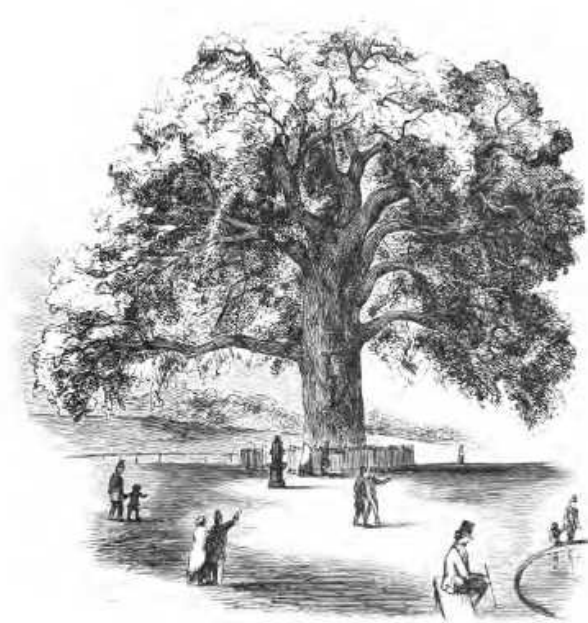
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J. C. WARREN

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BOSTON COMMON**



THE
G R E A T T R E E

ON

BOSTON COMMON.

BY

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THE

GREAT TREE ON THE COMMON.

At a meeting of the BOSTON SOCIETY OF NATURAL HISTORY some time since, the age of the large elm on Boston Common became accidentally a subject of discussion. On this discussion, it appeared there was some difference of opinion, which led the writer of these remarks to make inquiry into the facts, and endeavor to ascertain the age of the tree. This inquiry seems to be of no great importance at first view; but, independently of serving for the gratification of a proper curiosity, it may assist us in establishing the period of the duration of this valuable ornament to our country.

We propose, then, to notice this tree, not because it is a larger tree than any other in the country, nor because it is older or taller. The Aspinwall elm has

a greater diameter; there have been a number of trees, cut down from time to time, which have been thought to have a greater age; and the elm on Pittsfield Common, as we are informed by Professor Holmes, is a hundred and fourteen feet before the first branch is given off: of course, it is taller. This tree is an object of interest, from the fact of its being placed in the centre of Boston Common, and thence having attracted the attention of every native Bostonian. It is also interesting for other reasons. It has not only escaped the blasts which have occasionally threatened to annihilate it, but the more alarming threats of destruction from a British army encamped around it suffering under the severity of a winter's exposure. Thanks are due from the present and succeeding generations to General Gage, the commander of that army, for having preserved this and other valuable trees in Boston from being employed in protecting his troops against the severity of the climate.

It was the frequent scene, and in some measure the instrument, of inflicting vengeance on those whom popular indignation, whether justly or not, thought proper to stigmatize and terrify by hanging or burning in effigy. The writer was witness, and

in some degree an adverse actor, in a scene of this kind during the political riots of 1806. At a later period, for many months, it had to withstand the dangers from the little army encamped around it, destined to protect the town in the war of 1812. Many tumultuous scenes have endangered its existence on the annual recurrence of Election and Independence days, when there was no restraint in the public use of stimulants, which on those occasions so often drove men to madness, bloodshed, and all kinds of excesses. These circumstances will perhaps be thought sufficient to justify the attention we have bestowed on it.

A drawing has been introduced to give an idea of its present appearance to a succeeding generation. The map was inserted to show, that in 1722 this tree was represented as the largest tree in Boston: it is a diminished copy of the earliest plan of Boston, viz., that of Capt. John Bonner, published in 1722. This gentleman had previously sketched some portions of the wharves in the proximity of Long Wharf. The sketches, though valuable, included no part of Boston but the wharves already mentioned; and the plan of 1722 is undoubtedly the earliest complete one. The only copy of it which existed for many years within

my knowledge was in the possession of Joseph Peirce, Esq., of which I obtained a fac-simile to be drawn by a lady of Boston nearly forty years ago. In 1835, Mr. George H. Smith reprinted Bonner's plan, which corresponds with mine, and proves the exactness of the drawing. The diminished map is an exact copy of Capt. Bonner's; some trees, too small for representation in a diminished view, only being omitted. The Great Tree, and two trees at the head of Park Street, are well represented in their proportion to co-existing trees and to each other.

This tree is an American Elm, belonging to a species admired and cultivated abroad for its gracefully pendent branches. It is known by the most ancient surviving inhabitants of Boston as **THE GREAT TREE**. Citizens, who were of advanced age in the youth of those who are now the oldest inhabitants, knew it equally as **THE GREAT TREE**.

The writer of this, having always lived in the vicinity of the Common, where it is situated, and for half a century within sight of it, has a distinct recollection of its appearance for about seventy years.

When he first knew it, it bore strong marks of decrepitude and approaching dissolution. There was a large orifice in the bark of its trunk, through which a boy, eight or nine years old, could creep into its cavity; and in a picture wrought in 1755 by Miss Hannah Otis, aunt of the late distinguished orator and statesman, Harrison G. Otis, the same orifice is also represented, — thus adding thirty years to its known period of decrepitude.

The interior of the trunk was rotten, and much of it had disappeared. The aperture was from two to three feet in length, and about a foot in breadth. For many years, it was neglected; but when, in process of time, the spirit of improvement extended to its part of the Common, the edges of the aperture were protected by a mixture of clay and other substances, and the exterior covered by canvas fastened around it. In consequence of these attentions, the parts have been regenerated; and the opening, so far as can be ascertained, filled and obliterated.* We presume the

* The same process is now in successful operation in two American elms remaining in Park Street. The bark on the side towards the street was torn off by the passage of carriages. To accomplish their recovery, the trees were first guarded by forming a sidewalk with raised stones; and the wound, having been seasonably protected by a covering, has gradually healed, and is now reduced to a third part of its original dimensions. The trees, in the mean time, have increased a quarter part in size.