



# Oak Leaves

*Newsletter of the Warren County Historical & Genealogical Society  
Founded 1931 to preserve the history of Warren County, New Jersey*

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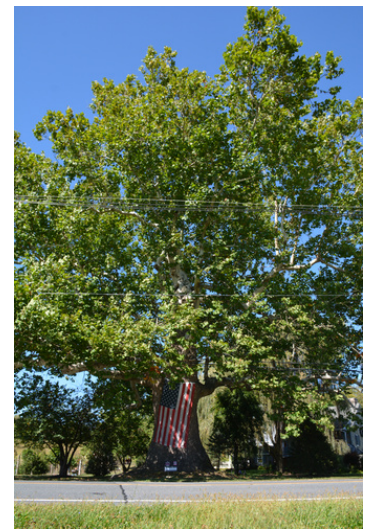
Brian Duke

## The George Washington Sycamore

by Brian Duke

**J**ULY 26th, 1782, may have been a sweltering day when General George Washington paid visit to the Moravian settlement of Hope, New Jersey. Throughout the Revolutionary War, the Moravians supplied flour from their grist mill to Washington's troops in Morristown. Accompanying Washington on his trip to Hope was the Moravian bishop John Ettwein. According to legend, while Ettwein rode ahead to announce Washington's arrival to the village, Washington rested beneath the shade of an old sycamore tree.

This ancient tree stands today on Hope-Bridgeville Rd about one mile before Hope. Now known as the George Washington Sycamore, current estimates place it to be around 400-450 years old. The New Jersey Forest Service measured the Tree to have a circumference of 302 in. (~25 ft.), a diameter of 96 in. (~8 ft.), a height of 70 ft., and a crown average of 107 ft. The Tree once held the title Sycamore Champion of New Jersey, when circumference was the only consideration. Sycamores are also known as buttonballs or buttonwoods for their ball-like seeds. Due to their warping wood, lumberers passed over the sycamores in favor of cherry and oak trees, leaving them to endure the ages.



The historic Swayze Settlement, which the Tree sits on, was once the farmstead of a Loyalist family. In 1743, Barnabas Swayze purchased this 800-acre tract of land west of

## News

**Donations Needed**

WCHGS needs your help obtaining a new air conditioner to preserve our Museum's unique collection and provide a comfortable environment for our visitors.

Please send your donations to Warren County Historical Society, Inc. PO Box 313, Belvidere, NJ 07823.

**Museum Hours**

The Museum will be open on Sundays from 2 - 4 p.m. for the fall and winter season. The Holiday Open House will be on Sunday 12/21 and Sunday 12/28, 1 - 5 p.m.

Hope (est. 1769); the land being too much, his brother Israel purchased a portion and settled there in 1745. On the settlement both men raised large families: Israel had eleven children, and Barnabas had twelve. In 1759, the Israel Swayze House was built of stone behind the Tree. Further along the road toward Hope is the Swayze Lime Kiln, one of the most finely preserved in the county. In 1774, Israel Swayze passed away and was interred in a plot of land beside his home, now the Swayze Cemetery. Both men bequeathed the land to their surviving sons.



Washington Sycamore, c. 1910.

The first mention of the legend in print (and photograph of the Tree!) appears in Benjamin Swasey's 1910 book, *Genealogy of the Swasey Family*. The Tree was dubiously titled the "Washington Elm," but a careful comparison of Mr. Swasey's photo with recent ones confirms it is the Sycamore. We see that the road then ran between the Tree and the Israel Swayze House. We also learn that

Washington reportedly dined for lunch beneath the Tree. A primary source telling whether Washington napped or dined under the Tree, or encountered the Swayzes, has yet to come to light. Considering the family's long allegiance to the Crown, would they have welcomed Washington?

The Swayze Settlement may have been vacated by the time of Washington's passage. In 1783, one year after the signing of the Treaty of Paris, the State confiscated Israel Swayze Jr.'s property near Logg Gaol. Israel Jr. and his family left the Colonies on horseback to seek refuge in Canada. Caleb Swayze, a surviving brother of Israel Sr. and Barnabas, also fled to Canada in 1788 after New Jersey authorities placed a bounty on his head.

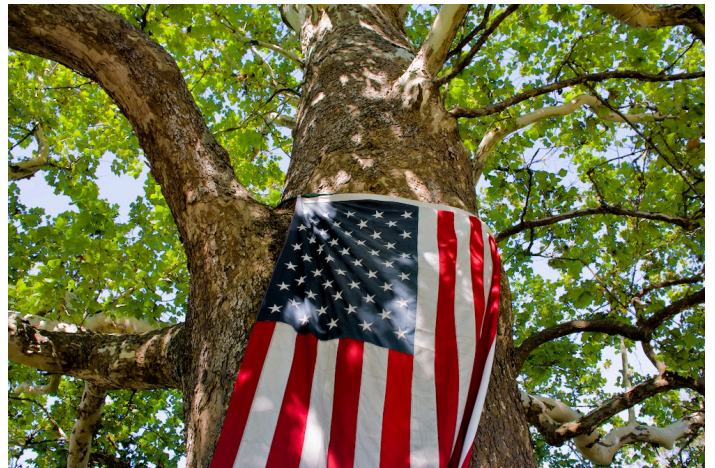
Washington's July 26th visit to Hope is indeed documented in the expense account book of Colonel Jonathan Trumbull Jr., an aide-de-camp who accompanied him on the trip, and in manuscripts from the Moravian Archives. The visit was one of several stops along his route from Philadelphia to his headquarters in Newburgh, New York. In Philadelphia on July 19th, Washington conferred with French commander Comte de Rochambeau. On July 25th, Washington and his aides, Colonel Trumbull and Major Walker, made an unexpected visit to Moravian Bethlehem. The men were treated to dinner at the Moravian Sun Inn and given a tour of the settlement. In the evening, Washington attended Ettwein's sermon. Washington knew Ettwein from his representation to Congress on behalf of the Moravian

Church. Ettwein was also instrumental in developing Hope into a settled community. The next morning, on July 26th, Washington and Ettwein departed for Hope. There Washington toured the village; then he dined with the Moravians at their Log Tavern, now the site of the Hope Community Center. The next day, Washington returned to Newburgh.

There is reason to believe the Tree would not have escaped Washington's attention. Twelve years before, on November 4th, 1770, Washington and his men were inspecting land along the Kanhawa River, Ohio, that was to be awarded to veterans of the French and Indian War. He came across two sycamore trees so massive that he recorded their measurements in his diary: one was 45 ft. in circumference, and the other nearby was 31 ft. in circumference. It is astounding to imagine such trees after visiting our county's own Tree.

Bob May is the owner of the historic Israel Swayze farmstead. In honor of the pioneering Swayze family, Mr. May named the farm Swayze Inn Farm. Here he raises award-winning heritage sheep breeds, and has maintained and restored the Swayze Cemetery through his non-profit, Friends of Swayze, Inc.

Mr. May graciously welcomed us on the farm one afternoon to photograph the Tree. It was a clear September day. The trunk of the Tree was adorned with an American flag. A gentle breeze rustled the leaves. The flag waved to motorists speeding by Route 519. I would like to know more about this footnote in history: the Friday afternoon Washington met this tree, and the evening festivities he partook in Moravian Hope. The Tree shall be a bystander to history for centuries to come.



References: Big Tree Map and Registry by the New Jersey Forest Service: <https://www.nj.gov/dep/parksandforests/forest/bigtrees/treesofinterest.html>  
*Genealogy of the Swasey Family* by Benjamin Franklin Swasey, 1910.  
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 "Diary entry: 4 November 1770." Founders Online, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/01-02-02-0005-0030-0004>. Original source: *The Diaries of George Washington, vol. 2, 14 January 1766–31 December 1770*, ed. Donald Jackson. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1976, pp. 308–309.