

# Beloved 600-year-old white oak tree takes final bow

April 24 2017, by Bruce Shipkowski

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Rob Gilles is raised by a crane into an oak tree in Basking Ridge, N.J., Monday, April 24, 2017. 600 Year Old Tree. Crews at the Basking Ridge Presbyterian Church in Bernards began taking down the 600-year-old tree that was declared dead after it began showing rot and weakness over the last couple of years. (AP Photo/Seth Wenig)

A white oak tree that has watched over a New Jersey community and a church for hundreds of years began its final bow Monday as crews began

its removal and residents fondly remembered the go-to spot for formal photos, landmark for driving directions and the remarkable piece of natural history.

Crews at the Basking Ridge Presbyterian Church in Bernards began taking down the 600-year-old tree that was declared dead after it began showing rot and weakness over the last couple of years.

The two to three days of chopping and pulling will draw attention from residents of a bedroom community about 30 miles (48 kilometers) west of New York and other tree fans who see it as a chance to bid a final farewell to their close friend.

"I know it seems funny to some to mourn a tree, but I'm really going to miss seeing it," said Bernards resident Monica Evans, recalling family photos during weddings and communions.

The tree has been an important part of the community since the town's inception in the 1700s. Officials say it was the site of a picnic Gen. George Washington held with the Marquis de Lafayette, and the Rev. George Whitefield, a noted evangelist, preached to more than 3,000 people beneath the tree in 1740.

Arborists say the tree had stood for nearly 300 years before the church was built in 1717. It stands about 100 feet tall, has a trunk circumference of 18 feet and has a branch spread of roughly 150 feet. Officials say the crews plan to initially remove the large limb segments until there is a large trunk section still standing, then remove that section in one piece.



A contractor from Yoos Crane and Tree Service dangles above the ground using a chainsaw to cut limbs from a historic oak tree in Basking Ridge, N.J., Monday, April 24, 2017. A white oak tree that has watched over a New Jersey community and a church for hundreds of years began its final bow Monday as crews began its removal and residents fondly remembered the go-to spot for formal photos, landmark for driving directions and the remarkable piece of natural history. Crews at the Basking Ridge Presbyterian Church in Bernards began taking down the 600-year-old tree that was declared dead after it began showing rot and weakness over the last couple of years. (Bob Karp /The Daily Record via AP)

Its death was likely due to its age. Arborists determined it wouldn't be able to withstand many more harsh winters or spring storms.

"It has been an integral part of the town, that's for sure," said Jon Klippel, a member of the church's planning council. "It has always been there, even before there was a town, and over the years many people have met there, been photographed there, had a meal under the tree.

We've been blessed to have it here."

But there is a silver lining for tree fans: Another white oak cultivated from the old tree's acorns was recently planted at the church, so its legacy will continue at the church.

The old tree's removal is a reminder of how older trees are starting to become less common across the nation.

Experts say fewer trees are replicating the old oak's 600-year lifespan. They note that several factors—including droughts, intensive wildfires and invasive insects—can greatly harm trees, which become more susceptible to damage as they age.



Rob Gilles works to remove an oak tree in Basking Ridge, N.J., Monday, April 24, 2017. Crews at the Basking Ridge Presbyterian Church in Bernards began taking down the 600-year-old tree that was declared dead after it began showing

rot and weakness over the last couple of years. The tree has been an important part of the community since the town's inception in the 1700s. (AP Photo/Seth Wenig)



In a photograph taken Friday, April 21, 2017, Keith Keiling carries boards to be used for support beams in holding a 600-year-old white oak tree on the grounds of Basking Ridge Presbyterian Church in Bernards, N.J. Keiling's tree removal company is scheduled to remove the tree, believed to be among the oldest in the nation but was declared dead after numerous problems started appearing last summer. (AP Photo/Julio Cortez)



People gather to watch the removal of a large oak tree take a moment to pray in Basking Ridge, N.J., Monday, April 24, 2017. Crews at the Basking Ridge Presbyterian Church in Bernards began taking down the 600-year-old tree that was declared dead after it began showing rot and weakness over the last couple of years. The tree has been an important part of the community since the town's inception in the 1700s. (AP Photo/Seth Wenig)



This 2006 photo provided by the Basking Ridge Presbyterian Church shows a 600-year-old white oak tree that's believed to be among the oldest in the nation, in Bernards, N.J. Crews are scheduled to remove the church's tree which was declared dead after numerous problems started appearing in the summer 2016. The tree has served as a scenic backdrop for thousands of photographs over the years and according to legend, was a spot where George Washington once held a picnic. (J. Wayman Williams/Basking Ridge Presbyterian Church via AP )



In a photograph taken Friday, April 21, 2017, Jon Klippel looks at an undated fine arts photograph of a 600-year-old white oak tree and the Basking Ridge Presbyterian Church in Bernards, N.J. Crews are scheduled to remove the tree, believed to be among the oldest in the nation but was declared dead after numerous problems started appearing last summer. The tree has served as a scenic backdrop for thousands of photographs over the years and according to legend, was a spot where George Washington once held a picnic. (AP Photo/Julio Cortez)

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