

'It has a story to tell': How a descendant of Napoleon's willow tree took root on a Seattle hillside

October 30 2018, by Erik Lacitis, The Seattle Times

It sits among the weeds and scrub vegetation just east of Interstate 5 in downtown Seattle, this long-forgotten link to one of history's greatest military leaders.

The descendant of a Napoleon willow tree—it's a genetic clone to one near Napoleon Bonaparte's grave site—hasn't given up despite arduous conditions, decades of vehicle exhaust and even once getting chopped down. The tree grew right back from its roots.

Drivers heading north on I-5, just before the James Street exit sign, can catch a fleeting glimpse of its graceful broad-rounded crown of branches that sweep downward to the ground.

The tree sits on Seattle Housing Authority land, and recently was surrounded by mounds of garbage and needles and syringes. A pallet has been wedged in its trunk, above the ground, for a sleeping platform.

The tree's lineage is believed to go back to the weeping willow that, as legend goes, Napoleon would sit beneath after the French emperor was exiled in 1815 to the far-off island of St. Helena in the South Atlantic. After Napoleon's death in 1821, cuttings from the willow were spread by sailors and those wanting a piece of history.

One was planted in Seattle 135 years ago.

"It's calling to us. It has a story to tell," says Jason Cooper, an archaeologist with the state's Department of Transportation, for whom the I-5 willow has become a passion.

He was at a dinner party when someone happened to mention the existence of a Napoleon willow in Seattle. Cooper couldn't help it.

As a cultural-resources specialist, one of Cooper's jobs is to research whether a highway project might trample on old tribal-burial grounds or anything else of historical value. The more he researched the I-5 willow, the more intrigued he became.

"In the grand scheme, this particular tree has survived by luck and or fate," he says. "This is not a 'save the tree' story. The tree is over 100 years old and so it won't live much longer. I see it as a living memorial."

He now believes it's his mission to get the word out on the origins and history of that willow tree.

"It'll capture the heart of the general public," he says.

A TREE TELLS ITS STORY

Cooper is not the first person to become engrossed with the I-5 willow. A story in the Dec. 21, 1895, Seattle Daily Times told the rather unusual tale as if the tree was talking from its home at Ninth and Main, an intersection that no longer exists after the hill was later regraded.

"Great was my pleasure when I knew that I was to grow in that commonwealth which bore the name of the father of his country ...," went the florid story. "Here I have grown and flourished ... I have looked out upon the Western skies, have watched the crest of the majestic Olympics, and kept note of the sun as it hid itself in the bosom of the

great sea beyond."

The author was J.B. Metcalfe, an attorney who had brought the tree here. He liked to go by Gen. J.B. Metcalfe, although he had only reached the rank of lieutenant when he served in the Confederate Army. But he had been appointed the attorney general for the-then Washington Territory, and so he was a kind of general, according to a biography in the Skagit River Journal.

Metcalfe's passion for Napoleon's willow began when he and an army buddy were visiting George Washington's tomb in Mount Vernon, just south of Washington, D.C. The superintendent at Mount Vernon had been in their regiment and gave them a personal tour.

He also gave Metcalfe cuttings from a Napoleon willow planted at Washington's home, grown from cuttings gifted by a French naval officer. That willow is no longer there.

Willows are astounding trees.

You can actually grow a new tree by simply taking a stem and sticking it in moist soil. Its hormones cause rapid rooting.

Napoleon had ended up in 1815 in St. Helena, a British island 1,200 miles from the west coast of Africa, after his crushing defeat at Waterloo. The British wanted him far away to prevent him from raising an army.

When he first sighted the island, Napoleon is reported to have said, "It will not be a pleasant abode."

A history of his six-year stay there until his death in 1821 says, "Napoleon had only a few distractions to occupy his time. He did some

gardening."

A website devoted to "The real Napoleon's willow" tells how one willow tree in particular "became associated with Napoleon, because it was said that he used to sit under it during his exile. It was his special place for tranquility and reflection, and he asked to be buried under its shade."

In those days, it was common for sailing ships to stop at St. Helena on the long voyage south around the Cape of Good Hope. French sailors inevitably would take cuttings from the tomb's willow.

And so the genetic clones began to spread around the world, including the one that was given to Metcalfe. He had grown it into an infant tree while living in San Francisco. He then brought it to Seattle.

A WILY WILLOW

In 1909, the willow was chopped down at the property at Ninth and Main, where Metcalfe had built a 10-room home. That area had to make way for the Jackson Street regrade, one of the projects that excavated and also filled city streets.

But the I-5 willow wouldn't die, growing back with several new clones.

Fast forward five decades.

"Spare those trees, city is asked," headlined a Seattle Times story on Feb. 20, 1966.

Metcalfe's son, J. Vernon Metcalfe, hoped that the city would enclose them in a small, fenced-off area above I-5. There is nothing to indicate that ever happened.

While there's no way to definitively say the tree that stands today is a direct descendant of the Napoleon willow short of a costly DNA test by a plant geneticist, Cooper is certain the willow came from the original planting because it is growing at what used to be Ninth and Main and is the only willow in that area.

Cuttings from the I-5 willow have even found new homes. Metcalfe's son arranged to have a cutting placed by the Fiske Genealogy Library in Madison Park by Lake Washington.

"We have two of them, probably 30 feet tall, maybe bigger than that, right next to the water," says Gary Zimmerman, the just-retired president of the library's foundation.

He says the trees are doing just fine.

"Our biggest problem is beavers that go for the bark, so we have the lower 5 or 6 feet covered with chicken wire," says Zimmerman.

There are likely other cuttings of the tree in this area, says Cooper, including at the University of Washington, the Suquamish Clearwater Casino Resort and another property on Bainbridge Island.

"Metcalfe was sympathetic of vanishing Native Americans in Puget Sound," says Cooper, and he probably planted the cuttings on Bainbridge Island. "The [trees](#) venerate a vanishing people, Chief Sealth and Princess Angeline's (Sealth's daughter) and their way of life before the Euros showed up."

Metcalfe was buried not far from Chief Sealth on the island.

The Seattle Housing Authority says there are no immediate plans for the vacant land on which the I-5 willow is growing, and no plans to cut it

down.

The housing authority will allow Cooper onto the property next month, when the garbage and needles have been cleared by workers in hazmat suits, and he'll take cuttings.

Cooper says he plans to plant them in buckets of soil and winter them over, and then to find homes for them in the region.

The I-5 [willow](#), he says, is not just another tree. "Its connection to Washington statehood makes me proud as a citizen and public servant of this state."

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Citation: 'It has a story to tell': How a descendant of Napoleon's willow tree took root on a Seattle hillside (2018, October 30) retrieved 23 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-10-story-descendant-napoleon-willow-tree.html>

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