

# PURCHASE

PURCHASE COLLEGE MAGAZINE | THINK WIDE OPEN

SPRING 2021

## THE *Elephant* TREE

### ALSO INSIDE:

Stephen Duncombe '88 and  
Associate Professor Steven Lambert  
Join Forces for Creative Activism

The Christopher Gorman Memorial  
Scholarship Funds Inaugural Award



**Purchase College**  
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

# THE MEMORY *of an* ELEPHANT





Few things spark a more nostalgic response in the hearts and minds of Purchase grads than the beloved Elephant Tree, the majestic copper beech tree that stood behind the original estate house. Sadly, the tree had to be removed last winter due to years of irreversible damage from pests and disease.



The copper beech tree stood silent watch over the land where it grew for roughly 200 years. Copper beeches belong to the species *Fagus sylvatica* 'Purpurea,' a variant of the European beech tree, originally brought to the United States as an ornamental tree in the late 18th or early 19th centuries. With its smooth grey bark resembling an elephant's sturdy leg, the source of its nickname, ours has witnessed weddings

and performances, study sessions and dances, picnics and meditations. And undoubtedly, many other activities.

The tree was likely planted by the Thomas family, original owners of the estate, which would eventually be sold in the mid-20th century to the State of New York to become home to Purchase College. What a remarkable coincidence that "beech" and "book" have the same ancient linguistic roots—the wood of beech trees used as tablets for the early writings of the Germanic people and also carved into the original moveable type that Gutenberg used to print his first bible in 1455.<sup>1</sup>

### Wedding Chapel

The beech tree's smooth bark often serves as a canvas for declarations of love and other graffiti. There's even a Latin proverb about carving initials into beech bark: *crescent illae; crescentis amores*, which translates to, "as these letters grow, so may our love grow." Our own copper beech served as a wedding chapel for many Purchase unions.

The first that we know of was **Olivia Sklar Powchik '77** (acting), who married **Peter Powchik '79** (chemistry) on June 11, 1983. "We wanted an outdoor wedding and were able to have a glorious event there. Others followed suit, but we were the first!" says Sklar Powchik. >>

<sup>1</sup>Heidenreich, Cathy, "Beautiful Beeches" web post, Geneva Arboretum Association, New York State Agricultural Experiment Station(<http://www.hort.cornell.edu/bjorkman/lab/arboretum/trees/beech.html>)

**Robin (Diller) Torres '87** (literature), who describes the tree as the “focal point of many romantic moments,” married **Wil Torres '87** (sociology) underneath. “We got married under that tree as the Purchase Jazz Ensemble played, the Registrar’s staff had their own table, and Clint Spiegel still attended while running Orientation later that day, June 28, 1987, when two alumni became a family.” Their daughter, Lauren, is a current student in the studio production program, and will graduate from the Conservatory of Music “as another branch on the tree or brick in the wall, from the place that gave us everything,” Torres writes.

Even our own Professor of Graphic Design Warren Lehrer married Judith Sloan in the tree’s shade, its branches acting as his wedding *chuppah* on October 14, 1990. He remembers it fondly. “There was a hurricane the day before. The Hutch and other roadways were closed until the morning of our wedding,” he recalls. “An hour before the ceremony, the clouds parted, and the sun came out for a glorious day and ceremony.”

### Haunting and Haunted

For those who attended Purchase in its first decade, the heritage buildings held the entire college, including classes, the dining area, and the administration. The sight of the Elephant Tree was a constant. In the '70s, acting students performed Shakespeare productions under it, including *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *As You Like It*.

Now the main building holds the Admissions offices, but the lawn out back has been a frequent place for college activities and student leisure time. Scores of barbecues and picnics were held in its surroundings, including faculty and staff celebrations, alumni events, and the annual parties that follow the LAS processional since the mid-1990s—the celebratory parade and submission of senior projects to the library. And how many hundreds of students have studied and napped beneath it or climbed its branches to hang out with friends?

As many will recount, the tree had an energy all its own. Students have reportedly heard whispers when no one was there and inexplicable rustling sounds. One even claims to have seen a Ouija-conjured spirit. According to [newyorkhauntedhouses.com](http://newyorkhauntedhouses.com), “The Elephant Tree is said to sway back and forth even when there is no wind.”

### Sad Fate

Beech trees often thrive for 200 to 250 years, with some living as long as 300 to 400 years in their native Europe. With ours dated at roughly 200 years old, it was nearing the end of its natural lifespan, its demise hastened by multiple attacks. Sporadic infestations of woolly beech adelgid caused occasional leaf browning and defoliation. Additionally, beech bark scale weakened the tree and predisposed it to beech bark disease, called “bleeding canker” because of oozing lesions on the trunk.

Old trees like ours, already stressed by drought, disease, and defoliation, are prone to attacks by the two-lined chestnut borer, a beetle that

causes branches to die and eventually attacks the trunk. An invasion of this beetle caused the tree to rapidly decline over the last couple of years. With limbs falling, the tree became a danger.

Michael Kopas, senior director of facilities and capital planning and certified tree expert, says despite the ongoing effort to save it, the tree’s demise was inevitable. “The various treatment strategies implemented over the years have extended its life, but unfortunately were not successful in saving it.”

A quick online search reveals that many European beech trees are suffering the same fate as our own. Notably, the copper beech planted by Theodore Roosevelt in the 1890s at the entrance to Sagamore Hill, the family’s estate in Cove Neck, Long Island, was overtaken by fungus and removed in 2019. And the city of Newport, Rhode Island is undergoing a tree crisis since so many of the beeches that line its streets and dot the mansion properties were all planted at

nearly the same time during the Gilded Age (1860–1896).

### A Fitting Memorial

Not unlike the *Giving Tree* in Shel Silverstein’s revered poem, many have taken from the Elephant Tree and she had nothing left to give. But unlike the selfish boy who sold her apples and used her branches and trunk to build a house and a boat, we will use the wood to create a proper memorial.

The tree’s wood has been safely stored. Under the direction of President Milly Peña, a committee of students, alumni, faculty, and staff will convene to determine the most appropriate way to memorialize the tree and its location. Look for news of these plans in an upcoming issue.



Photo: John Patterson