

February 2017 - Hughie Jones

Eastern White Pine Weymouth Pine
Pinus strobus

Eastern white pine is the matriarch of the eastern North American forest, watching over you and all the creatures from high above. She is the tallest tree in the forest and first nations used her steeped crowns to guide their way home. To them she is the tree of peace.

White pine has needles soft-to-the-touch and uniquely arranged in bundles of five; other eastern pines are in bundles of twos and threes. White pine bears banana-shaped cones, and the bark moves from smooth, shiny silver to a furrowed brown at maturity. With increased age, white pine develops the dancing, windswept silhouettes that were the subject of some Group of Seven paintings.



AJ Casson - Group of Seven

Ten thousand years ago eastern white pine was cornered down in the southeastern United States. As the glaciers retreated, white pine moved up the Atlantic coast spreading east across maritimes states and provinces and west across the Great Lakes. And then she not only met the axe of the early settlers from England and Quebec but also became key building material in the British Royal Navy's powerful fleet. Only 1% of the old growth forests remain after the extensive logging operations of the 18th century to early 20th century.

We all think tea and taxes when the American Revolutionary War is mentioned, but now it is time to think the eastern white pine too. With trunks measuring nearly 67 metres (201 ft) in length, these pines were ideal as the masts of large vessels.

Britain had cut down most of its forests in the 17th century for firewood and had to look elsewhere for timber. But the closest source was in the Baltic region, where England was in competition with France, Spain, and Holland. Eventually England was blocked from the supply.

That is when King George I assumed ownership of the tallest eastern white pines in the forests of New England. He appointed a legion of surveyors to mark their choices with a symbol of three hatchet slashes known as 'The King's Broad Arrow'. This indicated that they were for use by the British Royal Navy only. They were shipped back to Britain on special barge-like vessels that could carry up to 50 pine trunks at a time.



The King's Broad Arrow

Already upset over the issue of taxation on tea, many colonists whose livelihoods depended on eastern white pines disregarded the mark and harvested the trees anyway. When six mills in New Hampshire were searched for trees bearing The King's Broad Arrow, the owners were charged with disobeying the King's law, and many townspeople rioted in protest.

Clashes between the local settlers and the British authorities in these incidents and many others throughout New England became known as 'The Pine Tree Riot'. Some historians believe that this conflict was a key in bringing about the American Revolution and the first real acts of rebellion against British rule. The eastern white pine was such a potent symbol for colonists that it became the emblem emblazoned upon the first colonial flag.

This stately soft pine is Ontario's provincial tree and one of North America's most commercially viable trees. The wood is moderately strong and easily worked, with uniform texture and low shrinkage. It has been used in construction, interior and exterior finishing, furniture cabinets and carvings.

Eastern white pine live about 200 years and produce seed regularly after 20 to 30 years. The bark resists fire well, and after forest fires, surviving trees readily shed their seed over freshly exposed ground. Today it is not the axe but white pine blister rust and white pine weevil that are killing many eastern white pine.

<http://www.nanps.org/index.php/gardening/native-plants-to-know/113-pinus-strobus-white-pine-volume-7-issue-1> ; Trees of Ontario - Linda Kershaw
<http://easternwhitepine.org/the-tree-that-sparked-the-revolutionary-war-eastern-white-pines-colonial-history/>