

A TALE OF TWO PRESIDENTS

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Around the time that Christopher Columbus discovered America, two live oaks had already settled their roots in the alluvial soil of Louisiana. And, content with their surroundings, they planned to remain for many, many years.

The first one grew along the banks of the mighty Mississippi River, in an area which eventually became known as the German Coast. Karl d'Arensbourg, a slave trader and swindler, had enticed Europeans to come to the New World where he promised fertile lands and prosperity. Arriving in their new country the Germans found instead untamed forests, swamps, mosquitoes, snakes, alligators, and Native Americans whose friendship had to be earned. The German settlers cleared the land, tilled the soil, and grew crops and animals that they supplied to the early settlers of New Orleans, some 30 miles downriver.



1934 photo of the Locke Breaux Oak (*Quercus virginiana*).

Photo courtesy of the Live Oak Society

As Germans, they respected the forests and, in particular, one live oak tree in whose shade they rested while carrying heavy loads from their farms to their boats docked in the River. Frequently, they traded with the local Indians under the tree and it became a meeting place and a landmark.

In 1791 this live oak adorned the entrance of Providence Plantation and was given the name Perret Oak. Each spring the Mississippi River overflowed its banks and the Perret Oak was nourished by the rich deposits left when the waters receded. By 1835, it became known as the Davenport Oak when the plantation changed

ownership. It established itself as a point of navigation for steamboat pilots traveling to and from New Orleans as they rounded a bend in the River. Following the Civil War between the States, in 1888, Joseph and Pierre Brou, bought the plantation and renamed the tree the Brou Oak. Finally, in the 1900's, it was named for Samuel Locke Breaux, a prominent citizen of the area, a leading rice farmer, and first vice-president of Pan American Life Insurance Company and a member of the Board of Trade of New Orleans.

This majestic oak, The Locke Breaux Oak, grew to a height of 101 feet (31 m), with a trunk circumference of 36 feet (11 m) and a canopy span of 172 feet (53 m). It had survived clearings by the immigrant Germans, the Civil War between the States, numerous fierce hurricanes with winds over 140 miles (224 km) per hour, and the seasonal flooding of the River. During this time, levees were built, followed shortly thereafter by the Bonnet Carre Spillway. Afterwards, the Mississippi River could no longer overflow its banks and provide its yearly supply of extra nourishment to the area around the tree. Yet the Locke Breaux Oak thrived and was to be rewarded for its perseverance, stamina and service.

In 1934, the Live Oak Society was founded by Dr. Lewis Stephens in Lafayette,



Seven Sisters Oak, the U.S. National Champion live oak (*Quercus virginiana*).
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Louisiana, and the Locke Breaux Oak was named its first president and hailed as the largest live oak in the world. Thousands of people visited it each year and its photograph was seen throughout the world as it graced the Great River Road in Taft, Louisiana.

In the late 1950's the lifestyle along the German Coast changed drastically from agriculture to industrial. Chemical and fertilizer plants became giants overnight. The old oak no longer shaded farmers and Indians, but instead trembled as automobiles and heavy industrial trucks whizzed past its roots night and day. Regulations

on air pollution and ground-water pollution were scarce, if any, and soon the sturdy oak began to show signs of decline. In the spring of 1967 the tree's crown showed no new growth and the Locke Breaux Oak was declared legally dead by County Agent Achille Melancon. The cause—industrial pollution. An entire state mourned its loss.

The Live Oak Society began its search for a new president. After studying many ancient oaks, it was agreed that an oak on the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain would meet the requirements. Like its predecessor, this oak had enjoyed the company of Indians under its protective boughs, and had been nourished by a large body of water. In the spring of each year, as the Mississippi River overflowed into Lake Pontchartrain, this oak drank from the same water as the Locke Breaux Oak. It, too, had seen settlers arrive to disturb its forest primeval.

In 1968, Doby's Seven Sisters was named president of the Live Oak Society in a celebration marked with an address by the governor of Louisiana, renditions by the U. S. Marine Corps band, and a ballet troupe danced around its roots. As fierce and stalwart as Locke Breaux Oak had been in appearance, Doby's Seven Sisters was, in contrast, graceful and flowing, resembling the seven sisters for whom it was named.

Its name was later changed to Seven Sisters Oak and today it graces an area in Lewisburg, Louisiana, with a girth of over 38 feet (12 m) and a fan spread of nearly 180 feet (55 m). Foresters have deemed it to be over 1200 years old. Visited and photographed by hundreds of people each year, it is in no imminent danger of relinquishing its office.

Locke Breaux Oak and Seven Sisters Oak are only two of thousands of live oaks that began life in 14 states in the United States. Each adapted to its environment and lived its life well and in balance with nature. A man-made environment destroyed one tree. Measures are being taken to protect and preserve the others.

A brief history and complete registry of the Live Oak Society may be found on the internet at www.louisianagardenclubs.org.

Author's Note: The live oak, *Quercus virginiana*, adapts readily to a natural environment. It thrives mainly in warm, coastal areas and can live hundreds of years. It reaches its true beauty after 100 years of age. Known for its grace and strength, it is an asset to any community. Laws must be made to protect and preserve the live oak from man-made dangers, be it road construction, housing developments, or air and ground water pollution. Unable to speak for itself, we as stewards of the earth, must speak for it.