

Survivors—the Founding Member Trees of the Live Oak Society

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In South Louisiana, the landscape lies flat as cut sugarcane. Here, the sprawling shape of a live oak tree can dominate the view for miles. By the sight of a familiar oak you can tell where you're going, where you'd been, and how much farther you have to go before you reach your destination. Live oaks are heritage, heirlooms, and history all rolled into one. On the old land maps, oaks marked where one property line ended and another began. They were a point on the horizon to aim the blade of a plow or the nose of a tractor. They mark where back roads cross and provide a shady spot where neighbors can park their pickups, pass a plastic thermos cup of chicory coffee, and discuss the weather. Duels were fought and honor won or lost under their bowed limbs. People picnic under them, get married under them, dance the two-step under them, and finally when the music ends, are laid to rest alongside their massive roots.

In April 1934, Dr. Edwin Lewis Stephens, the first president of the Southwestern Louisiana Institute (now University of Louisiana at Lafayette), published an article in the *Louisiana Conservation Review* titled, "I Saw in Louisiana a Live Oak Growing." The piece drew its name from a poem by Walt Whitman, and like Whitman's poem, Stephens praised the singular beauty of this distinctly Southern species of oak (*Quercus virginiana*). His appreciation for live oaks grew over many years of being raised and living in Louisiana and from frequent motor trips he took with his wife along the back roads and byways through Cajun country. Influenced by his background as a science teacher, he observed, measured, photographed, and collected data on the oaks, taking special interest in the oldest and largest of the species. And from his orientation as a scholar and poet, he recognized the deeper truth of this Southern icon—that more than any other aspect of the landscape, the live oak symbolically reflects the most memorable and distinctive characteristics of the cultures and people that settled this rich alluvial area: strength of character, forbearance, longevity, and a hearty nature.

Eventually, Stephens was inspired to propose the creation of an organization that might preserve and protect the most senior members of this oak species, those "...whose age is not less than a hundred years..." He was not at a loss for examples near his home in Lafayette. As he noted in his *Conservation Review* article, "I, at present, number among my personal acquaintance forty-three such live oaks in Louisiana eligible for charter membership." These forty-three oaks comprised his original inductees into what is known today as the Live Oak Society. Seventy-four years later, the Society counts more than 5800 member oaks on its registry in 14 states (and now includes junior league trees with a girth of at least eight feet).

Early in my efforts as a photographer/artist, an older and wiser photographer friend advised me that if I wished to make more powerful and personal images, I should find something I loved and photograph it—over and over again. When I looked around my native Louisiana, I found myself drawn to the old oaks, and still

do today. For more than two decades, I've focused my camera's lens on these elder trees of Louisiana's landscape over and over again, searching to reveal their unique character and spirit. A sampling of my black-and-white images of live oaks was published by Bullfinch/Little Brown Books in 1998 in the book titled, *Heartwood, Meditations on Southern Oaks*.

The 100 oaks project.

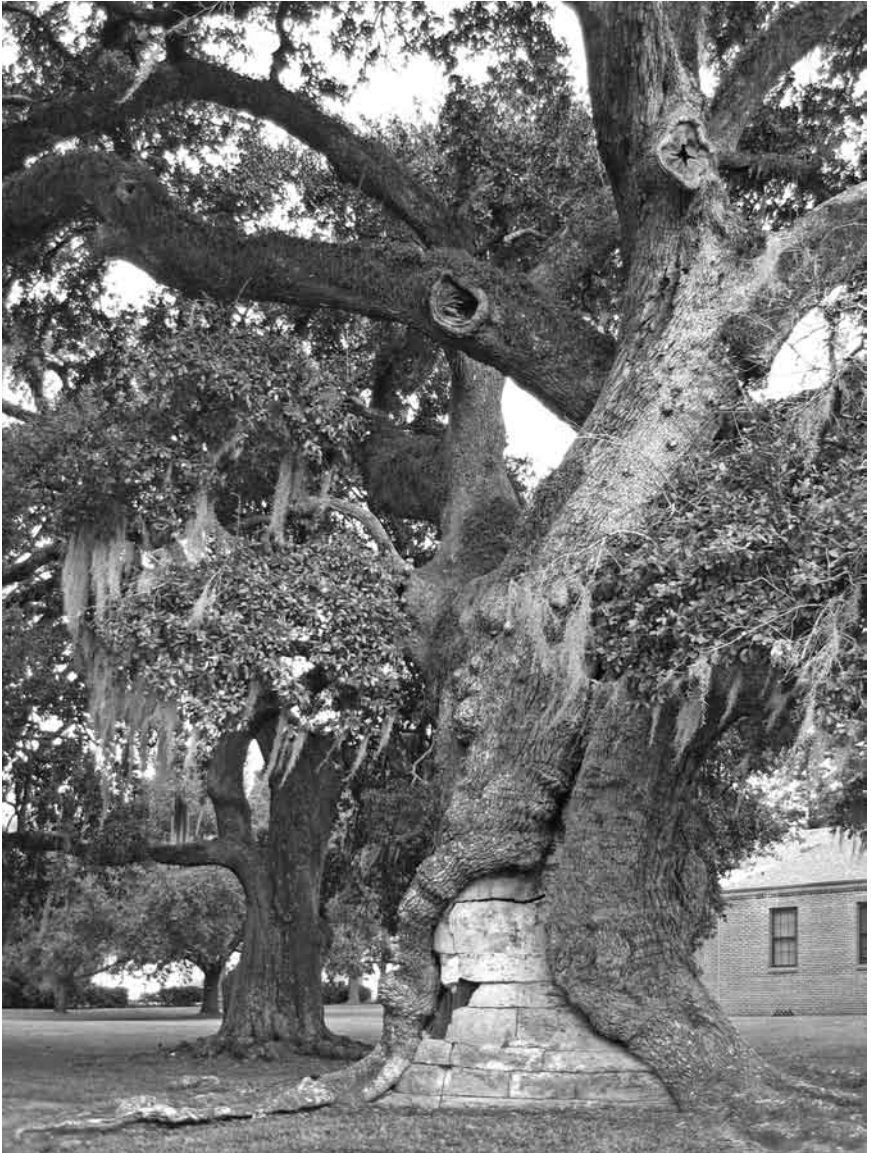
After the devastating one-two blow of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in late 2005, I realized that even the most permanent aspects of my native Louisiana could be lost overnight. Even centuries-old trees were not invincible. And though I had photographed several historic oaks, I had never seen many of the Society's oldest member trees, including most of Dr. Stephen's original inductees. So I turned my focus to documenting the "survivors"—the Society's 100 largest and oldest oaks, beginning with Dr. Lewis's forty-three charter member trees.

Using his 74-year old article as a guide, I began retracing his drives across South Louisiana, along bayous with names like Teche, Lafourche, Maringouin, Grosse Tete, and Terrebonne, and the along banks of the Mississippi River and Lake Pontchartrain—French and native American names that evoke romantic images of moss-draped trees, Cajun fisherman in flatboats, sultry heat, and white-columned plantation homes. Dr. Stephens listed the 43 charter oaks in order of their size—large to less large—noting the circumference, name (usually that of a sponsor), and general location.

I quickly realized on my journeys that I was naïve about the degree of change that can occur in a landscape over 74 years. Plantations have faded away, changed names, been parceled off and subdivided. Properties have changed owners, and entire families have died or moved away, and even trees of the size and magnificence of the Mays Oak were lost with the passing years. In some cases oaks have been registered more than once, and by different owners adding to the confusion between Dr. Stephens article and the current landscape. Some oaks were known to a few locals and were not particularly difficult to find. Others required extensive research through libraries, Web sites, and books, and the help of many local librarians, chambers of commerce, sheriff's deputies, and Louisiana Garden Club members across the state.

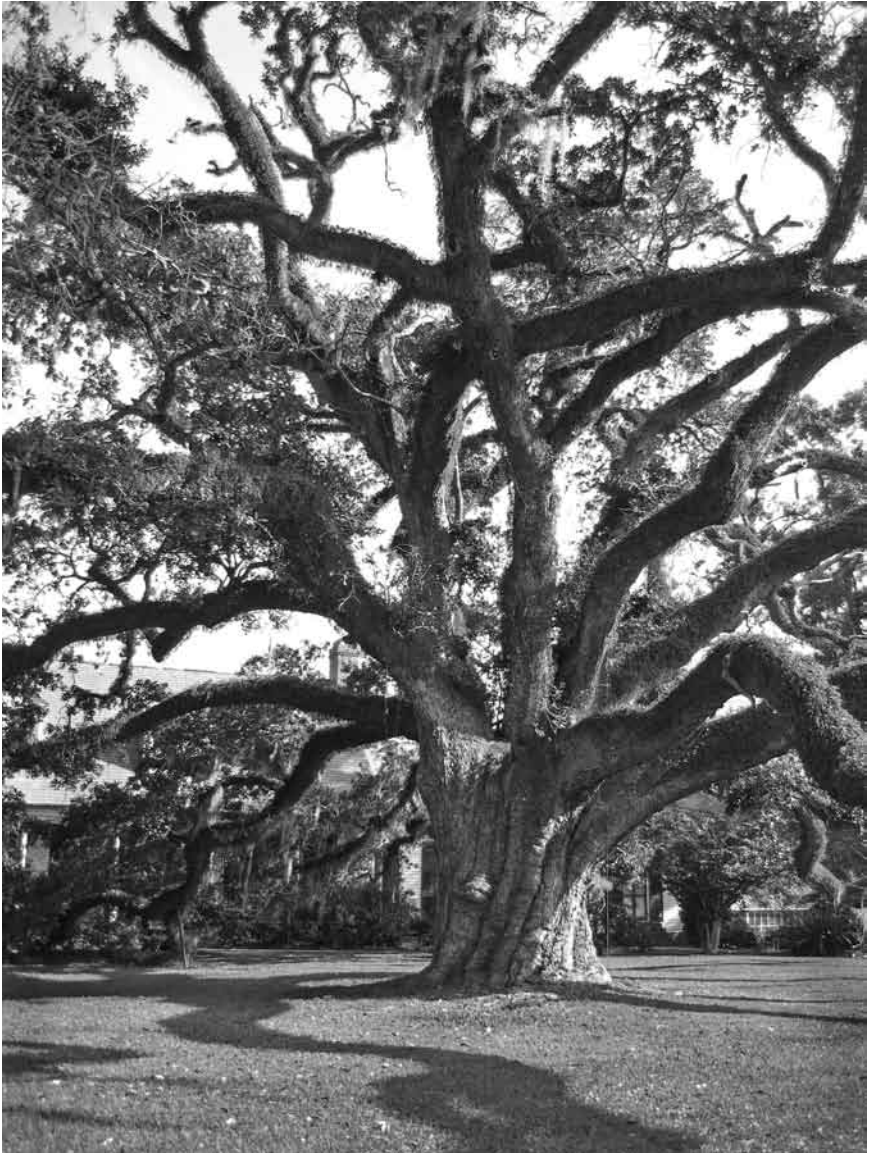
The top three oaks were the Locke Breaux Oak (a beautiful giant named after a descendent of the English philosopher, John Locke) located near Hahnville, in St. Charles Parish; the Arnaud Robert Oak, near Breaux Bridge in St. Martin Parish; and the George Washington Oak, located in Audubon Park, in New Orleans. They have all died since 1934. The Locke Breaux Oak reportedly died from air and water pollution from nearby chemical plants, and the other two from natural causes.

Fourth on the list was the Luling Oak, now also known as the Lagarde Oak (current girth, 30 feet, five inches). This elder oak towers above traffic passing along Old Spanish Trail (US Highway 90) in Luling. Fifth was the Martha Washington Oak, the mate of the George Washington Oak, which still stands in the rhino and wildebeest habitat at Audubon Zoo, sharing her habitat with the zoo's gray rhinos, Yvonne, Macite, and Saba. Martha's current girth is 28 feet, seven inches. The Mays Oak, sixth on the list, is located on the right bank of Bayou Grosse Tete, near Live Oak Plantation.



Beaux Bridge Oak

photo © William Guion



Gebert Oak

photo © William Guion

The number seven had several sevens associated with it. Stephens called it the Seven Sisters Oak, but it is now known as the Seven Brothers or Lastrappes Oak. Located two miles west of Washington in St. Landry Parish, this magnificent oak is comprised of seven main trunks growing in two clusters that merge into a single base. One cluster is 32 feet, two inches in girth, the other twenty-eight feet eleven inches. The current name originated with a previous owner of the property who reportedly had seven sons. As the legend goes, Mr. Lastrappes sent his sons into the woods to each gather a live oak sapling that he planned to plant in a row in front of their home. The sons piled the saplings together in the yard, but then the next day the call to arms of the Civil War caused the sons to leave home and enlist. The trees were never transplanted into a row, and they eventually grew together. However, based on the size of these oaks, it's more likely that they were planted as much as 150 to 200 years prior to the Civil War.

The remainder of the list of inductees is as follows:

- #8 – Jamison or Jackson Oak.** I assumed this tree would be easy to locate. Dr Stephens described its location on the Preston Pugh Plantation in Lafourche Parish, near Thibodaux, my hometown. But after extensive research, I learned the property had changed hands several times since the 1930s and today is completely overgrown with small trees and brambles. There's no evidence of the oak or even a plantation home at the site. I assume it's deceased.
- #9 – The Kaplan Oak.** Though reportedly still alive, I was unable to photograph this oak because it is located on a small island in Vermillion Bay near the mouth of the Vermillion River and is accessible only by boat.
- #10 – The double live oak at Parks on Bayou Teche.** I was unable to locate this tree, but found a stump of what was once a double-trunked oak of approximately the correct size and so suspect it is deceased.
- #11 – The Maryland Oak.** Located near New Roads, on False River, this historic oak was the inspiration for James Ryder Randall's song, *Maryland, My Maryland*. He supposedly penned its lyrics under this oak's limbs. It's confirmed alive, even though I've not yet found it.
- #12 – The Potier Oak in Parks.** I believe I've located this tree based on its measurements, though it's still unconfirmed.
- #13 – Audubon Park Oak #3, Etienne de Bore Oak.** This oak was later named the Etienne de Bore' Oak after the plantation owner whose land became Audubon Park and is noted in local history as the first man in Louisiana to successfully granulate sugarcane into sugar. The tree is now nicknamed "the Tree of Life" by locals. (34 feet, four inches).
- #14 – Breaux Bridge Oak.** Located in the southeast corner of the town square, this oak is being considered by the city council for removal. The city is facing a lawsuit for a large limb that fell onto a parked car during a storm. (26 feet 7 inches)
- #15 – Bayou Grosse Tete Oak.** Located on the north side of Interstate-10 along Bayou Grosse Tete. (30 feet, 3 inches)
- #16 – Stonaker Oak.** Growing north of the intersection of Airport Road and Highway 820 outside of New Roads. (28 feet, 2 inches)

- #17 – Kenner Ferry Oak.** Originally on the west bank of the Mississippi River in Jefferson Parish. Unable to locate. Suspect deceased.
- #18 – Jefferson Island Oak.** Located in an open field to the right (north) side of the gate to Jefferson Island. (28 feet, 5 inches)
- #19 – Cleveland Oak.** Located on Avery Island, home of Tabasco Pepper Sauce, and named after President Grover Cleveland who supposedly visited there in 1931. Another Cleveland Oak is located about seven miles away on Jefferson Island. (24 feet, 8 inches)
- #20 – McDonough Oak. City Park, New Orleans.** (26 feet, 1 inch)
- #21 – Avery Island Oak #2.** Unable to identify accurately, but there are many oaks on the McIlhenny property large enough to be this unnamed oak.
- #22 – Gosserand Oak.** Located on the west bank of False River, in New Roads (possibly later renamed to the Langlois Oak. (27 feet, nine inches)
- #23 – Avery Island Oak #3.** Suspect this may be the oak with a plaque stating “Planted by E.A. McIlhenny in the year of McIlhenny’s home.
- #24 – New Iberia Oak.** On grounds of Mt. Carmel girl’s school. Was recently struck by lightning, but still living. Photographed but unable to access private grounds to measure.
- #25 – Parks Oak #3.** Unable to identify accurately.
- #26 – Campbell Oak.** Supposedly located in the Catholic cemetery in Lafayette. Not found at this location. Suspect deceased.
- #27 – Charenton Oak.** Supposedly located at Charenton Beach. Unable to locate.
- #28 – Rochard Oak.** Located on east bank of Bayou Teche in back yard of old Pere’ Rochard home. Identified two oaks in the yard that could be the named tree.
- #29 – Grenier Oak.** Still on west bank of Bayou Lafourche, four miles above Thibodaux. (27 feet, five inches)
- #30 – Rosedale Oak.** Listed as located on the east bank of Bayou Grosse Tete. I believe I located the tree, but as yet unconfirmed.
- #31 – Audubon Park Oak #4** – Suspect this is a tree near the front gate of Audubon Park off of St. Charles Ave. in New Orleans, but unable to confirm.
- #32 – Monarch Oak of Paradise Woods.** One of Dr. Stephens’ favorite trees. He called the 74-acre grove “incomparable” in its beauty, and frequently took guests there. It has been developed and two large mansions built on the property. Several trees were lost. The Monarch Oak is confirmed deceased. Its stump is lying in the yard of current residents.
- #33 – Cathedral Oak.** Current 2nd Vice President tree of the Live Oak Society. Located next to St. John’s Catholic Cathedral in downtown Lafayette. (27 feet in girth)
- #34 – Singleton Oak.** Listed as located on Twin Oaks Place, northeast of Carencro. Unable to locate.
- #35 – G.A Martin Oak.** Supposedly located near Lafayette. Unable to locate.
- #36 – Audubon Park Oak #5.** Still living.
- #37 – Broussard Oak.** Supposedly located near train depot in Broussard. Unable to locate.



Grenier Oak

photo © William Guion



Gross tete oak

photo © William Guion

- #38 – Thomas D. Boyd Oak.** Deceased. It was on the north side of park in front of new state capital building but was blown down in Hurricane Gustav, September 2008.
- #39 – Uncle George Oak.** Supposedly located near Mobile, Mississippi. Unable to locate, suspect deceased in fire.
- #40 – Protestant Cemetery Oak.** Supposedly located in Lafayette. Found cemetery, but unable to locate tree. Suspect deceased.
- #41 – Shady Grove Oak.** Supposedly located in Iberville Parish. Unable to locate.
- #42 – St. Denis Oak.** Located in American Graveyard in Natchitoches. As yet unable to locate.
- #43 – Gebert Oak.** Located on Main Street in New Iberia, near downtown. This beautiful historic oak was recently poisoned in a neighborhood dispute and has lost much of its usual foliage.

After 74 years, the majority of the South’s historic oaks are still not legally protected from human damage or removal, though a growing number of cities and counties have begun to pass ordinances for their protection. In the City of Covington, Louisiana (a neighbor of the community Lewisburg where the current Live Oak Society President tree is located), the removal of any live oak larger than 12 inches in diameter is restricted. In Waveland, Mississippi, another Gulf coast city hard hit by Hurricane Katrina, citizens passed a similar ordinance protecting their historic live oaks and magnolia trees.

An innovative ordinance passed in 1996 in East Baton Rouge Parish, Louisiana, created the Tree Registry of Ancient, Historic and Unique Trees. This forward-thinking regulation is part of the Parish’s master plan for development. It could serve as a legal example for protecting trees across the Gulf South. The ordinance ensures protection not just to live oaks, but to all trees “which, by virtue of their size, age, historic significance, or other uniqueness, can be recognized as being the most noteworthy representatives of their kind.” Live Oak Society member trees were automatically included. According to the Program Statement of this ordinance, the purpose of this program is to “create a direct link between the recognized trees and the human or cultural community... to use this linkage as a means of encouraging the protection of these important trees... by using ancient, historic and unique trees as examples, we can stimulate a greater understanding of trees and their importance to the community and perhaps encourage an informed public to plant trees for future generations to enjoy.”

For more information about how to apply for a city ordinance in your city or county to protect any species of tree, the Louisiana State University School of Landscape Architecture has created a model “Guide to Writing a City Tree Ordinance” for Louisiana, available online at www.greenlaws.lsu.edu/modeltree.htm. It’s likely to prove helpful for other states as well.

See The Live Oak Society web site at: http://www.louisianagardenclubs.org/live_oak_society/about.html

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Rosedale Oak

photo © William Guion



Stonaker oak

photo © William Guion