

The Andrew Jackson Magnolia tree story

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on February 16, 2010)

This saga of an historic magnolia tree and sprouts from that tree over the years comes from John Rice Irwin, founder of the Museum of Appalachia. It is a most intriguing story covering more than 180 years. It is a story of a tree that began in Tennessee, went to Washington, DC as a sprout, then returned to Tennessee as more sprouts and eventually replaced itself at The Hermitage, near Nashville.

This story started in 1829 when President Andrew Jackson left his Tennessee home and journeyed to the White House for his inauguration and presidency. At some point he had a sprout from one of Rachel's favorite magnolia trees on the grounds of their home, The Hermitage, planted at the White House. It was located on the South lawn at the west side of the entrance.

In fairness to history, I have to admit the actual date of the planting of the tree is in dispute. While I would like to think Jackson took the sprout when he first went to the White House and was in mourning for his wife who had died just a few months before his inauguration, it may not have happened that way.

However, there is some thought that the sprout(s) may have been nurtured in conservatories for sometime before actual planting in the lawn. This would allow for an earlier date for movement from Tennessee to the White House.

The actual planting could have been as late as 1835, when President Jackson, in his second term, created the White House orangery (an early version of a greenhouse). He is known to have brought his own landscape gardener, Will Frost, from The Hermitage in 1834. Perhaps that is when the sprout was taken from The Hermitage to the White House, if it had not been taken there sooner. Several references indicate it was planted in 1835. This date is corroborated by Irvin Williams, head White House gardener, according to John Rice Irwin.

There is no dispute that the sprout was planted in memory of President Jackson's beloved wife, Rachel, who had died on December 22, 1828, after a grueling campaign where Jackson won the presidency but his dear Rachel was the brunt of many abusive campaign attacks regarding her previous marriage. Jackson was convinced that the unduly harsh treatment caused her death. He went to his March 4, 1839 inauguration while in mourning for his loss.

Taking a sprout of that magnolia tree obviously had strong meaning for Andrew Jackson. The majestic tree has held much strong meaning for several presidents and their families since. President Harry Truman found the tree a favorite, Jackie Kennedy was known to be very fond of it. President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill are said to have sat "underneath that old magnolia tree."

In 1988, President Reagan treasured the magnificent old tree enough to provide a cutting to his retiring Chief of Staff, Howard Baker, Jr., who planted the treasured gift at his Huntsville, Tennessee, home. This is the tree that caught John Rice Irwin's eye and forms the basis for this historic tree story that is being documented in *Historically Speaking*.

Lady Bird Johnson took sprouts from the Jackson Magnolia to her Texas homes. Sprouts were taken to Florida where a "Jackson Magnolia" stands near the capital. There is one on the south lawn of the Daviess County courthouse in Owensboro, KY. There is one in Mississippi and I am sure there are several other locations where cuttings have been taken and the "Jackson Magnolia" now grows as many majestic Southern Magnolia trees with special meaning because of the linkage to the original tree that Andrew Jackson took from Tennessee to the White House.

First lady Michelle Obama took a Jackson Magnolia seedling to the Department of Agriculture in February, 2009. The seedling was planted in the USDA's community garden, part of a larger USDA initiative to grow gardens at their offices around the world.

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From 1928 to 1998, the reverse image on a twenty-dollar bill depicted the Jackson Magnolia tree standing alone just southwest of the White House near the south portico. At sometime a matching magnolia tree has been planted on the east side of the south facing rounded portico. The two trees frame the entrance and create a balanced and artistically pleasing image...likely the most photographed view of the White House.

This grand tradition of Presidents planting trees at the White House has been followed by many presidents. A couple of recent examples are: George W. Bush planted a Cut Leaf Silver Maple in July, 2001. George H. Bush planted a Little Leaf Linden with the help of Queen Elizabeth II in 1991.

Another interesting tree on the grounds of the White House is an American Elm tree planted during the administration of Teddy Roosevelt somewhere between 1902 and 1906. During severe storms in 2006 the Elm came down. Take out a twenty dollar bill (since 1998) and look at the back. You can see Roosevelt's tree on the right side of the North Entrance to the White House.

You may recall that the Jackson Magnolia withstood an airplane crash in 1994. A single-engine, two-seat Cessna airplane initially hit the grass lawn about 75 feet from a holly hedge and the Jackson Magnolia tree. The plane skidded into the hedge, and its left wing was clipped by the magnolia tree which lost a large limb in the crash. The pilot was killed. The president was not at the White House.

The stately old magnolia tree formed the inspiration for one of two new sets of china that Laura Bush had designed for use in the Blue Room and the Yellow Oval Room above it, both rooms look out on the Jackson Magnolia.

This Jackson Magnolia tree also has special meaning for our John Rice Irwin, Founder of the Museum of Appalachia. In June of 1993, he was enjoying lunch at Senator Baker's Huntsville residence when he noticed a tall magnolia tree. As would be expected, John Rice inquired about the tree and wondered about its origin.

Can't you imagine the pride and joy of Senator Baker at being asked about this special tree? He must have reared back in his chair, raised his hand to the back of his head and with great expressions described the gift from President Reagan, some six years earlier. I'm sure he pointed out to John Rice that the Jackson Magnolia was pictured on the reverse of the twenty-dollar bill prior to 1998.

After hearing the grand story of the tree's history, John Rice asked for a cutting from the tree. Senator Baker agreed and arranged for two cuttings to be rooted and sent to John Rice at the Museum of Appalachia.

In the next installment of *Historically Speaking* we will pick up our story of the Jackson Magnolia and will tell you of the circuitous route that brought the tree back to its original home at the Hermitage near Nashville to replace the original tree that was destroyed by a tornado in 1998.

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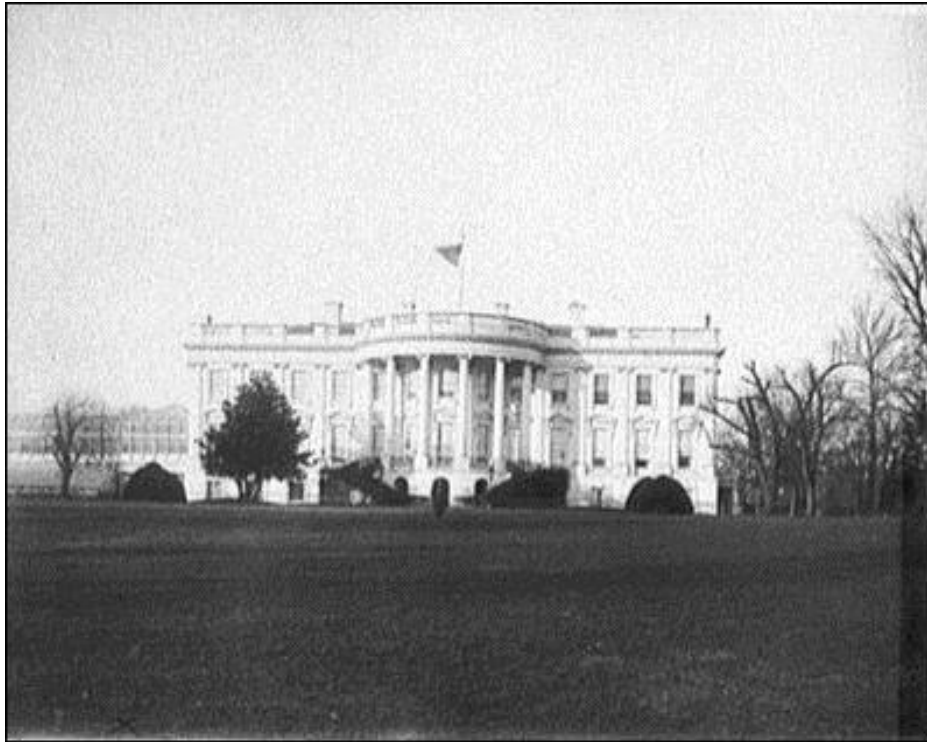
View of the South Portico of the White House with the Jackson Magnolia on the left and the matching Southern Magnolia on the right



View of the reverse side of \$20 bill prior to 1998 showing a single Jackson Magnolia tree southwest of the White House near the Southern rounded Portico

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View of South Portico of the White House with the single Jackson Magnolia shown to the left



A magnolia tree next to the statue of Andrew Jackson in Lafayette Square, across from the White House in Washington, was toppled as a blizzard struck the nation's capital and much of the Mid Atlantic region, Saturday, Feb. 6, 2010. – AP photo

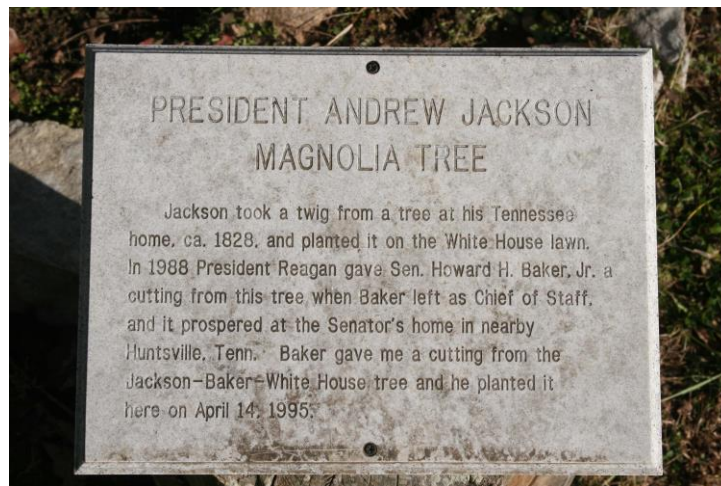
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ALTERNATE PHOTOS:



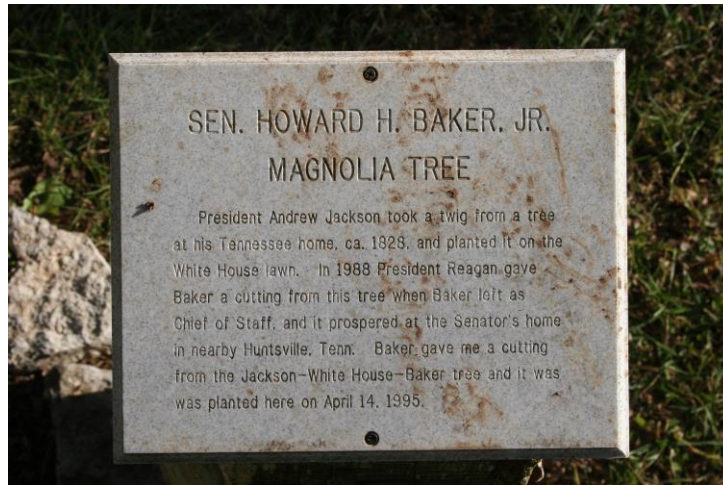
Photograph from 1995 planting ceremony showing Eugene Joyce along with John Rice Irwin and others at the planting of the Howard Baker, Jr. Magnolia Tree, courtesy of John Rice Irwin



Plaque placed at base of President Andrew Jackson Magnolia at Museum of Appalachia

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Plaque placed at base of Howard Baker, Jr. Magnolia at Museum of Appalachia



Sprout of Museum of Appalachia Magnolia descended from the Jackson Magnolia ready for planting

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The original "Jackson Magnolia" that stands at the Southwest corner of the White House



View of the White House south entrance with Jackson Magnolia on left and second matching Magnolia on the right

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Andrew Jackson Statue in Lafayette Park with snow damaged Magnolia Tree in the foreground



Andrew Jackson Statue in Lafayette Park with snow damaged Magnolia Tree in the background