

Lightning rods installed on Bicentennial white oak



STAFF PHOTO BY JASON BABCOCK

A worker from Bartlett Tree Experts installs lightning rods on a Bicentennial white oak tree at the Park Hall home of Scott Lawrence last month. The tree had already been struck by lightning before.

Only three of five trees so designated still surviving

By JASON BABCOCK
jbabcock@somdnews.com

The white oak tree in Scott Lawrence's backyard in Park Hall has grown and lived through at least 240 years of history. In more recent years, the towering tree has survived a lightning strike, a gypsy moth infestation and massive branches crashing down. Lately woodpeckers have been pockmarking the base of the old tree.

The gypsy moths were eradicated years ago, but Lawrence has been meaning to protect the tree from another lightning strike, which is more likely since it was already hit.

Last week, Lawrence and Bartlett Tree Experts installed lightning rods on the massive white oak, which was officially deemed by the state as a Bicentennial tree, meaning it was alive when the U.S. Declaration of Independence was signed in 1776.

There are two other designated Bicentennial trees still living in St. Mary's County — a willow oak tree on the banks of the St. Mary's River and an American beech tree also in St. Mary's City.

Lawrence had been meaning to get lightning rods installed on his historic tree, but it is an ex-

pensive project, running into thousands of dollars. Bartlett Tree Experts, which has an office in Odenton, agreed to do the work at no charge because of the importance of the tree.

"We're all about preservation," Brendan Domotor, arborist representative for Bartlett, said in an interview at Lawrence's property last month.

"We want to see this tree live as long as it can," he said.

"I feel like I have a moral obligation to it," Lawrence said. "It needs to be taken care of."

Lawrence's tree is the oldest documented white oak in St. Mary's, Charles and Calvert counties, according to the Maryland Big Tree Commission.

The white oak measures 183 inches around its trunk and is 74 feet tall.

Domotor said that "quite often" the company is requested to install lightning rods in trees.

Lawrence wasn't home at the time when the tree was struck by lightning years ago. But when he arrived back home, there was mud sprayed up all over the rear of his house.

When the tree was struck, it left a massive scar down its trunk and shattered the curbing in the backyard, which sprayed up the mud.

And once a tree is struck by lightning, it is 50 percent more likely to be hit again, Domotor said, because of the change in the tree's chemical composition.

Trees are often hit by lightning because of their height as well. Not to mention, being around for hundreds of years, "it's inevitable" that it would be hit by lightning, Lawrence said.

"If this tree were to be struck again, the best case scenario is everything in the house gets fried," Domotor said. In the worst-case scenario, the tree explodes, the

house catches on fire and the tree falls down on the house, he said.

By installing the lightning rods, which are really just copper nubs lightly driven into the bark, "we're not trying to attract lightning," Domotor said, but rather allowing a path of least resistance for the electricity to follow down to a copper rod buried deep in the ground.

"This is diverting all this electrical potential away," he said.

"A lot of historic sites you go to will have lightning protection" for their trees, he said, such as across the Potomac River in Virginia at Mount Vernon, the home of George Washington, the country's first president.

Lawrence's grandparents, David and Mary Hammett, built the house in Park Hall in 1946 that he lives in today.

A retired defense contractor, 54-year-old Lawrence plans to be buried in his backyard when the time comes, and already has all of the permits in place. A large field stone is already set in the fenced burial yard, which will be inscribed.

Asked why he wanted to be buried in his own backyard, he said, "I'm not religious. Why should I be buried at a church? I always liked it here."

There are 32 Bicentennial trees remaining in the state, according to the Maryland Big Tree Program.

In 1976, there were five trees in St. Mary's County listed as Bicentennials: the American beech tree and willow oak tree in St. Mary's City, the Park Hall white oak, another willow oak tree in Bushwood and an American holly tree at St. Mary's College of Maryland.

Three of those trees are still living; the willow oak in Bushwood and the holly tree at the college are gone.

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Tax bills for 2017 are available at www.stmarysmd.com/treasurer/taxes. Once 2018 tax liabilities are made available, any shortfall is the responsibility of the taxpayer. Contact the St. Mary's County Treasurer's Office with any additional questions at 301-475-4200, ext. *3300.

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