

Developer, Homeowner, Spare that Hickory!

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In January of 1837, poet and songwriter George Pope Morris's most famous work, "Woodman, Spare that Tree," appeared in *The Mirror* (under the title "The Oak"). Since that time, the poem (later turned into song) has been heralded as a plea to spare stately trees; it remains as relevant today as it was when pioneers started felling the mature forests of Virginia and Maryland in earnest. Back in 1837, a rich green blanket—one of the most diverse temperate broadleaved forests in the world—stretched from what is now southern Bethesda across Cabin John Creek to the Potomac River. It was filled with oaks, beeches, chestnuts, maples, hickories, catalpas, tulip poplars, ash, and hemlock, among many other tree species.

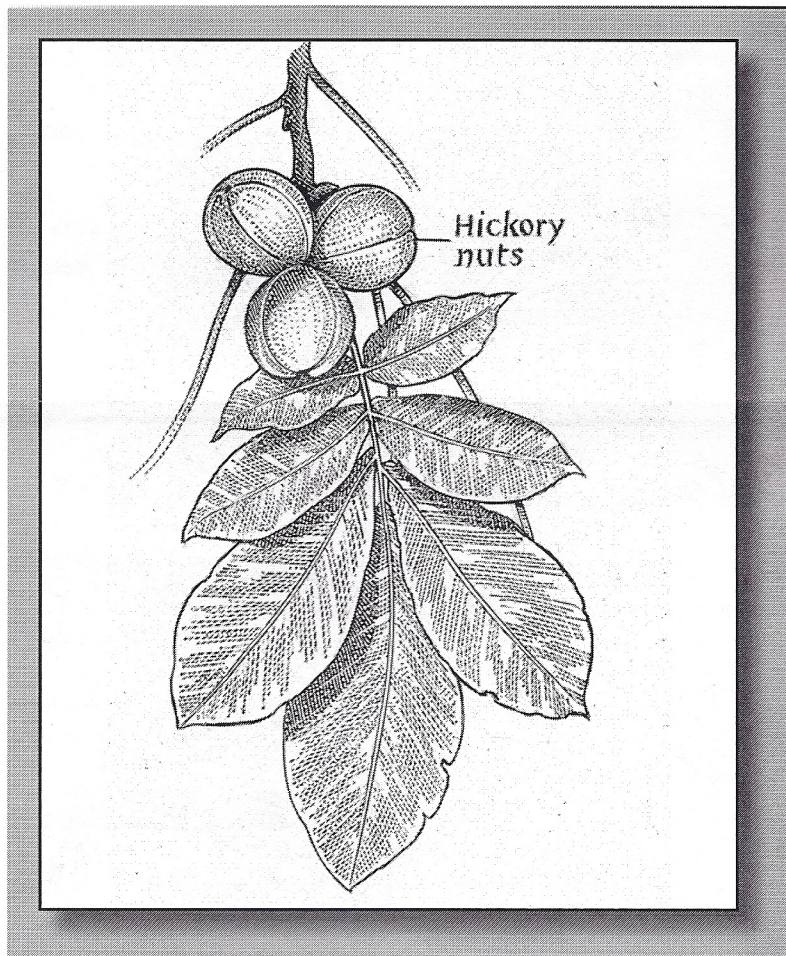
In the 1920s, the dominant tree, the chestnut, disappeared, killed off by a blight from China. Over the past few years, ash trees have been dying as a result of the introduced emerald ash borer (a kind of long-horned beetle, pretty but deadly). Now, the eastern hemlocks face doom from the woolly adelgid, a non-native leafhopper accidentally introduced from East Asia. Today, we can add a new set of threats to towering trees as a result of native actors: contractors and developers out to maximize profit, and local homeowners fearful of living next to or under the canopy of big trees.

Some of the trees, such as the oaks and tulip poplars in steep parts of Cabin John Creek, have been around since Morris penned his poem. And chances are that any tree taller

than fifty feet has been a resident of Cabin John longer than any living person who has moved in under its boughs. In short, big trees have tenure; on their timescale, most of us are recent immigrants to Cabin John.

The growing trend in our neighborhood is nevertheless to treat big native trees as disposable lawn ornaments or as

most egregious example, Foxhall Builders cut down several large native trees to add a new home, even though the contractor and realtor promised not to do so, and the trees could easily have been spared during construction. The problem was that the developers were within their legal rights: a contractor must only pay a small fee to the county, something like \$50/tree, to commit a crime against nature.



What is a majestic mature willow oak or red oak or red maple worth, anyway? Scientists specializing in "ecosystem services" attempt to put a price tag on creatures like big trees, arguing that placing a monetary value on wild things like oaks will enlighten policymakers to see the value of passing laws to preserve them rather than a strict emotional appeal to save them. Pricing aside, the ecological value of big trees is great. The ecological value of big trees extends far beyond the shade they provide in our increasingly scorching summers or the amount of carbon dioxide they sponge up from the atmosphere as the climate-change crisis worsens. Big trees also help retain soil, minimize runoff in heavy rains, and provide habitat for wildlife, especially shelter and food.

Few local trees are more valuable than the several species of hickories that call our local

forest home. In times of food scarcity, native Americans relied on the stately hickory with its edible nuts to make flour from the nut meal and extract oil, as sources of protein and fat. Many animals, including deer, Eastern chipmunks, Red and Gray Foxes and Flying Squirrels, raccoons, and rabbits all eat Hickory nuts. Squirrels may bury some of the nuts rather than eating them right away,

existential threats to our lives. Developers have targeted Cabin John as one of the last neighborhoods left inside the Beltway offering old bungalows on large tracts of land. Like vultures, these developers swoop in and purchase these "tear-downs" to erect McMansions in their place. The footprint required to add so much house/lot results in taking down the big trees "in the way." In the

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a practice that helps to disperse the hickories if the squirrels don't return to eat the nuts at a later date. Among birds, Wild Turkeys, bobwhites, Red-bellied woodpeckers, Blue jays, Rose-breasted grosbeaks and even Wood ducks feed on hickory nuts. Beyond the nut bonanza, the leaves of hickories feed the caterpillars of around 200 species of butterflies and moths, including the Banded and Hickory Hairstreak butterflies, the giant Luna moth, the Regal moth, the Hickory tussock, and the most remarkable of all, the Hickory Horned Devil, the largest native North American caterpillar, and my vote for the subject of a sci-fi epic that could be called *Attack of the Hickory Horned Devil*. Google this species and marvel at what one

would be like if crazed scientists had grown giant caterpillars to replace human fighters and they escaped control and went berserk.

I am drifting off topic here because the last point is hard to write about. Increasingly, we see neighbors, who are environmentally sensitive in every other way, considering cutting down their magnificent oaks and catalpas, to name a few, out of the rarely substantiated fear that the tree will fall on their house. The simplest way to prevent branches or limbs from coming down is to have your trees annually inspected by an arborist and pruned if necessary to remove dead branches and overhanging limbs. The environmental benefits of having more shade in the summer in your yard or the aesthetic pleasure of more

birds should be enough to offset the added cost of tree pruning. Rather than cut trees, you can be a great environmental citizen by planting a new native (they can be obtained for free from: <https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/green/trees/tree-montgomery.html>).

If you must cut a tree, consider planting five new ones, making sure they are native (native plants don't need as much water as non-native to get started and the caterpillars of native moths and butterflies and other insects can't digest the leaves of non-native trees and shrubs, so the birds go hungry). If you prefer an open space, a sun garden of native wildflowers and sun-loving shrubs is easy to maintain—no need for watering after the first year for native plants adapted to Maryland's

climate—making everyone from hummingbirds to monarch butterflies to flower beetles happy.

A recent *Washington Post* article reported that street surface temperatures in tree-lined streets are often twenty degrees cooler in summer than those lacking shade trees. Our street in Cabin John used to have many big trees, but as a result of extensive new house construction, it may well have gained the dubious distinction of being the most exposed street in Cabin John. Every summer I long for a line of oaks and hickories to walk under as I head up the street and into the blazing sun. Homeowners and developers, too, please spare our sacred trees. **VN**



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