



# *Under the Elms Is More Than a Phrase*

*The tower of Sayles Hall  
and the sun  
peek through this elm  
on the Green.  
But Brown's best-known  
tree is not the only  
species located  
on the campus*

By R. Bruce Allison '71

Photographs by John Forasté

## The elms are part of the heart and the history of Brown

Trees have always been a part of higher education and human aspirations. They have been our companions in the human experience since Eve plucked that first fruit from the Tree of Knowledge in Eden. The Greeks sought inspiration under the oracular oak of Zeus. Socrates, in selecting a place to discourse with Phaedrus, chose "that tallest plane-tree where there is shade and gentle breezes and grass on which to sit or lie ... a fair resting place, full of summer sounds and scents."

No doubt Brown President Benjamin Andrews had such an image in mind when in 1840, at the dedication of Rhode Island Hall, he declared, "Let the campus be adorned." Carrying on a British and New England tradition, the University planted elms, favored for their stately vase-like branching and high arching canopies. They were the ideal choice to match the grandeur and scale of the campus buildings and still retain a sense of spaciousness on the Green.

Over the century these great elms grew massive and tall, forming a living stoa on campus through which many gentlemen passed on their way to knowledge. The ranks of the campus elms were thinned by the uprooting winds of the 1938 hurricane. The losses served to increase the appreciation of campus trees. An article in the April 1939 *Brown Alumni Monthly*, seeking alumni donations for replanting, stated, "Arbor Day should have a new significance for Brown men this year, for trees become more precious than ever after the September hurricane that destroyed so many of the century-old elms." Another hurricane in 1954 blew over more elms. The real Achilles' heel of the elms, however, proved to be the microscopic fungal spores of Dutch Elm disease.

This devastating pathogen invaded the United States from Europe in 1932, hitching a ride on imported burl logs. Once a beachhead was established, there was no stopping the epidemic. By the 1950s, Dutch Elm disease was a tra-

gic fact of life for Brown trees. The *Brown Alumni Monthly* of May 1965 reported the loss of a campus giant that had stood by Sayles Hall for 125 years, and that had a girth approaching twenty feet.

It was a New England elm under which America's early patriots rallied, calling it the Liberty Tree. And it was under an elm that George Washington took command of the Continental Army on July 3, 1775. The elms had been witness and companions to our development as a nation. Likewise, the campus elms had become integrated into the history and heart of the University. No one understood this special relationship better than the late John Nicholas Brown. In the 1960s he established, through an anonymous gift, a special fund for the preservation and replacement of the campus elms. The University was able to turn to experts for help in spraying, injecting, and even planting the so-called "resistant" elms. All of the new technologies had shortcomings, and the disease continued to be a threat. Nonetheless, it is clear that many elms on campus today are alive due to the generosity of John Nicholas Brown.

That the campus also has a wealth of trees other than elms is due to the courage and intelligence of another Brown benefactor, the late Mary Elizabeth (Mrs. Henry D.) Sharpe. In the late 1920s and early '30s, Mrs. Sharpe created a beautiful landscape garden at her East Side home. She was well traveled, and she incorporated landscape design ideas from some of the world's finest gardens into her own. President Henry Wriston was familiar with her talents, and he approached her in 1935 for help with landscape plantings on the Brown campus.

In her informal memoirs, written in 1977, Mrs. Sharpe recalled, "President Wriston knew my garden ... so he asked me one day to come over and look at planting plans for the newly restored Brown administration building—the oldest building at Brown. I had the courage to say I didn't think it

very appropriate for such a building. He said, 'What would you do to plant it?' Well, that was something requiring thought—but I'd be happy to think about it for a few days and then tell him. So I sat down on a campus bench and this is what I came up with ..."

Mrs. Sharpe created a master plan for the whole campus, choosing plants that would unite the various architectural styles, provide seasonal color and variations, and be simple and inexpensive to maintain. For the front campus by the Van Wickle Gates, she wanted native laurel for winter greenness and white dogwood for bloom; in the middle campus, yews and spring blooming magnolias; in the lower campus by the Marcus Aurelius statue, she chose boxwood as an evergreen hedge and cherry and redbuds for their beautiful flowers. Mrs. Sharpe recalled that after she presented her plan to President Wriston, his response was simple and direct: "I like your ideas. Now go ahead and do it for us."

For the next thirty years, Mrs. Sharpe was actively involved in the planning, propagating, purchasing, and planting of the campus trees and shrubs. She put her plans into action with the cooperation of the buildings and grounds staff, of whom she spoke fondly: "Those men all became my friends and would work at breakneck speed when necessary to get things in before a threatened rainstorm."

Thomas Sneddon '43 was part of, and later head of, the grounds staff during most of those formative years. After graduating from Brown, he went off to war, returning to campus in 1947 as a university landscape planner. Sneddon's father was also a landscaper and had participated in the design and planting of Mrs. Sharpe's original home garden. During my recent research visit to Brown, Sneddon came out of retirement for a morning to join me on a campus tree walk.

We started at the Wriston Quadrangle, which was completed in 1950.

Passing through Wayland Arch, we entered Hughes Court. For an evergreen in this row of fraternity houses, Mrs. Sharpe had chosen hemlock (*Tsuga canadensis*), not to be confused with the herbaceous wetland plant of the same common name, which filled Socrates' last cup. On either side of the gate, growing in a hump form, are a pair of Sargent's weeping hemlock. These were transplanted from Mrs. Sharpe's garden at 84 Prospect Street. The remaining hemlock lining this court take the normative shape—tall, spiring like a church steeple with dense, deep green color.

In front of the Sharpe Refectory are honey locusts (*Gleditsia triacanthos*), a species that Mrs. Sharpe had hoped would, with proper pruning, serve as a substitute for the threatened elms. It is a different type of locust, in fact carob, to which the Bible refers as St. John's diet of "honey and locust." One cannot imagine a student climbing these honey locusts to gather pods for an after-dinner treat.

I can, however, imagine a student climbing a remarkable weeping cherry (*Prunus subhirtella*) growing in front of Diman. Carl Sagan tells the story of Robert Goddard, pioneer in modern space rocketry, climbing a New England cherry tree. In 1899, the seventeen-year-old Goddard was idling away an autumn day atop the tree when he had a vision of traveling to Mars. Space travel became his lifelong obsession from that moment, and through the years of hard work, research, and experimenting, he returned annually on October 19 to the cherry tree to celebrate the birth of that vision. Goddard never made it to Mars, but the rockets he invented did, rising from the daydreams born in the crown of a cherry tree.

Back to earth, Sneddon and I walked into Patriot's Court. He pointed out that the large linden (*Tilia americana*) growing at the south end of the Refectory was a remnant of the trees that lined Benevolent Street before that road was interrupted to build the



*DOGWOOD  
at University Hall*



*WEeping CHERRY  
at Diman House*

# The legacy of John Nicholas Brown and Mary Elizabeth Sharpe

quadrangle. In summer, bees swarm around the fragrant yellow-white blossoms of the linden or basswood. Bees also love the flower of the tupelo (*Nyssa sylvatica*). A pair of tupelo stand at the east end of Diman, between Marcy and Goddard. Tupelo is an American Indian name meaning "swamp tree." A more poetic image is offered by the tree's Latin name. *Nyssa* was a water nymph in classical mythology, and *sylvatica* means "of the forest." This pair of sylvan water nymphs turns a deep burgundy in autumn. After leaf drop, small blue drupes (fruits) remain on the branches as an offering to over-wintering birds.

In the moat along Charlesfield Street are several katsura trees (*Cercidiphyllum japonicum*), a remarkable, disease-resistant species. In the moat along Brown Street, the feather-like leaves of *Albizia julibrissin*, called albizia, silktree, or mimosa, can be seen. In the moat along George Street, facing St. Stephen's Church, is "the tree that grows in Brooklyn," *Ailanthus altissima* or tree-of-heaven.

The most remarkable moat planting on campus is on the Charlesfield Street side of the Keeney Quad (formerly the West Quad). Few people on campus today are aware that in the 1950s Mrs. Sharpe worked long and hard to create in this moat a replica of a Japanese garden. It was complete with dry brook, large boulders brought in by a Gilbane Construction Company crane, bamboo plants, and a flat concrete area carefully raked prior to hardening to imitate the daily-raked gravel of true Japanese gardens. Today it is overgrown and not easily recognized. Mrs. Sharpe said that her experiment in Japanese gardening illustrated that the Japanese secret was not in the choice of materials and design, but rather in the process of consistent, knowledgeable, and time-consuming maintenance.

A Japanese planting that is doing very well on campus is a Yoshino cherry (*Prunus yedoensis*) growing near the Barus & Holley Building. It was pre-

sented to Brown as a token of reconciliation and friendship by the Japanese ambassador after World War II.

Another gift tree is a Eurasian plane tree (*Platanus orientalis*) growing in front of the medical school administration offices in Arnold Laboratory. Under a tree of this species on the Dodecanese island of Cos, Hippocrates, the fourth-century-B.C. Greek physician, was said to have practiced and lectured. In 1973, the Schering pharmaceutical company gathered seed from the largest plane tree growing on Cos and mailed seedlings to the deans of each medical school in the United States. The recipient at Brown was Dr. Stanley Aronson. He nurtured the young seedling in the University greenhouse for two years, then carefully transplanted it to a protected site. After a few more years, when he deemed it hardy enough, Dr. Aronson planted the tree in its current location.

Another campus plant with a medical background is a Chinese witch hazel (*Hamamelis mollis*) growing near Soldier's Arch in front of Hegeman. Witch hazel is an aromatic plant that, when mixed with alcohol, is used as a gargle and antiseptic. Sneddon pointed out that this shrub was chosen because of its unusual characteristics. The bright yellow blooms appear in winter, and the shiny black seeds, when ripe, are ejected with considerable force, landing up to thirty feet away.

Mrs. Sharpe also took great care in selecting plants for the Pembroke campus. She emphasized seasonal color with an orchard-like planting of *Dorothea* flowering crabapple (*Malus "Dorothea"*). An abundance of pyracantha produces bright orange autumn berries. Azaleas were brought in from the National Arboretum in Washington, D.C. Also favored was a special rhododendron from Cape Cod named "Dexter," which also happened to be Henry D. Sharpe's middle name. Of special interest is a quince tree growing by the terrace in front of Andrews Hall. It was salvaged from an old farm near

Blackstone Boulevard and today still bears fruit.

Sneddon proudly pointed out that during those periods of rapid expansion when old buildings were coming down to make way for the new, every effort was made to preserve or transplant established trees. Brown, in fact, has a tradition of preserving campus trees. In 1903, during another period of rapid growth, the *Brown Alumni Monthly* reported, "It is noticeable that hardly a tree has been sacrificed in all the building operations on the campus." In the early 1960s, during the construction of the Rockefeller Library, plans called for the removal of Wilbur Hall and the giant European beech (*Fagus sylvatica*) growing beside it. The renowned professor of the history of mathematics, Otto Neugebauer, whose office was in the shade of the beech, stepped forward to save it by saying, quite simply, "If it goes, then so will I."

In 1978 the University greenhouse keeper, the late William "Scottie" Ansell, did his best to save a special tree. A dawn redwood (*Metasequoia glyptostroboides*) obtained from the Arnold Arboretum in 1946 had become well established behind the greenhouse. When Ansell heard the roar of a contractor's diesel engine, he ran out to stand between the tree and the tractor. It was a scene reminiscent of the opening stanza in George P. Morris's immortal poem: "Woodman, spare that tree! Touch not a single bough! In youth it sheltered me, And I'll protect it now." But the damage had been done. Within a year the tree toppled over in the wind. The University this year replanted a dawn redwood in Scottie Ansell's name at the same site.

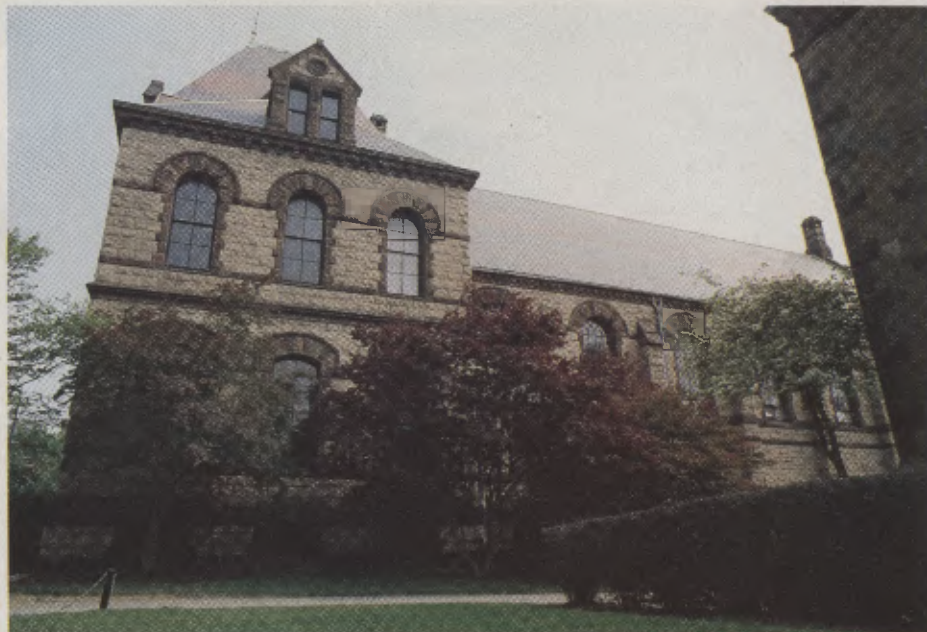
Professor of History William McLoughlin is the latest standard-bearer in the fight to preserve campus trees. In 1981 it was observed that a large sycamore maple (*Acer pseudoplatanus*) growing near the American Civilization building somewhat shaded the solar collectors of the new Urban Environ-

mental Laboratory. When McLoughlin heard of plans to cut the tree down, he organized a "save the tree" movement (*BAM*, November 1981). He won a reprieve for the tree long enough to measure the actual loss of sunlight and to establish that the tree's infraction against the solar collector did not warrant the severity of capital punishment. In addition to preserving the maple, the save the tree committee generated interest in a map, "Campus Trees and Shrubs," compiled by biology professor Annette W. Coleman. And it renewed interest in the annual campus celebration of Arbor Day, the tree planters' holiday.

John Nicholas Brown, Mary Elizabeth Sharpe, and other campus tree planters are no longer with us, but the beauty and pleasure of their plantings remain. Early American author Washington Irving described the special selfless spirit demonstrated by these and other campus dendrophylls when he wrote about planting oaks in *Forest History*:

"He who plants an oak looks forward to future ages, and plants for posterity. Nothing can be less selfish than this. He cannot expect to sit in its shade, or enjoy its shelter; but he exults in the idea that the acorn which he has buried in the earth shall grow up into a lofty pile, and shall keep on flourishing, and increasing, and benefitting mankind, long after he shall have ceased to tread his paternal fields."

Bruce Allison is the owner of Allison Tree Care Company in Madison, Wisconsin. During '71's 15th reunion at Commencement, he led more than thirty of his classmates on a tree walk through the campus. He brought with him three young elm trees as gifts from the University of Wisconsin disease-resistant elm research staff, one of which will be a gift from the class of 1971. These unique trees are true American elms (*Ulmus americana*) and resistant to Dutch elm disease, the result of twenty years of research by Gene Smalley, professor of plant pathology at Wisconsin. ■



*JAPANESE RED MAPLE  
at Sayles Hall*



*In the 1950s, Tom Sneddon and Mary Elizabeth Sharpe supervise the planting of a Japanese andromeda.*