



## Allegany County's Liberty Tree Trail: An Idea Rooted in History

On the eve of America's 250<sup>th</sup> birthday, a retired forester from the mountains of western Maryland is leading the charge to keep the story of Liberty Trees alive. Allegany County, affectionately dubbed [The Mountain Side of Maryland](#), is where he worked for more than 30 years and is now home to the highest concentration of Liberty Trees in the United States.

But for those who might have missed this lesson in their American history class, let's backtrack a bit to explain what a [Liberty Tree](#) is.

America's original Liberty Tree was an elm located in Boston, and colonists met beneath it to protest British rule and punish loyalists. That tree was chopped down and burned by British troops in 1775, but in a show of unity, people throughout the other colonies began to establish their own Liberty Trees. There's no record of how many such trees existed, but it's believed that the [final one](#) to survive was located on the campus of St. John's College in Annapolis, Maryland. When that tree was destroyed by a hurricane in 1999, seed was collected from it; by 2009, 13 seedlings were produced. Authorities decided that each of the original 13 states should receive one ... and that's where the 21<sup>st</sup>-century part of the story begins.



[Champ Zumbrun](#), then an employee of the Maryland Department of Natural Resources, was charged with finding a home for his state's young tree. He selected a site along the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal, which is part of the National Park Service, in his home of Allegany County. He wanted to keep a close eye on it and though Zumbrun was committed to helping the seedling survive, a local groundhog had different ideas ... and the rodent was protected by the NPS's policies about letting nature do what nature does. The groundhog ultimately destroyed the small tree, but it didn't destroy Zumbrun's dreams of raising a new Liberty Tree in Maryland.

A passionate researcher, Zumbrun found evidence that a scion – a twig removed from the late St. John’s tree – had been planted elsewhere on St. John’s campus in commemoration of the college’s anniversary in 1889. He discovered that a 100-foot tulip poplar tree on the campus was flourishing ... and that it has identical DNA to that last surviving Liberty Tree. St. John’s granted the forester permission to harvest seedlings from this “scion tree” each fall, and he’s been doing that for the past decade. For the first few years, Zumbrun used a long pole to collect the seeds on his own; now he works with Davey Tree Expert Company and with a bucket truck collects two big bins of seeds each autumn.

The seeds are “stratified,” mimicking winter conditions to prompt growth, then planted in the ground. By the following summer, it can be determined how many seedlings are considered viable and shared the next spring. This means that about 18 months after the harvest, tiny seedlings that measure 12 to 18 inches high are inspected by the Maryland Department of Agriculture before being sent across the country.

This collaborative effort among St. John’s College, the Allegany County Forestry Board, Davey Tree Expert Company, John S. Ayton State Tree Nursery, and the LaVale Lions Club has resulted in The Liberty Tree Project, which aims to regenerate trees of historic significance and promote the value and benefits of trees for future generations.



In exchange for a donation to the forestry service, seedlings are sent to people who want to carry on the tradition of Liberty Trees. There’s a steady stream of requests, so priority is given to people who want to plant the trees on public lands, whether that’s in national, state and municipal parks or near government buildings and museums. If there are enough seedlings, though, they can be shared with private citizens who’d like to try to grow their own Liberty Tree. Zumbrun has even sent a young seedling to the great-grandson of a former American president. Though tulip (also known as yellow) poplars can’t flourish in all geographies, the forester does his best to mentor anyone who acquires a tree so their seedling stands the greatest chance of survival ... even when pitted against a groundhog.

In the past 10 years, the program has shared at least 400 seedlings. Zumbrun’s short-term goal of seeing a Liberty Tree in each Maryland county will be realized by July 4, by which time all 23 counties will have planted a seedling. He’d also like to ensure that there’s a Liberty Tree in every state, and so far about half have at least one. Pennsylvania is committed to echoing Maryland by ensuring that each of its counties receives a tree this year.

That said, no destination in the United States has more trees than Zumbrun’s home of Allegany County, which boasts 15 trees planted on public lands. The local tourism office has launched a [Liberty Tree Trail](#) to ensure that people can easily identify and visit these natural tributes to America’s continuing story.

Zumbrun believes that we live in a land full of wonder, and that nature has been the ultimate witness to quintessential moments in history. It was important to him to provide a new generation of Liberty Trees to help Americans remember the ideals that united them in the first place.

As a long-term goal, Zumbrun wants to educate the next generation about the Liberty Tree program. At the age of 77, he is officially retired as a forester and committed to working on this project on a volunteer basis, but he dreams of training a young forester to continue his efforts.

To inquire about acquiring a Liberty Tree, to make a donation in support of these efforts, or to alert Zumbrun about young naturalists and historians who want to follow in his footsteps, you may contact him at [champzumbrun@gmail.com](mailto:champzumbrun@gmail.com).



**Credit for all photos: Champ Zumbrun**

- Page 2 (top): Davey Tree Expert Company brings in a bucket truck to help Champ Zumbrun harvest seedlings at St. John's College each fall.
- Page 2 (bottom): Seeds are harvested in Annapolis, then cared for in Allegany County, Maryland, before being shared around the country.
- Page 3: A young Liberty Tree was planted outside of George Washington's Headquarters in downtown Cumberland, Maryland, and is among the 15 trees that comprise Allegany County's Liberty Tree Trail.