



**ST JOHN'S**  
**College**

ANNAPOLIS • SANTA FE

## The Story of Maryland's Liberty Tree

The last surviving Liberty Tree in the United States was located on the campus of St. John's College in Maryland's capital city of Annapolis. St. John's is the nation's third-oldest college, behind Harvard University and the College of William and Mary. Founded as King William's School in 1696, the college formally opened as St. John's in 1789. Among the people who financed the college were all four of Maryland's signers of the Declaration of Independence (Charles Carroll, Samuel Chase, William Paca and Thomas Stone), and George Washington even sent his step-grandson there.

Liberty Trees could be any species of tree; what set them apart in each town or state was often their size or location. St. John's tree was a tulip (or yellow) poplar, which would typically live 250 to 300 years without humans' intervention. It's estimated that this tree dated to around 1600, so it was already a mature and robust specimen by the time of the American Revolution.

In Annapolis, the Liberty Tree could be identified by its size as well as its location. St. John's campus is located just steps away from Maryland's State House. Built in 1772, it's the oldest state house in continuous legislative use in the country and the only one to ever serve as the nation's capitol, from November 1783 to August 1784. It's where George Washington resigned his commission as commander of the Continental Army and also where the Treaty of Paris was ratified, officially ending the Revolutionary War and thereby making Annapolis the first peacetime capital of the United States.



Though local legend indicates that Marylanders planned Annapolis's own version of the Boston Tea Party – the burning of the ship the *Peggy Stewart* – under the tree, there is no written evidence to support this theory. There is, however, documentation from 1775 indicating that the tree was definitely called the Liberty Tree and that political meetings were often held under its branches.

For years following the Revolutionary War, people gathered under the tree for Fourth of July picnics and other celebrations, and it was the favored site for St. John's graduation ceremonies. Local and college records indicate that it was affectionately called the "Old Poplar."

It survived foul weather, student pranks, and even a rumored explosion and resulting fire in the 1840s, which local reports indicate may have ended up helping the tree by killing off fungus and insects. In 1907, a famed tree surgeon was called in to fill the tree's then-hollow trunk with 500 pounds of cement so it could continue to stand. But in 1999, when the tree was about 400 years old, Hurricane Floyd swept through Annapolis and damaged the tree so badly that it was determined any further measures to save it would not be viable.

Wood from the tree was used to make souvenirs, but seed was also recovered. Within a decade, that had produced 13 seedlings, and it was decided that one should be sent to each of the 13 original states in an effort to keep the old Liberty Tree's story alive by sharing its DNA. In 2007, the college's alumni association planted an unrelated tulip poplar in the same place occupied by the original Liberty Tree.



But it turns out that in 1889, to mark the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the college being known as St. John's, someone thought to plant a "daughter tree" across campus, using a scion – a transplanted branch – of the original tree. This means that today, the campus is home to a living tree that grew from part of the original tree, making it a genetic match. Each fall, seedlings are collected from this tree so that the story of Liberty Trees can live on.

The daughter tree stands just outside St. John's library, affording visitors a great view of living history. On the second floor of that library, they'll find a robust collection of Revolutionary history books; on the main level, they can see a desk that belonged to one of St. John's most famous alumni, Francis Scott Key.

St. John's is a private liberal arts college that's home to about 500 students. There are no standard textbooks, lectures or written exams. Instead, students read the original texts of about 200 "great books" that range in topic from literature to history and from music to mathematics, then discuss them with classmates and teachers who are called "tutors" rather than professors. The college is nestled in the heart of Annapolis and welcomes visitors who can simply walk onto campus to explore its historic buildings ... or perhaps settle in for a good read underneath the daughter of the country's last Liberty Tree.



### Photos:

- Page 1: Liberty Tree, from 1896 St. John's College Yearbook, page 131, Yearbook Collection, Greenfield Library, St. John's College, Annapolis, Maryland. Credit: St. John's College.
- Page 2: Hurricane Floyd hit in 1999 and spelled the ultimate demise of the 400-year-old tree. Credit: St. John's College.
- Page 3: A child studies the plaque on the "daughter tree" on the campus of St. John's College. Credit: MBPR.