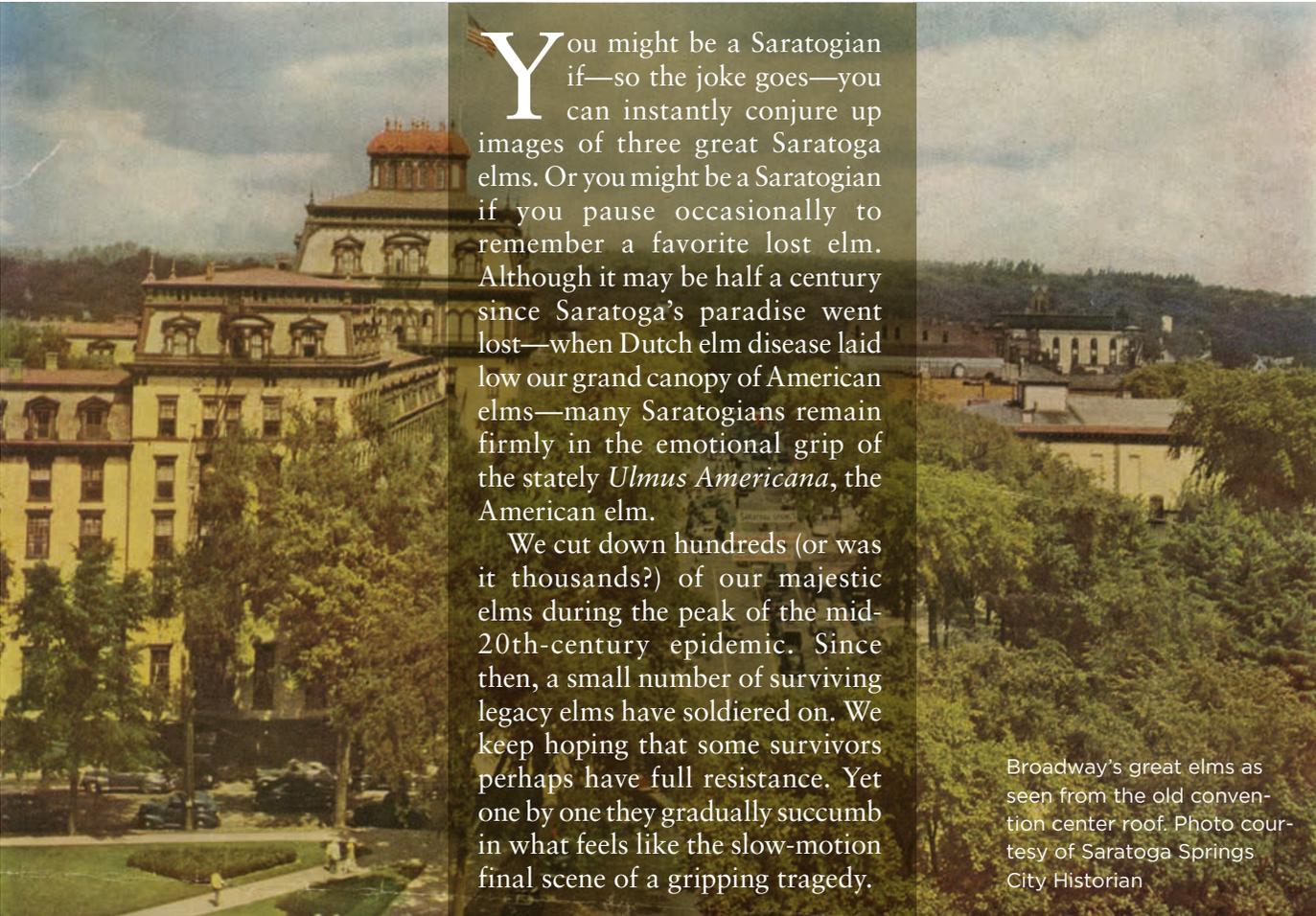


Story by
TOM DENNY



SARATOGA'S ELM LEGACY

PRESERVING HISTORIC ELMS WHILE THE
NEXT GENERATION GROWS



You might be a Saratogian if—so the joke goes—you can instantly conjure up images of three great Saratoga elms. Or you might be a Saratogian if you pause occasionally to remember a favorite lost elm. Although it may be half a century since Saratoga's paradise went lost—when Dutch elm disease laid low our grand canopy of American elms—many Saratogians remain firmly in the emotional grip of the stately *Ulmus Americana*, the American elm.

We cut down hundreds (or was it thousands?) of our majestic elms during the peak of the mid-20th-century epidemic. Since then, a small number of surviving legacy elms have soldiered on. We keep hoping that some survivors perhaps have full resistance. Yet one by one they gradually succumb in what feels like the slow-motion final scene of a gripping tragedy.

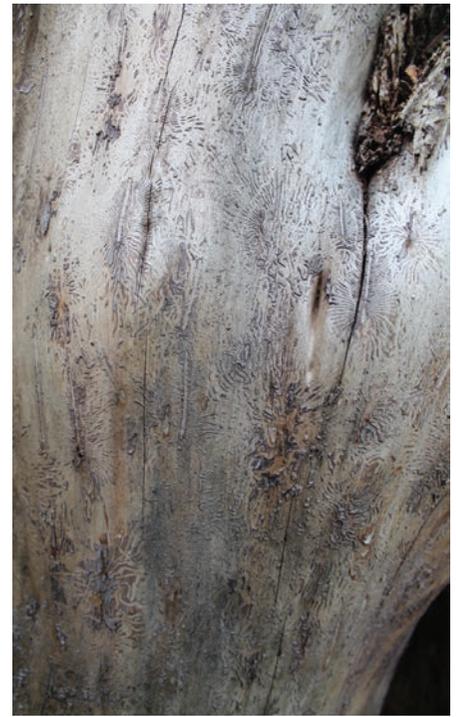
Broadway's great elms as seen from the old convention center roof. Photo courtesy of Saratoga Springs City Historian



Upper left: This 80-year-old American elm by the Little Theater in Spa State Park succumbed quickly to Dutch elm disease in 2013. Photo courtesy of NYS Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation.

Upper right: Elm bark beetles carve beautiful, but deadly, galleries that shut down the elm's vascular system. Photo by Tom Denny.

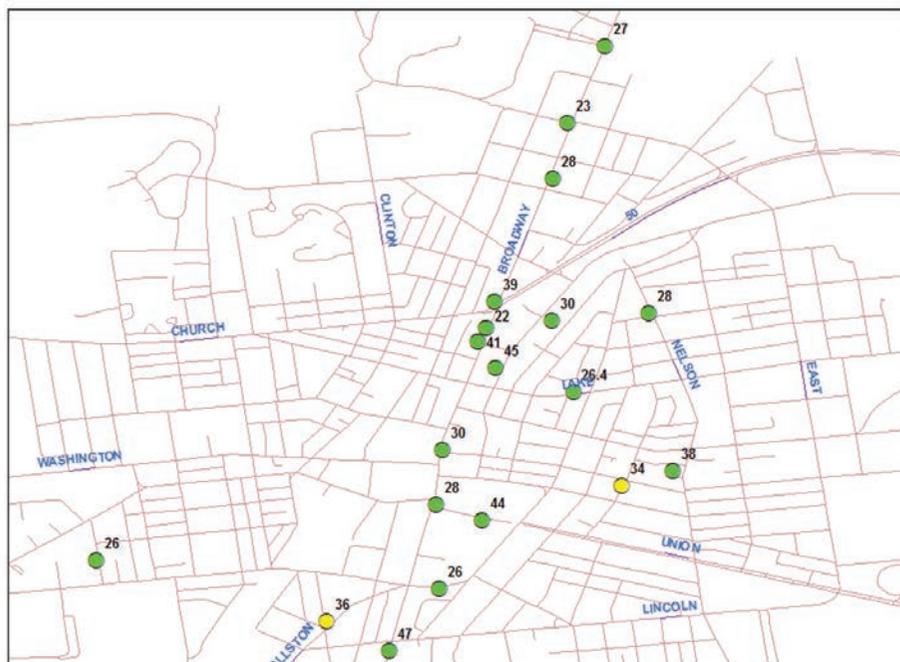
Lower left: a map of Saratoga's largest American elms by Sustainable Saratoga's Urban Forestry Project.



Or so it seemed until 2013, when Dutch elm disease suddenly killed five large elms around town, about 20 percent of our remaining stock of mature elms. Losses included the well-placed, spreading specimen by the Little Theater at Spa Park, a massive elm on Loughberry Road South, and a “volunteer” (i.e. a tree that wasn't planted by a human but sprang up on its own) on Lincoln Avenue by Greenridge Cemetery. At the same time, the disease sickened other large elms—on Court Street, on Broadway at Phila, at the Ray Watkin Apartments, on Birch Street, and on South Broadway near Lincoln. Might the end of our legacy elms not come gradually after all, but rather with a sudden surge that quickly fells the remaining survivors? Is our long-running tragedy now accelerating towards its climactic crisis?

If you asked an elm-loving Saratogian how many American elms Saratoga has, the number would almost certainly be fewer than the fingers on your two hands. A recent article on the slow decline of Saratoga's American elms, for example, directed the spotlight on just seven majestic survivors. A quite different perspective emerged from recent tree inventory work by Sustainable Saratoga, which provided the city with a great deal of information about our urban forest. After completing the 2012 survey of 5,600 street and park trees, Sustainable Saratoga focused additional attention

BATTLEGROUND ELMS: those worth fighting for (Sept. 2013)



Numbers=Diameter at breast height (at 4'6")
 Green=Healthy
 Yellow=Early stage of Dutch Elm Disease

on Saratoga’s American elms, including privately owned trees. This research uncovered more than 135 (!) elms of great variety: young, old, healthy, sick and dead. Yes, dead! More than 40 of the inventoried elms were standing dead trees, most of them not on city-owned property. Another 20 or so were either suspected or confirmed to have Dutch elm disease. Most of the rest were young volunteers, likely fated to fall to Dutch elm disease when they reach adolescence. But the research also offered some good news: It would take all the fingers on at least five hands to count Saratoga’s large elms—those with diameters greater than 20 inches.

American elms can live for two or three hundred years, and a tree that died recently in Michigan at the age of 212 was over seven feet in diameter. Forest elms here at the time the Europeans arrived were even larger. Although size is at best a rough indicator of a tree’s age, the Spa Park elm that died of Dutch elm disease in 2013 provides a hook on which we can cautiously hang some rough estimates about the age of our other elms. Measuring 37 inches in diameter, a count of its rings revealed it was 80 years old. Based on size and location, the biographies of our 135 diverse elms likely follow one of four basic story lines. Only four or five surviving elms have diameters larger than the Spa Park elm: South Broadway near Lincoln (47”), Maple Avenue near Lake (45”), Congress Park near the Casino (44”), Broadway in front of Roohan Realty (41”), and possibly North Broadway at the arterial (39”). This very small group of our largest legacy elms probably started their lives during the optimistic era before the arrival of Dutch elm disease in 1928. They have, one might say, seen it all.

A second group of about 15 mature trees with diameters between 20 and 35 inches were planted (or self-seeded) between the 1930s and the 1960s, during the decades when the disease hung like a pall over America’s urban forest. As we now prioritize preservation, it may be worth remembering that today’s 20-inch tree is tomorrow’s 40-inch titan. Those in great locations should be protected. At the other end of the spectrum are a small but growing number of newly planted disease-resistant American elm clones. Expanding this third group is the

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“Dutch elm disease results when a fungus and the elm bark beetle gang up on the trees. The fungus plays the hit man, the beetle the chauffeur.”

Top: Saratoga’s largest elm towering over the urban forest at our South Broadway gateway. Below: The stately elm in front of Roohan Realty on Broadway. This tree can be seen in old postcards of the Community Theater. Photos by Tom Denny.



TREE TOGA 2014

Sustainable Saratoga's Tree Toga 2014 combined an ambitious tree-planting project with a downtown festival that celebrated Saratoga's growing commitment to the preservation and expansion of its urban forest. Tree Toga marked an important new stage in the evolving partnership between Sustainable Saratoga's Urban Forestry Project and the city's Department of Public Works. Saratoga Springboard, a remarkable non-profit, selected Tree Toga for their annual project, took primary responsibility for organizing the festival, and bumped the whole enterprise to the next level.

Over 130 volunteers planted 25 trees around Saratoga on April 26. The city's DPW provided the trees, while Sustainable Saratoga chose the locations, selected the species, recruited the volunteers, and handled all logistics. Increasing the diversity of the street trees we plant (and ending our overreliance on maples) is one of the important goals set forth in Saratoga's 2013 Urban Forest Master Plan. Sustainable Saratoga selected disease-resistant American elms (Jefferson cultivar), hackberry, black tupelo, tulip poplar, swamp white oak, northern red oak, and basswood. Volunteers planted trees in many parts of the city: on Park, Division, Lawrence, and Walton streets on the West Side; Lake and York avenues and Schuyler Drive on the East Side; and Union, Lincoln, and Vanderbilt avenues and White Street in the city's southeast quadrant.

In a parallel effort, Public Works has been cutting concrete to open up tree wells in the commercial core. DPW planted 17 trees at sites recommended by Sustainable Saratoga on Lake Avenue and Church, Division and Henry streets.

Tree Toga volunteers represented a wide sampling of the community, from residents long retired to kids in elementary school. Numerous individuals and families volunteered and several businesses sent workers, while groups from Saratoga Mentoring, Saratoga Springs High School Key Club, the Girl Scouts, the Waldorf School, and City Hall also contributed their labor.

Explore Sustainable Saratoga's interactive map of the elm tree inventory at saratogaspringstrees.org.



Top: Sustainable Saratoga volunteers gather before the 2014 Tree Toga planting effort. Bottom: Volunteers dig on Vanderbilt Ave. during Tree Toga 2014. Photos by Camera Famosa

long-term future of Saratoga's elms.

A final, large group of self-seeded "volunteer" elms remind us that elms were once a highly successful native forest tree, numerous and fast growing. Saratoga's first street trees, planted in 1829, were "maples and elms from our forests." Even today, American elms propagate easily. Few people pay attention to these "volunteer" native elms, but they are everywhere. We find them on a weedy bank in Congress Park, in backyards around town, and scattered along property lines on West Circular, Fourth Street (near North Broadway), Clinton and Grand, and along little-known lanes such as Schrade, Smaldone and Foy. Many are dead, and almost all will sicken and die in adolescence, which makes them the real battleground in the fight to save our large legacy elms. For too long, we have ignored them, have not bothered to remove them promptly when they sicken, and they have become prime breeding grounds for the disease. Probably the wisest strategy is to remove them preemptively, healthy or not, before they become part of the disease cycle.

Dutch elm disease results when a fungus and the elm bark beetle gang up on the trees. The fungus plays the hit man, the beetle the chauffeur. Transported by the beetle from kill to kill, the fungus shuts down the tree's vascular system, killing it quickly. The three main strategies for preserving and managing a mature elm population hinge on interrupting the work of this deadly pair. By far the most cost-effective strategy is the immediate removal (and chipping) of sick or dead elms, for this eliminates both a reservoir of fungus and the breeding grounds of the beetles. Noted elm specialist R. Jay Stipes put it this way, "Cities which... leave [sick and dead] trees standing to be removed [later...] will face significant losses." Sadly, his words sound all too prophetic as we look out over Saratoga's current elm crisis. Second, for trees in the very early stages of the disease, pruning out infected branches or injection with fungicide can increase the odds of survival. Finally, for specimen trees, preventive injection with fungicide may be justified.

Unlike many other cities that have made battling for their historic elms a core civic policy, Saratoga took a com-

paratively passive approach. We never developed an active rapid response program that included training city workers to monitor the elms, immediate pruning, rapid removal and disposal, and selective injection with fungicide. The city's main strategy has been to plant disease-resistant Asian hybrids that, unfortunately, inspire none of the same awestruck loyalty as do our native variety.

In July 2013, Sustainable Saratoga formally requested that the city take action

by using its authority to ensure the removal of the backlog of sick and dead elms before the beetles emerged in April 2014. The tree ordinance, Chapter 220 of the City Code, gives the city authority to order the treatment or removal of sick trees, even on private property, when they threaten the health of our urban forest. Such is the current case. As this article went to press, the city was weighing its options and preparing to take action to protect our legacy elms. It would be great news if, by

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Mayor Yepsen, Commissioner Scirocco, author Tom Denny and Supervisor Martin proclaim Saratoga Arbor Week next to a new American elm at City Hall. Photo by Celeste Caruso

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the time this article reaches print, the bulk of Saratoga's infectious elms have been removed. It is the surest way to give our remaining elms a fighting chance.

At its core, the city's 2013 Urban Forest Master Plan rests on the insight that the "preservation and expansion" of our urban forest will serve the public good. For elms, this vision translates on the one hand into efforts to "preserve" our remaining legacy elms, both as beautiful, treasured links to Saratoga's storied past and as hard working parts of our urban infrastructure. On the other hand, we must seek to "expand" our elm population by planting the next generation of American elms, using types such as Valley Forge, Princeton, and Jefferson that are both disease resistant and beautiful. As Saratoga maps out a strategy for a greener future, in which the urban forest is increasingly recognized as a key part of our urban infrastructure, the elms offer us a host of challenges, as well as an inspiring symbol and ideal. **SL**

Tom Denny retired in 2010 from Skidmore, where he had taught music history for nearly 30 years, and chaired the Music Department for about a dozen. Since 2011, he has headed up Sustainable Saratoga's Urban Forestry Project. sustainablesaratoga.org