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# A Maple for the Ages

*Discovering a 250-year-old tree hidden  
in an overgrown nature preserve*

**Christopher Johnson**



**W**ACHUSETT MEADOW WILDLIFE SANCTUARY IN CENTRAL Massachusetts spreads like an emerald comforter over 1,200 acres of rolling terrain that encompasses wetlands, woodlands, and meadows. The sanctuary, owned and managed by Mass Audubon, reposes south of Wachusett Mountain, the most prominent rise in the rural precincts of this region. The mountain floats above the surrounding land like a gentle cone overlooking the Wachusett Reservoir. On a clear day, the mountain dives into the reservoir and leaves its image on the calm surface of the waters.

Far fewer people explore Wachusett Meadow than climb Wachusett Mountain, which hikers and skiers overrun. For that reason, I preferred exploring the sanctuary to climbing that modest mountain during the years that we lived in Massachusetts. On the 12 miles of trails at the sanctuary, I would encounter only two or three other nature aficionados, and we would approach each other shyly on the trail, say hello softly, and return to the comfort of our own solitude. The sanctuary's history—natural and human—drew me toward it like a siren's song carried on a fresh breeze. I watched the cycles of nature reemerge there. The sanctuary's natural rhythms helped me understand the cycles in my own life.

The human history at Wachusett Meadow is typical for central Massachusetts, and it reflects the conservation ethic that started to reclaim green spaces after World War II. Edward and Lois Goodnow established a farm there in 1786, a mere eleven years after the start of the American Revolution. They built a house and then added on to it, and in 1830, the rambling house turned into a tavern to service the bustling travel and commerce of the early republic. In 1917, C.T. Crocker III bought the property, which was then about 600 acres, and there he raised cattle, horses, sheep, and oxen. He also built an elegant gambrel-roofed barn that soared three stories into the sky. In 1956, the good Mr. Crocker endowed the entire property to Mass Audubon. Today, the home and the graceful barn still exist, housing the sanctuary's nature center and educational activities and serving as a testament to the human past of the property.

Since 1956, though, the main story of the sanctuary has been the gradual reestablishment of the hegemony of nature, as the staff of the sanctuary has permitted natural processes to reassert themselves on this land. I first hiked through the sanctuary in 1985. Starting at the Crocker house, I tramped south

*A few decades ago, the Crocker Maple's lower limbs stretched out like octopus arms. Its trunk was massive, and its bark resembled corrugated iron.* CHRISTOPHER JOHNSON

on a trail that had been mown to traverse a meadow that glittered with a cornucopia of buttercups, clover, and daisies. I came to a boardwalk that led into a red maple swamp. The environment became darker, denser. Frogs croaked incessantly as if from another world. Logs jutted through the surface of the water, resembling crocodiles. The wetland was quiet; an aura of mystery hung like black satin over it.

The year before, I had started hiking almost every weekend, sometimes with my wife, Barbara, sometimes with our two children, sometimes with members of the Appalachian Mountain Club. I savored those walks. Nature served as a counterpoint to my life during the week. In 1985, I was 37 years old and was the supervising editor for a Boston publishing house—my first position as a manager. Being from the perfectionist wing of the human species, I obsessed about deadlines, personnel decisions, and the quality of our work. At times, my week felt like a runaway train to which I clung, barely.

My weekend excursions in the Massachusetts countryside brought relief, comfort, and renewal. I could turn off my overactive mind and access my unconscious. The pioneering Swiss psychologist Carl Jung believed that nature had restorative powers linked to our evolution and the development of human consciousness. In 1909, he reported a dream involving a house of several stories. The top story symbolized modern consciousness. Each story below represented major eras in history and, correspondingly, stages in the evolution of human awareness. Beneath the cellar of the house, embedded in the earth, was the most primordial stage of consciousness. This was the layer of our instincts, which were buried beneath the hyper-consciousness of modern life. Jung wrote, “It is as if our consciousness had somehow slipped from its natural foundations and no longer knew how to get along on nature’s timing.”<sup>1</sup>

Nature’s cycles and my own cellars—I reconnected with both on my weekend hikes. As I walked on the boardwalk through the sanctuary wetlands, the pressures of the week gradually faded. From the wetland, the trail led me north, across an asphalt road that had been named after the Goodnows. To my left, on the other side of a meadow, an enormous tree towered over a thicket of smaller trees. Intrigued, I approached it. My guidebook informed me that the tree had been christened the Crocker Maple and that it had been there for centuries. It stood 85 feet above us. Its trunk measured 186 inches

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1. Carl Jung, *The Earth Has a Soul*, edited by Meredith Sabini (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2008, 68–69).

around. The lower limbs stretched out like octopus arms for 120 feet, longer than the length from home plate to first base. The trunk was massive, and the bark resembled corrugated iron. The tree was in full leaf.

The lowest limbs reached out only three or four feet above the ground. They swooped downward and then upward, and the locals called them “pony branches” because children used to heave themselves on the limbs and “ride” them. The Davey Tree Company first started acting as stewards for the tree in 1935, taking actions to keep it standing. The limbs and leaves were so heavy that one of the arborists embedded cables in the thick center branches of the tree to support the upper limbs’ weight.

Joe Choiniere, who once served as the property manager of the sanctuary, wrote in *Sanctuary*, the journal formerly published by Mass Audubon, “I am often affected by the notion that trees connect sky and earth, acting as a conduit between two worlds and serving as a living space for so many organisms.”<sup>2</sup> As I walked around the tree, I saw what he meant. The limbs of the Crocker Maple looked like arms, and the twigs resembled tiny, delicate fingers.

As I circumnavigated this magnificent tree, I soaked in its massive scale. It was a champion tree. Such trees are measured for their height and circumference and the spread of their branches. Arborists have a formula for declaring trees to be champions, and if a tree receives a score of 300 or better, it is considered to be one. The Crocker Maple’s unofficial score was 311. I could see that over the years, the weather had nicked away at the tree, downing one branch and then another—the cycles of nature at work. When a branch fell, the remaining limbs grew more leaves, increasing the load that the remaining tree had to bear.

Mass Audubon estimated that the tree was about 250 years old, meaning that it dated from before the Revolution. The tree had witnessed generations of human activities—wars, depressions, the turning of the centuries. It carried the burden of the decades. It looked upon us with stolid indifference.

The Crocker Maple touched me deeply. As Choiniere observed, the tree connected heaven and earth. It embodied the continuity of life. It was a sentient link to the past, a piece of living history. It had experienced the cycles of life—losing limbs, growing limbs, dropping leaves in the autumn, sprouting leaves in the spring. It was integrally connected to the surrounding

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2. Joe Choiniere, “The Life and Death of the Crocker Maple,” *Sanctuary: The Journal of Mass Audubon*, Fall/Winter 2013–2014, page 9.

biotic community: the soil, the grass, the birds, the squirrels, the worms, the snakes, the bushes, the surrounding trees, the atmosphere. I felt the power of this tree deep inside my nerves and muscles and bones. Jung wrote, “It is these primordial images which influence us most directly, and therefore seem to be the most powerful.”<sup>3</sup>

I walked north, passing the sanctuary headquarters and climbing a slope as subtle as the curve of a human body. The trail traversed another meadow and then entered a woodland. The sun blazed like a diamond, but leaves arrested the sun’s rays and fell to the soil in broken shards. I passed a stand of beeches and shagbark hickories and approached one of the hickories. The Crocker Maple had inspired me to draw close to the tree, to study this living being that connected heaven and earth. I closed my eyes and felt the slabs of bark that jutted out. The bark felt like rough leather, with hundreds of crevices in which insects could live, and the edges of the protruding bark felt like a blunt knife. I felt a kinship with this tree, which, like me, shared the resources of the earth.

I opened my eyes and looked upward. The crown, 80 or 90 feet above me, was oval-shaped. A memory flooded into my mind’s eye, as sharp and clear as if it had happened yesterday. It was the image of an ancient tree in a woods near where I had lived as a child in northern Ohio. It was a tree where my friends and I would gather often, and one time one of the friends took out his Boy Scout knife, and with that knife, we each carved our initials into the trunk of the tree. The memory made me shiver down to my hiking boots, down to the earth.

The trail carried me across a stone wall and past mountain laurel. The light pink flowers rested like sprites against dark green leaves. I headed right toward a rocky outpouring of granite. My guidebook said that the boulders were gneiss and schist. When glaciers sat on these lands between 12,000 and 15,000 years ago, they grabbed hold of the boulders and deposited them there. I felt the boulders, and they were craggy and implacable. I pictured the glacier like a steam shovel plowing these boulders through the terrain. The boulders were beautiful in their way—large and imperious. They had a strange power. They would be here long after I was gone. The trail continued on to Brown Hill, which according to the guidebook featured a relatively new growth of trees and shrubs spread across a plateaued surface. The hill was only 1,312 feet high, but I decided not to climb it. I was tired; I could make that short climb another day.

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3. Jung, 69.

IN 1995, I RETURNED TO WACHUSETT MEADOW, THIS TIME WITH BARBARA. The natural changes were startling, and the most remarkable transition had occurred at the wetlands with the boardwalk threading through it. A pond now spread across the shallow bowl of land, formed by a dam that beavers had built on East Wachusett Brook. Cindy Dunn, currently the site manager and conservation coordinator for the sanctuary, explained, "Beavers were purposefully introduced to Massachusetts, and they found their way to Wachusett Meadow in 1993 or 1994. They had been extirpated 200 years before. Beavers built a large dam, which blocked the culverts on the brook and gradually filled in a large bowl of land. It took a while for the land to flood from the dam. The water gradually crept upland until it covered about 80 acres."

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Branches had fallen to the ground like giant wounded soldiers, and some of the lower limbs sagged near the ground, groaning with the weight of time.

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Barbara and I drew near the pond. The boardwalk stood several feet underwater, now. I confess to being disappointed, for I had loved tramping through that mysterious wetland. Yet as I continued to observe, I saw new beauties. Waterlilies floated on the surface like exquisite figures frozen in time by an artist. Trees that had once dotted the wetland now stood in the water, lifeless and leafless and limbless and looking like noble pillars of black marble. Dunn noted that other hikers at the sanctuary had shared my initial disappointment at seeing the pond. "Just before the beavers came," she said, "the sanctuary had raised funds to build the boardwalk through the wetland. It was very popular. After we let the area flood, some people expressed frustration about losing the boardwalk, but we explained the natural process." The staff had not interfered with the cycles of nature. They had permitted the transitions of nature to occur and had even started conducting canoe trips on the pond to educate visitors about the newly formed ecosystem.

Barbara and I continued on to the Crocker Maple. The intervening years had also worked their inevitable way with the ancient tree. Branches had fallen to the ground like giant wounded soldiers, and some of the lower limbs sagged near the ground, groaning with the weight of time. Meanwhile, as

branches had fallen, the tree compensated by forming more leaves on the branches that remained, adding weight to the tree. By not adding more chains or buttressing the tree in other ways, sanctuary managers were allowing the cycles of nature to reassert themselves in this complex ecological community, of which the Crocker Maple was a highly visible representative.

ANOTHER EIGHT YEARS PASSED, AND IN 2003, BARBARA AND I RETURNED to Wachusett Meadow again. In the time since our last visit to the sanctuary, the cycles of life had moved inexorably forward for us. We had moved from Boston to Chicago, and we were visiting the sanctuary as part of a weeklong vacation in Massachusetts. Our children had graduated from college. Our son was married and had his own son. Barbara's father—an oak-like figure to us—had passed away.

We walked first to the beaver pond, finding the water lower than it had been in 1995, and the boardwalk was now submerged only a few inches below the level of the water. We learned that in the early 2000s, Massachusetts had endured a very dry summer, and at one point, the water had drawn down so far that one could see exposed mud. The pond had replenished itself somewhat since the drought, but the water had not risen to the level it had reached in 1995. Some of those lifeless and leafless trees still dotted the pond. Yet where the water had claimed the lives of the trees, it had also nurtured new life, as we saw several nests of great blue heron chicks, and their parents landed on and ascended from the water with grand majesty.

We walked north to the Crocker Maple. It had finally succumbed to time. On November 18, 2002, Mass Audubon workers had heard a loud snap, and they knew that the enormous tree had fallen. That day, an ice storm had swept through central Massachusetts. Ice had weighed down the branches, and a fierce wind howling out of the northwest had ended the life of this magnificent tree. The sanctuary workers had been able to count the rings, and they confirmed that the Crocker Maple had been 240 years old.

We felt an ineffable sadness as we stared at this fallen giant. Its enormous limbs lay, sprawled and broken, on the ground. In his article about the tree for *Sanctuary*, Joe Choiniere recalled, "After the tree fell, the outpouring of sentiment and comments overwhelmed me. Trees have an almost universal appeal, and old large trees even more so."<sup>4</sup> One teacher said she would miss

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4. Choiniere, 8.

bringing children to see the tree and that many children over the years had hugged it. Donna Choiniere wrote, “The Crocker Maple was a family tree—a few tears from my own little ones watered the tree’s abundant roots at times.”<sup>5</sup> We had lost a beloved conduit between the earth and the heavens.

Shaking our melancholy, Barbara and I headed northeast. This time, we climbed Brown Hill. Blazes in blue marked the trail and led us up on the flat rocks that ascended the hill. Arrows painted on rocks kept us on track toward the summit. When we reached the top, which was marked by a cairn, a soft yet insistent breeze greeted us. To the south, the beaver pond shimmered in the sun, and woods surrounded the pond like guardians. In the other direction, to the northeast, rose Wachusett Mountain—an old friend that we had climbed with our children long ago.

Yellow arrows led us on a path around the summit. Bushes scattered like pool balls across the plateau, which lay with arms opened to the sun. We saw a birch tree of medium girth and approached it. I felt its paper-like bark, which was as smooth as a child’s skin. I looked up and marveled at the leaves dancing in the breeze and catching the light at different angles, reflecting multiple shades of green. Then, unexpectedly, Barbara did something that only Barbara would do—she wrapped her arms around the trunk of the birch and gave it a kiss. A kiss! I howled! I loved what she had done! She had welcomed a tree to replace the Crocker Maple in our hearts. The cycles of nature and affection were like a Mobius strip, continuing ever onward.

I reflected that it had been nearly twenty years since I had first hiked at Wachusett Meadow. In the intervening years, I felt as if I had calmed down and invited life more fully. My self-doubts back then seemed like existential yearnings. In the rhythms of nature, I had learned my own rhythms—that I would feel sadness and disappointment and that these so-called negatives were simply a part of the rhythms of life that would eventually resolve into calm, confidence, belief, wonder, and amazement, like the times of the seasons.

For tens of thousands of years, humans lived in accordance with the rhythms of nature, rising with the sun, engaging in the hunt, sowing the fields, harvesting the crops, retiring with the setting sun. Only in the past 200 years, with the advent of industrialization, have most people lived lives out of sync with the rhythms of nature. Our hearts and our brains evolved to the sights and sounds and rhythms of nature. We in the modern world may have grown apart from those rhythms, yet if we welcome them, they

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5. Choiniere, 9.

still have the ability to calm us and make us feel whole. For 25 years, I have hiked almost every weekend, feeling the bark of trees, climbing mountains, wading through tallgrass prairie, winding down canyons. These experiences have burrowed inside me, just as Wachusett Meadow Sanctuary and the Crocker Maple became part of my heart and will remain there forever.

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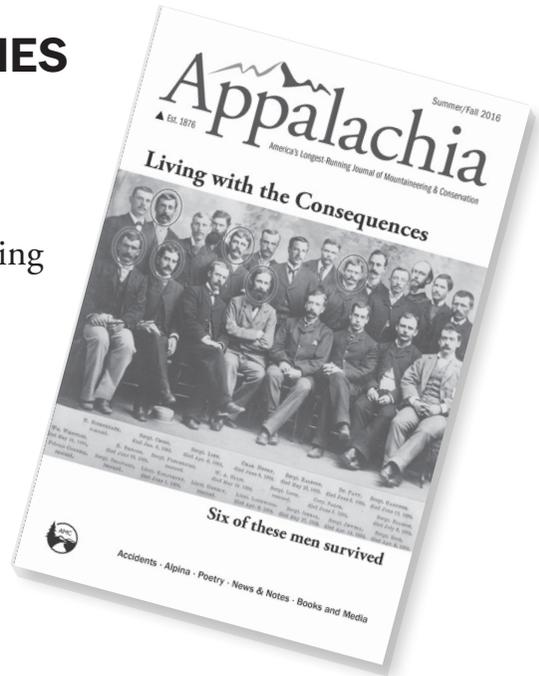
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