

The Trees of Prescott's Courthouse Plaza

By Mike King

Through the foresight of Arizona Territorial officials and the original design of streets and lots by surveyor, Robert Groom, an entire city block (4.1 acres) was set aside for community needs. This City block, known as “the Plaza,” has an illustrious history since those first territorial days.

The Plaza and its courthouse are included in the National Register of Historic Places. In 2008 the plaza was designated as one of the top ten public places in the United States by the American Planning Association. The trees, grass, walkways, Courthouse, and statues all come together to define the setting, character and “sense of place” of this nationally recognized public place.

Pictures from 1860-1877 of the Prescott town area show many open spaces covered by grass and scattered trees throughout what is now downtown. The Plaza location is for the most part, treeless. In fact, the open, almost treeless Plaza was the site of early Prescott baseball games. Pedestrian use, livestock grazing, including goats, would have resulted in compacted soil and closely nibbled vegetation.

The first courthouse to be built on this site was completed in 1878. Baseball was no longer a sight on the Plaza. A picket fence, painted by prisoners from the jail, was installed around the Plaza in 1879 to keep livestock off the courthouse grounds. With the elimination of livestock grazing, trees, cacti and grass were planted.

City Council minutes of May 15, 1880 indicate that bids were sought to supply 150 box elder or black locust trees on the Plaza. George Lount was awarded the contract and the Supervisors were to set out and keep the trees watered. A chapel, jail and hothouse along with a decorative mineral rock fountain and band stand (1895) were constructed. A

watermelon patch was established for refreshment during community activities. Gravel walkways were built to access the courthouse from the various adjacent streets. Trees were planted in the “islands” between these sidewalks and walkways.

Wells were established on the four corners of the plaza in late 1880. Their primary purpose was fire protection for the courthouse and nearby businesses. The Miller Creek dam, pump house and pipeline to the Mt. Vernon reservoir were completed in 1884. Hydrants were installed on the Plaza at this time. Most downtown residents used private wells but city water was available. From this information one can assume that from 1881 water was available for irrigating trees and other plantings on the Plaza.

Prescott folklore often credits Buckey O'Neill with the planting of the current trees on the Plaza.¹ He was elected Probate Judge in 1886 and served for 2 years. During this time he was also ex officio Superintendent of Schools. He was Sheriff from 1888-1890. He became Prescott's mayor in 1897 until he left in May of 1898 to fight in the Spanish-American War.

A Days Past article in the Prescott Courier of November 30, 1992 also states the above and goes on to say that these trees “keeled over” and were replaced by the civic minded ladies group, the Monday Club, established in 1895.²

Pictures in the archives of Sharlot Hall Museum show the Courthouse Plaza after the fire of 1900 having only a few scattered scrubby trees present. Tents, shacks, and other temporary buildings housing various stores, bars and other business are evident.

A citation in the Arizona Journal Miner in 1903 states that “the Plaza gardener quit.” His work was assailed as being “nothing more than a conglomerate of rock piles, a monument of useless, wasted money that disfigured the plaza.”

The Rough Rider monument was dedicated in 1907 and photos indicate numerous trees along the walkways surrounding the 1878 Courthouse. Obviously, numerous trees were planted on the Plaza between 1901 and 1907.

City Council minutes from March 1, 1909, and Journal Miner newspaper coverage the next day state “the Council closed the meeting with a debate as to the most desirable and or-

namental trees to be planted around the plaza inside the sidewalk curb.” Council members Belcher and Hughes were authorized to work with the County Board of Supervisors on the placing of trees around the plaza.

References in the Arizona Journal Miner in April 1909 state that “the gardener was planting trees, grass plots and flowers: installing sod around the jail and making changes in the walks.”

On July 4, 1910 Governor Sloan planted a Deodar cedar (*Cedrus deodara*) on the plaza. This was in celebration of the fact that the US Congress, through a vote in the House of Representatives, had finally come to agreement that New Mexico and Arizona territories should each be recommended for statehood on their own merits. Even with the 1910 vote, it took another year and a half to pass the bills admitting New Mexico and Arizona to the Union.



Prescott's Courthouse Plaza, circa 1930

Pictures of the Courthouse Plaza taken from 1900 to 1914 indicate that a variety of trees were planted in rows along the streets adjacent to the Plaza and in the “islands” around the walkways. The trees are a variety of sizes and species. Willow trees are evident in photos from this time. The largest trees look to be 15-20 feet tall. Most have a rounded crown rather than the vase shape of an elm tree.

On February 14, 1912, Arizona Admissions Day, “ a hardy white oak tree, brought from the Stewart Ranch in Williamson Valley, was planted in front of the courthouse, on the north side, almost in the center where the wide cement walk is now and between the building and the Buckey O’ Neill statue.” (Arizona Journal Miner, February 15, 1912). A quote from an article in the Courier dated February 14, 1929 states “ the oak tree, it is sad to relate, lived only one or two seasons and was eventually taken out.”

Officials agreed that the deodar cedar planted in 1910 would be a good substitute and therefore it became the “statehood tree.” Deodar cedar is native to the Himalaya Mountains. This species was brought to the US in the 1830s. The sign on the rock in front of the statehood tree identifies it as a White Mountain cedar. There is no tree species named White Mountain cedar but it may have been brought here from Arizona’s White Mountains area. The sign also indicates it was planted on statehood day which is also incorrect as the above paragraphs indicate the correct story.

Population growth, governmental needs and outdated facilities were the factors for the effort to replace the 1878 Courthouse. It was razed in 1915-16 and in October 1916 the cornerstone for the new courthouse was laid. Construction was completed in 1918 and the existing Courthouse was dedicated in late

1918. Although records are nonexistent for substantiation, one can conjecture that a new plan was developed and trees sought to highlight the Courthouse and Plaza.

This author has heard an urban myth that the current trees on the plaza were the result of efforts by Pauline O’Neill, Buckey O’Neill’s.³

Another folktale exists that these are Chinese elm trees either brought to Prescott by Chinese residents or that the trees are descendants of trees brought to Prescott by the Chinese people.⁴

The most popular urban tree in America at the time was the American elm. Its vase- shaped growth pattern and tall stature made this a good choice. Mature trees would often grow higher than the structures adjacent to them. This was a desirable attribute as they do not interfere with the view of the structure but softened and highlighted the buildings. The architect for the Courthouse was William Bowden, a firm from Denver where elm trees were popular along streets and in public places. The popularity of the species, similar weather, elevation and attributes of the tree were probably contributing factors in recommending the selection of American elm.

There are about 170 trees on the Plaza. They consist of several species. Some 75 percent of the trees are American elm, *Ulmus americana*. About one percent of the trees are Siberian elm (*Ulmus pumila*) and look nearly the same as the American elm. The age of the trees is generally in the range of 85-90 years as of 2009. American elm trees are known to live to be 175-300 years old in their native habitat. Trees in urban environs outside of their natural range usually do not live to this age, but can with proper care.

American elm is susceptible to numerous insect and disease agents that have various ef-

fects on the health of the tree: the most notable being the Dutch elm disease. This fungus reached the USA in a shipment of elm logs from Europe in 1930. The fungus is carried by the elm bark beetle which introduces it into the sap stream of twigs and small branches when feeding. It blocks nutrient flow with gradual wilting and yellowing of foliage. Eventually the branches and entire tree will die. There is no known cure other than developing trees with a resistance to this pathogen.

The reason that our Plaza trees have not succumbed to the Dutch elm disease is that these trees are outside of their natural range. Our small urban forest of American elm is west of their natural range and the disease has not traveled to our area. The range of American elm is generally east of a line from western North Dakota southerly to the eastern edge of the Texas panhandle. However, Dutch elm disease has migrated to California, Colorado, Montana and Washington states. The threat to our Plaza trees still exists, and thus a replacement plan is being implemented by Yavapai County.

The Liberty elm, *Ulmus americana libertas*, which is a disease resistant species, is being planted as a replacement tree. Ash trees are being planted as well.

The south side of the Courthouse has an Atlas cedar (*Cedrus atlantica*) near the steps. This tree is native to northern Africa and brought to the US in the 1840s. A taller conifer, the giant sequoia is also on the south side of the Courthouse behind the “Cowboy at Rest” statue. The reason and date of their planting are not known due to the lack of records of these actions.

Yavapai County, in concert with the City of Prescott and assistance of arborists and landscape architects, is committed to a plan to

monitor, trim, replace and otherwise maintain the trees of the Plaza. The objective is to maintain the setting, ambiance and character of this nationally renowned plaza.



NOTES

¹ An Article in the Daily Courier of 1889 states that shade trees were planted at the Courthouse “at the suggestion” of Sheriff O’Neill.

² The Monday Club may have helped with a project to plant trees on the plaza. However, the Monday Club meeting minutes from 1898-1918 make no mention of a project of this nature. They were known to do civic projects related to literacy, schools and childcare.

³ After Buckey’s death, Pauline O’Neill married Buckey’s brother, Eugene, in 1901 and moved to Phoenix. She was a state legislator representing the Maricopa County area for the years 1917-18. Although this is the time when the courthouse was built and follow up landscaping undertaken, her legislative authorities were limited. There is nothing to indicate any state funds were used to landscape the Plaza grounds of Prescott or that Pauline O’Neill played a role in these activities.

⁴ Although there was a Chinese presence in the Prescott area, there is no evidence to link them to the elm trees on the Plaza. The trees are Siberian elm and not Chinese elm. They are 2 different species with different growth patterns characteristics. The Siberian elm, also an ornamental tree like the American elm, were planted long after the Chinese population had essentially left the area and the trees are aged as being planted in the 1918 period. One cannot assert that these trees were planted by the Chinese or are they descendents of trees that may have brought by the Chinese.

ADDITIONAL SOURCES

Arbor Day Foundation, *Tree Guide* 2009.

Otwell Associates, Architects *Building Condition Assessment Report* October 2002

Wilson, Marjorie H. *National Register of Historic Places Inventory—Nomination* July 1976

Yavapai County Facilities/Parks Department *Courthouse Plaza Tree Replacement Plan* January 8, 1996