140 Year Old Tree Cut Down at Greenbelt Lake

by Owen Kelley, 13 August 2017

Last week, the city cut down a large, dead tree on the northeast shore of Greenbelt Lake, a tree that sprouted about 60 years before Greenbelt was founded. If you visit the stump of this double-trunked white oak tree, you can count 140 annual growth rings.

The stump of this large tree is a reminder that at least part of Greenbelt was wooded even before the town was built. And there is other evidence too of crop field and pasture reverting to forest no later than the early 1900s.

At the Library of Congress, one can find photographs of deciduous trees and pine trees about 30 feet tall, next to newly constructed Greenbelt buildings in 1936–1937 (photographer: Arthur Rothstein). Many tree species require at least a few decades to reach such a height.

In 1913, the Maryland Board of Forestry published a county map that labeled parts of present-day Greenbelt as "culled hardwood forest" and "culled pine forest" (author: Fred Besley). It takes decades for a forest to grow mature enough for selective timber harvesting to be viable.

Other forests in Greenbelt may have trees just as old as the oak cut down last week at Greenbelt Lake, but at least one of these forests is managed in a very different way. The forest that comes to mind is the city's Forest Preserve that lies between the Baltimore-Washington Parkway and the GHI woodlands east of Ridge Road.

The Forest Preserve has a number of healthy oak and maple trees comparable in girth to the 140-year-old oak that the city just cut down last week at Greenbelt Lake. The Forest Preserve is different than Greenbelt Lake, however, in that the Forest Preserve has been left alone to mature during the most recent 80 years, if not longer.   Today, the Forest Preserve has standing deadwood, fallen trees in various stages of decay, and small, sunny patches caused by recently fallen trees.

If a forest is allowed to mature on its own, it will begin to take on characteristics of old-growth forests, according to ecologists like Joan Maloof of the Old-Growth Forest Network. In such a forest, standing dead trees provide micro-habitats for animals and plants. When a tree falls, it opens up a sunny spot, again increasing the diversity of habitats.

Woods as old as Greenbelt's are fairly unusual. Only 10% of Maryland's forests are over 100 years old and only half a percent are over 140 years old according to a 2008 report by the U.S. Forest Service.

We are lucky in Greenbelt to be able to enjoy such forests either in the tame park-like setting of Greenbelt Lake or in the wild places that hide in the Forest Preserve.

caption: The annual growth rings of the 140-year old white oak that was cut down last week at Greenbelt Lake (Photo by Owen Kelley)