

## **Stories from the Oak Tree**

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It's been 230 years since my beginnings in a remote area of Wake County, North Carolina. Since my planting, I have witnessed a place called Raleigh transform from a sleepy state capital into a thriving metropolitan area. And along the way, I have witnessed a tremendous amount of history.

During my younger years, I heard older trees around me speak of two groups of native people known as the Tuscarora and Occaneechi, and their history remains alive to this day. When I was nearly two years old, a site was chosen a few miles to the east for a capital of a brand new state called North Carolina. And since that day, even though it was originally a few miles away, I have called Raleigh, the "City of Oaks," my home. I can recall the farmland that surrounds me, where tobacco and other crops were grown by planters. Enslaved African Americans, forced to work the land, surrounded me for my first 70 years. I can also recall a free African American man named John Chavis, who worked as a teacher and minister. His school in Raleigh was held in high regard, attended by African American children during the evenings and white children during the day.

After Chavis passed away in the 1830s, slavery became an issue that divided the nation. I remember hearing of a fort called Sumter, captured by Confederates in the city of Charleston, S.C., further south. In my area, the act of leaving the Union was debated, and I can still remember the debates from the capitol building. There was talk of a president named Lincoln, and the possibility of him taking away the right of North Carolina to keep slavery. By the time Virginia had seceded, it was only a matter of time until the "Old North State" would do the same. I remember the day well. May 20, 1861. North Carolina seceded from the Union.

For the most part, my life wasn't affected by the Civil War. The Raleigh area didn't see any action until the late stages of the conflict, when Union General Sherman marched into Raleigh after he passed through Georgia and South Carolina. I recall the sounds of a distant cavalry skirmish at Morrisville State, to the west. And I remember the sight of Sherman's soldiers in blue, walking past me on the way to a location called Bennett Place, near the present-day city of Durham. It was at the Bennett farm that Confederate General Johnston surrendered to Sherman, the largest surrender of the war. Alas, the war was over in the Carolinas, Georgia, and Florida.

The decades after the Civil War passed by, and the old plantations around me turned into sharecropping lands. I noticed changes. A college established down the road called North Carolina State University. And a woman named Sabrina Cook was laid to rest beneath me. I've heard the fireworks of the nearby State Fair since 1928, when it was moved to its present location. After my 100<sup>th</sup> birthday, Jim Crow laws became the norm in North Carolina, separating whites and African Americans. This was apparent until the 1950s and 1960s, when a movement dedicated to restore civil rights for African Americans kicked off across the South. A few miles southeast of my roots, at downtown Raleigh's Shaw University, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee was established in 1960. This organization, comprised of college students, protested against segregation, including the Woolworth's lunch counter at nearby Cameron Village.

The 1960s was a busy decade for my surroundings. A church named St. Paul's was built next to me. I've heard tell that those folks wanted to have a place where all people would be welcome, no matter the skin color. For over 50 years, I've enjoyed the sounds of the church, from picnics, memorial services, weddings, and the youth group playing "capture the flag." I enjoy hearing the music of the church. The choir, organ, hand bells, and 9:02 band. And I am certainly thankful for the church youth, who saved me from getting cut down in the early 1960s when the original congregation was working on the building plans.

I have been listening to the congregation discuss solar panels, and I am glad that the same spirit of stewardship of the earth continues today. Even though I am getting older now, I look forward to many more years of watching St. Paul's grow.

Out of tiny acorns, mighty oak grow, and as we watch the efforts being made to help our environment, from composting, recycling, and solar panels, I think the old oak tree reminds us that little efforts can make a big impact.