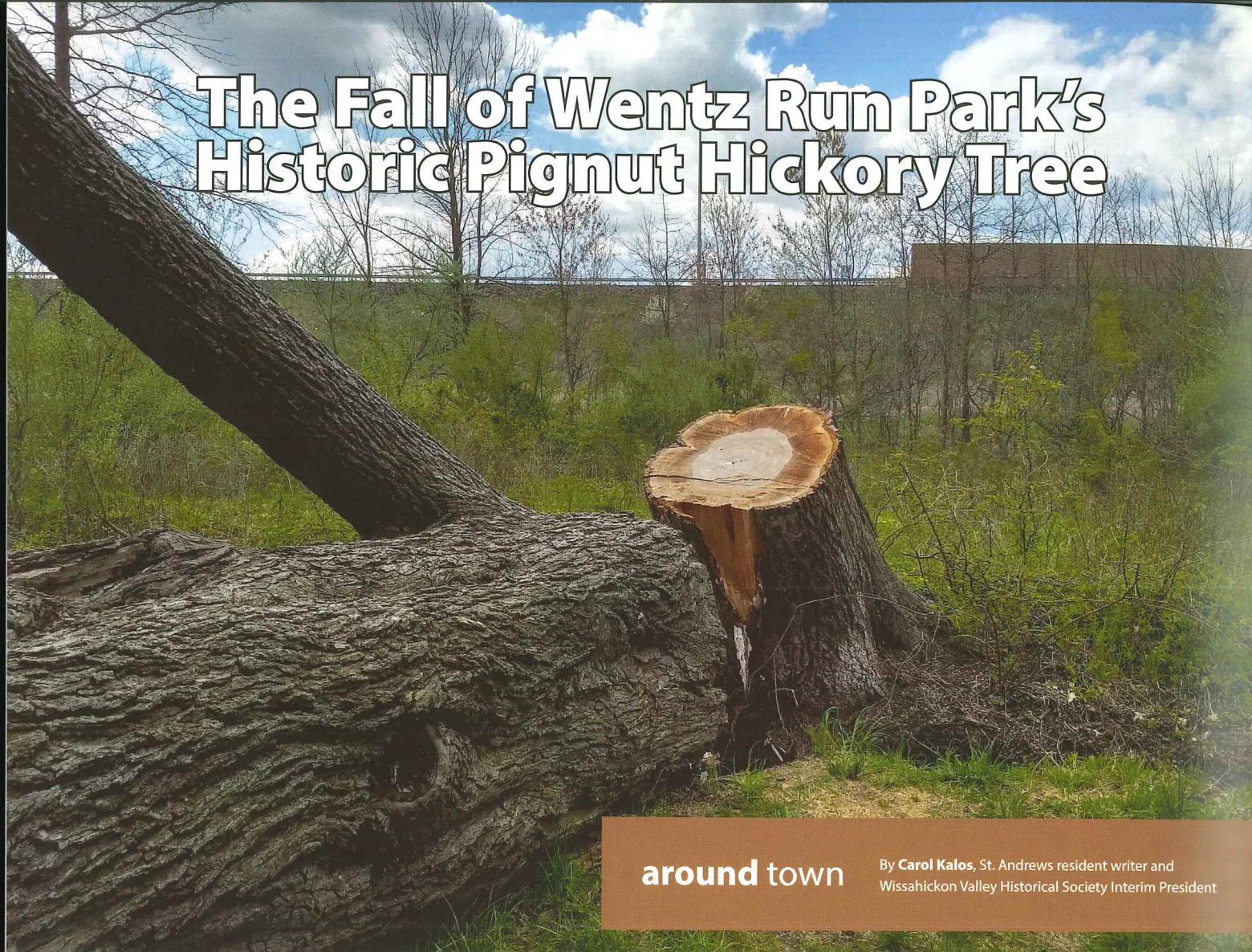


The Fall of Wentz Run Park's Historic Pignut Hickory Tree



around town

By Carol Kalos, St. Andrews resident writer and Wissahickon Valley Historical Society Interim President

The Pignut Hickory Tree, in April 2021, on its side. Note the sound barrier of the Pennsylvania Turnpike in the upper right corner.

Wentz Run Park was home to a perfectly shaped deciduous tree that's size made it a prizewinner, a Pennsylvania state champion pignut hickory tree. In 2020 a rare storm knocked over the pampered tree. Township officials and those who used to hike the park's trail to gaze at the tree were devastated because the tree was not only lovely and large, it was old. The arborist who cared for the tree measured its trunk at 31 inches across. Most significantly, he counted 248 rings, so the tree had witnessed local history since 1772!

In that year, the tree's seed landed beside a little stream in what was then Philadelphia County. (Montgomery County was formed from part of Philadelphia in 1784.) Today, yards from the Pennsylvania Turnpike, that stream trickles into Stony Creek, which feeds the Schuylkill River. *Whitpain Township, A Tricentennial Reflection, 1701-2001*, edited by Wayne A. Huss (2002), describes how the property was owned by Charles Jolly, who sold land in 1775 to Christopher Zimmerman. Zimmerman's farm extended across 200 acres, including the Mermaid Lake property and Wentz Run Park.

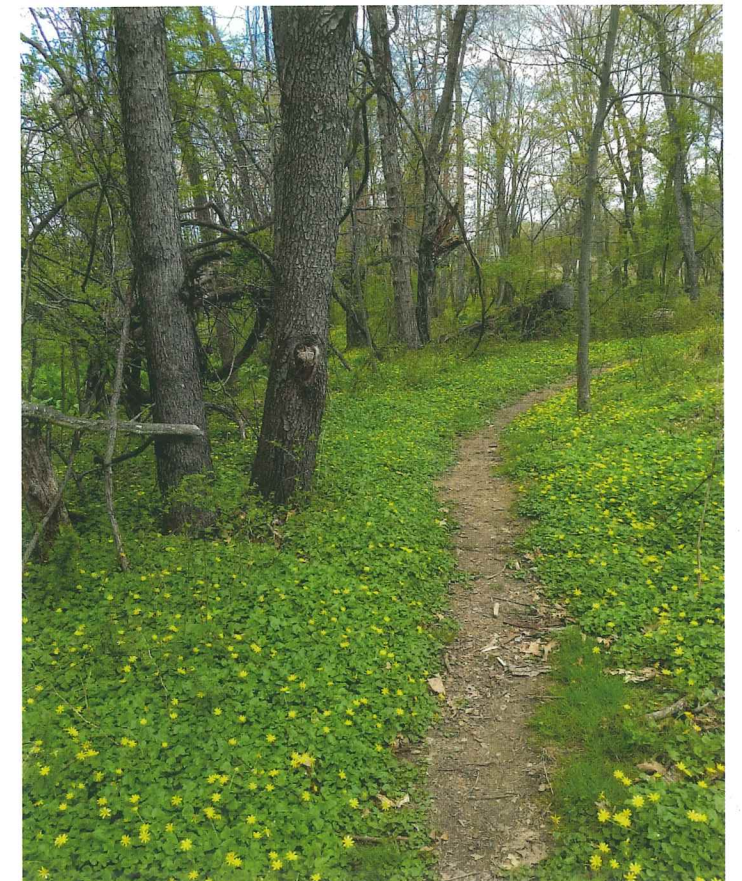
To visit the fallen tree, still lying across the pathway, hikers travel almost two miles over a floodplain. In fact, due to the mire, it will be a few months until the soil dries so that Whitpain can remove the tree and its wood saved. Pignut hickory trees are known for their valuable hardwood, used decades ago for broom handles. The township plans to use the special wood for planks for park benches so that the tree will continue with us. The tree has already done its part to bring life to its woodland community, reaching along the East Coast and Canada. Pignut hickory's nuts are bitter-tasting to humans but loved by birds, squirrels, deer, and other wildlife. In fact, the first settlers found wild pigs devouring the nuts, thus the name *pignut*.

Champion trees, the largest of a species, are determined by a point system based on three measurements: trunk circumference, height, and average crown spread. Slow-growing pignut hickories usually grow to about 60 feet, but this one stretched to an official 137.9 feet. Andrew Meehan, who serves on the township's Shade Tree Commission, and who, as an arborist, has cared for the tree for almost 20 years, relates how the tree became so distinguished. He explained that the nearby stream offered the tree

a constant water supply, so it was rarely completely dormant, even in the winter season. Furthermore, the township supplied the tree with good maintenance. Meehan, for instance, installed cables and lightning rods. He pointed out that the tree is still trying to survive; its root system is sending out new shoots, called "sucker growth."

Fittingly, on June 3, 2020, the spectacular tree was felled by a spectacular storm: a Derecho, an unusual thunderstorm with straight-line winds. In this case, NBC News reported that thousands lost power, and three local people died due to winds reaching up to 70 mph. Meehan explained that during the storm, the tree leaves acted as sails, catching the wind. The gale pushed across the top of the tree as its roots lifted from the moist soil below. Finally, from the force of the fall, the length of the tree split in half. On July 4, 2026, the United States will be 250 years old. As part of the America 250 celebration leading to that date, the WVHS plans a tree-planting ceremony to commemorate the treasured Pennsylvania state champion pignut hickory tree.

The Wissahickon Valley Historical Society. It is presently renovating the 1858 Franklinville School, the one-room school on Morris Road, across from Inverness. The school is listed in the National Register of Historic Places. The society's president is St. Andrews resident Carol Kalos. The WVHS headquarters are located on Skippack Pike at the 1895 Public School. New members are always welcome! To donate to the Franklinville School repairs, please visit the website www.WVValleyHS.org.



The trail through Wentz Run Park in April 2021, leading to the state champion Pignut Hickory Tree. Although attractive, those "fig buttercups" are considered an invasive species.







TAKE OUT AVAILABLE!

Hours: 11 A.M. to 8 P.M.

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