Chronology

1715 ca.
Based on trunk diameter and extrapolated annual ring counts, the tree started growing around this date. It was impossible to make a precise annual ring count when the tree was cut because of extensive wood decay at the base of the tree.

1855 ca.
Observatory Hill Office building (current official university name) was constructed and occupied as a private residence.

1861-65
Nearby Camp Randall occupied as a Civil War training ground.

1867 ca.
The university purchased the house in conjunction with land acquired for the experimental farm.

1867-78
House occupied by university presidents Chadbourne (1867-70), Twombly (1871-73), and Bascom (1874-78). Not known when the tree near the house received the name “President’s Oak.”

1879-1959
House used by the Astronomy Department, including for a time use as the residence for the director of the Washburn Observatory.

2013
Michael Yanny takes a cutting from the declining tree. Grafts scion to oak root stock to establish new tree.

2015, Jan. 14
Tree removed by Wolfe Tree Service. Sections of the tree moved to WoodCycle, a local mill and woodworking shop for sawing and kiln drying.

2018, Oct. 10
“New” President’s Oak planted near northeast corner of Washburn Observatory.
Media references


The report summarizes results of a “tree stability study” to assess tree health and risks of failure of the President’s Oak. The class used a variety of assessment tools to analyze the tree’s condition including: Fakopp 1D Microsecond Timer, PiCUS Sonic Tomography and an IML F400-S resistograph. The final recommendation was to keep the tree, but reduce the risk by removing limbs (crown reduction) and adding a warning sign stating the possible limb failure under high wind or ice and snow loading conditions.
The report repeats the legend that the tree was somehow involved in target practice by soldiers stationed at Camp Randall during the Civil War. This story, while colorful, is not supported by any physical evidence noted during the removal and subsequent milling of the tree (no bullets or cannon balls were found). Furthermore, the notion that soldiers were shooting at the tree during the period 1861-1865 would need to account for concerns that errant shots aimed at a tree located on a ridgetop might hit the adjacent President’s house (constructed ca. 1855). The current official building name for the former President’s house is “Observatory Hill Office Building. The current occupant is the La Follette School of Public Affairs.

Annotated photographs

Fig. 1: In the foreground (mid-slope) is the Solar Observatory, informally known as “Watson’s Mystery House.” The structure was removed ca. 1949. The silhouette of the President’s Oak can be seen directly behind the chimney of the Watson Mystery House. The image is in the UW Archives collection (S05883) and was taken ca. 1878. Note the proximity to the President’s House directly behind the President’s Oak. The building on the far right is University Hall, later renamed Bascom Hall. The first (original) dome is visible.
Fig. 2: This image (Annie Sievers Schildhauer, ca. 1893-99) is in the Wisconsin Historical Society digital collection (Image ID 67856). https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Image/IM67856
The President’s Oak is clearly visible on the right side of the image.
Fig. 3: This image was scanned from a private collection (CLP-W0092-Ann Waidlich). Date unknown, possibly 1940-1960.

Fig. 4: This view (1982, Wolfgang Hoffman) is in the Wisconsin Historical Society digital collection (Image ID 127867). The photo was used in the Allison book, *Every Root an Anchor*. 
https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Image/IM127867
Fig. 5: In 1998, as part of the university’s sesquicentennial celebrations, Daniel Einstein and Martin Bailkey co-wrote a self-guided campus tree walk pamphlet. The reference to the Civil War target practice legend in the pamphlet was based on Bruce Allison’s earlier publications. This story is now considered a colorful myth (see figure 10).

In the photo E.B. Fred’s hand is inserted into a small opening where a large cavity had healed over. When the tree was cut down, we encountered a three-foot tall column of concrete that was placed in the tree to “stabilize” the hollow base. It is estimated that this treatment must have occurred in the early 1900s given how the tree had subsequently closed over the opening. The trunk had continued to decay after the concrete was installed—so that after the tree was felled, all that remained on the stump was a perfect casting of the cavity (see figure 9). A portion of this concrete casting has been saved and is now in storage at the university’s horse barn.
Fig. 6: By September 2014 the tree was in serious decline, due to drought stress, root disturbance and internal decay. Major lateral limbs had been removed. (Image by D. Einstein)
Warning rope and flags were placed around the base of the tree in 2014 to discourage people from standing directly beneath the tree’s limbs. (Image by D. Einstein)
On Jan. 14, 2015, Butch Peschl, owner of Wolfe Tree Service, cut the tree down. Paul Morrison of WoodCycle then used a special 5-foot chainsaw bar to section the trunk. WoodCycle was able to mill quarter sawn lumber from the trunk. (Image by D. Einstein)
Fig. 9: A concrete pillar was revealed when the trunk was cut. Filling cavities in hollow trunks was a common "treatment" for decay in the early 1900s. The smooth surface of the pillar (visible behind the chainsaw) would have aligned with the opening in the trunk. The contours of the interior cavity are cast into the concrete. (Image by D. Einstein)
Fig. 10: All of the wood fiber that would have been present during the Civil War period had long turned to “sawdust.” Only the most recent 75 years of annual rings remained at the base of the tree trunk. The decayed wood fiber at the base of the hollow trunk was sifted to determine if any metal bullets/cannon balls had been dislodged and fallen to the bottom of the trunk. No bullets or cannon balls were found—nor were any metal fragments encountered during milling (other than hardware associated with metal cables used to stabilize weak branches.) This would appear to disprove any legends associated with this tree being used for military target practice. (Image by D. Einstein)
Fig. 11: The UW Child Development Lab at the School of Human Ecology used a section of the trunk to create a “Bur Oak Elf House.” The house is located on the school's playground.