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Description

Revealing the fascinating stories behind the park's magnificent trees

By **Michael Walsh**

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Many people enjoy walking through Westmount Park to admire the variety of beautiful mature trees but don't know their names and origins. Let's take a walk through the park to identify them and discover the stories behind these magnificent trees. Indeed, appreciating the true beauty of these trees in Westmount Park shows that some things we consider commonplace are truly exotic!

Westmount Park's Silver Firs and Snow Caves

Have you noticed the snow caves in Westmount Park? This is our dog's favourite area to explore during the winter season. They are located in a stand of six beautiful **silver firs** (*Abies alba*) adjacent to Westmount Park's clay tennis courts. This time of year, their boughs are downward-sloped creating a wall of snow containing snow-free areas.



Silver firs

Silver firs (also known as Sapin pectiné or Weißtanne) have a striking silver colour from the needle's underside containing two parallel white lines (comprised of stomates) adjacent to their midribs. The bark is a greyish-silver, bearing upright barrel-shaped cones (as in all "true firs") on the highest branches. The cone's scales fall off at maturity leaving the empty portion attached to the tree. Their crowns are initially conical and flatten over time – often referred to as "storks' nests". The tree's shape has been described as a "Chinese pagoda" with large cones that "hang like bells".

The trees' native habitat is the mountainous areas of central and southern Europe. Here, their snow caves offer snowshoe hares protection during the winter season. Large groves of silver firs still exist in the Vosges Mountains in France's Alsatian territory, protected within the [Ballons des Vosges Nature Park](#).

In Northern Europe, the silver fir is regarded as a birth tree. In Old Irish, the tree is named *ailm* – relating to the word "palm", the birth tree of the Middle East, from which the Phoenix (a bird that undergoes a fiery death and then rises again from the ashes) is born. In Greek, the tree is named *elate* from Eileithyia (Elate-Thuia), the goddess of childbirth that symbolically wields a burning pine torch.

Greek mythology tells the story of Pan, the god of the woods and pastures, pursuing the nymph Pitys who avoids capture by turning into a fir tree. Unable to catch his quarry, Pan removes a bough from the tree and, from that day on, always wore it like a crown. Pitys' mournful songs, however, are still heard when the wind blows through the tree's branches.

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processes as early as 2200 BCE.

In the past, people believed that these trees could impart healing powers. For example, in Sonnenberg, Germany, gout sufferers would tie a knot on a bough and say, “God guard thee noble fir, I bring thee my gout.” In Bohemia, poachers had a more insidious use: rendering themselves invisible by ingesting the cone’s seeds before dawn on St. John’s Day.

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In medieval times, Strasbourg turpentine, also known as Tuscan “*olio di abezzo*” (named after a forest of silver firs in the Hockwald), was manufactured from this species. It was used as a varnish on oil and tempera paintings – many artists utilized the less expensive Venice turpentine (from the larch). Strasbourg turpentine was also applied as a protective varnish, on sculptures, against verdigris (green pigments) that occur when certain metals oxidize.

In the 18th century, pitch was used for caulking and as a protective agent on rigging in ocean vessels against the detrimental effects of salt spray. A 1700s book describes the value of pitch as (it) “...will not only preserve the Health of her Men, by Lodging them warm and in good Order, but it will also add to the Motion of the Machine, and make her to Sail much swifter”.

By the 1800s, the Prussian and Austrian governments, encouraged the use of skin plaster made from Burgundy pitch as prevention from epidemic cholera.

The tree’s cones are used in the production of Templin oil, a pine, balsamic and sweet orange fragrance, also used as an additive found in cold and arthritis remedies. The wood is also used in the manufacturing of violins – it produces excellent resonance. (The Norway spruce is more commonly used.)

Finally, while standing amongst these trees in Westmount Park – watching our dog explore these snow caves – I am reminded of a quote from the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche:

‘The pine tree seems to listen, the fir tree to wait: and both without impatience: they give no thought to the little people beneath them devoured by their impatience and their curiosity.’

– *Der Wanderer und sein Schatten* (The Wanderer and His Shadow)

Westmount Park’s White Pine Trees

While taking pictures in Westmount Park, I have been asked on several occasions if I am the person that “writes about trees” and how this interest developed. This started as a young Biology student working as part of a research project sponsored by the Canadian Forest Service investigating the devastating effect the white pine weevil had on this species. Weevil damage was causing the abandonment of pine reforestation efforts and had a huge economic impact on lumber production.



White pine

It wasn't until many years later that I became aware of the historical and spiritual significance of these trees. Did you know that the white pine was the catalyst for the American Revolution as well as the basis of the Constitution of the United States of America? (Space constraints prevent a discussion of the latter).

To begin, the white pine (*Pinus strobus*) is easy to recognize: it is the only conifer with needles in bundles of five and possesses remarkable crowns that reach well past any surrounding trees.

In Westmount Park, there is a beautiful white pine east of the clay tennis courts. With a girth of only sixty-eight centimetres, it towers like a ship's mast over the children's library.

In fact, that is exactly what the English explorer [George Weymouth](#) envisaged in the 1600s when he saw large forests of white pines along the coastline of New England. (In England they are still known as Weymouth pines). The trees were over sixty meters in height, their trunks contained no knots and they would bend rather than splinter in high winds. To that end, they would make ideal masts for the Royal Navy. Upon this discovery, the British Crown laid claim to all white pines wider than sixty centimetres and within sixteen kilometres of a navigable waterway. These were marked, on their trunk, by the "King's Broad Arrow": three hatchet marks – a vertical line with an inverted "V". (This is the origin of today's roads named King's Wood and King's Pines). These trees provided the Royal Navy with masts for the next 125 years.

'Next time you are near the children's library, take a moment to appreciate how this tree, with a small girth, can support such a great height. In fact, the species has been described as 'inhabiting two worlds' – 'earthly life and the realm of the divine'.'



Needless to say, the colonists were outraged by the British Broad Arrow Policy denying them the use of these trees. The policy was largely ignored by the colonists and not fully enforced by the governors of New England. This initial challenge to royal authority, known as the "[Pine Tree Riot](#)", in the 1700s, laid the framework for the [Boston Tea Party](#) and eventually the American Revolution. The white pine's importance in the American revolutionary cause was symbolized in its inclusion on several flags (named Pine Tree Flags) used in New England in the 17th and 18th centuries.

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Finally, with Quebec and Maine sharing a common border, one can only speculate, that the park's tree might be a distant descendant of an extant ancient white pine, located deep in the New England woods that still bears the King's Broad Arrow markings.

Westmount Park's Scots Pine Trees

Those of us with children have spent many happy hours in the summer by the park's wading pond. The pond itself has gone through many changes: in the 1930s it was used by the Model Yacht Club as well as the Anglers' Club for casting practice (Read [Westmount places: A moment in time](#)).



Scots pine



Have you noticed the **Scots** (or Scotch) **pin**es (*Pinus sylvestris*) by the pond? They have been bearing a silent witness to all the changes that have occurred to both the park and our City over the years.

Former names for this species are Riga, Norway and Mongolian pine. It is one of the easiest trees to recognize with its low branches, reddish-brown scaly bark and needles comprising two per bundle.

Their origins are from the Caledonian Forest that, at one point, covered 1.5 million hectares of the Highlands in Scotland. The forest is legendary in myth – a place where Merlin (of King Arthur's kingdom) wandered in his madness lamenting the futility of war as well as a home of, as yet unnamed, mythical creatures and hermits.

The **Abernethy Forest** National Nature Reserve contains the last remains of the Caledonian Forest. Here, the Scots pine is named "The Harp of Trees" (*Clàrsach Nan Craobh*) for the sounds made by the wind as it blows through the trees' needles.

The trees are long-lived. In Lapland, there is one that dates back to 1244 and Sweden claims one that is at least 700 years old.

The Druids made bonfires with Scots pine to draw back the sun during the winter solstice. The trees were also decorated with reflective objects that represented the Divine Light that, over time, led to our present-day custom of Christmas trees. In fact, the species, being able to retain their needles, accounts for over 30 percent of today's Christmas tree market. (The Norway spruce is currently more popular).

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In the Highlands, Scots pines were used to mark the burial places of heroes. In England, they were used to mark crossroads as well as the perimeters of fields.

The English poet **William Wordsworth** describes this tree as an "enchanted tree with its often gnarled and twisted silhouette set against a winter landscape or moonlight shadows".

More recently, following a public poll, the Scots pine was chosen as the **National Tree of Scotland** (the Rowan was second and the Holly third).

Next time you walk by the park's wading pond, patiently listen to the sounds of the tree in the breeze and see if you agree it sounds like a Celtic *Clàrsach* harp.

Westmount Park's "King of Trees"

Have you ever noticed parents walking with their children near the lagoon's footbridge? They continue along the footpath and their children use a low brick wall, rising on an incline, as stairs until reaching a height equal to that of their parents! This used to be a favourite route to the playground when our daughter was small.



Oak tree by the lagoon

What is overlooked; however, are two majestic **red oaks** (*Quercus rubra*) that have been “standing guard” for centuries directly behind that same brick wall. In Europe, oaks were called the “King of Trees”. In Finland, they were referred to as “God’s Tree”. As such, they were highly venerated and possess a fascinating history.

The red oak, in the picture, measures 2.9 meters making it well over 200 years old. Their place in mythology dates much further back to the Druids and the Greeks in 200 BCE. The Druids believed that oaks were entrances to other worlds and performed their rituals in groves of these trees. Interestingly, the words “oak” and “door” are derived from Sanskrit “*Duir*” suggesting, in part, an entrance into another realm. The Druids also believed that mistletoe (a parasitic plant), growing in the oak’s uppermost branches, was sent from Heaven and could only be cut using a golden sickle during a solemn ceremony.

The sanctuary Dodona (located in Greece) had an oak tree that was sacred to Zeus (god of the sky). The area was an important religious-political centre in northwest Greece around 250 BCE. The tree’s leaves rustlings would be interpreted by priests to believers that travelled to this site. In fact, a reference to these priests is mentioned in Homer’s epic *The Iliad*.

The tree’s magical qualities are mentioned in legends of fairies dancing around old oak trees. Legend also states that elves live in oak trees and use the holes in their trunks as their doorways. An old English rhyme originating from the New Forest mentions turning one’s coat inside out to ward off fairies: “Turn your cloaks, for fairy folks are in old oaks!”



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Finally, in England, creatures called "oakmen" are said to live in oak saplings. A sure sign of their presence are bluebells growing nearby. The oakmen will offer poisonous fungi, disguised as food, to passing mortals.

Just being aware of a fraction of these trees' place in a historical context, gives one a new appreciation as we walk through Westmount Park past these magnificent trees with their acorns strewn along our path.

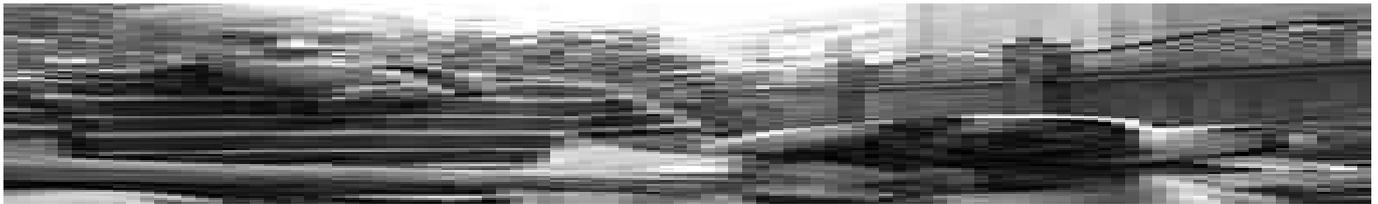
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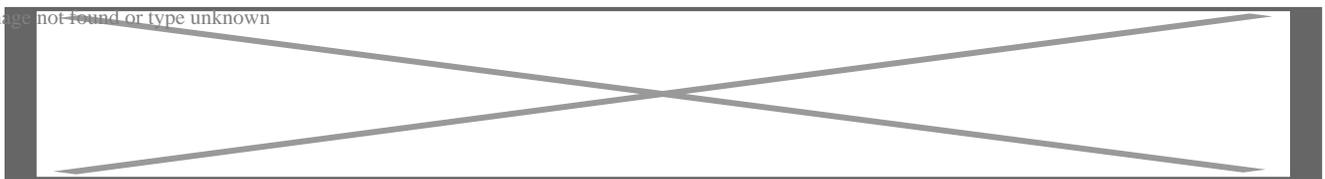
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Michael Walsh is a long-time Westmount resident. He is happily retired from nearly four decades in the field of higher education technology. A "professional student" by nature, his academic training and publishing include statistical methodology, mycology and animal psychology. Today, he enjoys spending time walking with his dog while discovering the city's past and sharing stories of the majestic trees that grace the parks and streets. He can be contacted at michaeld2003@hotmail.com or through his blog [Westmount Overlooked](#)

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