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The “Shoe Holly” and the “Dressing Trees” on Richmond Road

--Terry Meyers | September 8, 2022

A site connecting the W&M campus and local Black history should be recorded--the “Shoe Holly” on Richmond Road, just off the corner of Bryan Hall.

Martin C. Mathes, Professor Emeritus of Biology, wrote of this ancient tree in “Collection of Woody Species” (1980) that it is “one of the oldest trees on our campus” and that “legend has it that country people would rest on a bench in the shade of this tree and put their shoes on before going into the city proper.”

It’s likely that Professor Mathes heard that legend from Dr. John T. Baldwin, whose impact on and knowledge of the W&M campus plantings were epic.

I would venture that the Shoe Holly was the successor to the once near-by Dressing Trees. I described those trees and their fate in the Gazette, January 28, 2015, citing a nostalgic article by the Gazette editor, Edward Henley Lively, January 2, 1904:

Lively evokes local markets thronged by free and enslaved Blacks bringing to town carts and wagons loaded with “eggs, butter, vegetables, cantaloupe, melons, chickens etc.” Saturdays especially were busy as they bought food in anticipation of “the demands for the Sunday preaching with the big baptizing thrown in.”

The scene, says Lively, was a joyful one, reminding him of Spanish feast days; the women would walk to town with “a basket on each arm and one on their head, shoes and stockings off and their gown tucked up.”

In the middle of Richmond Road, just east of where Blow Hall is today, stood the “dressing trees,” four large oaks in a row (ultimately cut

down by Union troops). When the women would reach this “entrance” to town, “they all halted in the deep shade of the trees, brushing their linen, adjusting their toilet generally,” before going on to the market.

Lively suggests all this was accompanied by what he thought a nonsense song (but possibly a variant of “Cindy,” a North Carolina folk song): “India cotton petti-coat, india cotton gown. / Shoes and stockings in her hand, and feet upon the ground.” The singing was further “accompanied with a ‘fidango’ dance” or something akin to a “Highland fling.”

The bustle around the Shoe Holly was likely much the same at the Dressing Trees, but since Lively doesn’t mention the Shoe Holly perhaps the custom had died out by 1904.

Terry Meyers, W&M Chancellor Professor of English Emeritus, is the immediate past president of the Williamsburg Historic Records Association. With permission, this is reprinted (revised) from the Virginia Gazette, May 12, 2018, p. 27a.

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