March 10, 2024

Dotted around the grounds of the Cathedral Close are many benches and trees purchased by All Hallows Guild with memorial donations. Gifts in honor of, or in memory of, loved ones help the Guild maintain the beautiful 57 acres of gardens, grounds, and woods. The Guild has created and regularly updates a master file of over 139 memorial benches and over 400 memorial trees, demonstrating years of generosity.

AHG members originally compiled the now-electronic file from handwritten notes and other archival material. They then worked with the Horticulture staff to assemble a searchable spreadsheet describing and locating memorials wherever possible.

Family members often approach the guild, asking for the location of a memorial bench and tree. Through a master list, the guild helps families and friends find the memorial dedicated to their loved one. Finding these memorials are often emotional moments for family members. The Guild recently received a note and photograph thanking the Guild for the comfort this memorial tree brought to their family.

When a tree dies or is removed, the Guild researches the tree’s provenance to determine how to proceed with replacing the tree. And so, when the beautiful Copper Beech (pictured below) south of the Bishop’s Garden died, the Guild began to research its background.

The Copper Beech, also known as a Purple Beech, is a cultivated form of the common Beech.

Our research revealed that All Hallows Guild donated the tree in 1976 to honor Dean Sayre's 25 years of service (he retired two years later). Francis Bowes Sayre Jr. was Dean of the National Cathedral for 27 years (1951 to 1978). He was the first grandchild of Woodrow Wilson, the 28th President of the United States, and was born in the White House. As Dean of the National Cathedral, he helped to oversee the iconography, funding, and construction of the cathedral building, which began in 1907. His children attended National Cathedral School and St. Albans during his tenure as Dean. Dean Sayre was the first dean to call the Sayre House, constructed in 1953 as the "Deanery", home. Dean Randy and Melissa Hollerith moved into Sayre House in 2018 after both the house and front and back gardens underwent renovation.

All Hallows Guild contributed approximately $62,000 to the initial landscaping in the Fall of 2018. The July 2023 storm caused massive destruction of the trees behind Sayre House. All Hallows Guild paid for the approximately 20 trees planted, including white oaks, Southern magnolias, Pecans, Yellowwood, Dogwood, Sassafras, and Persimmon. The variety of species should help them thrive, with no one type dominating or subject to wholesale decline. Several Viburnums were added to help create an understory and will give lovely spring blooms along with the dogwood and spring bulbs.

The loss of the Copper Beech greatly affects the surrounding gardens and trees. The tree’s shade no longer provides relief from the sun for neighboring plants and trees. The Prodigal Son Garden will suffer and will have to be rethought, and no longer does the tree shade nearby benches for quiet contemplation. But as we consider the redesign of this area, we look to the nearby “Deanery,” Sayre House, to recall not only Dean Sayre’s long history at the Cathedral, but the Guild’s historical and present-day influence on the gardens and grounds of the Close.