

Jackson's Magnolias Lose Their Currency

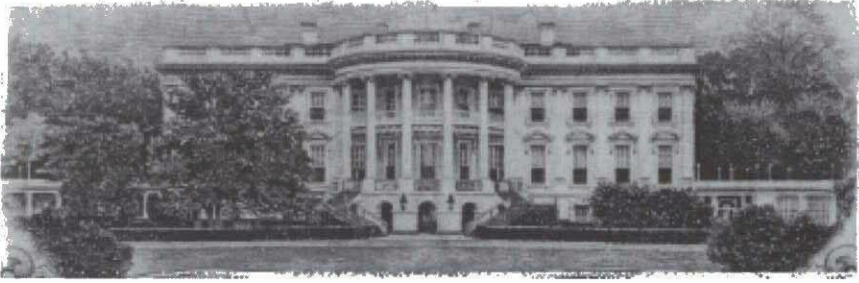
Roberta Davids Hagen

Many Americans were displeased with the design of the new \$20 bill. However, it was especially distressing for magnolia lovers. The old design featured the south side of the White House. The left of the South Portico is graced by the magnolias that allegedly had been personally planted by the seventh president, Andrew Jackson. In a 1999 article in *The Washington Post*, Melanie Choukas-Bradley quotes Larry Felix, who is the spokesman for the Treasury Department Bureau of Printing and Engraving. The north side of the White House was chosen for the new \$20 bill design, because of its "cleaner, more modern and symmetrical look. The old currency had lots of flourishes. The South Portico (including the Jackson trees) worked well with that look." The back of the new bill shows a more tightly cropped north front with a boxwood hedge, flanked by branches of two trees, which are unidentifiable in this rendering.

The tradition of presidential tree planting on the grounds of the White House started with the landscape plan of Thomas Jefferson, who was assisted by architect Benjamin Latrobe. In 1800, during the administration of the second president, John Adams, the White House grounds were barren and strewn with rubble, tools, and the shacks of workmen. Jefferson supervised the construction of low, rounded mounds that provided privacy for the occupants of the White House, but did not impede the view of the Potomac. Choukas-Bradley states that "these grassy knolls (known appropriately today as the "Jefferson Mounds"), are now shaded by handsome trees." Jefferson designed the first tree planting along Pennsylvania Avenue, although none of the original trees survive today.

Dolley Madison, the wife of the fourth president James Madison, was said to have taken an avid interest in the grounds of the White House. Unfortunately, in 1814 the British burned the White House, forcing the first family to move. Choukas-Bradley states that they moved across the street to the Blair House. In fact, the Madisons stayed at the Octagon House, which is about two blocks west of the White House.

In *City of Trees: The Complete Field Guide to the Trees of Washington D.C.*, Choukas-Bradley claims that Monroe's successor, John Quincy Adams, was the president who made the greatest improvements on the grounds of the



White House. As a result of spending so much time gardening, he soon was called "the tree planting Mr. Adams." For years, the oldest authenticated presidential planting was the so-called "John Quincy Adams elm." It was planted in the late 1820s on the eastern Jefferson Mound, which is on the south lawn of the White House. That elm managed to survive the plague of Dutch elm disease and a bolt of lightning in the 1960s, which destroyed one of the main limbs. In 1991, it succumbed to old age, leaving the Jackson magnolias the supposed oldest acknowledged presidential trees at the White House.

According to Choukas-Bradley: "Andrew Jackson, the Tennessean who was the seventh American president, brought the spirit of the frontier to the White House. He also brought tremendous sadness. His cherished wife, Rachel, had just died following a bitter political campaign in which the circumstances of their marriage (her second) were slandered." Unknown to the Jacksons, Rachel's first husband had failed to finalize their divorce before the Jackson marriage. Thus, technically the Jacksons were living as adulterers for more than two years before they could legally be married a second time. The ensuing scandal was thought to contribute to Rachel's death from a heart condition. Shortly after the election, she was buried on the grounds of the Hermitage, before Jackson left for Washington.

"Old Hickory," as he was called, was said to have brought a pair of *Magnolia grandifloras* from their Tennessee home, the Hermitage, so that he would have "something green" in Washington to remind him of her. They were thought to have been planted after Jackson's election in 1832, however the authenticity of the trees has yet to be precisely verified. These trees are seen in mid-19th century photographs of the White House. Even though there is no written documentation that specifies the exact date of the planting, White House legend always has been that these magnolias were planted under the auspices of President Jackson.

In September of 1994, a small plane crashed on the White House lawn and damaged the bark of one of the White House magnolias. However, this tree

fares better than its supposed parent tree at the Hermitage in Tennessee. In 1998, a tornado ripped through Nashville, uprooting more than 1200 trees at the Hermitage, including the historic *M. grandiflora* next to the graves of Andrew and Rachel Jackson.

A number of other presidents have also chosen magnolias as commemorative trees for the White House grounds. President Warren G. Harding had a *M. grandiflora* planted between the East Wing of the White House and East Executive Avenue. Another *M. grandiflora* was planted under the auspices of Franklin Delano Roosevelt after he took office in 1933. That very full tree can be seen today, located just to the south of the Harding magnolia on East Executive Avenue.

Harry Truman had the bright idea to move a mature *M. grandiflora* to the eastern side of the South Portico to balance the Jackson magnolias on the western side. Choukas-Bradley relates this story, which was supposed to have taken place after the Truman magnolia had been placed on the eastern side. "Truman asked a friend to hand him a twenty dollar bill. (The illustration of the White House on the back of the bill includes the Andrew Jackson magnolias to the west of the South Portico, but not the Truman tree to the east.) Pointing from the south window of the White House the president declared, 'It's a counterfeit! See the trees in the engraving of the White House? They don't look like the ones out there, do they?'"

During John F. Kennedy's administration, four pink *Magnolia* × *soulangeanas* were planted at the four corners of the Rose Garden. A cutting from one of the Jackson magnolias at the White House was supposed to have been taken by Lady Bird Johnson and was grown in Texas.

A nonprofit tree conservation organization, established in 1875, called American Forests, sells seedlings propagated from that tree. For more information contact:

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