

Vanguard branches out: *Trees*

Princeton's roots: the preservation and protection of local trees

Angela Chen and Reed Sacks, CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

Proudly self-described as “Princeton’s first and most whimsical nature preserve,” the Herrontown Woods Arboretum stands in stark contrast to the regimented consistency of Princeton’s archetypically suburban university-town structure. Rows of picturesque houses with pristine lawns surround a uniquely undomesticated refuge of ecological diversity, native plant species, enchanting trails, and a botanical garden (the Barden). Nestled within the diverse foliage lies the Veblen House, a 1920s prefabricated home formerly inhabited by mathematician Oswald Veblen, a key founder of the Institute for Advanced Studies, nicknamed the “woodchopping professor” for his habit of chopping wood to clear his mind. Today, however, the devoted Friends of Herrontown Woods (FOHW) maintain this house and the surrounding woodland’s trails and flora, including 57 distinct tree species.

Bordering the Autumn Hill Reservation, the 142-acre Herrontown Woods Arboretum is situated near the intersection of Snowden Lane and Herrontown Road. The preserve’s main access point is located just off Snowden Lane, equipped with a small parking lot and direct ingress to the Barden and trail network.

The parcels of land of the Herrontown Woods Preserve were acquired in the 1930s by Veblen and his wife, Elizabeth. In 1957, the couple donated 82 acres of this property to the Municipality of Princeton, forming Mercer County’s first nature preserve.

The FOHW was officially founded in 2013 by three passionate volunteers. The group’s president, Steve Hiltner, has spearheaded efforts to expand the preserve, develop the Barden, and engage the Princeton community.

“Working effectively and positively with the town is really important, since the town owns the property,” Hiltner said.

Since 2013, one of the organization’s main actions has been to clear overgrown trails and create space for native plants, particularly through the removal of invasive flora such as stiltgrass, mustard garlic, multiflora rose, wisteria, and wild privet.

“It’s important to pick your spots, and be strategic. Good timing — pulling invasive weeds before they go to seed — is really important for reducing the amount of work needed,” said Hiltner. “A few passionate volunteers who find satisfaction in pulling and cutting invasive species can make a big difference.”

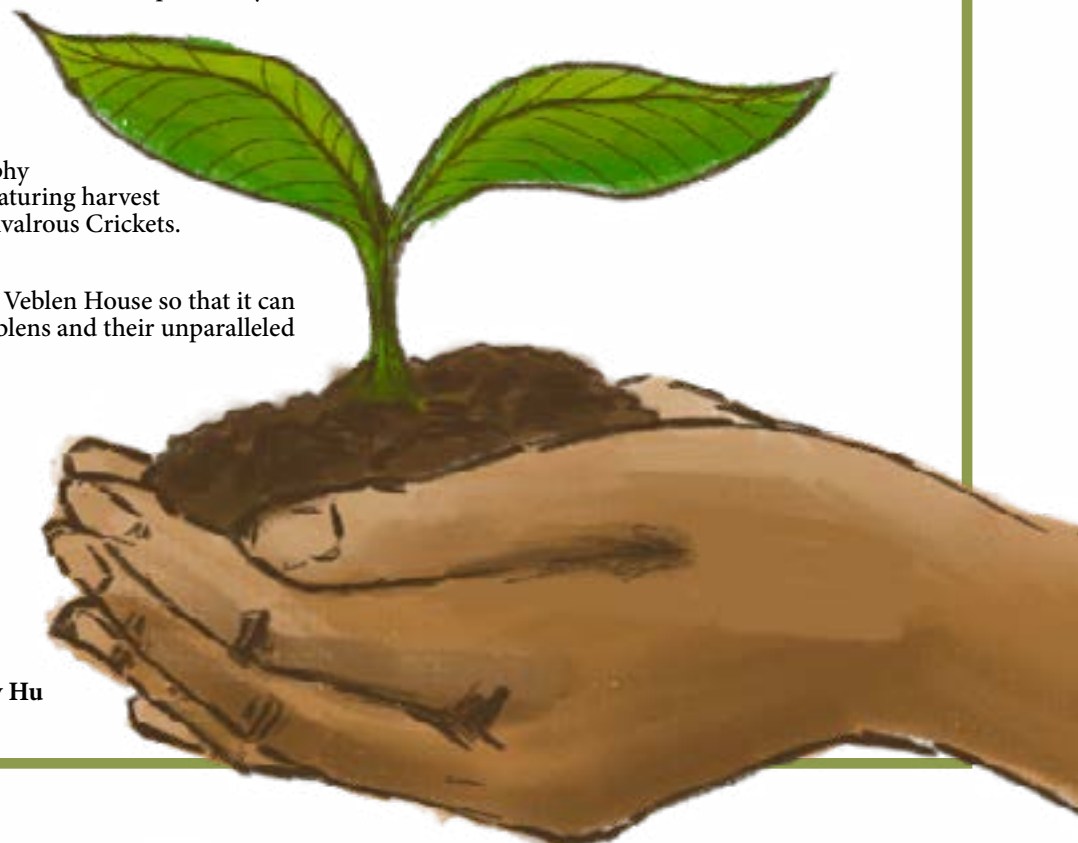
Pallavi Nuka, an enthusiastic local sustainability advocate and PHS parent, is the vice-president of the FOHW. Nuka highlighted an effort by the FOHW to catalog trees: 300 have been tagged so far, 50 of which are labeled with a QR code linked to a website with information about the particular type of tree. However, she is concerned about tree pests that threaten the well being of the Herrontown Woods ecosystem.

“One of the main issues is beech leaf disease, [which is] taking out many of the beeches. There’s a significant section of the woods that is essentially just a beech grove and, unfortunately, it looks like most of those beeches [will be lost] over the course of the next year,” said Nuka. “Another issue we’ve had in previous years is [the] Emerald Ash Borer, which has killed quite a number of ash trees ... it’s sad how these diseases just come through and ... wipe out entire species.”

The FOHW offers a wide range of educational activities and community outreach programs, such as a woodland photography contest, a class for “little gardeners,” and a fundraising event featuring harvest crafts, lantern lighting, and the acclaimed Celtic band, The Chivalrous Crickets.

Moving forward, the FOHW will continue their repair of the Veblen House so that it can house a nature center and showcase the unique story of the Veblens and their unparalleled nature preserve — a gift in perpetuity to Princeton.

graphics: Charley Hu



Artis-tree

Aarna Dharmavarapu and Finn Wedmid, CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

Tree art, for a variety of cultures, has been a vibrant way of expressing creativity and spirituality. From towering totem poles to intricate tree faces, the symbolic meaning of this art form extends beyond aesthetics. Historically, these living beings have served as a medium for artwork that represent life itself.

Tree faces aren't mere decorative pieces, but carry symbolic weight. For instance, in some Native American cultures, such as the Haida people of the Northwest Coast, tree carvings on totem poles are used to honor spirits and ancestors considered to be a connection between the physical and the divine. These totem poles are not only for artistic expression, but they highlight cultural narratives across various Indigenous societies. As a result, art found on trees have been thought to also mark burial areas. Likewise, Aboriginal Australians have created intricate tree

carvings that depict ancestral stories, blending art with sacred traditions.

In many Indigenous cultures, trees are viewed as living beings with spiritual connotations. Indigenous peoples still obtain resources from trees, but they do so knowing that it was only by the tree's generosity that they could harvest these resources.

In many Indigenous cultures, trees are living beings that link the physical and spirit world, serving as central figures in carvings. For the Maya people of Mesoamerica, the ceiba, a Mexican tree, is thought of as a being that communicated with both heaven and the world of the dead, uniting our universe. The ceiba appears on the most intricate stone carving found at Izapa — an archeological site in southern Mexico — and is believed to represent a religious narrative that has shaped many of their rituals and ceremonies.

Trees are also associated with a variety of spiritual systems and customs, including protection and knowledge, and also serve as symbols of life and growth. In some traditions, certain trees are believed to be home to spirits and deities, highlighting their importance in rituals and ceremonies. For the Yoruba people of West Africa, the iroko tree is seen as the "tree of life." They believe that the tree is inhabited by spirits, and their duty is to keep the iroko tree from falling beneath the earth's core.

While tree faces might appear as light-hearted garden decoration, they represent a rich picture of historical and spiritual significance. Rooted in ancient traditions, these carvings represent Indigenous cultural beliefs that view trees as sacred entities, symbolizing the value of life and the relationship between humans and nature.



How to draw a tree

Charley Hu, VISUALS CO-EDITOR



Which pop culture tree are you?

Maxime DeVico and Anna Petrova, CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

