

# The great bent tree of Hamilton's native past

Jeff Mahoney, Hamilton Spectator  
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Deep in the woods near the Beverly Swamp in Flamborough, where the undergrowth crackles beneath the feet in the spring and you half-imagine echoes of the ancients in the rustle of the new leaves, Paul O'Hara found what he wasn't looking for.

What he was looking for was a pine tree with a loop in it that a friend had come across.



Paul followed the lead, but the pine was way too young for Paul's purposes, and the loop in it the result of natural damage, not human intervention.

Paul looks at a lot of trees and forest growth, so he wasn't especially disappointed, and a walk in the woods is a walk in the woods — its own reward.

Then he saw it. He was heading back, in a pokey, unhurried way, and it loomed up before him. Massive. Old. Unmistakable. He could scarcely believe his fortune.

The feeling was a mixture — one part shock, like seeing some creature's great supple neck curl up from the depths of Loch Ness; two parts joy, like learning the yard sale painting is a van Gogh; and three parts awe, like standing hushed before the discovery of an ancient wonder.

"A sugar maple, between 220 and 250 years old, pointing toward the Beverly Swamp and the berry grounds," says Paul, botanist, landscape designer, native plant expert and owner of Blue Oak Native Landscapes in Hamilton.

You're asking: How does a tree point to a swamp or in any direction other than up?

So to the gist of our story. Paul's maple is an old native trail marker. Paul has found several of them in the Halton area, but this is the first ever located in Hamilton as far as he knows.

Native people used to identify the way along important routes, such as those that took them to the sources of spring water, by bending saplings over and tethering them in place. They'd use rawhide or grape vine, sometimes burying the sapling tip in the ground or putting a rock over it. The tree would then grow with a conspicuous kink in the trunk that would line up with direction of the route.

Knowing the way through forest and other terrain was crucial; getting lost, especially in winter, could prove fatal.

Taking me out to the tree recently, Paul tells me that some blueberries still grow near the Beverly Swamp, but back when it was a popular destination on native trails, they abounded.

“The hydrology of the swamp has changed; then there would’ve been tons of highbush blueberries. They would travel up the Fairchild creek seasonally and pick them from hummocks in the swamp.”

At the tree, Paul explains the telltale signs.

“The balding and plated bark is another indication, as is the right-angle branching and the stag-headed crowns and fluted trunk. And its classic marker shape.

“When the young tree was deformed, the suckers would grow from the bend, and when a new leader got strong enough growing upwards, the others would get removed, often leaving a pointing ‘nose.’”

Paul, who has studied southern Ontario ecology for 18 years, started researching marker trees three years ago. This paragraph, from his essay in the Field Botanists of Ontario newsletter, says it all:

“There is something so beautiful, sophisticated and poetic about a marker tree. It is incredible to think in this age of frenzied, electronic communication that living, natural messages, so simple and practical, are still standing — a centuries old tap on the shoulder pointing the way home. I would argue that our oldest trail marker trees are the most historically important trees in Ontario today.”

Dennis Downes, founder of Great Lakes Trail Marker Tree Society, confirms Paul’s tree is a marker.

Dennis, based in Wisconsin, has travelled 250,000 miles around North America over 30 years, talking with native people and historians to create his landmark book, Native American Trail Marker Trees Marking Paths Through the Wilderness, in which Paul is mentioned.

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