

WITNESS TREES are venerable specimens on National Park Service properties that have “witnessed” key events and people in American history. When witness trees are so old they’re on the verge of collapse and have to be felled, they’re sometimes turned into wood chips—an ignominious end for something once so proud.

Enter Dale Broholm, who teaches furniture making at RISD (Rhode Island School of Design), and Louis Hutchins, a historian with the Park Service. They came up with the *Witness Tree Project*, an innovative collaboration between RISD and the Park Service. Broholm worked with Daniel Cavicchi, chair of RISD’s Department of History, Philosophy, and Social Sciences, to create a new double course—one morning a week students study history; in the afternoon they make objects in the furniture studio, using wood from witness trees.

In 2009, the course’s first year, the students used wood from a 150-year-old pecan tree at the Hampton National Historic Site, a former plantation near Baltimore. The objects they created reflected their study of what life was like in the era of slavery.

Materials in 2010 came from the George Washington Birthplace National Monument in Northern Neck, Virginia, and from the Sagamore Hill National Historic Site, Theodore Roosevelt’s homestead in Oyster Bay, New York. That course dealt with iconic presidents and their memorialization.

An elm tree from the Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site in Brookline, Massachusetts, supplied wood for the 2011 course. Known as the father of landscape architecture, Olmsted designed New York’s Central Park. Among the themes the students explored were urban planning, use of public space, and recreation.

In some ways the witness trees are like *The Giving Tree* of Shel Silverstein’s children’s book. But unlike that tree, which had nothing left to give by the end of the story, at least some of the Park Service’s trees can be reborn, thanks to modern science. They’re propagated through genetic cloning, and the clones are replanted where their parents once stood.

— Christine Temin, Guest Curator

Major support for BMAC is provided by our members and



Hampton Pecan on site

Courtesy of the National Park Service

For the course's first year, in 2009, the students made a field trip to the Hampton National Historic Site, a former plantation outside Baltimore. There they selected wood from a pecan tree that had stood on the site for 150 years. At the plantation the students could get a sense of what life was like in the era of slavery. The course dealt with the wealth and refinement of the plantation owners' lives in contrast to the circumscribed and miserable lives of the slaves.





Colette Bazirgan
Hampton Corset 2009
 pecan, fabric, aluminum

The corset was a controversial undergarment in the 19th century that shaped a woman's body to conform to fashion. In the early 1800s its style was a dramatic hourglass shape, increasing women's health concerns. Doctors and women knew of these issues, but most women continued to wear corsets. Acquiring a strong erotic appeal, the corset was literally and figuratively a woman's container; it contained her sexual appeal and her body, sometimes to the point of destroying it. The Hampton Corset is a modern interpretation worn around the waist over a dress, to be seen instead of hidden. This would have been inappropriate in the early 1800s, as the bold blue color. Typically for the time, the corset is laced in the back. The busk in the center, often engraved with text and images of love, is here a non-standard shape made of aluminum, and is carved with the morning glory motif seen on Eliza Ridgely's lady's slipper chair in the Hampton mansion. The stays are made of wood from the mansion's pecan tree.



Colette Bazirgan
Hampton Loveseat 2009
 pecan, upholstery

The Hampton Loveseat is a reflection of the furnishings in the Hampton Plantation mansion, inspired by the intriguing importance of seating and the location and position of the body. Skin-to-skin contact was a controversial public act reflected in the furniture of the period.

The Hampton Loveseat is an exploration of the idea of furniture forcing the body to be located and positioned in certain ways. It is a two-person seat in which the sitters are placed to interact in a way that would have been uncomfortably close in the 18th and 19th centuries. The seats are joined but have no backs, so that the sitters have to either lean on each other or hold themselves very erect.

I chose to replicate the William and Mary style of the early baroque period in an exaggerated form. I selected a fabric that is similar to the patterning seen in the mansion, but one that would not overwhelm the beauty of the rich colors and striations in the pecan wood.



Rebecca Manson

Polyrhythmic Stool 2009

pecan

My stool is intended to impart to the sitter a symbolic notion of slave life. It has 13 legs, an asymmetrical seat, and eight bells hanging at different lengths from the bottom of the seat. The legs are each cut to a different length and angled. The seat rocks between the legs, creating a polyrhythmic motion as the bells make polyrhythmic sound. In order to create the rhythms the sitter must work, moving the body and getting physical with the chair. This is inspired by songs of slaves while they worked.

The stool is also difficult to sit on. The sitter must be aware of balance and use the feet to avoid falling off. This is similar to the awareness that slaves must have felt around their masters. The seat also has points in certain areas that make it difficult to place the legs comfortably.

Even relaxation for a slave could have been difficult. As soon as the slave tried to sit down, relax, a bell could sound and he or she would be called back to duty.



Brittany Bennett

Doll, Baskets, and Stool 2009

naturally dyed pecan, reed, rope

After touring Hampton National Historic site in 2009, I was dismayed at how racism still manages to permeate the plantation. The juxtaposition of the painstakingly curated Ridgely Mansion and the relatively deserted Slave Quarters (which were presented in a way that was both deeply unsettling and borderline distasteful—far too idyllic, pristine, and heavily renovated to be historically accurate) was particularly jarring. For The Witness Tree Project, I sought to tell the stories that I felt Hampton had neglected through these objects: a doll (reminiscent of its porcelain cousins on display in the mansion) for a little girl with the misfortune of an enslaved childhood; a sturdy set of handmade, hand-dyed work baskets; and a stool woven together with handmade fabric scraps. Each object is utilitarian and rustic—made of materials that would have been inexpensive and readily available during Hampton's heyday—while remaining beautiful and well-crafted. They are tributes to the massive, skilled workforce that Hampton built itself upon.





Matthew Jacobs

un/Refined Box 2009

pecan wood

I am often at a loss for words, but not for language. Languages I get. Fortunately, The Witness Tree Project encouraged a multilingual engagement with history and our relation to it. Through writing, reading, discussing, and making, we engaged various ideas and concepts. With the crafting of the box, as with the wood itself, I manipulated and explored complex notions of beauty, hierarchy, refinement, and order. The material tension between wormy and solid pecan echoes the tension that arose in my own understanding of the concepts addressed in the class. Through this material language, I analyzed, distilled, and expressed ideas.



Rebecca Manson

Urn for Eliza's Tree 2009

fired clay, gold luster, pecan

My ceramic urn is a tribute to Eliza Ridgely's tree, from which elements of the urn were made. The base and lid are both turned from the tree's wood, ashes from burned wood of the tree have been used in the glaze, and wood shavings are stored inside the vessel. Images of the tree and a closeup of its bark are depicted on the urn through a ceramic decal process. Through this vessel, Eliza's tree will physically live on.



Sagamore Hill Black Cherry on Site

Courtesy of the National Park Service

In 2010 the wood came from Sagamore Hill National Historic Site, Theodore Roosevelt's homestead, in Oyster Bay, New York. The black cherry, pin oak, and silver maple used for the class were not around during the president's lifetime. The trees were recent interlopers on what had been open fields during Roosevelt's time, and removing them restored the authenticity of the place. The historical part of the course dealt with iconic presidents and their memorialization, and created questions about government, leadership, and iconic figures.



Topher Gent

Refuge 2010

cherry, silver maple, bird nest

Theodore Roosevelt is known for being a conservationist, particularly in relation to our avian friends. During his presidency, Roosevelt was responsible for starting 51 federal bird reservations, along with 150 national forests, providing protected habitats for birds and other wildlife. As a sculptural memorial to Theodore Roosevelt and his efforts in bird conservation, this piece reflects the problems and instability that Roosevelt recognized, and the ways in which he pursued preservation.

Topher Gent

Sagamore Hill 2010

pin oak, seed pod, stone

This piece acts as a personal map of the Sagamore Hill historic site. It is made of three objects—oak wood, a seed pod, and a stone—each representing a part of my experience. The oak tree, as a symbol of sovereignty, rulership, and power, reflects the role of our nation's presidents. I turned and shaped the oak wood into a form resembling a trophy.

Roosevelt's house was filled with mounted examples of taxidermy and other keepsakes, demonstrating his pride in his accomplishments and closeness to nature. The seed pod had fallen just outside the entrance to the house. It symbolizes the growth of the memorial trees from natural fruiting, a process that is inspiring in itself.

The stone was on the beach at Sagamore Hill. To get to the beach, I had to follow a trail through the woods and cross a bridge over the marsh. Walking the same path that Roosevelt once did felt to me as if I were traipsing through my backyard. I then realized a parallel between Roosevelt and myself: naturalists, conservationists, philanthropists.

Elish Warlop

Above. Over. Never around. 2010
pin oak, maple, steel, plaster

My project is based on Theodore Roosevelt's point-to-point walks. He asked visitors to Sagamore Hill to take adventurous walks, going above, over, but never around. These markers are meant to replicate that spirit by creating new, less-used pathways around the site. Their concentric form is a reference to the maple and oak tree trunks from which they came. They are cut in a variety of ways, allowing visitors to peer inside to view the rings of growth. Within these rings are the story of the tree, the history the tree has witnessed, the chronology of its life.

The markers also function as a game for children and adults. Each marker holds a tag indicating a cardinal direction that leads to the next marker. With a compass, or a keen sense of direction, visitors would get a taste of their very own Roosevelt point-to-point walk.

Benjamin Kicic

Antler Chair 2010

maple (chair), boxwood (antlers)

Theodore Roosevelt preached one philosophy but lived another. A wealthy man, he was deeply concerned with the working class. A Nobel Peace Prize winner, as assistant secretary of the Navy, he declared war on Spain without authority to do so. A conservationist who worked to create national refuges for animals and land, he hunted extensively. He fought segregation and was the first to invite an African-American to the White House, but believed that Native Americans were an inferior race who should be conquered.

I created an object to convey a sense of these contradictions—

a simple chair with an excessively long back topped with branches. The chair's simplicity represents TR's straightforward way of thinking and living; he knew and understood his priorities and acted on them. The contrasting, more elaborate back of the chair talks about the contradictions he created. The unworked branches, resembling antlers, are meant to represent nature. They also provide a further contrast between the strictly angular chair and the curved branches. Finally, the chair resembles a throne, alluding to TR's larger-than-life persona.





Brendan Keim

Manstool 2010

pin oak

Made from the oak trees of Theodore Roosevelt's Sagamore Hill estate in Oyster Bay, New York, the Manstool embodies Roosevelt's belief in the values of the strenuous life. The construction of the stool involved the strains of milling, laminating, and ultimately lathing a large, rather heavy cylindrical log. The stool's form is derived from Roosevelt's obsession with chopping firewood as a means of exercise. The negative space of the legs was created through the removal of wood with an ax, just as Roosevelt would have done. The battleship-gray color has been applied to match the exterior of all of the buildings at Sagamore Hill.

Brendan Keim
Manstool 2010
 pin oak
 Made from the oak trees of Theodore Roosevelt's Sagamore Hill estate in Oyster Bay, New York, the Manstool embodies Roosevelt's belief in the values of the strenuous life. The construction of the stool involved the strains of milling, laminating, and ultimately lathing a large, rather heavy cylindrical log. The stool's form is derived from Roosevelt's obsession with chopping firewood as a means of exercise. The negative space of the legs was created through the removal of wood with an ax, just as Roosevelt would have done. The battleship-gray color has been applied to match the exterior of all of the buildings at Sagamore Hill.



Athena Lo

Ready to Assemble 2010

pin oak, poplar, rope

Teddy Roosevelt is known as a lover of the land and a conservationist. This bench illustrates the potential he saw in the natural landscape and environment to become more, and to benefit the people inhabiting it. The bench comes apart and can be reassembled, to symbolize how Roosevelt knew that with the land and natural resources already provided, America could be built and developed into a great nation.

Athena Lo
Ready to Assemble 2010
 pin oak, poplar, rope
 Teddy Roosevelt is known as a lover of the land and a conservationist. This bench illustrates the potential he saw in the natural landscape and environment to become more, and to benefit the people inhabiting it. The bench comes apart and can be reassembled, to symbolize how Roosevelt knew that with the land and natural resources already provided, America could be built and developed into a great nation.

Athena Lo

Beginning and End 2010

cherry, copper wire, reed

Teddy Roosevelt has always been portrayed as a pillar of strength. He was born with serious asthma, which drove him to work harder and become the strong figure that has gone down in history as a “Rough Rider.” Nevertheless, he was brought down by an affliction of his lungs. The knots in the wood from which this necklace was made represent the blood clot in his lungs that caused his death.

The necklace commemorates Roosevelt’s life and how one can overcome weakness to find strength.



Ming-Yi Wong

Washington's Level 2010

cherry, glass

“I walk on untrodden ground. There is scarcely any part of my conduct which may not hereafter be drawn into precedent.”

–George Washington to Catherine Macaulay Graham, Jan. 9, 1790.

The memorialization of George Washington is considered in two ways in this surveying instrument. First, the glass surveying level acknowledges Washington’s previous occupation as a land surveyor, prior to his presidency.

Second, the level reflects the balancing act required in Washington’s developing role as president. Washington established the presidency as the balance point of the United States government. The bubble centered in the level reflects this construct, with its shift to the sides indicating the two other branches of the government, judicial and legislative. When the level is held, the bubble is highly responsive to the shifting positions of the viewer’s hands, and this responsiveness suggests the difficulty Washington faced in his new leadership role.





Felicia Hung

Treaty of Portsmouth 2010

silver cherry, maple

Inspired by Theodore Roosevelt's involvement in the Russo-Japanese War, this bench celebrates the joining of two opposite sides. It is intended to be placed in between the two cherry trees in front of Roosevelt's home at Sagamore Hill. These two trees were given to Roosevelt by the Japanese government for his help in ending the Russo-Japanese War. The joining of both maple and cherrywood represents Roosevelt's act of bringing the two countries together. The form of the L-shaped bench gives the users a more intimate setting while sitting with others.

Olmstead Elm on Site

*Photo by Joel Veak,
courtesy of the National Park Service*

An elm tree from the Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site in Brookline, Massachusetts, provided the fodder for the 2011 edition of the course. Olmsted (1822–1903), the father of landscape architecture in America, designed New York's Central Park, Boston's Emerald Necklace, and dozens of other major projects across the country. Among the themes the students explored were urban planning, use of public space, and recreation.

Among the objects students produced with the wood were cross-country skis, representing a healthy use of urban parks; and a large camera, recalling the Western landscape photos Olmsted had taken for publication in the Eastern press, to show people the West's natural beauty



Jonah Willcox Healey

Elm Alpine Skis 2011

American elm, leather, copper rivets

During the early 1920s and the 1930s, skiing began to develop growing popularity in the United States, with the first ski shop opening in Boston in 1926. Fredrick Law Olmsted would have seen and possibly experienced this new form of public winter recreation while living and working in Boston.

I chose to make a pair of skis inspired by designs by the Northland Ski Company, founded in 1911. I began by hand-shaping two long blanks for the skis, and then steam-bent them into curved forms.





Jonah Willcox-Healey

Elm Large-Format Camera and Tripod 2011

American elm, blackened aluminum, metal hardware, camera components

Through the rise of photography, mainly that of large format, in the late 1800s and early 1900s, newly explored areas such as Yellowstone and Yosemite Valley were brought to public awareness, with the emphasis on

preserving these natural wonders. Without the aid of photography, the vast public would not have seen the importance of preserving and learning from these natural landmarks. Photographers such as Edward Muybridge and Ansel Adams, while exploring the Yosemite Valley, would have used a similar large-format camera and tripod.



Andrea Parikh

Decanter 2011

blown glass, American elm

A decanter, a symbol of leisure, often reflects the style of the person who owns it. In this instance, I imagined someone of the 1920s middle class who valued the popular Art Deco style of lavishness as a break from the austerity of World War I. Unlike a beer barrel or other vessel, the decanter represents classiness and style. Although intoxicating liquor had been outlawed throughout the country, the Roaring Twenties was a time of celebration, with men coming home after the end of the war and the lifting of the war's restrictions and pressures. People who now were more prosperous and had more leisure time than before continued to participate in one of the most common social activities, drinking alcohol.

Karl Sippel

Coca-Cola Flyer 2011

American elm

Advertising in Public Space

During the 19th and early 20th centuries, mass public advertising began to make a powerful mark upon the landscape, as billboards invaded public space. The goal was to get as many people to see the advertisements as possible, to create a national chain linking people from all over the nation and across classes through the things they buy. Larger and taller billboards were always better, and electrically lit advertisements were all the more effective.

I saw the kite as the perfect object to speak about this invasion of advertising into public space. A recreational object, the kite also presents valuable opportunities for marketing: it can fly high and be seen from very far away. Because of its tremendous lifting power, the box kite could be made very large. I chose Coca Cola as the advertising product because its logo is instantly recognizable, an advantage when advertising from afar.



August Lehrecke

Juggling Pins 2011

American elm

Olmsted's parks gave people the opportunity to do activities they chose in a public space. In thinking about the two kinds of activities that would take place in his parks—leisurely or active—I chose to make juggling pins as objects of active recreation. Not only does juggling embody an exertive type of activity that went on in public spaces, its performance aspect had the ability to transform a park into an arena for public spectators. Around the mid-19th century, when Olmsted was building Central Park, public shows which had been performed in the streets to attract viewers, were being organized into the first American circuses, moving away from the intimacy of a one-man show toward a larger enterprise. This shift directly paralleled the nation's transformation from a small pastoral society to an urbanized

industrial powerhouse—a topic that Olmsted was very much interested in, and which he tried to address in creating his public spaces.





Jonah Willcox Healey

Elm Box Camera 2011

American elm, copper, leather, camera components

Throughout Fredrick Law Olmsted's career, photography as well as drawings were the main forms used to document his ideas and the parks that he helped design. A common, everyday camera of the time period was the Kodak No. 2 box camera. As a photographer and camera collector, I had an old, rusted, and torn camera of this model and decided to reconstruct it and restore it to working condition with the aid of the Olmsted elm.

Mikyung Park

Covered Bowl 2011

American elm

This covered bowl represents the meaning of nature in Olmsted's design philosophy, and symbolizes the park where he wanted to embody the beauty of nature. Olmsted wanted people to absorb everything that nature can offer through different experiences. This bowl is intended to be an interactive object. The clicking sound of the top, the smell of the wood, and the motion of wrapping the strings around the twigs become a ritual-like experience.

F. Taylor Colantonio

Olmsted Elm Seed Box: For Olmsted, the Landscape Architect 2011

American elm, felt

Exploring small but complex forms and angles, this elm seed box is meant to keep safe the elm seeds that will become the next generation of trees. The dovetail joints at each corner, highlighted with dyed resin, emphasize the strength of the box and of the elm, and the slightly asymmetrical form echoes the form of the twisted limb from which the lumber was sourced. The interior of the box presents an ordered arrangement of two identical compartments, which reminds us that even a "naturalistic" planting of the seeds is somehow ordered and determined by aesthetics; Olmsted's best attempt at wilderness is still governed by order. Blanketed in a natural woolen felt, the box's interior recalls the pastoral landscape in which the elm tree remains an important fixture.



Christina Xu

Noise War 2011

American elm

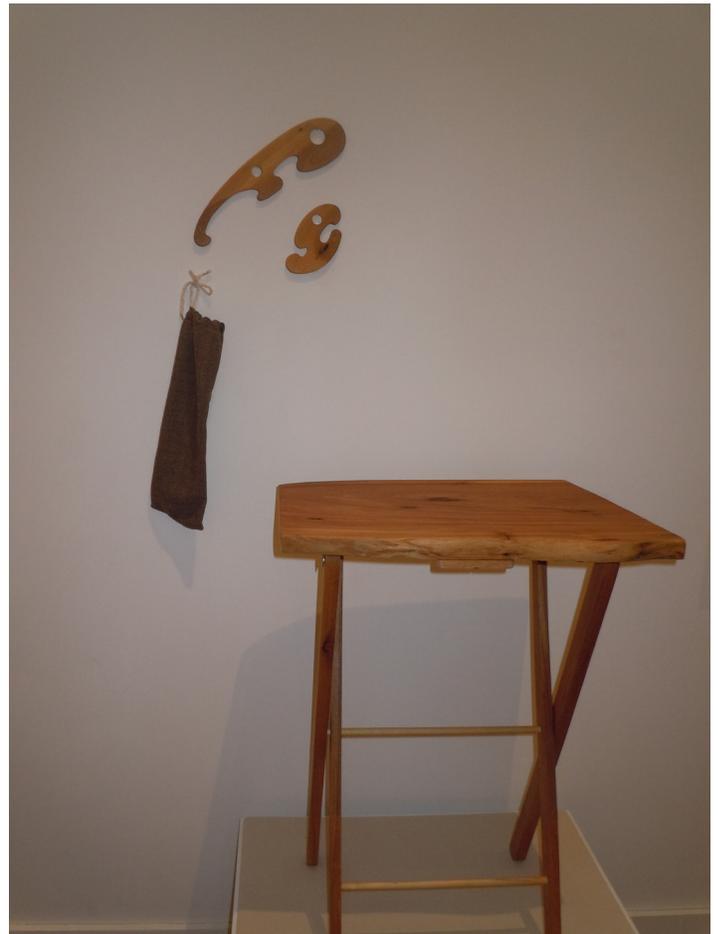
In light of recent arrests and regulations over the use of megaphones in public spaces, the device, which bears physical resemblances to a handgun, now bears social and legal resemblances to it, too. This sculpture highlights the blurring boundary both between the two objects and between First Amendment rights and "peace" crimes. With citizens and police both employing noise to gain control, the very parks Frederick Law Olmsted designed for unity and democracy have now become the arenas for a growing, national noise war.

Hilary Wang

French Curves 2011

American elm and brass

I felt that the iconic S-shaped bends of the French curve reflect the sense of having been organically calculated—as Frederick Law Olmsted took calculated measures in designing his landscapes. The French curves represent Olmsted’s obsessive perfectionism in designing Central Park, the first of many parks he designed. In my mind, they also reflect the layout of Central Park, which is composed of curving swatches of greenery with paths weaving through. I chose to ignore the conventional negative cutouts of the French curve and stick with just circles that could act as finger grips or a hole for a hook for storage. The addition of the pouch represents the utilitarian aspect of the user being able to travel with the curves on site, or during visits to other park sites.



F. Taylor Colantonio

Midcentury Picnic Table 2011

American elm

The Midcentury Picnic Table contrasts the ubiquitous 1950s TV tray table, an emblem of the suburban lifestyle, with a rustic wood-slab surface with live edges. The piece is intended as a commentary on how its user experiences nature and public spaces, and the ways in which this has changed with urban decentralization and suburbanization.

In the 19th century, Olmsted’s public spaces were meant to provide an interaction with nature for city dwellers. This “nature,” though contrived, was experienced firsthand. Yet, around the 1950s, when the population shifted to suburban areas where “natural” nature was more readily accessible, Americans chose to gather indoors around their televisions. The television became the filter through which Americans experienced adventure, learned about far-away places, or formed opinions on current events. It also became the focal point of mealtime, as demonstrated by the popularity of TV dinners during that era.

