

IN MEMORIAM: JONESBOROUGH'S GREAT OAK TREE



Jonesborough lost its' oldest living resident last week. In the wee hours of Tuesday, August 15th, 2023, the largest white oak tree in the state of Tennessee fell in a great storm at its' home at 508 West Main Street. As a town native, I cannot remember a worse storm. It took a great storm to bring down a great tree.

Its' dimensions were enormous. Its' limbs spanned over a third of a football field. To reach around its' base required a 22-foot rope. To see it fall would have been to watch a 12-storey building collapse.



Commonly called the "Shanks Oak" after the family that lived beside it for so many years, the tree was a witness to all the history of the town and long before there was a town. A young Andrew Jackson passed it every day on his way to the courthouse from Christopher Taylor's cabin where he was lodging west of town. Settlers in their wagons heading west passed its' roadside. Stagecoaches passed on the stage road to its' rear. It heard the first train engine enter town in the 1850s. The tree watched Alfred E. Jackson, its' owner at one point, and Confederate general go off to war, as well as the passing of troops of both sides during the Civil War.

It saw the smoke rise from the great fire of 1873, which destroyed much of the downtown of Jonesborough. The tree was here through wars and economic depressions, and parades and celebrations.

To honor and protect the great oak, the Town of Jonesborough declared it a “Heritage Tree” in 2002. Articles have been written about it, and a multitude of photographs were taken over the years. The saddest images were the ones taken August 15th, 2023, as it lay sprawled across the lawns it had shaded for so long.

Jonesborough has lost its’ sentinel of history.

-- Ned Irwin