

Tree Tuesday: Pining for more white pine

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The question comes up frequently: Where are the pines that are the namesake of Pine Avenue? I'm afraid there may never have been many, at least not when Pine Avenue was created in 1875 during the creation of Mount Royal Park. At that time, three streets were created, Elm, Cedar and Pine, and it's quite possible that the names had little to do with the predominant trees. Given the apple orchards grown on the south and west flanks of the mountain, any of the new streets in the northwestern expansion of the city might have been named Apple.

Well, perhaps the humble apple wasn't dignified enough to warrant lending its name to the prestigious streets of the nascent [Square Mile](#) that Canada's business elite would soon inhabit. Elm, cedar and pine, on the other hand, were well-respected trees. Elm, for its ornamental value; cedar, unrottable as it is, for its value in fence posts, boats and shingles for the exterior of houses; and, finally, pine.

What kind of pine? I'm guessing white pine (*Pinus strobus*, pin blanc) because it is the most common pine in the maple-hickory forest domain that covers southwestern Quebec and there would have been plenty on Mount Royal and in the surrounding forest. This is the pine you most likely know, the lone pine in the paintings of the Group of Seven (although Tom Thompson also painted the more northerly Jack Pine), the iconic, swirling pine, forever windswept, the pines that stand out on Laurentian Hills, the tallest evergreen in Quebec, and once the most common conifer south of the eastern Boreal forest.

Once, because this tree was decimated in the 19th century, firstly by the British for the masts and spars of the Royal Navy (they'd lost access to the Riga pine, aka [Scots pine](#), once Napoleon gained control of the Baltic ports in 1806); secondly, by settlers as they cleared the land for farming; thirdly, by the lumber industry that sawed the great diameters into boards for flooring, siding, barns and furniture. A major source of early wealth in the Ottawa area, and the *raison d'être* of many an Ottawa River village, the white pine's great attributes were its abundance, its size, the low shrinkage of the wood, and, perhaps most importantly, the fact that it floated (unlike the lucky hardwoods —

lucky, until the advent of rail).

Convoys of pine rafts, complete with sleeping and eating quarters for the raftsmen, left from the Great Lakes and the Ottawa River, and headed to Quebec City, then the hub of lumber exportation to Europe. The rafts pictured below are on the Ottawa, roughly 1850. I found this photo on the website [pastforward](#).

When next you're in an eastern Canadian farmhouse or barn, if the planks you see are a 20 centimetres or wider, chances are they came from a white pine. The trees could grow to 60 metres high, 200 cm in diameter, and could live for as long as 600 years. Among the oldest white pine, close to Montreal, are those on Mont St-Hilaire. In fact, most of the oldest white pine left in Canada are found on hilltops, mountains, and on those rocky islands you see in the middle of farmers' fields; i.e. areas where the trees were inaccessible or the land beneath them not worthy of the plough.

Mount Royal too falls into the mountain category and, sure enough, there are a few old white pines visible from the ski/walking trail that takes you through the woods behind the belvedere up to the cross. There wasn't enough space in the forest for me to get an unencumbered shot of those old trees but what you see in the photo at the top is, in some ways, even better. These are white pine that were planted roughly 20 years ago and seem to be flourishing. You will find them on the right hand fringe of the forest above the chalet, growing in full sun, in the company of a red oak, on the right, fellow sun-worshiper.



The row of pines with darker needles on the far left are likely red pine, another native, one easily distinguished from the white by its bundles of two, rigid, needles. The white pine has bundles of five needles, each one a letter in W-H-I-T-E or B-L-A-N-C, and each one representing one of the original five nations of the Iroquois Confederacy: Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga and Seneca.

For the Iroquois, the white pine, or [Gonrah Desgohwah](#) ("tree of five needles" in Onondaga), is the [tree of peace](#). Gonrah Desgohwah, with its long branches and soft needles symbolized shelter, room for all, and its roots pointed in the four sacred directions. According to legend, roughly 1,000 years, there was much warring between the Iroquois nations, so the Peacemaker uprooted a great pine, leaving a crater big enough for everyone's weapons. He then replanted the tree and proclaimed: "If any man or nation shows a desire to obey the Law of the Great Peace, they may trace the roots to their source, and be welcomed to take shelter beneath the Tree."



Nice symbol for our times.

