

Trail Marker Trees



Kathryn M. Buder Center
for American Indian Studies

Brown School

Kaleigh Edwards, MSW Candidate

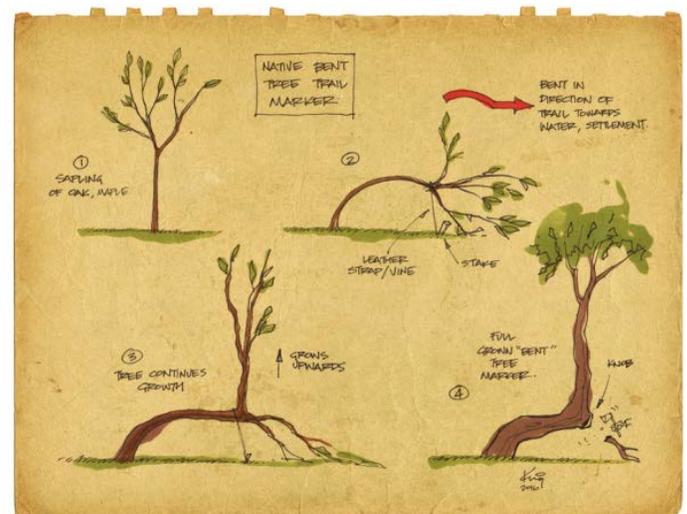
For arborists and others who study forests and plant life, “Indian trail trees” or “trail marker trees” are an intriguing way to mark a path. But, for Native American people, the trees provided a trail marker that led to essential resources. According to Guy Sternberg (2015), there are several criteria for a tree to be defined as a trail marker tree; such standards are that the “species is Native to the area, long-lived, and point towards a significant location” (Sternberg, 2015). Through traditional deformation, white and red oak trees were the primary species of trail marker trees because of their strength and pliability (Kawa and Murray, 2015). As saplings, these trees were bent and tied down to grow in a deliberate direction (Kawa and Murray, 2015). These specifications are essential to identifying Indian trail trees because other trees may seem to fit into the category due to natural deformations such as wind, snow, or animal use of the trees (Janssen, 1934). There are many steps needed to categorize a tree as a trail marker tree, but that is why the authentic trees are full of history.

“Although trail marker trees are no longer commonly used to direct people towards a path or for ceremonial purposes, they are still significant because they are a living history that shows how Native peoples navigated the land in which they lived.”

Native Americans skillfully used trail marker trees throughout eastern and southern parts of the United States. Nomadic tribes of the plains, such as the Comanches, Lipan Apaches, and Tonkawas (Riley and Smith, 2015), utilized their knowledge of these trees to create important markers. The Seneca in New York (Ryan and Ryan, 2005), the Creeks in Georgia (Armitage, 2013), and the Pottawatomie in Wisconsin (Tovar, 2016) all used trail marker trees as a navigational tool. Tribes

such as the ones listed above used these trail marker trees “to identify resources such as food, medicine, water, a path, a burial site, or a meeting place and more often than not, these trees marked more than a singular resource,” (Houser, Arterberry, and Pelon, 2016). Indian trail marker trees have been identified most notably in the Mississippi Valley, including in Illinois, Wisconsin, Michigan, Indiana, Ohio, Kentucky, and Missouri (Janssen, 1934). Within Missouri, trail marker trees have been found and are common in the Ozark region. Little evidence exists that show trail marker trees within the St. Louis area, however, it is likely that they were here due to the importance of the region to Native people.

In a recent study by David Tovar (2016), Indian Trail Trees were used by Indigenous peoples for ceremonial purposes, and he asserts that the trees were more than just a navigational tool. Tovar (2016) shares that during a ceremony, both Pawnee and Sauk and Fox people would hang a dog on a tree as an offering, which caused the deformation in trees. In these sacred ceremonies, the dogs would be oriented towards a specific direction, causing the tree limb to grow in that direction (Tovar, 2016). In Northern California, the Hupa Indians split trees so that they could insert newborns’ umbilical cords, which was intended to symbolize the growth of the child and the tree (Tovar, 2016).



King, A. (2016, August). Strange things: Old Native trails once marked by bent trees. Ottawa Rewind. <https://ottawarewind.com/2016/08/07/strange-things-old-native-trails-once-marked-by-bent-trees/>



Washington University in St. Louis

Other tribes across the U.S. modified the trees during winter and summer solstice ceremonies (Tovar, 2016). The use of modified trees for cultural and ceremonial practices is an additional way that Indigenous peoples utilized these trees, which led to the trees having unique deformations.

Although trail marker trees are no longer commonly used to direct people towards a path or for ceremonial purposes, they are still significant because they are a living history that shows how Native peoples navigated the land in which they lived. Over time many trail marker trees have been torn down and destroyed due to urban planning, but new conservation efforts have started to protect these living artifacts. One group, called the Mountain Stewards, has created the Indian Trail Tree Project and Indian Trails Mapping Program to document the trail marker trees' existence throughout the country while also working to preserve the culture behind these trees (Mountain Stewards, 2020). Indian Country Today shares this group's conservation efforts and state that their National Trail Trees database includes 2,034 trees in 40 states (Armitage, 2013). The interconnectedness between Native Americans and nature is evident, especially through the modification of Indian Trail Trees for navigational or ceremonial purposes. One day these trees may no longer be here and these stories may not be told. It is our responsibility to conserve, as the Mountain Stewards organization does, as well as the Native communities that continue to preserve this legacy.



ENDNOTES

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 - 8 Sternberg, G. [MortonArboretum]. (2015, October 31). *Pathfinder: The last Prairie Sentinel Oak* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RJmY7Apo9pU>
 - 9 Tovar, D. J. (2016). The history and analysis of Wisconsin culturally modified trees. *The Wisconsin Archeologist*, 97(1), 53-83. [PDF The History and Analysis of Wisconsin Culturally Modified Trees | David Tovar - Academia.edu](http://www.academia.edu)
- Azotea, C. (2019). Bent Tree [Photograph]. Waymarking. https://www.waymarking.com/waymarks/wm10PV8_Bent_Oak_at_Warrenton_Schnucks_Certified_as_Authentic_Missouri