

## Don't Pine Away Your Independence

By: Adam Downing, Virginia Cooperative Extension

In anticipation of our nation's celebration of independence and out of respect for those who have given so much for this unique gift of freedom, I would like to pose the following question: What do the flags of Maine and Vermont have in common with the Royal Navy and the American Revolution? (Hints: The answer is a species of tree that was fought over; the ensuing rebellion paved the way for the better-known Boston Tea Party; and it has been called the sequoia of the East).



*The state flags of both Maine (left) and Vermont (right) prominently feature eastern white pine.*

While not as tall as the sequoias, eastern white pine (*Pinus strobus*) is the tallest species in the Eastern US and the tallest pine in all of North America. White pines growing on good soils today can easily exceed 150 feet. The current champion exceeds 180 feet. Even more remarkable, though not verifiable, is that, according to some sources, old-growth white pine in the New England region of pre-colonial America may have exceeded 200 feet. This height, combined with the lightweight and excellent strength of the wood, leads us to the story behind the flags bearing this majestic tree and its role in American history.

Great Britain's Royal Navy ruled the seas in wooden ships powered by wind. To go farther and faster, to maintain their nautical supremacy, the Navy needed tall masts. However, England's forests had long ago been cut over several times, leaving little but firewood. By the 17th century, the King was competing with other great empires for shipbuilding material in the Baltic region. Then came knowledge of an abundance of the perfect tree, the white pine! In addition to the desirable growth characteristics, white pine also provided pitch and tar used for waterproofing and making turpentine.

White pine became a significant export commodity. But, when the King of England felt that too many of the best trees were being used by the colonists, he feared a shortage would ensue. The Crown revised its Massachusetts Bay Charter in 1691 to include a "Mast Preservation Clause" which stated that all trees 24 inches and larger (measured one foot above the ground) belonged to the King. Royal surveyors then commenced to mark such trees with the King's Broad Arrow. The colonists grew to resent this act of eminent domain on what they



*The King's broad arrow marked trees to be reserved for masts for the English navy during the Colonial Period and was one of the irritations that led to the American Revolution. Photo by William Cullina.*

viewed as their private property; many began to resist. Many pines with this three-hatchet mark in the shape of an upward pointing arrow were poached by colonists and sawed into widths just under 24 inches to spite the law.

This civil disobedience culminated in 1772, a year before the Boston Tea Party, with what came to be called the Pine Tree Riot. Officials in New Hampshire, who were to protect the King's trees, arrested six sawmill owners for possessing and milling the King's trees without a license. One of the owners refused to pay the fine of £100. This sawmill owner was released with the agreement he would return the next day with his bail. He did return and brought with him 30 to 40 of his friends, all disguised with soot covering their faces. They literally ran the tree police out of town. According to Heather Cox Richardson, Professor of History at Boston College, "While eight of the men were later charged with assault, the local judges who sentenced them let them off so lightly the verdict could easily be seen as support for their actions."

We are a nation and a people based on principle. Many historians regard this act of rebellion every bit as important in launching the fight for independence as the wrongful taxation of tea. I think these rioters had at least one thing right, that our trees should be used to meet our needs as a society. Thankfully, we did win our independence and we still have eastern white pine and other tree species as a continuing rich natural resource unique to our great country.

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