



From the Land of Holly

The American holly became Delaware's state tree in the 1930s when Sussex County was considered the holly capital of the nation and was shipping wreaths across the country and to Europe. Though the holly industry is now virtually extinct, the state tree is still a treasured symbol.

*by Walter F. Gabel
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Each holiday season, the tree we recognize most is the native American holly, Delaware's state tree. Holly blankets mantels and is tucked into evergreen wreaths, its red berries and shiny green leaves bringing Christmas cheer.

The holly has long been the First State's first choice of holiday greens. In the 1890s, Sussex Countians realized they had in their backyards a source of colorful, cheap and (at the time) plentiful holiday decoration. Soon an entire holly industry sprang up in southern Delaware. By 1930, Delaware was the leading producer of yuletide holly wreaths in the country. Maryland was a close second.

Milford's William Buell started it all a century ago. Buell knew the holly tree, which had a reputation among farmers of being useless, was indeed decorative. The entrepreneur advertised his idea, harvested 500 cases of loose holly branches, and shipped them to Vaughn Seed Stores in New York and Chicago. The following year, he received an order from two firms for 10,000 cases. Buell's right-hand man was John T. Watson, a Georgetown merchant and public servant who conceived the idea of shipping wreaths. Business boomed, and the Delaware holly wreath industry began.

In the 1920s and 30s, Milton, Bridgeville, Georgetown, Millsboro and Selbyville were bustling holly towns. Holly cutters,

wreath makers and dealers all wanted to earn profits from this last cash crop of the growing season. For many, it was the cushion for a bad crop season; for others, particularly the elderly, it was their only income of the year. By working day and night between Thanksgiving and the week before Christmas, farm families could make \$155-300 a season by turning out up to 1,000 wreaths a week. In 1940, a family which made 10,000 wreaths a season could earn up to \$500.

Entire farm families would busy themselves with harvesting holly to make colorful wreaths and sprays for the ready market. Men picked sprays and berries in the woods while at home women and children formed hoops of slender maple, gum or willow

shoots, and with wire bound bunches of holly and evergreen to the wreath frames. Two men could pick 15 burlap bags of holly each day, enough to make 450 wreaths. Two or three times weekly, the holly dealers sent drivers on routes similar to mail routes. The drivers visited farm families, left berries and picked up wreaths. Finished wreaths were



Young Charlie G. Jones sits among the greenery at the packing house of Milton's Charlie Jones, the "Holly Wreath Man." Jones sold holly wreaths and sprays, boxwood and pine wreaths, and roping made of turkey beard, laurel and pine. These were shipped to florists, department stores and churches across the nation. (Photo taken in Dec. 1929.)

stacked three dozen high on tall stands called "sticks" to prevent the wreaths from hitting each other and knocking off the precious berries.

Another entrepreneur was Charlie Jones, the "Holly Wreath Man" of Milton, who used bright shipping labels proclaiming the crate contents were "From the Land of Holly." Selling to Delawareans and florists, churches and department stores across the nation, the fertilizer salesman produced large and small holly wreaths, holly sprays, boxwood

wreaths and roping made of turkey beard, laurel and pine. He started selling the evergreen products under the name of Burton Evergreen Co. in 1906 but then went on his own in 1908 and continued until his death in 1944. His son, W. T. "Bill Tom" Jones took over his father's business, making, buying and shipping holly wreaths and products. The Jones residence, a Victorian house on Federal Street in Milton is still known as "the Holly House."

The elder Jones was a perfectionist. He was known to burn thousands of wreaths because the quality wasn't there. He knew florists wanted wreaths in a perfect circle, something you

can't get with bound switches, so he was the first to use wire wreath frames in Delaware. He also imported artificial holly berries from Germany, especially during the years when Delaware trees didn't have many berries. Artificial berries were made mechanically by repeatedly dipping the tips of strings four inches long into a plaster of paris solution. The strings then would be dipped in red paint and a waterproofing solution. Jones never paid less than 10 cents per wreath to keep the quality up.

Many wreath makers shipped their product on a commission market. Wreaths generally were transported by train every day because they remained fresh only

about three weeks. On Saturdays between Thanksgiving and Christmas, the Pennsylvania Railroad was known as the Holly Express because it would send a special train to make holly stops between Delmar and Wilmington.

Eventually, though, the traditional holly wreath began facing competition. After World War II, Jones ordered dried wreaths, some from Italy, which in mid-summer arrived in yellow, compressed bales. Jones would preserve, paint, pack and ship them to stores by October for the holiday displays. The imported wreaths were thicker and of better quality than Delaware wreaths.

It was the younger Jones who in 1951 made what was then called the world's largest holly wreath. The 11-1/2 foot-wide wreath, built in two pieces, was placed at Radio City Music Hall in New York City, according to records in the Delaware Agricultural Museum. He sold his last holly wreath in 1955.

Other dealers and shippers included W. B. Truitt & Son (1929), Layton and Owens (1934) and former state senator Charles Brown, all of Bridgeville, and the Delaware Holly Company (1937) of Selbyville, which gathered fresh holly stock from an area stretching to Accomac, Va.

The holly industry brought hundreds of thousands of dollars into Delaware, according to annual Department of Forestry reports written between 1935 and 1939 by former state forester W. S. Taber. A 1934 Department of Forestry survey of dealers and shippers of Christmas greens and of shipping case manufacturers helped determine the amount of holly transported out of Delaware to Philadelphia, New York City and Chicago. Foreign destinations included Canada, Mexico, South America and London.

Two million wreaths were made in 1934, bringing the state \$188,000. Part-time employment during the 1934 season was estimated at 8,550 people, mostly families. Farm families received



Holly gathering was the last cash crop of the growing season. From Thanksgiving to Christmas, men cut holly branches in the woods for wreathmaking (right). Two men could fill 15 burlap bags daily. In the 1920s and 30s, wreathmaking was a cottage industry in Sussex County. Farm families would sell their products to large dealers, such as the Layton & Owens plant in Bridgeville (above). Reese Layton is pictured at left. (Photo taken in Dec. 1934.)



between three and six cents per wreath, more (up to 15 cents) for an excellent wreath. City folk bought wreaths for less than 50 cents.

Delawareans took the holly business seriously. If trespassers picked holly without permission, they were actually arrested and fined. In 1935, two holly cutters were arrested in Georgetown for illegally cutting holly and trespassing. For the first charge, they were jailed in default of \$250 bail each; for the second, they received a 10-day prison sentence upon failure to pay the \$25 fine plus costs.

In 1935, Taber wrote that Delaware "now supplies the greater portion of the holly wreaths marketed in the U.S." He

noted that butchering or cutting down holly trees threatened the wreath-making industry, and recommended the adoption of wise harvesting methods that would encourage and protect natural growth. To preserve the industry in Delaware, he asked holly produce shippers to adopt a policy of insisting on high quality greens and an "attractively designed label" to "advertise Delaware as the holly state."

In 1938 Albert Early, Sussex County supervisor of schools, suggested that holly plantations be established to perpetuate the species. His idea never took root but the Journal-Every Evening carried a Dec. 9 editorial supporting his plea for holly conservation. The State Forestry Department,

THE ANCIENT HOLLY PROLIFERATES WORLDWIDE

William Aiton (1731-93), a Scottish botanist, first classified the holly, *Ilex opaca*, in his *Hortus Kewensis*, published in the 1750s. Aiton first served as chief gardener at Chelsea Gardens in London, England, then was appointed director of the famous Kew Gardens in London where he wrote his *Hortus*, a book that listed most of the plant genera of the times.

There are more than 300 distinct species of holly which grow in all countries of the world except Australia. The ancient tree is associated with numerous beliefs and myths around the globe.

The early peoples of Europe believed the holly tree was inhabited by spirits, both evil and good. Europeans decorated the tree with bits of food to appease the evil and feed the good spirits. The tradition of decorating holly trees was perpetuated by the Druids and other "little people of the forest" who considered the tree holy. Ancient Druids, according to legend, revered the holly tree and holiday ceremonies. They claimed holly held certain powers to make people joyful and happy.

History records show the holly tree also was highly-prized and its products used as decorations by the Persians, the Chinese and even the Romans. The latter would send a sprig of holly to friends and

neighbors as an invitation to holiday festivities.

Even holly tree colors are symbolic. The creamy white color of the flowers that appear before the berries emerge is said to represent innocence, modesty and purity. In contrast, the red color of the berries is said to represent personal stimulation, suggesting power, passion and danger.

To this day, it is considered bad luck in England and Germany to step on a holly berry, the favorite food of the robin, which tradition says got his red breast from the thorns at the Crucifixion.

Holly decorations were not to be left up after New Year's Eve, according to English tradition, lest the maidens of the household be visited by a ghost, who brought a misfortune for every leaf on the tree.

Still other believers suggest holly must be removed by Shrove Tuesday, the day before Ash Wednesday, and burned on the same fires that cook the traditional English pancakes.

English farm people decorated their stables with holly. If any livestock were able to see a sprig of holly on Christmas day, it was believed the flocks would thrive all year. Even honey bees were treated to a holiday decoration, with a sprig of holly on each hive.

The State Federation of Garden Clubs and the Georgetown Kiwanis publicized wise pruning practices.

In 1936 wreath shipments tallied 204,000 dozen wreaths in wooden cases, and 9,625 in cartons. Volume grew by 15 percent over 1935 and brought \$220,000 of business to the state. Employment dipped slightly to 8,500.



An example of the wreaths made in Delaware

Taber regretted that "citizens of the State who traffic in holly do not recognize it as 'the green forest goose that lays the golden Christmas egg'" and continued to ask wreath makers to cut wisely and save the holly tree crop. By 1938, Delmarva holly value approached \$1 million. The next year it was named Delaware's State Tree by the General Assembly. A few years after this pinnacle of production (1934-1940) the holly business began to decline in

Sussex County, although families and individuals continued for years on a local basis. Some sources attribute the advent of plastics as the main reason for decline. By the late 1940s, entire plastic holly wreaths came on the market and the fresh holly industry perished. The plastics industry also pushed the box and crate manufacturers to a low production point, as they could not compete with the cheaper, stronger, more attractive packages. Others, like Bill Jones, blame the decline on Uncle Sam. In 1956, a special ruling from the U. S. Department of Labor declared that people who made wreaths in their homes were subject to the \$1/hour minimum wage under the Fair Labor Standards Act. (Dealers previously had paid per wreath.) Although Delaware's holly wreath dealers and makers pressed for an exemption, it was denied.

The beautiful and distinctive holly tree survives in Delaware, though mainly in Kent and Sussex counties, and is doing well. Today only a few farm families make a small number of wreaths annually for local markets. Perhaps some day the holly industry may return.

(Donna Sharp, public information officer with Dept. of Natural Resources also contributed to the article by Walter Gabel. Special thanks to William T. Jones, Charles G. Jones and the Delaware Agricultural Museum.)

DELAWARE'S STATE TREE

The American holly, also known as the Christmas holly or evergreen holly, officially became Delaware's state tree in 1939 by an act of the General Assembly.

Olive Wilkins, secretary to State Forester W. S. Taber, suggested to her boss that the holly be designated the state tree

not only because of its importance to Delaware's economy from 1900 through the 1930s, but also because of its beauty.

Everyone seemed to agree with Mrs. Wilkins because the governor approved the resolution to make the American holly Delaware's state tree on May 1.

AMERICAN HOLLY FACTS

Species Name:
Ilex opaca (Aiton)

Tree type:
Deciduous evergreen

Location:
scattered sparingly throughout the state, primarily in Kent and Sussex counties

Soil:
prefers rich, moist soil, but is also found at higher elevations and in drier soil

Size:
Delaware species rarely exceed 30' in height and 12" in diameter

Leaf:
simple, alternate, oval, thick and leathery, 2-4 inches long, and armed with spiny teeth. They remain on branches about three years, then drop off in the spring

Bark:
light gray and roughened by wart-like growths. Numerous short, slender branches form dense, narrow pyramid shape

Flower/Fruit:
small, whitish flowers; male and female flowers usually borne on separate trees. Fruit is a dull red, sometimes yellow, round berry about 1/4" in diameter containing 6 ribbed nutlets. Fruit ripens late in the fall and persists on branches over the winter

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For more information on the American holly or other native Delaware trees, contact:

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