

# BEDFORD HISTORICAL SOCIETY *stories*

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## **The Ripples of Preservation**

*How our Community Saved the Oak in 1977*

While there are many special places and landmarks that define Bedford's historic character, the Bedford Oak is our oldest testament to this community's preservation efforts. On this day in 1977, the two acres surrounding the Oak were given to the Historical Society to preserve our beloved tree and protect it from development. We hope you'll enjoy the story about our "oldest citizen" and how it's touched our community. Sometimes, as you'll see below, a photograph or better yet, a video, can paint a more compelling picture.

Film maker Jamie Edgar of Hound Dog Media, Sonja Bartlett of Sonja Bartlett Productions and photographer William Abranowicz have documented the 10 buildings and landmarks we preserve.



## The Bedford Oak c.1500

The Bedford Oak stands at the corner of Hook Road and the old Bedford Road - now Cantitoe Street. It is estimated to be over 500 years old, its girth is more than 30 feet, and the spread of its branches is 120 feet from tip to tip. While white oaks are among the longest lived trees, the Bedford Oak will most definitely live longer as it resides in our hearts.



The Bedford Oak 1906

The great tree has been a part of residents' life from Bedford's earliest days and has been the subject of much folklore. When surveyors were planning the route of the Harlem Railroad, legend has it that Mr. Smith, who owned the land, told them: "It is all right to survey, but if the railroad touches that oak tree, it can't come through here." L. Hollingsworth, the son of James Wood wrote in 1952, "My father taught me to take off my hat whenever I passed what he used to call 'our most venerable citizen.' I do it to this day, as does my son." And it's been said that if you kiss someone under the Oak, that is the person you will marry!

We don't know if Harold Whitman kissed his wife Georgia Squiers Whitman under the Oak but he did deed the Oak and a small parcel of surrounding land to the Town in her memory. A tea party was held under the tree when it was given to the Town with members of the Whitman family and the Bedford Farmer's Club in attendance.





Illustration by Georgia Mary Mitcham, daughter of Harold C. Whitman  
who donated the Oak to the Town of Bedford in 1942

The Oak grew undisturbed until 1977 when 30 acres of neighboring land was sold to a builder who planned to develop the property. This change to the environment threatened the Oak's survival. A. Douglass Hall, President of the Bedford Historical Society began a campaign to buy the land surrounding the Oak and prevent the encroachment of houses. Though he secured pledges from the community, he couldn't act quickly enough.



Fritz & Billy Mitchell waiting for their school bus at the Oak in 1971

Fortunately, Mrs. George C. Sharp stepped in after noticing a bulldozer on the property. She called the developer and asked him to sell enough land - two acres - to give the tree breathing space and protect it from harm. The builder agreed and eventually, with the help of friends, the community, many local organizations and the Bedford Historical Society, \$51,000 was raised to save the Oak.





Since then the Town of Bedford has continued to care for the Oak while the Historical Society preserves the land protecting our beloved tree. The Bedford Oak stands tall and proud as it has for the past 500 years - a living testament to the value our community places on our heritage.



[William Abranowicz preparing to make a photograph of the Bedford Oak](#)

If you value history and our heritage, we hope you will support the Bedford Historical Society by becoming a member. You can [join, renew or make your donation on our website](#). Our members make everything we do possible! Thank you.

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