

THE WITHERSPOON WITNESS

VERTICALITY • OLD TREES • WASHBOARDS • HUES OF GREEN • ETYMOLOGY

APRIL 4TH, 2020



Historic Overlook Park, in Princeton, offers a rare topological feature—verticality—that is otherwise difficult to come by in a moderately walkable distance from Princeton.

TREASURES ABOUND ON A SIMPLE WEEKEND HIKE

In 1987—the 200th Anniversary of the signing of the U.S. Constitution—the National Arborist Association and the International Society of Arboriculture jointly recognized a significant tree in the Princeton area. The tree, “having lived here at the timing of the signing of our constitution,” was designated with a plaque presented by Calton Homes and the Princeton Township Shade Tree Commission. Aaron and I came across the tree last weekend while taking a leisurely hike along the seam of a field and residential development. After searching the Princeton Township Shade Tree Commission’s online archive of shade trees and noting that this tree was not listed, I sent an inquiry to the Commission contact. After more online sleuthing, I found that the tree—called the [Washington Oak](#)—and the surrounding area are historical not only for Revolutionary-era battles in the Princeton area, but also for a contested housing development plan in the 1980s.



This is the quite old tree.

Later, in a debris pile fronting a small manse, I discovered a glass washboard. Having harbored the desire for a (free) washboard for several years now (to the extent that I have even enlisted

my grandmother to keep an eye out on various adventures at yard sales and flea markets), I seized it—it now is on the porch decontaminating.

THE PARTICULAR GREEN OF BUDS IN SPRINGTIME

It seems to be peak season for daffodils, forsythia, and cherry blossoms in Princeton—and the delicate new growth on trees and shrubs seem to hover, cloudlike, over the wet darks of the forest floor and asphalt. Why is that spring green so much brighter—yellower—than a late summer emerald? According to *Inside Science* magazine, it stems from several characteristics of young leaves—their relative thinness, a lack of wax and tough layers, and the undeveloped nature of their chloroplasts all contribute to a lighter, chartreuse hue.

THE ORIGINS OF THE WITNESS

‘Witness’ is rooted in Old English’s *witnes*—attestation of fact or event from personal knowledge. In the past few years, I have seen new uses for the word via several thinkers at Princeton University citing Robert Jay Lifton, who defines *witnessing professionals* as those who leverage their expertise to recognize and warn. This is often applied to global risks, such as experts warning of the pressing threats of climate change, pandemics, or the malignant normalities of demagogues remantling the landscape of political discourse. With the Witherspoon Witness, I seek to start a practice of witnessing the subtle transformations apparent and latent in today’s world and how we navigate it—not a newsletter so much as a thoughtletter.

BY EMMA IGNASZEWSKI

Questions or comments? [Email me.](#)