

**MARYLAND HISTORICAL TRUST
DETERMINATION OF ELIGIBILITY FORM**

NR Eligible: yes
no

Property Name: Three Mile Oak Inventory Number: AA-895
 Address: Generals Highway (MD 178) at MD 450 (Defense Highway) Historic district: yes no
 City: Parole Zip Code: 21401 County: Anne Arundel
 USGS Quadrangle(s): South River
 Property Owner: Undetermined Tax Account ID Number: --
 Tax Map Parcel Number(s): -- Tax Map Number: 0051A
 Project: MD 450 Defense Highway ADA Sidewalk Improvements Agency: Maryland State Highway Administration
 Agency Prepared By: Maryland State Highway Administration
 Preparer's Name: Consultant Architectural Historian Matt Manning Date Prepared: 10/13/2014
 Documentation is presented in: Project Review and Compliance Files
 Preparer's Eligibility Recommendation: Eligibility recommended Eligibility not recommended
 Criteria: A B C D Considerations: A B C D E F G
Complete if the property is a contributing or non-contributing resource to a NR district/property:
 Name of the District/Property: _____
 Inventory Number: _____ Eligible: yes Listed: yes
 Site visit by MHT Staff yes no Name: _____ Date: _____

Description of Property and Justification: *(Please attach map and photo)*

The original Three Mile Oak monument is located north of US 50 at the intersection of MD 450 (Defense Highway) and MD 178 (Generals Highway) in Parole, Anne Arundel County. The marker was erected to commemorate the tree that once stood at this location, said to have been visited by George Washington and Lafayette. Although it once held the trunk of the fallen tree, all that now remains is a large concrete base and a steel brace that supported the trunk.

The Three Mile Oak monument stands against a backdrop of trees on the southwest corner of the MD 450/MD 178 intersection, between an Orthodox Jewish cemetery and the parking lot of a Toys "R" Us store. Located along a concrete sidewalk and beneath utility poles, it comprises an approximately four-foot wide by two-foot high concrete base with a three-foot tall steel post protruding from the center. The base is square in plan, and the post appears to be a segment of repurposed railroad rail. A bent steel rod and strap are wrapped around the rail and affixed through a hole near its top; all steel members have rusted. The rail, rod, and strap once held the trunk of the Three Mile Oak in place atop the concrete plinth. The concrete is cracked and spalling, in some places leaving the smooth, round aggregate exposed. The plinth's northeast face, fronting the intersection, has four bolt holes that once supported a bronze plaque exhibited with the trunk.

The original plaque has been relocated east of Jennifer Road at the US 50 interchange within a large, grassy area bounded by US

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MHT Comments:

Jim Jarman
 Reviewer, Office of Preservation Services
[Signature]
 Reviewer, National Register Program

12/22/2014
 Date
12/30/14
 Date

50, MD 450 and the US 50 westbound exit ramp. Along MD 450, two bronze plaques are mounted on a granite slab. The top of the slab is tilted off the ground, supported by two small pine logs. A small plaque at the top of the slab reads:

THIS OAK TREE PLANTED IN 1967,
PERPETUATES THE MEMORY
OF THE ORIGINAL
THREE MILE OAK
WHICH STOOD NEARBY AS EXPLAINED BY THE MARKER BELOW.
ERECTED IN 1967 BY THE
FOUR RIVERS GARDEN CLUB

The larger plaque underneath states:

TRUNK OF THE THREE MILE OAK
UNDER THIS TREE PASSED GENERAL GEORGE WASHINGTON
DECEMBER 19, 1783 ON HIS WAY TO ANNAPOLIS TO RESIGN HIS
COMMISSION AS COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF OF THE CONTINENTAL
ARMIES, AND IT IS THOUGHT THAT GENERAL SMALLWOOD
ACCOMPANIED BY GENERAL GATES AND DISTINGUISHED
CITIZENS OF ANNAPOLIS MET GENERAL WASHINGTON AT
THIS SPOT.
GENERAL LAFAYETTE PASSED HERE DECEMBER 17, 1824
TO VISIT THE FRIENDS OF REVOLUTIONARY DAYS.
ERECTED BY THE ROTARY CLUB OF ANNAPOLIS

Standing behind the plaque to the southwest is a 40- to 50-foot-tall oak tree, presumably planted in 1967.

History/Context

The Three Mile Oak once stood at the intersection of present-day Defense Highway and Generals Highway east of Annapolis. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it was customary for local officials and community leaders to meet visiting dignitaries outside their destination and accompany them on the final leg of their journey. Tradition holds that the Three Mile Oak, located approximately three miles outside the city, was a common meeting place. Newspaper accounts from 1783 confirm that Washington traveled along what is now known as Generals Highway during his journey from New York to Annapolis to resign his commission as commander-in-chief of the Continental Army following the signing of the Treaty of Paris. He arrived in Annapolis on Friday, December 19, where he was met "a few miles from" the city by generals Gates and Smallwood (probably Horatio Gates and William Smallwood) along with "several of the principal inhabitants." No more specific details are given about the meeting location.

Forty-one years later, the Marquis de Lafayette traveled from Washington on a tour of the United States. He arrived in Annapolis at three o' clock accompanied by a large entourage, including a delegation from the city which had apparently met him on the road. Lafayette's course would have followed the road between Bladensburg and Annapolis along present-day Defense Highway. This route would have led Lafayette right past the Three Mile Oak before reaching Annapolis. Upon leaving Annapolis, he returned to Washington and probably passed by the tree once more.

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It is unknown exactly how old the Three Mile Oak was or when it acquired its name. Descriptions of Washington's 1783 journey and Lafayette's later travels in 1824 do not mention the Three Mile Oak and make no reference to any specific tree. The earliest discovered use of the name occurs in an 1839 report of the Annapolis and Elk Ridge Railroad to describe a surveyed route: "A line was also run from the neighborhood of the three mile oak, to Spa Creek, in the vicinity of Mr. James Murray's." The name appears well established by the mid-nineteenth century; it was used in an 1854 letter to the editors of the Annapolis Gazette concerning the poor condition of the section of road "from the Three Mile Oak to Baltimore," and in the same paper in 1860 when soldiers from Fort Severn paraded at the "Three Mile Oak."

Accounts vary as to how the tree ultimately met its end. Most agree that at some point the tree caught fire, but how and when is a subject of debate. Minnie Richardson, owner of the farm on which the Three Mile Oak was located, recounted in 1954 that the tree had been burned in the late 1890s. As she recalled, a group of hunters set fire to the tree in an attempt to smoke out a raccoon that had taken refuge inside its hollow trunk. Eva Dorsey Gasperich, a local author with ties to the Three Mile Oak area, published a different account in 1958. Her version, which included a romanticized history of the tree mixed with stories and recollections passed down through generations, took place in early winter 1900. She described a "tramp" who sought shelter in the hollow of the tree and built a fire to heat a can of beans and warm his frozen limbs. Neighbors discovered the charred remains of the tree scattered across the field the next day. Another story, according to Anne Arundel Community College history professor Dr. Hal Counihan, suggested that students from nearby St. John's College in Annapolis, home of Maryland's Liberty Tree, started the fire as a prank or out of jealous competition. A December 1906 ceremonial presentation by the Annapolis chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution made reference to the tree, noting that it was still standing but giving no account of its condition.

Three years later, a very brief article in the Washington Evening Star reported that the tree had been blown down by a storm the night of May 21, 1909. An account in the Annapolis Evening Capital the following week reveals that the tree had been in poor shape prior to the storm. While in the area to repair the St. John's College Liberty Tree, horticulturist and tree surgeon J.T. Withers proposed stabilizing the Three Mile Oak by infilling the voids in the trunk, but the local chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) was unwilling or unable to pay his \$25 fee.

The tree remained as it fell for the next several years, and the exact date of the monument's construction remains unknown. The construction of the Three Mile Oak's concrete base is consistently attributed to Frank Gilliam, local resident, building contractor, and owner of a store on the east side of the intersection, across from the tree. Eva Dorsey Gasperich apparently interviewed Gilliam in 1958, but even he could not recall the year the monument was dedicated. News articles from the 1950s through the 1980s suggest construction dates ranging from 1916 to 1937, but research did not uncover local newspaper articles or other primary documentation from this period. The original plaque includes no dedication date but credits the monument's erection to the Rotary Club of Annapolis, which was chartered in February 1921. A 1921 article published in Daughters of the American Revolution Magazine described colonial-era landmarks along Generals Highway but observed only that the Three Mile Oak was "fallen."

Eva Dorsey Gasperich lamented the lack of a date on the plaque in her 1958 account of the oak's history. She envisioned a summer dedication with singing schoolchildren, the Maryland Parent-Teacher Association (PTA), and local residents and officials, speculating that the event occurred in 1926. The date and the inclusion of the Maryland PTA may have stemmed from memories of tree plantings by the PTA in November 1926. The plantings occurred in anticipation of the December opening of the Defense Highway, a 15-foot wide concrete road constructed by the Maryland State Roads Commission (SRC) along parts of an earlier route between Washington and Annapolis. The new highway may have provided the impetus for the planting program, but it seems unlikely that the monument had been placed by this time, considering neither the Baltimore nor Washington newspapers reporting the planting recorded the monument's presence.

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According to the Baltimore Sun, the PTA's saplings were grown from trees under which George Washington had sat when in Annapolis. The first planting was to be made at the location of the Three Mile Oak. The Washington Post gave a more detailed account of the ceremony and reported specifically on the planting of saplings to replace two large lost oaks. The paper described these trees as the Washington and Lafayette oaks, and curiously referred to the Washington oak as the "Two Mile Oak" and the Lafayette oak as the "Three Mile Oak." The paper notes that the saplings were "planted at the spot where the original giant trees stood," but offers no more specific location. The description of the Washington oak as the Two Mile Oak may have been in error; although there are multiple historical references to the Three Mile Oak, no other reports of a Two Mile Oak in Annapolis have been found.

Interest in the nation's colonial past, and George Washington in particular, grew exponentially during the second quarter of the twentieth century. In anticipation of the 200th anniversary of George Washington's birth in 1732, Congress established a George Washington Bicentennial Commission in February 1930, replacing an earlier commission established six years before. The 1932 bicentennial became an important opportunity for the country to reflect on and honor its past at a time when its future seemed uncertain. The Commission planned history-themed events and gatherings throughout the year, organized around holidays. Wakefield, the site of Washington's birth in Virginia, and Kenmore, his sister's home in Fredericksburg, were restored in preparation for the festivities. The Mount Vernon Memorial Highway was completed in 1932 as a parkway between the nation's capital and Washington's Mount Vernon homestead. That same year, Washington's profile replaced Lady Liberty in a redesign of the quarter dollar, one that endures today.

By 1931, Maryland had established its own bicentennial commission. Its plans included restoration of the Annapolis State House Senate Chamber to its 1783 appearance, identification of every house in Maryland used by Washington, and a determination of the roads and routes he travelled in the state. Trees were to be planted along each route, and individual counties were urged to arrange *memorial programs* and celebrations at related historical sites. These efforts to promote historical sites within the state came as new highways and the automobile made the entire country more accessible than ever before. As Americans took to the road, roadside signs and monuments became popular as interesting road trip detours and destinations. They raised public awareness of important historical places and events and preserved the memories of places lost to time or consumed by the very highways that brought them to light.

In 1930, the SRC widened the Defense Highway to 20 feet, adding concrete shoulders. It is possible that these improvements brought further attention to the remains of the Three Mile Oak, prompting the Rotary Club to erect its monument. In October the following year, United States President Herbert Hoover traveled from Washington to Annapolis to board the USS Arkansas on a trip to Yorktown. Annapolis mayor Walter E. Quenstedt and other city officials planned to meet the President outside Annapolis, but the Washington motorcade bypassed the meeting point, identified as the Three Mile Oak in a 1967 Annapolis Capital editorial. If the Three Mile Oak was really the intended rendezvous, the monument may have already been in place; it is unlikely the Annapolis delegation would select a spot littered with the charred remains of a dead tree, despite its historic importance.

In 1932, the DAR erected multiple cast iron roadside markers at various sites in Maryland along Washington's 1783 route to Annapolis to resign his military commission. The Three Mile Oak was not listed among those markers placed, but the SRC later included the site as a historic point of interest on its 1934 highway map, calling attention to the "portion of the old tree where citizens of Annapolis met General Washington in 1783 on his way to resign his commission." By that time, the location would have been highlighted by a roadside historical marker. A later marker, erected by the Maryland Historical Trust and the Equitable Trust Bank, still stands on the east side of the Defense Highway/Generals Highway intersection at the front door of a Bank of America branch.

A 1967 news article suggested the Rotary Club placed the Three Mile Oak monument in 1937, when William U. McCready, later

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Annapolis mayor, was club president. The monument was unquestionably in place by 1940, when the state released a guide to Maryland history including points of interest and driving tours. The guide identified the Three Mile Oak as "a blackened stump of a tree set in concrete."

By 1954, the trunk of the Three Mile Oak was infested with termites and rapidly deteriorating. An Annapolis Gazette article brought the tree to the attention of Governor Theodore McKeldin, who conveyed his desire to see the Three Mile Oak protected. In 1961, the Four Rivers Garden Club expressed interest in planting a tree at the site of the Three Mile Oak. Due to planned intersection improvements by the SRC, a new location was chosen south of the original tree. No action was taken until May 1967, when the club planted a new tree north of US 50. The spot chosen for the tree is almost exactly three miles from the State House in Annapolis. In addition to the planting, the Garden Club relocated the plaque from the Three Mile Oak's concrete base and affixed it to a granite slab placed in front of the new tree, facing MD 450. The Garden Club also added a plaque with the dedication date of the new oak and the location of the original tree.

Meanwhile, the Three Mile Oak's remnants remained in place on the now unmarked concrete plinth. It was not until 1987 that the stump was finally removed from its base. In an effort to preserve what was left of the tree, the Parole Rotary Club stored the remains at the home of Leon C. Johnson in Edgewater. The stump was reportedly kept in a barn until October 1988, when it was transferred to Anne Arundel Community College. The college planned an outdoor display for the tree in a lighted glass case on campus. However, the stump remained in a storage closet at the college's Careers Building for nearly 25 years. Finally, in 2012, the remains of the tree were donated to the Special Collections of the Maryland State Archives where the tree remains today. The concrete base with steel post still occupies the southwest corner of the Defense Highway/Generals Highway intersection.

The area along the highway has undergone major changes since the placement of the Three Mile Oak monument sometime between 1926 and 1940. Undated photographs of the Three Mile Oak mounted on its concrete base reveal rural surroundings; open fields with scattered trees spread out behind the monument. Visible beneath the concrete plinth is a concrete footing that appears to now be absent or buried. The Defense Highway and Generals Highway intersection was widened and realigned in 1961, US 50 was constructed south of the intersection in the early 1950s, and intense commercial development has encroached upon the corner where the Three Mile Oak once stood. Little remains to suggest the quiet crossroads setting that existed when the monument was originally erected.

Significance Evaluation

The Three Mile Oak monument was evaluated for significance under National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) Criteria A, B, and C. The monument was placed by the Rotary Club of Annapolis between 1926 and 1940 to commemorate a fallen tree that may have functioned as a meeting place for visiting dignitaries to Annapolis. Such commemorative monuments were common features at historical sites and along the country's growing road network in the second quarter of the twentieth century, and the Three Mile Oak monument is not unique among such markers. Furthermore, although the Three Mile Oak was an important meeting point for Annapolitans and distinguished visitors, no evidence suggests the monument itself has served in a similar function. The Three Mile Oak monument has no known associations with events that have made a significant contribution to history; it is not eligible for the NRHP under Criterion A.

Although George Washington and Lafayette are both rumored to have passed under the Three Mile Oak, research has not revealed significant persons associated with the later monument, and it is not eligible for the NRHP under Criterion B.

The Three Mile Oak monument consists of a simple concrete plinth with a steel support frame and was apparently assembled from readily available scrap metal; the remains of the tree itself have been removed. Its simplistic design was completed by a local

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building contractor; it does not represent the work of a master or possess high artistic value and is not eligible for the NRHP under Criterion C.

The removal of all remnants of the Three Mile Oak and the original plaque, the deteriorated condition of the remaining plinth and framework, and the extensive changes that have occurred at the surrounding intersection have all had a deleterious effect on the monument's condition. The object lacks integrity of design, materials, workmanship, setting, feeling, and association.

The Three Mile Oak monument is not recommended eligible for the NRHP. The boundary is confined to the extents of the monument itself at the MD 450/MD 178 intersection. Approximately four feet long on each side, the monument occupies a sixteen-square-foot area.

Works Consulted

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Eligibility not recommended _____

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Reviewer, National Register Program

Date

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USGS 7.5' Quadrangle - South River
1:8,000





AA-895

Three Mile Oak

Anne Arundel Co, MD

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9/4/2014

MD SHPO

View west from MD 450 eastbound

1/6



AA-895

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Three Mile Oak

Anne Arundel Co., MD

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Monument from sidewalk; view south

2/6

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View SE from sidewalk along MD 450

3/6



AA-895

Three Mile Oak

Anne Arundel Co

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MD 5460

View north of the MD 450/MD 178 intersection; monument
stands to the left behind fire hydrant.

4/6



AA-895

Three Mile Oak

Anne Arundel Co.

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MD stps

1967 oak planted by Four Rivers Garden Club; view SE
toward US 50 from MD 450

5/6

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Three Mile Oak

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MD SHPO

1967 granite slab facing MD 450; original plaque at
bottom

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