Paul Camire
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She Lives!

A Pilgrimage to the Norlina Torreya

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The Norlina Tree

The story of the world's largest Florida Torreya (*Torreya taxifolia)* has all the elements of a legend—a secluded location, Presidential ties and rumors of demise. After several years of researching and searching, I was finally able to meet this tree in person, as well as members of the family that are preserving it on their farm—despite it's haggard appearance.

According to Calvin Seaman, owner of the tree, the Torreya was given to the plantation owner, Weldon Edwards (US Congressman), as a hospitality gift from President Buchanan, about 1860, after he stayed there on his travels. For over 160 years this tree has endured the seasons of time and grown to the largest documented Florida Torreya ever known. It was last officially measured at 53 feet tall, a crown spread of 40 feet and a circumference of 124 inches. It stands on a slight rise in what is currently a cow pasture, next to the driveway into the barnyard. It has been documented as a female tree, which has produced viable seed and seedlings in the past. (Thanks to the late A.J. Bullard, we know that opposite sex branches are usually found on mature Torreyas, whether predominantly male or female.). Decades of visitors have been allowed to collect seeds, seedlings and cuttings from this tree. This material has been maintained by various individuals, gardens and institutions in their efforts to save the species.

Sometime between 2013 and 2016 there was a consensus that the old tree had died. It was removed from the Big Tree database and replaced by the Spring Grove Cemetery Torreya in Cincinnati, Ohio. I

found several archival and current articles that mentioned the tree, as well as herbarium sheets and photographs. I pinpointed the location, looked at satellite images and thought I was ready to find out if the famed Norlina Tree still lived.

As I drove up the road and neared the Seaman farm, the tree immediately caught my eye and seemed to be glowing in the fading sunlight. To add to my excitement there were clear bursts of foliage, spottily emanating from the trunk, branches and base. After stopping at the house and getting permission to photograph and inspect the tree, I entered the pasture.

The large branches emerged from the trunk as if they were ribs of a giant skeleton. They were mostly bare of foliage and bark, but somehow had lush foliage bursting out at irregular intervals. The trunk circumference was covered by vigorous basal sprouts, as was the trunk, clear to the top! Some basal sprouts had vertical growth, however, the majority appeared to be taking on horizontal growth and becoming branches—this was my first observation of this unique growth habit. I couldn't see how massive the trunk of the tree was until I circled around to the northwest side of the tree. I stood for a few moments staring at the thick furrowed bark and realizing how much larger this tree is compared to any other Torreya that I've visited or seen pictures of. Far larger than the Madison, Columbus and Henry Foundation trees. (Even historical documents, that I've read, seem to all mention multiple trunks and 8-10 inch diameter trunks as large.). It looked like the foot of a giant elephant that had stepped on a tree. It looked more like an oak tree trunk, than what I have ever seen on a Torreya. I can only imagine what a forest of Torreya in this size class must have looked like!

--North Carolina - A recent report of a large cultivated specimen of the rare Florida torreya (Torreya taxifolia) near Norlina in Warren County, stirred some anxious excitement. In the wild, the tree is seriously threatened by extinction from a debilitating leaf fungus that eventually kills the tree. However, the tree is cultivated in various places outside the range of the fungus and no doubt will continue to persist in gardens. At the end of October 1975, the Norlina site was visited to obtain herbarium material, seeds, and cuttings of this magnificent specimen, which measures 50 ft. tall with a branch spread of 50 ft., and a girth of 9 ft. 7 in. Records show the specimen was planted about 1840.

We don't exactly know how large the Florida Torreya can grow. In their tiny native range along Florida's Apalachicola River, the large specimens were apparently regarded as ideal boat building material for river commerce. Basal resprouts proved ideal for turning into rot resistant fence posts. The regrowth stems were harvested repeatedly, until the disease and climate began to decimate the population.

This tree may look haggard, with bare branches and spotty growth, but it's size and strength command respect. My sense is that the tree is attempting to mend itself, despite whatever calamity occurred that caused the distress. Whether it will rebound enough to produce a full canopy of lush growth, or even pollen and seeds cannot be known at this time. It is a slow death for Torreya—growth, loss, resprouting, roots holding firm against both weather and the hands of time. Pushed south by the ice age, possibly losing it's seed dispersal partner; this ancient tree, member of a prehistoric species, is the image of fortitude and steadfastness.

Visit the Norlina Tree page on the Torreya Guardians website, for more archival photos, documentation, and analysis of the tree's past, present and future

Black and white photograph taken 1975 by Clay Nolen .

All other photographs by Paul Camire.