

POSTMASTER PEROT'S RUBBER TREE

PAR-LA-VILLE



The rubber tree at Par-la-Ville when photographed by N.E. Lusher sometime after he opened his photographic business in the 1880s.

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Most of the articles in this series have been about buildings at risk but this article covers the loss of a much photographed and admired nearly 200 year old tree in Hamilton.

Read more about its history below.

It is sad to see familiar landmarks disappear. However, the reality is that trees rot and decay and eventually either fall down or need to be removed for safety reasons.

William Bennett Perot's rubber tree (*Ficus elastica*) had a long life and was the subject of many photographs and postcards. Hamilton's postmaster for more than 40 years, Perot spent his leisure time in the gardens of his five-acre property on Queen Street. Besides the avocado pears, limes, lemons, loquats, Surinam cherries he grew four varieties of oranges. Although the grounds at Par-la-Ville were ornamented with many decorative trees and shrubs, the most spectacular feature

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was the rubber tree that dominated the front garden. It had been sent as a small sapling from British Guiana (now Guyana) in 1847 by Perot's son Adolphus. It was not the first such tree as it is recorded that one was brought to Bermuda in 1826 by the wife of the then governor, Sir Hilgrove Turner.



Probably taken slightly earlier than the one above; James Bell Heyl, a pharmacist, shared the nearby post office premises with Perot. Heyl's daughter Edith later published her father's photographs. (Bermuda Through the Camera of James B Heyl 1868-1897)

By 1874 Perot's rubber tree was already making an impression when an engraving of it appeared in the U.S. magazine Harper's Monthly. In 1898 the Philadelphia Record carried an article that stated "it is not generally known that the largest and finest rubber tree in the world stands in a garden of a beautiful residence in Hamilton Bermuda".

In September 1899 the "Great Hurricane" hit Bermuda. Some of the Front Street verandahs lost slate and the various flagstaffs disappeared but the rubber tree at Par-la-Ville, while badly battered, survived.

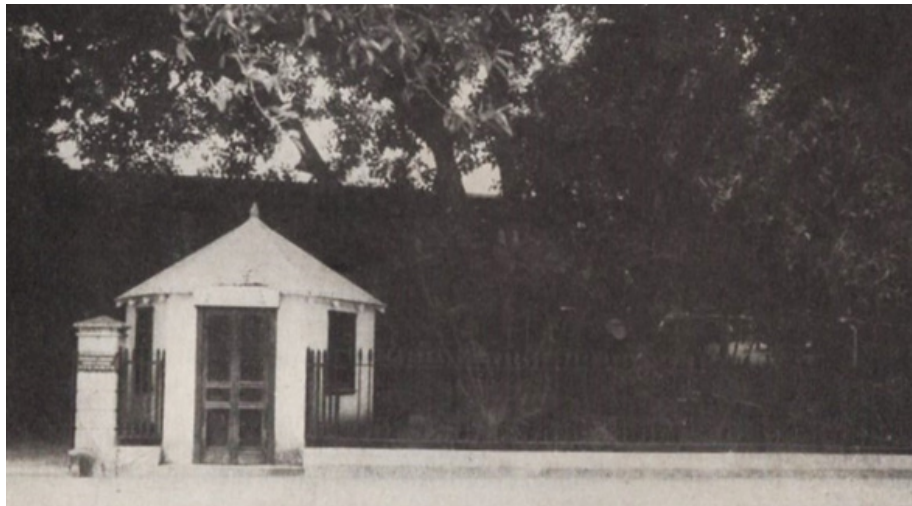


Par-la-Ville's manicured front lawn before the roots started to appear above ground. The building in the background was replaced by the Phoenix Drug Store in 1902. (Old Bermuda: Our Island, Our History)



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An undated Bermuda Almanack stated that the rubber tree's enormous roots had raised the surrounding ground by almost three feet. In 1928 the rubber tree had reached a height of over 45 feet and an expanse of over 70 feet. When Hurricane Arlene passed over the island in August 1963, the rubber tree lost only a few branches while other trees considered much hardier had been uprooted or cracked in half. By this time it was acknowledged that, although the rubber tree had once been an attraction, tourists now expected something more dramatic.



By 1947 the library occupied Par-la-Ville and was almost obscured by the rubber tree.

Can anyone tell us anything about the small building at the gate?

(Beautiful Bermuda, Tenth Edition)

In 1974 rot was discovered and workmen, under the supervision of parks superintendent George Ogden, decided to prune it as a means of saving it. The Corporation of Hamilton staff confirmed they had no intention of chopping down the tree. They had recently come under fire for taking down a large poinciana tree on Victoria Street.

In May 2023 Postmaster Perot's rubber tree had to be cut down after branches collapsed onto the roof of the nearby preschool. Tree surgeons from Brown & Co determined that although it looked



Postcard circa 1908 sold by Bradley's Drug Store which was located on the corner of Queen and Reid streets (now Discovery Wines).



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healthy and vigorous the tree had been found to be riddled with numerous cavities and significant rot. This is considered common for a subtropical species of its age. City engineer, Patrick Cooper, stated “The tree’s historical significance is not lost on us but fortunately the tree can and has been propagated to enable it to have a new life to be enjoyed by future generations.”



*Sad, but clearly necessary, the decaying rubber tree had to be taken down.
(The Royal Gazette, photo by Akil Simmons)*

We agree with Bermuda Historical Society president, Andrew Bermingham who said it was “very very unfortunate, but it had to be removed”. We join him in thanking Mayor Charles Gosling and Dwayne Caines, Chief Executive Officer and City Secretary, for consulting with environmental groups and considering all other options before deciding to cut down the tree. However we hope that something suitable will be planted in the now-vacant space and, perhaps, that a sign will be erected to commemorate the tree that stood there for so long.



*One good outcome of removing the rubber tree is that
Par-la-Ville’s attractive façade can now be appreciated.*

Sources: *Rider’s Bermuda Guide Book 1928, Beautiful Bermuda Guide Book 1947, The Royal Gazette 19 Jul 1898, 25 Aug 1963, 22 Feb 1974, 4 & 16 May 2023, 13 Feb 2024.*

