

Article

On the Persistence of the Organic: The Material Lives of the *Robinia pseudoacacia*

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Abstract: Just as plants confiscated from one part of the world and introduced to another may become naturalized over time, so too may the stories humankind tells about the natural world. Both can have consequences for local and global biocultures. The North American black locust tree (*Robinia pseudoacacia* L.) offers a case study through which to consider the transmission of early modern environmental and cultural histories. The persistence of a singular specimen planted in Paris in the early seventeenth century stands in contrast to the mutability of histories over time and the divergent modality of narratives about the natural world in different cultures. The many material lives of the plant species—from its propagation and first publication by Europeans to accounts by European colonizers in North America to the tree’s historic and continued use in Indigenous craft practices—can be read through intertwined histories of botany, bioprospecting, settler colonialism, and the Atlantic slave trade. Expanding the profundity of the black locust’s history by connecting its prehistories to written narratives reveals the tree to be an entangled organic object whose histories are integral to its materiality.

Keywords: environmental history; garden history; ethnobotanical knowledge; visual culture; history as materiality; early modern botany; nomenclature; arboriculture



Citation: Cannady, Lauren R. 2023. On the Persistence of the Organic: The Material Lives of the *Robinia pseudoacacia*. *Arts* 12: 253. <https://doi.org/10.3390/arts12060253>

Academic Editors: Lisa Pon and Kate Van Orden

Received: 5 September 2023

Revised: 10 December 2023

Accepted: 11 December 2023

Published: 14 December 2023



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While walking the perimeter of the Oak Spring Garden Foundation property in Upperville, Virginia—a 700-acre estate and biocultural farm once owned by Paul Mellon and Rachel Lambert Mellon in the eastern Piedmont region of the Appalachian Mountain Range—the Foundation’s ecologist paused in front of a spindly black locust tree (*Robinia pseudoacacia* L.) [Figure 1].¹ She explained to us—a cohort of artists, scholars, and creative writers in residence—that while the species is favored by humans for its easy propagation, the hardness of its wood, and the beauty and fragrant smell of its flowers, it is something of a global menace. The black locust is endemic to Appalachia, the very spot on which we stood and where its ubiquitous presence can be seen along the roadsides and open woods of northern Virginia, but the tree is considered invasive in almost all parts of the world where it has been introduced (Bouteiller et al. 2019, p. 2399). The ecologist then asked if anyone knew the site of the oldest known black locust. “Paris, France!”, she exclaimed as we moved on to marvel at an objectively more impressive 250-year-old white oak (*Quercus alba* L.).

The oldest known and recorded black locust grows on a site a few meters from the River Seine in central Paris [Figure 2]. It was planted between 1620 and 1622 by the gardener, herbalist, and arborist Jean Robin, after whom the genus was named. The species was given its current scientific name—*Robinia pseudoacacia*—by the Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus in his *Species plantarum* of 1753 (Linnaeus 1753, vol. II, p. 722). Though propped up by concrete supports, the 400-year-old Virginia tree is considered the oldest tree of any kind in Paris. It stands in what today might paradoxically be characterized as a quiet corner of the city center, in the shadow of Saint-Julien-le-Pauvre, a modest thirteenth-century parish church, and mere steps away from the medieval Cathédrale Notre-Dame de Paris, among the most prominent of Western European landmarks, the decidedly more modern Shakespeare and Company bookstore, and the many shawarma shops catering to students

and tourists in the Latin Quarter. Though the tree has been eclipsed by its more prominent neighbors, this singular material being has retained its status as an American curiosity in Europe and, as indicated by the protective railing surrounding it, a perpetual site of interest. Indeed, the status of the tree as among the earliest “New World” introductions to France is what has safeguarded the living organism through wars, regime changes, industrialization, natural and human-caused environmental disasters, and the accelerated urbanization of central Paris since the seventeenth century. The survival of the tree is due, in part, to the longstanding human fascination with and veneration of what environmental historian Jared Farmer has termed elderflora, very old plants whose lifespans far exceed that of a human being (Farmer 2022).



Figure 1. *Robinia pseudoacacia* (black locust tree), Oak Spring Garden Foundation, Upperville, VA, USA.

This article is about how histories become naturalized and normalized over time. Like plants confiscated from one part of the world and introduced to another, the stories humankind perpetuates about the natural world can forever alter the bioculture of a place. Intangible as they may be, the diverse narratives that have circulated around the Paris black locust tree—its historical and cultural significances and erasures—are a part of this very real material being. Across cultures and societies, we recognize and value the immaterial. One example is the protection and preservation of “intangible cultural heritage” built into the mission of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization headquartered in Paris. UNESCO defines “intangible cultural heritage” as follows:

[...] the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills—as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith—that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides

them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.²



Figure 2. *Robinia pseudoacacia* planted by Jean Robin c. 1620–1622, Paris, France.

If materiality is “an active zone of encounter and admixture, a site of mediation and projection, memory and transformation,” as Giuliana Bruno has suggested, then the environmental and cultural histories of this singular organic specimen are part of its materiality (Apter et al. 2016, p. 15). In thinking about the material traces—or the many material lives—of the Paris tree, this article will address the formation of narratives through selective inclusion and omission; sites as repositories for personal and institutional memories; and the ways in which the depth of history might be made more profound by merging prehistories of the tree with recorded histories.

1. The Written and Visual Record

The European history and naming of the *Robinia pseudoacacia* offer a compelling case study through which to consider vernacular knowledge networks and how heroizing narratives are passed down colloquially from father to son, gardener to physician-professor, and artisan to artisan. Like much American flora seized by the earliest European explorer-colonizers, the history of the black locust tree begins only in publication. The Paris tree was first documented in 1635 when physician Jacques-Philippe Cornut published a description and illustration of the “*Acacia Americana Robini*” in *Canadensium plantarum*, a botanical of

ninety-three non-native plants, including thirty-eight from North America, then growing in Paris [Figure 3].



Figure 3. “Acacia Americana Robini” from Jacques-Philippe Cornut’s *Canadensium plantarum* (Paris, 1635). Oak Spring Garden Foundation, Upperville, VA.

Cornut’s knowledge of plants and their pharmaceutical properties developed synchronously through his training as a *docteur-regent*, or physician-professor, in the faculty of medicine at the Université de Paris. His aim in the *Canadensium plantarum* was not to be encyclopedic, but to compile and disseminate, for the first time, knowledge about the previously unpublished plant specimens in public and private gardens around Paris. While he never traveled to North America, his methodology foregrounded experiential knowledge; the other criterion for inclusion in his botanical was that each plant had been observed firsthand by either himself or the engravers with whom he collaborated. Cornut’s description of the “Acacia Americana Robini” begins with a misidentification of the tree as a member of the Egyptian acacia species, from which gum arabic is derived, and a reference to the ancient Greek physician Dioscorides, author of *De materia medica*, a pharmacopoeia of medicinal plants and their uses that remained a source of required reading for European physicians in the seventeenth century. Despite misclassifying the tree, Cornut was correct on several points:

North America does not lack this type of tree, which, once transplanted to our gardens, does very well, to the point of charming the eye by the beauty of its flowers and the regular disposition of its leaves.³

The ornamental tree first planted by Robin did indeed take well in French soil, having matured enough in the decade since its first introduction for the engraver to depict its roots, trunk, distinctive phyllotaxy (or leaf arrangement), and clustered blossoms.

As a former medical student-turned-professor in the Paris faculty, Cornut was acquainted with the faculty’s teaching garden, located on the rue de la Bûcherie in the heart of

the city's medieval Latin Quarter. Weekly demonstrations for medical students were held in the garden from summer through early fall. Fees collected from students like Cornut, who matriculated in the early 1620s, went towards the upkeep of the garden and provided a modest stipend for the gardener who, from 1597 until the late 1620s, was Jean Robin (Bouvet 1947, p. 221). Robin's botanical interests extended beyond simples (plants and herbs used for medicinal purposes) to the cultivation of ornamental and non-native plant specimens. In addition to the medical faculty's garden, Robin tended the Jardin du Roi on the Île de la Cité, a small garden walled within the Palais de la Cité for use by the royal family and court, while also cultivating his own private garden on his Right Bank property on the rue du Bout-du-Monde.⁴

In 1608, Robin collaborated with royal embroiderer and engraver Pierre Vallet on an illustrated florilegium titled *Le Jardin du roy très chrestien Henry IV*, designed to serve as an embroidery pattern book. The inclusion of the portraits of both Vallet and Robin in the front matter of the *Jardin du roy* signals the collaborative nature of this artisanal project. Among the many examples in the book, an engraving of a magisterial Turk's cap lily (*Lilium martagon* L.) with flowers in various states of bloom readily lends itself to the repetitive patterns of embroidered textile design, including interesting symmetries in the blooms and the butterfly, whose downward-pointing antennae mirror the drooping stamens of the flowers [Figure 4]. In his dedication to Marie de' Medici, queen consort to Henri IV, Vallet credited Robin with having cultivated the lilies, irises, tulips, and other showy flowers in the royal garden. The gardener also contributed concise descriptive information about the specimens in the *Jardin du roy*, including "certain exotic plants brought by Jean Robin from Guinea and Spain in 1603". (Vallet and Robin 1608). Robin traveled little, if at all, beyond Paris, so the "exotic" plants he obtained from elsewhere in Europe, as well as Africa, Asia, and the Americas—including the North American plants later catalogued by Cornut—were received through exchanges with other European naturalists and gardeners.

Names impart meaning and they tell stories, yet only to the extent that humankind has bestowed on names the power to signify. Cornut included the black locust tree in his botanical due to its foreignness; the polynomial name he gave—"Acacia Americana Robini"—signaled its American-ness: "Acacia" as belonging (incorrectly) to a known type; "Americana" for the geographic region of "discovery"; and Robini for the tree's first known French cultivar. Traces of the name given by Cornut resurface in the binomial name given by Linnaeus—*Robinia pseudoacacia*—in his *Species plantarum* of 1753, a two-volume book of all known plants categorized by genus. Having lived over a century after Robin's death and having never met the gardener or seen his Parisian gardens, Linnaeus' association of the tree with Robin came from Cornut's *Canadensium plantarum*, the first publication to tie Robin's name to the American tree, and an association cemented in the mid-eighteenth century that continues to the present.

Tensions arise between what are often local histories written into individual scientific names and the global application of nomenclature as a classificatory system. Linnaean binomial nomenclature is an artificial system of names created for the purpose of imposing order and homogeneity, names introduced to facilitate universal communication regarding the material contents of the natural world. For the black locust, Linnaeus created a new genus—*Robinia*—and named the species *pseudoacacia*, or false acacia, thus negatively defining the tree not by what it was, but what it was not—the African acacia. Absent from the name is any indication of origin, of the tree being endemic to North America. This naming system that he promoted—in which plants were given Latinized names after renowned explorers, plant hunters, cultivars, and patrons—was, by definition, Eurocentric. As historian of science Londa Schiebinger has written, "Linnaeus's system itself retold—to the exclusion of other histories—the story of elite European botany". (Schiebinger 2007, p. 97). The Linnaean system was designed to be selectively universal (across Europe and its colonies)—for biological matter to be identifiable no matter where, no matter what language was spoken regionally, or by what common name an organism was known. Whether in rural Virginia or elsewhere in North America, South America, Asia, Oceania, Africa, or

Europe, the black locust tree continues to be known globally by the scientific community as the *Robinia pseudoacacia* L. after the singular tree planted by Robin next to the church of Saint-Julien-le-Pauvre in Paris.



Figure 4. “Martagon Pannonicum flore fauve rubente” (*Lilium martagon*) from Pierre Vallet and Jean Robin, *Le Jardin du roy très chrestien Henry IV* (Paris, 1608). Oak Spring Garden Foundation, Upperville, VA, USA.

Unlike Linnaeus, Cornut was a living connection to Jean Robin, having known the gardener and his son and successor Vespasien personally, spent time in their Paris gardens, and acquired new botanical knowledge from them, even if he did not witness the planting of the first American black locust tree in the medical faculty’s garden between 1620 and 1622. While still a medical student, Cornut penned the short epigrammatic poem published in Jean and Vespasien Robin’s *Enchiridion isagogicum* (Paris, 1623), a 70-page catalogue of “indigenous” and “exotic” plants—listed alphabetically according to given polynomial names and grouped by family—all of which were growing in the Robins’ garden. Cornut and Jean Robin were further connected through the engraver Pierre Vallet, who, in addition

to having collaborated with Jean Robin on the *Jardin du roy* of 1608, contributed several botanical plates to Cornut's *Canadensium plantarum* of 1635. Describing one of the more ornamental engravings in his book—the northern maidenhair fern (*Adiantum pedatum* L.) with its fronds fanning out in centrifugal swirls—Cornut drew explicit comparison to the art of the embroiderer, in what was perhaps an allusion to Vallet's demonstrated skill in rendering flora in the *Jardin du roy*. Moreover, the specimen examined by the engraver in preparation for making this image was, Cornut explained, then growing in the garden of Vespasien Robin, who had inherited his late father's garden in 1629 and continued to populate it with non-native plants.

Historian Pierre Nora, writing on *lieux de mémoire*, or sites of memory, describes the cleaving of history from memory as symptomatic of the emergence, particularly in the French intellectual tradition, of historiography. Memory—as living, evolving, vulnerable to manipulation, affective, and magical—has been not only separated from but superseded by history, which is reconstructive, intellectual, and universal in its authority.

By questioning its own traditional structure, its own conceptual and material resources, its operating procedures and social means of distribution, the entire discipline of history has entered its historiographical age, consummating its dissolution from memory—which in turn has become a possible object of history (Nora 1989, p. 10).

Like the name given by Cornut to the “Acacia Americana Robini” tree in Paris, the *Canadensium plantarum* was the result of a local network of personal acquaintances and collaborators. The scientific name introduced by Linnaeus and still in use today suggests that the history of the black locust tree begins with Jean Robin in seventeenth-century Paris. This historic episode serves as a point of origin, implying that the tree's history begins only in naming, in writing down, in selectively memorializing a singular act from a precise moment. That this particular organic matter has persisted centuries beyond its namesake points to the incongruous lifespans of a deciduous American tree and the French gardener who planted it.

2. Site as Memory

The Paris tree stands as a memorial to one historical individual, the gardener Jean Robin, but also as an enduring material vestige of an institution. Today, the medical faculty at the Université de Paris occupies buildings located west of the rue Saint-Jacques and boulevard Saint-Michel in the Odéon neighborhood. The origin of the idea of an encyclopedic botanical garden that served the medical faculty under the patronage of the crown was one first incubated during Jean Robin's tenure at the medical faculty's garden on the rue de la Bûcherie until the contents of that garden began to exceed the small plot of land surrounded by provisional lecture halls, apothecary shops, and the river. Other than the ancient tree planted by Robin in what was once the university's teaching garden, there are no spatial markers identifying this place as having once been the center of early modern academic medicine in Paris. The tree is, in a literal sense, a landmark; it is both a conspicuous marker of site and a monument to development and change over time. Stripped of any institutional framings, the natural tree has outlasted ready recognition of its cultural significance.

Upon coming into possession of seeds from a North American tree in 1620–1622, Robin had few public places in which to plant them. The Jardin du Roi on the far western tip of Ile-de-la-Cité, where he had cultivated simples and ornamental flowers, ceased to exist after 1608. This small walled and gridded royal garden, enclosed within the Palais de la Cité once occupied by successive French kings, is visible on the eastern-oriented map of Paris made by Olivier Truschet and Germain Hoyau around 1552–3 [Figures 5 and 6].⁵ By the mid-sixteenth century, the palace complex functioned as the administrative hub of the crown, with buildings dedicated to the royal judiciary, treasury, chapel, and prison. The royal garden on the Ile-de-la-Cité was demolished in 1608 when Henri IV initiated work on the Place Dauphine residential development, an extension of the campaign begun by

Henri III in 1578 to further develop the city's central island. The first step in Henri III's urbanization project was to have plans drawn up for the Pont Neuf, a bridge that spanned the end of the island to connect the right and left banks of the city to the end of the island, which was expanded further westward to include what is today the Square du Vert-Galant. Work on the Pont Neuf proceeded haltingly until 1599 when Henri IV recommitted to completing the project, which happened in 1606 (Ballon 1991, pp. 114–22). The royal garden remained intact and planted with herbs and flowers through these developments until around 1607–1608 when the plot of land was designated for the new Place Dauphine. It is possible, then, that Vallet and Robin's *Jardin du roy*, published in 1608, was intended to rematerialize the historic royal garden on the Île-de-la-Cité—an imagined garden on paper made to stand in for the lost physical garden.



Figure 5. Olivier Truchet and Germain Hoyau, *La ville, cité et Université de Paris*, c. 1552-3, woodcut. Universitätsbibliothek Basel AA 124.



Figure 6. Detail of the Jardin du Roi on the Île de la Cité in central Paris from Truchet and Hoyau's c. 1552-3 map of the city.

With the displacement of the Jardin du Roi, Robin had only one logical site in which to plant the black locust tree: the medical faculty's garden, which had been his responsibility since 1597.⁶ The teaching garden was centrally located between the Sorbonne, further south on the rue Saint-Jacques, and the Hôtel-Dieu hospital for the impoverished, which was across the Seine from the rue de la Bûcherie. Because the Université de Paris remained largely decentralized into the seventeenth century, the medical faculty had few if any

purpose-built structures in which to hold lectures and meetings. Instead, what existed was an ad hoc system in which academic gatherings were held in available buildings in the neighborhood, one of which was the church of Saint-Julien-le-Pauvre. The university's small teaching garden was bounded on one side by the rue de la Bûcherie and, on the other, by the church and the rue Galande, where many apothecary shops were also clustered.

Given that Robin's interests in plants ranged from the medicinal to the ornamental, the site of the faculty garden where he planted the first black locust tree became as critical to the emerging field of botany as it already was to academic medicine in Paris. Robin's—and eventually the faculty's—ambitions soon exceeded the circumscribed plot of land on the rue de la Bûcherie hemmed in by existing buildings and the river. Within the French kingdom, the Université de Montpellier already had an extensive botanic garden chartered by Henri IV in 1593 for the cultivation of simples, which attracted students from across Europe. Unlike Montpellier, however, Paris was the capital, a university city that, as the seat of the king and, increasingly the court, was also a royal city. That a city as important as Paris lacked an encyclopedic garden for the study of medicine and botany on the scale of the garden at Montpellier was the reason given by physician and anatomist Jean Riolan in his 1618 petition to the king for the creation of an expansive new Jardin Royal. The establishment of a royal botanic garden would, according to Riolan, enhance the university's prestige and be seen by Parisian subjects as a gesture of civic largesse and paternal benevolence:

You have a great opportunity in medicine, which is one of the most necessary sciences for your life, and the longevity of your subjects. The school of medicine founded in your Université de Paris needs a royal garden in which to place all the plants in the world that one could have.⁷

Riolan urged the Crown to follow the model established in the southern European university cities of Pisa, Bologna, and Padua of creating a comprehensive garden dedicated to the instruction and study of medicine, anatomy, pharmacy, and botany, a garden to serve as the primary repository for plant specimens acquired from all corners of the globe through the emerging French colonial empire.⁸

In July of 1626, Louis XIII issued a royal edict establishing in Paris a “jardin des plantes médicinales” in response to a renewed request submitted by two other royal physicians, Jean Héroard and Guy de La Brosse (Louis XIII 1626). La Brosse laid out a plan for the scale, specimens, plantation scheme, and personnel needed to maintain his ideal physic garden in *Dessein d'un jardin royal pour la culture des plantes médicinales à Paris*, published in 1628. When La Brosse was named the garden's first intendant, he realized many of the plans he had previously prescribed: the chosen site in the southeastern faubourg Saint-Victor was extensive and underdeveloped, with access to the River Seine but away from cesspools, and with an abundant source of fresh water flowing from the River Bièvre to the Seine (La Brosse 1628). The new Jardin du Roi was founded in 1635—the same year Cornut published his *Canadensium plantarum*—and officially opened to the medical faculty and public in 1640. The bird's-eye view rendering of the garden engraved by Frédéric Scalberge in 1636 is one of the earliest images of the garden that would soon become the preeminent site for experiential learning about the natural world in France (Figure 7). As *arboriste du roi*, Vespasien Robin was given the official post of *sous-démonstrateur des plantes* at the Jardin du Roi, where an offshoot of the original tree planted by his father in the small medical garden was among the first things he propagated (Louis XIII 1635).

During a visit to the Jardin du Roi in 1682, the chemist, apothecary, and physician Nicolas Lémery drew up a list of all the plants then growing in the garden. Lémery, who operated a successful apothecary shop where he also taught chemistry lessons in the rue Galande, directly in front of the church of Saint-Julien-le-Pauvre and the black locust tree planted by Robin earlier in the century, likely intended to use the list of plants in the Jardin du Roi as a resource against which to compare his shop's inventory. Among the plants Lémery catalogued in the Jardin du Roi was an “Acacia robinia. . .”. In Lémery's time, the tree was understood by Europeans to have no medicinal properties, yet the chemist still

recognized and identified the type. Like the name given to the tree by Cornut, Lémery used a name that tied the tree to fellow apothecary Robin while erasing any reference to a place of origin or sense of foreignness. In doing so, Lémery further naturalized the tree in French soil.

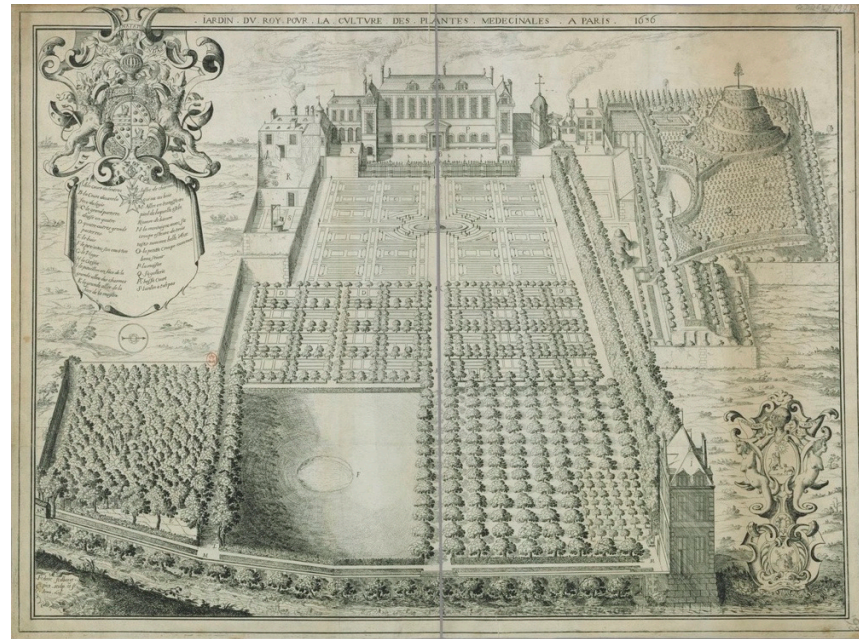


Figure 7. Frédéric Scalberge, *Jardin du Roy pour la culture des plantes médicinales, à Paris*, 1636, engraving. Bibliothèque nationale de France.

The oldest black locust tree in Paris now stands alone, in a space of neither–nor—neither within the medical faculty garden, which no longer exists, nor within the parameters of the Jardin des plantes, as the Jardin du Roi was renamed in the Revolutionary years of the late eighteenth century. It is among the last material traces of the seventeenth-century history of this corner of Paris that was once the center of academic medicine. The Paris *Robinia pseudoacacia* is a material vestige from the past that today appears out of place, a singular tree that postdates the small Jardin du Roi tended by Jean Robin on the Ile-de-la-Cité at the turn of the seventeenth century and that predates the more ambitious Jardin du Roi tended by his son.

3. Towards a Prehistory

What, then, is the pre-Robinian history of the Virginia tree growing in what was once the medical faculty’s teaching garden at the Université de Paris? Extensive genetic testing on North American and European black locust populations, each of which displays very slight regional variations, led a research team of geneticists and molecular biologists to conclude that “the black locust was more probably introduced to Europe from only a few populations located in a limited area of its native range in the northern part of the Appalachian Mountains”.⁹ Genetic testing would appear to corroborate Cornut’s history of the black locust as a tree introduced to Europe via the French gardener after whom he named it, which became the dominant narrative. But the black locust tree is not indigenous to the region of North America colonized by the French in the early seventeenth century. Because Jean Robin never crossed the Atlantic, he relied on intermediaries for the North American plants growing in his garden and that Cornut then published in *Canadensium plantarum*. When Cornut published his botanical in 1635, the French colonial presence in North America was scant, as Montréal had yet to be established and Québec was a settlement of barely a few hundred. To further complicate this timeline, the French temporarily surrendered Québec to the English in 1629, which, according to historian

Jacques Mathieu, means Robin must then have received his North American specimens earlier in the 1620s.¹⁰ The likeliest source for the first introduction of the black locust to Europe was John Tradescant, a London gardener, naturalist, curiosity collector, and plant hunter who was an investor in the Virginia Colony and knew Robin—the two gardeners having met in Paris in 1611 when Tradescant accompanied his patron, the Earl of Salisbury, on a plant purchasing trip (Pringle 1998, pp. 197–98). The first written record of the “*Locusta Virginiana arbor*” appears in Tradescant’s *Plantarum in horto Johannem Tradescanti nascentium catalogus*, a published list of plants growing in his South Lambeth garden in 1634 (Gunther 1922, p. 339). However, only a single copy of the *Plantarum in horto* exists today in the Magdalen College Library at Oxford, a fact that indicated to historian of science R. T. Gunther a highly limited print run and circulation that may never have exceeded Tradescant’s immediate social network (Gunther 1922, pp. 227, 334). Likely all European black locust trees have evolved from just a few North American seeds planted in the early seventeenth century, which suggests a single introduction spread from Tradescant in London to Robin in Paris, and eventually to a much wider network of gardeners and naturalists.

Tradescant was an active plant hunter who expanded his collection of living curiosities through exchanges and during his travels to Europe, North Africa, and Russia. The full history of the Paris black locust tree must include the means by which Tradescant acquired American plant specimens. In February of 1617, he invested £25 in the Virginia settlement of Captain Samuel Argall, to whom Tradescant was perhaps introduced through Captain John Smith.¹¹ A mariner and privateer, Argall had by 1617 already completed several trans-Atlantic voyages and spent time in the nascent Virginia Colony. Argall sought out encounters with Algonquin-speaking Indigenous peoples of the Virginia Tidewater region, notably the tribes affiliated with the Powhatan Confederacy, who paid tribute to the paramount chieftain, Wahunsenacawh (or Powhatan, as he was called by the English settlers). In a 1619 engraving published by Johann Theodor de Bry in his *Americæ* series, Argall, with armed Englishmen gathered behind him, is depicted sitting down with members of the Chickahominy [Figure 8].

The engraving’s caption suggests that the supposedly peaceable encounter was one in which the Chickahominy, as former subjects of King Powhatan, willingly subjected themselves to the English king by swearing an oath to Captain Argall. Argall is also credited with having orchestrated in 1613 the kidnapping and ransoming of Amonute (or Matoaka, more commonly known as Pocahontas), the daughter of the paramount Powhatan chieftain, in exchange for a more favorable trade agreement between the English and the Powhatan (Connor 1951, pp. 166–67; see also Fausz and *Dictionary of Virginia Biography* 2020). Amonute and her captor-husband, John Rolfe, were aboard Argall’s ship when he sailed to London in 1616 and again during his return trip to Virginia in March of 1617, though she died just as the ship left London, only a month after Tradescant invested his £25 in Argall’s plantation. Upon arriving at Point Comfort in May of 1617, Argall established his plantation and assumed the position of Deputy Governor of Virginia, which he held until he was forcibly removed and required to return to London in April of 1619. Before leaving his post in Virginia, however, Argall engineered another sinister episode in the early history of colonial America. On his order, an English ship, working in concert with a Dutch ship, intercepted the *San Juan Bautista* slave ship captained by Manuel Mendes de Acunha, en route from Angola to Veracruz. After intercepting the *San Juan Bautista* off the coast of Campeche (Mexico), the English ship sailed for Point Comfort where “20. and Odd Negroes” (<https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/twenty-and-odd-negroes-an-excerpt-from-a-letter-from-john-rolfe-to-sir-edwin-sandys-1619-1620/>, accessed on 15 August 2023) were made to disembark and were among the first enslaved Africans forced into abject servitude in colonial America.¹²

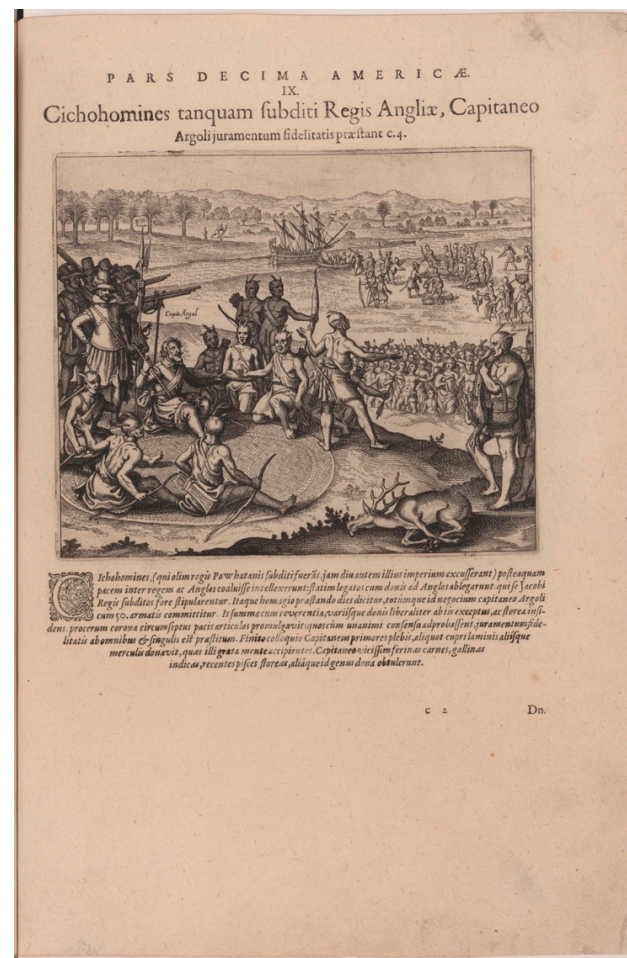


Figure 8. *Cichohomines tanquam subditi Regis Angliæ, Capitaneo Argoli juramentum fidelitatis præstant* published by Johann Theodor de Bry in *Americæ* (Oppenheim, 1619). John Carter Brown Library, 35311, Brown University. Courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library.

Aristocrats and merchant adventurers were not the only Europeans complicit in the colonization of America and the Atlantic slave trade. This, too, is part of the history of the European cultivation of black locust trees. Tradescant, an artisan-gardener, risked half his annual salary in the hopes of being the first to “discover” and introduce American plants to Europe. Therefore, he—and Robin by extension—must be written into this much larger and consequential narrative. Whether Tradescant expected to receive novel flora to add to his collection of curiosities or strike it rich by laying claim to raw materials of intrinsic value, his investment in Argall’s Virginia plantation was motivated by self-interest. When the disgraced Argall returned to London in 1619, he must have brought with him seeds and roots of plant specimens collected for Tradescant. Among those seeds was likely that of the black locust tree. The gardener sailed with Argall to Algeria in 1620, suggesting that he benefitted sufficiently from his previous investment in the captain to be willing to do so again.¹³

The earliest recorded ethnobotanical knowledge of Indigenous American uses of black locust wood in cultural and craft practices was written by European settlers and explorers. Among the very first is an account by William Strachey from his *Historie of Travaile into Virginia Britannia* (c. 1612), which was not published until the middle of the nineteenth century.¹⁴ Strachey, as Secretary of the Virginia Colony from 1609 to 1611, was primarily interested in colonial bioprospecting and the potential commodification of natural resources. The black locust appears in Strachey’s discussion of three Algonquin-speaking tribes: the “Nandsamund” (Nansemond), Warraskoyak, and “Weanock” (Weyanoke):

Their weapons for offence are bowes and arrows, and wodden swords; for defence, targets. The bowes are of some young plant, eyther of the locust-tree or of weech [witch hazel], which they bring to the forme of ours by the scraping of a shell, and give them strings of a staggs gutt, or thong of a deare's hide twisted (Strachey 1849, p. 105).

These three Tidewater-region tribes all lived along the Powhatan River (James River). Their settlements, along with the English settlements at Point Comfort and Jamestown, are illustrated on John Smith's 1608 map of Virginia (Figure 9).



Figure 9. John Smith and William Hole, Virginia (London, 1624). Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division.

The black locust grows almost everywhere in the world where it has been introduced, so well that in many places the species is now considered invasive. English settlers first encountered the tree in the part of Tidewater Virginia inhabited by tribes of the Powhatan Confederacy. At some point, the species was introduced to the eastern coastal region from slightly further south and west in the Appalachian Mountains, possibly through extensive Indigenous trade networks that existed before the arrival of Europeans. The Powhatan, for example, had established both local and long-range trade routes through which objects, both handmade and natural—including plants and seeds—were exchanged for purposes of diplomacy or gifted in acts of fealty (Stewart 1985, pp. 66–67). The introduction of the black locust to coastal Virginia from the Appalachian Mountains is an example of Indigenous interventions into the landscapes and ecosystems of North America. Such alterations to pre-colonial ecosystems were not uncommon “as a consequence of the development of agriculture or for other sociological reasons,” wrote historian Richard Grove in *Green Imperialism*, his important early contribution to the field of environmental history (Grove 1995, p. 7). European colonizers magnified and accelerated changes to the American landscape through further plant dispersals, deforestation, exploitation, and overcultivation. For Grove, the ecological changes wrought by Europeans were not wholly destructive. Interest in and knowledge about American ecosystems prompted new scientific thinking about their conservation and preservation, and what Grove framed as an example

of early modern environmentalism. Nevertheless, the dissemination of the black locust to ecosystems beyond the North American continent in the early seventeenth century by European settler colonists proved an indelible act.

Among the tribes who traded with the Powhatan were the Cherokee, their neighbors to the south in what today is the southeastern United States and for whom sturdy black locust wood was equally important to bow making. The English naturalist John Lawson, who traveled through the Carolinas and Virginia at the turn of the eighteenth century, wrote in his *New Voyage to Carolina* (London, 1709) that the black locust “bears a leaf nearest the Liquorice-Plant. ‘Tis a pretty tall Tree. Of this the Indians make their choicest Bows, it being very tough and flexible”. (Lawson 1709, p. 97). Writing three decades later from North Carolina, Irish physician John Brickell added to his description of the black locust a few words about the tree’s virtues and uses, namely that its cuds contained a honey-like substance that could be used to sweeten medicines (Brickell 1737, p. 71). Beyond craft, the black locust had historically been used in Indigenous medicine, particularly by the Cherokee, who used the bark to cure toothaches and chewed root bark as an emetic (Hamel and Chiltoskey 1975, p. 43). Of the tree’s medicinal uses, European explorer-colonizers, including Lawson and Brickell, remained ignorant. This is but one example of an existing body of Indigenous knowledge that did not travel across the Atlantic when the first black locust trees were taken to Europe.

The Cherokee continued the practice of making bows from black locust wood until they were forcibly removed from their ancestral homeland in the American Southeast following the passing in 1830 of the “Indian Removal Act” by the United States Government. Along with other Indigenous nations, the Cherokee were subjected to genocide; survivors were forced to endure the Trail of Tears and resettle in the newly designated Indian Territory west of the Mississippi River. There, in the region that now encompasses Oklahoma and neighboring states, the Cherokee encountered a native tree that grew in abundance and whose harder wood was even better suited for making bows—the Osage orange (*Maclura pomifera* Raf.), also known by the common name *bois d’arc* (bow-wood) (Vick 2011, p. 410). After their forced displacement from the southeast and relocation to Indian Territory, the Cherokee adapted their craft practices to the natural resources they found in this new landscape with its own distinct flora. The history of Cherokee material adaptation—of making bows first from the wood of black locust and then Osage orange trees—continues to be passed down orally, from generation to generation. Noel Grayson, a contemporary Cherokee bow maker working in heritage materials and techniques, remains active in perpetuating Cherokee histories of the natural world. Grayson has been designated a Cherokee National Treasure, an honor bestowed to tribal citizens who preserve Cherokee art, culture, and traditions. Much like the UNESCO designation, Grayson is a guardian of Cherokee “intangible cultural heritage”. In a video interview produced for OsiyoTV in 2020, Grayson discussed the weight of the legacy he carries as a heritage maker and cultural knowledge disseminator:

I share knowledge because knowledge [. . .], back in the day we didn’t place a value on money, on gold, on silver. We had all that stuff back in the Southeast but [they were] just too soft a metal for us to use. But what we did treasure, what was a treasure to us was knowledge. That knowledge got passed down (OsiyoTV: *Voices of the Cherokee People* 2020).

In my personal correspondence with Grayson, he recounted his story of learning to make bows from black locust wood as a child. His father told him how to select the best wood by following growth rings, cutting the desired shape, and bending the limbs evenly to make a bow, but he did not show him through demonstration. Both his father and mother insisted that he call the locust tree by the Cherokee name *galiwā’dī*.¹⁵ What we call things matters. Names not only tell stories, but they also hold the potential to flatten history, erase history, or even rewrite history.

It is not the case that the *Robinia pseudoacacia* has no prehistory. Rather, its prehistory has been overwritten by a narrative of “New World” discovery and of a curiosity introduced

to European soil. The story of Jean Robin's successful cultivation of an American tree in Paris—a history first recorded in the seventeenth century and one commemorated in the tree's current scientific name—has become naturalized over time with, until now, little if any recognition of the tree's interrelated histories of botany, bioprospecting, settler colonialism, and the Atlantic slave trade. In thinking about cultural values, the stories we choose to perpetuate, and the things we preserve, it is little wonder that the Paris tree has become an object of veneration. Even if the species is common and its everyday existence banal, this one ancient tree in particular has persisted. Perhaps there are old-growth specimens in North America that are even more ancient, but, even if so, their existence or discovery would do little to change the narrative of the Paris tree as the oldest to have been purposefully planted and written into history. The tree has been imbued with cultural significance. It is a memorial—to Jean Robin, to early modern European “discovery” and ingenuity, to a medical garden that no longer exists, and to a royal botanic garden that does but in altered form. The story of this single tree in Paris has become the story of a species, which makes its environmental and cultural histories—colloquial histories that get told and written histories that get published—anything but immaterial.

Funding: This research was funded by Oak Spring Garden Foundation.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Acknowledgments: For their critical insights and suggestions, the author wishes to thank Leigha McReynolds, the staff at the Oak Spring Garden Library, special issue editors Lisa Pon and Kate van Orden, and the two anonymous reviewers for this journal.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

¹ Landscape tour with Oak Spring Garden Foundation ecologist Rea Manderino (1 June 2023).

² UNESCO (2003), the author is grateful to Kate van Orden for bringing this connection to her attention.

³ “America Septentrionalis nec huius generis arbore caret quæ etiam translate in hortos nostros non infelicitèr adolescit: adeo ut intuentes floris elegantia, foliorumque ordine concinno plurimum oblectet”. (Cornut 1635, p. 173). “L’Amérique septentrionale ne manque pas d’arbres de ce genre, qui, une fois transplantés dans nos jardins [botaniques], y réussissent fort bien, à tel point qu’ils charment l’œil par la beauté de leurs fleurs et la disposition régulière des feuilles”. As translated from the Latin by André Daviault in (Mathieu 1998, p. 311).

⁴ Mathieu, 65.

⁵ Universitätsbibliothek Basel (AA 124).

⁶ In 1568, the medical faculty used student fees to purchase property at the intersection of the rue des Rats (today rue de l’Hôtel Colbert) and the rue de la Bûcherie that was transformed into the teaching garden (Vons 2012, n96).

⁷ Riolan (1618, p. 8) “Vous avez une belle occasion qui se presente en la Médecine, qui est une science de plus nécessaire pour vostre vie, et la conservation de vos sujets. L’Eschole de Médecine fondée en vostre Université de Paris, a besoin d’un Jardin Royal, pour y placer toutes les plantes du monde que l’on pourroit avoir”.

⁸ For more on the earliest French colonizers of North America who collected plant specimens to send back to Europe, see (Parsons 2018; Mathieu and Asselin 2017).

⁹ Boutteiller, Verdi, Aikio, et al., 2409.

¹⁰ Mathieu, 3–5.

¹¹ Brown (1891, vol. II, p. 1032), Smith bequeathed books from his library to Tradescant in 1631.

¹² Sluiter (1997), this quotation comes from a letter written by John Rolfe to Sir Edwin Sandys in January of 1620. The historic episode recounted here is also the point of departure for the New York Times Magazine’s 1619 Project (Hannah-Jones 2019).

¹³ Brown (1891, vol. II, p. 1032).

¹⁴ Two manuscript copies of William Strachey’s *Historie of Travaile of Virginia* exist, one in the Ashmole manuscripts in Bodleian and the other in the British Library. Strachey’s account of Virginia and its inhabitants was never published in his lifetime.

¹⁵ Email exchange with the author, 20 July 2023.

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