

Carroll County Times "Carroll's Yesteryears" Articles

"Dr. Arthur Tracey"

Carroll County Times article for 10 January 1993

By Joe Getty

A recent development in the field of historic preservation has been the use of dendrochronology to date old buildings. This is a scientific process of dating by analyzing the tree rings in a wood sample from an old building against data compiled from trees in the same locality. While this is considered new technology nationwide, a Carroll County amateur historian was, in fact, using these same theories for dating old buildings over 40 years ago.

During the 1940s, Dr. Arthur G. Tracey of Hampstead developed profiles of tree growth in this region to assist in his pioneering work to document the early history of Carroll County and Western Maryland. He produced "yardsticks" that showed the tree rings from the bark to the heart of the tree on which he identified the decades by counting back from the year the tree was cut down.

His own description of the use of tree rings for dating appeared in several newspaper articles:

"In every community there is a typical pattern of seasons recorded in the rings of the trees. These vary slightly in different trees, depending on the moisture each tree obtains. A white oak tree that grew close to water, for example, would not be a dependable gauge of the seasons.

"But a white oak tree that grew on a dry knoll, far away from any underground spring, would tell the pattern accurately. In dry years its rings would have grown narrow and close together. In wet years, it rings would have grown wide and far apart.

"About the oldest tree I've found in Carroll county dates to 1726. To increase my accuracy I make many yardsticks from different parts of the county. On all of the yardsticks I've made, the seasonal pattern indicates that 1780 to 1790 was a ten-year dry period. This makes a good starting point for measuring the age of old houses.

The dating of houses through dendrochronology was just a small part of Dr. Tracey's investigations into the earliest periods of Carroll County history. Dr. Tracey is being recognized as part of the Historical Society's Legacy Campaign for his many contributions towards documenting the history of settlement of Carroll County.

Dr. Tracey also served in a prominent leadership role at the Historical Society. Following the death of the first president, Senator J. David Baile, he assumed the presidency and his administration was marked by his efforts to interest the entire county in collecting and preserving artifacts of lasting importance.

He and his daughter, Dr. Grace Tracey, set examples with their pioneering research of Western Maryland land patents and local history. Dr. Tracey also sought to expand the membership by holding district meetings and tours throughout the county. His efforts broadened the Historical Society's mission as an organization dedicated to preserving the history of the entire county. Following his death in 1960, his rich collection of research materials, manuscripts and artifacts were donated to the Historical Society.

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One of Dr. Tracey's tree-ring "yardsticks" will be on display when the Historical Society hosts an exhibit and reception in honor of Carroll County's 156th anniversary on Tuesday, January 19th. The exhibit will feature architectural artifacts from the Historical Society's collection. The reception will be from 4:00 to 6:00 p.m. in the Shriver-Weybright Auditorium, 210 East Main Street, Westminster. Call 848-6494 for information.

Photo Caption: Dr. Arthur G. Tracey displays a tree-ring "yardstick" that he developed to help date old buildings in Carroll County. Historical Society of Carroll County Collection.