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## Ode to the oak

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# Ode to the oak



**F**urman is justly famous for its beauty — and its noble trees. The campus would be sterile and lifeless without them.

The trees, most of them planted 50 years ago, define and dignify the campus. Their stunning palette of leaves, each a subtly different shade of green, excites the eye and refracts the light.

Although more than 100 different types of trees grace Furman's 800 acres, the oaks stand out. No tree ages more gracefully than oaks; they often live more than 100 years. An elegant brigade of half-century-old oaks lines Furman Mall and envelops us in their protective embrace. Their thick-waisted trunks support huge canopies of leafed branches that shade our days and inspire our reflections.

Richard Webel, the Long Island landscape architect who designed the "new" Furman campus, featured oak trees for several reasons. Oaks have long been symbols of reverence. The earliest humans believed that the oak was the first tree created by God. The ancient Greeks, Romans, Norse, Celts and Hebrews all viewed oak trees as sacred symbols. When Isaiah prophesied the redemption of Israel, he predicted that they "will be called oaks of righteousness, the plantings of the Lord, to display his glory."

Oaks continue to inspire an almost spiritual devotion. Their magisterial stature draws attention to forces much greater than our own.

In planning the campus, Webel also sought to re-create the setting of an English park, and oak trees have long been a central feature of Britain's history and culture. In medieval England oak symbolized strength, endurance and good character. The most virtuous knights (paladins) were said to have "hearts of oak."

Today the oak is also the most popular choice of Americans, according to the National Arbor Day Foundation. The redwood is a distant second. One reason oak trees are so popular is that they grow just about everywhere. They are abundant

throughout North America, Europe and Asia, with more than 400 species world-wide and more than 40 varieties in the eastern United States.

For thousands of years, oaks have provided many of the raw materials for human existence. Oak acorns were among the first foods eaten by people, and oak timbers were used to build houses, furniture, bridges, wagons, barrels and ships. Oak, of course, is one of the best sources of firewood. For centuries surveyors have used oak trees as landmarks because they know that oaks will live a long time.

The Furman campus features trees native to the Piedmont: white oak, water oak, willow oak, black oak, Southern red oak, scarlet oak, post oak and black jack oak. According to biology professor Joe Pollard, however, three oak species on campus are not indigenous: live oaks, pin oaks and Chinese evergreen oaks. Live oaks, planted around the library and dining hall, are native to the Lowcountry and the coastal plains throughout the South. Pin oak is a Midwestern species but is often planted outside its native range as an ornamental. There are also two large Chinese evergreen oaks in the Japanese Garden.

Whatever the species of oak, their majestic branches and deep roots help protect and anchor us. They also help elevate our gaze and lift our spirits. Not as tall as redwoods, as massive as sycamores or as showy as beeches, oaks are resilient and persistent, adaptable and pervasive. Their patient soaring provides a tonic reminder for us to slow down our daily frenzy.

Oaks bridge earth and sky, linking earthly reality with transcendent truths beyond our grasp and understanding. We all grow taller by walking among them.

— David Shi '73  
President

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