

The Chinese Hackberry Tree Witnessing a Century of Change

About the Chinese Hackberry

The Chinese hackberry (*Celtis sinensis*) is native to China, Korea, and Japan, where it is often found on forested slopes. It is a member of the hemp family (*Cannabaceae*), along with marijuana and hops.

One of the prettiest shade trees in Japan, suitable for avenues or private gardens, parks, etc. . . . It should be tried in the Southwest as a shade tree.

—David Fairchild, Agricultural Explorer,
U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1903

This tree has seen many changes.

Planted around 1905 on the grounds of what was then the U.S. Patent Office Building, it has slowly grown as the city has developed and transformed around it.

A rare, large, local specimen of a Chinese hackberry (*Celtis sinensis*), it has witnessed the relocation of Chinatown from its original site on Pennsylvania Avenue; rioting, looting, and burning during the 1968 riots; the opening of the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery and American Art Museum; the rise of Chinatown as a major entertainment and sports destination; and many other momentous events in the history of our nation's capital.

About Smithsonian Gardens

Smithsonian Gardens is a vital and vibrant part of the Smithsonian Institution and an American Alliance of Museums-accredited museum. Our gardens are outdoor gallery spaces that extend the Smithsonian's museum experience in a public garden setting.

A Living Collection

This tree is one of nearly 2,000 specimens that form the Smithsonian Gardens Tree Collection, located throughout Smithsonian museum grounds and gardens.

Today

At more than 115 years old, the Chinese hackberry remains healthy and strong, with a trunk diameter of nearly four feet. Who knows what it will witness in years to come?

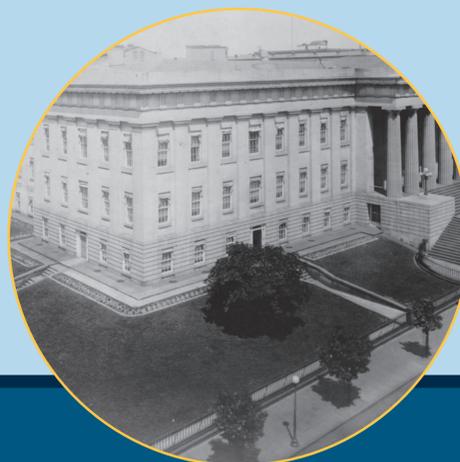


Washington, D.C. in 1905

- Teddy Roosevelt was president.
- D.C. had a population of around 300,000 people (compared to around 700,000 people in 2019).
- Automobiles had only been on the streets for a few years.
- Much of the city was still lit by gas lamps.
- Many commuters got around by streetcar.

Left: Looking west down F Street from the Patent Office Building, circa 1909, showing gas lamps and streetcars.

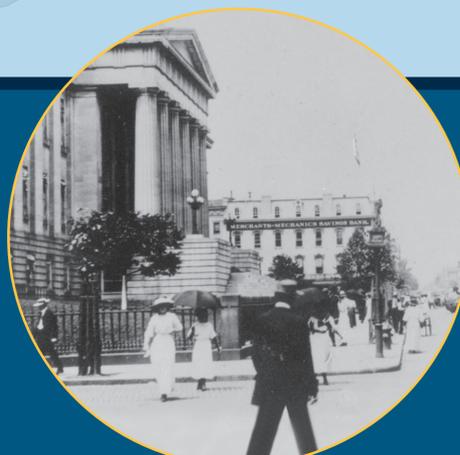
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ca. 1920

The building served as the U.S. Patent Office until 1932. The Chinese hackberry is pictured at center.

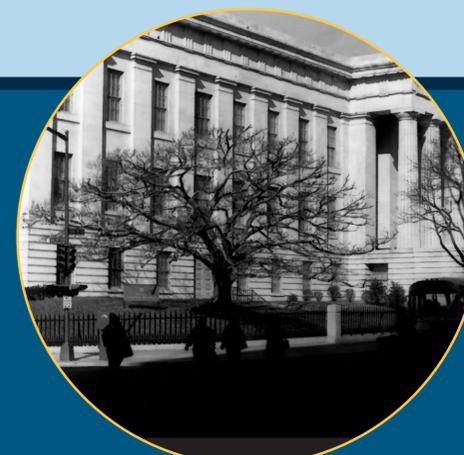
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ca. 1910

The U.S. Patent Office Building, built in 1836, was one of the first federal buildings in Washington, D.C. The Chinese hackberry is pictured on the left.

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ca. 1971

The Smithsonian acquired the former Patent Office Building in 1962. After extensive interior renovation, the National Portrait Gallery and the Smithsonian American Art Museum opened to the public in 1968. The Chinese hackberry is pictured at center.

National Park Service. W. Brown Morton, III, photographer