



Yellowwood Grove, Paynters Hill, Hamilton Parish



A Yellowwood tree in bud. Courtesy of Alison Copeland.

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We often include articles about a building at risk. This month we include instead an article about a rare group of trees on Paynters Hill which have been documented for over 150 years and which are now at great risk.

In 1872 Governor John Henry Lefroy measured a Yellowwood tree on Paynters Hill in Hamilton Parish. In 1912 it was measured again, perhaps by Nathaniel Lord Britton who wrote Bermuda's first full botanical handbook, and had only increased three inches in girth in 40 years. These slow-growing trees were then recognised as extremely rare and important and one of the few places they flourished was Paynters Hill.

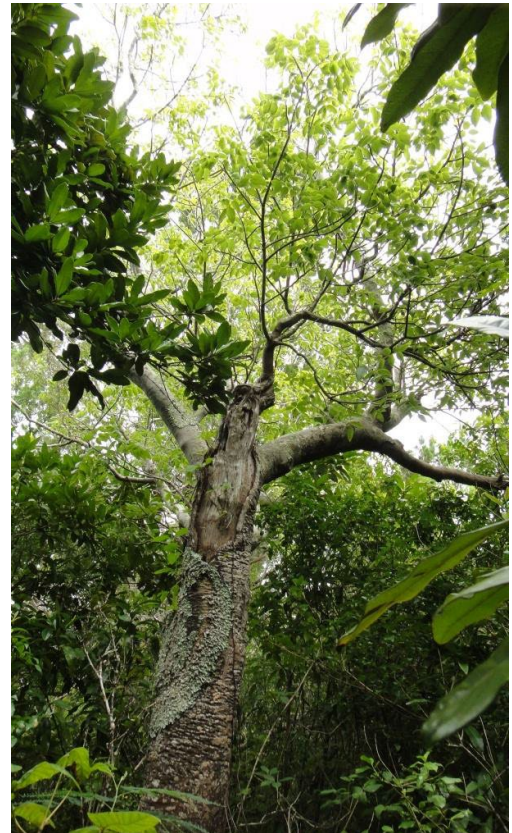
The Yellowwood was common when Bermuda was settled but within a



few years was brought to near extinction because of its valuable timber. Today it is listed as critically at risk. The greatest number still grow on Paynters Hill in a 6.6 acre area of Government Nature Reserve.

An impressive paper, “Recovery Plan for the Yellow Wood Tree”, was prepared by the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) in 2016. It listed all the mature Yellowwoods then known and confirmed that their primary area was still Paynters Hill. It even included a photograph of the tree measured by Governor Lefroy and gave its measurements when it was measured again by Hubert Jones in the 1970s – it had hardly grown since 1912. The paper also confirmed that there are Tree Protection Orders on 16 of the most mature trees in the area. So in theory they are well protected. However, the reality is a different story.

The Paynters Hill Yellowwood grove was mapped by DENR in January 2019 and at that time, three of the protected trees were found to be dead, including the Lefroy Yellowwood. This precious grove of trees continues to be under threat for a variety of reasons. One of the points the Recovery Plan made was that the tree is susceptible to overgrowing by invasive species. For many years the DENR periodically cleared around the trees but at some point this work stopped due to cut-back and underfunding, and the whole area has become heavily overgrown. This prevents this slow-growing tree from successfully reproducing, as seedlings get crowded out and overshadowed. In addition, there is no demarcation or signage for the nature reserve and vandals have recently been in the area cutting trees (though fortunately not the



The tree believed to have been measured by Governor Lefroy in 1872 and photographed in 2012. Courtesy of Alison Copeland.



Yellowwoods themselves).

Worst of all, the 2011 Special Development Order for Tucker's Point has allowed development too close to the trees. The buffer zone of vegetation that served as a windbreak protecting the trees has been cut down and already the remaining trees are not looking as healthy as they once were.

Recently, the Minister of Works and Engineering announced that the lookout tower on the top of Paynters Hill is going to be demolished. It is unclear what if any measures have been put in place to ensure that the nearby Yellowwood grove will be carefully protected during the demolition.

As far as is known, there is no Conservation Management Plan for this Government nature reserve that is home to such an important piece of Bermuda's natural heritage. It is high time that appropriate protections are put in place and the necessary care is taken of these special trees, and that the Recovery Plan for the species is dusted off and implemented.

Sources: *Flora of Bermuda*, Nathaniel Lord Britton, first printed 1918, facsimile printed 1965; Protected Species Amendment Order 2016 BR 4 / 2016; *Recovery Plan for the Yellow Wood Tree *Zanthoxylum flavum*, in Bermuda*, DENR 2016. Many thanks to Alison Copeland for advice and photographs.