

The Mystery of the Market Street Beech Tree

By Robert Dunkelberger



*The Market Street beech tree on its final full day, June 24, 2025.
Recently broken branches can be seen on the grass at both sides.*

The Town of Bloomsburg lost a more than century-long resident on June 25, 2025, the beech tree located at the northwest corner of Market and West Third streets. It had been a landmark for generations and, aside from the linden tree that for possibly 150 years had been at Market Square, was the most recognizable tree in the community.

Yet for all its notoriety and prominent location, in recent decades several questions concerning the tree have yet to be definitively answered: What kind of beech is it, when was the tree planted, and by whom? This article will attempt to answer these questions.

First, a brief history of the site of the tree and the nearby mansion. At the northwest corner of Market and West Third streets was a family home, the longtime residence of carriage maker Morris Sloan, which by the 1890s was serving as a boarding house. Then to the north were buildings associated with the business that for many years had manufactured and repaired buggies, carriages, sleighs, and wagons, run by Morris and his brother Charles Sloan. The last two structures on Market up to Pine Avenue were the homes of their sister Sarah Sloan and at the corner, of Charles. By 1901, the carriage works had been closed for years and the area had a disreputable look, referred to by the *Columbian* newspaper as an eyesore.

It was therefore a relief to the community when that May, 34-year-old Edward B. Tustin, cashier of the First National Bank, purchased much of the block for a grand residence. This took six property transactions in 1901 and 1902, from the Drinker, Hughes, and Sloan families, at a total cost of \$20,800. All lots were included except for Charles' home. The full story of Edward Tustin, his family, and the mansion is suitable for a book, but this article will only include a brief summation in order to provide background on the tree.

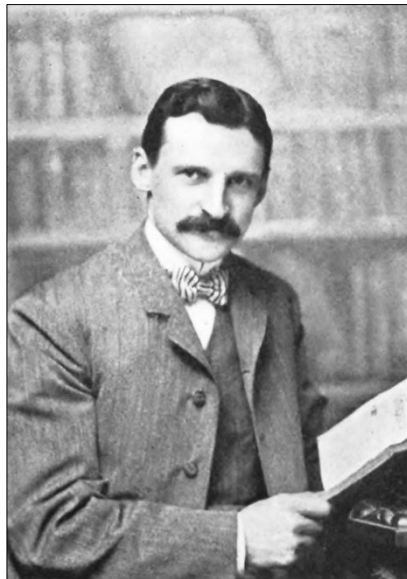


The image at upper left (taken from the 1896 Sanford insurance maps of Bloomsburg on the Penn State library's website), shows the block bounded at right by Market Street, bottom by West Third, left by Murray Avenue, and the top by Pine. On the map the Drinker residence is at lower left and the boarding house (seen in the photo at upper right, taken early in 1896) is at the lower righthand corner. The buildings of the Sloan carriage works are nearly all located on the street front along Market. On the map's upper righthand corner are the two homes owned by the Sloan family.

Work soon began on tearing down the carriage works, followed by the foundation being laid for the mansion. In 1902 the boarding house, the eventual site of the beech tree, was taken down to open up the corner. Tustin's grand mansion ended up taking five full years to complete. It was not until July 16, 1906, that the *Morning Press* announced Tustin had moved into his new residence on Market Street, and even then interior decorators were still busy until the end of the year. The total cost of the work was said to have been around \$250,000, in today's money nearly nine million dollars.

How could Tustin have afforded to build such a palatial residence? His father, the Reverend J. P. (Joseph Phillips) Tustin, had been cashier at the First National Bank from its founding in 1864 until his death in 1892. Edward (who started as teller in 1887) took over the cashier position for a decade, then was named vice-president in 1902. In addition, he was a director of numerous companies but most importantly, dealt heavily in the stock market and in speculation. This involved numerous mining companies located in the American Southwest and Mexico.

It is unclear how much money Tustin actually made from all his financial activities, which involved constant travel to and from New York City. It all began to unravel, however, less than a year after the mansion was completed. Tustin became disaffiliated from the bank, the Panic that took place in October 1907 drove down the stock market, and the hopes of wealth from the mining companies evaporated. These factors combined to greatly diminish Tustin's wealth and credit. Maintaining his extravagant lifestyle, and the mansion, eventually became impossible.



Edward B. Tustin in 1901, the year he set in motion the events that led to the construction of the greatest mansion Bloomsburg had or would ever see.

In April 1910 the residence was to be sold at a Sheriff's sale, which was averted when a settlement was reached with creditors. But in November 1911, Tustin was forced to file for bankruptcy, owing nearly \$400,000 (almost \$13.7 million in today's money), and a year later in December 1912, the delayed sale was held and his dream home lost.

By this time Tustin had moved to New Jersey to continue his financial dealings in New York City. His wife Helen and their four sons would eventually follow, ending up along the shore in Ocean Grove. The last two to go were the middle brothers, wrapping up their studies at the Bloomsburg State Normal School's model school. They withdrew on December 19, 1913, leaving Bloomsburg permanently for New Jersey.



A postcard view of the mansion and side yard, probably taken around 1907. It shows the original look of the landscaping, with trees along the curbs, a hedge at the sidewalk, bushes along the mansion's foundation, and grass. This is the way it would remain, other than becoming overgrown, for 14 years.

The new owner of the mansion, who had acquired it for \$16,000—nearly \$5,000 less than just the land and former buildings had cost Tustin—was 37-year-old Henry “Harry” Phillip Field, Jr. of Berwick. The name will not mean much to most people and it is through his wife that one can see how Field acquired the financial resources to purchase the Tustin home. She was Katherine Jackson, whose grandfather was Mordecai Jackson of the Jackson and Woodin Manufacturing Company, which in 1899 merged with the American Car & Foundry corporation.

In April 1899, Field came to Berwick to work at the plant and in less than a year became engaged to Katherine. After her father, Frank Jackson, died in 1909, she inherited his share of the company. In the meantime, Field worked at the plant as an engineer and served as a director of the First National Bank of Berwick.

The reason Field purchased the mansion can be traced back to the lawsuits that instigated the Sheriff's sales. Field filed the suits in his role as administrator of the estate of his father-in-law. Frank Jackson must have been one of Tustin's creditors and Field was looking to get something back. Instead, he purchased the property. At the time Tustin filed for bankruptcy in 1911, it was revealed he owed Field, or probably more accurately the Jackson estate, \$18,500.

What Field would end up doing with the former Tustin mansion was essentially nothing, even though he owned it for seven and a half years. This situation of neglect might have gone on indefinitely if not for the April 6, 1917, entry of the United States into the First World War. One month later Field gave use of the mansion to the local chapter of the Red Cross to serve as its headquarters for the duration of hostilities.

In preparation for the Red Cross moving in, its female volunteers gave the mansion's interior what it had not had for years, a thorough cleaning, while the men did the same to the grounds. It was on May 14 that Charles Dillon had a large crew begin placing the lawn around the mansion "in first class condition." On the 17th the interior was scrubbed clean by ten women after an all-day frolic, helping the home regain much of its original beauty.

The Red Cross remained through October 1918, during which time the Town's groundskeepers took care of the property. In 1919, to prevent the lawns from once again becoming unsightly, a public subscription was raised to keep the grass cut. Owners of property at this time were not required to maintain them and Field did not. So by 1919 the mansion was again unoccupied and the grounds looked much the same as they had since the Tustin family moved in during the summer of 1906. The impetus for any change was a new owner, which finally occurred in 1920.

The property was not purchased by anyone from Bloomsburg, however. Instead, he was a dentist, Dr. Arthur W. S. Loewen of Tamaqua. Although he would not be moving to Bloomsburg, the property was to be used by his two sons: Richard a surgeon and James a dentist. A large amount of rehabilitation and restoration work was done beginning in August 1920, first to the mansion's exterior and over the course of the winter to the interior, which had suffered greatly during the time the building was vacant.

It was in April 1921 that work began on the lawn and grounds. As the *Morning Press* reported on April 27, "The work of improving the property of Dr. Loewen, the former Tustin mansion, by contractor W. E. Geisinger, is steadily continuing. The lawn is beginning to get beautiful." It had earlier been reported this work on the grounds would include "re-terracing and re-grading the lawn."

As for the mansion, in addition to part of it being used as a residence for members of the Loewen family, the rest was to become a private hospital. To provide office space for the brothers, a new building was constructed at the corner of Market and Pine. This was after the last structure on the block other than the mansion, the former Charles Sloan residence, had been purchased and torn down. A one-story structure was built in the second half of 1921.

Now come the three questions surrounding the beech tree. First, was it a Japanese split beech? An Internet search reveals nothing on Japanese split beeches, contemporary to this time period or later. So where did this information come from? A search of the *Morning Press* shows the first reference to the "Japanese Split Beech" was an unattributed statement in a "Tracking Yesterday" column by Ted Fenstermacher, published on June 6, 1983. In the column he stated, "The tree on the front corner of the lawn is a Japanese split beech. When it was planted there were only three such trees in the United States." A more reliable source is an arborist who worked on the tree in 2005 and felt it was actually a fern-leaf beech, whose leaves are very similar to the Market Street tree.



The restored mansion and to the right the new medical building, c.1922. The new landscaping ordered by Loewen removed the hedge and transplanted a young beech tree, which can be seen at center. Photograph by Harry Keller.

The two remaining questions concern when the tree was planted and by whom. A marker placed along the sidewalk in the 1990s, besides repeating Fenstermacher's assertion on the Japanese split beech, stated "This tree was planted about 1910 by Edward Tustin, owner of the Tustin Mansion which is now the home of the Bloomsburg Elks." Logic dictates there is no reason why Tustin would have redone the newly installed landscaping around the home in 1910 or at any other time. Beginning in 1907 he was in serious financial difficulties and the last thing he would have done was spend money on a tree. It was also in 1910 when he first faced having to sell the mansion because of his debts, so why landscape for a new owner?

In addition to the financial reason for Tustin not planting the beech tree before his property was sold at the end of 1912, there is the visual evidence. A number of picture postcards showing the Tustin residence, often in conjunction with the Methodist Episcopal church to the south, were taken from approximately 1905 to 1915. The original landscaping can be seen, which consisted of a hedge at the sidewalk, bushes, and grass. The only trees in sight were the ones growing between the curb and the sidewalk. There is nothing else and certainly no beech tree in a prominent location at the southeast corner of the property.

In addition, a photograph was taken in the fall of 1915 by Harry Keller, uncle to future wild animal trainer George Keller, when Market Street was being prepared for paving. It showed the area to be uncared for and wildly overgrown, both the hedge and especially the bushes, demonstrating Henry Field had not taken care of the property. It is a virtual certainty he had no reason or desire to redo the landscaping by planting the beech tree. The Red Cross volunteers of 1917 had no incentive

either, since they did not own the property and merely returned the bushes and hedge to a more respectable state.

The individual who had the money and incentive to relandscape the area around the mansion was Dr. Arthur W. S. Loewen. In addition, the lawn was re-terraced and graded. This could not have been done if a beech tree were already there. It is my firm belief, based on all currently known facts, even though I have not found it explicitly stated, that the historic beech tree was planted in its location at the southwest corner of Market and West Third streets in the spring of 1921. Its actual age is another matter, since it was transplanted to the site after it had reached some level of maturity elsewhere.



The mature beech tree, seen in a photograph taken on June 17, 2018, by William Fischer, Jr., of Scranton. In 2005 the tree was measured as being 45 feet in height with a diameter of 42 feet.

The property was purchased by the Bloomsburg Elks in March 1923, and they remained there for nearly 80 years until it was sold in 2002. Twenty years ago on May 18, 2005, the current technology center was dedicated. During all this time, the beech tree continued to grow and grow. It dominated its corner on Market Street and towered over nearly all nearby trees.

Then in 2021, 100 years after being planted, the unthinkable happened. A fungus attacked the beech. The extensive foliage thinned out, and once solid, healthy branches died. These were cut out in an effort to save the tree, causing it to continually shrink in size. The tree grew more brittle, with high winds causing more branches, even large ones, to break off. Then, in mid-June 2025, two more branches fell and it became apparent that the beech finally had to be taken down. After just over 104 years at Market and West Third streets, the Loewen fern-leaf beech, as the Market Square linden tree had done in 1962, passed into history.