THE WYE OAK DESK

Governor Martin O'Malley shows the Wye Oak desk to students from Our Lady of Lourdes School.

TEXT OF WYE OAK DESK COMMEMORATIVE PLAQUE

The Great Seal of Maryland

THE WYE OAK DESK

A Legacy Desk for Maryland

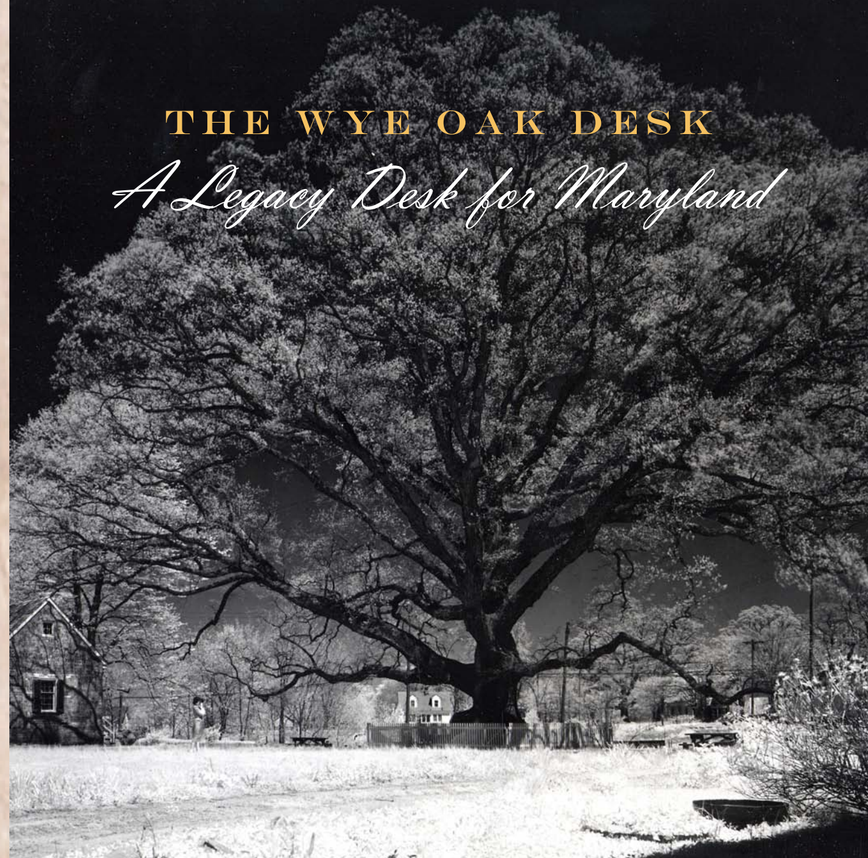
This desk was created in 2004 from the wood of the Wye Oak, Maryland's Champion White Oak, which fell on June 6, 2002. It was made possible through the generous support of The Dorothy L. and Henry A. Rosenberg, Jr. Foundation, Inc. on behalf of the Rosenberg family and was presented to the state on November 18, 2004 to be used by the governors of Maryland.

Made by:
James McMartin and James Beggins
of McMartin & Beggins Furniture Makers, Inc., Saint Michaels, Maryland

Under the supervision of the Maryland Commission on Artistic Property
of the Maryland State Archives

With assistance from the Forest Service of the Department of Natural Resources

The Great Seal of Maryland, 1794-1817
Designed especially for Maryland in 1794
by Maryland artist Charles Willson Peale



The Wye Oak

When the venerable Wye Oak fell during a thunderstorm on June 6, 2002, it was mourned throughout Maryland and the nation. It was one of the most historic trees in Maryland, along with the Liberty Tree which had to be removed from the campus of St. John's College in 1999.

The Wye Oak had stood for some 460 years on the Eastern Shore, witness to all of Maryland's colonial and post-colonial history. When the *Ark* and *Dove* landed at St. Clement's Island in 1634, the great tree was already 100 years old. Native Americans, believed to be the Wiccomisses, lived and hunted in the area, and the Choptank Trail, which eventually became a major route in the development of the Eastern Shore, was nearby.

The tree was owned by a succession of private owners over the centuries and was purchased by the state in 1939. In 1941, the white oak was declared the Maryland State Tree, and the Wye Oak was long recognized as the largest white oak in the United States.

Wye Oak Facts

- Location: Wye Oak State Park, Wye Mills, Talbot County
- Date it fell: June 6, 2002
- Age: Approximately 460 years
- Height: 96 feet
- Circumference of trunk: 32 feet
- Diameter of trunk: 10 feet
- Spread of crown: 119 feet
- The crown covered one-third of an acre
- Until it fell, it was the oldest and largest white oak in the U.S.
- The white oak (Quercus alba) was declared the Maryland State Tree in 1941

Jim McMartin selecting pieces of the Wye Oak for the desk.

*Cover photograph by Marion E. Warren. *Photograph by Richard A. K. Dorbin, Paragon Light, Inc.*

A Legacy Desk for Maryland's Governors

After the Wye Oak fell, the massive amount of wood, including the bole (trunk), was immediately moved into storage in state facilities. As part of the process of preserving the remains of the tree, the Department of Natural Resources, the Department of Agriculture, and the Department of General Services worked together to make sure that the wood was secured and thoroughly inventoried, including tagging and numbering each piece.

Among many suggestions made for how the wood should be used, one of the most frequently mentioned was that a significant piece of furniture should be created for the State House, including a desk for the governor. Research by the staff of the State Archives determined that the desk currently in use in the governor's office had no historical or artistic significance. Therefore, a new desk made from the wood of the Wye Oak would be a most fitting use for the wood of this venerable tree.

*Jim Beggins laying out a veneered panel.**

*Jim McMartin handcutting dovetail joints.**

In the spring of 2003, Baltimore businessman Henry A. Rosenberg, Jr. agreed to underwrite the construction of the desk and two cabinetmakers working in Saint Michaels, Jim McMartin and Jim Beggins, were selected to design and construct it. The project was announced to the public at a press conference in the Governor's Reception Room on May 15. Milling of the wood at the state nursery at Preston began the next day. The milled wood was then moved to the shop of McMartin & Beggins Furniture Makers, Inc. to dry, a process that took a year.

McMartin and Beggins assembling the desk.

As construction of the pedestal-style desk began in June 2004, McMartin and Beggins were hopeful that the wood of this ancient tree would contain extraordinary graining as a result of its many years of growth. Indeed, this hope was met, and even exceeded. Three distinct variations of the oak were used in the desk's construction: The most elaborately figured wood, cut from the juncture of one of the tree's massive limbs and its trunk, was chosen for the front and back panels; mottled, or curly, grained wood was used on the side panels; and quarter sawn wood was used for the frame rails and stiles. McMartin and Beggins utilized traditional joinery techniques throughout the construction of the desk, including hand-cut dovetails and mortise-and-tenon joints.

Finishing details include inset sheepskin leather writing surfaces embossed in gold foil featuring the reverse of the Great Seal of Maryland. The pull-out writing surface is embossed with the obverse of the Great Seal. The front of the desk has a door that opens to reveal a plaque commemorating the Wye Oak and those who made the construction of the desk possible, especially The Dorothy L. and Henry A. Rosenberg, Jr. Foundation and the Rosenberg family. The work was initiated and overseen by the staff of the Maryland Commission on Artistic Property of the Maryland State Archives.

Wye Oak Desk Facts

Dimensions: Length: 74" Width: 42" Height: 31"

Makers: James McMartin and James Beggins, McMartin & Beggins Furniture Makers, Inc., Saint Michaels, Maryland

Supervising Agency: The Maryland Commission on Artistic Property of the Maryland State Archives
Dr. Edward C. Papenfuse, *State Archivist*
Mimi Calver, *Director of Exhibits, Conservation, and Artistic Property*
Elaine Rice Bachmann, *Curator*, Maryland Commission on Artistic Property

Jim Beggins, Henry A. Rosenberg, Jr. and Jim McMartin discuss final details of the desk.

Prepared by the Maryland State Archives, May 2007