



Fine Antique Wood Flooring Since 1976

Heart Cypress -- Nature's Blend of Grace and Function

Millennium Giants -- Survivors From Prehistoric Times

Heart Cypress, of the Bald Cypress tree, is one of the few surviving prehistoric species. Cypress logs, estimated by scientists to be at least 100,000 years old, were unearthed in excavations for the Mayflower Hotel, in Washington, DC. Through centuries of adaptation to its environment, Cypress has developed an inherent resistance to destructive forces not found in other woods.¹

One of the most picturesque trees of the American forest is the full-grown cypress. It is slow growing tree, and reaches its best development in tidewater swamplands. Trees well over a thousand years old, towering to heights of over a hundred feet, were common in virgin stands. The mature cypress develops a swelled butt of 8 to 10 feet in diameter and is surrounded by so-called knees, which are really offshoots of the root. It is believed they serve the double purpose of respiratory organs and anchorage.

American Bald Cypress grows in a belt along the southeastern coastal plain, mainly along rivers and swampy areas. Much of the finest and largest cypress timber grew where the land was submerged most of the year. Horses and mules could not work under such conditions and machine equipment was impractical. An early solution to the problem of making these stands accessible was to build canals through the swamps, so that large pullboats could drag the cypress logs out where they could be made into rafts and towed to the mill.

Preliminary to logging the cypress forests of the 1800's, the trees to be felled were marked and girdled a year, or several months in advance. Girdling was done by cutting a notch three inches deep around the circumference of the trunk and about three feet above the ground with an ax. Thus the tree was killed and the wood was allowed to lose part of the moisture, so that when it was cut, the logs would float.

The Wilson Cypress Company in Florida once cut cypress that was of markedly superior quality, because salt-water intrusion was more abundant in Florida and the timber attains the greatest perfection in tidewater districts. Wilson's rafts on the Ocklawaha River in Florida were about 25 feet wide and 32 feet in length.² The logs were held in place by an outside log called the boon. A cable was wrapped around this log and interwoven between the other logs. Holes were drilled in the ends of these outside logs to connect the rafts together. When the rafts were towed they were made up into 150-foot sections. About six of these 150 sections were then joined together and towed to the mill.

In general, the relative "flatness" of the South meant that rivers were wide, slow moving, and circuitous as they meandered through their flood plains. They were good log-driving streams like fast moving northern rivers. Log drives were restricted to fast-flowing headwaters and small tributaries and to a few major rivers such as the Pascagoula and Pearl in Mississippi. Generally speaking, the rafting of logs and timber was much more common in the South than driving logs.

¹ "Cypress Lumbering on the St. Johns River from 1884 to 1944," a term paper by Frank R. Owen, 1949.

One company's records from the 1880s say that when they tried to float the logs without rafting, only 60 percent would float, 30 percent would sink and the rest remained suspended in the water. After losing several million feet of good logs, companies developed the rafting and bundling method. An attempt was made to raise the lost logs on the riverbed, but it was not successful, and they remained as a hazard to the operation.

Independent operators, usually the small-scale farmers, who took time off during the slack winter season to earn much needed cash, often did rafting. During the 1850s, for example, there were some 50 small mills around Aiken, SC near the headwaters of the Savannah and Edisto Rivers supplying cut lumber to Savannah and Charleston. Every 4,000BF made a "bull," which was taken downstream by a crew of eight, who later returned upstream by steamboat or, in later years, by railroad.

Compared to railroad freight charges at this time, water transport was much cheaper; if a lumberman lived, say, and 40 miles from Charleston it would cost him \$2.25/MBF (thousand board feet) to move his timber by railroad or about a quarter of the price received for the product on the market, compared to about \$1.50 if rafted. The price differential was so great farther south on the Savannah and Altamaha Rivers that rafts of 50,000BF were common.²

These methods of exploitation did not change for over 150 years, and even as late as 1889 Dr. Charles Mohr described the scenes of activity in the baldcypress swamps of the Tensas River, Alabama, after three weeks of torrential rain. The flood had made it possible to harvest the timber. "No idle man was found on shore; everybody who could swing an ax, paddle a boat, or pilot a log was in the swamp engaged in felling and floating cypress timber. All the mill hands worked in the swamps; fields and gardens were left untouched, and even the clerks from the stores were sent into the swamps as overseers."

Today Bald Cypress is still found along all the rivers here in Florida. A boatride on the Santa Fe, the Suwannee or the Withlacoochee is graced with long sweeping green fernlike boughs and large trunks covered in thin furry bark with cypress knees several to each tree. Especially in springtime when the pale green foliage is emerging the cypress is an elegant sight. But the millennium giants are no more. Some trees of 100 years age or more left from the previous century's cut, and many young trees are easing their way into the sunlight. But the wood from these young trees today is pale and coarse compared to the uniquely fine-grained and richly toned heartwood of presettlement-growth cypress.

There are a several different Goodwin grades available; Select with arching grain, Vertical grain with only pin-striped grain, Midnight with darker tones and more color variation, Character that is still 100% heartwood, however, may have some larger knots or light peck or cracks and Pecky Heart Cypress. The Pecky cypress occurs when a storm breaks off a limb and the water and a fungus makes its way down the tree over the course of a millennium.



River Recovered® Specialists



Giant Heart Cypress trees
were girthed at waist height in late Winter
to cause the tree to dry out so the logs would float
when rafted downriver to sawmills.

Circa 1910



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AN INSIDE STORY OF RED CYPRESS

"He who looks before he leaps,
Builds of Cypress and builds for keeps."

Because the building of a home involves the twin problems of beauty and long, carefree service, Cypress appeals to the discriminating home-builder's sense of relative values.

For over a thousand years, the original massive Cypress doors of Saint Peter's Church in Rome swung on their hinges. They were still in a perfect state of preservation when replaced with ornamental bronze.

The famous, sturdy Cypress tree in the Mexican village of Santa Maria del Tule is over five thousand years old and measures 137 feet in circumference. Florida possesses a Cypress tree over three thousand years old. Egyptian mummy cases, both plain and highly carved, were made of Cypress, "The Wood Eternal."

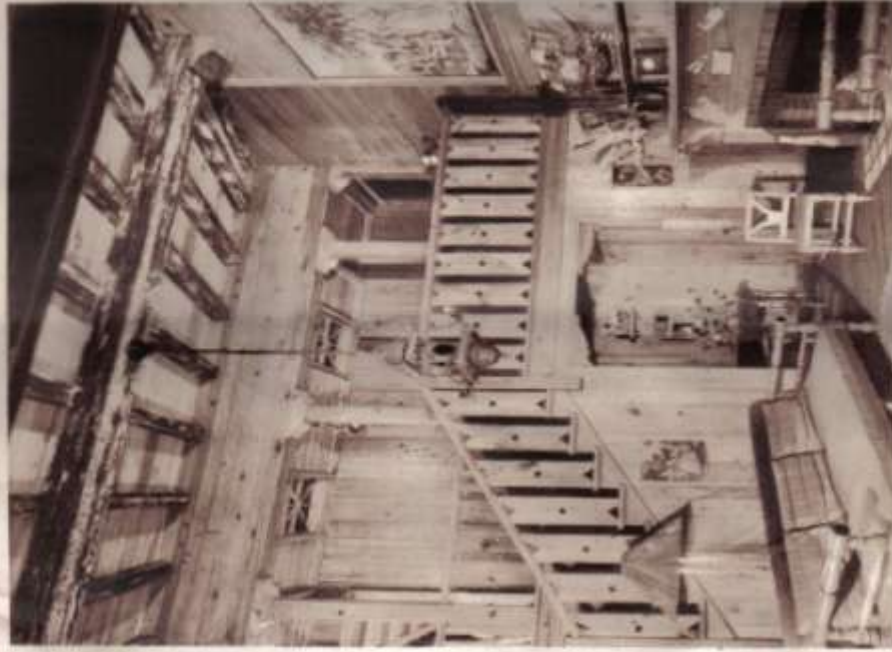
LASTS FOR CENTURIES

The American Cypress which grows in the deep swamps of Louisiana, Florida and Georgia, within a hundred miles of Gulf and Ocean, has been given the name of "Tidewater Red Cypress" to distinguish it from the upland, inland or highland Cypress which is lighter in color and less durable.

Recent excavations along the Atlantic coast have uncovered Cypress logs from forests buried 100,000 years ago. Yet the wood is still sound. What Nature did in preserving that Cypress, she will still do today when Cypress is buried in the ground. Use it for caskets and burial vaults. Cypressene—the essential oil of Cypress—makes Cypress highly repellent to Termites. Cypress timbers in 300 year old Spanish buildings in Florida have resisted termites, while connecting timbers of other woods were destroyed.

But it is for interior trim that Tidewater Red Cypress stands apart in impressive relief. It is possible to install Cypress walls which will not exceed in cost those of lath, plaster and a good wall paper. From the standpoint of beauty and luxurious appearance, there is of course no comparison. Wood is warm to the touch and

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In the beach home of Mr. Jessie L. Rice, Treasure Island, St. Petersburg, Florida, Mr. Wm. O. Spunklin, St. Petersburg Architect, has effectively employed knotty Cypress.

The doors of ancient St. Peters at Rome were Cypress. When removed by Eugrinius were 3100 years old . . .

Images and Gods were made of Cypress. One statue of Jupiter carved out of Cypress is known to have existed