It's been said there's nothing more American than apple pie. Paraphrasing that, what could be more natural than cypress in Louisiana?

In earlier times Louisiana was the home of vast forests of virgin cypress, disturbed only by the occasional hammering of an “Indian Crow”, as some called the pileated woodpecker.

Later, a whole lumbering industry grew up around the swamps where the virgin timber was found, with logging and manufacturing practices peculiar to the handling of such trees.

Because the heartwood of the cypress tree is highly resistant to insects and decay, it became known among early settlers as the “wood eternal”. It was used by all, from the most humble to the influential, to build cabins and mansions, furniture, barns, fences, pirogues and carriages and, yes, even their cradles and coffins.

Thirty years ago, visitors to the bayou country of Louisiana could still find an occasional craggy-faced Cajun hewing a pirogue from a cypress log, or, with even more care lovingly fashioning a coffin for some family member—or maybe himself.

The virgin timber and heart cypress are gone. The young cypress of today, which has a higher percentage of sapwood than old growth cypress, lasts only about as long as a sigh through the swamp, you might say—or, at least, no longer than other woods. Nonetheless, its symbolism as the “wood eternal” lives on, and it is fitting that in 1963 Louisianians officially embraced it as their state tree.