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*Snowy Museum Gardens, March 4, 2019.*

## **Hello Friends!**

It remains to be seen whether March will come in like a lion or a lamb, but we're nudging Mother Nature for a little snow with the March 2019 image above. Just a little snow...

February is typically a quieter month at the Danbury Museum, but this year we're so pleased to be hosting a new and very special event to celebrate Marian Anderson's birthday--"Marian Anderson: In Her Own Words." This event will be held in the museum's Marian Anderson Studio on Friday, February 24 and Saturday, February 25, from 10-4. Join us as a number of very special guests read from Ms Anderson's autobiography, *My Lord, What a Morning*. Cake and refreshments will be served, and

this event is FREE and open to all. Stop in between 10 and 4 and hear our guest readers share Marian Anderson's story in her own words. Readings will begin each half-hour from 10 am to 3 pm. Special guest readers include Mayor Dean Esposito, members of the Danbury NAACP and Mary Wooster and CT State DAR.

We're are very pleased to have our regular essayists with us once again. John and Tom bring us such thoughtful and interesting pieces each month and we're grateful for their continued participation! John writes about an evening spent with Jacques Pepin and Chris Sarandon, and Tom writes about Beech-Nut, bubblegum, baseball, and beech trees, too--including the magnificent beech tree in the Danbury Museum garden. We'll echo Tom's sentiment that now is a great time to take a walk through the museum's tranquil gardens--there is always something to see and plants and trees to observe.

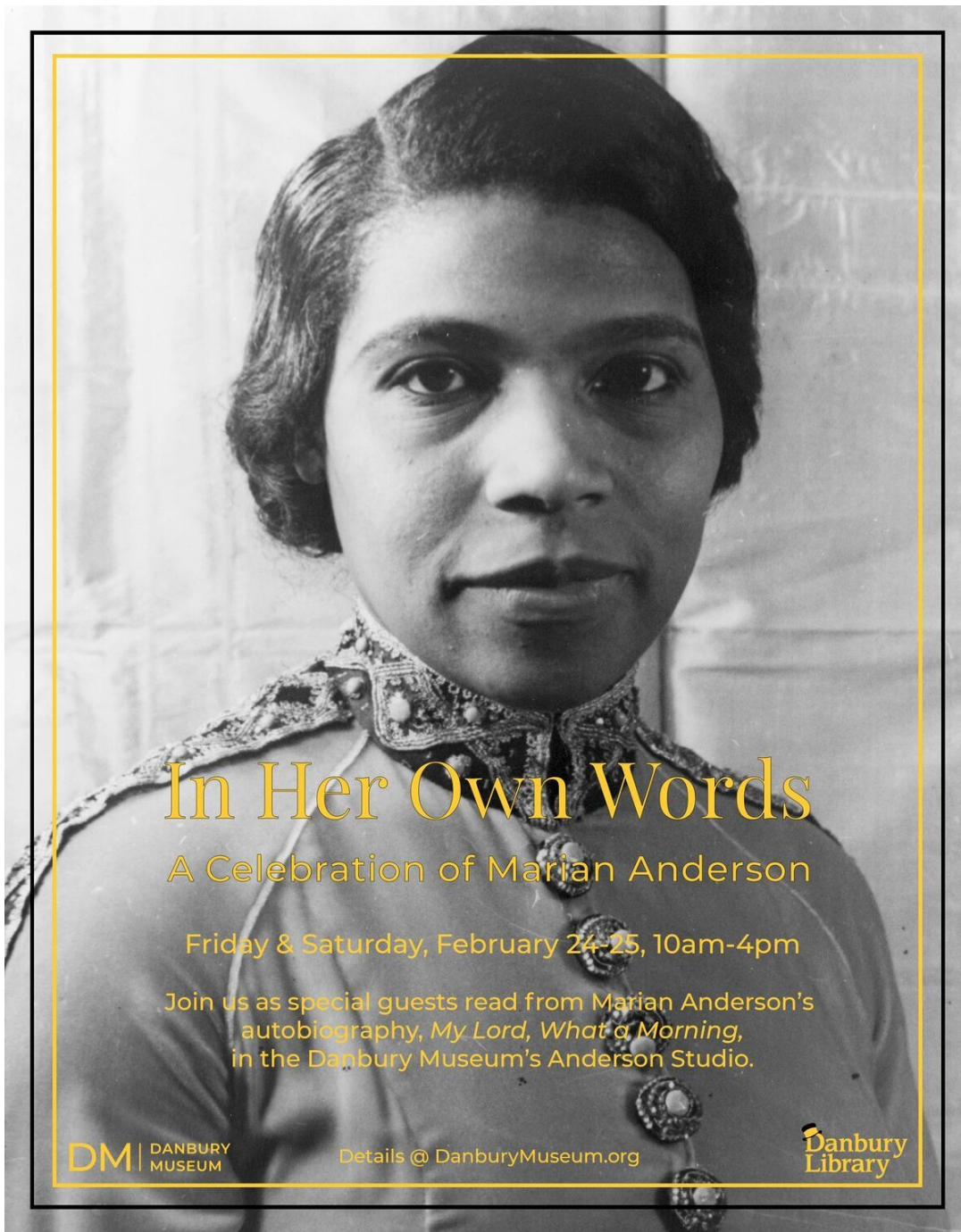
We hope we'll see you for our Marian Anderson birthday celebration or at one of our upcoming programs in March--always consult our Upcoming Events page and our social media channels for the most up to date programs!

Keep well and look forward to seeing you here again in a few short weeks!

*Brigid Guertin (Executive Director, City Historian)*

*Patrick Wells (Research Specialist, Social Media Manager)*

*Michele Lee Amundsen (Collections Manager, Newsletter Editor)*



# In Her Own Words

A Celebration of Marian Anderson

Friday & Saturday, February 24-25, 10am-4pm

Join us as special guests read from Marian Anderson's autobiography, *My Lord, What a Morning*, in the Danbury Museum's Anderson Studio.

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Details @ [DanburyMuseum.org](http://DanburyMuseum.org)

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*Celebrate Marian Anderson's Birthday With Us!*



## Jacques the Great!

By John O'Donnell

Last month my wife and I had the good fortune to attend an event in Fairfield which we both enjoyed. It was a live interview (which was taped for a podcast) with chef Jacques Pépin by Chris Sarandon who calls the series “[Cooking by Heart](#).” I knew some brief biographical facts about Pépin but my wife was more familiar with him because of watching his recent television show. I knew him as one of the premier chefs in the world and the author of thirty cookbooks as well as a television personality. After seeing this interview I now have to add on to these attributes the fact that he is also a gifted raconteur, a very humble and modest man, a very skilled artist, and very knowledgeable about French literature as well as cooking and culinary education. Let us take a closer look at this man’s extraordinary life.

Jacques Pépin was born on December 18, 1935, in Bourg-en-Bresse, France. From his conversation with Sarandon, it is clear that his love of cooking was encouraged by his mother. She owned a series of restaurants in their local area during World War Two and after. His father was away from the family a great deal during the war fighting the Nazis with the French Resistance. Jacques worked in his mother’s restaurants and became very interested in cooking. Another task that his family had to do was to accompany their mother on foraging expeditions to find fresh fruits and vegetables for the family and for the restaurants. They lived in a rural area and would try to visit nearby farms and buy what they needed. One of the solutions to the shortage of food during wartime that Jacques noted was eating preserved eggs and using beets as a sweetener. Sarandon asked Jacques about his earliest food memory, and he said it was a chicken dish that his mother made in the restaurant as well as at home. Pépin spoke vividly and tenderly about his memory of the aroma and the satisfying taste of this dish--he still cooks it himself.

After the war Jacques started an apprenticeship at a local restaurant at the age of thirteen. He worked as an apprentice for about a year, learning the necessary culinary skills that he needed. He honed his talents so quickly that when the head chef became ill, he filled in for him very successfully. The diners asked to see the chef to compliment him and were surprised at how young he was (14!) when he came out of the kitchen to take a bow.

His career then took a meteoric path by dint of hard work and real talent. He first moved to Lyon and then to Paris to take advantage of the larger opportunities that these urban areas offered to a young chef. He was only sixteen years of age but impressed everyone with his culinary skills. He did military service in the French navy from 1956 to 1958, where his skills were likewise recognized, eventually becoming the personal chef to President Charles de Gaulle. Jacques spoke very highly of his time with de Gaulle whom he said accepted him into his family and tended to favor classical French recipes. As we know de Gaulle was not an easy man to please. Jacques obviously possessed excellent social skills alongside his culinary ones.

In 1959, Jacques came to the United States to work at the restaurant Le Pavillon in New York City, which was the premier French restaurant in the US at the time. He succeeded beyond expectations, establishing himself as one of the greatest chefs in the world. He became friends with James Beard and Julia Child, the latter becoming a lifelong friend, mentor, and collaborator. Jacques was interested in furthering his regular education as well as his culinary one. He enrolled at Columbia University from which he received his B.A. degree as well as a Master of Arts degree in French literature. Sarandon asked him what his favorite novel was. He answered that it was *The Human Comedy (Le Comedie humaine)* by Balzac which is a multi-volume collection of interlocked novels and stories depicting French society in the nineteenth century. Jacques subsequently entered a doctoral program at Columbia University with a focus on French food in literature, but his proposed thesis was rejected for being “too frivolous for serious academic pursuit.” What a shame that this thesis was not allowed, I am sure it would be an acceptable doctoral topic today.

Jacques turned down an offer to become personal chef to President John F. Kennedy, instead opting to work for Howard Johnson who was a regular customer at Le Pavillon. He developed food line for the Howard Johnson restaurants which at that time were the second largest supplier of meals in the country. Only the United States Army supplied more meals! His career as an active chef abruptly ended with a near fatal automobile accident in 1974. He moved to Madison, Connecticut, and reinvented himself as an educator, author, artist, and television personality. During the pandemic he focused on cooking what you had on hand in the refrigerator. He said that as he has gotten older (he is now 87), the cooking is simplified. These days he said it is more about the discussion and community that comes with the experience of cooking than the food itself. Viva Jacques!

**John O'Donnell first became a history devotee while in elementary school. He**

was raised in Brooklyn and frequently went to Prospect Park which has a Revolutionary War monument. He was hooked!

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*Danbury Museum garden photo by Tom MacGregor.*

## **Beech-Nut**

by Thomas MacGregor

When I was a child in the 1950s and 60s, I enjoyed Beech-Nut chewing gum. Maybe I chose this brand of gum, having graduated from Beech-Nut baby food (ultimate brand loyalty), or because I could purchase it by myself from an outdoor, coin-operated vending machine. As I played Little League baseball, I enjoyed its distinctive flavor. Sadly, Beech-Nut chewing gum is no longer available and coin-operated vending machines are becoming scarce as well. I never really wanted Bazooka Bubble Gum while playing baseball, despite the advertising, because it was too easy to blow a bubble with it and thus be distracted from fielding a high fly ball or a hot grounder. Besides, the enclosed comic featuring Bazooka Joe was never very

funny. Black Jack gum was out of the question also because chewing it left one's teeth and tongue smelling and looking like black licorice.

I reminisced about Beech-Nut gum during last month's essay on trees in the Danbury Museum garden. However, it turns out that Beech-Nut gum is not made from any part of the beech tree. I had assumed that it was produced in a similar manner to the myriad of maple tree products that line the shelves of many New England candy emporiums.

Beginning in 1910, Beech-Nut gum was manufactured by the New York State-based Beech-Nut Company (founded in 1899) that was noted for hams and bacon smoked over smoldering fires fed bitter, astringent beech nuts. Beech wood is an excellent firewood that splits easily and calmly burns for many hours -- ideal for smoking hams. The Beech-Nut Company expanded its market lines to include chewing gum and, with the invention of a gasket-sealed vacuum jar, baby food and peanut butter. Interestingly, in its heyday, it was a master of advertising, promoting Amelia Earhart's flights and sponsoring the Dick Clark Show. Unfortunately, the company eventually fell on hard times while trying to stay afloat in a competitive business world, and now the only product left in its portfolio is baby food. Wrigley's Double Mint chewing gum, starring the Double Mint twins in television ads, eclipsed Beech-Nut's bestseller and led to the gum's demise. Beech-Nut is now owned by a Swiss company, but is still located in upstate New York.

The beech tree (*Fagus sylvatica*) found at the Danbury Museum garden is a high branching tree with a stout trunk and smooth, silvery bark. Beech trees are monoecious with yellow-green male flowers (called catkins) hanging threadlike for wind pollination of the small, female double flowers attached to hairy stems on the same tree. After being pollinated in the spring, these flowers give rise to three-sided beech nuts in autumn. Some beech trees may slowly grow to be 400 years old. However, recently a beech-leaf disease has been observed that is threatening all beech trees, both native and ornamental. Very little is known about this disease, although it is associated with a nematode that infects the leaves resulting in a striping pattern. The pattern can be observed by the naked eye, but the causative agent can only be viewed using a special microscope like the one located at the UConn Fairfield County Extension Center in Bethel.

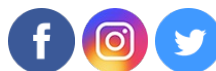
Have you been to the Danbury Museum garden lately? Now is a good time to take a tranquil walk through the garden to observe the trees (including the magnificent beech tree) and exhibits during the winter-season finale. By the time of our next newsletter, it will be spring and the garden will have undergone a tremendous change from its winter landscape.

**After 33 years at Boehringer Ingelheim, Dr. Tom (UConn '85) retired to his garden and piano.**

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