1802 was a year of new beginnings for Alexander Hamilton, our country’s first Secretary of the Treasury, Federalist Papers scribe, and Lin Manuel Miranda muse. Following the birth of his first son Philip earlier in the year, Hamilton purchased 30 acres of land, along with a house, in Harlem Heights 9 miles from the heart of New York City. The Grange, as it were to be known, was an ode to his Scottish ancestors’ humble dwellings. True to form, while admitting his lack of naturalist tendencies, Hamilton quipped he was “as little fitted as Jefferson to guide the helm of the U[nited] States.” But in true Hamiltonian fashion, Alexander took to the new endeavor with enthusiastic detail. While drawing up his diagrams for his ornamental plantings, Hamilton decided to dedicate the young nation he helped build with a small grove of sweetgum trees. Thirteen sweetgums to be exact, one for each original colony. While these trees are no longer standing, one can see a slice of one of these sweetgums at the Grange, now a National Park site in St. Nicholas Park in New York. If Hamilton had it his way, the sweetgum would be as American as the bald eagle or apple pie, but alas the overlooked sweetgum has been passed by the mighty oaks, redwoods, and sequoias that inspire Americans and visitors alike.

One of the most common hardwood trees east of the Mississippi, sweetgum is easily recognizable for its five-pointed, star shaped leaves and accompanying spiked orbed fruit, loved by finches, squirrels, and chipmunks alike. Growing up to 60-70 feet tall, sweetgum is a great tree for open sunny areas such as yards and parks. Its seasonally rich green alternating, serrated leaves turn a brilliant ‘Starburst’-like spectrum of red, yellow, orange, and purple colors. While not as well-known as its arboreal doppelganger the maple, sweetgum is a worthy if not more desirable
alternative in the Chicago region due to its heartiness and salt/drought tolerance. Its name comes from the tree's fragrant, gummy resin that has been used as chewing gum, incense, and a balm. Historical uses of the sweetgum include the harvest of its resin as a cure for sciatica and weak nerves. Also of note, Styrofoam was originated using a chemical compound from its Asian sweetgum counterpart.

For more information on this species, please contact trees@openlands.org.