



April 25, 2008

## With an eye to the future, White Plains plants a tree with a magnificent past

*Keith Eddings*

*The Journal News*

WHITE PLAINS - The bare and brittle sapling recently planted in a northeast corner of a small downtown park seems hardly able to hold up against even a winter dusting of snow or the gnawing of a curious deer, but much more than that will be expected of it.

The tree, a hybrid of the American Chestnut that was wiped out by blight in the past century and a Chinese cousin that is resistant to the blight, will first be asked to withstand the fungal onslaught that killed an estimated 4 billion American Chestnuts after arriving by boat from Asia just after 1900.

The blight not only obliterated the East Coast's most prevalent hardwood, it decimated wildlife populations that were dependent on the blanket of nuts it dropped on forest floors every fall and robbed the nation of a sturdy, fast-growing wood used for everything from railroad ties to violins.

If the genetically mixed chestnut planted in Turnure Park last week proves immune to the blight, the tree - now just 10 feet tall and only beginning to bud the species' trademark jagged green leaves - will face a more formidable task: producing the seeds that may help restore a species that made up 25 percent of the hardwoods in Appalachian forests.

"It's no small task to restore four billion trees to the Eastern landscape," Marshal Case, president of the American Chestnut Foundation, which is leading the effort in a partnership with the U.S. Forest Service, told about 30 people who came to the park yesterday to dedicate the tree. "But we're on our way."

The tree was given to the city by Elisabeth Radow, a local lawyer and 1978 Cornell University graduate who is donating other chestnuts to Larchmont and New Castle to honor the 200th anniversary of the birth of Ezra Cornell, who founded her alma mater in 1865. The Westchester chapter of the Cornell Cooperative Extension will monitor the tree along with city arborists.

The tree and its 3,000-pound rootball were trucked up from the Virginia farm where it was pollinated by a Q-Tip about eight years ago and raised in carefully monitored rows of American Chestnut saplings. Other chestnuts from the farm have been planted at The White House and at Thomas Jefferson's Monticello home and George Washington's Mount Vernon home, both in Virginia.

In White Plains, the tree was planted for free by Almstead Tree and Shrub Care Co. of New Rochelle.

"This is a momentous chestnut," Mayor Joseph Delfino told the small crowd in characteristic hyperbole, probably speaking more about the tree's potential than the still scrawny specimen he stood beside. For sure, the tree's potential is huge: it could stand for 400 years and grow to about 120 feet if it can fight off the blight, Case said.

"We're hoping it can," city Parks Commissioner Arne Abramowitz said. "Then all the other trees from here on will be called the White Plains Chestnut."

---