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## Vandals target near-extinct tree

By Mike LaBella

[mllabella@eagletribune.com](mailto:mllabella@eagletribune.com)

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HAVERHILL — It could have been a child who was attracted to the wooden stake protruding from the ground, decided to pull it out and then use it to strike a little tree that was planted in a site along Mill Street.

Or maybe it was someone older who did it intentionally.

Either way the damage is done and now Haverhill's Brightside volunteer David LaBrode worries the American Chestnut tree he planted there may not survive the winter.

"I am at a loss to explain what causes an individual to basically go out of their way to destroy something as simple as a small seedling," LaBrode said. "What satisfaction can one obtain through this?"

The city has been quietly playing a role in supporting the comeback of American Chestnut. This majestic and versatile tree, once called the redwood of the east, populated eastern woodlands from Maine to Florida and west to the Ohio Valley until the mid-1900s. It was prized for its wood and nuts.

During the first half of the 20th century, 4 billion American Chestnuts succumbed to a lethal fungus infestation known as the chestnut blight.

People like LaBrode have been given the opportunity to plant seedlings that have the potential to be blight-resistant and are the result of 25 years of cross breeding.

Last fall, LaBrode secured two of these rare restoration seedlings, which scientists refer to as B3F3, as part of a test planting program intended to determine if they have what it takes to survive and grow to maturity.

City Tree Warden Roland Goudreault helped LaBrode select appropriate sites for the seedlings. One was planted in a grassy area along Mill Street and near the public boat ramp to Plug Pond, and the other at Tattersall Farm.

"I was one of the few members of the American Chestnut Foundation to obtain one of these new and rare seedlings to test plant," LaBrode said. "After years of research and countless testing, the ACF is now at a crossroad in its genetic research into finding a blight-resistant tree."

LaBrode has planted non-blight resistant pure American Chestnuts in Haverhill in the past, but nearly every one is now showing signs of the blight, even though to the untrained eye they may seem healthy.

During a recent check of the Mill Street site, LaBrode found that both the wooden stake and plastic

protective barrier around the base of the little tree were missing.

Most of the mulch he had spread a month ago was gone as well, and there were footprints around the mulch pit.

"At first I thought it could be animal destruction, but when I investigated further it appeared that a person took the stake out of the ground and from what I can surmise basically whacked the small seedling with it," he said. "Much of the branches show scrape marks and most of the buds have been torn off and some of the root system exposed."

He said the tree itself is intact, but at its young age and with winter coming he is concerned it may not survive.

"Now through a careless and thoughtless act of destruction it may not survive," he said.

LaBrode replaced the mulch and plans to monitor the tiny tree over the course of the winter in the hopes it will survive. He said the tree at Tattersall Farm appears to be doing well.

"We cannot teach our children what is special about our history on freeways or in shopping malls," LaBrode said. "As a professional historian, I deeply believe that the present owes the future a chance to know its wilderness past. Protecting the remnants of wild country left today is an action that defines our nation."

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American Chestnut tree facts

Once covered more than 200 million acres of eastern woodlands

Hardwood from the beech family

Reached 150 feet in height and 10 feet in diameter

4 billion of the trees succumbed to what is known as the chestnut blight in early 1900s

The blight, imported to the U.S. on Asian chestnut trees, is a fungus dispersed via spores in the air, raindrops or animals

Rural communities once depended on the annual nut harvest as a cash crop for livestock

Chestnut wood is easily worked, lightweight and highly rot-resistant

SOURCES: Wikipedia and The American Chestnut Foundation