

Chautauqua Watershed Notes  
From the Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy  
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Giving Thanks Throughout Our Changing Times  
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For the Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy



*Chestnuts are a delicious addition to your Thanksgiving meal and a reminder of our natural heritage.*

With the Thanksgiving holidays coming up, I am reminded of the many riches this country offers, and how truly thankful I am to experience the bounty offered to me during my lifetime. But how different that first Thanksgiving Dinner on this continent must have been! The holiday originated from an autumn harvest feast and celebrated the richness of the season and fortifications offered for the upcoming harsh winter. These blessings were appreciated in a way that many of us can only imagine because, in our times, a wide variety of foods from all over the world are dependably available nearly year-round.

The only two items that historians know for sure were on that first menu are venison and wild fowl, which are mentioned in initial accounts. But through educated guesses based on the stores that the Pilgrims had with them and what is known about both Native American and English meals, historians have surmised that the first Thanksgiving Dinner likely included the following: fish including cod and bass; shellfish such as clams, mussels and oysters; birds including goose, duck, crane, wild turkey and partridge; venison; agricultural crops such as corn, barley, squash, onions, and cabbage; and wild forage such as walnuts, chestnuts, hickory nuts, wild root crops, and berries that were dried earlier in the year. The meal may have been embellished with limited supplies brought from England including spices, grains, cheeses, and flours.

Thinking about what we know of the menu at those first celebratory feasts, brought me around to thinking about how different the landscape must have looked. For one thing, until the 1950s the American chestnut (*Castanea dentata*) was the most abundant large tree in the eastern North America, and this species alone filled about 25 percent of our magnificent hardwood forests. The range extended from Maine to Georgia and the species was prevalent in our region. These were very large trees that reached 100 feet or taller and up to ten feet in diameter. Their presence on the landscape was immense and affected everything from the diet and shelter available to wild animals, to the health of our streams and waterbodies through sheltering of shorelines and abatement of erosion, to the very composition of our soil types. The wood was valued for its strength and rot resistance. Numerous wildlife species as well as pigs and other farm animals ate

the nuts, which were produced in great abundance, and the sweet tasting resource made its way into the vitality of those animals and affected their flavor as well.

Unfortunately, by the early 1950s, virtually all of those stately trees were lost from the landscape as the result of a fungus inadvertently introduced at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century presumably on imported Asian chestnut saplings. Some believe this to be the greatest botanical disaster in history. The fungus causes the death of the inner tissues of the tree but leaves the roots systems of some individuals intact. These can resprout and a few grow to produce nuts before quickly succumbing to the fungus once again. Today, most of the chestnuts available commercially come from afar, but a few are grown in Chautauqua County and the New York State Chapter of the American Chestnut Foundation has established several restoration orchards within New York State. Growers are working toward the development of a blight-resistant American chestnut tree that will enable reintroduction of a population of these resistant trees back into forest ecosystems.

If you are lucky enough to incorporate a few chestnuts into your Thanksgiving Holiday celebration, you might take a moment to think about the value of these trees on our landscape, and to remember to appreciate both the things we have lost and those we have not yet lost thanks to the diligence of our natural heritage stewards.

The Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy is a private, not-for-profit, 501(c)(3) organization with a mission to preserve and enhance the water quality, scenic beauty and ecological health of the lakes, streams and watersheds of the Chautauqua region. Its urgent focus is to conserve the endangered natural shore lands of Chautauqua Lake, which provide fish and wildlife habitat and pollution filtering functions essential to a healthy lake. Only four miles (10%) of the lake's shoreline remains in a natural, undeveloped condition. The Conservancy is funded primarily through membership donations. Its 2008 annual membership campaign is currently underway. It is presently raising funds to conserve the Chautauqua Lake's most important remaining natural shoreline habitats, undertake programs to address the root causes of the conditions that fuel lake plant growth, and manage its preserves. It is the only local organization conserving lands in perpetuity for these purposes. Please contact the Conservancy at 664-2166 to join for 2008!