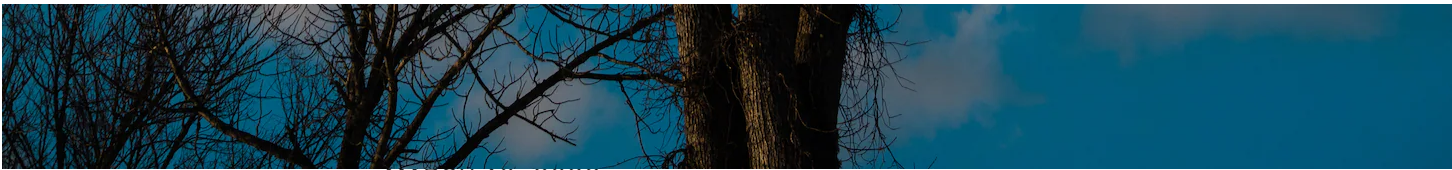


Spring Travel Issue

The Survivors

The American elm tree has all but died off in this country. In Castine, Maine, residents have found a way to keep their precious citizens thriving.





MARCH 10, 2022



It's a sunny September day in Castine, Maine, and I'm standing in a stranger's yard debating how best to hug a tree. Not just any tree, but an American elm, a fully mature *Ulmus americana*.

I want to hug this elm for practical reasons. At least that's my justification. I remember hearing somewhere that your arm span roughly equals your height — 5-foot-7 in my case — and I wonder if I can better decipher the size of this elm by encircling it. I'm sure my hands won't come close to touching. The trunk is massive, channeled by thick gray ridges of bark and reaching high overhead to an elegant vase-shaped canopy. The light has changed under its shade; the sun filtered through so many leaves creates a chlorophyll coolness.

This tree, which is tall enough that a schooner coming into Castine Harbor could navigate by it on a clear day, has been here awhile. I know from the literature on the Castine elms that many were planted in the 1850s. Poet Walt Whitman was still inking “Leaves of Grass” when these went in the ground, and the Statue of Liberty didn’t yet exist. The trees were saplings when the Fugitive Slave Act was still in effect and Booker T. Washington was born, and they towered several stories tall when the first Black U.S. president was elected in 2008. This elm, with its view of the water, has seen villagers ship off for a Civil War, a First World War, and then a second one. It has survived its own pandemic, Dutch elm disease, which leveled the elms of Europe before hitting America in the 1930s and felling over 70 million of its species. So, truth be told, I wouldn’t mind hugging this particular tree just for the hell of it. This tree is a miracle.

I was the kind of kid who grew up knocking around the woods near my home in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. I was reared in the

benevolent company of trees. As an adult, I find excuses to write stories about them. I have spent time with scientists as they mapped the [complex genome of California's giant coastal redwoods](#), those dinosaurs of time that house independent ecosystems in their tree canopies. The dendrologists and botanists have been amazing us of late with their discoveries about trees, including how they survive and communicate and care for one another. And here in Castine, the humans respond in kind.

Castine is one of the few places in America where you can still see hundreds of mature *Ulmus americana*. Roughly 300 survive in the historic village and surrounding area by a recent inventory, which is an exceptional number. Exploring Castine is a trip back in time to a landscape no longer visible anywhere else. A town shaded by mature elms, some nearing two centuries old. The town motto: Under the Elms and By the Sea.

I first came to Castine four years ago because dear friends live here. I've

returned because I've been dreaming of this seaside place and its community of elms. The world, as the nature writer Henry Beston aptly observed in his book, "The Outermost House," seems to be "sick to its thin blood for the lack of elemental things." Life, of late, has been both frenzied and anemic. It's the ever-mutating virus eroding our physical and mental health. It's the monotonous months of worry and isolation. It is, too, the wear and tear of politics and vitriol that have frayed our civic life. I've come to Castine to get the news from something older and wiser. I've come to commune with the elms, and to understand how it is that tree and human have taken such good care of each other all these years.



Castine, one of North America's oldest settlements, has the feel of an island.

Castine is one of North America's oldest settlements. In the 1600s, Europeans coveted the land for its auspicious trade location on the Eastern Seaboard and its deep-water harbor, never mind that the Abenaki, Penobscot and Mi'kmaq tribes already lived here. Castine, bounded by Penobscot Bay and the Bagaduce River, has the feel of an island, but it's really a peninsula that's shaped like an ax head lying on its side. The neck of this geographic ax connects to the mainland, offering up the designation

of those who live “on neck” in historic Castine and those who live “off neck.”

The French, the Dutch, the British and later the Americans fought mightily over these 20 square miles. The British used Castine as a strategic naval base during the American Revolution in 1779, and then occupied it again during the War of 1812. These nations’ various efforts still mark the landscape in well-preserved forts and historical markers. Today, Castine is a palimpsest of four centuries of vying nations, cultural aspirations and historic buildings, with the earliest surviving house dating to the mid-1700s. It’s peopled by hard-stock year-rounders who know how to sail and navigate the waters, pull vegetables from the soil, survive winter, and keep an eye out for one another when the weather rears up or the porcupines conspire to wreak havoc on gardens and tree bark again.

My first morning on the peninsula, I walk from the cottage I’m renting to the town common for a tour hosted by the [Castine Historical Society](#). It’s easy to get around on foot here, with

everything you need within a mile or two. I take Perkins Street, one of the thoroughfares running alongside Castine Harbor. Castine is about 130 miles northeast of [Portland](#), but it's considered to be "Down East" in Maine parlance, which makes little geographic sense until you realize that designation is from the point of view of the water and has to do with the prevailing downwind sailing routes.

Read more

[Unable to travel, she approached her hometown of Baltimore as a new destination and discovered a city of culinary wonders](#)

[A lifetime of travel writing prepared her for everything — but staying in one place](#)

Like many coastal New England towns, Castine lives by the ebb and flow of seasonal tourism, and I'm here at the end of summer, when those "from away," as the 800 or so year-rounders call them, migrate back south for winter. September is exquisite, a last hurrah from Mother Nature before the long-huddling winter returns with a gust off the Bagaduce.

I pass Fort Madison, built in the early 1800s to protect the town against foreign invasion from the sea. It fell briefly to the British during the War of 1812. Today, it's an earthwork of rolling green fortifications with a lone cannon pointing toward the luxury yachts and modest sloops out for a sail. The Victorian shingle house on this property isn't a visitors center, as many tourists who venture onto its porch believe, but a private home, a reminder of how close past and present reside together here.

Down the road from the fort is the campus of the [Wilson Museum](#), which offers historical exhibitions, tours of the John Perkins House built around 1763, and a living-history village of traditional trades, like blacksmithing and shipbuilding.

There are several magnificent elms along Perkins, their massive trunks in some cases right up against a house. The elms of Castine defy capture by an amateur like me. I try. My phone camera can't manage to get them in frame unless I step so far back that they seem less regal. Elms can top 100

feet. On close inspection I can see metal tags embedded in their furrowed bark. The elms are inventoried, each numbered and carefully monitored by the town's Tree Committee. There's a book of trees kept in Emerson Hall, the Colonial Revival building that houses village business. Many of the trees are town property, even some of those on private land. In a state known for its fierce individual spirit, here the elms are under common care.

I continue on and am passed by a group of midshipmen from the Maine Maritime Academy, located a few blocks away. They're easily recognizable in their summer uniforms of khaki and white, with a garrison cap perched on their heads.

The sun is high and golden when I reach Main Street. The town rises quietly from the water's edge along this street lined by Georgian and Federal buildings. The topography levels out long enough for a classic New England town common, before rising up again in places to cliffs offering unobstructed views of

Penobscot Bay and a place for a squat white lighthouse. Witherle Woods, a 193-acre preserve, lines the crags of some of these cliffs with a forest of spruce, balsam fir, white pine and hardwood (not to mention Seussical-looking yellow mushrooms that my plant ID app warned me are highly poisonous).

The harbor is impossibly blue today and topped by a cumulous of white sails when I join a handful of people gathered outside the Castine Historical Society on the east end of the town common. Our group is a mix of tourists hailing from Southern states, many in town for the day as they tour other nearby attractions like [Acadia National Park](#), [Blue Hill](#) and Deer Isle. I soon realize that I'm not alone in my interest in the elms. As we walk, one man asks our tour guide about the trees. The guide points to an elm in front of us, and we all tip our heads back to take in its full height. "That is an elm tree that we have photographs of from about 155 years ago, so it's been around a long time," he explains.

“But how did they survive Dutch elm?”
another person asks.

“We were not spared the elm blight,”
our guide says. “But we’ve got a long
history of trying to save them.”



TOP LEFT: Julie Van de Graaf, owner of Castine’s Pentagöet Inn and Wine Bar, is on the town Tree Committee. TOP RIGHT: A town elm. BOTTOM LEFT: A dooryard elm. Trees were planted in front of houses for good luck. BOTTOM RIGHT: Town arborist Bill Burman.

The story of the Castine elms
and their survival dates back
to the origin of America itself.

The elm’s tall, elegant trunk crowned
by greenery made it a wonderful shade

tree, beloved by early European colonizers. According to Thomas J. Campanella, who wrote a cultural history of the tree, “[Republic of Shade: New England and the American Elm](#),” Europeans saw the wild elm as a providential sign. They “understood that elms, among the largest trees in the landscape, signaled deep, rich alluvial soil,” Campanella wrote, and new settlements “favored the elm,” which was a “tenacious and adaptable tree [that] flourished in the wake of clearing and agricultural development.”

The elm later became a symbol of American freedom. There were stories of revolutionaries meeting under an elm in Massachusetts to plot the colonies’ release from England’s grip, earning the tree the moniker of the Liberty Elm. As towns began to prosper, the elm was central to landscaping. Dooryard elms were planted in front of newly built houses for good luck. Two trees on either side of a door were called bridal elms, signifying a marriage. Elms were planted in commons across New England, and along with the steeple of

a church, they marked the shared center of civic and religious life. Charles Dickens, upon seeing New England in 1842, described the elm-lined villages as “a kind of compromise between town and country; as if each had met the other half-way, and shaken hands upon it.”

No tree, Campanella contends, “has loomed larger in American history than the American elm.”

In 1857, town elders of Castine voted to create a committee of seven people to “superintend the setting out of trees on the common and elsewhere and to protect them,” according to town records. Over the centuries, Castine has attracted many famous writers and artists who were inspired by the elms. One of the earliest was the painter Fitz Hugh Lane, who stayed with friends on Main Street in the mid-1800s. Lane captured the young plantings of elms in landscape portraits, which show how Castine at the time was devoid of a tree canopy after decades of clear-cutting and war. The shoulder-height elms are shown lining the dirt avenues in orderly rows.

By the 1930s, elms were being planted on thousands of namesake streets across America, and notably along Fifth Avenue in Manhattan near the new Rockefeller Center. The writer [E.B. White](#) traveled from his Maine farmhouse, just 28 miles outside of Castine, to witness the spectacle of mature trees arriving in the middle of the night. “I think elm-birth is the prettiest fairy tale in the city’s wonderbook,” White wrote in an essay. “In all the long swing of time there has never been a fortnight such as this — these midnights when late strolling citizens come suddenly on a giant elm, arriving furtively in the marketplace and sliding into position for early risers to discover on their way to work.”

Around the same time that New Yorkers were waking up to discover these elms, an arborist in Ohio discovered Dutch elm disease in a tree there. The elm bark beetle had arrived from the sea, carried in the hull of a ship. Elm wood burls bound for the ports of America and meant to be used as veneer in decorative furniture carried the castaway, *Scolytus*

multistriatus. The tiny beetle likes to feed on the sapwood of the elm, and it carries on its body a fungus, the spores of which infect a healthy elm by needling their way into the tree's vascular system. Soon the tree is no longer able to carry nutrients or water to its outer branches. The elm is effectively strangled.

By the 1960s, the blight had spread across the country. "People speak of worrying about the trees," the novelist Elizabeth Hardwick wrote from her home in Castine in 1971. [Hardwick and her husband](#), poet Robert Lowell, lived for many summers in a house on the northwest edge of the common. "The great old elms, with their terminal woe, are dying grandly," she wrote.

Most of America's elms were dead by the 1980s. "It was an ecological calamity that changed the face of the American nation," Campanella wrote. But not in Castine.

"There was action taken back in the late '60s and early '70s by several

townspeople to save the trees,” Don Tenney tells me.

Tenney holds what is quite possibly the greatest public office ever invented, that of the Castine tree warden. It’s Tenney’s job, along with the elected Tree Committee, to care for the town elms, about 75 of which are actively being treated to stave off Dutch elm disease.

Back in the 1970s, no real treatment existed. Richard Campana of the University of Maine was one of the early researchers to try to create a serum to inoculate against the disease. Castine’s elms were injected with his experimental fungicide; Tenney, who is 75, remembers those early interventions: “One summer there were these orange tanks strapped to the trees all over town, and they were pressurized to deliver the fungicide. It was a total experiment.”

Some believe it was this treatment that helped save many of the elms. Others posture that it is Castine’s unique topography, on a wind-swept peninsula, that made it hard for the

beetles to take purchase here. Still, the disease found its way to Maine and on neck to Castine, and now, arborists fear, it's on the rise.

To better understand the state of the American elm, I connected with Jan Santerre, a forester who works with the Maine Forest Service as part of its urban tree canopy program. Santerre agreed to drive from her home about an hour away to meet me at Compass Rose Books, a shop and cafe on Main Street.



A scene from the town dock.

One of my quarantine pastimes back home in Baltimore has been trying to identify trees, and I often conflate the elm and the beech tree because of their similarly shaped leaves. Coffee in hand, Santerre and I walk up Main, and she gives me a lesson in elm identification. “To do tree ID, it’s best to use your five senses,” she tells me as she takes the leaf of a smaller elm tree in her fingers and rubs gently. I do the same. “The elm leaves feel very different. They are thick and with a rough texture, almost like sandpaper.”

As we walk, I can see what appear to be different types of elms. Not the species, but the human intent. Bridal elms flank a door; an 80-foot dooryard elm shades a house.

Dutch elm disease never went away, Santerre tells me; it merely subsided for a time. “And it mutated, like a virus, something that all of us understand all too well right now,” she says.

You can tell a tree has been infected when the leaves at its crown turn yellow and crisp to brown in summer,

evidence of the vascular choking. The disease moves quickly, killing a century-old tree in a matter of months.

The past 20 years have been a boon of discovery about the botany of trees in general, with popular books like “[The Hidden Life of Trees](#)” recounting what scientists now know: the way, for example, one tree may send nutrients via its root system to a neighboring one that is suffering, and how they “talk” through electric energy at the root level.

Dutch elm disease is insidious because it is easily communicable. What made America’s boulevards of elms so majestic, those tunnels of deep green, are the very thing that contributed to their death. The interwoven roots, that underground communion, became carriers of the fungus just as much as the beetles themselves. Elms in the wild, buffered by other species, sometimes fared better, a reminder that nature abhors a monoculture. We do better with diversity. “However well intentioned,” Campanella writes in “Republic of Shade,” “the Yankee

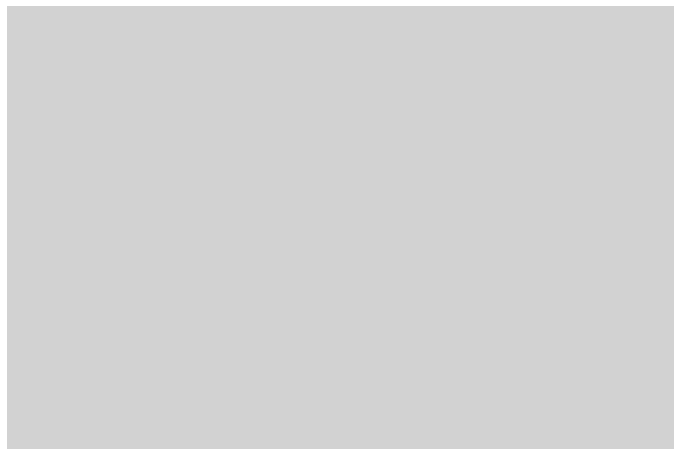
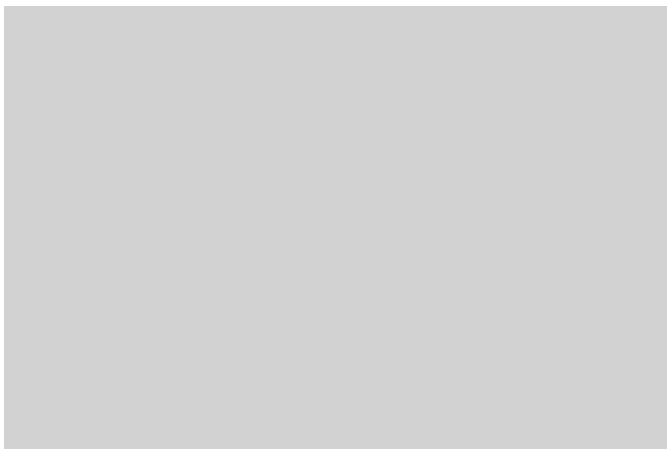
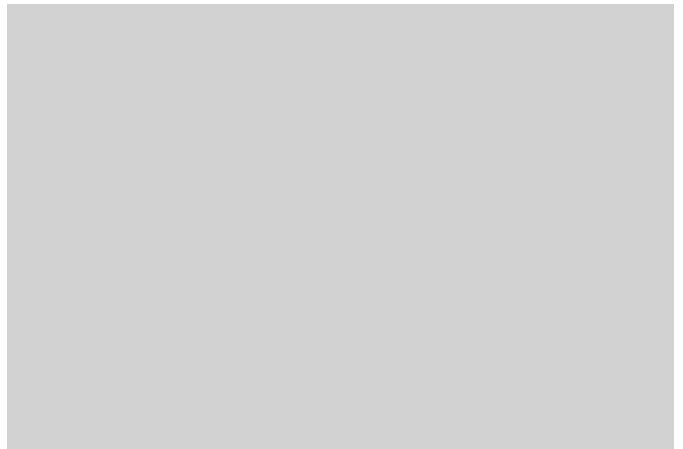
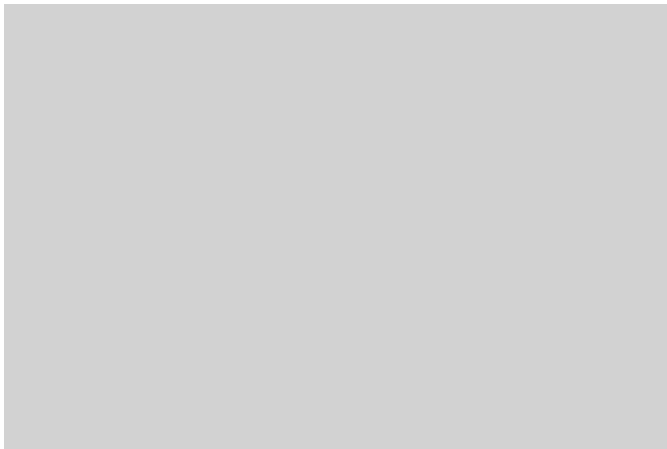
tree planters of the past committed a grave error in planting their cherished elms as far as the eye could see. But what a glorious error it was! And what magic, what magnificence, their recklessness bestowed.”

Santerre is excited to show me one particular tree, No. 165 on the town registry, which has earned the designation of the largest elm in Maine. She hasn't been back to Castine for months, though, owing to the pandemic, and when we turn east onto Court Street her face falls. “Oh God, I think it's gone.” She picks up the pace, and when we reach a stump large enough to hold several adults, her fears are confirmed.

I later learn from the town arborist, Bill Burman, that the elm had the disease. Burman pruned infected limbs and then treated the tree with fungicide. “We tried everything we could,” he says, “but the disease had already gone too deep. It's a loss of a unique, live entity, and it's tough having to be the one cutting down a tree when it's one of your patients.” Burman had cut a “cookie” of the

trunk, or a slice; the large slab is being studied by scientists at the University of Maine.

Santerre and I now stand there for several minutes, quietly staring at the stump, while I imagine [what once was there](#).



TOP LEFT: Castine tree warden Don Tenney, who, along with the elected Tree Committee, cares for the town elms. TOP RIGHT: A storm blows in from the ocean. BOTTOM LEFT: A Maine Maritime Academy training ship. BOTTOM RIGHT: Johanna Barrett, owner of Compass Rose Books in Castine.

On my first trip to Castine in 2017, I witnessed the aftermath of just such an elm

removal. My friend Robin was giving me a tour of the town that she had made her home after being a lawyer for many years in Manhattan. She and her husband, Chris, a chief mate on a tug and barge boat, moved here shortly after the twin towers fell. Robin's office had been in the World Financial Center, near the North Tower, and by a miracle, she'd been running late to work that day, something she never did. Chris spent days assisting in evacuations and cleanup operations from the water. They are hardy stock, Robin and Chris, the kind of self-sufficient people who can live frugally and independently and repair just about anything, but who also recognize the importance of participating in town meetings and civic events, and in buying groceries for elderly neighbors.

Robin stopped the car when we saw a woman weeping by a fresh tree stump. The elm in her side yard had gotten the disease, and now a few neighbors crowded around as if at a funeral. The burned-wood smell of fresh sawdust still lingered, as did the wet fug of sap. Column-sized logs littered the yard for

removal the next day. I looked at the woman's beautiful garden, cultivated over decades in the shade of that tree, and I knew that the hostas and ferns and begonias would suffer now from so much direct sunlight. The death of a great tree is a particular kind of loss. These cathedrals of green, felled, forever change the ecosystem. And in a place like this, where geography is marked by trees as much as by the water — *I'll meet you by the post office elm* — their loss is particularly acute.

One evening, the owners of the cottage where I am staying invite me to tea on the porch of the main house. Ann is 100 years old and has summered or lived in Castine for much of her life. Her daughter, Helen, is here, and Ann is thrilled because this means she's allowed to take her riding mower out to cut her own grass. "Helen won't let me on it anymore unless she's here," Ann says.

Ann tells me stories of Castine's progressive past, of the artists and intellectual troublemakers who lived here, like author [Mary McCarthy](#), who lived up the road. Later, Ann and

Helen take me on a tour of their house, which is a true Maine summer cottage with no insulation. It's the kind of rambling home filled with the accretion of generations, a comfortable place that makes me dream of long summer days with a passel of books. In the living room I see a sculpture made of wood, a sensuous, curved shape, almost like that of an infinity symbol. "That," Ann tells me, "is made from elm wood."

The sculpture is by the late Maine artist Clark Fitz-Gerald, who carved it from a slab of elm taken from a tree that succumbed to the disease in the 1970s. Elm wood is tough and has strong interlocking grains, making it good for hockey sticks and baseball bats, but tricky to carve. Even in their death, though, something beautiful can be made, something worth working hard to shape. He titled this piece "Eternity."



Roughly 300 American elms survive in the historic village and surrounding area by a recent inventory, which is an exceptional number.

In 2019, the Castine Tree Committee began replacing fallen elms with saplings. This time, with a cultivar that has been specifically bred to resist the fungus. Looking out of his living room window, Tenney tells me that he can see the fruits of Castine's early plantings, a tall elm on Court Street that he estimates to be at least 175 years old.

Despite the summer tourists and real estate boon from outsiders looking to buy in bucolic Maine, Castine is still a waterfront town of diminished industry. Fishing is down, businesses have suffered from the pandemic, shops have shuttered. Like all small towns, it must make hard choices over budgets. It's notable, then, that Castine continues to siphon a portion of its limited funds each year to maintenance of the elms. I ask Tenney, who has sat through his share of budget debates, why it is that the residents continue to appropriate thousands of precious dollars for the trees.

“It's a matter of what you love. People who live here love the waterfront, they love the Penobscot Bay and the character of the town, and along with all that, they love their elm trees,” he tells me. “And you support and care for what you love.”

On the town common, a young elm tree no taller than my shoulder is held firm to the earth and stabilized with posts. Elms grow quickly as trees go; even still, those who planted these

saplings may never see them reach the height of the old growth. Planting a tree is a gift to the future. Two centuries on, Castine continues to tend to its elms, and I think about the dichotomy of thoughts required for this commitment. There is the hope placed in the science to stave off the disease, and the knowledge that it may not work. There are the hard choices of a place known for brutal winter weather and varying fortunes, and a place also graced by days as beautiful as they are fleeting. Castine is a town that understands the interdependency of neighbor and nature, of private life and civic duty. Theirs is a telluric pride coupled with a wisdom that some of the best moments in a human life are the simplest ones. Like those shared under the shade of a tree.

Elizabeth Evitts Dickinson is a writer in Baltimore.