



2022 Eagle Hill Institute  
Online Natural History Seminars  
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## The American Chestnut: An Environmental History

Donald Edward Davis & Ralph H. Lutts

January 15th – 23rd, 2022

Before 1910 the American chestnut was one of the more common trees in the eastern United States. An important natural resource, chestnut wood was used for woodworking, fencing, and building construction, as it was rot resistant and straight grained. The hearty and delicious nuts also fed wildlife, people, and livestock. However, after a blight fungus was introduced into the United States in the late nineteenth century, the American chestnut became “functionally extinct.” Although the eradication of the species caused one of the greatest ecological catastrophes since the last ice age, considerable folklore about the American chestnut remains. This seminar will discuss the evolutionary history of the American chestnut, as well as its relationship to other *Castanea* species. It will address the impact of the American chestnut on Native American life and culture both before and after European settlement. We will also discuss the tree’s important influence on nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American life, including the commercial nut-trade. In the Southern Appalachians, the nuts were a major element in the local economy, as whole families collected and depended on them to get through the winter. The importation of the chestnut blight fungus will be addressed, including the tree’s decline as a dominant forest species. Finally, we will evaluate efforts to restore the American chestnut to its former place in the eastern deciduous forest, including attempts to genetically modify the species. Numerous archival images, maps, and illustrations will be shared with participants in the seminar, which will be conducted via Zoom over several weekends.

### Scheduling Details

January 15, 16, 22, 23

1 PM – 3 PM ET

Participants need to have a Zoom account (<https://zoom.us> sign up for zoom is free). You will receive a secure link to join the instructor before each class. Classes will be recorded so participants can review them or make up missed ones.

For more information regarding seminar costs and registration please visit:  
<https://www.eaglehill.us/programs/sems-online/general-info.shtml>

### About the Instructors

**Donald Edward Davis**, Ph.D., ([donaldedwarddavis@gmail.com](mailto:donaldedwarddavis@gmail.com)) is the author of six books and has published articles in such journals as *Environmental Ethics*, *The Ecologist*, and the *Utne Reader*. Davis has lectured widely in the United States and abroad, including the countries of France, Belgium, Romania, Ukraine, Canada, England, and the Czech Republic. He was the founder and President of the Armuchee Alliance and has served on the Board of Directors of the Appalachian Institute for Mountain Studies and the American Chestnut Foundation. His books include *The American Chestnut: An Environmental History* (UGA Press, 2021), the award-winning *Where There Are Mountains: An Environmental History of the Southern Appalachians* (UGA Press, 2005), *Homeplace Geography: Essays for Appalachia* (Mercer University Press, 2006), *Southern United States: An Environmental History* (ABC-CLIO, 2006), and *Ecophilosophy: A Field Guide to the Literature* (R & E Miles, 1989). He is a former Fulbright scholar, serving fellowship terms in both Romania and Ukraine.

**Dr. Ralph H. Lutts** ([rhlutts@swva.net](mailto:rhlutts@swva.net)) had a career as a museum curator and manager as well as an environmental historian. The Forest History Society gave him an award for one of his papers and the American Society for Environmental History included his work among seventeen papers exemplifying “path breaking scholarship that has shaped our field” during its journal’s first forty year of publication. He has published *The Nature Fakers: Wildlife, Science, and Sentiment and The Wild Animal Story*.