“The Chestnut”

After I took some wood for picture framing from the Mail Pouch barn, I began a long, tortuous drive through eastern Adams County, up and down hills, through dense forest and around curves – making me feel as if I were in a national park – until I reached this wonderful barn. Its sides made entirely of American chestnut wood, the barn was photogenic from both sides, allowing me to do two paintings of it. The chestnut had worn into a striking yellow-brown patina but its many missing boards, warped roof, shaky foundation, and vine-encrusted rear wall meant that its days were numbered. I’m lucky to have captured it in time.

American chestnut, an icon of early America, goes back to time well before the Native Americans inhabited the land. My college roommate lives in western Massachusetts where old homes and barns, some dating to the 1600s, still bear chestnut wood. In the mountains of Appalachia, where one fourth of the hardwoods were chestnuts, the tree grew tall, up to 100 feet, averaging five feet in diameter – a source of dependable wood. From the 1600s to the early 1900s, chestnut was used for most homes and barns east of the Mississippi. Besides its wood, the chestnut tree provided its nuts, used for food both by the early natives and then by the American pioneers.

But in the early 1900s a fungal blight was introduced to the eastern United States via Japanese tree imports. This blight slowly but surely destroyed the American chestnut, wiping out four billion of the trees by 1940. Though this iconic chestnut tobacco barn has been dismantled, it lives on in these paintings.