

A Most Unusual Buckeye in Hartford

by Edward A. Richardson



Photos: Edward A. Richardson

On May 30, 1990, I first noticed, and subsequently measured, a red-flowered tree of the genus *Aesculus*, on grounds then occupied by the Industrial Risk Insurance Company at 85 Woodland Street, Hartford. It appeared to have been grafted, probably on root-

stock of the common horse chestnut (*A. hippocastanum*), and I assumed that it was a red horse chestnut (*A. X carnea*). The leaves, however, were elliptical, not the somewhat obovate leaves one would have expected.

In October 2003, I checked it again and found some seed. The husks were smooth, light tan, and shaped somewhat like a small pear. This, together with the elliptical, stalked leaves led me to conclude that it was a red buckeye (*A. pavia*), although the height was extreme for this species.

In the winter of 2007 I was reading a recent book (*The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Trees* by More and White) and saw for the first time a drawing of the leaves and flowers of *Aesculus x hybrida*. Those matched the subject tree perfectly. It was a Eureka moment!

Subsequent research showed that *Aesculus x hybrida* is a rather obscure group of hybrids between the yellow buckeye (*A. octandra*) and the red buckeye (*A. pavia*). Both red and yellow petals appear in the flower cluster. There are several forms of the hybrid, with varying percentages of red and yellow in the flowers. Another identifier is the presence of glands and hairs on the petal edges.

Bean has the best write-up on this variety, followed by Dirr, Rehder, More/White, and Jacobson. Bean has the only reference I could find on size, noting that trees in England have reached 60 inches in girth and 60 feet in height. The Hartford tree is now 88 inches in girth and 57 feet high.

Aesculus x hybrida has been known since 1815. Jacobson says that it is occasionally found in cultivation. Nothing seems to be available on rate of growth, but with one parent being *A. pavia*, a small tree, it seems likely that it would take a very long time to get as large as this specimen.

Assuming this is true, and given its rarity, who might have planted this tree? My nomination is John Francis Huss (1846-1925). Huss was superintendent of grounds at the James Goodwin estate, which consisted of a very large mansion and considerable land at the northwest corner of Woodland Street and Asylum Avenue, on which site this tree stands. Huss was a noted plantsman of his era, president of the Connecticut Horticultural Society, and propagator of an unusual dwarf conifer, the Huss hemlock (*Tsuga canadensis 'Hussii'*). He was induced to come to Hartford from the George Morgan estate in Lenox, Massachusetts during the late 1890s, and remained in Hartford for the rest of this life. He is buried in Hartford's Cedar Hill Cemetery, where two Huss hemlocks adorn his grave site.

While the above is logical, it is not provable. What we do know is that this is the only tree of its taxon reported to the Notable Tree Committee of the Connecticut Botanical Society, that its condition appears to be good, that its location is adequate, and that it is unchallenged as a State Champion.

To add frosting to the cake, the tree has acquired a new and protective owner, Hartford's Classical Magnet School. Also, a small monument has been placed under its branches attesting that the noted poet Wallace Stevens passed this point twice daily on his oft-chronicled four mile round trip from his home to the Hartford Insurance Company (the first of thirteen such stones to commemorate the historic walk).

Rare tree and famous man must have been brought together thousands of times during Stevens's long business and poetic career. Whether he ever commented poetically on the striking hybrid buckeye will have to await the efforts of some future Stevens exegesis.



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