

TRACKING HISTORY

All thanks to 'Liz' for Saturday's blueberry fest

That tasty little blue fruit that everyone enjoys has its roots in Burlington County. It all started in Whitesbog in Pemberton Township in the 1800s.

But the story begins not with the blueberry, but with the cranberry.

According to the Whitesbog Preservation Trust, James A. Fenwick purchased a 490-acre tract in the early 1800s. The tract included the site of the former canal and canal pond that fed Hanover Iron Furnace during its operation in the early 1800s. By the 1860s Fenwick's cranberry farming efforts proved to be successful and the cranberry boom began.

Steve Thompson, executive director of the trust, says Whitesbog's founder Joseph Josiah White, commonly called "J.J.," was an innovative farmer who revolutionized the cranberry farming industry in New Jersey. Born in 1846 in Springfield Township, White married Fenwick's daughter, Mary, in 1869. Thompson, who is married to



Tom Bergbauer

White's great-granddaughter, says Whitesbog was the first cranberry farm in New Jersey.

When Fenwick died in 1882, White's wife became the owner and J.J. sole executor and manager. According to the trust's historical records, White expanded the bogs over the years and became the first grower to actually dig bogs and cultivate cranberries where they did not grow naturally. The action, according to the archives, was so novel that while he was developing the bogs his friends referred to the venture as "White's Folly."

By 1912, "White's Folly" was the largest cranberry operation in New Jersey. It was White's daughter, Elizabeth, who became interested in the blueberry.

"The culture used to dictate in the old days, the sons inherit the business," Thompson said.

White had no sons and would not allow his four daughters to get involved in running the farm, according to Thompson.

The enterprising young Elizabeth developed an interest in cultivating the land between the cranberry bogs where wild blueberries grew.

"Elizabeth was way ahead of her time," Thompson said. "She took the wild blueberries and over a number of years she would research them, gather them, cultivated them and she came up with a number of varieties of the blueberry. The cultivated blueberry started with Elizabeth White. Before then there was no such thing as the blueberry farm. It was just a wild bush that grew around this area."

In 1911, Elizabeth read about Dr. Frederick V. Coville's work with the blueberry and persuaded her father to support Coville's work and convinced Coville to come to Whitesbog to do his research.

Five years after Elizabeth's alliance with Coville, they had

managed to cultivate and produce a blueberry ripe for sale.

"Whitesbog became the first blueberry farm in the nation," Thompson said.

"She started clearing more land, planting this variety here, that variety there, and at one point she had close to 200 acres under cultivation and they are still here," Thompson said. "Some are very overgrown and some we actually restored."

According to the trust, Elizabeth hired local residents, called "Piney's," to search the Pines within a 20-mile radius of Whitesbog and locate the choicest blueberry shrubs.

Today, the trust is restoring the fields.

"Our purpose in restoring the fields is to keep the village setting in a more historic way," Thompson said.

Every year, the trust sponsors a Blueberry Festival. This year, the festival will be on Saturday from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.

"We give everyone a ticket and let them go out into the

fields and pick a pint," Thompson said. "We are not in the business of farming. But because they are historic fields we want to preserve them."

Thompson says the trust is considering subleasing other area fields to an organic blueberry farmer who has expressed interest in restoring more of the fields to the point where it (Whitesbog) could become a commercial blueberry operation again.

In 1927, Elizabeth helped organize the New Jersey Blueberry Cooperative Association and became its first female member to receive a New Jersey Department of Agriculture citation.

She lived at "Suningive," her home in Whitesbog Village, next to her grandfather Fenwick's first bog, until her death in 1954. She never married.

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