

Group working to preserve bog's legacy

by **Darlene Bakhoun**
Community News staff

BROWNS MILLS — A historic restoration group is trying to bring back the soul of Whitesbog.

The group of around 300 people is working to breathe life back into the once bustling town known as Whitesbog Village.

The site was once a model company town that now sleeps quietly in the Brendan T. Byrne Forest off Route 530 in Browns Mills.

In 1984, The Whitesbog Preservation Trust was established to protect and preserve the legacy of the historic village.

The trust intends to restore historically significant buildings and agricultural components of Whitesbog, and redevelop the area as a historic site with state and private funding.

The development and implementation of educational and interpretive programs about the historic culture and natural environment is also a continuing goal of trust.

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In its heyday, the village was self-sustaining and had a general store, a post office, a school, a pay office, and a water tower to protect the village in the event of fire.

It was also the center of the plantation's cranberry production facilities, which included a 600-foot packing and sorting house, where the cranberries were processed and stored, a barrel factory, and a barrel storage house.

The majority of the buildings from the main village are still standing today.

John Joyce, vice president of the trust and chairperson of the Buildings Committee, became involved with Whitesbog in 1980 when he was hired by the Conservation and Environment Studies Center as buildings caretaker.

"At that time there were more buildings than employees," Joyce said.

Dr. Eugene Vivian of Glassboro College founded the CESC, an environmental education program, in 1968.

Through the help of the CESC, the National Park Service designated Whitesbog as a National Environmental Education Landmark in 1972.

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Whitesbog trust president and botanist Mark Ehlenfeldt shows off some of the mixed variety Blueberries at Whitesbog in Browns Mills Tuesday.

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Whitesbog and its two satellite villages, Rome and Florence, were home to hundreds of permanent and seasonal laborers who worked in the cranberry bogs and the blueberry fields.

The trust has established a five-year plan to organize the restoration and education provided at the site, according to Teresa Earley, executive director of the trust.

"Each committee has definitive goals in which they must achieve in a given time. The five-year plan helps the committees remain focused so they can do the work of the trust," Earley said.

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The CESC, which led early preservation in the village, disbanded when Vivian retired and federal funding was no longer available.

Even after Joyce's position was eliminated in 1985, he continued living in Whitesbog until 1989, and paid rent to the state.

"I was an original member of the Trust," Joyce said.

Once the trust became active, more extensive restoration efforts began to take shape.

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tered into a lease agreement with the state for Whitesbog, so they could develop a complete "master plan" for the management and restoration of the village.

According to Joyce, one of the largest restoration projects in the village has been the barrel warehouse, which now houses an agricultural exhibit.

A \$12,000 grant from the 1772 foundation also aided in the restoration of the barrel warehouse, and helped fund the completion of a portion of the floor.

"That building has been painstakingly restored. Now with the floor completed, we can actually use the space for interpretive education," Joyce said.

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across the dirt road from other buildings, has also been converted to a small interpretive museum operated by the Antique Engine Association.

"Arguably one of the most historically important buildings in the village is the packing house, which at this point is beyond saving," Joyce said.

The packinghouse was an impressive structure at one time, spanning 600 feet, and today only a third of the original building remains.

Joyce said that the neglect of 40 years led to the ultimate collapse of the structure.

"The middle portion collapsed, and the eastern third of the building burned in 1972," Joyce said.

Joyce said the massive structure is now too dangerous for workers to try and restore, and is now resting behind a metal fence for safety reasons.

Most of the 26 buildings in the village, however, are still standing and relatively intact.

the water tower and installed a large tank for fire protection on the west end of the village.

In the next year, the trust intends to stabilize three buildings, according to Joyce.

"There are three structures that need immediate attention, the fire engine building, which is in a precarious state, the ice house, and a garage behind a residence," Joyce said.

The buildings committee, which oversees the buildings grants, won a grant for almost \$400,000 last year to aid in the restoration, and it is the largest grant received by the trust.

Buildings and wood are not the only historic elements of the site.

Another part of the trust is working to preserve the agricultural significance of the area.

"One of the restoration goals of the trust is not only to restore the village and its buildings, but the agricultural aspect as well," said Mark Ehlenfeldt, U.S.

search geneticist, and president of the trust.

Whitesbog is the home of the cultivated blueberry and also contributed to major advances in cranberry harvesting, according to the trust.

"Whitesbog was really a center for cranberry and blueberry innovation," Ehlenfeldt said.

The trust, with the collaborative efforts of the landscape committee, the Antique Engine Association, and local Eagle Scout candidates has begun restoring some of Elizabeth White's acidic gardens, and has planted a blueberry demonstration field next to Suningive, White's home, for interpretive education purposes.

"The demonstration field is organized into three plant plots, of all the blueberry varieties that Elizabeth White named that could be identified," said Ehlenfeldt.

One particular blueberry variety, Elizabeth, was named in honor of White, more than a decade after her death in 1954.

"It is one of the tastiest varieties," Ehlenfeldt said.

The Antique Engine association has donated hundreds of hours of labor clearing White's blueberry test field, where most of her original bushes have survived.

"The blueberry is an under story plant, and fairly long lived, so as long as they (the bushes) are not killed off by drought or disease, they can survive even if a forest grows up around them," Ehlenfeldt said.



DARLENE BAKHOUM

Building committee chairman John Joyce points out the most impressive of the historical buildings at Whitesbog. The building, however, is too damaged to repair.