



Whitesbog Preservation Trust

NEWSLETTER

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www.whitesbog.org

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Birthplace of the Highbush Blueberry - Historic Center for Cranberry Innovation

The Mystery of the 'Laura' Blueberry

The What, the Why, the Who

by

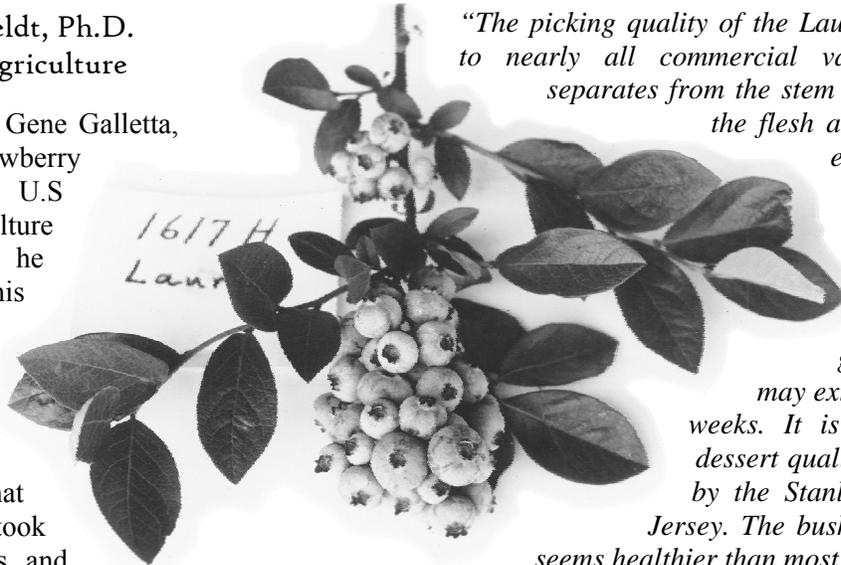
Mark Ehlenfeldt, Ph.D.
U.S. Dept. of Agriculture

In late 2002 when Dr. Gene Galletta, the well-known strawberry breeder with the U.S. Department of Agriculture was preparing to retire, he asked me to stop at his office in Beltsville, Maryland to pick up four boxes that contained documents and journal reprints related to blueberries that he felt I should have. I took them with many thanks and headed back to my office in New Jersey. Shortly thereafter I began to sort through them.

The What

Of greatest interest to me in these boxes were old archival photographs taken by a USDA photographer and a number of documents pertaining to the initial release of several now historical blueberry cultivars. One document I came across was a three-page carbon-copy description of the 'Laura' blueberry along with two photos - one of the plant in the field, the other of the fruit (above). There were numerous similar archival photos with the 'Laura' designation. Most had attributions that said: March 23, 1938; G.M. Darrow, observer; Whitesbog, New Jersey. In one photo, Elizabeth White stood next to a dormant, but robust-looking blueberry bush (see next page). I am much smarter today with regard to historic blueberry varieties than I was then, but even at that time, I knew that there hadn't been a variety released with the name 'Laura'. Thus, the mystery.

The release notice divulged the pertinent details: *"The Laura blueberry originated as a cross of Rubel × Pioneer made by F.V. Coville in 1916. It was selected from the seedling field of the Joseph J. White Co. at Whitesbog, N.J., by Elizabeth White, and was propagated and tested by her."*



"The picking quality of the Laura blueberry is superior to nearly all commercial varieties, for the berry separates from the stem with the least tearing of the flesh and skin. Because of this ease of separation it keeps better than most sorts. It ripens somewhat later than Jersey and Rubel and, because of its good keeping qualities, may extend the season at least 2 weeks. It is above the average in dessert quality, being surpassed only by the Stanley as observed in New Jersey. The bush is vigorous, erect, and seems healthier than most other varieties."

Despite these optimistic comments, I had to ask myself if it was a failed variety. Was it a variety intended for release until a fatal flaw was discovered in the final stages of testing? None of the adjacent documents provided a clue.

A month or two later while scanning a published release article (from 1939), I recognized one of the photos as being identical or nearly identical to those in the 'Laura' blueberry write-up. On closer comparison, I found it to be identical to one of the 'Laura' photos. The write-up in the article was word-for-word that of the 'Laura' blueberry, except for the name. This doppelgänger for the 'Laura' blueberry was the variety we know today as the 'Burlington' blueberry. Thus, I now knew that 'Laura' was not lost, but had become the 'Burlington' variety.

A few facts about the 'Burlington': it was a successful variety in its heyday for all the reasons listed in the release notice, and ... it is still grown today in parts of Canada. It has the reputation of being a berry that holds up well in cold storage, and 'Burlington', notably, gave rise to the 'Elliott' blueberry, our main late-season variety in New Jersey.

The Why

The "why" of the 'Laura' blueberry is more difficult to explain. By 1938, the originator of the USDA component
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Elizabeth White standing next to a bush of the 'Laura' blueberry, March 3, 1938.

(continued from page 1)

of blueberry development, Dr. Frederick Coville, had died (Jan. 9, 1937), and the blueberry breeding program at Whitesbog had been phased out as the White family concentrated on commercial production. As early as 1929, when Coville was still alive, blueberry development at Whitesbog had lessened as Coville spent more of his time launching the National Arboretum. By 1938, Dr. George M. Darrow had taken over the USDA blueberry breeding program, and was in the process of becoming fully immersed in its various aspects. Rutgers University had assumed many of the facets of local New Jersey testing, and testing was being done at other locations in addition to Whitesbog.

The Galletta archive contained one other pertinent document. It was a response to an inquiry from a Mr. Gould (presumably associated with the NJ/Rutgers University testing program), and read:

March 21, 1939.

MEMORANDUM FOR MR. GOULD

Dear Mr. Gould:

In answer to Dr. Darrow's memorandum of February 27 regarding the propagation and introduction by Miss White of certain blueberry varieties produced in cooperation with this Bureau, I see no reason why Miss White does not have this authority. We canceled our memorandum of understanding with her some time ago, and it would be my feeling that she is free to go ahead with the propagation and introduction of such stock as was left.

Very truly yours,

E. C. Auchter, Chief of Bureau

A further letter from Dr. George Darrow to Mr. Gould on July 28, 1939 discussed considerations about releasing

four numbered selections as named varieties. The selections enumerated were: GN-45 ('Jersey' × 'Pioneer', mid-season to late-season ripening), FI-66 ('Katharine' × 'Rubel', late ripening), 1617-H ('Rubel' × 'Pioneer', very late ripening), and GN-87 ('Jersey' × 'Pioneer', very late ripening). The letter commented that three of five members of the New Jersey State Blueberry Council including Elizabeth White, Stanley Coville (Frederick Coville's son and then manager of the Tru-Blu Blueberry Cooperative), and J. Cutts all disapproved of the possible release of FI-66 and GN-87 because they felt these two selections were not of high enough quality.

Ultimately, GN-45 became 'Atlantic', FI-66 was released and became 'Pemberton', and 1617-H became 'Burlington'. GN-87 was never released (but persists, even today, in one or two small plantings in New Jersey). Its proposed name had been 'August'.

It seems obvious that Elizabeth White had developed the 'Laura' variety and was poised to release it herself. Presumably the New Jersey State Blueberry Council decided to take advantage of her reputation, and her accumulated knowledge and familiarity with these selections, and acceded to her belief that the 'Laura' should be released.

Why did 1617-H become 'Burlington' rather than 'Laura' as earlier intended? We don't know, but we can speculate that the three late-ripening varieties being released simultaneously presented an opportunity for a unified South Jersey trifecta, *name-wise*, with each variety representing a southern New Jersey county or locality.

The Who

The final question is: Who was Laura? Only two Lauras turn up in references from Whitesbog history. One is Laura Doan, the wife of Superintendent Sydney Hutton. Little is known of this Laura other than this single piece of marital status information. The second, and far more likely candidate, was Miss Laura Fair.

Laura Fair was a graduate student and research fellow in the School of Education at Rutgers, and a trained social worker. Laura Fair conducted a case study on the lives of the Italian workers at Whitesbog in 1930 and 1931. For this study she worked at Whitesbog for twelve weeks during 1930 and during the harvest season from June to October in 1931. While at Whitesbog, Fair worked at the nursery school or "social center" operated by the Council of Women for Home Missions in cooperation with J.J. White Inc. According to the Historic American Landscapes Survey,⁴ this social center at Whitesbog was a "little house right in the midst of the Italian settlement. It had three rooms – a nursery, a kitchen, and a large recreation room. Here there were trained workers, often college graduates, who had a combination day nursery, nursery school, and kindergarten during the day to take care of the children under ten years while their parents are

out working. At night there were clubs for the older girls and boys, who had been working in the fields during the day.” As a further part of her study, Fair later visited sixty-nine of the approximately ninety-six Whitesbog worker families at their homes in Philadelphia to observe their living conditions in the city and gather data about employment and school progress. Her research was published as a report on the education of migrant farm workers’ children and provides perhaps the best and most detailed view of what it was like for workers and their children at Whitesbog in 1930.⁴ Laura Fair would have been 22 in 1930.

This information in itself would not be conclusive that Miss Laura Fair was the Laura, but for the fact that one more piece of information exists - Elizabeth White’s Last Will and Testament of January 27, 1954.⁵ In it Elizabeth White leaves to Mrs. Laura Fair Smyth of 210 Krameria Street, Denver, Colorado, her large cameo pin and \$100. The cameo pin undoubtedly was something that Laura Fair admired in her association with Elizabeth White, and it would have been an item of sentimental value befitting a bequest to a cherished friend. It seals my belief that she is indeed the Laura of our blueberry mystery. Mystery resolved. ■

References

- ¹ The Laura Blueberry. Type-written document, 3 pp. Whitesbog Preservation Trust archives, USDA Collection, Acc. # 1997.1, Object ID 1997.1.3.
- ² Darrow, G.M. and J.H. Clark. 1940. The Atlantic, Pemberton, and Burlington blueberries. Circular No. 589, U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, Washington, D.C., 8 pp.
- ³ Historic American Landscapes Survey (HALS) NJ-1, Whitesbog Village & Cranberry Bog. 2003, National Park Service, U.S. Dept. of the Interior, Washington, D.C., 67 pp.
- ⁴ Fair, L. 1932. Migrants as a Social and Educational Problem in New Jersey (Studies in Education – Number Three). Rutgers University Bulletin, Series VIII, Number 11a. School of Education, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ, 40 pp.
- ⁵ Last Will and Testament of Elizabeth C. White, Whitesbog Preservation Trust archives, Whitesbog Heritage Collection, Acc. # 1984.2, Object ID 1984.2.20.

The preceding article is typical of feature articles researched by the Whitesbog Preservation Trust (WPT) and published in the Whitesbog Preservation Trust Newsletter. These articles are designed to be educational, informative, and generally Whitesbog-related. They pertain broadly to New Jersey history, and more specifically to cranberry and blueberry history. An archive of WPT Newsletters can be found on the WPT website at: www.whitesbog.org/newsletters.

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Your membership is vital to the ongoing restoration and preservation of Historic Whitesbog Village and the interpretive programs offered by the Trust.

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Calendar of Events

July

- 13 Whitesbog Village Tour** 1 p.m.
\$5 donation/person
- 14 Blueberry Tasting** 1 p.m.
\$5 donation/person, reservations required. Sample unique and hard to find blueberry varieties. Learn about Whitesbog's role in blueberry cultivation from Mark Ehlenfeldt, USDA Blueberry Geneticist.
- 20 Moonlight Walk** 7 p.m.
\$5 donation/person, reservations requested.
- 22 National Moth Week** 9 p.m.
There are hundreds of thousands of moth species, many of them as beautiful as their colorful cousins - butterflies. Bring your chair, camera and a snack for later, and see what fantastic moths the bogs, cedar stands and pine forests release. **FREE**

August

- 3 Whitesbog Village Tour** 1 p.m.
- 11 Quarterly Lecture Series** 1 p.m.
"Living and Working at Whitesbog" An exchange of memories, experiences and recollections of life at Whitesbog, with Facilitator: Sharon Goodman. \$5 members, \$7 non-members, by reservation.
- 17 Moonlight Walk** 7 p.m.
\$5 donation/person, reservations requested.

September

- 7 Whitesbog Village Tour** 1 p.m.
\$5 donation/person
- 15 Suningive's Gardens** 10 a.m.
Join Mark Szutarski. to learn about Elizabeth White's unique plant collection and efforts to preserve her gardens. \$5 donation/person, reservations requested.
- 21 Moonlight Walk** 7 p.m.
\$5 donation/person, reservations requested.
- 22 Art in the Park at Smithville Park**
Stop by our table to celebrate the cranberry harvest and sample J.J. White's new blueberry & cranberry honey & jams - products grown & produced right here at Whitesbog! Be sure to bring the kids.
- TBA Cranberry Industry Bus Tours** \$28
View a modern wet-harvest and learn about the history and cultivation of cranberries in NJ. **Call for dates and times.** Space is very limited.

October

- 5 Celebrating Elizabeth White's Work on her Birthday** 10 a.m. – 3 p.m.
Join us to recognize Elizabeth White's pioneering contributions to agriculture, and view a modern cranberry harvest.
- 19 Moonlight Walk** 7 p.m.
\$5 donation/person, reservations requested.
- 20 Living History Tours** 1 p.m. – 3 p.m.
Experience a 1920's cranberry harvest and tour Whitesbog Village with the 'Cranberry King', Joseph J. White, his daughter, Elizabeth, and Charles Beckwith, played by historical interpreters. \$15 donation/person - Reservations are required.

We are continually adding new programs and events. Check with us often at (609) 893-4646 or on the web at www.whitesbog.org. ■



Funding for the 2013 Whitesbog Blueberry Festival is made possible in part by the New Jersey State Council on the Arts/Department of State, a Partner Agency of the National Endowment for the Arts from a grant to the Burlington County Board of Chosen Freeholders, Department of Resource Conservation, Division of Parks. The Whitesbog Preservation Trust has received a General Operating Support grant from the New Jersey Historical Commission (NJHC), a division of the Department of State, for fiscal year 2013, and has also received from the NJHC, a mini-grant for historical research.

A Newsletter Archive & more information is at: whitesbog.org.

For even more Whitesbog history visit: whitesbog.blogspot.com and whitesbog2.blogspot.com.



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1st Quarter www.whitesbog.org 2013
Birthplace of the Highbush Blueberry - Historic Center for Cranberry Innovation

June Mershon Vail, 1922 - 2012

With this issue, we celebrate the life of June M. Vail who died on November 27, 2012 at the ripe age of 90. June was a companion and assistant to Elizabeth White during the last 10 years of White's life. June was a supporter of the Whitesbog Preservation Trust, a noted horticulturalist in her own right and was responsible for conveying much that we know about Elizabeth White's horticultural pursuits at Whitesbog, and for donating many letters and artifacts that belonged to Elizabeth White. A formal obituary by the Wm. H. Clark Funeral Home can be found as part of the online version of this Newsletter. What follows are contributions from members of the Whitesbog Preservation Trust who knew June over her long association with Whitesbog. We start with an interview of June's friend and neighbor, his brother, and done by documentarian Nancy O'Mallon on Jan. 20, 2013.

How did you meet June?
IG: I met June at the Post Office in Anslomink (Pennsylvania). I held the door for her. I would then occasionally, coincidentally, run into her there and we started talking. I saw her sitting in her car one day, and I had noticed how difficult it was for her to get in and out, so I asked her if there was something I could do for her in the Post Office. You know, to save her the trip. And she said, "Yeah" and she hands me a set of keys, tells me the number of the Post Office box and said, "Can you get my mail?" And I looked at her and I said it was so odd, "You don't just give someone you don't know your whole set of keys?" And she looked at me with those piercing blue eyes and said, "Where ya gonna go?" And I said (laughing), "You got a good point there." And that was the start of a really lovely friendship. If you were to describe June to someone who never knew her, what would you say?"

IG: I would say, what a remarkable woman she was, strong of mind and body, even with her handicap. She was fiercely independent, generous, and warm, with lots of interesting stories. She was just a very special person with a spark in her eye that said mischief.

What was your favorite thing about her?
IG: That's hard. I think it was that look in her eye, that little mischievous look. She was like a child in so many ways. I think that was one of my favorite things about her. Although I have to say, one of the things I find very special is how she lived her life. She lived her life clean and honest with other people. She was a good Christian. And to me she really epitomized that phrase "A good Christian" because she didn't want to be recognized for anything. She gave what we call Tzadaka to Hebrews. In my house I have a Tzadaka box ... just a little coin box ... it's a very common traditional thing for all Jews to have. The filial piety is righteousness. But we've loosely translated it to charity. And she would always say to me: "Here's some money for that" and she called it the poor box. I said, "Okay." June had basically filled the box up herself; every time she would come to my house, she would put money in it. Then, when I turned in the box to the Rabbi, I asked if he would please send a note to her, you know, thanking her for her donation. And when I got the note, when it came to me in a letter, and I read it to her, she was upset with me. I said, "Why are you upset? I thought it was so nice!" And she said, "You didn't have to tell him that. You didn't have to tell him that I contributed to that." And I said, "Whoa." Something new I learned about June. She didn't want the recognition. But I was impressed with that.

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