

Back to the roots of berry industry

Movement to save farming village

By **Janny Scott**

Staff Writer

WHITESBOG — The birthplace of the modern blueberry is a clearing in the Pinelands, where hens skitter along the white sand roads and the only sound is the distant crackle of guns at Fort Dix.

The giant berry packinghouse is rotting now, and pitch pines are returning to reclaim their turf. Pigeons have abused the water tank for so long, it has been drained and is in danger of dry rot.

Vandals have torn cedar siding from the barrel warehouse, stolen fixtures, and painted **FAT PAT** on the packinghouse wall. Here, where the forest is bone-dry in summer, what Barry Brady fears most is fire.

"As an historic site, this place is just about unique," said Brady, a Pinelands Commission archaeologist. "It represents a type of settlement once very common — the berry stations. They just don't exist anymore."

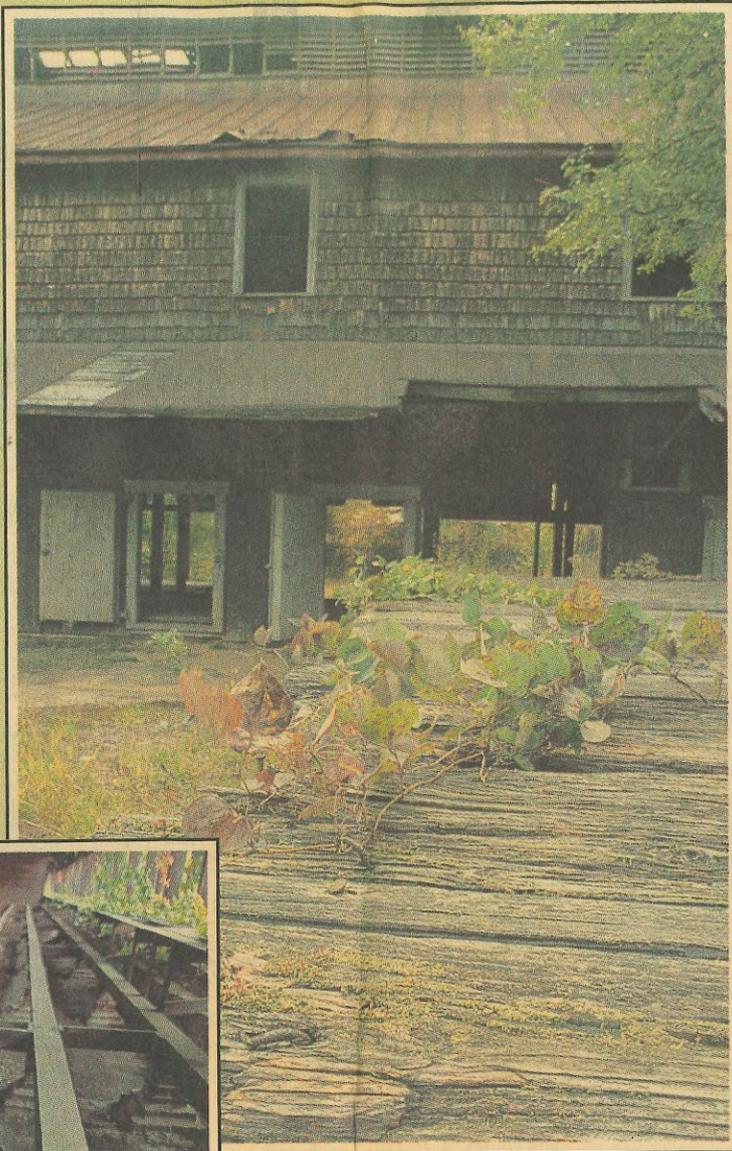
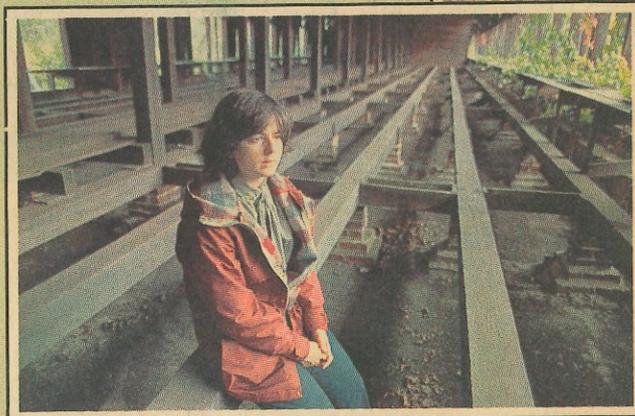
Brady, once the archaeologist for the City of Paterson, is part of a small group trying to rescue the 100-year-old agricultural settlement, which played a seminal role in the

country's blueberry and cranberry culture.

But his group wants an uncommon form of preservation: maybe a Pinelands museum in the packinghouse, but with ordinary people living in the cedar-shingled workers' duplexes and bogs flaming every fall with the cranberry harvest.

The Whitesbog Preservation Trust is up against more than the encroaching forest and decay. The state, which got Whitesbog when it

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Michele Byers, left, is one of a handful of people who live in Whitesbog. Above, a decaying cranberry packing and storage house.

Staff photos by Steve Auchard

Preserving roots of berry industry

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bought the forest, wants to keep its options open.

Founded in 1882

While the state studies, Whitesbog rots.

"Some of the buildings we really want to save are unoccupied," Brady said recently. "What we are really worried about is some day some kid's going to come in with some matches. And that will be the end."

Cranberries, picked wild by Indians for pemmican cake, came into commercial cultivation in New Jersey in the mid-1800's after the bog iron industry in the Pinelands collapsed.

Whitesbog was founded in 1882 by Joseph Josiah White and in 30 years grew to 3,000 acres with 600 in cranberry production. It was the largest berry farm in New Jersey, and a progressive model of an agricultural community.

Eighty-eight workers lived here year-round. Septembers would bring some 600 migrants, many of them Italian immigrants and their families, who would be housed in two satellite villages named Rome and Florence.

There was a general store, post office, and school. The giant packinghouse — three 196-foot-long sections each 2½ stories high — held 60,000 bushel crates of cranberries, or most of the harvest.

An inventor, White patented and put to use various mechanical berry-sorting machines. He helped form the Growers Cranberry Cooperative to modernize berry marketing, changing his own brand name from White Star to Eatmore.

Whitesbog's blueberry chapter came with White's oldest daughter, Elizabeth, who in 1911 read about federal botanist Frederick V. Coville's blueberry breeding experiments and invited him to Whitesbog to work.

Miss White got local people to search the forests for the best blueberries, which grew wild but had never been cultivated. She paid \$2 for every bush with berries of five-eighths-inch diameter or larger.

'Her hands were midnight blue'

In 1916, Miss White and Coville sold the country's first commercial crop. New Jersey now produces more blueberries than any state but Michigan, and more cranberries than any state but Massachusetts and Wisconsin.

In recent years, New Jersey's cranberry crop has been valued as high as \$8 million and filled 245,000 barrels. Massachusetts filled 1.4 million barrels, and Wisconsin filled 1.1 million.

New Jersey's blueberry crop has been valued at nearly \$16 million and totalled 26 million pounds — compared with the 41 million pounds harvested in Michigan.

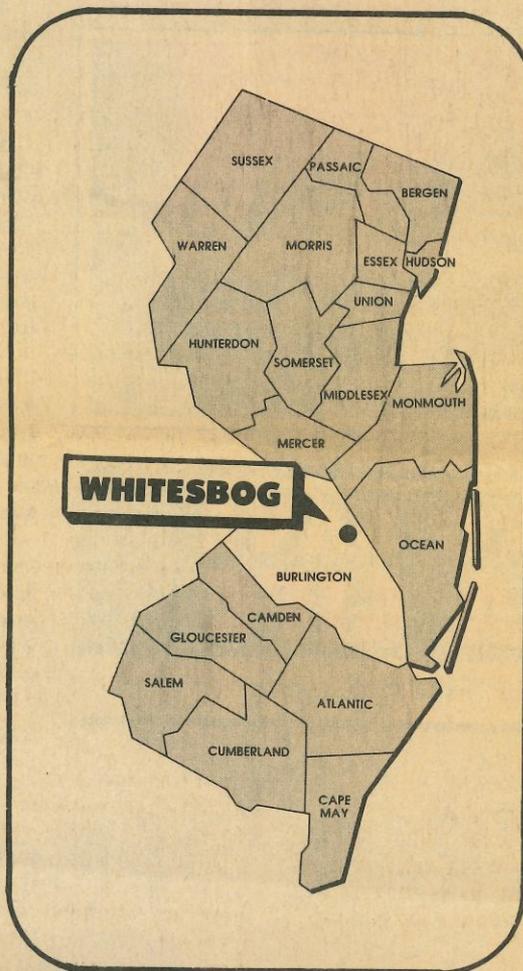
In his book "The Pine Barrens," author John McPhee described a visit by landscape architects from the state highway department to the home of Miss White late in her life:

"Her ankles were black from the dirt of the fields, and her hands were midnight blue from the wax of the berries. In her home, she served each of her visitors a blueberry that was the size

of a baseball, as they recall it, heaped over with sugar and resting in a pool of cream."

Elizabeth White died in 1954. Her descendants have continued to expand the cranberry farming operation, but with mechanization and higher-yielding bushes, parts of the bogs and the village have fallen to ruin.

Florence and Rome were abandoned, burned, and finally bulldozed after the state bought the property in 1966 and 1968. Two thirds of the packinghouse was destroyed by fire. The blueberry field along Whitesbogs Road is overgrown.



Only half the remaining houses in the village are occupied — by a few farm workers, teachers, a private environmental education center, and the South Jersey office of the New Jersey Conservation Foundation.

Michele Byers, the Conservation Foundation staff member who lives in Elizabeth White's old house, figures there are 15 to 20 people in Whitesbog, and about 1,000 chickens.

The first move to protect Whitesbog came in 1982, when the Conservation Foundation commissioned a historic architectural survey and applied through the state to list the village on the national register of historic places.

The state responded that the village would

need an active citizens committee and a reuse plan before the listing could be considered. A preliminary plan is due out next month; a citizens committee began meeting regularly this year.

The first meeting brought about 100 people, Brady said. Now the preservation trust's active members number about 20, including Brady and Ms. Byers, village residents, Pemberton Township officials, and the superintendent of Lebanon State Forest.

To raise money and consciousness, the group has begun holding Whitesbog events. A blueberry festival and 10-kilometer run in July brought about 600 people. A cranberry festival, bus tour of some bogs, and a five-kilometer run were scheduled for today.

Brady envisions for Whitesbog what he calls "low-intensity reuse." He sees people living in the houses again, the first Pinelands museum in the packinghouse, and berry farming continuing in the fields.

The preservation trust does not want "a New Hope," says Brady, referring to the restored Delaware River town in Bucks County, Pa., with its antique shops and ice cream cones.

Control of future

What the trust does want is control of Whitesbog and its future, through national historic status and a lease agreement with the state.

But the state has its own thoughts about the future of Whitesbog, which is only one of six historic villages it owns. The Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) is studying all six and wants to preserve its choices.

As Helen Fenske, assistant DEP commissioner for natural resources, said last week, "We don't want to get locked into another lease that in many ways usurps the park management's prerogatives when we have a \$100,000 study out there."

The study is intended to help the state decide how to manage its historic villages — so the public can enjoy them, so they bring in money, so they can be restored, interpreted, and understood, she said.

She said Whitesbog is the most vulnerable, ecologically, and could not withstand too many visitors. Its advanced state of deterioration would make it extremely expensive to stabilize and restore.

Ms. Fenske said some of the most debilitated buildings could be torn down, if there were duplicates. But she dismissed any suggestion that the village would ever be bulldozed.

A week ago, as the afternoon sun blazed through the scrub oaks at Whitesbog, red and orange leaves glowed like stained glass. A great blue heron waded in Union Pond, then took off flying low over the water.

Ms. Byers pointed out a spot where on summer nights you can hear four different breeds of frogs. Then she recalled how people have come and shot down migrating tundra swans.

"I've been kind of torn through the whole process of publicizing this," she said ruefully. "It's a conflict between trying to restore it, and not wanting people to come."