

THE ARTS AND THINGS TO DO

Time and season create ever-changing experiences at Whitesbog, where the blueberry is said to have been born.

Moonlight makes hike on historic farm 'magical'

By Louise Harbach

INQUIRER SUBURBAN STAFF

It is known as the birthplace of the blueberry.

It was here in 1916, at Whitesbog, the farm in Pemberton Township where Elizabeth White lived, that the self-trained horticulturist hit upon a berry that was suitably sweet and plump, and easily picked.

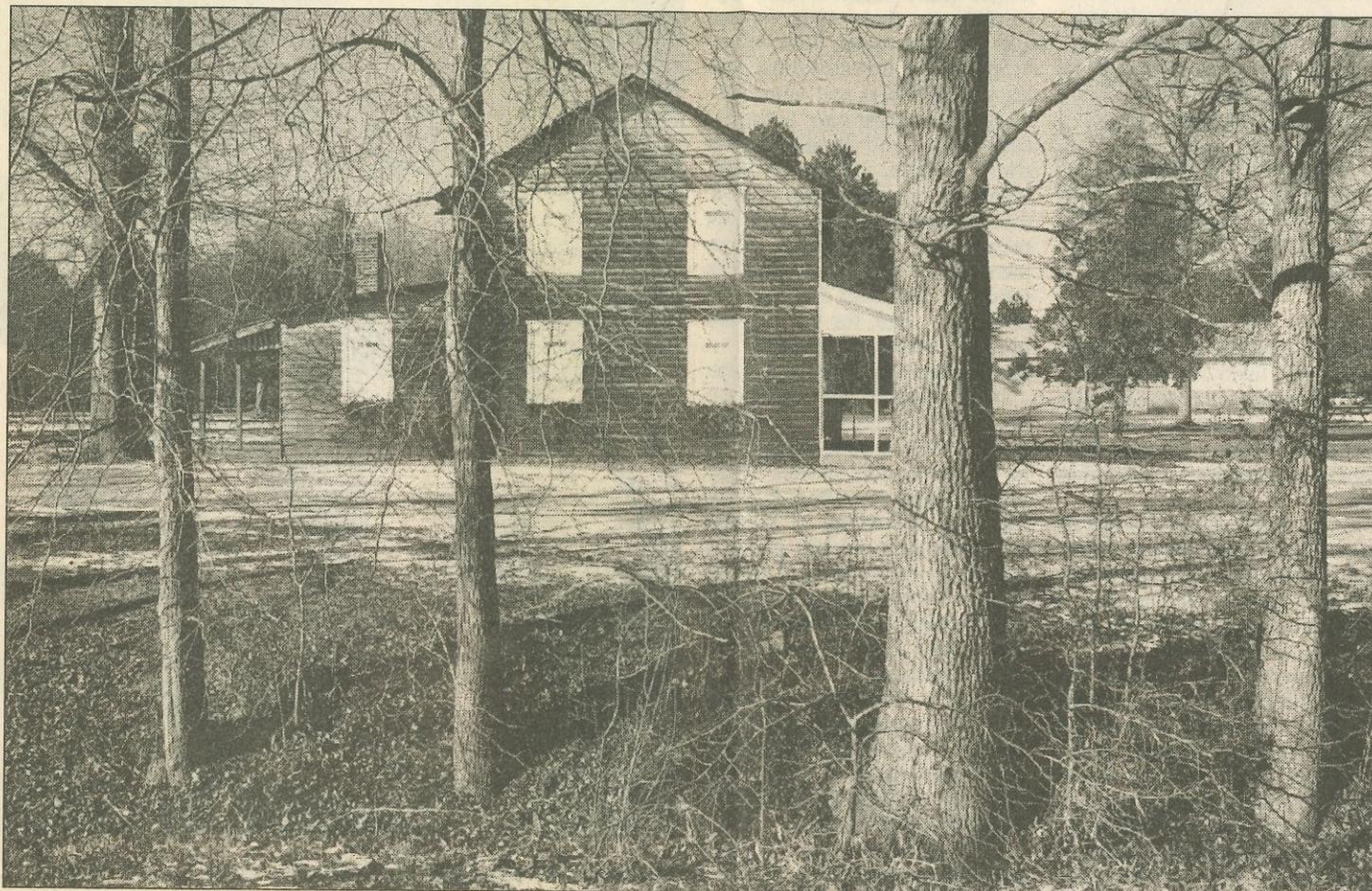
Later, the farm became the center of one of the region's first company towns, with more than two dozen village buildings, some dating to the 19th century. By the turn of the 20th century, hundreds of laborers, many of them Italian immigrants, harvested cranberries and blueberries at the farm. Many of them lived in the village until the 1950s.

Today, the village and its surrounding 3,000 acres of land are part of Lebanon State Forest and open to the public for recreation from dawn to dusk.

But those who visit Whitesbog for a moonlight walk are sure to notice more than village buildings, the blueberry fields, the cranberry bogs, and the tea-colored streams that dot the region surrounding Whitesbog — the 1.1-million-acre area known as the Pine Barrens.

"It's a very different experience by night," said Steve Thompson, executive director of the Whitesbog Preservation Trust, which sponsors monthly 2- and 5-mile hikes through Whitesbog and the surrounding area. "It's almost magical walking in the moonlight, and when there is snow on the ground, that is the most magical time of all."

In winter, Thompson said, hikers are likely to see tundra swan, large birds with a wing span of up to six feet. And in June, Canada geese can be found nesting.



An old worker's house is one of two dozen buildings in Whitesbog Village, which is listed in the state Register of Historic Places and on the National Historic Register. The village and 3,000 acres around it in Pemberton Township are part of Lebanon State Forest.

ROSE HOWERTER / Inquirer Suburban Staff

June is also a time when visitors are almost certain to hear frogs.

"It's the frog-mating season, and believe me, those frogs are loud," Thompson said.

At other times screech owls, foxes, opossums and raccoons may be seen. Depending on the season and the weather, hikers can trek along the white-sand bottoms of reservoirs.

"You're never quite sure exactly what you're going to see," Thompson said.

But no matter which season, Thompson said, the hikes — all on flat ground — offer a unique experience.

"There are no city lights, no airplanes," he said.

The monthly walks — the next is set for 7 p.m. Saturday — always fall on the Saturday closest to the full moon.

The region's rare plant life draws botanists from around the world, while others flock to the region for hiking, canoeing and other pursuits, Thompson said.

It was at Whitesbog that Elizabeth White noticed wild blueberries growing next to cranberry bogs. She had wanted to find another crop to extend the cranberry-picking season, and in 1911 enlisted the help of Frederick Coville, a botanist for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, to help cultivate a commercial blueberry. After five years of crossbreeding, they hit upon that berry.

In the early 20th century, Whitesbog was one of the larg-

est cranberry farms in the state, and during the fall harvest, hundreds of laborers filled the village. Many were Italians from South Philadelphia, but there were also Portuguese, African American and Puerto Rican workers.

Many of them lived in the village, which once included a wood-frame general store; a schoolhouse; Suningive, White's three-story home; buildings for the processing of cranberries and blueberries; as well as work-

If You Go

What: Moonlight walks, 2 and 5 miles

Where: Whitesbog Village, 120-13 Whitesbog Rd., Browns Mills, Pemberton Township. Walks depart from general store.

When: 7 p.m. Saturday, April 19, May 17, June 14, July 12, Aug. 9, Sept. 13, Oct. 11, Nov. 8 and Dec. 6, weather permitting.

Cost: \$5 per person, \$10 per family; includes refreshments. Bring flashlights.

Reservations: 609-893-4646

Other: Whitesbog is open dawn to dusk daily for self-guided tours.

ers' homes.

After White's death, in 1954, the buildings deteriorated as the number of workers needed to run the farm declined. By the early 1960s, Whitesbog was largely abandoned.

In 1984, the trust was established to restore and protect the land and buildings at Whitesbog. After four years of restoration — which continues to this day — the village was listed in the New Jersey State Register of Historic Places and on the National Historic Register.

The trust has offered moonlight hikes for the last several years, but visitors are welcome to take self-guided tours of the village and hike a nature trail at any time.

"But if you have the chance, you should hike by moonlight," Thompson said. "It's magical."

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