

Red & Blue & Whitesbog



What's blue and red and white all over? Blueberry and cranberry center, Whitesbog Village, on the fringe of Lebanon State Forest, near Browns Mills and Toms River. Here cranberries have been harvested since the time of the Lenni Lenapes. To these bogs came ships' captains when clippers ruled the waves. Their red fruit saved sanity, teeth, and lives. The berries' high vitamin C content conquered scurvy, giving navvies everywhere reason to be thankful.

In the mid-1860s, the cranberry industry literally boomed here, Whitesbog the center of this world in its day. Sandy land surrounding the Village went from worthless to spectacular in the 1800s, producing 30 to 60 barrels of cranberries per acre, worth \$10 each in this country and \$20 in Europe.

In tiny Whitesbog, a seemingly limitless woman — Elizabeth Coleman White — also invented the cultivation of blueberries. Before Miss White, commercial growing of this fruit was considered impossible. But to this woman, Pinelands born and bred, "impossible" was kin to obscenity.

Whitesbog Village, alluring destination in any season, is hidden, an egg tucked into the nest woven by Routes 70, 72, and 530, not far, from Fort Dix. Despite isolation, the village maintains a comprehensive website: [\[bog.org\]\(http://bog.org\). There you can link to Pine Barrens information. Memorize their directions; then find your way to this "town that time forgot."](http://www.whites-</p></div><div data-bbox=)

The vibrant cranberry harvest continues throughout October. On Saturday, November 4, join a Whitesbog Star Party at 6 p.m., sponsored by the Toms River Astronomy Club. The Pines are far

other continents to view Barrens specialties.

Drive in on any dreamy afternoon, when gilded light slants through those eponymous pines. You'll find yourself at a subtle and deserted crossroads, presided over by a rickety General Store. If it's before 3 p.m., the newly renovated store should be open so you can buy a guide to the dike driving tour. (To order in advance, call 609-893-4646.) If not open, pamphlets abound; but you're on your own on dike roads.

Don't set out for the bogs now. Instead, walk "down certain half deserted streets . . . the murmuring retreats" of the two berry industries, once New Jersey's glory. You'll think you've stepped into a three-dimensional Edward Hopper, profoundly vacant. You'll peer into Andrew Wyeth rooms with shredded curtains, dust motes in sunbeams along scoured wood. Walk very slowly, taking in the whole perspective of this once-bustling company town. Where Italian families once burgeoned in four-square company houses, emptiness and silence reign. Study your rudimentary map. Printed arrows point to rustic Browns Mills to the west, to nonexistent Rome to the east. With its sister city, Florence, this place exists only in memory. Homesick Italian workers of the bogs founded both.

Stroll empty lanes where non-profit Whitesbog Preservation

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from artificial light, deep in blessed darkness where stars take center stage. Telescopes provided (rain date is November 11). This is your chance to learn to distinguish double stars, star clusters, nebulae and galaxies. Registration: 609-893-4646.

Any spring or summer's day trip offers posted lists and color photographs of unique Pinelands wildflowers, including flattened pipewort and horned bladderwort. The cognoscenti travel here from

by Carolyn Foote Edelmann

Cranberry Central:
In the 19th century, shown right, Italian workers and their families picked New Jersey's berries by hand; by the 1930s, left, cranberry scoops were in use. Below right, is Thomas Darlington with his patented dry harvester of 1954. All were eventually replaced by wet harvesting.



Trust is turning back the hands of destruction. Restoration of the General Store and one of the Worker's Cottages was celebrated in July. Ridged black metal roofs keep elemental forces from the tidied workers' cottages. Red metal roofs shelter factories and warehouses. Identify the cranberry packing and storage building, where Whitesbog's managers developed the first cranberry sorting mechanisms. Walk where felled trees and trampled grasses signal some ghostly dwelling. You may find yourself whispering in honor of those who labored and left.

This vacated venue carries the year 'round aura of Halloween. You may back off from the workshop, lurid signs warning of pesticides. Odd cottony batting puffs and expands through shattered panes, like ectoplasm run rampant. Dead ahead, a 1930s green Chevy truck sits idle, gleaming incongruously among the ruins. It could be the Joad truck of "The Grapes of Wrath." You wouldn't be surprised to hear Rose O'Sharon's querulous voice.

Try to call back the sounds of machinery, workers' voices, shouts of children on their way out of the schoolhouse. Note two privies (one hopes that they are survivors, not the sole facilities). Solid and discreet, they seem to be his-and-her. Requisite crescent shapes decorate their back walls. But no one has opened and closed these doors since the 1940s.

Ruin has a way of triggering the phoenix, especially in the Pines. Whitesbog burst into life upon the ashes of Hanover Iron Furnace. In a matter of decades, that industry had burgeoned and vanished, leaving what seemed worthless swamps. Colonel James A. Fenwick, in the early 19th century, purchased a 490-acre tract, birthing the first cranberry boom. It took J.J. White (born 1846) to innovate and expand upon the 100 acres he received from his grandfather in 1866. With brother George's site, the Rake Pond Cranberry Company sprang to life.

White soon married Mary Fenwick, beginning a joint book on

cranberry cultivation, soon the industry guide. Neighbors mocked their operation "White's Folly". But the folly soon surpassed all other New Jersey cranberry growers.

The Whites also produced four daughters. Among them was the aforementioned Elizabeth. At 22, she began working on her parents' plantation, distributing tickets to harvest workers in return for laboriously hand-filled boxes.

Elizabeth would devote her entire life to improvements and innovations in berry cultivation and harvest. She involved Dr. John B. Smith, government entomologist. This expert soon eliminated a species of katydid that had been decimating crops. But Elizabeth didn't stop with katydids.

In 1911, she encountered the work of Dr. Frederick V. Coville. Elizabeth enlisted family support for his research, a berry of a different color. For Elizabeth and her father were convinced — despite local cynicism — that the blueberry could and should be cultivated. Five years later, she and Dr. Coville had a crop to sell.

Elizabeth's gifts included a way with people, especially "Pineys," as outsiders called Barrens' residents. She set them on a quest to find the most reliable wild berries. Elizabeth provided gauges, accepting no fruit smaller than 5/8-inch. The Whites rewarded seekers with money and by naming fruit after

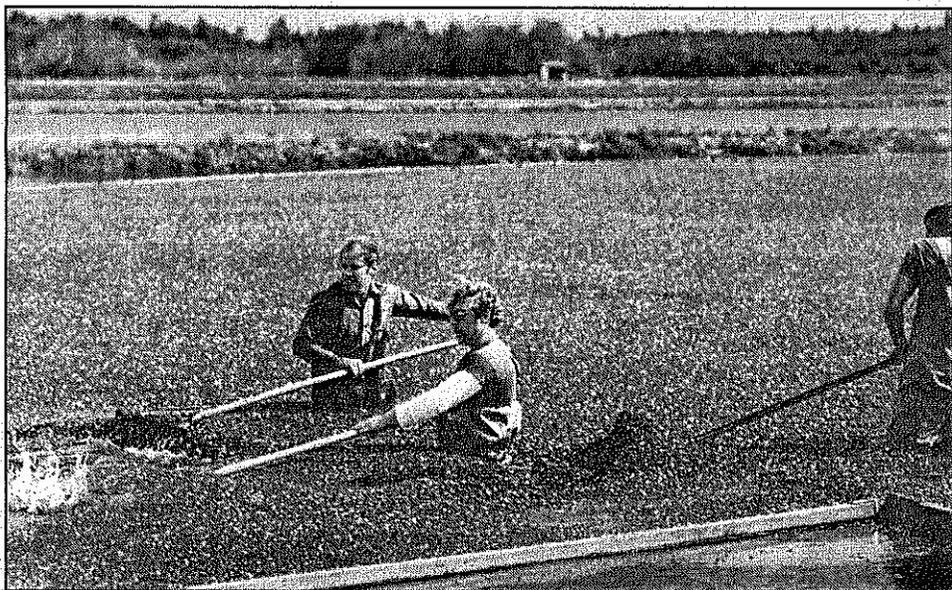
their discoverers. Some names had to be altered: Sam Lemon's became "Sam;" Rube Leek's "Rubel," one of the keystones of blueberry breeding to this day. Sample Whitesbog's wild fruits in summer to discover that workers were also rewarded by marvelously varied flavors.

After identification, the most promising bushes had to be chopped for propagation, seriously challenging workers. Ultimately, the field was narrowed to six varieties: Rubel, Harding, Sam, Grover, Adams, and Dunphy. Elizabeth White soon harvested not only berries, but also an entire propagation business. White bushes now bear extensively in North Carolina and Michigan; and to a great extent in Washington, Oregon, British Columbia, and New England; somewhat in New York and Connecticut. In 1927, her new crop was worth \$20,000. At production peak, 90 acres of blueberries sustained Whitesbog.

Elizabeth's enthusiasm spilled over to local hollies, then rare Franklinia. This shrub — with white fruit as well as flowers — was named after Benjamin Franklin. It was reportedly found only in the South, according to naturalist, William Bartram. I can't promise you'll find Franklinia on your own in Whitesbog. But, when the Pres-

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Modern Harvest: Cranberry bogs are flooded and the berries float to the surface in today's wet-harvesting method that is less labor-intensive.

ervation Trust gets Elizabeth's Sunning garden blooming again — the restoration project is now underway — *Franklinia* should have a place of honor.

This woman's resume reads like a family tree: who organized the first New Jersey Blueberry Cooperative? Became first woman member of the American Cranberry Association? Was the premier woman to receive the New Jersey Department of Agriculture's citation?

In the early 20th century, sociologist Elizabeth Kite carried out controversial research in this region. From her published work came the derogatory term, "Piney," Kite having concluded that inbreeding and moonshine — among other pastimes — had generated a population of misfits. It would take 50 years for John McPhee's incisive book, "Pine Barrens," to counter the damage. McPhee is frankly admiring of the region's crusty characters. Even so, Pinelands locals still resent Kite's indelible slur. Elizabeth White had supported Kite's research, though disagreeing with its negative conclusions. Declared Elizabeth, "I am a Piney myself."

But Whitesbog's fascination is not limited to haunting scenes, nor biological breakthroughs. Not even to unforgettable women. Enchantment awaits, out on that driving trail, up on golden dikes, between ancient cranberry fields. In

June, star-like cranberry blossoms are tucked among the bitter greenery. In July, in fields no longer tended, you'll find every berry hue from white to pink to rose to burgundy. Past and future — red, then white — pass in review. Walk down, kneel, touch the waxen berries and the history of founders and workers, sailors and Lenni Lenapes, wisely encouraging these stubborn little plants since long before European settlers.

Frissons of fear may accompany you on your journey: The simplistic map declares many passages "Impassable Sand Roads." Without the purchased guide, you can only hope that you've followed all the right arrows upon wooden posts. You'll drive high on fragile sand, among certain cave-ins, alongside waters the color of stout. There's no way of gauging depth, — unsettling. After all, this is the Pinelands. The Jersey Devil (a native), is known to fly. But could these fathomless waterways hide a Jersey Loch Ness Monster?

The fruitful bogs are framed with ditches full of legendary Pines water. Canoeists go into rapture over this substance. I touched it first at Whitesbog. These waters "are lovely, dark and deep," the hue of strongest tea, espresso. Rich in tannins from cedars and pines, they are dyed by centuries of oak leaves and roots. Bog iron forms,

slowly, from these substances; seems almost to be floating in the waters swirling about you. Coppery particles catch light; other bits are black as coal. When you step into a bog pond, your mottled leg turns the color of ripe pumpkins. To swim it is to savor a full-body massage. The waters are silken, almost oily, yet squeaky clean. You long to imbibe, as seamen did. Knowledgeable whalers filled barrels for two-year voyages, knowing Pines water would not spoil. However, no one is to drink of any wild waters in this, our 21st century, because of dire intestinal implications.

In midsummer, white water lilies open along shimmering waterways as far as the eye can see. Yellow exclamation points erupt, the tight-fisted heads of bull head lilies. All along the roads dance waist-high tufts of healthy prairie grasses. July holds the brief glory of rare Turk's Head lilies, — globbing, bittersweet. You can rekindle belief in Pinelands pirates with flowers flung like Pieces of Eight alongside Whitesbog roadways.

In autumn, swamp maple flares amidst the dark waters. Setting off that vibrancy is the green-black density of the Pines themselves. Crimson woodbine and scarlet poison ivy hold plump berries aloft, luring migrant birds who attract predatory raptors, especially at dusk. Off across inky impoundments, large white egrets settle and fish. Early inhabitants mistook them for cranes, hence "crane berries."

If you're very lucky, a late golden shaft will zap onto a creature of intense cinnamon brown. Impressive as Bambi's father, it may well plant four hooves across your roadway, staring and daring approach. You'll know you're not in Kansas in these dappled lanes. You'll have to wait for winter for Whitesbog's white glories, the rare tundra swans. If it looks like snow, it's probably these winged creatures, worthy of a journey in themselves.

Whitesbog was once Cranberry Central, then Blueberry Genesis. It reverted to the "cranes" and the memories of Indians, pirates and privateers, stout laborers, silent canoeists. And to you, if you'll take yourself to those trails and waters in any season.

Fall Star Watch, Whitesbog Historic Village, Route 530, Browns Mills, 609-893-4646. Night sky viewing with powerful telescopes provided by Tom's River Astronomy Club. Preregister. \$5 individual; \$10 family. **Saturday, November 4, 6 p.m.**