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# Blueberries at Whitesbog

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BLUEBERRIES

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MOUNT HOLLY, NEW JERSEY

On the rising tide of public interest, many little-known treasures in New Jersey's Pine Barrens are being swept into public focus. Whitesbog, the birthplace of the cultivated blueberry and home of one of the state's oldest cranberry plantations, is clearly one of those treasures.

Straddling the Burlington/Ocean County border, Whitesbog is a convenient midway point for shore-bound vacationers. Rich in the history of berry agriculture, this village and its surrounding plantation have seen the evolution of farming techniques which dramatically increased production while nearly eliminating the need for labor. It is these high-tech farming techniques that promise even greater cranberry and blueberry harvests in the future, insuring New Jersey's nickname as the Garden State.

Originally Whitesbog was a plantation and company town. Today, no more than 25 buildings remain in the village which served as the hub and headquarters for a thriving 3,000-acre berry plantation. In the early part of this century, as many as 450 migrant farm workers came together for annual harvests of cranberries and blueberries which thrive in the sandy, acid soils of the New Jersey Pine Barrens. It was there that Joseph J. White and his family began a series of experiments which revolutionized the production of cranberries and spawned the cultivation of the American blueberry industry.

Whitesbog is located at the northwestern edge of the Pine Barrens, along the emerging retirement village centers along Route 70. Roughly 35 miles from Philadelphia, this scenic and expansive agricultural complex is now part of Lebanon State Forest. It offers a tranquil respite from the day's labor

where water and sky and the unusual vegetation of the Pine Barrens mingle in ways that no photographer can resist.

Joseph Josiah White (known as J.J.), for whom Whitesbog is named, was an enterprising and inventive man. In 1870 he and his wife Mary authored the definitive text *Cranberry Culture*, which served as the authoritative guide to the cultivation of cranberries. He also developed new methods of harvesting, sorting, packing and storing these berries, greatly improving the standards of and market for his produce.

Watching her father's experiments was his daughter Elizabeth C. White. She and her father discussed the idea of adding blueberries to their operation, although other farmers in the area maintained they could not be cultivated.

In 1911 Miss White invited Frederick V. Coville, botanist with the U.S. Department of Agriculture to use Whitesbog and her assistance for the domestication of the wild blueberry. This collaboration led to the eventual cultivation and marketing of the blueberry and is responsible for the multi-million-dollar industry it is today. (See *"The Blueberry Invention"* in the *NJO* July/August 1982 Issue.)

Miss White gave a great deal of credit for the cultivated blueberry to the native population. In Miss White's words, "It takes a good woodsman to find a good bush." She found that the old pickers know which swamps to head for to find the best berries.

Armed with bottles, gauges with holes up to 5/8 of an inch in diameter and a unique understanding of the local terrain, Pineys brought back samples of the bushes that were to father a new generation of agriculture. Among the rewards for finding exceptional bushes were liberal wages and the promise of a sort of immortality, for Miss White considered it good psychology to name the blueberry varieties after their finders. Varieties still in existence bear the names of their discoverers, names like the Rubel, named after Rube Leek of Chatsworth; the Harding, named after Ralph Harding; the Dunphee, named after Theodore Dunphee and, simply, the Sam, named after Sam Lemmon.

Whitesbog village proper contained a schoolhouse with upstairs living quarters for teachers, a post office, a general store with a built-in ice house, housing for 41 permanent workers, a building used to make cranberry barrels, two large packing and storing sheds, a water and power supply for the community, and spacious housing for the foremen and supervisors.

Eventually Elizabeth White built a house for herself in Whitesbog village and named it "Sunninglive." From her upstairs living quarters she viewed the original Whitesbog cranberry bog, called "Old Bog," to the southeast and looked out over her newly framed rows of blueberries to the northwest.

Mechanization of harvest practices in the 1950's spelled the end of the labor-intensive farming practices of the past. As the need for a large seasonal labor force decreased, so did the usefulness of the workers' housing. People left, and machines took over the harvest chores in a thoroughly efficient manner.

Tom Darlington, grandson of J.J. White and current owner of the berry company and inventor-in-residence, is credited with many of the latest advances in cranberry and blueberry harvesting. His

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COLOR PHOTOS BY DAVID ENNIS

blueberry picking machine, looking like a long-legged mechanical monster, is actually a tender and gentle sort. Designed to straddle rows of blueberry bushes, the harvester shakes the ripe blueberries from the bushes and catches them on a conveyor belt down below.

Whitesbog village and the 3,000 acres of bogs, swamps and pine woods comprising the plantation were bought by the State of New Jersey in the late 1960's as additions to Lebanon State Forest. Many of the old cranberry bogs and blueberry fields, now under lease with J.J. White, Inc., are still in production. The company continues its tradition of innovation and technological advances in the berry industry both at Whitesbog and at its new state-of-the-art bogs at nearby Buffins Meadow.

Although the needs of Whitesbog's agricultural lands are cared for under J.J. White's long-term lease with the state, Whitesbog village is a company town in need of a helping hand. Since the village was merged into Lebanon State Forest, Whitesbog has lacked any cohesive management strategy. Limited state resources have been directed to other state parks and forests in response to the demands of an expanding population. Yet, in the meantime, deferred maintenance has led to deterioration of many village structures, and prompt attention is required to insure that these structures are not lost to the elements.

In addition to the J.J. White company, several other leaseholders contribute to the current way of life in the village. The two principals among these are the Conservation and Environmental Studies Center (CESC) and the New Jersey Conservation Foundation (NJCF).

CESC leases the majority of buildings in Whitesbog. A private nonprofit organization, CESC provides environmental education programs for schools and groups throughout South Jersey. Pine Barrens ecology, recycling and general environmental education are a few programs CESC has become noted for.

The New Jersey Conservation Foundation (NJCF) leases one building in Whitesbog for a South Jersey office. Operating out of "Suningive" NJCF work on Pine Barrens conservation and education, farmland preservation, the restoration of Whitesbog village and open space preservation in South Jersey.

As part of Lebanon State Forest, Whitesbog is also a recreational resource for residents of the surrounding community and for many New Jersey residents who have, often by chance, stumbled onto the village.

Numerous small streams, abandoned cranberry bogs and old fields provide habitat for a variety of plants and animals.

Among botanists, Whitesbog is known for its unusually high number of rare Pine Barrens plants as well as for the diversity of its vegetation.

A stopover for migrating waterfowl, Whitesbog is also a popular hunting ground and fishing area.

Canoeists, joggers, hikers, horsebackriders, birders all enjoy Whitesbog's scenic qualities.

In an attempt to secure an historic register nomination for the settlement at Whitesbog, the New Jersey Conservation Foundation has led the way to a clearer understanding of the cultural significance of the site. Through a grant funded by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the National Park Service, The New Jersey Department of En-

vironmental Protection and the Victoria Foundation, NJCF's consultants have detailed the significance of the inventions, experiments and discoveries at Whitesbog.

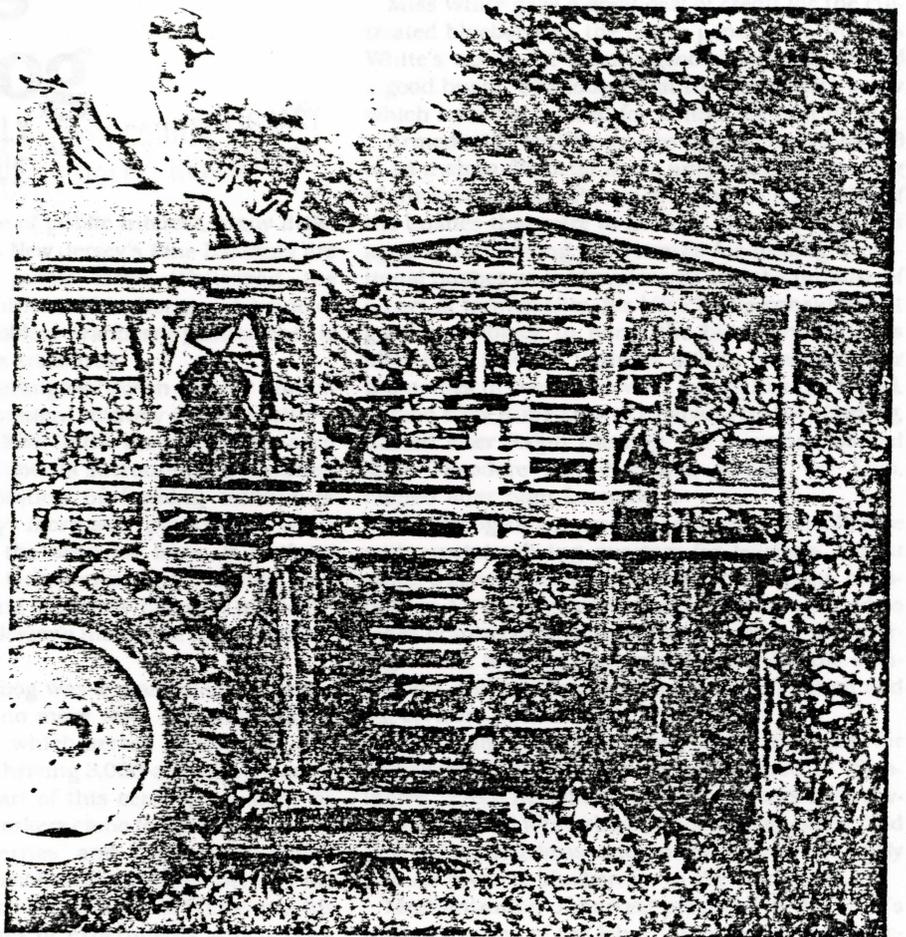
Under the leadership of NJCF, a group of concerned citizens has initiated the development of a plan for the stabilization, repair and reuse of the village. Soon to be incorporated as the "Whitesbog Trust," this nonprofit corporation hopes to rejuvenate the village and provide people with an opportunity to view the origin and evolution of New Jersey's berry industry.

Pemberton Township, the Whitesbog Trust, the State of New Jersey and many local groups and businesses have planned a series of festivals at Whitesbog. The first will be a blueberry festival to celebrate the glories of Miss White's discovery.

Billed as one of the "Parks '84" events to be held this year throughout New Jersey, the Whitesbog Blueberry Festival, scheduled for Saturday, July 28th, will be an all-out celebration of Pine Barrens arts, crafts, music and culture and will include the joys of cooking and eating blueberries in every imaginable form. Also planned is a 10-kilometer cross-country race through the bogs and some of the most relaxing scenery in New Jersey.



*Elizabeth C. White examining blueberries in June 1928.*



*Blueberry harvester at work.*

For details on the Whitesbog Blueberry Festival, the 10K race, and a guide to local "pick-your-own" blueberry farms, please send a self-addressed stamped envelope to:

Whitesbog Blueberry Festival  
c/o Whitesbog Trust, Inc.  
120-34A Whitesbog Road  
Browns Mills, New Jersey 08015  
Phone: 609-893-4646

