

THE GREAT OUTDOORS



Remnants of the 600-foot Cranberry Sorting & Packing Warehouse at Whitesbog. Of three original sections only the firewall remains. The first section was built in 1890. Fires in 1961 and 1970 destroyed two other sections.

Photos: J. Morton Galetto unless otherwise noted.

Cranberry Fields

The hourlong drive north to Whitesbog results in a history lesson in cranberry production and the development of blueberry cultivars.

J. Morton Galetto, CU Maurice River

The day was a mixture of balmy and cloud-cover-cool. Leaves had started to show fall colors and many shrubs bore brightly-hued fruit. With our CU Maurice River entourage we ventured north for a little over an hour, from central Cumberland County, for a guided tour of Whitesbog Village in Browns

Mills, Brendan T. Byrne State Forest. CU calls these monthly ventures *Tuesdays on the Fly*. Often they are theme-based, with this year's topic being Southern New Jersey's farm culture.

Travelling the heart of the Pinelands on Route 54 is always nostalgic for me, I suppose like the Blue Ridge Parkway may seem to a Virginian. Instead of hillsides painted in autumn colors we have flat vistas with pines and oaks, farm fields, blueberry fields, and cranberry bogs. It's an acquired taste but it's ours and it's home.

The region is rich in natural history – from Batsto Village's bog iron cannon balls, to the Wharton State Forest's Batona trail, to Warren Grove's pigmy pines, to Tuckerton's decoys and a lot more. The Pine Barrens Reserve's huge aquifer and unique flora and fauna are world-famous. And with the approach of Halloween let's not forget Mother Leeds' thirteenth child – the Jersey Devil. These are but a few quintessential Pine Barrens icons that connect us all as Pineys.

We arrived at Whitesbog in the morning, primarily a group of retired and inquisitive folks. Before our tour began we had some free time to try out Face-In-Hole boards designed for kids. Apparently big kids – like

us, too. They were themed in part for Whitesbog's Blueberry festival and their upcoming Halloween festivities. We tried out the rocking chairs on the general store's porch and eventually explored its offerings. All good fun.



We learned that the Whitesbog Preservation Trust runs the interpretative aspects of the Village, which include at least 26 features on a tour map. In the general store the executive director told us about the friends group's mission. From here we embarked on a tour led by Mackenzie Tansey and Clint Crawn.

Tansey holds a master's in Museum Leadership from Drexel, an undergraduate degree from Albright College, and did a marvelous job of giving us an introduction to the historic ownership of Whitesbog. The story began with James A. Fenwick who grew cranberries along Cranberry Run beginning in 1857. After his death his son-in-law Joseph J. White took over the business, renaming it J.J. White.

The acclaimed Elizabeth Coleman White, J.J.'s eldest daughter, became interested in growing blueberries. She and USDA Botanist Dr. Frederick Coville developed the first experimental commercial blueberry crop on the village grounds.

The cranberry farm grew to 3,000 acres and was called White's Bog by locals. By the early 1900s it was New Jersey's largest such operation.

Today Pine Island Cranberry Co., owned by Haines and Haines, Inc., is the largest cranberry farm, at 1400 acres of cranberries and 14,000 acres of woods and supporting reservoirs. It dates back to 1890. It produces an average of 13 million pounds annually!

In the 1920s Whitesbog Village grew to include workers' houses, a general store, and 600 employees during the fall harvest. After J.J. White's death, in 1924, his sons-in-law Lewis and Emlen Darlington ran the operation.

During the 1940s what had previously been a *dry handpicked harvest* changed to a more mechanized *wet harvest*, and because it became less labor-dependent the need for workers at the Village decreased. "In 1967, the village and nearby fields were sold to the State of New Jersey to be managed as a state historic site. The Darlington family still farms the cranberry bogs." (Whitesbog Interpretative Guide).

We learned about the environment that supports cranberries and visited an area that is transitioning to a demonstration cranberry bog. This enabled us to understand the mechanics of *wet harvest* such as dikes, sluices, reservoirs, and flooding.

We strolled nearby dikes to look at fields of cranberries. The adjacent wooded areas had a number of patches of wild cranberry vines. We also saw the outside of agricultural specialist Elizabeth Coleman White's home.



Wild cranberry vines grow in the wooded areas of Whitesbog Village. Commercial berries are harvested September through November.

We passed Triangle Field where White (1871-1954) had her experimental blueberry crop, started in 1916. White was the first woman to become a member of the American Cranberry Association and she also

developed wild blueberries into the cultivated variety we enjoy today.

Visitor Services Assistant Clint Crawn showed us the migrant workers' homes on the grounds. These c. 1900 cottages consisted of four tiny apartments. Inconceivably each held as many as eight family members. Clint also highlighted the museum's collections in the coopery and packing house.



Whitesbog migrant housing. Photo: Julia Wiberg

The coopery displays a selection of artifacts and a family business history including short biographies. The last cranberry barrel was made in 1925, and in 1937 the coopery was converted to a community hall for workers. Faint traces of shuffleboard numbering remain visible on the floor.



Whitesbog packing house. Photo from Whitesbog Museum.

The neighboring storage warehouse showcases implements, machinery, and photographs related to harvest. Artistic advertising and marketing signs were also on display. Crawn discussed the way bouncing determined berry quality and how the practice of bouncing evolved. It is said that an employee tripped with a crate of cranberries while transporting them down a

set of steps. As the berries bounced down the steps it naturally sorted the best from the inferior ones in a tiered fashion.



H.R. Baileys Cranberry Separator (patented 1923), is a machine which relied on "bounce" to sort berries, is exhibited at the Whitesbog Museum.

The exhibit allows visitors to visualize the evolution of implements from dry to wet harvest. Originally cranberries were picked by hand, and later cranberries were scooped with a handheld box rake. Wet harvest involved flooding bogs, walking behind harvesters, driving harvesters, floating berries, and booms. Today the size and

modernization of cranberry harvests varies from company to company.



Note the workers using a cranberry scoop. Cranberries were originally "dry harvested". The work force included children until 1938 when the Fair Labor Standards Act placed limitations on child labor. Photo/s in Whitesbog Museum.

Historic photos showed families, including children, harvesting in the field, which prompted discussion about child labor laws and early migrant labor forces. Italians were among the initial work force, which gradually evolved into Afro-American workers in the field and whites in the packing houses.

We finished our guided visit in the back of the general store where we watched some short videos on cranberry harvests and tasted some jams, mustards, salsas, and other jarred berry-based treats. At the end

we had the opportunity to purchase souvenirs. This is when the taste samplings paid off!

A few of us remained behind and walked the dikes to look at flora and fauna. There were at least four different species of asters in flower: in particular Staggerbush, *Lyonia mariana*, was quite a sight, as was Southern Wild Raisin, *Viburnum nudum*. I have not seen the s. wild raisin around Cumberland County and it really threw me; it was a show-stopper!

The Village is staffed on Fridays and Saturdays and by appointment. The grounds are open daily for self-guided exploration. The interpretative trail guide is available on the property and the web; some of my text comes nearly verbatim from this source. The site is great for families who might enjoy a combination of historic interpretation and being outdoors.

As the end-of-year holidays approach Whitesbog hosts a Halloween event on Saturday, October 26, 5-9 p.m. This is the Whitesbog Preservation Trust's haunted history tour fundraiser for the public.

Honestly, what better time to learn about cranberry farming than before Thanksgiving? There is also a blueberry festival that runs on

Saturdays from the end of June to the end of July at Whitesbog Village. The in-person tour truly enhanced our experience and can be booked online at Whitesbog.com. ■





Triangle Field is where Elizabeth Coleman White (1871-1954) experimented developing a cultivar from wild highbush blueberries.

More to check out on Whitesbog's Website:

Whitesbog.org > About> Oral Histories

Jim Buddy Jefferson's oral history: a 2018 interview of growing up at Whitesbog Village, YouTube.

Other recordings can be found on the Whitesbog website.

Sources

Whitesbog Historic Village & Farm Interpretative Trail Guide