THE GREAT OUTDOORS

Cranberry farms have existed in the Pinelands since the mid-1800s, but the fruit was gathered by indigenous peoples long before. The modern way to harvest cranberries involves flooding the bog. Photo: Leslie M. Ficcaglia.

Precious Pinelands - Part 2

How a region's natural and cultural resources were protected with the help of many advocates.

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When the National Parks and Recreation Act was passed in 1978, including legislation for the Pinelands National Reserve, the text

directed the planning entity to develop a Comprehensive Management Plan (the CMP) to guide protection and development in that area. Governor Byrne appointed Franklin Parker to be the first chairman of the Pinelands Commission, Candace Ashmun, called "the Godmother of the NJ Pinelands," was among the first members, and Terry Moore was the first Executive Director. This was the group that, with the help of Michael Catania and a number of others from both the legislative branch and the governor's office, was instrumental in creating the CMP.

Candace McKee Ashmum, "Godmother of the Pine Barrens." Photo: Leslie M. Ficcaglia.

John McPhee's book *The Pine Barrens* became required reading for the senators

and assemblymen who were asked to approve the plan. The phrase "Preserve, protect, and enhance" became the guideline that enabled the Commission later on to do virtually anything it wanted within the context of the law.

At a retrospective symposium in 1987 in which key players came together to discuss the process, Candy Ashmun observed, "… I remember … everybody having a sense of humor, which has been crucial for these long years. Without a sense of humor, maybe we would all have gone mad." She also noted, "We finally had a bunch of public hearings on solid waste disposal and suddenly we became everybody's hero. That was the most rewarding time of all. But it is an issue…that we will all have to remember, because the Pines has nobody in it, and I say that in quotes. But it's really right there waiting for somebody to use as a dump." (pp. 46-47 https://governors.rutgers.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/BTB-10-15-87Pinelandscolloquium.pdf)

Terry Moore commented that, very early on, few people understood the importance of the Pinelands plan "as a land use measure that is now being borrowed for lots of other areas of the country." (p. 47 https://governors.rutgers.edu/wp-

content/uploads/2020/07/BTB-10-15-87Pinelandscolloquium.pdf)

Since that time the task of the Commission, its staff, and the Commissioners has been to weigh each application to develop or make changes in the Pines against the requirements of the CMP. Of primary concern has been the 17 trillion gallons of potable water that lie beneath the surface of the Pinelands, and their protection for future generations. As well, the fact that this area is habitat for a large number common and rare plants and animals – many of which are on the threatened and endangered list – makes its protection a life-and-death concern for these species. But in addition, the Pinelands encompasses a way of life that is important to our history as well as our present-day culture. Blueberry and cranberry farming are two of the most iconic.

Native Americans and the early settlers gathered wild blueberries and cranberries and made them an important part of their diets, whether eaten fresh or dried and preserved. However, the blueberry as we know it today had its start in 1906, when Dr. Frederick Coville began trying to create a better cultivar from the native varieties. Elizabeth White, who was the daughter of a local cranberry farmer, heard of his work and invited him to pursue his experiments on her

father’s land. Her interest was in the development of a variety that could produce berries large enough to become a significant crop on her father’s farm, Whitesbog, in Pemberton Township, Burlington County. She assisted in his efforts by asking locals to look for bushes with bigger berries, offering money for the largest fruit and naming each variety after its discoverer. Dr. Coville developed thousands of plants from the best bushes, and in 1916 the first crop from the new cultivars was offered for sale. Blueberry farming soon became a staple for farms endowed with the acidic soil that the fruit prefers. Fresh blueberries are still a major crop in New Jersey today and, nationally, the state is one of the leaders in its production.

American Indians used the cranberry not only for food but also for medicine and clothing dye. Its name comes from the Pilgrims, who were reminded of the head of a crane by the fruit’s pink flowers. They called it “craneberry,” which was later shortened to “cranberry.” In NJ cranberry farming was first attempted in a bog near Burrs’ Mills in Burlington County. Other shallow ponds were developed where water was naturally available, and some of the initial sites are still producing on wetlands worked by descendants of the original farmers.

Blueberry picker on Pinelands farm. Photo: Leslie M. Ficcaglia.

Although once gathered painstakingly by hand, cranberries have been harvested by the wet-picking method since the 1960s. A machine with a water reel is driven through the mechanically-flooded bogs, knocking the berries off the vines where they can be gathered as they float on the water. They

are then sorted and shipped to a processing plant to be made into sauce, juice, and other products.

Historically the Pinelands was home to a number of other occupations traditionally associated with the area. Sawmills dated back to 1700 and several continue to be active. Charcoal making was common from 1740 to 1960. Initially it was part of the process of smelting bog iron, but after 1850 it was used for fuel both for heating and for cooking. However, at the end of the 19th century many Pinelands residents were left without jobs when rural industries such as glass, iron, cotton, and papermaking failed. Some fell back on "working the cycle," taking advantage of the seasonal resources of the forests, plains, and coastal areas. Hunting, fishing, gathering, trapping, lumbering, and boatbuilding, - especially the small sneakboxes and garveys used for shellfishing and waterfowl hunting - were among the occupations that people turned to as a livelihood.

Duck hunter on a Pinelands stream. Photo: Leslie M. Ficcaglia.

The Richard J. Sullivan Center at the Pinelands Commission offices in Pemberton, which opened in December of 2001, showcases Pinelands history, geography, and biology at The Candace McKee Ashmun Pinelands Education Center, unveiled December 14, 2018. It features more than 400 square feet of displays, a 90-gallon aquarium with native Pinelands fish, a terrarium with live, carnivorous plants, and dozens of Pinelands artifacts. Well worth a visit, it is open Monday through Friday from 9 am to 4 pm; for groups larger than 10 people, contact the Commission's Public Programs office to arrange an appointment.

The Pinelands has a rich cultural history and its woodlands and plains provide habitat for

a significant number of rare flora and fauna. It is truly a New Jersey treasure and should be protected for future generations. Its fate is in the hands of both the government and the people, who hopefully will make the right choices to sustain it.

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