

# Elect Elizabeth White to the New Jersey Hall of Fame



Elizabeth Coleman White, 1871-1954

Elizabeth Coleman White, Pine Barrens resident who master-minded the development of the nation's first cultivated blueberry was born on October 5, 1871 on her father's cranberry farm in New Lisbon (Burlington County), NJ. She was the oldest of four daughters, the only one to remain unmarried and to pursue the family's agricultural interests.

Both of White's parents were Quakers and members of the landed working gentry. Mary A. (Fenwick) White, her mother, was the daughter of James A. Fenwick, a pioneer cranberry farmer with 108 acres along Cranberry Run, south of Hanover Furnace. Joseph Josiah ("J. J.") White, her father, an engineer in Camden, inherited 100 acres of promising cranberry land near New Lisbon, which introduced him to cranberry cultivation as well as to Mary A. Fenwick. Following their marriage in 1869, the Whites prepared a book on cranberry culture that became a standard guide in the industry. Later, J. J. White worked as machinist

and in inventor for the H. B. Smith Company in nearby Smithville. Upon his father-in-law's death in 1882, J. J. White became sole executor and manager of the now 600-acre cranberry farm, which he later expanded into a 3,000-acre plantation known as Whitesbog.

As a girl, White often accompanied her father on his weekend visits to Whitesbog. After 1887, when she graduated from the Friends Central School in Philadelphia, she worked in the bogs, helping to supervise the cranberry pickers during the fall harvest. She lived in the farm's small cedar office and was soon deeply involved in the farms operation, packing and shipping cranberries all over the country.

White's winters were spent in Philadelphia, where she continued her education, taking courses in first aid, photography, dressmaking, and millinery at Drexel University.

Her great love was always the farm at Whitesbog. When in 1910 the National Child Labor Committee

(NCLC) published a pamphlet critical of cranberry growers' treatment of children helpers, she believed the charges to be greatly exaggerated. Families from the Pines and from Philadelphia, mostly of Italian origin, returned year after year to pick in the same bogs, and White knew many families personally, having applied first aid in emergencies. She had watched some children mature.

Reports and magazine articles spread the details nationally. White was an articulate and exacting communicator in the growers' defense. She wrote many letters and spoke widely, arguing that the seven weeks each fall children and their families worked in the bogs trained them "to be self-supporting individuals of a character as near an ideal of American citizenship as possible." The controversy, hearings, and correspondence between J.J. White, Elizabeth White, and the NCLC continued for four years. At last, the NCLC printed a retraction in the Trenton Times. Everett Colby, one of the NCLC's three members acknowledged White's tireless effort as peacemaker.

At this time, White also championed the research of Elizabeth Kite from the Vineland Training School, who was investigating intelligence patterns in families living near White's home. Kite's study was widely misinterpreted to have stated that most of the people who lived in the New Jersey Pines, - the "Pineys"- were inbred and feeble minded. White wrote extensively on the issue, refuting misunderstandings and urging establishment of a new training school. She was on the board of the Work Training School at Four Mile Colony near New Lisbon until she died.

White's deepest involvement with her native Pine Barrens began in 1911 when she read a U.S. Department of Agriculture bulletin describing Frederick Coville's progress in blueberry propagation. Although the soil requirements of blueberries and cranberries are similar, and wild blueberries thrive in the swampy Pines, New Jersey farmers believed blueberry cultivation impossible.

White wrote inviting Coville to continue his research at Whitesbog. The J.J. White Company would provide the land and labor needed for the experiments and would keep the proceeds from any crops produced. Coville accepted the offer and the work began a few months later.

During the next five years, White assisted Coville at Whitesbog by locating wild blueberry bushes with desired traits. Tramping through the swampy woods, "Miss Lizzie," as the tall, imposing woman was called, asked woodsmen questions about berry size, vigor, resistance to cold and disease, flavor, texture, productivity, and time of ripening. She enlisted their help in finding the best bushes.

"For each huckleberry picker who was interested, I provided a neat little aluminum gauge 16mm or a trifle less than  $\frac{5}{8}$ " in diameter, three 2 oz. jars for samples of the largest berries on a bush and a paper of typewritten directions.... The finder was to receive a dollar for marking on any bush the largest berry which would not

drop through the gauge, and in addition be liberally paid for the time spent in guiding me to it."

White named the new varieties produced from the bushes after their finders. Thousands of cuttings were taken from the more than 100 bushes collected, and their growth and characteristics painstakingly described and documented. While these wild varieties were brought under cultivation, Coville cross-fertilized bushes by hand to create new varieties.

In 1916, their collaboration resulted in the nation's first commercial crop of blueberries. At Whitesbog, the business of blueberry production and bush propagation began.

White was the first to use a cellophane wrapper for protecting and marketing the berries. In 1927 she helped to organize the New Jersey Blueberry Cooperative Association. By 1986 New Jersey's blueberry industry ranked second in the nation, with blueberry bushes derived from early work at Whitesbog planted extensively in the United States and Canada.

White's horticultural interests extended beyond cranberries and blueberries, to include all plants native to the Pine Barrens. Her garden at "Suningive," her home at Whitesbog, received much attention because of its design and its wide diversity of native plants. This garden exemplified White's interest in the district, the rich flora of the Pine Barrens, and the harmonious use of the environment.

Late in life, White widened her interest in native plants by forming Holly Haven, Inc., her own corporation. She was particularly interested in native American holly and was active in rescuing it from obscurity, and so in 1917 she helped to found the Holly Society of America. She propagated and sold many varieties of holly, Pine Barrens plants, and a rare magnolia called *Franklinia*, which was first discovered in Georgia by John Bartram, an 18th-century botanist.

White was the first woman member of the American Cranberry Association and the first woman to receive the New Jersey Department of Agriculture citation. Horticultural societies from Massachusetts and Pennsylvania awarded her their highest medals. Toward the end of her life, she concentrated on writing and on giving addresses to horticultural clubs and radio audiences. She died of cancer at Whitesbog on November 27, 1954, at age 83. She was cremated at the Ewing Crematory in Ewing Township, NJ, and in accordance with her will, her ashes were distributed by airplane over the headwaters of Whitesbog.

*By Michelle Byers and Sheila Cowling, from "Past and Promise - The Lives of New Jersey Women" pp. 208-210. The Women's Project of New Jersey.*