
Where Nature and Culture Are Closely Intertwined

The 1.1-million-acre Pinelands National Reserve in New Jersey is the largest open space on the eastern seaboard between Boston, Mass., and Richmond, Va. It lies next to the most concentrated highway, railroad, and air-traffic corridors—and the most densely populated region—in America. But if you stand on Apple Pie Hill (209 feet), the highest spot in the Pinelands, what will you see? Not turnpikes, not trains, not airports, not people, but forests—a canopy of trees that stretches as far as you can see. The primary trees are pitch pine and oak, along with Atlantic white cedar that trace forest streams. Only cranberry bogs, tea-colored rivers, a few meadows, and white, sand roads punctuate this landscape. The Pinelands, with few villages, sparse population, and vast forests, offers you a chance to experience its distinctive cultural and natural heritage.

Pine Barrens? Early settlers called this area the Pine Barrens because they couldn’t grow traditional crops in the sandy, fast-draining, acidic soil. What does grow is diverse and often unique. Sticky sundews and other carnivorous plants get their homes here. Some plants love acidity, including Atlantic white cedars, sphagnum moss, and orchids. Carnivorous species, like pitcher plants (right), absorb nutrients from insects.

Adapting to Rigors of the Pinelands Plants and animals living here face extra challenges, including nutrient-poor, acidic, sandy soil. Yet over 850 plant and 500 animal species, like the tiny Pine Barrens tree frog (right), make their homes here. Some plants love acidity, including Atlantic white cedars, sphagnum moss, and, orchids. Carnivorous species, like pitcher plants (right), absorb nutrients from insects.

The Importance of Fire—a Balance Few natural forces have shaped the Pinelands like fire. Fire prevents woody undergrowth, allowing seedlings to sprout and regenerate the forest. Intense heat helps pitch pines (at top) release seeds from their cones. Dwarf pygmy pines grow extensive root systems, perhaps in response to frequent fire. Today the N.J. Forest Fire Service is controlled, prescribed fires to protect human life and help keep the ecosystem healthy.

Harvests from the Land Towns in the 1700s sprang up around two industries: bog iron manufacture and glassmaking. Acidic groundwater percolating through layers of sand and iron-rich clay leached soluble iron and deposited it along riverbanks and in swamps, where it was mined and smelted into bog iron (reddish rock, above). Ironmasters helped supply a young nation with weapons, tools, and monogrammed objects like the fireplace cypher for George Washington (right). Local sand high in silica produced window glass, blown glass objects, and the first Mason jars (right). Fossilized iron and glass furnaces--by the mid-1850s these industries declined.

James Still 1812–1885 James Still (right) was born near Indian Mills, N.J., the son of formerly enslaved parents. Still was fascinated by the potential healing powers of plants. With three months’ formal education, but self-educated in medical botany, he treated a range of illnesses—not by “the scientific manner,” he wrote, but by “the laws of nature,” which led to the accolade Doctor of the Pines. His son James, Jr., followed his father’s passion for medicine and, in 1871, became the third African American to graduate from Harvard Medical School.

Elizabeth C. White 1871–1954 At age 22 Elizabeth White (lower right) began working on her family’s cranberry farm at Whitesbog. In 1911 she convinced botanist Frederick V. Coville—and her father—to try growing blueberries. At that time blueberries were wild and not uniform. They were pear-shaped or flat, sour or sweet, tiny or large. People said “blueberries could not be cultivated.” White proved otherwise. She paid locals to bring their shrubs with berries ½ inch or larger in diameter and named the cultivars after their finders. Today New Jersey is second in U.S. production.

The Pine Barrens [Pinelands] seem vast because of the accretion of many small things: a million acres of forests with small trees; more than 17 trillion gallons of water in one aquifer made from raindrops that filter through the soil; extraordinary numbers of endangered plants and animals, none larger than an eight-foot snake and most smaller than a green frog . . . .


Congress designated the Pinelands National Reserve in 1978. It was a bold act of stewardship—protecting an ecologically sensitive region while respecting the people who live here. We invite you to explore this treasure.

The 50-mile Batona Trail is marked with pink blazes. The mansion in Batsto Village was home to ironmasters. The 1.1-million-acre Pinelands National Reserve in New Jersey lies a huge natural reservoir—the Kirkwood-Cohansey aquifer system. The water table, which is just a few inches to several feet below the surface, is recharged annually by precipitation as rain and snow percolate through the gravel and sand. We must protect this precious, local resource from pollution—it is the region’s primary source of drinking water.

Chronology of Human Activity in the Pinelands

Before 1600 Ancestors of Lenape Indians live here centuries before European explorers arrive in 1609. 1650 Growing quilting industry attracts settlers to southern New Jersey. 1688 Shipbuilding begins, using local Atlantic white cedar, oak, pitch, tar, and turpentine (wood shipbuilding continues into the 1900s). 1740 Charcoal making begins at present-day Indian Mills, Shamong Township. By this time few Lenape remained in the region. 1765 Bog iron furnaces built. 1776 American Revolution begins. 1778 Battle of Chestnut Neck, near Port Republic; British fall to capture Batsto Iron Works; supplier of weapons, and iron products to the Continental Army. 1799 First glass-producing factories established at Port Elizabeth. 1800 Whaling ends; efforts shift to harvesting fish and shellfish. 1830–1832 Earliest cranberry bogs cultivated at Bums Mill and Cassville. Paper mill opens at McCartyville. 1854 Barely community connects to Atlantic City, now a popular resort. 1876 Francois Joseph Muhlen propops piping Pinelands water to Camden and Philadelphia, is blocked by N.J. legislature. 1905 Bass River State Forest created. 1916 Whitesbog produces first U.S. commercial blueberry crop. 1928 Mexican aviator Emiliano Carranza dies as his plane crashes in Tabernacle Township on a goodwill flight between Mexico City and New York City.