

IT HAPPENED HERE NEW JERSEY

Elizabeth White and the Blueberry Business

Target Age: Middle School
Time Period: 20th Century
Featured County: Burlington
NJ 350th Theme: Innovation



Courtesy of New Jersey State Archives; Department of State

Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts:

W.CCR.2- Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

SL.CCR.1- Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

SL.CCR.4- Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

NJ Common Core Standards:

Social Studies: 6.1.12.B.8.a, 6.1.12.C.8.b, 6.1.12.C.12.d

FOCUS QUESTION: How much can one person's innovation reshape a region? How important is collaboration in bringing such innovations to fruition?

BACKGROUND:

Hammonton may be the "blueberry capital" of New Jersey, but the birthplace of the cultivated blueberry is Whitesbog. Today, blueberries are considered a super-food, rich in vitamins and antioxidants, and grown around the world; North Carolina, Michigan, Georgia, and New Jersey are the top U.S. producers. Americans consume, on average, five cups of blueberries per year, and in 2011, New Jersey had a banner crop of 62 million pounds of blueberries, valued at \$94.7 million. But until the early twentieth century, most farmers thought that wild blueberries could not be cultivated successfully. Elizabeth Coleman White changed all of that.

White came from a family of successful farmers who were experts in the cultivation of cranberries. Her father wrote the definitive report on the crop, "Cranberry Culture" in 1870, and invented several innovative pieces of machinery to aid harvesting. In 1893, when Lizzie was 22, she had her first real job

on the farm, acting as a “bushel man.” From there, her influence on the family plantation “White’s Bog” grew. After reading “Experiments in Blueberry Culture” by botanist Dr. Frederick Coville, White reached out to him, not only seeking advice but also a working partnership. In exchange for his expertise, she provided the labor and land, and in 1916 they produced the first cultivated blueberry crop.

White’s innovations did not stop there. She introduced the idea of packaging the berries in cellophane and travelled to Europe in order to procure the cellophane materials. She helped organize the New Jersey Blueberry Cooperative Association, was the first female member of the American Cranberry Association, and the first woman to receive the New Jersey Department of Agriculture citation. Her agriculture and horticulture work went far beyond the cranberry and blueberry, as her gardens celebrated the indigenous plants of the Pine Barrens, and she is credited with helping to save the holly bush. Despite such successes and innovation, White’s father choose not appoint her as president of his company in his will when he passed away. He instead named the husband of his youngest daughter to that position, a reminder that White lived during a time when women rarely ran a business. Notwithstanding this personal choice, the region of Whitesbog and the blueberry industry owe a debt of gratitude to this female pioneer, whose botanical experiments help reshape one of the most important agricultural industries in southern New Jersey.

ACTIVITY:

NJ 350 celebrates the qualities of innovation, diversity, and liberty in the state of New Jersey. The story of Elizabeth White and her work is one of both innovation and diversity.



Courtesy of Whitesbog Preservation Trust

Elizabeth Coleman White was a “farmer, naturalist, entrepreneur, writer and speaker.” She graduated from the Friends Central School in Philadelphia and took extension courses at Drexel University, studied

nursing, often cared for injured workers in her father's business, was an advocate for child labor conditions, and "was a recognized authority on native plants, writing articles for the local and national press and appearing on radio broadcasts."¹ White thrived in the all-male New Jersey cranberry and blueberry businesses. She defended cranberry farmers against charges of child labor abuse and was the first to seek out ways to domesticate the plant through her partnership with Frederick Coville.

The collaboration between White and Coville raises several questions about the role of men and women in the early twentieth century, particularly in the workplace.

1. Ask students if their fathers and mothers work outside the home—and spend a few minutes compiling the answers on the board.
2. Now ask students to consider how their parents work inside the home.
3. Remind them that White and Coville lived over 100 years ago, when fewer women could enter professions. Give this scenario, ask students to consider how White's and Coville's partnership is an innovation in itself. Dr. Coville was an educated specialist in botany and agriculture; Miss White learned from her father and from her experience on the farm. Ask your students how natural passion can influence innovation. Can students think of activities in which they participate that are inspired by natural passion?

Divide into small groups. Each group will brainstorm and discuss either how White is an example of innovation or diversity - or both. After completing the worksheet, students will report their ideas, using as much specific detail as possible to support their argument.

FOLLOW-UP:

Elizabeth White's innovation extended beyond cultivation; she also became a child advocate, responding to both the charges of the National Child Labor Committee (NCLC) and the needs of children. And just like her botanical collaboration with Dr. Coville, White turned to other experts in this initiative as well, including the Council of Women for Home Missions.

The NCLC worried about the children of seasonal workers who came from South Philadelphia to pick cranberries and blueberries on south Jersey farms. White's innovation and collaboration ensured safety for the children working in the blueberry region. With the help of the Council of Women for Home Missions, White established a daycare and nursing facility at Whitesbog which offered education, care, and recreation. She described these programs as "the germ from which such education as I visualize would have to grow." The program was initially designed to serve ages ten and younger, but ultimately expanded to help older children as well. From 1929 to 1940, the center continued to grow, expanding from the original Casa Hall, the main gathering building at Whitebog, to the former barrel factory used for recreational activities such as movies and shuffleboard games.

In this activity, students recreate the Whitesbog nursery. Below is an excerpt from Albertine Senske's article "A Time to Teach and a Time to Learn," which appeared in the *Whitesbog Preservation Trust Newsletter* in 2013, and which was based on documents and diaries from the Women's Council for Home Missions. Provide students with paper, rulers, and utensils such as colored pencils, crayons, and markers. Ask students to design and illustrate Elizabeth White's attempt to create a center that would

¹ See: <http://www.preservationnation.org/magazine/story-of-the-week/2011/the-blueberry-queen.html> and <http://www.whitesbog.org/whitesbog-history/elizabeth-c-white/>

put “the education of these children on a permanently high plane.” Depending on time, you can encourage students to make a variety of visual products (two or three dimensional). You can elevate your activity if you have access to computer programs such as CAD.

EXCERPT: *There were three rooms, a nursery, a kitchen and a large recreation room, which suited their needs to accommodate three groupings of children: infants, pre-school and kindergarten. With the help of a few older girls, they got the nursery in shape. Tables, chairs, shelves and cabinets were wiped down. Men put up window screening. Youngsters milled about watching every step of the procedure. Some would come to the center while others would be cared for by their own families.*

Monday, September 9, 1929. The adventure began, as did many accompanying challenges. Thirty-six children arrived. There were seven infants – but there were only four baskets that could be used as cribs. There were ten more little ones who were under three years of age and would require as much care as the infants. The remainder ranged in age from three to nine. Following the NCLC investigation, farm rules prohibited children under ten from being in the bogs. One of the first things the “nurses” did was to order twelve quarts of milk.

In the early days of NCLC scrutiny allegations were made that the children were malnourished when they returned from the bogs. That could never have been said of the children under the care of the Home Mission ladies. They cooked as well as taught and served nutritious meals of vegetable soup, bean soup, spaghetti, milk and always lots and lots of bread and butter.

When the mission women first drove into the village, the children had said the nurses had arrived. True enough; for as well as being teachers and cooks five and a half days a week, the women had an additional calling - nurse on demand. Minor, and sometimes not so minor ailments, were presented for care. They treated cuts, burns, infected wounds and poison ivy. Sometimes more serious conditions like impetigo and head lice had to be dealt with. When a case proved beyond their expertise, the women saw to it that the person got the proper medical care. Because they lived among the workers, nursing hours went beyond eight to five.

WANT TO LEARN MORE?

Places You Can Visit

Local Farms: The website PineyPower.com offers links to farms in Atlantic, Burlington and Ocean Counties where you can pick your own blueberries.

<http://www.pineypower.com/blueberries.htm#upick>

Historic Whitesbog Village: On both the National and State Registers of Historic Sites, Whitesbog offers living history tours, a quarterly lecture series, seasonal programs, and festivals.

<http://www.whitesbog.org>

More Classroom Activities

“Blueberries for Sal”: This site has lesson plans for math for Pre-K through 2, for use with the Caldecott Honor book, *Blueberries for Sal* by Robert McCloskey. These activities are taken from *Teaching Early*

Math Skills with Favorite Picture Books available from Scholastic Professional Books.

<http://www.scholastic.com/teachers/lesson-plan/blueberries-sal-lesson-plan>

The New Jersey Digital Highway: A website with information and documents about the problem of child labor in New Jersey for the first part of the twentieth century.

http://www.njdigitalhighway.org/enj/lessons/child_labor_in_nj/?part=problem_of_child_labor

USDA National Agriculture Statistics Service: A site where students can break the crop into specific categories, and then trace the statistics over different time intervals.

http://www.nass.usda.gov/Statistics_by_Subject/index.php?sector=CROPS

For More Information

Link to the report "2011 Blueberry Statistics - National Agricultural Statistics Service:

http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:NQedlkq53IJ:www.nass.usda.gov/Statistics_by_State/New_Jersey/Publications/Blueberry_Statistics/bbbook2011Final.pdf+&cd=3&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=us

Paula Newcomer, *The Blueberry Girl: The Story of Elizabeth Coleman White*: online book and discussion guide geared towards elementary and middle school learners, available online at,

<http://www.theblueberrygirl.com/>

Letitia Roa Nixon, *Blueberry Lady: The Story of Elizabeth Coleman White, 1871-1954* (Bloomington: Authorhouse Publishers, 2009).

Elizabeth Ginsberg, "The Blueberry Queen: How a New Jersey Town Celebrates its Pioneer," *National Trust for Historic Preservation Magazine* (online only, March 2011):

<http://www.preservationnation.org/magazine/story-of-the-week/2011/the-blueberry-queen.html>

Albertine Senske, "A Time to Teach and a Time to Learn," *Whitesbog Preservation Trust Newsletter* (3rd Quarter, 2013), p. 1 (available online at: <http://www.whitesbog.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/3rd-quarter-13-newsletter-internet.pdf>).

Whitesbog Preservation Trust, biography of Elizabeth White:

<http://www.whitesbog.org/whitesbog-history/elizabeth-c-white/>

CREDIT INFORMATION:

Pg. 1: Elizabeth White inspecting berries on a sorting machine, Courtesy of New Jersey State Archives; Department of State.

Pg. 2: Elizabeth White and Frederick Coville, Whitesbog, Courtesy of Whitesbog Preservation Trust

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