



Dennis Historical Society

Newsletter

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**The April Board Meeting will be held April 9, 2:00 pm at Jericho, 90 Old Main Street, West Dennis
Members Welcome**

Please send information & stories for the newsletter to Dave Talbott at the DHS Website email address: info@dennishistoricalsociety.org

The Cultivated Cranberry

A Cape Cod Story of Discovery and Success

Those of us who were fortunate to hear Bob Poskitt's informative presentation *Creating the Cultivated Cranberry*, which kicked off our 2019 program season on March 16th, know it was incredibly interesting. For those who missed Bob's talk, here is Part 1 of a slightly condensed and edited version. The history will be continued in future newsletters.

Harvesting Cranberries



(Images from the DHS Digital Archives)

Let's go back 8,000 to 10,000 years to the time after the retreat of the glaciers. The glaciers left behind a great variety of materials, many of them unique, in forming natural growing areas or bogs. On Cape Cod, these bogs began as kettle holes. They varied widely in both surface area and depth. These holes were lined with materials like sand, peat, gravel and clay. And there was always water nearby, lots of it. The bogs were natural growing areas for *Sassamanash*, the word for cranberry to people native to the area. Cranberries grew on low lying, trailing vines much like strawberries. These vines can live to 150 years and older and still produce fruit. The cranberry is one of 3 fruits native to North America, the other two being blueberries and grapes. The Wampanoag and other native peoples used the berry to make pemmican, a modern-day energy bar. The berries were pounded into a mixture of dried deer meat and whale blubber, then the mixture was stored in animal skins. The fat and the acidity of the fruit combined to lower the Ph and helped preserve it by resisting bacteria. Pemmican would last for months and could be eaten on long journeys when hunting for food and furs. It became popular with some early French and English explorers as an item of commerce. The fruit is very high in Vitamin C and was eventually well known to reduce scurvy.

Early European explorers in the 1600s and 1700s were not completely surprised to see cranberries in North America. A smaller version grew wild in boggy regions of southern England and in the low lying areas of the Netherlands. The North American berry, though, was distinctively larger in size. There were many other important uses for cranberries beyond pemmican, such as a red dye, a bait for trapping, leaves as a tobacco substitute, tea, and for medicinal purposes, to address fever, stomach cramps and child birth pains. As a poultice, it could draw out infection. The berries are also very high in anti-oxidants and are thought to help prevent heart disease. Early European colonists were quick to coin their own European name for this fruit. To them the small pink blossom resembled the head and bill of the Sandhill Crane from the UK. The word crane berry was eventually shortened to cranberry.

Initially, the Pilgrims and other colonists incorporated the cranberry into their more traditional old-world recipes. Over time, the Wampanoags probably taught them to use natural sweeteners such as maple syrup to help curb the tartness of the berry. Did the Pilgrims enjoy cranberries at their early Thanksgiving feasts? The answer is probably NO, at the first Thanksgiving. By November 1621, the time of the first Thanksgiving, the sugar supply from the Mayflower's voyage was gone, so the berries would have been too tart. At future Thanksgiving harvests, though, we can assume they did. We know that about 50 years later, cooks began boiling cranberries routinely with sugar to make sauces for meats. With a consistent form of sweetening available from honey or maple syrup, usage of wild cranberries started to increase. Had the use increased to the point where cranberries were a regular part of the diet at the time of the American Revolution? To try to answer that question, I researched Quartermaster records from the War. The records did not show any stocks, or supplies of wild cranberries among the items inventoried. The reason being, at that time, cranberries still grew only wild and were not available in any predictable quantities.

Moving next to 1816, we will focus on what was happening in Dennis. A Captain by the name of Henry Hall had returned from the War of 1812, his second major service to his country. The first being during the American Revolution where he served with Colonel Freeman of Cape Cod and under Brigadier General John Stark with Vermont's Green Mountain Boys at the Battle of Bennington. After the War of 1812, times were very tough almost everywhere, including Cape Cod. Henry had a farm that needed to support his wife and 9 children. Part of that farm included a swampy area where some cranberries grew wild. It was located in Dennis off Scarsdale Road about a half mile north of the Cape Playhouse. Captain Hall's wild cranberry bog was fairly close to the shoreline.

The winter of 1816 was expected to be very cold. Sure that he would need much wood for heat, Henry cut down the trees between his wild bog and the shore. Following that brutal winter, when he went out to check his land and the bog area, he could not believe what he saw! With his bog no longer in the lee of the trees, winter winds had blown large quantities of shore sand over parts of his bog and the wild vines. He was devastated, as he felt he had lost this crop. As spring turned into summer, to Henry's amazement, his vines had begun to show new growth! He decided to move his dairy cow Molly from that swampy area to a nearby pasture so he could begin to experiment with his wild cranberries. He concluded that his vines and their roots were stronger with the addition of sand, and some varieties appeared to resist the insects better. When neighbors and friends heard of Henry's techniques, they began to copy what he had been doing, thus increasing the number of growers over time, who would experiment with the use of sand. The evolution was slow. No one thought anyone, let alone whole families, could actually make money by growing cranberries.

Hall's timing of this new farming opportunity could not have been better. The ship building industry in Dennis and Cape Cod had begun to slow down as steam power was introduced. For many years in the first half of the 1800s, however, local bogs continued to be picked only for personal consumption. Henry's experimentation with the use of sand as a natural fertilizer led to the eventual development of the cultivated cranberry as we know it today. The word "cultivate" means to foster, refine, or improve a crop, and that is what Henry had started in 1816 with the use of his shore sand. The big disadvantage to the cranberry's broader use was probably the large amount of sweetening needed to turn the berry into an acceptable sauce. Over time, the production of molasses from sugar cane, or sugar beets may have provided a reasonably priced source for sweetening. I was unable to find any documented proof of this theory, but there is logic in it.

1838 was the first year on record of flooding and freezing the bogs. It helped to control insects and prevent frost damage. Also, the easiest way to fertilize the vines was to spread sand on the frozen bogs and wait for it to melt in the spring. Even today, sanding is done every several years.

Even though many other towns were becoming more engaged, Dennis remained at the center of activity for this emerging crop for close to 25 years. In 1846, Harwich became the first community to produce the cranberry as a viable commercial crop. Historians in Dennis have often said, "the cultivated cranberry was founded in Dennis, but Harwich took it to the bank." For this, credit does go to Captain Alvin Cahoon who produced the first commercial crop near Pleasant Lake. He devised ingenious canal systems to readily bring water to the bogs. There is an outstanding exhibit on the cranberry at the Harwich Historical Society in Harwich Center. It was created by the Thatcher family, specifically Bev and Link Thatcher, who have been recognized local leaders in this industry for many years. If you haven't already visited and seen this exhibit, I highly recommend it!

Local Cape residents had a hard time believing that anyone would pay money for these berries when they grew wild in so many area bogs and swamps. However, as the quality and variety of these cranberries increased, commercial interest began to take over. Cape Cod families needed cranberry farming to produce badly needed income. A few growers on Cape Cod took the lead in this new enterprise. By the 1880s, in Barnstable County alone, more than 3,000 acres were under cranberry cultivation. An outstanding reputation was achieved and their fruit brought the highest possible prices. It became a money-making undertaking, a testimony to the inventiveness and diligence of both Henry Hall of Dennis and Alvin Cahoon of Harwich.

By 1900, the acres under cultivation had tripled. Cranberry Fever had struck the Cape Cod towns! Although many growers relied on traditional family and community support during the harvest, demands for higher wages provided opportunities for newly arrived immigrants from Finland and from off the western shores of North Africa, the Cape Verde Islands. As a re-supply stop in the international whaling trade, the residents of the Cape Verde Islands became familiar with the Cape Cod whaling captains and crews. And, as natural disasters and colonial exploitation increased in those islands, many left on the Cape Cod whaling ships in hopes of better lives in farm related jobs. Many locals bogs on Cape Cod were created by the skill of these new immigrants. Cape Verdeans were also key to improvements in both the processing and the harvesting the berry. With their good work ethic and knowledge of farming, they became an essential part of, and eventual partners in the local cranberry industry.

Picking cranberries was as much of a social event as it was work. Whole communities would gather at the local bogs to harvest their annual crop. Bogs were separated by rope or fishing line into a series of 4 foot wide rows. Two pickers would work side by side. At the end of the harvest the bog owner would tally up the quarts picked by each worker. The going rate was one and a half cents per quart. For each quart, or pail picked, a worker would receive a ticket from the bog owner. At the end of the day, the pickers would turn these in and collect their wages. A good worker could pick 15 barrels a day, or 1,500 lbs. Using first cranberry barrels, and then pounds and converting into dry measure quarts, at 1.5 cents per hour, this amounts to between \$2.20 and \$2.30 per day. Based on mid-October daylight, this was probably for an 11 hour day. These wages were quite good in 1900, but the picking season was short. As late as the 1930s, the cranberry harvest was still so vital to local and state economies in parts of Massachusetts that school children could be excused for weeks in the fall during the harvest season.

Thank you Bob for contributing this fascinating history: TO BE CONTINUED!



(Image from the DHS Digital Archives)

There's nothing "*Unknown*" about this amazing picture from the DHS Digital Archives. Many readers will easily identify the buildings in the photo, but who will be the first to email: the earliest year, and the latest year the picture could have been taken? Can anyone pin down the actual year? Please email answers to:

info@dennishistoricalsociety.org

Correction: the owner/date board on #27 North Street is wrong on both counts. It is the house of Captain Enos Sears and was built c. 1830. This information is from the archives of the Massachusetts Historical Commission. Thank you Diane Rochelle for setting the record straight on this.

Another correction to last month's newsletter; I misread Henry Kelley's notes. The purchaser of 26 consecutive years of new Buicks was "country gentleman, Henry Howes Sears." The story was related by his grandson, Henry Homer Sears.

With last month's house in the, "The Flower Gardens of West Dennis, Mass.," not identified at press time, readers are still batting .583.

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Cape Cod Museum Trail Hosts Third Free Festival of Museums

Saturday, April 6th, 10 am to 4 pm

See the DHS Exhibition Booth and other Exhibits

Hyannis Youth & Community Center

141 Bassett Lane, Hyannis

Coming this month, don't miss it!

Give the Gift of History

When your membership renewal arrives in the mail this spring, don't just renew your own membership, start a new membership for a family member, or friend with a connection to the Town of Dennis.

Not only will your gift be appreciated, it will help grow your Society!

Please include a note with the name and mailing address of the gift recipient along with your payment.

You can do so online using **PayPal** at <http://www.dennishistoricalsociety.org/>

Get Involved/Membership

After making your payment, email us at **info@dennishistoricalsociety.org** to send the name and address of the recipient.

Thank you!