

# Cranberry Harvesting

by Jennifer Stone Gaines

Cranberries are one of the truly native plants of Cape Cod, thriving in the acidic bogs found on this sandy peninsula. Cape Cod is also the first place where cranberries were grown commercially. Through the years, cranberries and Cape Cod have become paired in the public consciousness.

For generations before the first colonists arrived, the Wampanoags had been harvesting the beautiful red berries, using them for food, medicine and dye. The Pilgrims found the berries when they arrived that first cold autumn. Though probably startled by their tartness, they ate them, and inadvertently ward off the dreaded disease of scurvy. As early as 1640, the natives were selling cranberries to the Pilgrims.

Throughout the colonial era, cranberries continued to play an important part in the life here. Their harvest marked the last fruit crop before the cold winds of winter.

In the early days there was little management of the crop beyond clearing brush and thorny weeds away from the damp places where the berries grew, cutting back the tall weeds with scythes. Only after 1816 when Henry Hall of Dennis noticed that in places where sand had blown across his bogs the cranberry vines grew more vigorously, was there any more manipulation of the bogs. This marked the beginning of

cranberry agriculture, which spread slowly through the first half of the 1800s. The earliest experiments in growing methods were done by the same clever men and their heirs down-Cape who had experimented and perfected salt making a few decades before.

By 1840, landowners across Barnstable County were regularly "setting out a few rods to cranberries." People encouraged the vines in small wetlands, harvesting and selling their berries. There was

a particularly good harvest in 1859, considered very valuable, which led even more people to plant the vines. All across town, land owners grew their small patches of cranberries. There were bogs "behind the beach" at West Falmouth and Racing Beach. The marsh that

was excavated for Fiddler's Cove Marina in 1957 had been planted as a bog and was still operational in 1903. (Looking farther back into our history, we find that this marsh had previously been the site of a saltworks.)

In the archives of the Woods Hole Historical Collection and Museum is a map dated 1850 which shows the land which is now the ball field off Millfield Street, Woods Hole before it was filled and flattened; back then it was divided into field, pastures, wet meadows and cranberry bogs, all owned by people who lived closer to the main part of town.



Cranberry Harvesting Plaque by Sarah Peters. Photograph by Jacki Forbes.

Through the second half of the 1800s, growing was no longer restricted to the small naturally occurring bogs and damp depressions in the sand; by then bogs were being carved out of many wetlands. Trees and their stumps were laboriously hauled out of the swamps; then the rough patches were cleared and flattened. Ditches and water gates were dug and built. Sand was carted in to cover swamp-bed. Cranberry shoots were cut from another bog and tucked into the new sand. "Proper" cranberry agriculture required an annual application of sand as well as serious water management involving seasonal flooding.

In 1854 the first official census of cranberry bogs lists 26 acres of bogs in Falmouth, placing it third in Barnstable County's total of 197 acres. Ten years later, in 1864, the county total had increased by an order of magnitude to 1074 acres. By that time, cranberries were being referred to as "the economic salvation of the Cape,"



This screen-bottomed trough, placed on a gentle slant, allows "screeners" to pick out detritus, as well as any bad berries, while rolling the good ones down the screen and into the barrel. Photo from the Massachusetts Cranberry Experiment Station. ca. 1890.

replacing the failing maritime industry. Cranberries were shipped from the Cape to the Union soldiers on the battlefields of the Civil War. All through the century cranberry farming grew in importance. By the end of the century growing cranberries had become big business.



Carrie Medeiros, age 12, during her second year of picking cranberries. Taken at Swift's Bog, Falmouth, 1911. Photo by Lewis W. Hine. Spinner collection, Falmouth Historical Society.

In 1860 Dr. Lewis Miller laid out one of the earliest ditched and managed bogs in town in a former marsh behind his house on the West/North Falmouth border. It was the old Captain Ward Eldred home, now numbered 142 North Falmouth Highway. In the early years of his bog he probably shipped the barrels of cranberries on schooners that docked at the pier in North Falmouth. In 1895 he shipped out 800 barrels. The bog is still operating today just below Wings Pond.

Another cranberry grower was Deacon Lorenzo Eldred who owned many acres around and to the north of Quissett Harbor. His bogs were just



Dry harvesting from an East Falmouth bog, ca. 1960. Courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.

inland from Racing Beach extending north through the marsh to the shore of Flume Pond. In an article in the Seaside Press published in Sandwich in 1879, the author tells an idyllic story of a “carriage ride from Falmouth Heights to Quissett to watch the cranberrying. Deacon Eldred and his son were in the fields with the young pickers, who each received  $\frac{1}{4}$  of what they had gathered and then departed at dusk on foot or in the ox cart which came to gather the fruit at day’s end.” The great-granddaughter of Lorenzo, Judy Cooper, remembers as a child walking all along “the hills of Racing Beach. The place was covered with wild cranberries, the remains of my great-grandfather’s cranberry bogs.”

In the Woods Hole Museum archives is a series of letters from locals to Thomas Dunham Fish who had moved from Quissett to New York to join his uncle’s shipping firm. These letters vividly document the commerce of the day. Evidently he received goods which the Cape Codders shipped down by steamship

(sometimes called “propeller”) and then sold the goods for them. In the letters covering the years 1871-1885 there are records of barrels of eels, salt codfish and tongues, white stones and cranberries being shipped from Woods Hole to New York. Here is one of the most informative letters (though somewhat startling in its revelations.) The writer, Braddock Gifford, had come to town to work as a blacksmith in the shipbuilding business in Quisset Harbor. When the whale ships were being built in Woods Hole, he moved there to continue his craft.

*Woods Hole    Nov 3 1873  
Mr. Fish Sir*

*I shall send to you 10 barrels of cranberries by Propeller on Tuesday 4th day. I should like for you to sell them for me in so doing will oblige your friend*

*Braddock Gifford  
these berries have been picked the most of them since the 10th of Oct. we call them good hard berries.*



Wet Harvesting ca. 1960. Cranberries in the water are collected inside floats, then raked or scooped onto the conveyer belt that loads them in the truck. Courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.

*My son Benjamin sold our berries last fall at Bridgewater but now has gone to England to get him a wife. He may not return until Spring.*

In 1872 the railroad had been extended south to Falmouth and Woods Hole. We can only imagine that the young Mr. Gifford had availed himself of this new mode of transportation when he traveled to Bridgewater. We do know from the records that yes, he did get himself a wife in England.

By the 1890s cranberry growing had become one of the leading industries in Falmouth. Many people in town were involved and many acres of land were converted to this agriculture. In 1891, the Anderson bog was created in Teaticket. It was arduously prepared, then planted and the young plants were allowed to become well established for three years before harvesting began. Raleigh Costa remembered that in his childhood this very productive bog was flooded in winter and became a favorite spot for skating, with bonfires on the ice. Today it is covered in asphalt, the site of the Falmouth Mall.

After the mill on the Moonakis River burned in 1894, the property was sold to the Swift brothers who drained the pond to create a cranberry bog.

As Waquoit historians have said in *The Book of Falmouth*, "Near the end of the 19th century, most of the Waquoit swamps were made into cranberry bogs," and, "The swamps all along the way up to Johns Pond were made into cranberry bogs and the water was diverted for early frost protection and for winter coverage of the vines."



Harvesting in an East Falmouth bog in the 1960s. Although mechanical harvesters existed at this time, they are not visible in this photograph. Here a picker brings a box of cranberries up out of the bog by wheelbarrow to add to the stack which a truck will then pick up. Courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.

The story behind the second largest bog in town tells that in 1890 the three Swift brothers of Sandwich and later Waquoit, took a Boston investor fishing along streams above the abandoned mill ponds on the Coonamesset River and there persuaded him to back their plan of converting the ponds and bordering swamps to cranberry bogs. With the funding assured, the brothers hired Finns and Russians from New York City to clear the swamps

of trees and stumps, to ditch and dike, eventually creating 25 acres of bogs.

These workers were not the first, nor by any means the last, of the migrant labor brought in to help with the cranberry growing. In a pattern which was mirrored in the strawberry industry, workers were brought in for the harvest from New Bedford and Fall River. Most of these workers were from the Azores; the first had come into New Bedford on whaling ships which had stopped in the Azores for supplies

and more crew. At the end of the voyage, the men had the option of leaving the ship at its home port of New Bedford, and many did so, finding work in the mills. Since many of these men were from a farming background, they eagerly took jobs here for the harvest, happy to be out of the city and dirty factories, and to bring their families out into the fresh air. Eventually many were able to move to Falmouth and buy their own plots that they made into small farms. The Azoreans, along with the Cape Verdean people who emigrated to New Bedford and Fall River in large numbers after the terrible drought in their homeland in 1904, were the forebears of the most important group of people settling in East Falmouth. In 1900 there were 31 Portuguese in Falmouth, 30 years later, there were 2,000, out of a town population of 5,000.

The story of one family, which was similar to so many others, starts with Manuel J. Roderick, (whose grandson Paulino Rodriques became Falmouth's police chief in 1983). At age 17, Manuel had joined the crew of a whaler when it put into the island of Brava in the Cape Verde Islands. For more than 2½ years he risked his life aboard whalers, earning a grand total of \$178. He went ashore in New Bedford and sailed on coastal schooners. During that time he met and married a young woman

in New Bedford who had come to work in the mills from the Cape Verdean island of Fogo. In 1898 they left the city to pick strawberries in Falmouth. The season was short but compared to the mills, the pay was good. Besides, "My wife felt good here. She was sick a lot in New Bedford." The next year they moved to Falmouth and in the autumn worked on the cranberry bogs. In a few years he got a job on the bogs overseeing six men. His wife continued to pick at harvest time. In 1905 they were able to buy a house and land and start their own home among their hardworking neighbors.



Mother and daughter use the cranberry scoops while the young son picks by hand into a pail. Through the 1930s children were routinely let out of school to harvest the berries. Courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.

This hiring pattern continued for decades; in 1910-11 Swift's bog in East Falmouth alone employed 150 workers for the harvest. These people brought their children and lived in communal housing provided by the bog owners. There was good money in the cranberry business; even children would work alongside

their parents earning extra money for the family.

By 1910 the work of the whole family was still important enough to the harvest that the school term in Falmouth's "cranberry district" was stopped for two weeks so the children could help with the harvest. In 1911 Lewis W. Hine, hired by the U.S. Child Labor Committee to document child labor

practices in America, photographed workers on the Falmouth bogs, portraying the children working alongside their mothers, pails clutched in hand. His vivid photographs are the only record we have of that important time in the life of our town. Through the 1930s children were routinely let out of school to harvest the berries.

Up until 1880 cranberries were picked by hand one at a time. Even small children could do it, but the woody stems of the plants were hard on the hands. In the early days everyone picked into baskets, but by the 1870s the standard picking unit was the "cranberry pail," a six-quart tin cylinder with a bail handle. The workers, adult and child alike, were paid by the number of pails they could fill in a day.

The cranberry scoop had been invented by 1880 and rapidly was put to wide use. At least one picker remembered gratefully that the scoop more than doubled her income, allowing her to pick twice as many berries a day. However, the normal scoop was much too heavy for the children to manage.

One of the first acts of the Cape Cod Cranberry Growers' Association, founded in 1888, was to standardize the size of barrels, the usual measure of commerce. The standard barrel held almost 100

quarts and when filled weighed between 115 and 125 pounds. Barrels and boxes for the berries were made in Waquoit on Carriage Shop Road. Boxes began to replace barrels around 1900. By the 1920s barrels were no longer in use; boxes replaced barrels as the standard unit.



Lewis W. Hine, who was hired by the US Child Labor Committee to document child labor practices in America, studied the living conditions as well as the working conditions of the Cape Verdean cranberry pickers. This shack near Crocker's Bog in Falmouth measured 10 feet by 12 feet and was home to these seven men, ca. 1911. Courtesy Falmouth Historical Society

In 1895, Falmouth's cranberry harvest was 15,000 barrels, valued at \$43,000, one tenth of the total Massachusetts production. By 1905 there were 4,700 acres of bogs in Barnstable County, second only to Plymouth County with 6,240 acres. By 1936 between 75,000 and 100,000 barrels were shipped out of Falmouth.

The first mechanical harvester was

developed in 1920 and used through the 1940s. Wet harvesting was not used until the 1960s, but now it is the norm for berries that will be processed into juice or sauce. It is, of course, dependent on mechanical equipment that was not around for most of the lives of the bogs, nor does it require whole families to help with the harvest. Anyone who sees the carpets of floating berries is struck by their brilliant beauty.

As we look at the progression of industries in Falmouth, we repeatedly see a new industry rising from the ashes of a defunct industry. Thus we see cranberry bogs being created in some cases on the



A picker, dressed for a day's work in the cranberry bogs. Wide brimmed hats protected face and neck from the sun, as did the long sleeves of an old dress. The fingerless gloves protected the hands from the sharp vines. The ticket in this woman's hat tells how many pails of cranberries she has picked so far on this day. Clothing was always chosen from the oldest and most ready-for-the-ragbag available. From a 1906 calendar.

sites of former saltworks and more often out of millponds left from abandoned mills. The history of Falmouth can indeed be seen as a sequence of man's use of the land.

There is one instance when the record of this history has tumbled in on itself. When the contents of the old Tobey Farm in East Falmouth were sold in 1968, Captain John Tobey's logbook of a voyage aboard the whaler *Japan* in 1839-1840 was discovered. On the back two pages were records kept by Hattie Tobey (1890-1968), the last of the family to live in the house, of her cranberry bog accounts. She had lived alone at the end of her life, doing all the plowing, chopping wood, cutting hay and, we presume, tending her bogs by herself. She must have lived a thrifty life, of necessity using whatever came to hand, including this ancient logbook.

Even today, in all parts of Falmouth there are active cranberry bogs. The views across the bogs are beautiful, especially when the plants are bedecked with their brilliant berries or their maroon foliage of early winter. They bring our past hauntingly close, standing as they have for more than 100 years as an important part of our town's history.