

Image source: Pinelands Preservation Alliance

This Halloween, the Office of DEIB is Uncovering the Mystery & Folklore of the New Jersey Pinelands...

Stretching across seven different counties, 22% of the State of New Jersey is comprised of what we know

as the PINE BARRENS. These 1.1 million acres of forest have fundamentally influenced the makeup of our state, from our everyday culture, something as consequential as how our roads are laid out, and our sports teams. The Pine Barrens are a unique and rare ecosystem which differentiates it significantly from more typical forests. Our pinelands are very flat, with sandy, nutrient deficient soil. The canopy is more open than other forests, with more sunlight reaching the floor. The pine trees have evolved to be resistant to frequent forest fires, their reproduction even being tied to the heat causing pinecones to burst. The Pine Barrens provide essential services to us by creating natural filters for aquifers, which provide us clean drinking water, and cleaning the air of the carbon dioxide produced by our many highways. The Pine Barrens also provide for our state economically; naturally occurring peat bogs provide the perfect foundation for cranberry crops. 61% of the entire United States' cranberry crop is sourced from here in New Jersey, with thousands of people's jobs relying on the industry. With how important the Pine Barrens are to the fabric of our state's communities, it only makes sense that culture would project back on to the Barrens, and culture goes hand-in-hand with folklore. If one has ever been to the Pine Barrens in person, the endless repetitions of columnar trees, abundant concentrations of carnivorous plants, scattered ruins of long abandoned villages, and the occasional drift of fog paint a distinctly eerie picture. It is dangerously easy to lose your way among the pines. It's only natural that many of the colloquial tales about the Pine Barrens diverged into darker and more haunted faire; Ghosts, monsters, and witches being the common storytelling staples surrounding wayward hikers and campers. Digging a little deeper, one can trace many of these campfire tales back to watershed periods in US History, often born from conflicts of politics and philosophy. Today, these stories serve as an illustration of how our societal ideas have changed since the founding of our nation, yet at the same time still influence the identity of 'New Jersey' in the modern day.

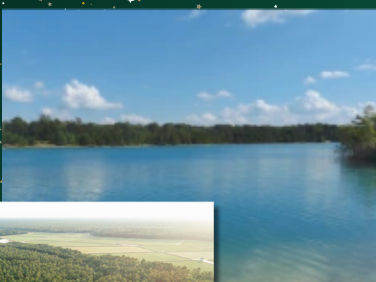


Image source: South Jersey Adventures

Beautiful but Deadly

Cratering parts of the Pine Barrens are enigmatic pools of deep cerulean, blue. As if a spot of the Barrens were displaced by a beach in Barbados. However, this mysterious incongruity is manmade. These great pits used to be quarries used for gravel mining. Filled with water now, a combination of chemicals and frigid water temperature results in the pristine azure that almost glows. The most famous 'blue hole' rests in Winslow Township, on the border between Camden and Gloucester Counties and is allegedly a common haunt for the Jersey Devil himself. Their inviting beauty belies a cruel trap. DO NOT SWIM IN THESE. The sandy bottoms of these holes have the consistency of quicksand, trapping a would-be swimmer's legs. Combine this with frequent 80ft drop-offs and strange and unpredictable currents, and the risk of drowning becomes far too high to dare.



Image source: NJ Spotlight News, credit Christopher Smith



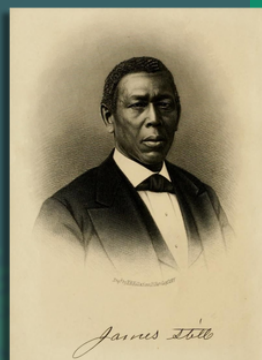
Image source: StockCafe

Have you ever seen a white stag? If so, you may have fortune's favor. In 1809 a rushing stagecoach from Evesham's horses were halted on their nighttime journey to Philadelphia by a White Stag standing wardingly in the middle of the road. Unbeknownst to the passengers, the upcoming Quaker Bridge had collapsed. If the horses had not stopped, the whole stagecoach would have plummeted into the Batsto River. Sighted many times since in the Pine Barrens, the White Stag is said to guard travelers from disaster.

Alternative Medicine

One of the most enduring folktales of the Pine Barrens is that of the 'Black Doctor'. When traveling between the pines, a wanderer might encounter a strange figure walking the opposite way. He might offer to gift you a tincture or a cure-all, then after accepting your gift, he vanishes. The story behind the specter is that the doctor was not permitted to study medicine on the basis of his race, and so he secluded himself within the pines to learn all he could of medicine from textbooks and providing care to the local communities until his life was cut short by a heart-attack. This tall tale has a lot of basis in historical truth. 'The Black Doctor of the Pines' was named James Still, born in 1812 and the son of two former slaves. He grew up in Washington township and was first enamored with medicine upon receiving his first vaccination at the age of three. However, as an African-American, he was barred from attending any medical school during that time period. Determined to be a physician anyway, Still would teach himself. He studied natural remedies from what he had access to, purchasing a distilling device to extract oils from herbs. He held disdain for many common medical practices at the time, such as the injection of mercury and calomel into a patient. His progressive treatments were more successful, and his popularity led to frustration from the establishment medical practices, who would seek to have his office shut down, claiming Still practiced without a license. That accusation was hard to prove, as Dr. Still did not charge a fixed rate for his services. Instead, he accepted what people could afford to give him. Much loved by his community, Doctor James Still would die of a stroke in 1882.

Image source: Wikipedia



SPEND A NIGHT IN NEW JERSEY'S

PINE BARRENS

CAMP AT YOUR OWN RISK



Heroine of Red Bank



image source: Wikipedia

On October 22nd, 1777, a British force was sent to capture Fort Mercer on the New Jersey side of the Delaware River. The British needed to take the fort in order to halt the blockade along the Delaware river hampering their supply chains. The resulting battle was successful in delaying the advance of British troops. Today the Battlefield still hosts trenches and canons fielded by the US soldiers against a force of 2,000 enemy combatants. It is also a National Park within Gloucester County. Worthy of recognition is the James and Ann Whitall House. This house, despite suffering damage during the battle, operated as a field hospital for America troops while fighting took place outside its doors. Ann Cooper Hall would receive the epithet of 'Heroine of Red Bank' for her efforts. Due to the traumatic nature of its past, the Whitall House and surrounding battlefield, the area has a reputation for being among one of the most haunted locations in the states, with strange sounds heard from within and strange figures spotted in windows from outside. The Whitall House still receives visitors and offers tours today! Visit [here](#) for more info!

The 'Witch' of Mt. Misery

Peggy Clevenger, or 'Old Mother Clevenger' was a suspected Witch who lived at the base of Mt. Misery. Yes, that is rather on the nose, and yes that is a real place! Peggy Clevenger was a woman of advanced age who lived alone in her single floor cabin. According to the times, her single living aroused suspicion from her hometown of Pasadena. Today the village lies abandoned and in ruins. Rhymes were made up about her ability to transform into a large lizard or a hare, or how she hoarded a treasure underneath her cabin. Ms. Clevenger was not a witch, but that didn't protect her from the harassments of her neighbors. Miscreants had begun killing her hogs and horses during the night. One evening in 1857 her home was burned down under suspicious circumstances. The newspapers would put the blame on Clevenger herself for an alleged opiate addiction, but the story of her mistreatment stands as an example of paranoia and fear leading to injustice.



Ruins of Pasadena

image source: Pinterest
Preservation alliance

THE DEVIL IN THE DETAILS

October, 2024

Origin of the Jersey Devil revealed!!

Exclusive!



image source: Wikipedia

pective, is even more interesting. The Leeds family was real, Leeds Point near Absecon is named for them. Daniel Leeds, the family patriarch, was a royal surveyor for the British Crown, and was considered a loyalist to England. His son, Titan, would publish a yearly almanac in direct opposition to Benjamin Franklin's 'Poor Richard's Almanac'. Not liking the Leeds's loyalist predilections, Franklin took it upon himself to ruin this man's career and reputation.



image source: Hoosier kin blog

came true and Titan Leeds had died. The person speaking was Leeds resurrected from the grave as a foul spirit to haunt Franklin with his inanity. Titan would pass away for real in 1738, but Franklin would not let the joke die. This jibing fed off of his already occult reputation within South Jersey Christian congregations, leading to his incorporation within folklore as the 'Leeds-Devil' haunting the Pine Barrens. For the actual form this devil took, an explanation can be sourced from the Leeds family crest itself, depicted prominently on the Leeds Almanac.



Almanacs are periodicals that can be considered astrology adjacent. They predict things such as weather, the tides, and the dates of religious days. Sailors astronomers, and most importantly, farmers are the prime market for these folios. Often contained between their pages were editorialized opinions on philosophy and witticisms on behalf of the author. The Leeds family were already at odds with the local Quaker congregations, his almanac work being considered witchcraft. Franklin used this as a lever to isolate and humiliate Titan Leeds further from his community. In what could be considered in the 1700's a mega-level burn, Franklin's 1733 almanac used Leeds's own astrology model to predict Leeds's death the following year. Leeds took the bait and published a public condemnation of the very popular philosopher. Delighted, Franklin issued a response where he poked fun at Leeds. He suggested that his own prediction came

The shield depicts three creatures evocative of a gargoyle, dragon, or demon creature not unlike descriptions of the Jersey Devil's shape. Who can really say, though? *Something* has been sighted many times in and around the Pine Barrens. Napoleon Bonaparte's own brother, Joseph, describes an adventure where he fired gunshots at the Devil while on holiday in 1820. In 1909 some creature terrorized the whole of the South Jersey and Philadelphia area. Reportedly attacking a trolley car in Haddon Heights and a Camden Socialite club. Strange footprints were found throughout Burlington County during a five-day stint of hundreds of sightings. Schools across the Delaware Valley even closed due to panic. Maybe, just maybe, there is something dangerous walking amongst the Pine Barrens.

Exclusive Language Spotlight

While an attempt has been made to reclaim the adage by the affected groups, the word 'Piney' is still often considered slur. The word has roots in being a descriptor of criminals and runaway slaves hiding within the Pine Barrens. Pine Barrens denizens were even stigmatized by eugenics studies in the early 20th century which falsely labeled the as inferior.

Jersey Not-so-Devils

The New Jersey Pine Barrens are home to some organisms that may seem scary, but in reality, are harmless to humans and serve as an important part of our ecosystem. One is the Pitcher Plant, which grows frequently. It creates a scent which lures unsuspecting insects to its mouth. They slip on the hair-like teeth lining the bell, and fall into a vat below. This vat is filled with a digestive acid enzyme that slowly dissolves the insect. Great for combating the proliferation of West Nile Disease!



The Northern Pine Snake is potentially the largest constrictor in the United States, and also endangered



in our home state. Unfortunately for the Pine Snake, they make impressive and docile pets, and so are illegally collected from the wild by enthusiasts, damaging the overall population. Their native territory is also split by many roads and highways, leading to many being hit by cars. During your next drive through the Pine Barrens, drive slow and keep your eyes peeled to lower the risk of running over one of these beautiful creatures!

image source (inland): wonderrivway blog
image source (snake): Smithsonian