



The Society Scroll

Newsletter of
The Ocean County Historical Society
26 Hadley Avenue
Toms River, NJ 08753
Phone: 732 341-1880 FAX: 732 341-4372

“Telling The Stories Of Ocean County”

On-Line Extra - April 2009

Webb, John I.

(See “Cranberry People and Places” for additional information.)

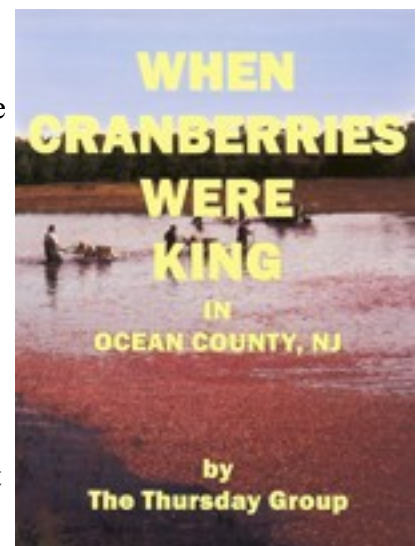
Excerpted from: When Cranberries Were King In Ocean County, NJ by The Thursday Group

The following is adapted from *Hearth and Home, A Fortune From Cranberries, New Jersey Courier*, October 27, 1869.

In about 1849, John Webb of Cassville was a young one-legged poor man who lived with his wife in a lonesome brown house, standing on the verge of a dismal little morass. A fever sore had destroyed his right leg when he was a boy and he wore a wooden leg, therefore the “Peg Leg”.

In 1869 he was opulent, a magnet in the pines who loaned money right and left. But he still lived on the edge of the swamp, for that dismal little morass had been converted from a frog pond to a mint, and every year he took from \$5,000 to \$10,000 worth of produce from a sour, cold, mossy, grassy surface, ten acres in extent.

Not long after John came to Cassville, he began to thrive. He and his wife picked all the wild cranberries they could find nestled in the moss or hidden beneath the tufts of coarse grass and cat-tails. Some years they gathered as many as thirty bushels, and John would bag them, pile them into a rough little wagon and drive his load through dull sandy paths westward thirty miles to Trenton. The merchants gave him a dollar a bushel. Soon he made a practical observation, that, acted upon, built up his fortune and added great wealth to all the region in which he lived. He noticed that where the sand was washed by winter freshets, or summer showers from the sterile margin of the swamp, and settled over the cranberry vines, they bore better. So he bought a wheelbarrow and commenced work. His wife helped him sometimes at the spade, and sometimes at the handles. The more he wheeled sand over the bog, the more he believed in sand as the proper top dressing for the extraordinary vine. In other respects he aided nature, fighting the grass with a hoe or plough, grubbing up the bilberry bushes and the dwarf cedars, and making ditches. His wife gathered an apron full of cranberry plants where they grew the thickest, and followed him to the spots where the vines were thin. He would punch a hole with the end of his wooden leg in the soft black soil; she set a vine in the drill just made and with a press of her foot embedded it. By thrift of this sort their crops increased apace, soon yielding them one hundred bushels, then two hundred, four hundred, eight hundred, and one thousand. Now in 1869 he said the yield would be not less than two thousand bushels and those at a guess said twenty-five hundred.



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Another marvel about this anomalous berry, the price grew as the supplies enlarged. Mr. Webb for years was glad to get a dollar a bushel, he was merry when they brought two dollars, and soon the prices ran up to four dollars a bushel, as now in 1869.

John Webb had a few feeble imitators, but the vines did not grow for them as they did for him. Some joked and said none but a wooden-leg man could raise cranberries. Others imagined there was some magic in the iron ferrule at the end of that stump with which he punched the holes.

**This obituary of John I. Webb appeared in the *New Jersey Courier*,
March 21, 1895, and is as follows:**

To whom Ocean County, and not Ocean alone but all the South Jersey seaboard, Cape Cod, Wisconsin marsh lands owe a debt of gratitude as the originator of cranberry cultivation, died at home in Jackson Township, Monday, 18th inst., aged about 85 years. Along about 1845, so the story is told, Webb had occasion to drain a piece of swampland for meadow purposes. While at work ditching, he noticed growth of cranberry vines around the edges of the marsh, and that those raked up with the turf and thrown carelessly on one side were still growing.

Webb was known as “Wooden-legged John” – from the fact that one leg was of the timber variety – and he began to work out the idea that presented itself to him, by poking holes in the swamp mud with his wooden leg and setting out the wild cranberry vines. His neighbors laughed at him at first, but when he sold cranberries at \$50 a barrel in a few years time, all the rest began making bogs. The idea of cranberry culture was taken up at Cape Cod and around the Great Lakes, and today there are millions of dollars invested in it, while Ocean County alone gets yearly returns that foot up in the hundreds of thousands.

Mr. Webb, it is said, lost the money he acquired in the early days of cranberry culture in land speculation during war times, and died a poor man.

