

A BIT OF HISTORY ON ATLANTIC WHITE CEDAR IN SOUTH JERSEY

By Dan Voorhees

Atlantic White Cedar, otherwise known as Jersey Cedar, has played an important part in the development of South Jersey culture for several hundred years. When settlers came to the Mullica River area, they found acres of giant White Cedar stands, with some trees as thick as three to four feet at their base, many hundreds of years old. All that remain of these giants are the massive stumps found along the banks of the Mullica, at low tide. This provides evidence of early logging operations, when cedar was loaded onto ships for sale throughout other parts of the country.

White cedar has been used for many purposes including shingles for houses and boats for gunning. The sneakbox is traditionally constructed from cedar because it is light in weight and resistant to rotting. The use of cedar in boat building is mentioned in Nathaniel Bishops 1879 book, *Four Months in a Sneakbox*. "No wood used in boat building can compare with the white cedar in resisting the changes from a wet to a dry state and vice versa..." he writes.

Decoys are traditionally built of cedar because of the wood's light weight and strength. Decoy bodies are usually hollow because it lightens the weight and also prevents the wood from checking. Their light weight, also enables them to be racked on the decks of sneakboxes.

All of these special qualities of white cedar have lead to its scarcity in South Jersey. Old growth cedar is extremely rare, and a three hundred-year-old tree has not been discovered for many years. Cedar grows at an extremely slow rate. The demise of swamp areas in northern Ocean County has nearly eliminated all of the once large stands of white cedar. Only a few small areas remain.

Today, efforts are in place to preserve the harvest of the remaining South Jersey White Cedar stands. People who log for a living today play a large part in these efforts to reforest and to properly harvest the remaining stands so that future generations may enjoy and promote the use of Atlantic White Cedar in South Jersey culture.