

Cedar Mining in New Jersey's Sunken Forests

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MINING AND LUMBERING, two industries that seem to bear little relation to one another, have been combined uniquely in the swamplands of southern New Jersey in a district that looks as if it would yield nothing but mud and mosquitoes.

A century or more ago a sunken forest of white cedar was discovered in the Great Cedar Swamp which stretches for seven miles across the neck of Cape May peninsula, following the shores of Dennis Creek and Cedar Creek that drain the swamp's overflow.

Early settlers of the region dug into the thick muck of the swamp and brought up great trees that had lain for centuries covered more and more by the accumulation of swamp ooze. From these they cut logs and shingles for their homes.

Cedar mining was an important industry in South Jersey until about 50 years ago. Then, as cheaper cedar lumber was brought in from the northwest, the industry fell into a decline. Recently a small company of men engaged in removing peat for fertilizer from the swamplands near Haleyville in Cumberland County have discovered another sunken forest. Logs buried from 4 to 20 feet deep are now being mined and sent to the sawmill at Dennisville to be sawed into planks. Cedar is valuable for use as shingles, siding for boats, and for other purposes where it will be called on to resist water.

It is this quality of resistance to dampness that has preserved the buried cedar logs that have lain for countless years in the soggy swamp. Lumber cut from them is as usable as that made from living cedar and gives off the same fragrance as if it had been cut yesterday in the green forests.

It is not uncommon to find buried cedar logs in swampy places throughout the United States; but there are few places where man has troubled to dig for the hidden treasure.

No one can estimate how long these logs have lain in their mucky bed. The count of the annual ring growths on one of the logs recently mined showed that the tree was 500 years old when it fell. There is a tradition of a log found a century ago with more than 1,000 rings.

The submergence of these cedar trees is explained in several ways — none of which has been proved conclusively. One school of thought has it that the land on which the trees stood sank gradually. As water began to stand around the trees the earth softened, the trees lost their hold, and overturned. The land continued to sink and eventually the growth was entirely buried beneath the silt. Another theory maintains that a great hurricane once leveled the entire forest of about 12 square miles. The felled giants then slowly sank beneath the ooze. Among the many legends of South Jersey is one that attributes the submergence of the cedar forest to the Flood that prompted the building of Noah's Ark.

The surface of the swamp is largely covered with brush and a few stunted trees surrounded by pools of water. There are higher spots, however, where the ground is dry and where farming has been made possible by the use of dykes that keep out floods.

That South Jersey is sinking has been well known for a century or more. Commodore Stephen Decatur when a guest at Cape May Point measured the loss each year from 1804 to 1820 and found that the coast had receded about 160 feet in that time. The State geologist 70 years ago reported the sea still advancing. The silt that has buried the trees has also filled some of the streams. There are records and pictures of large ship building along Dennis Creek where only motor boats now run. There are great areas of salt marsh on the coast of Delaware Bay once said to have been farmland.

When the first white settlers came to southern New Jersey they found themselves much hampered in their explorations of the interior by the Great Swamp which prevented their building roads across the land, and they had to use boats to travel. It is not certain how or when they discovered the sunken forest, but it probably was very early in the State's history. There is a cabin of hand-hewn cedar timber on the grounds of the Hancock House, at Hancock's Bridge near Salem, that is said to have been built by the Swedes more than 200 years ago with cedar mined from the swamps of New Jersey. In 1740, when Independence Hall needed a roof, hand-split shingles were used from the Great Cedar Swamp's logs.

For many years there has been at Dennisville a sawmill that cuts the logs into planks and shingles. Captain Ogden Gandy, now 90 years old, runs the sawmill. He remembers the days when ships of 200 to 1,000 tons were built along Dennis Creek. At that time most of the men in this neighborhood were seafarers. Between voyages, young Gandy used to mine the cedar logs and help to cut them into boards and shingles.

The cedar wood is used in boatbuilding, although it is not tough enough for the hulls of large ships. It is used for the center boards of boats and for parts of motor boats, and other small craft.

The men who go out into the swamps to mine the submerged cedar are called "swampers." Armed with "progues," which are iron rods about 12 feet long pointed at one end with a ring or loop at the other, the swampers poke around in the deep muck until they strike a sound log. With his progue the swamper finds out just how the log lies, then he and his helpers shovel off the muck until the log is in view.

With log saws, very much like those used to cut ice from lakes and rivers, the logs are cut into lengths of six feet each. While the men are cutting the logs into the required lengths the water flows into the hole made by taking off the muck. In many instances the water will be deep enough to allow the sawed-off section to float to the surface. This, of course, is a help to the swamper, for then all he has to do is attach a rope to the section, place a couple of skids under it and haul it to solid footing.

When the logs do not float to the surface the swampers are obliged to fasten a rope or chain around the section, pull it to the surface, and then lift it with skids and man power.

They have to lie in the sun for some time to dry out. Then the outside slabs are cut off, sometimes thin, sometimes thick, according to the quality of the log. The balance of the log is cut into strips for the manufacture of shingles. Some of the board lengths are kept for use in boatbuilding.

Because of the inaccessibility of the swamplands and the difficulty and expense of extracting the logs from their ancient burial place, it is not likely that cedar mining will ever be a major industry. But those who have made use of this prehistoric cedar value it for its lasting quality