

## THE EDGE OF THE WILDERNESS

by Maggie Heineman

*A mild March day found three of the would-be campers wandering at the edge of this mysterious country. The old town of Medford was not far distant; the deep, dark waters of the south branch of the Rancocas Creek flowed beside them. In the distance the purple pines formed a frieze along the skyline, hemming in the desolate regions beyond. We had come to the eastern edge of the farming country. A mile further and we would enter the Bear Swamp region, and then one might wander across some forty miles of almost uninhabited wilderness before reaching the coast. To us it seemed an enchanted land lying out there in the soft spring sunshine, and it called us with alluring voice. We determined to settle, if possible, within sight of its borders.*

That quote is from an article, "Catoxin Cabin on the Rancocas," published in the 1908 issue of the journal of the Delaware Valley Ornithological Club. Pioneering naturalist Witmer Stone and his colleagues decided to "settle" within sight of the wilderness. More than a hundred years later their work was celebrated by a weekend conference at Medford Leas.

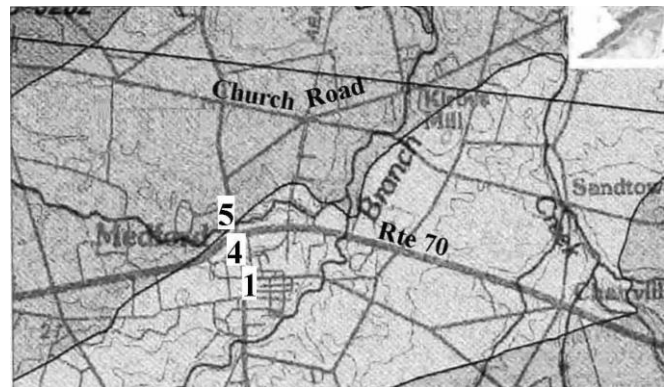


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Prior to the tree walk at Camp Dark Waters, during Witmer Stone Weekend, John Braxton holds a section of the "Bedrock Geologic Map of Central and Southern New Jersey" as Wayne Ferren points out the boundary between the outer and inner coastal plains.

Stone and his colleagues built Catoxin Cabin in the late 1890s. It still stands at Camp Dark Waters, across the Rancocas Creek from Medford Leas. For more than a decade Catoxin Cabin was used by Philadelphia naturalists as the base for their explorations, by foot and canoe, of the Pine Barrens and beyond.

It's all about the bedrock. The boundary between farms and wilderness observed in the 1890s is a result of the boundary between fertile inner coastal plain and sandy outer coastal plain. The Bedrock Geologic Map of Central and Southern New Jersey shows that Camp Dark Waters and Medford Leas lie at that boundary.



Closeup of geologic map with added road names. Even in greyscale the map shows Medford Leas and Camp Dark Waters situated at the boundary between the sandy outer coastal plain (light gray) and the fertile inner coastal plain (darker gray).

All 14 of the conference speakers and field trip leaders at the Witmer Stone Weekend have outstanding professional credentials. One has a special connection to Medford Leas. Botanist Ted Gordon, who spoke Saturday on the history of Catoxin Cabin and led a Sunday field trip here at Medford Leas, was hired by former CEO **Lois Forrest** to do the botanical surveys for both the Medford and Lumberton campuses. Gordon's reports are in the Nature Library. A longtime resident of the Pine Barrens, he is known statewide for his knowledge of the trails, historic sites, industries, people, folkways, and the rare and endangered plants and animals in the region. He was president of the Philadelphia Botanical Society for 12 years and is currently the chairman of the Governor's Natural Areas Council.