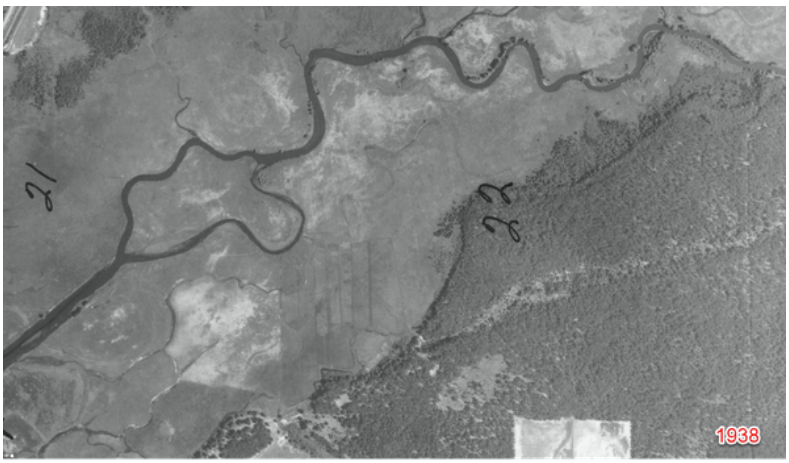
Hekkema-Bishop Wetland Preserve
HISTORY AND BACKGROUND

The celery fields of the Whitehall–Montague area are developed on fertile, water-rich lowlands bordering the White River and White Lake. These organic muck soils retained moisture and nutrients, making them well suited to celery, a crop that required reliable water and intensive management. As the lumber era receded in the late nineteenth century, agriculture provided a new use for cleared land and drained wetlands. Dutch immigrants contributed specialized growing practices and family labor that helped establish celery as an important regional crop [1].



By the early twentieth century, celery farming had become a defining feature of the Whitehall–Montague landscape. Seed was started in greenhouses; seedlings were transplanted, often more than once; and mature stalks were cut, trimmed, washed, and packed by hand. Maintaining productive muck required drainage ditches, dikes, and pumps. Rail, truck, and Lake Michigan shipping connected western Michigan growers with markets in Chicago, Milwaukee, and beyond [1,4].

Multigenerational farm families shaped this agricultural landscape. Edward Weesies, a Dutch immigrant who arrived in Muskegon in 1884, worked in sawmills and celery fields before his family purchased a Montague farm in 1908. By the 1940s, Weesies Brothers Farms had expanded to more than 400 acres along the White River [2].
William Bishop developed approximately 120 acres south of the river near Whitehall. During the 1944–1945 labor shortage, German prisoners of war worked on Bishop's celery farm, an episode documented in letters preserved by the Lakeshore Museum Center [3].





After World War II, mechanical planters and harvesters reduced some of the intensive hand labor. Bishop was among the early Michigan growers to adopt an electric automated celery harvester in the 1960s [3]. Greenhouses originally used for celery seedlings also supported diversification into bedding plants and flowers. Even with mechanization, regional growers faced rising costs, crop disease, labor constraints, and competition from large-scale production in warmer states.

Commercial celery production ultimately disappeared from the Whitehall–Montague landscape. Weesies Brothers Farms recorded its final celery harvest in 1998 and shifted toward ornamental plants, landscaping, and other crops [2]. The former fields nevertheless remain visible in today's berms, ditches, and modified lowlands. This legacy links local agricultural history directly to current restoration questions concerning hydrology, soil quality, and ecological function.





In 2015, Muskegon Conservation District purchased the western parcel from the Hekkema family in collaboration with Ducks Unlimited and the North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA) Funds. A Conservation Easement was placed over the acreage to protect it. The pumps on the western side were turned off in 2015. In 2019/2020, MCD worked with the Bishop family to purchase the eastern parcel, and the purchase was finalized in late 2021-early 2022. The Hekkema easement was dissolved and recreated to include the entire 154 acres, now called the Bishop Wetland Preserve.

Year	Event
1859	Whitehall established as a lumber community
1867	Village incorporated
1890-1900	Wetlands drained for agriculture
1890-1930	Celery production expands throughout western Michigan
1930-1955	Peak commercial celery production
1960-1990	Agricultural decline; wetlands begin recovering
2012- Present	MCD and DU aquire property for restoration

Strychar, K. B. (2026). Former Celery Fields of Whitehall, Michigan: Historical Context, Site Background, Field Investigation, and Screening-Level Results. Technical report prepared for Muskegon Conservation District, July 2026.

[1] Douma, M. J. (2020, June 12). Muck farms and Dutch immigrants. Origins Online, Calvin University. https://origins.calvin.edu/2020/06/12/muck-farms-and-dutch-immigrants/

[2] CatchMark Community. (2025, September 9). Growing through the generations: Weesies Brothers Farms. https://catchmarkcommunity.com/growing-through-the-generations-weesies-brothers-farms/

[3] Lakeshore Museum Center. (n.d.). German POW letter collection (Object ID 2007.027.094). https://lakeshoremuseum.org/wp content/uploads/2019/09/German-POW-Letter-Collection1.pdf

[4] The Henry Ford. (n.d.). Harvesting celery blanched by boards in Michigan's famous celery fields [Photograph]. Keystone View Company Collection. https://www.thehenryford.org/collections-and-research/digital-collections/