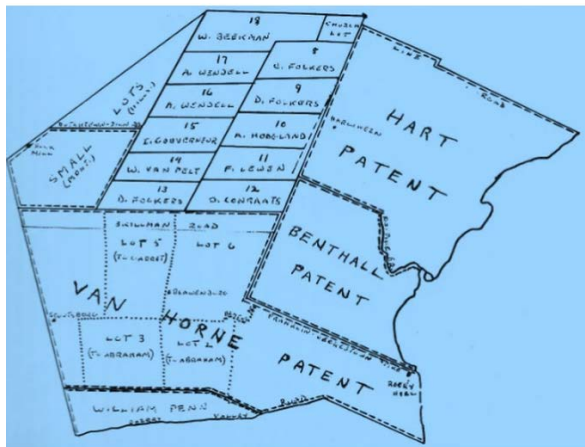David Cochran, 5 min

3. The Settlers of Blawenburg

Original Land Patents in Montgomery Township. Hand-drawn map by Ursula Brecknell.

You would think that the question of who settled Blawenburg would be a no brainer. Of course, you might say, it was the Blaw family. After all, the village was named after them. While the Blaws were among the first Dutch immigrants to settle near the village, you could argue that others had a greater impact on creating the village.

In 1700, all the land in Montgomery Township belonged to just three owners: Peter Sonman, Thomas Hart, and Walter Benthall. The only exception was a small parcel of land in the southernmost region along Cherry Valley Road that was owned by William Penn. The tracts were called patents, which means that they were given as exclusive land grants by a sovereign power. In this case, that sovereign power was the British, who had taken over many of the lands originally claimed by the Dutch. Lord John Berkeley and Sir George Carteret received much of the vast land beyond the Hudson River, the region we now call New Jersey, from James, the Duke of York. They, in turn, granted land patents to various people. The land was then allowed to be sold. Even then friends "looked after" other political friends.

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New York used to be called New Amsterdam, but when the British took over in 1664, they decided to name the settlement New York in honor of the Duke of York. They didn't change the name of the primary residents of the colony, so we still have a large island in New York City named after the Manhattan tribe.

One of the first big land owners in the Blawenburg area was John Van Horne who purchased 6,979 acres from Peter Sonman. His holdings ran from Rocky Hill west to Province Line Road and from just north of Skillman Road to near Cherry Valley Road on the south side. He then split his holdings between his sons, Abraham and Garret Van Horne. See the land parcels within the Van Horne Patent on the map above. Abraham, in turn, sold 400 acres to John Blaw in 1739. Blaw also purchased another 95 acres from New Brunswick investor, Nicholas Lake, who was related to the Covenhoven family. This family ended up owning most of the village of Blawenburg and were instrumental in its settlement. In 1741/42, John Blaw divided his land between his sons, Michael and Frederick. Michael was given the land in the eastern section and Frederick was given the land to the west. What we know as Great Road was the dividing line between their properties.

It has been said that in the old days, it took a crossroads and a mill to make a village. This was certainly true of Blawenburg. Michael Blaw built a mill on his land along the banks of Bedens Brook on the eastern side of the current bridge on Great Road to serve the local farmers. The pathway to the mill and the crude road along what is now called Blawenburg ridge (Route 518) formed a crossroad that led to the emergence of a village.

It wasn't long before local folks wanted a better road to the mill, so an improvement project was approved to turn the rough pathway to the mill into a

road on September 11, 1743. The old records show it as a road from the road that went to Hopwell (now Route 518) to Blaw's mill. The road measured four-rods, which means that it was 5 1/2 yards (5.03 meters) or 161/2 feet wide. The standard width of a single lane today is 12 feet, so the Great Road allowed a little extra room for wagons to pass each other.

Soon after the Great Road connected at the crossroad, the people of Princeton wanted to get to the mill as well. The road extension from Blaw's mill to the road to Trenton (Route 206) was approved on January 28, 1744. It became known as Great Road. There are no traces of where Blaw's mill stood. Some speculate that Blawenburg was first called Blaw's Mill, but there is no evidence of this.

Bordered by Two Farms
There were not any homes in the village for many years because almost everyone worked on farms, known then as plantations. And, yes, like the southern plantations, they had slaves. Slavery in this area is the topic of a future blog. Early on, there were two farms that framed the eastern and western borders of Blawenburg along the pathway that became Route 518. John Covenhoven purchased 222 acres from Abraham Van Horne in 1753 and built a house near what is now Rt. 518 and Mountain View Road. It burned down around 1930 and was replaced by three smaller houses within the past 40 years. The Covenhoven homestead marks the eastern border of Blawenburg. The carriage house and one of three barns still exist today on Mountain View Road as part of the Greenflash Farm (former Golden Back Farm, former Gallup Upper Strode Farm). The Covenhoven farm was eventually sold outside the family, and during Prohibition, it had a dubious history that will be recounted in another Tale of Blawenburg.

The Nevius/Van Zandt home as it looks today

Along the western Blawenburg border is the Nevius/Van Zandt farmstead. This property still exists today and is the oldest house in the village. The farm was built by Peter Nevius in 1740 and willed to Bernardus Van Zandt in 1811. It remained in the Van Zandt family until the 1990s. Most of the farm was sold to become part of Cherry Valley Country Club, the Elks Club (former dairy barn), and a residential neighborhood west of the Elks.

The Van Zandts and the Covenhovens agreed to make a road between their houses, which was the beginning of the improvement of the old wagon path that eventually became known as the Georgetown – Franklin Turnpike and later, Route 518.

The roots of the village were sewn gradually over a century before the village emerged. As we will see in a future blog, it took a major road improvement along the Delaware River and the entrepreneurial spirit of the Covenhoven family to grow the village.

Blawenburg Fact: The Nevius/Van Zandt and Covenhoven farmsteads remained the only homes in what became the Village of Blawenburg for 65 years.
Looking Ahead: Getting to and From Blawenburg

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