

David Cochran, 5 min

10. The Original Houses of Blawenburg: The Nevius/Van Zandt Homestead, Part 3

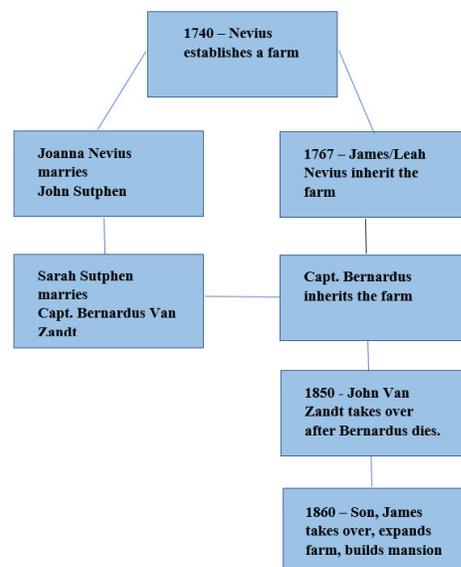
Model Farm with Modern Farmers

This is the third blog in the Original Houses of Blawenburg Series. In Part 1 (blog #6) we learned how Peter and Altje Nevius came to Blawenburg and built the first farmstead. In Part 2 (blog # 7) we learned how the farm transferred to the Van Zandts. In this blog we will explore how the Van Zandt farm known as Broad View Farm became a model farm for the agricultural community.

The following paragraph from the *National Register of Historic Places nomination* in 1988 summarizes the importance of the Van Zandts to the history of Blawenburg.

“This house (Nevius/Van Zandt farmstead) is the oldest residence in the District. Its owners, the Van Zandt Family, generation by generation, played a significant role in the life of the village ranging from contributions to the church, providing a community cemetery, serving as storekeeper and postmaster, running a model farm and introducing advanced technology, and finally founding the area's agricultural supply and equipment center, which contributed to the modernization of 20th-century farming.”

If you are like me, you have trouble remembering who came first, when it comes to genealogy and historical events. This is especially difficult when many long-standing families name successive generations with the first names of the previous generation. So, a recap is in order. (See blog #7 for details on this recap.)



The Story Continues



Catharine Nevius Van Zandt (1821-1889) and James Van Zandt (1821-1900)

James Van Zandt inherited the farm and expanded it to encompass much of the land along Route 601 between Rock Brook and Camp Meeting Avenue in 1860. His original land now houses Montgomery High School and his mansion is now the SAVE animal shelter. James has been credited with advancing the use of modern farming techniques such as new methods of drainage to get the greatest yield from the farm. James set the pace for many innovations to come with later generations of Van Zandts.

James's son, Edgar Laing Van Zandt, who was also known as Pappy by the family, took over the farm from his father and continued to operate it successfully into the 20th century. As was the case in the early days, Edgar had eight children. Three passed away at an early age and five boys remained – Irving, Albert, Malcom, John Percy, and William Buchanan (Buck). Irving, Malcolm, and Buck all pursued non-farming careers, so that left Albert and Percy to run the farm. Albert was older than Percy, and before he got involved with the farm, he served an eight-year tour of duty from 1909 - 1917 helping to construct the Panama Canal.



*The Van Zandt boys with Pappy
L-R Albert, Buck, Irving, Pappy, Malcolm,
Percy*

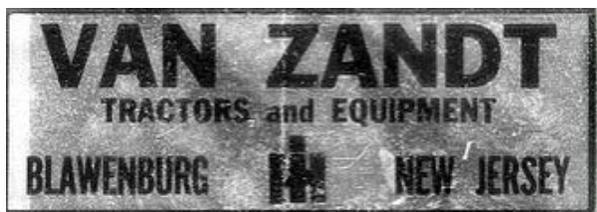
A Brief History in their Own Words

The following history was written by the Van Zandt Company in 1950.

How It All Started

“The history of the Van Zandt organization is typical of many farm machinery dealerships. In 1915, a prosperous and well-kept farm was being operated just west of the village of Blawenburg. The farm, owned by Edgar L Van Zandt was known far and wide as a very progressive farm. Newspaper stories told of a farm tractor, milking machines and pen stabling, all of which were in operation on the Van Zandt farm at that time.

While the father was very progressive and up to date, it was his son, J. Percy Van Zandt, who was said to be revolutionizing the farm. When the son saw how interested other farmers were in his farm and the new gadgets, he began to sell these machines. Thus, was begun this organization which now employs twenty-three persons full time, runs a 100 head milking herd, and is considered one of the largest dealerships in New Jersey. J. Percy and Albert Van Zandt have been in partnership since 1919 and in January of this year (1950), their business incorporated under the name J Percy Van Zandt Co.”



Albert and J. Percy Run the Farm and Business

When Albert returned to Blawenburg, Percy was in his early 20s and they worked together on the farm. Their innovations were chronicled in an article that appeared in *The Country Gentleman* magazine in the early 1920s.



Country Gentleman magazine

According to the *National Register of Historic Places nomination*, "In 1921, the farm was featured in the magazine, *Country Gentleman* (Feb. 5 issue), described as "Real Farm Home on a Thoroughly Modern New Jersey Farm." ... In his youth, Percy conducted an egg and dairy business. He devised the first covered henyard and used electricity to increase egg production. He shipped milk from the nearby train station at Skillman to New York and Philadelphia markets. He also had a chicken market."

Being aware of the many changes occurring with the advent of cars, trucks, and other vehicles, Percy saw the potential of providing farm equipment to the many farmers in the area. They started the equipment business with Percy at the helm. Albert managed the farm, and both were successful.

The farm became well known for its modern techniques such as terracing, while the equipment business became popular with farmers from Hunterdon, Mercer, Somerset, and other counties in Central Jersey. With the help of farm managers and farm hands as well as business employees and Percy's sons, John and Edgar, they ran the successful businesses until 1969. Edgar opened a second farm equipment business in Flemington in 1964, and it continued until 1979.



Elks Lodge

The original barn still stands, but was purchased and renovated by the Princeton Elks in September, 1972 for their lodge.



Cow barn along Route 518

A second barn was torn down in 1980, but its silo still stands near Route 518 west of Van Zandt Drive.

After the business closed, John P. Van Zandt Jr. took his knowledge and experience in agriculture in a different direction. Instead of working the local farm, he worked for the NJ Department of Agriculture for many years sharing his talent with the broader community.



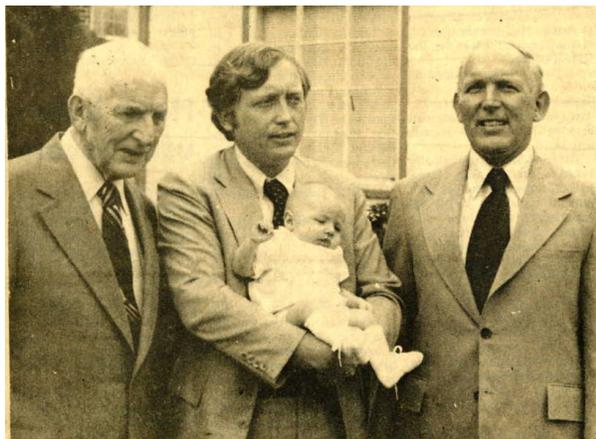
J. Percy Van Zandt is pictured in a newspaper photo with his second wife, Hannah, at the farm in the mid-1980s. Note the iconic windmill in the background.

After Percy died in 1987 at the age of 93, the family sold the remaining farmland. The land south of Route 518 along Great Road became part of Cherry Valley Country Club. The land west of the Elks Lodge became a development as well with the entry drive retaining the Van Zandt name.

Don Quixote Project

We are still looking for the iconic windmill that once graced the Broad View Farm. See blog #9. It was removed from the Rutgers campus when the NJ Agriculture Museum closed. A Rutgers Dean reported that it was "transitioned to a non-profit organization". We checked with the organization that we thought received it, but they don't know anything about it. So, like Don Quixote, we are chasing windmills. If you have any idea where it might, [send us an email!](#)

Blawenburg Fact:



Four J.P. Van Zandt's

Four generations of the Van Zandt family gathered in Blawenburg for a photo, and they all have the same name. From left are John Percy Van Zandt (Percy), John Percy Van Zandt III (Jack) who is holding John Percy Van Zandt IV (John), and John Percy Van Zandt Jr. (John). The younger two live in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

J. Percy Van Zandt, who operated the farm with his brother Albert, was the first of four J. Percys. The newspaper picture below (source unknown) from the mid-1980s shows four generations of J. Percy Van Zandts.

Looking Ahead:

Blog 11 in two weeks – *The Day Blawenburg Had 8,000 Visitors*

Look for a picture related to Blawenburg in the weeks between blogs.

Sources

Ursula Brecknell, *National Register of Historic Places nomination*, 1988

Van Zandt Company publication, 1950

Two newspaper photos, family photos, and Van Zandt sign –shared by Richard Van Zandt from the Van Zandt family photos

Interview John P. Van Zandt Jr.

Photos shared by Bill Van Zandt from the family collection

Additional email notes from David Van Zandt and Mary Wachterhauser