

David Cochran, 6 mins

Hillpot's Hilltop Store

Our last blog traced the history of the “corner store,” which has hosted many businesses in Blawenburg since the 1830s. Beginning in the 1920s, the corner store had some competition from a store built across the street on the northeast side of Rt. 518 at the intersection with Rt. 601. Joe Hillpot hired Allan Weart, a Hopewell contractor, to build the store, and Hillpot was the first owner and proprietor of the Hilltop Store. He chose the name because the new store was at the top of Blawenburg Hill on the ridge where Georgetown – Franklin Turnpike and the Blawenburg Village are located. But some must have wondered if the store’s name was really a play on words from Hillpot’s name.

Thanks to a chronology shared by Dot May in *Three Boys from Blawenburg* and information from Larry May, we know who the owners of the store were, but not their years of ownership. Here is what we know:

Owner Approximate Time of Ownership

Joe Hillpot 1920s and 30s

Tom and Agnes McGuirk 1930s

Everett and Dot May Late 1930s

Ed Williams 1940s and 50s

John and Ruth Suveg 1950s

The Holbigs 1950s

Jimmy Ajamian owner/proprietor 1950s and 60s

Bill Wellemeyer, proprietor 1950s and 60s

mmThe May Store in the 1930s. Note the White Flash gas pumps. The right portion of the store was torn down when the flat-roof addition was added.



In the 1950s, Jimmy Ajamian bought the building and ran Blawenburg’s first and only officially licensed liquor store in a loft in the back of the store. There had been plenty illegal liquor sales by

local bootleggers in Prohibition (1920-33). Ajamian demolished part of the original store and built a flat-roofed addition to the south side of the building. He moved the liquor store into the new building, part of which was leased by Bill Wellemeyer for a convenience store. Ajamian named the liquor store Town Wine and Liquor and then in the mid-1960s moved it to the new shopping center that opened on Rt. 206

Memories of the Store Abound

Larry May remembers when Ajamian built the addition and leased to Bill Wellemeyer, who operated it for several years before he set off on a new adventure across the street. “The new store was a small grocery store with a soda fountain counter where they served soda and burgers. They also had a pinball machine, which was probably the first in the area (3 games for quarter). It was part of my misspent youth.”

In the early 1960s, Wellemeyer bought the property across the street from the store on the northwest corner of Rt. 518/601. He had ice cream on his mind. There was a house on the lot, which he moved to a new location near the railroad tracks on Hollow Road. He purchased a franchise and built a Dairy Queen on the vacant lot where the house was located. We will explore this topic in our next blog.

Jim Beachell recalls that Mr. Ajamian Sr. “was the man who took care of the graveyard (Blawenburg Cemetery) and didn’t speak English.” This was no easy job since he only had a push mower to cut the grass. At some point the Ajamians bought the store and leased it. Jimmy Ajamian, his son, served in the Navy as a pilot. When he returned from the service, he continued to lease the store to other proprietors, but added and ran a liquor store in the loft in the back of the store. Beachell remembers that there was free delivery from the liquor store. Imagine buying a \$2.00 case of beer and having it delivered for free!



The store as it looks today. Note the low flat roof where the original Hilltop store stood.

Peggy (Terhune) Querec remembers that in the Suveg era the store had a lunch counter with round stools that

you could spin.

Bill Van Zandt says that “it wasn’t as much a grocery store as Musselman’s (the corner store), but it was more a place to get lunch or ice cream.”]]

Norma Haight Arons reported in *Growing Up in Blawenburg* that there was soda-pop at the store, and it was a favorite gathering spot for teenagers. There were tables in the front of the store near a jukebox and dancing was allowed! She reports that her older sister spent hours dancing there, and her job was to check up on her sister. This could be one of Blawenburg’s earliest surveillance operations.



This was real fake news. The reason for the panic wasn't real, but the panic was.

In the late 1930s, Everett and Dot May owned the store, and Larry May recalls his parents telling the story of the CBS Radio broadcast of the famous H. G. Welles *War of the Worlds* program. It was the night before Halloween, Sunday, October 30, 1938, and Orson Welles was realistically reading the script for the program. The Martians were supposed to have landed in “rural” Grover’s Mills

in West Windsor. It was a dramatization, but many people tuned in late because they were listening to the popular Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy Show. They thought it was a real account of an invasion. They panicked when they heard about “walking war machines” and Martians releasing poisonous gas into the air. Larry’s parents said that several travelers stopped by the store the next day to ask directions to Grover’s Mills. It wasn’t clear whether they were courageous warriors or they wanted be gracious hosts for the aliens.

The store has been a continuous work in progress. Sometimes there were gas pumps in front and at other times not. During the oil embargo of 1973-74, there was gas rationing, and cars needing fill-ups at the store waited in a line that stretched east on Rt. 518 from Rt. 601 past the church.

What was initially a convenience store and then a liquor store has been a consignment shop, home décor store, and tile store in recent years. The remaining original part of the store has been a lacrosse shop until recently.

What will the future bring for Hillpot's Hilltop as it nears its first century anniversary? Since it is for sale, you might want to give "the other store" a try. You could add your name to the growing list of entrepreneurs who have provided services to the village over the years. Who knows what tales you could create!

Blawenburg Fact:

The Hilltop store wasn't the only building built in Blawenburg in the 1920s. Jazzy's Barber Shop, B & V Garage (pictured above), and a dance hall were among the businesses that flourished at the corner. The barber shop was in a small building near the garage. The garage has been completely replaced with a modern building with businesses on the first floor and apartments on the second floor. It is unclear where the dance hall was, but I suspect it was above the garage since several people have said that the area above the garage was a large open area. We will share the tale of another store near the corner that served as the fire department, a foreign car repair shop, and pizza parlor in a future blog.



Blawenburg Garage, then and now



Forward Look:

1964 was the year that the World's Fair came to New York, and this drew the Wally Byam Caravan, a travel club for Airstream trailer owners, to the fields just north of Blawenburg once owned by James Van Zandt. It's also the year that Bill Wellemeyer opened the Dairy Queen at the crossroads of Blawenburg. We will explore what was happening in Blawenburg 55 years ago in our next blog. What are your memories of the Dairy Queen? the Wally Byam Caravn? Email your thoughts to blawenburgtales@gmail.com.

Sources:

Baker, Walter. *Growing Up in Blawenburg with Norma Haight Arons, Oral History 04-14*. Belle Mead, NJ, The Van Harlingen Historical Society, Inc., 2004.

Baker, Walter C. *Three Boys from Blawenburg with J. Kenneth Dorey, Robert (Bob) Saums, William (Bill) Terhune, Oral History 04-15*. Belle Mead, New Jersey, Van Harlingen Historical Society of Montgomery, Inc., 2005.

Discussions/eMails – Jim Beachell, Peggy Querec, Bill Van Zandt, Larry May

Images/Photo credits:

Everett May store – from a calendar

Current stores – D. Cochran

Newspaper headline – NY Daily News

Old garage – L. May