

David Cochran, May 13, 6 min read

## 18. Blawenburg's Long Serving Postmaster – John Nevius Van Zandt

When we begin life's journey, we have no idea where it will lead us. When John Nevius Van Zandt was growing up in Blawenburg, there was little that would have predicted the longevity of his service in his chosen career. He was the son of James Van Zandt and Catherine Nevius, who built the mansion just north of Rock Brook on Belle Meade-Blawenburg Road (Route 601). He was the brother of Edgar Van Zandt (aka Pappy), whose sons, Albert and Percy Van Zandt, ran the adjacent Broad View farm, which served as a model agricultural site for regional farmers. (See Blog 10)



### *Postmaster John Van Zandt*

In 1866, John became a general merchant and village postmaster when he bought the store in Blawenburg from Cornelius Stryker, the builder and longtime owner of the store. He held the position of postmaster for 69 years – far longer than any other postmaster in the village and the second longest of any postmaster in US history.

His story is best told by someone who knew him well, his daughter Katherine Van Zandt. She was a teacher and poet. We will share more about her in a future blog.

The following is Katherine's story of John's success as America's longest serving postmaster at the time and how he shook the hand of three presidents of the United States. Katherine wrote her story in 1931, after John's second trip to Washington.

## Postmaster Longest in Continuous Service By Katherine Van Zandt



*In the little village of Blawenburgh, so called by its first settlers of Holland Dutch descent, lives this man, who the United States government is declaring its "postmaster oldest in term of service."*

*All of his life of eighty-seven years has been spent in this quiet village. This may have a sound of monotony to you who have traveled from country to town – from town to city – seeking other and better occupations. But not so to the*

*"oldest postmaster." His has ever been a happy life, for he enjoys life's good things to the full and takes pleasure in passing cheer on to others. His sense of humor helps to stimulate contentment and happiness.*

*Psychologists teach us that through right feelings, or healthy minds, we gain healthy bodies. This theory proves itself in the postmaster's life, for, though slight of build, he is always well; and, so far as he recalls, has never failed in his post office duties because of illness.*

*His early boyhood days were spent on a farm. Born in 1844, from that time until 1865 he lived with his parents on a large farm just out of the village. He attended school in "the little red school house" of Blawenburgh as much as he could be spared in those days. For it must be known that he was the oldest of seven sons and one daughter. Farm life needs many helping hands. John, this oldest son, must drive the team many miles to the mill, and on other errands at a very young age. He recalls that when a boy but eleven, he and his next younger brother, each driving a team of mules, were sent to a lumber yard eighteen miles distant. Many times, this trip was made to bring lumber for the new home which was being built. The brick for the construction was made on the farm, the clay being dug from a home clay-pit and baked in a homemade kiln. (This new home was the James Van Zandt mansion, now the SAVE animal shelter.*

*John Van Zandt and his wife, Margaretta Williamson Updike before they were married.*

*This farm was lately bought, with other adjoining farms, by the State of New Jersey, for the site of an Asylum for Epileptics. The big brick farmhouse is now used for the Administration Building.*

*When the eldest son was sixteen, his father, desirous of education for his children, sent John to Claverack, a college preparatory school on the Hudson. During his second year came a rumor of the passing of Abraham Lincoln through Claverack, as his train took him to Washington to deliver his first Inaugural Address. This was the winter of 1861.*

*Such news naturally aroused the excitement of the school boys. A crowd of them, John included, piratically forced a stop of the train in order to gain a handshake and word-of-mouth from the big, much loved President.*

*His first handshake with a president is now a happy memory. But two others of later years have been realized and proven even greater pleasures to Mr. Van Zandt as he has received them in more ripened age.*

*From Claverack-on-Hudson he passed on to Rutgers College for a short period, and at the age of twenty-one was started on his life-work. As general merchant in the corner store of Blawenburg, his life as a man began.*

*He was appointed Postmaster in the year 1866 by Postmaster General Dennison, who served during President Johnson's administration. Since that time, he has been in continuous service.*

*At the beginning of his career the mail was carried by stagecoach from Trenton to New Brunswick, Blawenburgh having a halfway inn and stables where the horses were changed. (Blawenburg Tavern)*

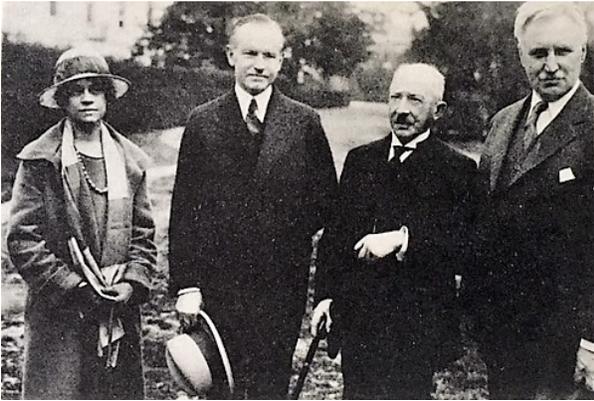
*Progress now shows itself in the sale of airmail stamps.*

*In the front right-hand corner of the village store, back of the post-boxes, Mr. Van Zandt is happy in his work, and all who know him are his friends.*

*It has ever been his custom to attend regularly the Dutch Reformed church of the village; sharing such duties as Deacon, Elder, and Sunday School Superintendent when he was needed. Devout in spirit and faithful in service has been his life trend. One day a new friend came into this life. This man entered the store, talked with the merchant and postmaster and was interested in hearing Mr. Van Zandt in his hearty way address his customers, - "Now, my friend, what can I do to make you happier today?"*

*This was a beginning of interest aroused in Congressman Eaton, United States Representative from New Jersey, concerning the postmaster of so long service to the government.*

*Soon after this interview Mr. Van Zandt was the recipient of a surprising letter. It bore the stamp of the Congress of the United States, coming from Congressman Charles A. Eaton. It contained an invitation to Washington, D. C. – there to celebrate his sixtieth anniversary as postmaster; to meet Postmaster General New and his assistants; to be honored guest as a luncheon in the Capitol; and to be given a private reception with President Coolidge.*



*L-R. Miss Katherine Van Zandt, President Calvin Coolidge, John Van Zandt, Representative Charles Eaton on the White House lawn.*

*More urgent letters followed. These letters were read with strong feelings of pleasure, coupled with some excitement at this honor conferred upon him. The day arrived – April 11, 1926 – a day as sunny as Mr. Van Zandt's disposition. All preparations were fully carried out and made indelible by many photographers, who followed the little group from place to place – Capitol to Government Post Office, on to the White House, returning to the Capitol for an interview with the Speaker of the House, the late Nicholas Longworth.*

*It was a day always to be looked back upon as the best in his whole life. New friends loomed up from many states of the Union. Happy notes of congratulation were received; requests for talks to be given at postmasters' gatherings; invitations to banquets; and from a thoughtful postmaster in California a gift of first grapes picked – delivered across the continent by iced freight.*



*John shakes the hand of US Postmaster General Brown after receiving an award for 65 years of service.*

*After five years more of service the postmaster again spent an anniversary in Washington – this his sixty-fifth year without a break. He was cordially welcomed by Postmaster General Brown and his first and second assistants. A private interview with President Hoover was graciously extended, this being the third presidential handshake which Mr. Van Zandt values so highly – the first a boy's whim, the latter two given in honor of the "Oldest Postmaster of the U. S. A."*

### **A Long and Distinguished Career**

John served as postmaster in Blawenburg from 1866 until 1935. According to the Historian of the United States Postal Service, John is the second longest serving postmaster of all time. He served 69 years, while Roswell Beardsley of North Lansing, NY holds the record at 74 years.

John's son, James, took over the store in the later years but preceded his father in death in 1932. John continued as postmaster until his death on July 16, 1935. His daughter became Acting Postmaster on the day he died.



*James N. Van Zandt's store which specialized in postcards, bicycles, sundries, and phonographs.*

**Blawenburg Fact:**

According to the US Postal Service, John N. Van Zandt was the third postmaster in Blawenburg. When he passed away in 1935, his daughter served as Acting Postmaster until a fulltime postmaster was found in February, 1936.

**Early Postmasters of Blawenburg**

Samuel Skillman Postmaster 1832 - 1833

Cornelius Stryker Postmaster 1833 - 1866

John N. Van Zandt Postmaster 1866 - 1935

Miss Frances Van Zandt Acting Postmaster 1935 - 1936

(John's daughter)

**Looking Ahead:**

In Blog 19, we will look at the "other" store in Blawenburg. Like the corner store owned by John N. Van Zandt, this store had several owners. It was a popular place to go for ice cream and housed Blawenburg's first legal liquor store.

**Sources:**

Bill Van Zandt – Katherine Van Zandt's story; photos of John and Margarete Van Zandt; award picture with Calving Coolidge; and James Van Zandt's store.

Somary, Anne Van Zandt and Van Zandt, William Chamblee. *Van Zandt Family History*. 2019. (A privately published family history)

US Postal Service