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## 17. The Corner Store – A Chronology

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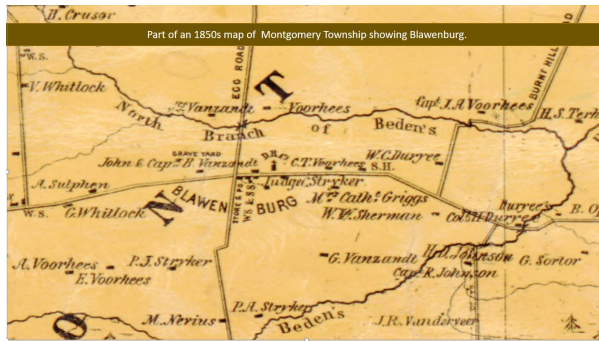
*The old corner store has hosted a variety of businesses since the 1830s.*

People have lines of descent, genealogies, but it's hard to think of a store in the same way. One store is not connected to another except by its location. Nevertheless, stores, like people, have stories about the many owners and events that have occurred throughout their history. The corner store in Blawenburg has had numerous businesses for most of the building's 188+ years. We'll take a look at the various businesses that ran in this old building and share the progression of ownership along with some of the tales about the businesses and their patrons.

### **1830 – 60s**

#### **Judge Cornelius Stryker's Store**

In 1830, when the Blawenburg Tavern was still the only dwelling in the village, William Griggs, the tavern owner, sold a one and one-half acre plot of land on the corner of Georgetown-Franklin Turnpike and Great Road to John A. Voorhees, who lived on the farmstead on Burnt Hill Road. That federal-style mansion was known as Maplewood. Voorhees was more interested in reselling the corner property than developing it. The local judge and politician, Cornelius Stryker, was trying to figure out where he should live in the township, so he bought land in Harlingen across from where the Harlingen Church is today, and he also bought the corner lot from Voorhees. As a member of the township committee and Commissioner of Deeds, he knew how and where to find a good deal.



*Note the reference to Judge Stryker near where his store was located at the intersection.*

Stryker ultimately built the existing structure in Blawenburg sometime before 1836. His house was quite different from the traditional farmhouse that was typical of the area. It was more reminiscent of houses in Princeton than those you might find in a fledgling country village. It has been said that the Judge had “a vision of the future village as a street of good town architecture.” (Historic Register Nomination)

In 1832, Stryker began his 33 years of service as postmaster, and after several years, he determined that there was a need for a store to serve the new neighbors who were building houses in the village and the travelers who might need general store items as they traveled between Philadelphia and New York along the turnpike. Building the store meant renovating his house, so the judge built an addition on the west end of the house and modified the original dwelling to improve its architectural aesthetics.

While it isn't clear when Stryker originated and operated the store and post office, his business appears on an 1850 map of Blawenburg. He eventually sold both the store and the post office to Abraham Skillman, who operated it for only a short time.

## **1866 - 1937**

### **Van Zandt's Store**



*Note the way Van Zandt's Store (first building on the right) looked in this 1907 postcard.*

In 1866, Skillman sold the store and post office to John Nevius Van Zandt, the son of James Van Zandt, builder of the mansion just north of Rock Brook where the SAVE animal shelter is today. John Van Zandt would become the longest owner of the store and certainly the most notable of all its proprietors. We will tell the story of John's celebrity as a postal official in Blog 18, our next blog. John ran the store for many years, eventually turning it over to his son, James N. Van Zandt in his later years. He remained as postmaster until his death in 1934.

## **1937 - 40s**

### **Crossroads Store**

Jake and Jessie Stryker bought the store in the 1930s and ran it until 1949. Gas pumps added a new means of income to the business. It was named Crossroads Store, but most called it Stryker's.

In her interview with Walter Baker for the Van Harlingen Historical Society Oral History series, the late Norma Haight Arons also recalled going to Stryker's at an early age. "I remember you walked in the door and the first thing that you saw on the left was the penny candy section and then you had the ice cream. On the other side were the dry goods... And then, straight back, you would have the milk and cheese, and sometimes there would be fresh produce there ...."



The Strykers had some competition from Albert Wearts' store that opened across the street along Route 13/Belle Mead-Blawenburg Road (now Route 601). Stryker's store was characterized as more of a grocery store and Wearts' Hilltop was known more as an ice cream store. We will tell the tale of the Hilltop store in a future blog. (Note: This Hilltop store is not the same as the Hilltop Family Restaurant that replaced the Dairy Queen on the northwest corner of the Blawenburg intersection.)

*The Strykers share a tale with George Gallup Sr., local resident and founder of the Gallup Poll. (Thanks to the many people who helped figure out who the people in this picture are.)*

## **Late 1900s – Present**

### **Musselman's Store**

In 1949, Reuben (Spud) and Mary Musselman bought the store from the Strykers and continued it as a general store until the late 1967. Musselman's is the store that is most remembered in Blawenburg. It was the last use of the building as a general store, and there are people around who still remember it from their youth.

Eric Perkins remembers working there after school and in the summer as a young teenager. He would ride his bike or walk to Musselman's from his home a half mile south on Great Road. He recalls that it was a meeting place for the local politicians and town officials – the mayor, school board members, and others, who were also local farmers, plumbers, and carpenters. Wilbur Drake, Pud Stryker, Bill Kirk and Johnson Moore were among the notables who frequented the store. They would gather at the store almost every day in the late afternoon for a soda and snack and to kibbitz while “briefing” each other on important local news (aka gossip).

Peggy Querec lived diagonally across from the store in a house that was moved to make way for the building of a Dairy Queen in 1964. She remembers going to Musselman's in the morning, smelling the fresh baked pies and picking up the morning newspaper that was waiting for her on the window ledge with her father's name (Bill Terhune) on it.

The Blawenburg Post Office continued to operate in the small building behind the store with Mary Musselman as postmaster from 1953 until the Musslemans sold the store in 1967. She continued as postmaster the “new” post office that is used today until 1977.

### **Torelli Deli and Dry Cleaning**

After the Musslemans sold the store, the type of businesses that operated in the building changed. This may have been because of the development of a shopping

center on Route 206 with a much larger “supermarket.” Before this time, the “corner store” was the local place to buy groceries. No longer. Dominic Torelli bought the building and opened a delicatessen. He later expanded his operation, adding a dry-cleaning business.

### **Robbins’ Antiques**

Sandra Robbins first rented and later bought the store from Dominic Torelli. She started an antiques business. This operated for about four years from 1970-74 until life circumstances changed and the business closed.



*Three guys from Blawenburg – Cal Lovering Jr. (L), Max (Nathaniel Jr.) Hartshorne (C), and Reed Chapman (R) at the antique store owned by Reed’s mother in the early 1970s.*

### **Creesy and The Montgomery News/Dog Grooming**

The next owner was Charles Creesy, who bought the building in the mid-70s. His wife, Virginia, began the Montgomery News and ran it at this location. This publication was the forerunner of the Montgomery News that is published today. This was not the first newspaper in Montgomery. In the 1960s, the Montgomery Citizen was published with Nat Hartshorne, resident of the Blawenburg Tavern for many years, as editor. There may have been other papers in earlier times. While Creesy owned the building, an unfortunate fire did considerable damage to the structure, which resulted in major reconstruction to the original building. Virginia Creesy sold The Montgomery News to Cliff Moore of Rocky Hill in the 1980s and Moore moved the office to Route 206 in Harlingen. Meanwhile, he rented the building to dog groomer until Jennifer Hartshorne became the next tenant in 1985.





## **Blawenburg Market and Catering Company**

Hartshorne saw an opportunity to take the building closer to its original purpose and opened as The Catering Company with her partner, Caron Wendell. They ran the company together for the next 4-5 years, when Wendell left to start Lucy's Ravioli on Route 206.

Hartshorne recalls that while they were renting the store, there were some unusual renters in the building. She recalls that "they kept a boa constrictor in the apartment and would frequently bring it down for some fresh air. I would be trying to impress a client about a fancy wedding, and they would be sitting in lawn chairs with beers in hand and the boa wrapped around their neck." In 2002, Hartshorne bought the building from Creesy and spent considerable time fixing it up to become the Blawenburg Market and Catering Company. She continued the catering business and added lunches and take out dinners to the business. In 2007, Hartshorne sold the business to her sales person, Carolann Manfredi, but retained ownership of the building. She married Steve Gilbert that year, too.



*The old building has several additions which serve as apartments. On January 21, 2016, a fire broke out in one of the apartments, which destroyed the living quarters and caused water damage to Blawenburg Café.*

## Blawenburg Café and Catering Company



In 2014, Manfretti decided to end her time in the Market, and she sold the business to Rod and Alicia Mitchell of Rocky Hill. Hartshorne-Gibert continued to lease the building to the Mitchells, who continued the catering business and also operated a popular breakfast and lunch restaurant. They ended the business in December 2018 and bought a catering business called Iquisine LLC to Rocky Hill.



*Interior of the Blawenburg Café (now closed)*

## What Will the Future Bring to the Old Building?

Who knows what the future of the old building will be? It has seen many businesses and a large volume of people come through its doors over these many years. The building is currently for sale. It could become another village hang out or perhaps another restaurant. Or maybe, those beer swilling guys with the boa will buy it to just sit back and chill out! Stay tuned. It's hard to know what will happen next in that old store on the corner.

**Blawenburg Fact:**

According to Ursula Brecknell in writing the village nomination for the National Historic Register, many of the original builders of homes in Blawenburg were local residents desiring to move to a village rather than remain on a farm.

### **Looking Ahead:**

In Blog 18 we will continue the story of John Nevius Van Zandt, who owned the store for many years and also operated the Blawenburg Post Office. He achieved a national distinction from the Postal Service that led to a meeting with the President Coolidge.

Note that future blogs will be published monthly and local pictures will be published between blog dates.

### **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.

Brecknell, Ursula C., Blawenburg Nomination Form, National and State Register of Historic Places, 1988.

Perkins, Eric. Personal recollections interview.

Querec, Peggy. Personal recollections.

Hartshorne-Gilbert, Jennifer, Personal recollections

### **Photo Credits:**

Max Hartshorne shared by Reed Chapman – three boys in the antique store

D. Cochran – Blawenburg Market sign

Montgomery Fire Department website archive – fire photo

Source unknown

Strykers with George Gallup

Map of Blawenburg, 1850

Crossroads store

Blawenburg postcard

Website – Blawenburg Café sign and interior