

22 A Church Comes to Blawenburg



In the Beginning

Religion was central to the lives of the Dutch farmers who settled Central New Jersey. They brought the Reformed Dutch Church to America from the Netherlands in the early 1600s. Wherever the Dutch settled you are likely to find Reformed churches today—north/central New Jersey, Hudson Valley/Albany, NY, and Michigan (i.e. Holland, MI). The Reformed churches, including the Dutch Reformed, are those that broke away from the Roman Catholic faith and formed their own denominations in the 1500s. Named for the Reformation, they include the Presbyterian, Lutheran, Methodist, Reformed, and other protestant denominations.

The Dutch immigrants in southern Montgomery Township worked their farms for over 70 years without a village or church close by. The Reformed Dutch Church at Harlingen was the only church in close proximity to what would become the village of Blawenburg, but getting there by horse and buggy on rugged, dirt roads was difficult.

The church at Harlingen was first called the Church over the River. It was so named to differentiate it from the Six Mile Run Reformed Church in Franklin Park. Some residents of Blawenburg attended the Six Mile Run Church, which was nearly 10 miles away. Most southern Montgomery families would attend the Sunday service at Harlingen. They were not likely to participate in church services and activities on the other days of the week, especially in the dark winter months.

By 1802, before there was a village in Blawenburg, James Lake, a resident of the Covenhoven farm, petitioned the Consistory, the governing board of the church at Harlingen, on behalf of the residents to build a church in the southern part of the township. The Consistory took no action on the request.

Turnpike Helps Create a Village

Things changed between 1818 and 1822. The municipal governing bodies of several communities between Georgetown (now Lambertville) and Franklin (Kendall Park) agreed to improve the old, 20-mile road that ran between the communities and open it as a turnpike. The road became known as Georgetown-Franklin Turnpike, and it was a major road for travel between New York and Philadelphia.

William Griggs's wife's family (the Covenhovens) owned much of the land that constitutes the village of Blawenburg. He saw an opportunity to build the first home in the village that was not a farmstead. He and his wife built and ran it as a tavern and stage coach stop. In recent years, the tavern has been the residence of the Hartshorne family.

After the turnpike was finished, Cornelius Stryker recognized the need for a general store and built a house and store at the intersection of the turnpike and road that ran from Princeton to Plainville (Belle Mead). Between 1830 and 1845, several more houses were built along the turnpike east of the crossroad and the village of Blawenburg emerged.

A Church is Built



This primitive-style picture of the Blawenburg Church properties was painted by Becky Boehmer, a former Montgomery resident, in the 1970s.

Seeing this influx of residents to the village got the people thinking about having their own church again. They began having Saturday prayer services and Sunday school in people's homes and started raising money in hopes of building their own church. They raised \$2,791 (\$66,393 today) to demonstrate their serious intent. In 1929, they again petitioned the Reformed Dutch Church at Harlingen to build a church, and "showed them the money." This time they were successful, and they set about planning the new church in Blawenburg.

The first job was to purchase land to build the church. There was no shortage of land in the burgeoning village, and on April 7, 1830, the building committee purchased an acre of land east of the crossroads from John Stout, Esq. for \$50. Instead of receiving cash, Stout applied money toward the leasing of a pew in the new church. At the time, pews were leased to families for about \$95 for the duration of their lives.

We don't know the name of the architect, but the architectural plans for the church resemble several other churches that were built at the same time. The Hillsborough Reformed Church at Millstone closely resembles Blawenburg Church, and Six Mile Run Church in Franklin Park has similar features.

The Consistory appointed Peter Voorhees, Col. Henry Duryea, Ralph Johnson, John A. Voorhees, and John Van Zandt to manage the project. They hired Richard Brown as the head carpenter. He led a team of 24 church members, including a few slaves, to erect the building.



The Roman numeral marking on the beam (XXIII) near the front door of the church suggests that parts of the church were marked in advance to help the carpenters build it rapidly. Note the round wooden dowels that were used to hold the beams together instead of metal bolts.

Amazingly, most of the new church was built in just three days, September 23 to 25, 1830. It was finished by the spring of 1831, opening its doors as the Second Dutch Reformed Church of Harlingen. Of course, the residents wanted their own church, a church with the name Blawenburgh (spelled with an H in the early days). The Blawenburg Consistory worked with the Harlingen Consistory to create separate congregations and Consistories, and the new church became the Reformed Dutch Church at Blawenburg on March 4, 1832. Over the years, the church became known as Blawenburg Reformed Church.

In the 1800s, a time of individual piety and religious devotion swept across America. It was called the Second Great Awakening. The first Great Awakening took place a century before. Because of this religious fervor and perhaps because of the impending Civil War, the membership of the Reformed Dutch Church at Blawenburg greatly increased. In 1860, the Consistory voted to add a 14-foot addition to the front of the church to extend its seating for the growing numbers of worshippers. The same architectural style was maintained in the addition, and it is difficult to see where the addition begins in the sanctuary.

At the same time that the addition was built, a prominent congregation member, Paul Tulane, donated a large bell that is housed in the belfry and is still rung each Sunday to signal that worship will soon begin. Today, the Tulane bell shares the space with a growing wildlife population—bats. (I know what you're thinking. Yes, we have bats in our belfry!)

At the Center of Blawenburg

The church is located near the center of Blawenburg, just east of the crossroad. In its early years, the church governance was also at the center of the village residents' lives. The church took great interest in people's behavior and held moral authority over the community.

When community members stepped out of line, they were brought before the Consistory and called to task for their wayward actions. They might be denied the right to have the sacrament of communion or be asked to make amends for their wrongful behavior. While the Consistory had no legal right to deal with personal matters, the mainly Dutch village seemed to agree that church leaders had the authority to keep the community in line.

A Legacy of Service

Since its inception, Blawenburg Church, as it is commonly called now, has had a legacy of service to the community. It regularly hosts community groups, supports people in need, hosts a preschool, provides food for the hungry, and holds worship, prayer, wedding, funeral and interfaith services. Over the years, 25 pastors have led the congregation through good times and bad, providing support and hope for the church members and the community.

In 1985, both the church and the Blawenburg Village School, a preschool for children aged two to five which is adjacent to the church, were placed on the State and National Registers of Historic Places.

The church has been continuously active since its inception and is recognized as a beacon in the community.



Project SOS

This stately church, so rich in local history, is physically showing its age and is in need of significant repairs and improvements. It recently launched a campaign to preserve its historic steeple and sanctuary. Called Project SOS, Save Our Steeple/Save Our Sanctuary, the campaign seeks to raise \$300,000 to restore the structure to its former glory. More information and a video of a drone's eye view of the steeple can be found at <http://www.blawenburgchurch.org>.

Blawenburg Fact

The Reformed Dutch churches in the Netherlands and America traditionally have weathervanes on their steeples. In the Netherlands, the weathervanes have roosters on top, but in America, a feather is the preferred symbol. We use the Blawenburg Church steeple as the logo for this blog because of its rich history and its role as the iconic centerpiece of Blawenburg.



The Blawenburg Church steeple with its feather weathervane is showing its need for restoration.

Looking Ahead

Blog 23 I usually know well in advance what the next blog will be, and I am planning an interesting spin-off from a recent blog. Since I don't know if I will have the information in time, I'm declaring the next blog a surprise. Stay tuned at the end of September for a short picture post and in mid-October for the surprise blog.

Sources

Blawenburg Reformed Church Significance from the application to the State and National Registers of Historic Places, February 10, 1985.

Cochran, David W., *Blawenburg Reformed Church, 1832-2007, 175 Years of Faith and Hope*. Blawenburg, NJ, Blawenburg Reformed Church, 2007.

Photos/Graphic

Gallery – various sources

Primitive church painting – Becky Boehmer, owned by David Cochran

Church beam – David Cochran

Project SOS logo graphic – Dr. Cathy Grimaldi

Steeple – David Cochran