

31The Burying Grounds of Blawenburg

Death was an accepted part of life among the Dutch settlers of Blawenburg, and early farmers with large families knew all too well about losing family members. It was not uncommon for offspring to die from accidents or diseases before they reached adulthood. The burial of the dead usually took place on family farms in designated areas commonly called burying grounds.

According to the late Walter Baker in his seminal publication, *Family Burying Grounds, Montgomery Township, Somerset County, New Jersey*, there are at least 40 burying grounds in Montgomery Township and Rocky Hill. Most have been identified, but several are only known through deeds or other early paperwork. Baker's work is the result of a study by the Van Harlingen Historical Society which tried to identify and restore as many burying grounds as possible and to gain public respect for these final resting places. Baker's book is available from the society (<http://vanharlingen.org/about-us/publications/>).

Three Burying Grounds

There are three known burying grounds that relate to Blawenburg: Blaw-Nevius Burying Ground, Blawenburg Reformed Church Cemetery, and John Blaw's grave site.



The Blaw-Nevius Burying Ground on Cherry Valley Country Club property.

The Blaw-Nevius Burying Ground

The Blaw-Nevius site, also spelled Blau-Nevius, is located on the Cherry Valley Country Club property and has experienced varying degrees of care since its inception in 1751.

When the Blaws, Neviuses, and Covenhovens settled their farmsteads near what would become the Village of Blawenburg in the mid-1700s, they broke the tradition of family burying grounds by forming the Blaw-Nevius Burying Ground. It is located on John Blaw Drive on Cherry Valley Country Club property



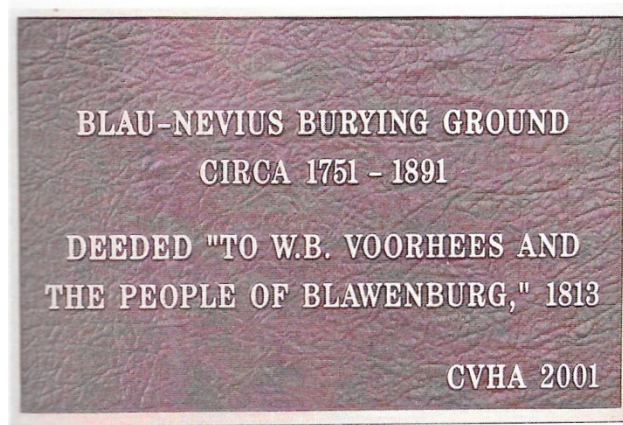
Michael Blaw (1704-1786)



Frederick Blaw (1707-1793)

The grave markers for Michael and Frederick Blaw in the Blaw-Nevius Burying Grounds are illegible, but have been documented by historians in the past.

It is a burying ground for several area families on property once owned by John (Jan) Blaw. John then gave the property where the burying grounds are located to his son, Frederick. Both Frederick and his brother Michael are interred in the Blaw-Nevius Burying Ground. Other Blaws are buried there, as well as Blews and Blues. Many Blaws changed their name to Blew or Blue. Blaw means blue in Dutch. There were also Covenhovens, whose farm still exists as the Greenflash Farm on Mountain View Road. There are also Conovers, the Anglicized version of Covenhoven. There are several Nevius family members in the cemetery, too. The Neviuses were the original settlers on what would later become the Van Zandt farmstead on Georgetown-Franklin Turnpike (Route 518). Other names on tombstones read like a who's who of the early Dutch settlers - Stout, Stryker, Voorhees, and Whitlock.



A sign near the entrance to the burying ground on John Blaw Drive.

According to the Baker book, "In 1813, Isaac and Eleanor Blue ... and James and Elizabeth (Blue) Voorhees deeded. . . to W.B. Voorhees and all the people of Blawenburg, for \$1.00, land in the estate of Ezekiel Blue occupied by the old burying ground."

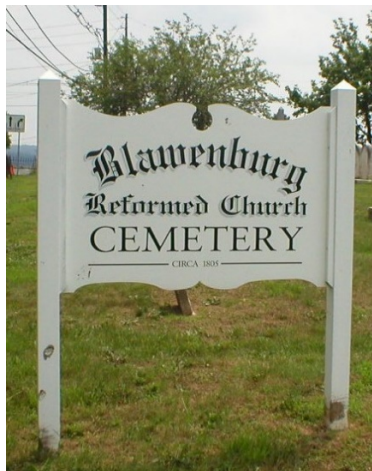
From these tombstones and cemetery maps, we learn that there was a lot of intermarriage among the settlers. A Nevius married a Blaw, a Blue married a Voorhees, and a Skillman married a Stryker. It was a finely woven web of interconnections among families that had little free time or transportation to travel far to find a mate.

Over the years, different owners of the property took varying degrees of care of the Blaw-Nevius burying grounds. The families whose relatives were buried there were the main caretakers of the cemetery. For many years, Woodacres Farm, a large dairy farm, occupied the land where the burying ground is located. The farm managed the care of the graves and surrounding property. The burying ground fell into disrepair over time until brothers Jeff and Travis Rickards took on the task of restoring the old burying ground in the 1990s for their Eagle project in Scout Troop 46. The property is now cared for by Cherry Valley Country Club.



Looking north in Blawenburg Reformed Church Cemetery.

Blawenburg Reformed Church Cemetery



The Blawenburg Reformed Church cemetery is on Route 601 just north of the Blawenburg Village Square offices and apartments in Blawenburg. Court Williamson (d. 1805) and his wife, Ann Williamson (d. 1811) are the earliest inhabitants of the cemetery for which there are

markers. The Van Zandt family owned the property where the cemetery is located, and there are at least 95 Van Zandts buried there. There are mixed stories about who was the first Van Zandt to be buried in the cemetery. I reported in my history of Blawenburg Church that in 1835, Garret Van Zandt was killed hauling wood down from the mountain and was presumably buried in the cemetery. This information was taken from the Blawenburg Church Consistory minutes. Walter Baker reported that in 1838 Lucy Ann Van Zandt, died at the age of 15 and was the first known Van Zandt to be buried in the cemetery. A look at the cemetery occupants list does not show either person with these dates of death. Another mystery!

In 1859, John Van Zandt (1791–1881) gave the first of several family donations of land to Blawenburg Reformed Church to enlarge the cemetery for future use. In 1884, Augustus Van Zandt added more land to the cemetery. In 1911, when E. L. Van Zandt donated additional land, the Blawenburg Cemetery Association was formed. The new association was a part of the Blawenburg Church, but it was separately incorporated. In 1986, the Van Zandt Company made a final donation of an acre of land to bring the cemetery to its current size.



JOHN VAN ZANDT.

John Van Zandt was the first to donate Blawenburg Cemetery land to the Blawenburg Church.

In the summer of 1859, as the new cemetery association evolved, a controversy arose over how the lots would be organized in the cemetery. According to church Consistory records, younger church members wanted the lots to be sold in family groupings, while the older members wanted lots to be sold individually. The older members felt that family lots would be “giving way to false pride.” They resolved the matter by the end of that summer, and graves are sold individually to this day.

Over the years, the Blawenburg Cemetery has seen a lot of activity, some of which has been described in previous blogs. In 1923, the first KKK funeral in NJ took place in the cemetery. (See blog # 16.) In 1999, a Nickelodeon made-for-TV movie called *Cry Baby Lane* was filmed in the cemetery. (See blog #26.) In more recent times, the cemetery has become a favorite spot for viewing the Montgomery Township Fourth of July fireworks that are set off at Montgomery High School down the hill north of Blawenburg.

Unlike the Blaw-Nevius Burying Ground, Blawenburg Cemetery is active today, although its residents are not!

Where on Earth is John Blaw Buried?

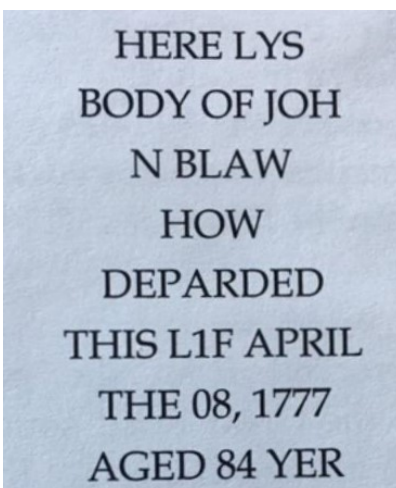
John (Jan) Blaw, who many consider the patriarch of the Blaw family from which Blawenburg takes its name, died in 1757, but where he is buried is a mystery. He is believed to have been buried near Servis Road, which is off Hollow Road. There are at least three graves located near Servis Road on land owned by the New Jersey Beagle Club. The Beagle Club land was previously Skillman and Garrison farms.

I first heard about John Blaw's burying site from Tom Skillman, who lived his whole life in Montgomery Township and had a strong interest in local history. Tom died in 2012 at 102. While I was writing the history of Blawenburg Church in 2006, Tom shared a picture of himself next to a grave marker that references John Blaw. He said it was on Servis Road, but I was unable to find it.



Tom Skillman at a grave marker for John Blaw around 1980.

In his *Family Burying Grounds* book, Walter Baker, another centenarian who passed away in 2010 at the same age as Tom, gives a specific location for Blaw's grave. He, like Tom Skillman, reported that it, along with two other grave markers is on property owned by the New Jersey Beagle Club.



John Blaw's grave marker reportedly contains these words.

In the fall of 2019, another interesting twist in the mystery of John Blaw's grave occurred. Out of the blue (or maybe the Blaw), Pastor Jeff Knol of Blawenburg Church received an email from a relative of John Blaw named Gael Rodriguez. Gael, who lives in Mexico City, MX, traced his roots back to John Blaw and wanted to know where his 7th generation grandfather is buried. Pastor Jeff passed the email along to me, and I began an email conversation with Gael.

I told him about the Servis Road site and said I would try to find the marker, take a picture of it, and send it to him. I rode very slowly along Servis Road off Hollow Road with no luck. I went back with my wife as a spotter a few days later. Again, we had no luck. I reported my lack of success to Gael who tried to find it on Google Earth. Still no luck.

Walter Baker's directions are very clear about the location of the Blaw grave, but the markers are on private, fenced property. I plan to seek permission to go onto the property to try to find it.

And then there came a hitch in our search. During the process of trying to locate the grave, Gael realized that the date of death on the marker pictured above is 1777, the date of the death of John Blaw's son, also named John. His father, John (Jan) died in 1757. So, we now know that the patriarch's marker has yet to be found. But there are a couple of other markers at the site, so we may find John (Jan) after all.

Stay tuned, we'll continue to try to find John Blaw's grave. If you know where it is, please let me know. This is almost as big a mystery as the missing Van Zandt windmill! (See blog # 9.)

We Don't Know the Whole Story

There likely are other graves long forgotten in the area around Blawenburg. For example, shortly before he died, Walter Baker told me that he thought there was an unmarked slave burying ground just south of Bedens Brook near Mountain View Road. This burying ground has not been discovered, but it represents one of several possible locations of unidentified burying grounds.

Remembering those who came before us helps us recognize that our days are finite and that our lives have been shaped, in part, by those who came before us. Future generations will look back at our lives as they discover what their past was and what they want their future to be.

Blawenburg Fact

Three tall monuments for old Blawenburg families in Blawenburg Church Cemetery



Left - Bernardus (d. 1859) and Sarah Sutphin (d. 1840) Van Zandt., the first Van Zandts to take ownership of the farmstead from the Nevius family

Middle - John (d. 1836) and Mary S. (d. 1872) Hageman

Right - John (d. 1876) and Elizabeth Skillman (d. 1883) Voorhees

Looking Ahead

Look for a picture post at the end of the month and another blog in mid-February.

Sources

Baker, Walter. *Family Burying Ground, Montgomery Township, Somerset County, New Jersey, 2nd Edition*. Van Harlingen Historical Society, Belle Mead, NJ, 2008.

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

Snell, James P. *History of Hunterdon and Somerset Counties, New Jersey*. Philadelphia, Everts and Peck, 1881.

Pictures

Blaw-Nevius Burying Ground

Blau-Nevius sign – D. Cochran

Blaw grave markers – www.findagrave.com

Blawenburg Cemetery landscape – www.blawenburgchurch.org

Blawenburg Cemetery sign – www.blawenburgchurch.org

John Van Zandt – J. Snell

Tom Skillman at John Blaw's grave – D. Cochran

John Blaw's grave marking – W. Baker

Three tall grave markers – D. Cochran

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