

114 Blawenburg Church Organs, The Rest of the Story

By David Cochran

Church organs often are taken for granted. They are an important part of worship services, but there is much more to the story of the Blawenburg Church organs. The church has had four different organs over the years, going from an organist-pedaled pump organ to a powerful modern pipe organ. In this blog, we show the evolution of organs over the 192-years the Blawenburg Church has served the Village of Blawenburg.



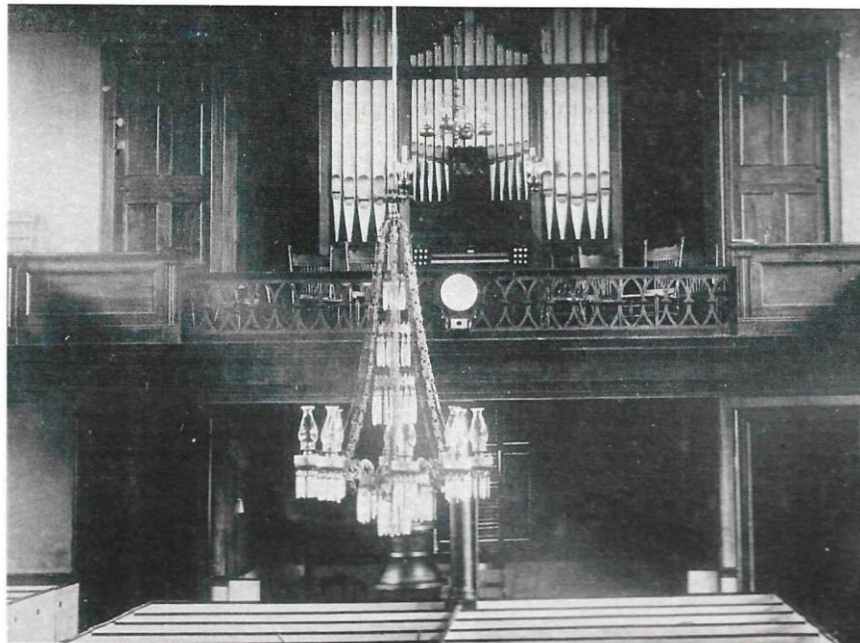
The decorative organ pipes have been in Blawenburg Church since 1873.

Church music in colonial times in Protestant churches included the singing of chants and congregational singing of hymns and psalms. The music was often unaccompanied, but sometimes stringed instruments such as the viol (an instrument similar to the violin) or the lute were used.

Italian Bartolomeo Cristofori is credited with inventing the piano in the early 1700s, and some churches used it in their services. Gradually, the organ, which could play a variety of sounds, was embraced by churches.

There were a variety of instruments developed in the 18th and 19th centuries which were preludes to the organ as we know it— melodeon, harmonium, physharmonica, seraphie, and reed organ. These were all efforts to create musical sounds using wind power.

By the time the Reformed Dutch Church in Blawenburg was established in 1832, the pump organ had been invented and, like many 19th century churches, the church purchased a small pump organ.



The original organ in the south gallery was a pump organ requiring a pumper and organist. Note the decorative pipes on the front of the organ.

The Pump Organ

Pump organists used foot pedals to pump air into a bellows system that holds and distributes air to the reeds in the organ. The bellows system has two parts: a reservoir or wind chest to hold a volume of air and feeders that take small units of air to the reeds. The keyboard corresponds to the reed locations, and when the keys are pressed, air goes to the reed and makes the corresponding sound. Small pump organs can be played by one person. The organist pumps pedals and presses the keys to release the air through the reed.

As time went on, larger organs known as pipe organs were invented. There was no electricity, so they still required a bellows system. With much more air needed, the pipe organ system required more effort than the organist could provide and still play the keyboard. Besides the organist, pipe organs required a second person to pump the air into the bellows. One of the prized jobs for the youth in churches was to be an organ pumper. It was a paid job—ten cents to pump the

organ during a service. In some larger churches, pumpers received the title of apprentice. At Blawenburg Church, Harold Skillman, Tom Skillman, and Bill Terhune recalled years ago how it was an honor to be selected to be a pumper. They all had fond memories of the experience.

The Pipe Organ

In 1871, Rev. William Brownlee Voorhees accepted the call to become Blawenburg Church's fifth pastor. He was an enthusiastic and engaging leader, and he had a successful tenure until his death in 1892. One of his goals was to replace the small pump organ with a much larger pipe organ. Few churches in the area had them. In December 1872, the Consistory (church board) approved the purchase of the new organ provided it did not create a debt greater than the cost of the organ. The following year, it was installed in the south gallery at the rear of the church.

1873 Organ

The purchase of the new organ was met with great fanfare in the farm community of Blawenburg. Once it was installed, the church held a concert featuring music from the new pipe organ.

In the June 21, 1873 edition of the Princeton Press, a reporter wrote a review of the event. Note that all the spelling, grammar, and punctuation are as they originally appeared in the article. See an additional note at the end of this blog.

Blawenburgh is a pretty place, and a railroad is in course of construction through it, the depot is now being built, which will certainly give its business an impetus lying as it does in the centre of a rich farming country. The only church in the village is a Reformed Church, having a commodious and comfortable building. The outside being shingled gives it a more antiquated appearance than it deserves, as it is not a very old structure.

The congregation has just received a new organ, a superior instrument, made by Mr. Alexander Mills of No. 539 Broonie St., New York, at a cost \$1,600. A concert usually follows hard upon the setting up of a new organ, to show the power and beauty of the instrument, and Blawenburgh is no exception to the general rule in this case. Consequently an Organ Concert was given on Thursday evening, at which Mr. Henry Eyre Browne of New York was expected to preside at the organ, and the choir was to assist with vocal music. Mr. Browne from some unknown cause, failed to reach Blawenburgh, and so a couple of gentlemen who were present were pressed into service, and the concert passed off very creditably, although the audience was small. Mr. Murphy, of Princeton Seminary, played several selections in good style. The name of the other gentleman who took part we have been unable to learn. The singing was very good. In this Miss Emma Weart took a leading part, in the duets and choruses, as well as singing a solo, which received an encore, bringing her a second time before the audience. In response to the special invitation, she also sang "Coming thro' the Rye." The concert closed with "Coronation," by choir and audience.

Certainly the good people of Blawenburgh have no reason to feel ashamed of their choir, altho' we hope the choir don't do all the singing on Sunday, to the exclusion of the congregation from this delightful portion of worship. We should also mention that a Festival was given in connection with the concert in the ground adjoining the church. We hear the receipts were light, as several similar Fairs were being held in the surrounding country.

The 1873 organ served the church well until 1926, when an organ with an electrified bellows was installed behind the pulpit in the front of the church. Pews were removed from the center of the church and an organ pit and new platform for the pulpit were created. The wooden organ pipes were behind a decorative set of steel-blue pipes with fleur-de-lis, a stylized lily symbol and gold trim. In Christianity, the lily is a symbol of purity and virtue. These pipes were originally on the 1873 organ, and they are still behind the pulpit today for all to see.



The pulpit of the church before an organ was installed.

The electrified 1926 organ was used for almost 50 years until 1973, when a Gress-Miles organ was purchased for \$32,950. A vigorous campaign to raise funds involved sales of a variety of items, from shrubs to scrap metal. They even raised funds by selling the pipes of the old electrified organ. Through diligent effort, the church was able to make the last payment on the organ on March 31, 1976. When the new organ was installed back in the South Gallery, the church members decided not to move the decorative pipes from the front of the church that had been associated with the organs since 1873. Today, they are still in the front of the church.



*The newest organ is in the south gallery,
where the original 1873 pump organ was installed.*

By 2020, the 1973 organ was showing its age and underwent a major overhaul using restoration funds, which also were used to repair the steeple, paint the church inside and out, pave the driveway, and make general repairs.

Blawenburg Church's organs have filled the church with melodic sounds for worship services, weddings, funerals, and more for almost 200 years. While we sometimes take them for granted, organs are an understated, but important part of churches.

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\*The article from 1873 refers to a railroad being built in Blawenburg. This was the Millstone and Somerset Railroad, which ran through the property between Montgomery High School and the SAVE animal shelter. It only existed until 1880. You can read more about it in Blog 78, *The Frog War and M&S Demise*, at [www.blawenburgtales.com](http://www.blawenburgtales.com).

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## **FACTS**

1. In addition to the pipe organ, the church uses an electronic piano/organ in its services. In many newer churches, the electronic organ has replaced the pipe organ.

2. Restoring the 1973 organ was an extensive project. The entire organ with its many pipes had to be completely dismantled with pipes being cleaned and repaired or replaced as necessary. When it was reassembled, it had to go through a process known as voicing to balance the sound to match the church's acoustics.
3. A personal connection. We moved to Blawenburg in 1973. We first met the pastor, Roger Rozeboom, when he left the pulpit to put out a fire in our house. A few months later, we helped at the Harvest Home, a fundraiser for church to buy the 1973 organ. We joined the church shortly thereafter.
4. Many visitors to Blawenburg Church ask why there are two sets of organ pipes, one in front and one in back. Having read this blog, now you know.
5. \_\_\_\_\_

## SOURCES

### Information

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

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[https://www.pumporganrestorations.com/physics\\_of\\_the\\_pump\\_organ](https://www.pumporganrestorations.com/physics_of_the_pump_organ)

Shannnon, Keith. *Where do church organs get their air supply from?* Quora  
<https://www.quora.com/profile/Keith-Shannon-2>

### Pictures

Organ pipes and pulpit – D. Cochran

1873 organ in the south gallery – old postcard

Pulpit before the 1926 organ was installed – old postcard

Pipes and console in the south gallery today – D. Cochran

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