

## Blog 90 The Slaves of Blawenburg, Part 4

By David Cochran

*This is the final installment of the story of the slaves that worked on the farms in and around Blawenburg. In this blog, we tell the story of one slave, Harry Brister, who helped build Blawenburg Church and worked on local farms after he was freed. Thanks go to Jane Van Zandt who connected local residents' names to their slaves via Somerset County and Blawenburg Church records and assisted with the writing of this blog.*

In Blog 87, we showed that there were hundreds of slaves of African American origin in Somerset County. They were brought to America by Dutch slave traders in the early 1600s to fill the labor shortage on Dutch farms. When the British took over New Amsterdam and renamed it New York in 1664, many Dutch migrated to New Jersey to establish plantations. We will refer to these plantations as farms, a more common term. The three key farms in or near Blawenburg were owned by the Covenhoven, Nevius, and Blaw families. The first slaves likely came with the Blaws in 1738, and then many others followed. Over the years, these slaves had children, so the farms and households had plenty of labor well into the early 1800s. It was quite common for children, even under the age of 10, to be working on the lands and in the homes of their owners and neighbors. Since these slaves were considered property, they could be bought, sold, and traded as their masters desired.

### Freedom

Freedom came slowly for the slaves, as the abolition movement grew. New Jersey was among the last of the northeast states to abolish slavery. By 1850 according to the Montgomery Township census, four individuals remained on record listed as slaves—two males and two females, ranging in age from 47 to 80-years-old. The owners of these slaves were surnamed Hogland, Duryea, and Crusier. But these were not the only slave owners around.

In 1850, there were 313 households in Montgomery Township and at least 30 of them were occupied by freed black residents with surnames such as Miller, Vreeland, Skillman, and Stryker. Approximately 15% of the residential population in Montgomery recorded in the 1850 census were listed as colored.

You might think it was easy to find the names of slaves and their former masters, but it wasn't. Enslaved people were often not listed by name on official records until they were freed, and then most times only by first name. For example, a typical record might show a master's name, *Blaw*, with a number such *four* after it to show the Blaws had four slaves.

To figure out who the slave owners were, we compared the list of pew owners in Blawenburg Church in 1843 to a list of freed slaves in the first half of the 1800s. These are known as manumission records. The records include the slave masters, their town, and the slaves (sometimes by name, sometimes by just a number). We matched the manumission records for Montgomery Township with the church pew records to try to identify and quantify specific Blawenburg slave owners. Out of the 60 church pews sold in 1843, on both the east and west

sides of the church, at least 12 were purchased and held by men who either still had slaves or freed them.

When these lists were cross checked with the names of church members in 1843, it revealed some of the names of some of the former slave holders. The names on both lists are mainly of Dutch origin; however, there are some British names, too. We will not reveal the first names of these masters and only a few last names for illustration. By the time the lists were compiled, there were many masters with the same last name, and they were likely related. Some of the common local last names on the list were Duryea, Voorhees, Van Zandt, and Cruser, but there were many more. There are many stories of slaves in Blawenburg still to be unearthed; however, we can share the stories of a well-known family known as the Bristers now.

### **Harry Brister (1814 – 1891)**

The story of Harry Brister is one of the few tales we have about a Blawenburg slave. He was born around 1814, likely to a slave family in Blawenburg. This puts him in the time period of NJ state manumission laws, which means he would be freed after 25 years. We aren't sure where his family lived when Harry was born or how he got the last name Brister, but we do know where he lived later in life.

Harry is one of the few slaves we have information about. He was the child slave of the local magistrate, Judge Voorhees. When Harry was 16, the Reformed Dutch Church of Harlingen permitted residents of the burgeoning village of Blawenburg to build a new church. It would be a satellite church called the Second Reformed Dutch Church of Harlingen. The church builders were local folks, and the materials to build it were acquired locally. As the story goes, young Harry was enlisted to go to Rocky Hill to pick up a very large beam that was cut from a tree in the Rocky Hill swamp. The beam was destined to be the main beam running from the front to the back of the church.

This very heavy beam was a real challenge to move. It required oxen, which were loaned by Judge Voorhees, to pull the wagon the two-plus miles to Blawenburg. All was going well as Harry and his heavy load traveled west on Georgetown-Franklin Turnpike until they came to Bedens Brook at the Duryea homestead, which is now known as Washington Well Farm. Apparently, the sight of water made the oxen thirsty, and they turned off the pathway to get a drink. The wagon became hopelessly mired in the mud, and Harry needed help. A passing rider went to the church to inform the workers about what had happened. They sent a team of horses to assist in pulling the heavy load from the brook, but it was still a challenge. As Harry told the tale for many years afterward, the oxen pulled to the west and the horses wanted to pull to the east. According to a letter written by a woman identified only as Emma B. to a friend, Harry's retelling of the story drew laughter whenever he told it. As you can imagine, it was a major project for a 16-year-old to pull the wagon out from the mud and get the beam to the church. Eventually, the beam made it to its destination and still underpins the 191-year-old building today. At the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the church in 1882, a gray-haired Harry told the story one more time to the delight of all in attendance.

We wondered what happened to Harry when he grew up. A photo found in the Van Zandt family album became of interest, when we learned that it was labeled “Sah Libbie Brister” Could a link be found between this young black child in the picture and Harry Brister in the church records? We wanted to find out more

We know that Harry married Elizabeth, who was likely from the area, but her maiden surname is unknown. It was common for freed slaves to pool their resources with other freed slaves to live and work together on a farm. They often lived in the same small house and paid the rent from their meager salaries. In 1850, Harry and Elizabeth were living with other black families, who bore the last name of their previous owners— Stryker and Skillman. The census showed they had children named Becca and James. They were listed as Free Inhabitants of Montgomery Township. Rebecca Brister remained in Montgomery Township, working in a white household as a servant and later marrying William Van Derveer in 1867 at Blawenburg Church.

Other Bristers at the time of the 1850 Census include Andrew Brister, age 9, living on a Blawenburg Voorhees farm and Jane Brister, age 14, living in the James N. Van Zandt household. How Andrew and Jane are related to Harry is unknown and left for further genealogy digging. We do know that Andrew is buried in the Stoutsburg Cemetery, an African American burial ground only a short distance from where he grew up as a black child in Blawenburg.

### **Horace Brister**

By the 1860 census, Harry and Elizabeth are recorded as living together with a six-year-old son named Horace and his younger siblings, Alex, Elias, and Moses. Rebecca and James were no longer living with them. Church records show Horace was baptized in 1853 in the Blawenburg Reformed Church. He went to school, which was an uncommon event for the children of slaves. We aren't sure which school he attended, since black children were not usually accepted in public schools in the mid-1800s.

We wonder if Horace could have been one of the first black children to attend school in Montgomery Township? We can't say for sure, but the thought of a son of a former local slave receiving early education is exciting to think about.

Horace married a woman named Phoebe (surname unknown). Handwritten farm ledger records kept of the Van Zandt farm in the late 1800s show that Horace Brister worked there for many years.

Following slavery, former slaves and their offspring often remained on farms as laborers. Sometimes they were sharecroppers, laborers who lived on the farm, raising their own crops, and paying their rent with profits from the crops they raised. Others were laborers who received a salary. Horace received a farm salary as shown below in the Van Zandt farm records from 1891. It is believed they rented a house on the James Van Zandt farm along Belle Mead/Blawenburg Road (Route 601 today) just north of Blawenburg, where they worked as farm laborers. The annual salary covered rent, food, and incidental expenses. It was surely a challenge to live under these conditions, but they were free and could earn their own money.

Horace Brister

1891	House rent	25 00	
May 29	Cash	10 00	
July 16	corn	35	
" 24	Cash	10 00	
Aug 12	corn	35	
" 27	Cash	10 00	
Oct 30	"	11 00	
Dec 9	"	1 00	
" 19	" picture	50	
" 19	"	5 00	
" 29	" presents	2 50	
1892	Jan 1	"	2 00
" 16	corn	25	
" 20	Cash	5 00	
" 23	3 hams	4 50	
Feb 5	S. C. D. Still	2 48	
Mar 19	cash Bill	28 86	
Apr 1	Cash	10 00	
" 2	Cash to Bal	36 21	

The Van Zandt farm ledger from 1891 for Horace Brister

### Sarah Elizabeth Brister

We wanted to know more about the girl in the picture, Sah Libbie. In 1881, Horace and Phoebe had a daughter, Sarah Elizabeth, who was also known as Sah Libbie. It is likely she could have

been born on the Van Zandt farm, where her parents lived and worked. She probably spent her entire childhood in Blawenburg and must have been close enough to the Van Zandt family that they retained a photo of her as a child.

Our search to connect the local slave Harry Brister of Blawenburg Church records to Sah Libbie, an African American child in a photo kept for over a century in the Van Zandt photo album was complete. Our Blawenburg Brister family lived in Blawenburg for at least three generations, starting with Harry, the young slave enlisted to secure a main beam for the church construction, to his son Horace, raised and possibly schooled here in Montgomery to his daughter Sarah Elizabeth, photographed in the early 1880s. The Bristers knew Blawenburg during the time of slavery and after it was abolished.

Harry died in March of 1891, and no doubt would have been alive to love his granddaughter. While she was born a free child, the picture below is the only picture of a grandchild of a slave that we found. This was no small task given the lack of local records kept on black residents and their family stories. According to later census data, Horace, Phoebe, and Sah Libbie, relocated to John Street, Princeton, in the early 1900s, as farm life in Blawenburg was changing. Sah Libbie died there in April, 1936.



"Sah Libbie"  
Sarah Elizabeth Bister

*Sah Libbie and the identification of her name  
from the back of the picture*

### **Summary**

There are so many slave stories that we don't and may never learn about. Many of them would be sad tales of oppression, but all of them would tell of humans trying to make the best of their lives. If there is something to be learned from these stories, it is that slaves were people, not

property. No matter what they were enduring, they first were humans who lived, learned, and loved.

In this series, we have tried to show a realistic picture of what life was like for slaves in Blawenburg. We showed how the slaves got here, how they were treated here and elsewhere, and gave a portrait of the Blaw slaves and the Brister family. Our goal was to inform with factual and accurate information. In the course of this research, we discovered many new things about our village, and our hope is that these writings will remain in the public knowledge base for years to come.

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### **Facts**

1. Slaves were often brought to church so they could learn about and develop Christian values. When Blawenburg Church was built, the pews in the balcony were used by these slaves. The pews downstairs were purchased by families, and they didn't want their slaves sitting in the family pews. Today, the downstairs pews are painted. The upstairs pews are deliberately left unfinished to remind people of the segregation that occurred in the early years of the church.



*Blawenburg Church balcony today*

2. The 1860 census showed that Harry and Elizabeth owned real estate valued at \$300 and personal estate valued at \$20. Harry was listed as a farm laborer. They were living with their four children who were still at home, Horace, Alex, Elias, and Moses.
3. At the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Blawenburg Church in 1882, Harry Brister was the only former slave that was present. He regaled the group with his story of getting the beam to the church one last time. The laughter was reportedly plentiful at the celebration
4. According to The Week magazine, “the Prime Minister of the Netherlands, Mark Rutte, wants to atone for Dutch involvement in the colonial-era slave trade. He plans to offer an official apology and fund a new museum to promote awareness of past Dutch crimes.

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## Sources

### Information

Blawenburg Church pew records

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

Harlingen Church records

Somerset County manumission records

Van Zandt farm records

### Pictures

Blawenburg Church balcony – D. Cochran

Horace Brister records – Van Zandt farm records

Sah Libbie – Van Zandt photo collection

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