

76 The Famous Preachers of Blawenburg

By David Cochran

A new church in a small village with several famous preachers... how did they end up preaching in Blawenburg?

Blawenburg was a fledgling village surrounded by farmland in 1829, and the only businesses were a tavern/stagecoach stop and a general store. Most of the residents of the Blawenburg area attended the Reformed Dutch Church at Harlingen, which has served Montgomery Township since 1727. A group from Blawenburg petitioned and finally convinced the Consistory (Board) of Harlingen that they could build and sustain a new church in Blawenburg. You can read more about the transition from Harlingen in Blog 23.

The new church was built between the fall of 1830 and the spring of 1831. It was run by a combined Consistory, with members of both churches serving as Deacons and Elders. Because there was no permanent pastor in Blawenburg, the church had a procession of guest pastors from Reformed and Presbyterian denominations to lead the services each week in the period between its dedication on May 14, 1831 and its separation from its parent church at Harlingen on March 4, 1832. Some of these preachers were famous preachers and professors; others were pastors seeking to lead the new church; and several were itinerant pastors who filled in as needed.

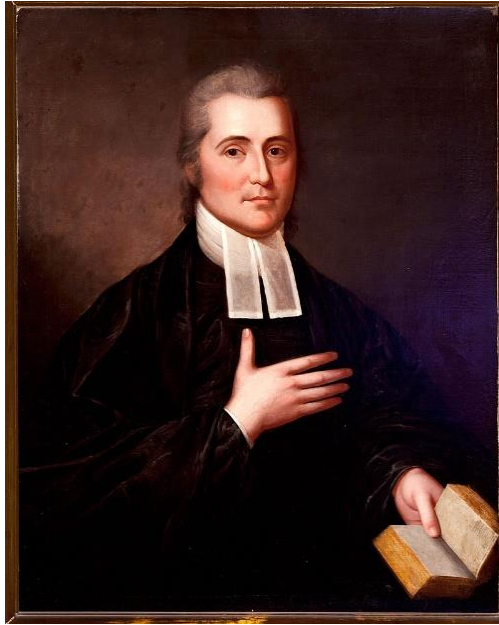
At the time of the separation, the young church changed its name from the Second Reformed Dutch Church at Harlingen to the Reformed Dutch Church at Blawenburg(h). Under the separation agreement, the ownership of the church was transferred to the Consistory of Blawenburg. That was 190 years ago, and on March 4, 2022, the church celebrated its long and continuous service to God and the community.

Famous Preachers

You might wonder how a small church would end up having well-known preachers. As it happened, Blawenburg is situated between two of the oldest Protestant seminaries in the country — New Brunswick Seminary, now New Brunswick Theological Seminary, (1784) and Princeton Theological Seminary (1812). New Brunswick trained students to become pastors in the Reformed Dutch tradition. Princeton taught students in both the Presbyterian and Reformed denominations. Having such theological talent nearby, helped the church find special preachers, as well as aspiring preachers, to lead their worship services.

Here are a few of the more notable pastors who preached at the Second Dutch Reformed Church of Harlingen.

Rev. Philip Milledoler



Rev. Philip Milledoler by James Peale

Rev. Philip Milledoler was the guest preacher at the dedication service on May 14, 1831. He was the fifth president of Queens College in New Brunswick. In 1825, when he took over after Rev. John Henry Livingston died, the college was in poor financial shape. He elicited help from a philanthropist and Revolutionary War hero, Colonel Henry Rutgers. Queens College closed for a time in 1825, but Colonel Rutgers' \$5,000 donation enabled it to open as Rutgers College. Rev. Milledoler was instrumental in starting Princeton Theological Seminary and the American Bible Society.

When he preached at the dedication of the new church, he referenced 2nd Chronicles, Chapter 2, which says that God is everywhere and cannot be contained, even within the new church building.

Rev. Archibald Alexander, DD

Before he arrived in Princeton, Archibald Alexander served as the President of Hampden-Sydney College in Virginia, became licensed as a pastor, and served as an itinerant pastor in Virginia and a full pastor at Vine Street Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia. When Princeton Theological Seminary was founded in 1812, Rev. Alexander was its first professor and Principal (President).

On July 31, 1831, Rev. Alexander preached in Blawenburg using Psalm 84, Chapters 1 and 2. His sermon challenged people to trust in God and walk uprightly.



Rev. Archibald Alexander

Rev. Professor Charles Hodge



*Rev. Professor Charles Hodge
by Rembrandt Peal*

Charles Hodge intended to seek his undergraduate degree at Princeton College, now Princeton University. It was his father's alma mater, and the primary place to receive training as a Presbyterian minister. In 1812, when Princeton Theological Seminary opened to provide a more thorough program for ministers, Charles became a student of Archibald Alexander.

Rev. Hodge became the second Principal of Princeton Theological Seminary, following Rev. Alexander. He had a son, Archibald Alexander Hodge, who succeeded him as Principal. On July 26, 1831, Rev. Hodge spoke at the new church in Blawenburg using Psalm 83 as a reference point. These verses are a petition to God to intervene and destroy those who would do harm.

Rev. John Schermerhorn



Rev. Schermerhorn

Rev. John Schermerhorn was a famous Reformed Dutch pastor with an infamous legacy. He preached at Blawenburg several times and was usually there to raise money for missions and education for the Synod. When he preached at Blawenburg on July 26, 1831, he was the head of the General Synod of the Reformed Dutch Church. He later went on to become the national leader of the Department of Indian Affairs in the Federal government administration of President Andrew Jackson. Under his watch, the infamous Trail of Tears took place. Thousands of Native Americans died as they were displaced from their homelands to Oklahoma and other midwestern areas.

On July 26, he preached from Luke, Chapter 11, Verse 2 about the Lord's Prayer. See Blog 51 to read Rev. Schermerhorn's story.

Rev. Peter Labagh, DD

Rev. Labagh was the pastor at Harlingen when the churches separated. The original plan was for the preachers at Blawenburg and Harlingen to exchange pulpits periodically. Before the first pastor was called, Dr. Labagh preached several times at Blawenburg. He was an experienced pastor, having served both Neshanic and Harlingen Reformed Dutch Churches from 1809 – 1821. He then went on to serve exclusively at Harlingen for many years. He also served on the General Synod and was a Trustee of Rutgers College.

Rev. Henry Heermance

Rev. Heermance was the pastor who preached frequently during this interim period, and ultimately, he became the first pastor of the Blawenburg Reformed Dutch Church. Originally from Long Island, he graduated from Union College in 1825 and New Brunswick Seminary in 1826. He served at Blawenburg for three years.

For 190 years, Blawenburg Reformed Church has been the centerpiece of the village it serves. The church was showing its age until recent renovations brought back its luster on the interior and exterior. It's ready to continue its service to God and its neighbors for many more years.

Facts

1. Since Rev. Heermance's time in Blawenburg, there have been 24 other pastors called and several interim pastors at Blawenburg Reformed Church. Rev. Jeff Knol is the current pastor, and he also serves the Griggstown Reformed Church.
 2. You may know the names Alexander and Hodge from the streets of Princeton. Alexander Road runs right next to the Princeton Theological Seminary that Rev. Alexander served. Hodge Road is just a few blocks away.
 3. Blawenburg was originally spelled with an *h* on the end – Blawenburgh.
 4. The recent renovations to Blawenburg Reformed Church were made possible by many donations from church members, community residents and organizations, and friends. The funds have enabled the repair and painting of the outside and inside of the church, and the renovation of its organ. Other projects will follow when additional funds become available.
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Sources

Information

In this blog, I have relied on the diary of Elizabeth Van Zandt, a primary resource where Elizabeth kept notes on who preached and what scripture they used between the time of the dedication of the church on May 14, 1831 and January 22, 1846. I am grateful to Bill and Jane Van Zandt for sharing this book with the church.

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Van Zandt, Elizabeth. Personal diary of preachers at Blawenburg Church, 1831-1846.

Pictures

Rev. Milledoler – Wikipedia, public domain

Rev. Alexander – Wikipedia, public domain

Rev. Hodge – Wikipedia, public domain

Rev. Shermerhorn – <http://www.findagrave.com>

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