

115 The Beginning of the State Village

By David Cochran

In 2021, I published four blogs (#62-65) about the State Village for Epileptics and the other State institutions that followed it:

1898-1952: New Jersey State Village for Epileptics, aka the Village.

1953 – 1983: New Jersey Neuro-Psychiatric Institute, aka the Institute/NJNPI

1983 – 1998: North Princeton Developmental Center, aka NPDC

This blog is a prequel to the published blogs. We look in detail at the farms that existed on the land that became the State Village.

Epilepsy in the 19th Century

By today's standards, little was known about treating mental health and other medical conditions in the 1800s. Often, medical conditions were thought to be mental health issues. Such was the case with epilepsy, a neurological condition that causes recurrent seizures. While dangerous to the individual suffering from the condition, epilepsy is not contagious, nor is it a mental health disorder. Aside from unpredictable seizures, epileptics are otherwise functional people.

Today, this condition can be treated effectively with medication; however, in the 1800s into the first half of the 1900s, it was often treated by separating epileptics from society. It was common to place these patients in facilities such as the State Lunatic Asylum in Trenton. This meant that epileptics and insane patients were often living in the same buildings. Each type of malady would aggravate the other, making matters worse. At that time, there were 13 epilepsy-specific institutions in the country.

Leaders of state institutions petitioned the legislature in 1877, 1884, and 1888 to provide funds to build separate buildings for epileptics at their facilities. Finally, in 1895 through the efforts of Professor S. Olin Garrison from the New Jersey Training School for the Feeble-minded at Vineland, the legislature provided \$600 to form a commission to study the problem. The wheels of government turned slowly in those days, too.

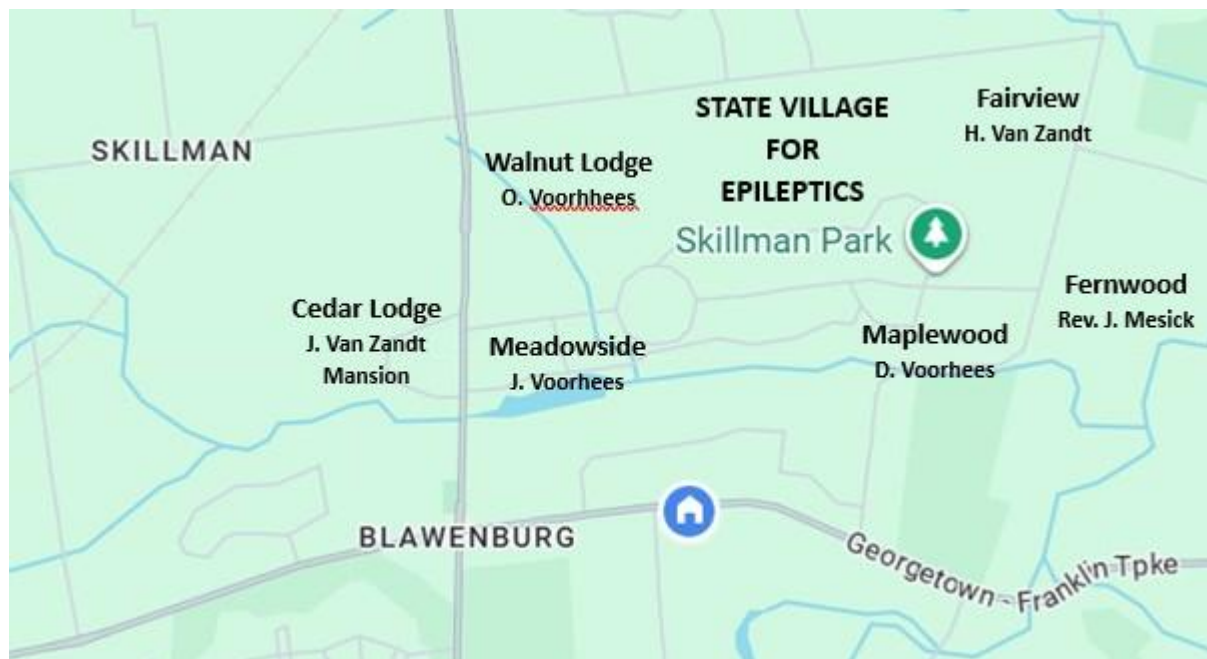
As in current times, money drives decisions. In 1896, Governor John Griggs vetoed a bill establishing separate facilities for epileptics. The persistent medical community gathered more information to show over 2000 epileptics being housed in asylums and living untreated throughout the state. The legislature passed a new bill, which Acting Governor Foster Voorhees, an advocate for better epileptic treatments, promptly signed in 1898. This bill awarded \$15,000 to start the village.

Locating the Village

There were several criteria that guided a State-appointed Board of Managers in the search for land. According to Walter Baker's *A History of the New Jersey State Village*, the new facility had to:

1. be within 25 miles of Trenton.
2. be near a railway.
3. be secluded, not near main roads and towns.
4. have a good climate needed for the health of residents.
5. include a self-supporting farm.
6. have separate housing for men and women.

The then-sparsely populated Montgomery Township met these criteria, so between 1898 and 1920, the State purchased six farms encompassing 1097 acres to build the State Village.



The Six Farms Used for the Village

These farms were purchased over the years to form the area where buildings and supporting farmlands were located. The Voorhees and Van Zandt families owned several of these farms at the time.

1. Maplewood

As plans were developing for the State Village, the Board of Managers wanted to purchase two properties—Maplewood, a farm with the largest house in Somerset

County at the time, and Fernwood, an adjacent farm owned by a retired Reformed Church pastor. They were able to close on Fernwood first, but Maplewood was the first to be used for the Village. Owned by Captain David C. Voorhees, the land that became Maplewood Farm was originally sold by absentee owner, Abraham Van Horne, in 1754. The Board of Managers for the State Village paid \$11,500 for the property, which was located on a hill just north of the Burnt Hill Road Bridge. The farmland comprises most of the southeastern portion of Skillman Park today.

Maplewood, which had been named by the Voorhees, served as the administration building for the new institution from 1898 to 1900. Tenant buildings were adapted as dormitories for men and women. They could house up to 20 patients.

In 1899, the Village Board hired Dr. Henry Weeks, its first superintendent, and soon purchased a farm west of Maplewood to house the increasing number of patients. They named it Meadowside.

Maplewood served as the administration building and superintendent's residence for most of the life of the Village and its later iterations. In the early 2000s, the NJ Epilepsy Foundation planned to make it a museum and administration offices, but a nefarious arsonist had other plans. The building was set afire and had to be demolished in 2011. See Blog 108 for more information about Maplewood.

2. Fernwood

This property was located northeast of Maplewood and was originally part of the Jacob Ten Broeck Farmstead, circa 1737. It later became part of the Terhune Farmstead and was owned at the time of its sale in 1899 by a retired Dutch Reformed pastor, Rev. John Mesick. The original farmhouse at Ten Broeck Farm exists today as a private residence on Burnt Hill Road. This 215-acre farm included the now-state-owned property on the east side of Burnt Hill Road. When it was part of the State Village, Fernwood was a farm where most of the animal husbandry took place, providing meat, eggs, and dairy products for the Village. Today, it is land remaining on the non-operational, State-owned Skillman Dairy Farm. It was operated by the Department of Corrections until 2012, when it was closed. On its north side, there were orchards, giving Orchard Road its name. It was renamed Fernwood in 1899 by the first administration of the State Village. It was demolished in 1998.

3. Meadowside

This 100-acre parcel was the third farm purchased by the State Village. It was originally purchased from Abraham Van Voorhees by Aert Sutphin circa 1754, and then by Jacob Voorhees. Bounded by Rock Brook on the south side,

Meadowside was located between Route 601 on the west and Maplewood on the east. It fronted on former Sylvan Lake, which was used for harvesting ice in the winter. Two icehouses were nearby. This land comprises the south side of Skillman Park today.

4. Van Zandt Mansion/Cedar Lodge

The brick mansion is much different in design from other buildings in the area. It has a brick façade fashioned after an Italian villa. It is one of two original farm buildings still standing today. James Van Zandt inherited the land from the Van Zandt family and built the farmstead in 1860. Today, it is the SAVE animal shelter, on the west side of Route 601 across from Skillman Park. The farm was originally 72 acres, and other acreage was added to bring it to 279 acres. It was purchased by the State Village in 1905. This purchase brought the size of the State Village to 780 acres. This land encompassed the land where the former Boys Training School was located and where Montgomery High School and Board of Education offices are today. During its time as a State Village residence, it was known as Cedar Lodge.

The Van Zandt Mansion and farm purchase gave the Village access to a railroad line. This enabled them to build a railroad spur to bring in coal and other supplies to their power plant and ship farm goods created in the village out to other markets.

5. Fairview

In 1913, the growing Village made its next purchase, the Harry Van Zandt farm, which was on the northeast corner of the Village. It was bounded by Skillman Road on the north and Burnt Hill Road on the east. This property was originally owned by Abraham Van Horne, who owned the Maplewood and Meadowside properties. Aert Sutphin bought both properties in 1754. He sold this farm to Bernardus Van Zandt on an unspecified date in the 1800s. In 1913, Harry Van Zandt became the owner of the property. In the 1930s, it had a 50-acre apple orchard. Today, it is the home of St. Charles Borromeo Roman Catholic Church and Hunter Farms North/Princeton Show Jumping. This purchase raised the size of the Village to 1000 acres.

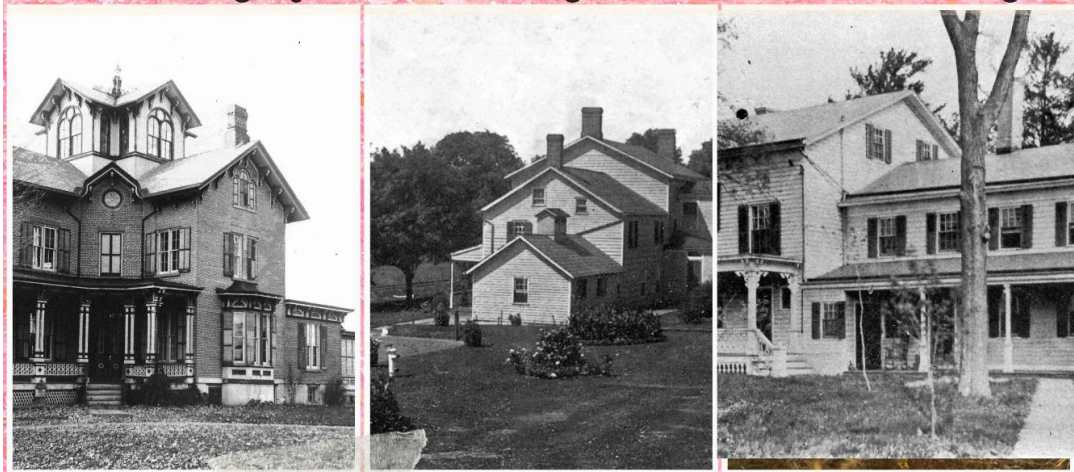
6. Ouke Voorhees Farm

In 1920, the Ouke Voorhees Farm was the last purchase by the State Village. It was sold by Ouke Voorhees's son, Peter. The farmhouse and refurbished barn still exist across from Montgomery High School on the eastern side. The 100-acre property is at the corner of Skillman Road and Route 601. It is believed that the house and barn date from the mid-1800s. The property has served as a sod farm in recent years. During its time as a residence for the State Village, it was known as Walnut Lodge. It is under private ownership today.



The farmhouses of the six farms that composed New Jersey State Village for Epileptics

Courtesy of Van Harlingen Historical Society



*Top L-R: Maplewood, Fernwood, Walnut Lodge
Bottom L-R: Cedar Lodge, Meadowside, Fairview*

Remaining Land

All the land that made up the State Village and its subsequent organizations was owned by the State of New Jersey. After the North Princeton Developmental Center (its last iteration), most of the land was sold off. Examples: Montgomery High School, SAVE animal shelter, Selody sod farm, St. Charles Borromeo, Hunter Farms North, and Skillman Park. Only one building remains in the park—Village Elementary School. Two other buildings still exist and are in use today—Cedar Lodge/SAVE and Walnut Lodge.

There are two other parcels of land still owned by the Department of Corrections. The now-defunct Skillman Dairy Farm is on the former Fernwood Farm on the eastern side of Skillman Park, and the land between Montgomery High School and SAVE on the former Van Zandt property on the western side is known as Brookside Farm. There apparently is interest from the State and the local Open Space Committee in preserving this land. Just as it took many years to negotiate the sale of the defunct North Princeton Developmental Center, so it is taking a long time to close the deal on these remaining properties. Stay tuned to see how these remaining properties are settled.

When you look at the beautiful, passive Skillman Park, it is hard to imagine that it went from six farms to 110 buildings bustling on a large, self-sustaining property with over 600 patients at its peak. While we may not know all that went on at this active property, we can be thankful that modern medicine helps those with epilepsy and other conditions so they do not have to be institutionalized.

THANK YOU

This blog was made possible because of resources gathered by Reed Chapman. He has amassed several references about the history of the State Village and generously shared them with me. He also has an in-depth knowledge of the Village, having lived there for many of his formative years.

Thanks also to Candy Willis, who created the photomontage of the farms from the library resources of the Van Harlingen Historical Society.

FACTS

1. Another factor influencing the separate housing of epilepsy patients is the prevailing belief at the time in eugenics. Much is written about this and its relationship to the State Village in Blog 62.
 2. You can learn more about the farms that made up the State Village by reading *A History of the New Jersey State Village for Epileptics* by Walter Baker. It is available from the Van Harlingen Historical Society.
 3. Renowned civil engineer Charles W. Leavitt Jr. and architect A.D. Shepard Jr. designed the State Village in 1901.
 4. Montgomery Township bought the remaining 253 acres of the closed facility and spent millions of dollars removing buildings and repairing the dam at Sylvan Lake. Ultimately, it was sold to Somerset County, which now manages and maintains Skillman Park.
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SOURCES

Information

Baker, Walter C. *A History of the New Jersey State Village for Epileptics*, 2nd edition. Belle Mead, NJ, Van Harlingen Historical Society, 2005.

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Pictures

Map of State Village Farms—D. Cochran, Google Maps

Montage of State Village Farms—Candy Willis, Van Harlingen Historical Society

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