

56 Three Schools of Blawenburg

By David Cochran

Education was very important to the settlers who journeyed in the early 1600s from the Netherlands to settle in the area between the Connecticut and Delaware Rivers, a land they called New Netherland. They brought both their religion and educational philosophy with them. Their religion emerged from the Reformation, and like other European countries that “protested” the Roman Catholic faith, they were Protestants. Their denomination was known as the Reformed Dutch Church, and religion was a central part of their early educational practices.

When the first settlers came to the section of Montgomery Township that later would be called Blawenburg, there were no schools, and the local church was over four miles away, a once-a-week trek on Sundays. As a result, the first settlers were home schoolers. Boys and girls were taught the basic skills of reading (likely from the Bible) and math. Boys would then apprentice on the farm, and girls would learn to sew, cook, and keep house. Roles were clearly defined by this early education. Most would begin plying their skills at an early age as helpers on the farms.

According to Ursula Brecknell in her history of Montgomery Township, “A public school system in New Jersey was not ordered until 1834, but long before then the Dutch had erected a number of neighborhood schools, often, if not always, church related.” She further notes that the first school in Blawenburg was built before 1829. The first settlers arrived in the Blawenburg area in the 1730s, so home schooling was the format for teaching and learning for several generations.

The First School

In her book, *One-room Schoolhouses in Montgomery Township, NJ, Late 1700s to Early 1900s*, Carol Skillman Harcarik says that the first Blawenburg School was built across from the current Montgomery Fire Company No. 2 firehouse on the north side of Georgetown-Franklin Turnpike (Route 518). Ursula Brecknell locates it along Burnt Hill Road at Georgetown-Franklin Turnpike. Today there are houses across from the firehouse and a large drainage field near Burnt Hill Road and Route 518. Wherever it was, it hasn’t been there for over a century and a half.



*Possible site of Blawenburg School #1.
Montgomery Fire Company No. 2 firehouse is shown at the top of the picture.*



The road sign for Schoolhouse Corner Road is the only indicator that there was once a school nearby. The field on the right is a possible site of the original Blawenburg School.

The curriculum of this old school was broader than the typical home-schooling curriculum. According to the minutes of the Montgomery Township School Committee from September 8, 1845, the curriculum included history, geography, English grammar, philosophy, arithmetic,

reading, writing, and spelling. Noticeably absent from the list is religion; however, Rev. James R. Talmage, the Blawenburg Reformed Dutch pastor, and two local church members, Peter Voorhees and F.V.D Voorhees, were the members of the school committee that oversaw the operation of the school.

The Second School

The first school house was a long walk on the old dirt road for many children from the village and surrounding farms, and that did not sit well with some parents. School attendance was sporadic. The distance to walk, the need to do farm chores, and bad weather all impacted attendance. One of the primary reasons for abandoning the first school in Blawenburg was its distance from the farms. If you lived on the Covenhoven farm on Mountain View Road, it was a short walk, but if you were a Blaw or Van Zandt, the walk to school would take quite a while. Few families offered horse and buggy pickup and delivery services for school. They were too busy on the farm.



*Blawenburg School #2 faces Georgetown-Franklin Turnpike
just east of Blawenburg Reformed Church*

The population of Blawenburg was growing in the 1830s and 40s, and the old school outside the main village was proving unsatisfactory. On October 8, 1849, a meeting was called for parents, guardians, and others who lived in Blawenburgh (old spelling) to approve a new school to be built in a more central location in the village. Cornelius Stryker, the local judge and original owner of the general store at the Blawenburg intersection, was the treasurer of the school district, and he assessed fees to the families who lived in the Blawenburg District. They raised \$154 to buy or lease the land, purchase materials, and pay for the labor to erect a new school. It would be hard to buy a schoolhouse door for that price today.

A site right next to the church was chosen. It was near the center of Blawenburg and was much more accessible for students and parents.



The church built an addition on the old schoolhouse after 1925 and renamed the school Church House.

When the one-room schoolhouses in Montgomery had served their purpose, they were often torn down or repurposed as private residences or businesses. The Cherry Hill School on the east side of Cherry Valley Road and Great Road is a private home. The second Harlingen School is the office of Montgomery Medical Associates.

When Blawenburg School #2 ended its public school days in 1925, it didn't go out of the education business. It's still a school after 170 years. Blawenburg Church used the school building for Sunday school and other activities until the late 1950s when the small space, which had already been expanded with an additional classroom and kitchen, was too small for church purposes. The church built a multipurpose building, known today as Cook Hall, behind the school in 1959.



Blawenburg School students before 1925.

The church leased the schoolhouse to the Rock Brook School in 1974 to serve children with communication needs. The school remained in the old schoolhouse for two decades until it outgrew the facilities. The Rock Brook School is now located on Orchard Road, still serving its special purpose.



In 1999, a new concept for using the old schoolhouse emerged, and the Blawenburg Village School was created. The school serves as a Christian preschool, which according to its mission “is dedicated to nurturing the social, developmental, emotional, and spiritual lives of its children.” The school is still in operation today with expanded programming for children ages two through five, including traditional morning programs and afternoon enrichment.

It would be hard for the nineteenth century residents of Blawenburg to realize that the old Blawenburg schoolhouse could survive and remain an active building where young people can learn and grow for so many years. This building has served its tenants well for all these years, and there is every expectation that it will continue to do so into the future.

The Third School



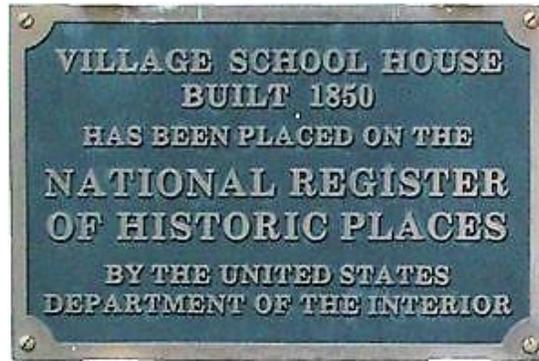
Blawenburg School #3, a two-room schoolhouse

Blawenburg School #3 opened in 1925 on the west side of the church, keeping education in the center of the village. It was a two-room schoolhouse with modern facilities like indoor plumbing, and it served as a school until Burnt Hill Road School was built in 1966. It then served as a Board of Education office for the school district for another decade until it was sold to Grey Jones for a commercial education business.

On June 2, 2002, the church bought the building from Grey Jones, owner of FLI (Film Loops Inc.). The building was renamed Memorial Hall at the suggestion of Dora Verbeyst in memory of all those who had served Blawenburg Church throughout the years. The church had great hopes of using the additional space for special projects; however, these did not materialize. The space was ultimately leased to outside vendors. In 2018, Memorial Hall was sold to The Farmhouse Store.

National Recognition

In the late 1980s, the Village of Blawenburg was placed on the National and State Registers of Historic Places. Additionally, Blawenburg Reformed Church and Blawenburg School #2 were placed on the registers. Plaques representing this designation appear on both buildings.



The Montgomery Township population has grown from a few thousand in the mid-19th century to over 24,000 today. This has caused a commensurate growth in the school population. The early settlers would find it hard to believe that there are over 4,700 students in the school system today compared with a combined school population of 300-400 students in all 10 one-room schools. Nevertheless, education was important to those early Dutch settlers just as it is for residents of Montgomery Township today.

Interesting Facts

1. It's hard to believe that there once were 10 one-room schools serving Montgomery Township and Rocky Hill. Each neighborhood had its own school and each school was considered a district. School districts included Bedensville, Blawenburgh, Cherry Valley, Griggstown, Harlingen, Plainville, Rocky Hill, Skillman, Stoutsburgh, and Unionville.
2. It was the norm for students to complete their education after eighth grade. In the early twentieth century, more students began going to high school. Since there was not a high school in Montgomery Township, students took the train from Skillman Station to attend Bound Brook High School.
3. Teachers often lived close to work a century ago. The teacher pictured here is Mary Ellen Hoagland Terhune. She graduated from the Trenton Normal School, now The College of New Jersey, in 1898. She taught in Blawenburg School #2 and lived just across the street.



*Blawenburg School students with teacher,
Mrs. Mary Ellen Hoagland Terhune, c1920*

Credits

Information Sources

Brecknell, Ursula C., *Montgomery Township, An Historic Community, 1702-1972*, Van Harlingen Historical Society, Montgomery Township, NJ, 2006.

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

Harcarik, Carol Skillman. *One-room Schoolhouses in Montgomery Township, NJ, Late 1700s to Early 1900s*. Hart Publishing, Lake Mills, WI, 2005.

<https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/news-wires-white-papers-and-books/schooling-evolving-variety>

Photos

School #1 possible site

School Road sign and School #1 possible site – D. Cochran

School #2 – old postcard

Church house – Peggy Querec

Students – Peggy Querec

Blawenburg Village School logo – website

Blawenburg School #3 – D. Cochran

National Register plaque – D. Cochran

Mrs. Terhune and students – church files

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