

**66 Katharine A. Van Zandt**  
**Blawenburg Poet and Teacher**  
**By David Cochran**



*An early picture of Katharine Van Zandt*

Katharine A. Van Zandt (1873-1944) was a published poet and teacher with a playful spirit who grew up in Blawenburg. She was the youngest of four children of John Nevius Van Zandt (1844-1935) and Margaretta Updike Van Zandt (1844-1916). Her siblings, in birth order, were Mary Updike Van Zandt (1867-1909), James Nevius Van Zandt (1869-1932), and Frances (Fannie) H. Van Zandt (1871-1956). In her later years, she lived in the house her father built behind the corner store where he served as postmaster.

Katharine's grandfather was James Van Zandt who built the Van Zandt mansion on Blawenburg-Belle Mead Road (now Route 601) in 1860. For many years it was owned by the State Village for Epileptics and subsequent state facilities. Today, the mansion is part of the SAVE animal shelter and the farmland is where Montgomery High School is located. James is described in the Van Zandt history as "one of the model agriculturalists in Somerset County." He adopted many modern agricultural practices, including an underground drainage system. James was devoted to his home, family, and church (Blawenburg Reformed Church).



*Katharine's parents*

John Nevius Van Zandt, Katharine's father, was born at the Van Zandt house his father built. He was a lifelong resident of Blawenburg and was the second longest serving postmaster in the United States at the time of his death. According to the Van Zandt history, he served "Blawenburg Post Office from 1866 until his death in 1935 without missing one day due to illness." The post office was in the back corner of the store at Route 518 and Great Road where Blawenburg Bistro is today. Katharine's account of her father's service and national award appears in Blog 18.



SIXTY YEARS  
A POSTMAS-  
TER—President  
Coolidge, with  
John H. Van  
Zandt, at his left,  
who has been  
postmaster at  
Blawenberg,  
N. J., sixty years.  
His daughter,  
Miss Kathrine  
Van Zandt, is at  
left, while Rep.  
Charles Eaton of  
New Jersey  
stands at right.  
(Photo, Interna-  
tional Newsreel.)



*This picture was taken in Washington, D.C., in 1926 when John was recognized for his 60 years of service as postmaster. (L-R: Katharine, President Coolidge, John, and Rep. Charles Eaton)*

## Teacher

We know little of Katharine's teaching years. She was a kindergarten teacher in Arlington, NJ, north of Newark near Kearny at the time of her father's death in 1935. The pictures below reveal that she taught young children. She likely did not teach in a one-room schoolhouse since the children pictured appear to be of the same age.





*Katharine with her students*

## Poet

Katharine loved poetry and published two books based on poems she wrote for her kindergarteners and other young children. In the introduction to *Singing Through the Year* (Princeton University Press, 1940), Katharine stated her belief that simple verses could help kindergarteners “in bringing out little nature lessons, in explaining holidays, and developing useful, happy and kindly habits.” She incorporated her poems in her teaching as alternate ways of expressing ideas. “When failing in efforts to find words and thoughts made clear enough for

the very young mind, I would contribute my thoughts to the poem period," she explained. After some years, she had collections of poems, which she published later in her life, likely when she retired and moved back to Blawenburg.

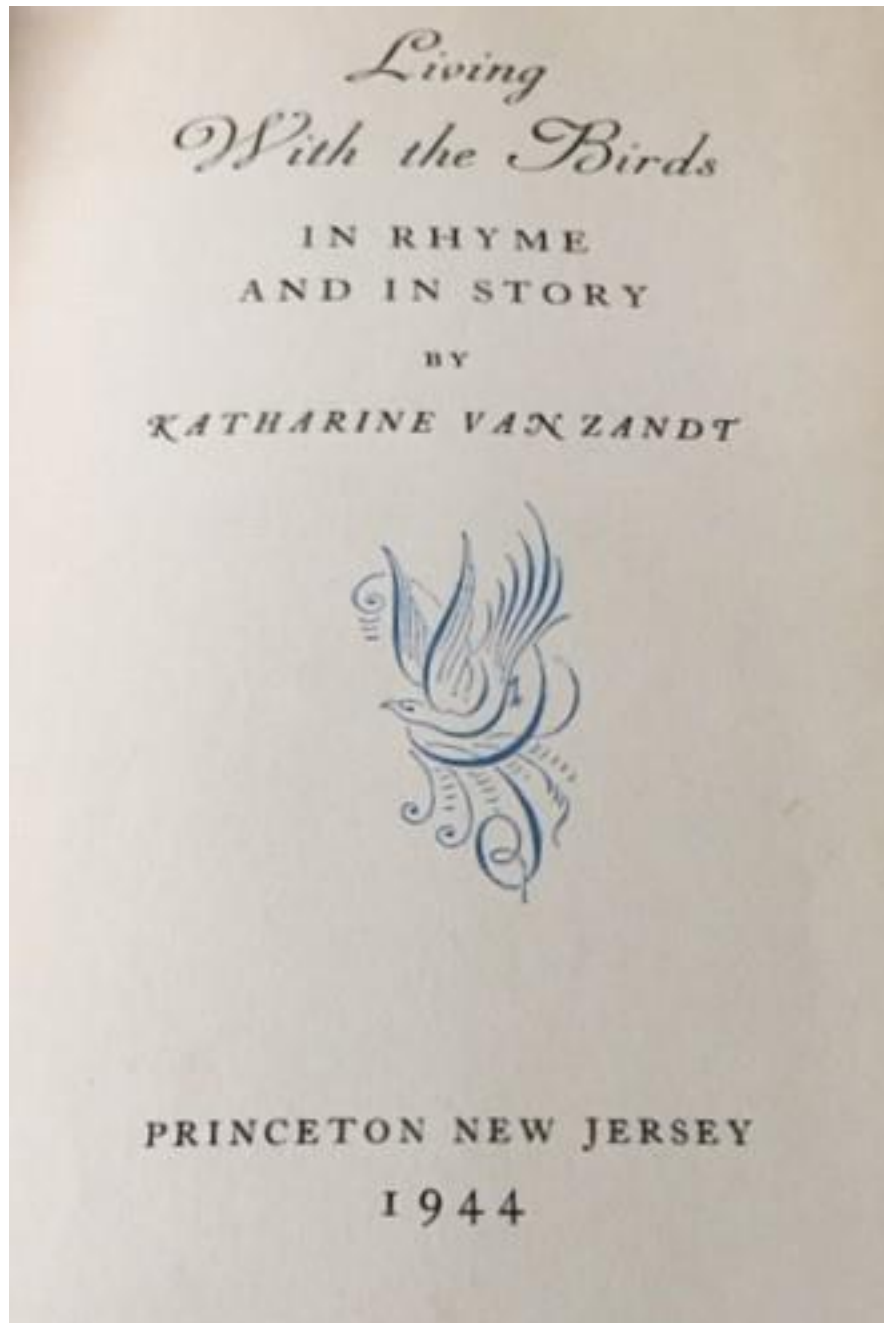
One of Katharine's poems seems to have come from the way her father greeted people at the post office. He would address his customers in a cheerful, hearty way, saying, "Now, my friend, what can I do to make you happier today?" Katharine included a poem on happiness in her book, *Singing Through the Year*.

### **Be Happy**

Do you know what it means to be happy?  
It means to laugh and skip and sing,  
Instead of looking cross and grumbling  
At every little thing.

Sometimes the day is cloudy,  
Or the sun shines out too bright;  
Or the friend on the other corner  
Wouldn't do as you would like.

Things can't always go your way,  
Others must have their turn.  
So be glad when they are happy,  
That's the happiness to learn.



Katharine had an interest in birds, which led to her final book of poetry, *Living with the Birds in Rhyme and Story* (Princeton University Press, 1944), which was published the same year she died. Her poem, *Crow*, showed how she dealt with pesky crows by diverting them to another location.

### **Crow**

My daddy made a funny man  
That is no man at all,  
Just a stick with coat and hat

Standing by the wall.

But he can scare off all the crows,  
And drive them far away,  
When these crows come to the yard  
Where our baby chickens play.

The crow is black, as black as black can be,  
And very big and strong;  
We'll let him have the worms and grubs,  
But to eat our chicks is wrong.

He calls, "Caw, caw," and flies away  
When he sees the scare-crow-man.  
He'll find his dinner somewhere else,  
I am sure he can.

### **Sisters and Friends**

James Nevius Van Zandt, Katharine's brother, built a house on the Great Road just south of the store where their father served as postmaster. Fannie and Katharine lived in the house. After Katharine's death in 1944, Fannie moved to a house that was catty-corner from her father's post office on the northwest corner of Blawenburg-Belle Mead Road (Route 601) and Route 518. It was a two-story house that preceded the Dairy Queen (see Blog 21). It was moved to Hollow Road when the Dairy Queen was built in the 1960s. Blawenburg Square shopping area is at this site today.



*Fannie (L) and Katharine (R) shown in a picture from the 1870s.  
Neither married, and they were close friends for life.*

Peggy Querec and her sister, Nancy Landuyt, lived with their parents, Bill and Grace Terhune on the first floor of Fannie's house, and Fannie lived on the second floor. Peggy has fond memories of going upstairs to have Fannie read books to them. After story time, they would play hide and seek, which ended in the kitchen where they got a snack.

### **Interesting and Interested**

One of Katharine's friends, Jimmy (last name unknown) referred to her by her nickname in a letter to her sister Fannie following her death as "the beautiful, lovable, and always interested Kittie." Later in the same letter, he remembered Kittie as "interesting and interested." She had a broad interest in life and related well to others.

Katharine often had guests at her home for social events. Wendy Drift used to live in the Saums' house next to the corner store/post office on Route 518. Katharine was her backyard neighbor, and Wendy remembers going to Katharine's house for outdoor tea parties. They would dress up and have fun. Katharine would hang party favors and spoons from the branches of the bushes and trees and play games. These parties were not just for kids; adults participated, too.





*A tea party at Katharine's house.*



*This picture from Singing Through the Year has a caption Dressed-Up in Grandfather's Wedding Clothes. It was likely taken at the James Van Zandt house on Route 601. The four people pictured may be Katharine, Mary, James, and Fannie. Some may be dressed in Grandmother's wedding clothes.*

Katharine lived a rich, full life. While we don't know many details about it, the things we know paint a picture of a woman who was successful as a teacher and poet. She enjoyed life as she helped children learn, wrote poems for children to enjoy, and shared the company of others. A simple but fulfilling life.

### **Interesting Facts**

1. Katharine was interested in Van Zandt family history. Handwritten notes and a newspaper article were found with her belongings after her death. The newspaper article was about an early Van Zandt relative, Catherine Van Zandt Maxwell (1763-1830), who danced the minuet with George Washington at a "dancing-hall" in New York City just a week after his inauguration as our first president. Look for more on this in a future blog.



2. In 1977, when he bought the house where Fannie and Katharine lived just south of Blawenburg Post Office, Steve Boynton was told that the house was built in the early 1930s by James Nevius Van Zandt, Fannie and Katharine's brother. Sometime after Katharine died, the house was sold to Walter and Mazie Terhune (see Blog 50), then to David and Helen Evans, and finally to Steve and Julie Boynton.

3. All the members of the John N. Van Zandt family are buried in Blawenburg Church Cemetery.



## Sources

### Information

Bill and Jane Van Zandt—conversation about the John N. Van Zandt family

Peggy Terhune Querec—conversation about living at Fannie's house

Somary, Anne Van Zandt and Van Zandt, William Chamblee. *Our Van Zandt Family History, beginning 1628*. December 2018.

Van Zandt, Katharine. Letter from Katharine describing her father's work. 1932.

Van Zandt, Katharine. *Living with the Birds in Rhyme and Story*. Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1944.

Van Zandt, Katharine. *Singing through the Year*. Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1940.

## **Pictures**

Book title page—from *Living with the Birds*

All other pictures were scanned from the Van Zandt family archives, generously shared by Bill and Jane Van Zandt.

Copyright © 2021 by David Cochran. All rights reserved.