

Blog 124 ~ A Lot of History

By David Cochran

In this blog, we explore the history of one property, just one lot. It has been the home of families, restaurants, and even a veterinary clinic. It's in a prominent place in the heart of Blawenburg, where the crossroads meet.

The Village of Blawenburg looks remarkably the same as it did in the 1800s, with almost all the buildings and properties that have earned it placement on State and National Registers of Historic Places still intact. During this time, many events have occurred. Some of them were routine happenings, while others were more dramatic. Perhaps the most moving experience of all was the relocation of the house that stood on the northwest corner of Georgetown Franklin Turnpike (County Route 518) and the Blawenburg-Belle Mead Road (aka County Route 13, now 601).

This tale involves many people: residents and former residents, entrepreneurs, and bystanding and upstanding Blawenburgians. It isn't the tale of a single event; rather, it's about a series of happenings over many years on one property as it has gone from an empty lot to a two-family residence to several restaurants and a strip mall.

Let's start at what is sometimes called Blawenburg Corner, the village's only crossroads. As you can see from the picture below, there wasn't much at that intersection around the turn of the 20th century. You can look east on Route 518 and see some houses and businesses that were built in the early 19th century. The oldest of these is The Tavern, the house on the left side of the picture. (See Blog 15.) The photographer stood on the vacant lot in the foreground of this classic photo near where the words Blawenburg, N.J. appear. None of the buildings discussed in this blog were old enough to qualify for the registry; nevertheless, they all have a story to tell.



Downtown Blawenburg at the turn of the 20th century. This blog focuses on the property depicted here as a vacant lot at the intersection known as Blawenburg Corner



Blawenburg Corner as it looks today.

Living in Downtown Blawenburg

The Van Zandts built a house on the vacant lot on the northwest corner in the early 1900s. It was a two-family unit with a large front porch.

Fannie Van Zandt, the daughter of longtime postmaster John N. Van Zandt, lived on the second floor of the building. In the 1950s, Bill and Grace Terhune and their daughters, Nancy and Peggy, lived on the first floor. Peggy Terhune Querec recalls how different it was living in that location at that time. She has fond memories of her upstairs neighbor, who they called Miss Fannie. "If we were ever bored, we would ask permission to go visit her. She had lots of books, and she would read them to us. She also would let us cut up magazines and paste them on pieces of paper. The best part was a snack. Often, she would give us ice cream, but we had to go downstairs and sit on the steps to eat it."

Bill Van Zandt remembers going to Cousin Fannie's house to recite the Bible verses he was charged to learn in Blawenburg Reformed Church Sunday School.

Querec remembers the buildings at the intersection. "The corner was the center of town. On the corner were the garage owned by John Ficken, the Blawenburg Fire Company No. 2 Firehouse, the liquor store owned by Jimmy Ajamian, two general stores (Musselman's and Hillpot's Hilltop), Jazzy's barbershop, the Blawenburg Cemetery, and the Blawenburg Post Office. It was a cluster of businesses that formed a community."

Other businesses came and went from Blawenburg Corner over the years. The house remained in its location until the early 1960s, when a local resident had an idea for a restaurant.

An Entrepreneur's Idea

Bill Wellemeyer had lived in Montgomery Township for many years, having grown up on the family farm on Bedens Brook Road. Montgomery Township was a farming community at that time. Portions of the Wellemeyer farm were sold and became part of Cherry Valley Country Club after dairy farming was no longer feasible. Wellemeyer had an entrepreneurial spirit and experience in the restaurant business. He and his business partner, Martin Cummins, leased a portion of the building owned by James Ajamian on the northeast corner of the Blawenburg intersection. Ajamian also ran a liquor store in a part of the store. The complex was known as Towne House, and Wellemeyer and Cummins's operation included a café, grocery store, and Sinclair gas station.

In the early 1960s, Wellemeyer and Cummins wanted to expand their food interests. They kept looking at the property across the street where the Van Zandt house was located. They thought the property would be a great location for a franchise restaurant, but the big house was an enormous obstacle to deal with. After some discussion with the Van Zandts, the partners bought the property to make way for a Dairy Queen ice cream shop and restaurant. While it might have been easier to tear the house down, it was in good condition. They opted for the more daunting task: buying a new property and moving the house to a new location.

The next decisions they had to make were challenging. Where would they move the house to and how would they actually move it? While we don't know the moving company details, we know where the house was relocated. They purchased a lot right next to the railroad tracks on Hollow Road, where the house still sits today.

Moving the House

The house needed to be off its foundation and off the property so the Dairy Queen project could get underway. To open the restaurant in the summer of 1964, the move had to take place in the fall of 1963.

House moving is not a speedy process, and this move was especially slow. Once the house was moved from its original location, it was placed in a field on the south side of Route 518. Keith Van Zandt said the house was placed across the road from the houses of J.Percy Van Zandt, his grandfather, and Albert Van Zandt, his uncle, in the field owned by the Van Zandt's Broad View Farm. Keith Van Zandt remembered, "It sat there through the winter before completing its journey the next spring down Hollow Road to its new site by the railroad tracks. I'm not sure if it sat there because it was stuck in the mud, or because the new site wasn't ready, or both."

The picture below, which appeared in the Princeton Town Topics, was taken while the house still sat in the field in March 1964.

There are varying reports from those who remember the move. All of them were in elementary school at the time. Keith Van Zandt and Ann (Brownie) Hartshorne Allen were in the fourth grade in Blawenburg School (now the Homestead warehouse). They both remember their beloved teacher, Mrs. Zimmerman, taking them on a field trip to the corner to see the house being moved. There were likely many other locals who couldn't resist going to Blawenburg Corner to see the only house moving in Blawenburg's history. Several other people said they missed the move because they were in school in other locations or working.

Dick Van Zandt remembers being amazed by the move. "I recall watching it outside our living room window and marveling at how anyone could put a house on wheels and roll it around. It was hard for a 12-year-old to really comprehend."



NO TOGETHERNESS HERE: This large, two-family clapboard home sits in isolated grandeur in a field in Blawenburg awaiting its final resting place on Hollow Road, Skillman, about a half-mile away. Originally, it was located at the intersection of the Blawenburg-Belle Mead Road. The owners, William Wellemeyer and Martin Cummins, who also own the Towne House across the street, plan to use the vacant site to build a restaurant. (Staff Photo)

The house is parked in Van Zandt's field. Note the twin silos of Woodacres Farm in the distance on the right. They are located south of Blawenburg, just off Great Road, about ½ mile away.

Although he lived on Hollow Road, Gary Eversen rode his bike to Blawenburg for the big event. He remembers, "It was a big deal for little kids (and likely big kids, too). The house traveled across the fields and down Hollow Road. I just remember how slow the house move was. I believe it took two days. When it got to its new location, the house sat on blocks for a while before being lowered onto the new foundation."



Many years after its move, the house is still a two-family dwelling on Hollow Road. Note that the original porch was removed.

Dairy Queen

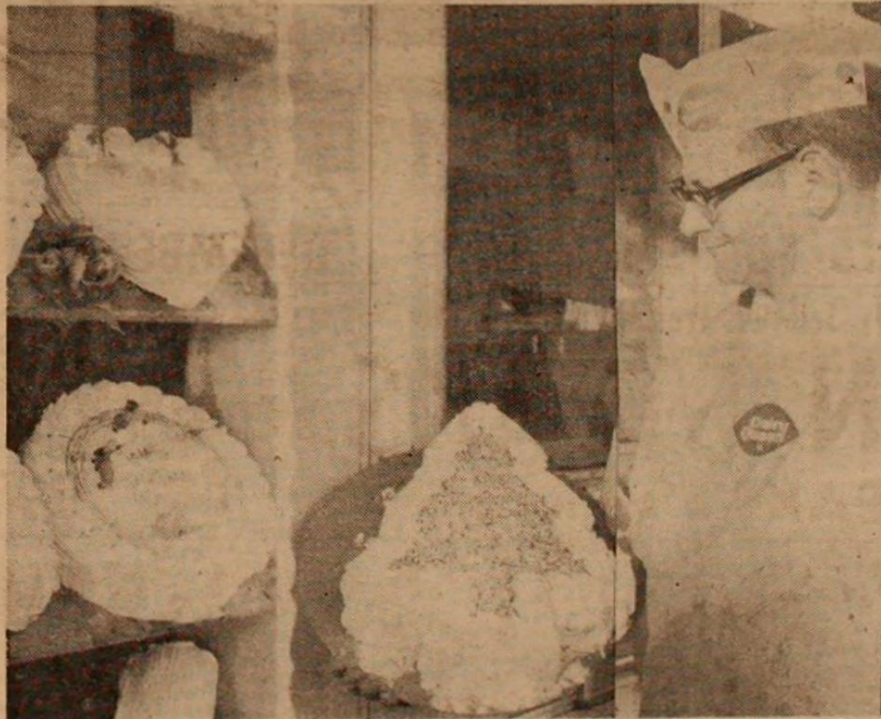
When the Dairy Queen opened in 1964, it was likely the most modern building in the village. It had the traditional red barn roof, also known as a gambrel roof, a serving area inside the front doors, and a room for indoor seating on its west side. It had all the other DQ trappings, including the bright red lips logo with Dairy Queen on it in front, just below the roof.



Many Dairy Queens have windows to take orders and provide pickup directly in front, but this DQ was an exception. Larry May remembers that there was a dispute with Montgomery Township about having an outside walk-up window to serve customers. Montgomery had an ordinance at the time that required all ordering and pickup be done inside the facility. To comply, Wellemeyer and Cummins enclosed the walk-up window. They put a small addition on the front with double doors that led to an ordering and pickup counter. Once orders were filled, patrons could go to the restaurant area or leave to eat elsewhere.

The Blawenburg DQ operated year-round, but it did a bustling ice cream business in the warmer months. Lines would form as the heat of the day subsided. Little Leaguers, families, and others visited the DQ for their evening treats. Kids could safely ride their bikes to the restaurant, and local workers frequented the DQ for lunch.

Planing A Holiday Party?



Bill Wellemeyer of Dairy Queen holds one of his creations, an ice cream and cake Christmas Tree on sale for the holidays.

Let us furnish the dessert.

Special For The Holiday

Cake and Ice Cream Christmas Tree
Regularly 9.50 SPECIAL **\$7.95**

Order anytime between now & Christmas

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Ice cream cakes and log rolls made to special order.
Also parfaits and dessert novelties in bulk for caterers.



DAIRY QUEEN BRAZIER

RT. 518 at The Great Road, Blawenburg 466-1793

Bill Wellemeyer displays one of his ice cream cakes in a Town Topics ad.



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is "family
nite"

BUY 'EM BY THE SACKFUL!

SAVE 50¢!

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FLAVORFUL CHAR-BROILED
BURGERS

5 FOR ONLY **\$1.75**

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DAIRY QUEEN, BRAZIER'S

Blawenburg N. J.

corner of Rt. 518 and The Great Road

466-1793

An early Town Topics ad for Blawenburg DQ, September 1964

As time went on, Bill Wellemeyer bought out Martin Cummins's interest in the Dairy Queen and dropped the Dairy Queen franchise. He ran it as the Hilltop Family Restaurant for a while and then closed it.



The Dairy Queen became the Hilltop Family Restaurant. Notice the absence of any Dairy Queen signage.

In 1987, Wellemeyer was approached by three local investors: Neil Van Cleef, Skip Rawson, and Don Long. They offered him a good price to buy the restaurant, and he accepted. Van Cleef knew a young man who had restaurant experience, so they hired him to restore the restaurant, which they renamed the Hilltop Sub Station.

"I was only 17 1/2," Adrian Johnston said. "They had me fix up the place, and then I opened and ran it." Despite his youth, Adrian had a lot of experience, having worked in a pizza restaurant at age 12 and then in a sub shop for several years after that. Running a restaurant came naturally to him.

He kept some of the original menu and added items that sold well in other restaurants. Many people remember the restaurant for its ice cream and food, but others remember its unique roof color.

The red restaurant roof was fading and needed a coat of paint, Adrian explained. "My friend Cory and I were going to paint it, so we went to the store and picked a color we thought would work well. But when we got it to the restaurant, it turned out to be a very dark purple color. Not knowing what to do with 10 gallons of this paint, we just applied it to the building!" In hindsight, this might have been an excellent marketing strategy. Everyone knew the purple restaurant in Blawenburg, and the business flourished.

Although he didn't own it, Johnston continued to run the Hilltop Sub Station until 2004. By that time, Van Cleef had bought out his partners and had other plans for the corner. He informed Johnston that the restaurant would be closed to make way for a strip mall he planned to build.

The restaurant soon closed, but it took six more years to get all the approvals from the township to build the stores. Called Blawenburg Village Square, the mall has historic aesthetics to blend in with the surrounding village. It has a colonial appearance on the front facing Route 518, keeping parking and business access in the rear of the buildings. Businesses occupy the first floor, and apartments are on the second level.



Progressive Veterinary Care, the eastern end unit of the Blawenburg Village Square sits in the approximate location of the original house and restaurants that preceded it.

A lot has happened on this lot at Blawenburg Corner over the past century or so. Meanwhile, in the acreage behind the lot is the Blawenburg Reformed Church Cemetery, where many who remember the lot before it was developed are resting in peace.

Also of Interest

1. In the 1950s, times were certainly different in Blawenburg. There was no traffic light at Blawenburg Corner, so Peggy Querec and her sister could walk freely across what was then County Route 13 to get candy and ice cream at Suvic's store. They even let their dog, Corky, run freely. He went missing one day and was found the next day sitting on a fire truck inside the fire station (now New World Pizza).
2. See Blog 21, *Sweet Memories at the DQ*, to learn more about the history of the Blawenburg Dairy Queen. Note that this blog updates some of that history.
3. Barb Reid remembers going to the Dairy Queen for a Dilly bar, vanilla ice cream on a stick coated with chocolate. Her mother gave Barb and her brother and sister a dollar to cover the cost for all three Dillies. Times have changed!
4. The summer of 1964 was a busy time in Blawenburg. In addition to the new Dairy Queen, the Wally Byam Caravan brought 5,000 people and their Airstream campers to the field where Montgomery High School now stands. You can read about it in Blog 20.

Sources

Information

Many people provided information for this blog. All of them lived in or near Blawenburg when the events in this blog took place. Thanks to all of them.

Keith Van Zandt

Richard Van Zandt

Gary Eversen

Bill Van Zandt

Ann Hartshorne Allen

Larry May

Peggy Terhune Querec

Bill Wellemeyer

Adrian Johnston

Barb Reid

Pictures

Blawenburg Corner around 1900—old postcard, public domain

Blawenburg Corner today—D. Cochran

The house in Van Zandt field—Town Topics, March 12, 1964

House today—Zillow.com

Dairy Queen logo—Google

Dairy Queen ad—Town Topics, September 17, 1964

Hilltop Family Restaurant—J. Arehart, Weird NJ

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