



The Monmouth County Historical Association Presents

The Covenhoven House Audio Tour

Welcome to Covenhoven House! Thank you for visiting! Today you will learn about the home you see before you, the inhabitants, and the historic role it played in the longest battle of the American Revolution, the Battle of Monmouth. Covenhoven House is one of the finest surviving rural architectural interpretations of the Georgian style, deliberately chosen by descendants of some of the earliest Dutch settlers of the area. William and Elizabeth Covenhoven decided to spend the money accumulated from multiple inheritances in a visible and powerful way, through the construction of an impressive home which served not as a residence for a growing family but as the house in which Elizabeth and William planned to spend the rest of their days. It is through Elizabeth's bravery, certainly motivated by her love for her home and all it represented, that the Covenhoven House was saved from almost certain destruction by the British Army. As it did nearly two and three quarters centuries ago, the Covenhovens' house stands beside the Burlington Path, welcoming visitors to Freehold with its charm and elegance.

History of the Property

Let's step back to at least 1690, before the hustle and bustle of traffic surrounded this property, when a 500-acre tract of land was patented to Thomas Warne, an original proprietor of New Jersey. The property was L-shaped, fronted on the west by the Manalapan River, and on the Southeast by the Old Burlington Path.

The land changed hands several times, though not all the owners lived here. In 1706, the 100 acre lot upon which Covenhoven was built was sold to Benjamin Cook for £150. He built a small dwelling approximately 17 by 20 feet, about 400 feet back from the Burlington Path. Cook was apparently a man not to be trifled with, and was one of several men indicted in 1700 by the Grand Jury for "riotously assembling" and assaulting Sheriff John Stewart and Henry Leonard. The assault allegedly included both Stewart and Leonard being beaten and their swords taken. Less than a year later, Cook was again up on charges as one of a hundred men who participated in a Middletown riot during the trial of Moses Butterworth, who was accused of piracy and confessed to sailing with Captain William Kidd. Although indicted, neither Cook nor any of the other rioters were effectively prosecuted, so high was the public feeling against the British government.

Upon his death, Benjamin Cook left most of his estate, valued at £267, to his son, Nicholas.

The Covenhovens

In 1723, Elizabeth Van Cleaf, or Libertje as she was christened in Dutch, married William Albertse Covenhoven, a fifth generation American and the oldest of twelve children. The couple welcomed their first of ten children later that same year in a small farmhouse on this original tract of land. They lived here as farmers for 24 years when, in 1747, Elizabeth's father passed away and left her the substantial sum of £300 in his will. The following year, William received *his* share of his father's estate. The couple found themselves with a large amount of ready cash and in 1751 decided to use the money to build a fine new home. William purchased 100 acres from Nicholas Cook, and in the summer of 1752, construction began on the house. Burlington Path originally passed in front of the house, but in 1790 it was straightened and re-routed to pass behind it, which is why the house faces away from the road today.

Architectural Details

The builder of Covenhoven House may be the same man responsible for the construction of Old Tennent Church, also in Freehold. Old Tennent Church was constructed between the spring of 1751 and the spring of 1752, and the architectural similarities between the church and the house have long been noted. It was not until the discovery of the Wikoff and Rhea account books containing Covenhoven's purchases for his house's construction that the relationship between the two structures was made clear. Church records show that the construction of Old Tennent began in February or March of 1751 and was finished in the spring of 1752, immediately prior to construction on the Covenhoven's new residence. The master builder for Old Tennent was John Davies, chosen to be "Chief Carpenter to Carry on the Work of the Meetinghouse or Church...at four shillings and Six pence light money a Day and his Accomodation..." The provision of room and board suggests that Davies was not from the Freehold area.

Ledger books kept by local merchants include William Covenhoven's purchases of nails, hinges, glass, and paint, indicating that construction took place from early 1752 through June of 1753. The purchase of eighteen thousand nails in September indicates the house was being shingled.

The Covenhovens were of Dutch descent, and the house incorporates some distinctly Dutch features within its $\frac{3}{4}$ Georgian styling. It has retained many of its original features.

If you are facing the front of the house - the side furthest from the road - you will notice the split door to the right. This is known as a Dutch door, and is a convenient way to let in air and light, while keeping small children in, and animals out.

The front door in the center is also original to the home, and welcomes you into the large center hall where William conducted his business and received associates.

The twelve-over-twelve windows you see are typical of the era - many of these panes are now reproduction glass. The reason for the small panes is due in part to the rough start to glass factories in colonial America. It was much easier to ship smaller panes over land and sea without breaking them than it was larger ones.

The decorative moulding running along the top is called dentil moulding, and it was originally likely painted either red or blue to contrast with the original natural wood color of the house.

The decorative shingles you see are called round butt shingles, and were in keeping with the Dutch style. Most are reproduction now, but if you move to the left side of the house and look up, you will notice that the first dozen rows or so are thinner than the rest of the shingles. These thinner shingles are original to the house.

In November, Covenhoven paid for panes of glass, glazier's points and paint, indicating that work on the house had moved to the interior. During the winter, finishing items such as H-hinges for thirteen doors and other hardware were bought. When construction began on the house, Elizabeth was already 47, William 50. Of their ten children, at least three were already grown and married, with families of their own. Their youngest, Maria, born in 1746, was seven when the family moved into their new house. This was clearly not a starter home with the needs of a growing family to consider. When the Covenhovens' house was completed, it was extraordinary for the time and place it was built. In the mid-eighteenth century, Freehold was still a small community of less than 100 inhabitants. At the time of its construction, compared to the smaller homes of the other settlers, the Covenhoven house must have seemed a great mansion.

Lives of the Enslaved

The presence of a "Negro wench" in Elizabeth Covenhoven's 1778 deposition statement indicates the Covenhovens, like many Dutch farmers of Monmouth at the time, owned slaves. Although the term "wench" was used in the eighteenth century to indicate female indentured servants or young, unmarried local women working as household help, it more commonly appeared in Colonial-era documents to refer specifically to female slaves. At the time of William Covenhoven's death in 1790, he owned four slaves. Their names appeared in the inventory of his belongings: "Negro man Cyro," valued at £30; "Negro wench Nanny [Nancy]," valued at £22.10; "Negro boy Bross," valued at £65; and "Negro boy Hercules," valued at £40. In William Covenhoven's original 1786 will, mention was also made of "the Negro wench Yan," who was the mother of Cyro and Nancy.

Yana lived to be quite old for the era, and even older for a slave. Life expectancy for the enslaved in the mid-18th century, depending upon the lifestyle they were forced into, was about half that of the white population. It depended on many factors, such as high infant and childhood mortality from sickness, disease, and poor nutrition, but on average, life expectancy in Colonial America at this time was about 38-40 years old. Both the Covenhovens and Yana were of advanced ages for their time, as Yana was about 60 years old at the time of William's 1786 will. Elizabeth was in her early eighties, while William lived to 88 years old.

Slave life for males on small NJ farms such as the Covenhovens' typically consisted of agricultural tasks in the production of Indian corn, oats, flax, buckwheat, winter grain and

pasture grass. Winter tasks consisted of tending to the livestock, slaughtering, meat curing, threshing oats and breaking flax, cutting wood for fires, hauling limestone to crush down for the soil, and rail splitting for fencing.

In the spring, the planting and plowing began. The land would need to be cleared and planted. In order to sustain good soil health, manure was a necessary addition, so you would typically find approximately 30 sheep, around five or six cows, and maybe as many horses on a small farm. These animals would require daily care, so animal husbandry was an important skill to master.

Summer brought more harvesting of potatoes, wheat, hay and corn. Tools were sharpened to help ease the strenuous task of heavy physical labor. The harvest was carted to market and the planting of pumpkins began. Apple season came in the fall and production of cider commenced. This long cycle began anew with preparation for the colder months such as the slaughtering of animals for winter meat storage.

The female enslaved spent a good portion of time in the domestic sphere, but their duties often extended beyond. Their skills were many and widely varied. Childcare, cooking, baking, brewing ale, cleaning, washing, sewing and clothes making, spinning flax and weaving cloth, soap and candle making, medicinal skill, the list goes on. Despite this great workload, she was not exempt from sharing agricultural duties in the fields, such as planting, plowing, and harvesting crops. On small and mid-sized farms such as the Covenhovens', white women often shared in the domestic duties of their enslaved females.

The Covenhovens operated a mixed-use farm upon which they had dairy cows and pigs, grew grains such as corn and barley, and produced flax and linen, potentially in the production of thread. The enslaved here were likely a combination of house and farm laborers.

The enslaved in the more prominent Monmouth County homes such as the Covenhovens' were typically privy to some form of basic education, better quality clothing, lodging and nutrition, resulting in longer life spans. 18th-century homes on small farms often reserved the quarters above the kitchen for the enslaved, as outbuildings for lodging a large number of slaves were not necessary. Considered part of the master's "kitchen family," these spaces were often dark, hot, and stuffy. Church records show that slaves were often baptized into the master's religion. Yana was baptized at the Old Tennent Church in 1738. She baptized her children Cyro and Nancy there in 1747 along with Mack, who is also listed as her son. Mack was not of the Covenhoven household, though he was clearly nearby. It is possible that he was enslaved by one of the few local families.

While small farm living afforded slaves and masters potential opportunities for developing closer relationships than on large plantations, the fact remains that slaves were considered property, and any slave or member of their family could be sold off at any moment. They were often distributed amongst the master's children upon his death; some were required to stay behind with

the widow, and some were given to a master's daughter upon entering her marriage years as part of a dowry to make her a more attractive prospect for a husband. Strict laws in New Jersey afforded masters the right to brutally punish their slaves without so much as a reason or a penalty for any level of brutality, even that which resulted in death. Wives were separated from husbands; children were separated from parents and siblings. As for the enslaved family here at Covenhoven, William's 1790 will transferred each of them separately to one of the Covenhoven children. The heartbreaking nature of human bondage remains the most cruel, brutal and shameful aspect of early America.

Clinton's Arrival

On a sweltering Friday in late June, British General Sir Henry Clinton and his exhausted men arrived in Freehold, then known as Monmouth Courthouse. Less than a month before, General Howe had been ordered back to England, and the command of the British troops stationed at Philadelphia was given to General Clinton. Along with his new command came orders to evacuate the troops to New York. Disobeying orders to go by water, Clinton marched his troops across New Jersey. The marching British soldiers and the accompanying line of baggage trains stretched almost twelve miles. Upon their arrival in Freehold, the exhausted British Army pitched their tents in the rain along the road they had just traveled, stretching in a long line from four miles west of the court house to the junction of what are now Routes 79 and 537. Clinton first chose the stone house of Thomas Thomson Sr., four miles west of Freehold, as his headquarters but left this location late in the afternoon of 26 June. He and his staff made their way to the home of William and Elizabeth Covenhoven. The house, one of the finest in the immediate area and much closer to the main body of the British army, would serve as Clinton's headquarters for the next two days. Clinton's reason for halting his troops in Freehold was clear. In the oppressive weather, the men required a rest. Freehold's terrain offered the British an impressive defensive position, crucial in light of the proximity of the American forces, which were approaching Freehold from Englishtown to the west. The approach of the British army terrified the residents of Freehold and its surrounding countryside, many of whom fled their homes as quickly as they could. A letter from "the patriot Dr. Thomas Henderson," which appeared in the Jersey Gazette on 18 July 1778, dramatically recounted just why local residents feared the approach of the British forces:

The devastation they have made in some parts of Freehold exceeds perhaps any they have made for the distance in their route thro' this State, having in the neighborhood above the Court-House burnt and destroyed eight dwelling-houses, all on farms adjoining each other, besides barns and out-houses...The first they burnt was my own, then Benjamin Covenhoven's, George Walker's, Hannah Solomon's, Benjamin Van Cleave's, David Covenhoven's and Garrit Vanderveer's; John Benham's house and barn they wantonly tore and broke down so as to render them useless...It may not be improper to observe that the two first mentioned houses that were burnt adjoined the farm, and were in full view of the place wherein Gen. Clinton quartered. In the neighborhood below the Court-house they burnt the house of Matthew Lane, Cornelius

Covenhoven, John Autonidas, and one Emmans; these were burnt the morning before their defeat.

The smoke from the burning farmhouses must have been visible to seventy-three-year-old Elizabeth Covenhoven from the doorway of her beloved home. The house represented both success and security for the elderly couple, and Elizabeth was not about to abandon it. Instead, she decided to stay and attempt to save it from destruction. As the British approached, Elizabeth prepared for their arrival.

Thankfully, Elizabeth had warning of the British Army's approach. She was able, with the help of enslaved servants and possibly other family members, to cart away almost all the household goods, including the furniture. The farm animals, including milk cows and horses, remained on the property. Once her possessions were hidden, Elizabeth waited for the enemy's arrival. When Clinton and his staff arrived at the house, hot and tired, they were frustrated to find that the house was empty, with only an elderly woman and her servants in residence. Apparently, General Clinton spoke directly to Elizabeth, promising her that if she told them where the household goods were hidden, nothing would be taken and the house would be left standing. Elizabeth, gambling on Clinton's word, revealed the whereabouts of at least part of her possessions.

On July 30, 1778, Elizabeth Covenhoven appeared before Justice of the Peace Peter Schenck and gave a detailed account of what happened next:

...some time after they had been there, she saw a soldier driving her horses away, upon which she applied to them to perform their promises, and one of the General's Aids said she should be paid for them; she answered that she could not spare them; he then took down the marks, and declared they should be returned; but she heard no more of them. Some little time after she perceived all her cattle, including her milk cows, driven by the same manner; she then made alike application and said, they must go without milk themselves if their cows were taken away; he then gave orders to have them stopped; but before they went off they killed and took every one of them, not leaving her a single hoof. This deponent further saith, That the General and his Aids finding her furniture chiefly sent away, were exceedingly urgent to have them sent for, declaring it likely they would be destroyed where they were concealed, but if they were in the house they should be safe; she told them she had no way to send for them; upon which they ordered a waggon and guard to go with the Negro wench to bring the goods, and they brought one waggon load home and placed a guard over it, and refused absolutely suffering her to have any thing out of it; That the next morning she found almost everything of value was taken out of the waggon, and only a bible and some books, with a few trifles, left, which were scattered on the ground; she then applied to the General himself to have liberty to take these few things his Honor had left her – he ordered one of his Aids to go to the guards and suffer her to have them – she followed him, and he said, here you damned old rebel, with one foot in the grave, take them. This deponent also saith, That though a very old woman, she

was obliged to sleep on a cellar door in her milk room for two nights, and when she applied for only a coverlet it was refused her; That by the time they went away her house was stripped of her beds, bedding, the cloaths of her whole family, and every thing of any value. The farm was also left in the same situation; and that at moderate computation, her loss amounted to 3000 pounds, and that she lost this in trusting to the personal honor of Sir Henry Clinton, which threw her off her guard...

One mystery which surfaces after reading Elizabeth's dramatic and poignant account of her treatment at the hands of the British Army is this: where was her husband, William, while this was happening? He was seventy-six at this time, but Elizabeth never mentions him in her deposition. It is somewhat unlikely that at this age, he had taken up arms against the enemy. Instead, it is a possibility that he was unwell or ailing, and Elizabeth had made sure he was out of the house, perhaps at the home of one of their children, to make sure he was safe if the British set fire to their home. It is possible that William may have taken refuge at his sister Rachel's house nearby, but we will never know for sure where he was that day, or why he agreed to let Elizabeth stay behind.