



Monmouth
County
Historical
Association

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COVENHOVEN HOUSE BACKGROUND AND NOTES

William Covenhoven was born in Monmouth County in 1702. His great-great grandfather was a Dutch settler who came to New Amsterdam (New York) in 1630. By the time William was born, the Dutch in New Netherlands were under English rule. However, his family, like other Dutch families, strongly maintained Dutch customs of language, dress, religion, and diet.

William married Elizabeth about 1723 and bought a farm soon after. They raised ten children and lived quite comfortably for the next twenty years until suddenly, in the 1740s, they inherited a large sum of cash. This was very unusual, because at this time, most business was conducted through barter, rather than through the exchange of money, like today.

This sudden fortune dramatically changed the lives of William and Elizabeth increasing their social position, and making them important citizens in the community. In order to show off their new social standing, they donated money to the new building of their new English-speaking church, the Old Tennent Church, and bought a pew in a prominent area of the church.

Also, in 1752, they built a new and elegant house in the most up-to-date style, which we know today as the Covenhoven House. The house, which combines both elements of the English Georgian style and traditional Dutch features, is an interesting example of the transition to the higher style in architecture and furniture in the mid-eighteenth century, in a rural and relatively unsophisticated area in central New Jersey.

Thus, this house reflects the increased prosperity of the Covenhovens, their subsequent change in lifestyle, and their integration into the dominant English culture in New Jersey and the Colonies as a whole.

The Covenhoven House has been restored and opened to the public by the Monmouth County Historical Association. The interpretation and furnishing plans are based on a 1790 inventory taken after William Covenhoven's death.

The Covenhoven House of Freehold, New Jersey, is an excellent example of how the merging of the Dutch and English cultures in Monmouth County, in the middle of the eighteenth century, influenced the architecture of the period. This house, which was built in the 1750s, must have been one of the finest homes in the area at that time, reflecting the social circumstances of its owners, William and Elizabeth Covenhoven. Both the exterior and the interior incorporate the newer, high style in colonial architecture, the Georgian style, while still retaining many traditional Dutch features.

According to Richard P. McCormick, "the most striking characteristic of the population of New Jersey in the eighteenth century was its extraordinary diversity."¹ New Jersey, like all the colonies at this time, was now under English rule. However, on the eve of the Revolution, the Dutch, making up about one-sixth of the population, were the largest ethnic group next to the English in New Jersey.

William Albertse Covenhoven was born in Monmouth County, New Jersey, on March 7, 1702, the eldest child of Albert and Neeltje Covenhoven, fourth generation Dutch settlers in the New World. Albert Covenhoven, a farmer, had moved to what is now Marlboro Township in 1700, from Flatlands, Long Island. This was not uncommon, as Adrian C. Leiby points out, "Dutch New Jersey was settled by men and women from the other Dutch settlements in America ... seldom if ever by colonists from Europe."² These Dutch settlers, states McCormick, " ... brought with them a tradition of industry and thrift, a strong desire to cling to their native tongue and their reformed church, a remarked lack of interest in politics, and a propensity toward slaveholding."³ Thus, despite the fact that the

Covenhoven family had been in America since the 1630s, they confined themselves within the local Dutch community, retaining Dutch customs of language, dress, religion, diet, and building traditions. Both William and Elizabeth were raised in the Dutch Reformed Church, and were baptized into the congregation in 1727, four years after their marriage.

Sometime between 1723 and 1731, William acquired 180 acres of land just west of the village of Monmouth Court House (Freehold). This property was originally part of a five-hundred acre tract owned by Thomas Warne. In 1690, Warne had sold the land to Scottish surveyor John Reid, who later occupied a dwelling on the rear portion of the property. In 1706, a lot of one-hundred acres was purchased from Reid by Benjamin Cook. This lot was not included in the sale to William Covenhoven. The Covenhovens apparently moved to the Reid dwelling in 1723. Little else is known about them for the next two decades, other than the fact that they baptized all ten of their children in the Dutch Reformed Church. According to "The Covenhoven House: A Study in Cultural Transition," "in the absence of other information, it can only be assumed that the Covenhovens led a routine farm life and participated in the usual affairs of family and church."⁴

Around 1750, however, the fortunes of the Covenhovens suddenly and rapidly changed, altering the pattern of their lives and improving their social position and standing in the community. In a will written on September 26, 1747, shortly before his death, Benjamin Van Cleaf bequeathed to his daughter Elizabeth Covenhoven the sum of 300 pounds, to be paid in annual fifty pound increments beginning six years after his death. The following year, William's father Albert also made a will and died shortly thereafter. His estate was appraised at the large sum of one thousand, eight-hundred pounds, placing him in an upper middle class position. The assets were to be divided equally among his eleven children, with William, as the oldest, receiving an extra three shillings. Thus, between the years 1750 and 1759, William and Elizabeth received 464 pounds in cash, quite a large and unusual amount in a time when most business was conducted through barter.

The Covenhovens immediately went ahead making their new financial status evident in their community. At about the same time as the Covenhovens' sudden financial windfall, in 1750, a new and elegant Presbyterian meeting house, now known as "Old Tennent," was being constructed west of Freehold. William Covenhoven donated five pounds to the drive, one of the largest single contributions made. Furthermore, he also purchased a pew for his family in one of the most expensive and visibly prominent sections of the church.⁵

Not only is this significant as an example of William Covenhoven's personal increase in financial status, but it also exemplifies the increasing integration between people of Dutch and of English heritage in Monmouth County at this time. By becoming so involved with the building of the new meeting house, William indicated that he was a strong supporter of the English-speaking Presbyterian congregation, the first of his family to do so. While the new Presbyterian meeting house was miles closer to Freehold than the Reformed church in Marlboro, and thus easier for the Covenhovens to attend, William's break from many of the Dutch traditions was also reflected in a change in lifestyle.

At this point, it is interesting to note that William was by this time almost fifty years old. His ten children were probably all nearly grown, as at that point in history, childhood was much shorter than it is today. The Covenhovens' lifestyle change thus occurred rather late in their lives.

Also in 1750, William acquired the title to the adjacent tract of land which had been sold to Benjamin Cook in 1706.

By 1752, William Covenhoven began to build a large new house on the newly acquired land. In order to reflect his growing prosperity and his new social status in the community, William took as a prototype the latest high style of Georgian architecture, which had been introduced with the recent building of the Old Tennent Presbyterian church. According to "A Study in Cultural Transition," this church "... was probably the first statement of high English fashion to appear in an area which had been dominated by small vernacular houses.⁶ Furthermore, according to the ledgers of local merchants, the Covenhoven House was probably begun the month that Old Tennent was completed, and construction lasted about a year. Additional evidence supports the theory that the master builder of the church. John Davies, also supervised the building of the Covenhoven House.⁷ Thus, not only was William Covenhoven keeping up with the new style, he was also instrumental in setting new architectural standards in his community.

This new addition was a simple, boxlike, two-story structure. Keeping in mind that this was designed to be the home of a prosperous farmer in a rural and relatively unsophisticated community, it is not surprising that the Georgian style was expressed in a rather modified fashion. Typically, Georgian houses were dominated by a sense of balance and symmetry, with an equal number of windows to the left of the doorway as to the right of it. The Covenhoven House is only three-quarter Georgian style. Nonetheless, the facade still creates an elegant and refined appearance, with its clean lines and balanced windows, unlike the irregular massing of elements which characterized the earlier architecture of the area.

Furthermore, many Georgian architectural decorations adorn the facade. Carved, classical pilasters flank either side of the doorway, and scroll-type carvings extend above them, suggesting graciousness and refinement. A dentilated molding decorates the area directly beneath the roof-line. There are also moldings around the doorway and the dormer windows. At present, the roof on each wing is peaked. However, because of architectural findings during the restoration of the house, it is believed that the original roof was hipped. A hipped roof would have been in keeping with the Georgian style.

Despite the addition of all of these new elements, many Dutch elements are still retained. It is interesting to note however that, as Russell Hawes Kettell points out, "The rural frame houses of the Dutch have no exact prototype in the old world," and instead, "... were developed to meet the conditions of a different climate and to utilize the materials at hand."⁸ Therefore, the traditional characteristics which are incorporated in this house were developed and adapted by Dutch settlers in America. The stoop with the projecting roof is one of these traditional features. Originally, two small benches surrounded the main entrance also, but are missing now.

Like most other Dutch country houses, the Covenhoven House was built of wood. The two chimneys were built into the house at either end. According to Kettell, "In the old Dutch houses ... chimneys were not built on the outside of the house, but on the inside," and "frequently the back of the chimney showed on the exterior as a panel of brick or stone."⁹

Such is the case in the Covenhoven House. A panel of brick interrupts the smooth side wall of shingles. These round-butt shingles used for siding are also a traditional feature, and according to "A Study in Cultural Transition," they "... were also attributed in eighteenth century New Jersey references to Dutch builders."¹⁰ Their scalloped effect further enhances the decorativeness of the facade, and adds a unique charm to the Georgian style.

One last significant Dutch feature on the exterior of the house is the Dutch door on the old section, which the Covenhovens turned into their kitchen wing. This type of door, which is divided laterally and opens in two parts is, according to Kettell "of authentic Dutch origin."¹¹ He further states that "this ingenious invention was of the greatest practical value for it enabled the housewife to open up the house for ventilation and at the same time to keep small children in and to shut out dogs, pigs, and chickens."¹² This door was placed in a recessed porch area.

The interior of this house also combines the traditional with the newest and latest styles. A 1790 inventory of the estate of William Covenhoven by Joseph Clayton James Tapscott, and Samuel Forman remains as a guide to help determine how the house was furnished. However, there is one problem in using this to create an accurate description of the interior as it was when the Covenhovens lived there, and that pertains to the occurrence of the Revolutionary War, prior to the inventory.

In 1778, the British army passed through Freehold at the time of the Battle of Monmouth. According to an article written in the Jersey Gazette, by the patriot Dr. Thomas Henderson soon after the event, General Clinton took it upon himself to use the Covenhoven House as his headquarters, as it was the finest home in the area. Elizabeth Covenhoven, who was nearly seventy, predicting this, sent off her valuables in wagons so that the British soldiers would not plunder her fine things. Unfortunately, the crafty Clinton, recognizing that the house was nearly empty, tricked her into revealing their location. Henderson relates, "He then allowed her to take care of some trifling articles, which were all she saved, not having, (when I saw her, and had the above information from her) a change of dress for herself, or husband, or scarcely for any of her family."¹³ Thus, there is a debate as to how much of the original furnishings were saved, and whether the inventory records a complete and accurate list. Nonetheless, its information is valuable, and it is the basis by which the Monmouth County Historical Association furnished the house.

The interior of the house, in keeping with the exterior, is ornamented throughout with fine architectural decoration, such as elaborately carved moldings and paneling, exemplary of the high style. However, as William Covenhoven was a farmer, albeit a rather wealthy one, the furnishings of the house tend to be more practical and useful than lavish. There are still many Dutch elements to the interior, and many of the furnishings inevitably reflect local taste and carpentry. According to Margaret E. White, "During the eighteenth century people of means combined in their homes both furniture of local manufacture and imported pieces."¹⁴ During the second half of the eighteenth century, there were at least thirty-four cabinetmakers working in New Jersey. Although, according to Suzanne Carlene, "some of New Jersey's more prosperous citizens purchased their household furnishings from Philadelphia or New York," it is likely that the Covenhovens acquired many of their furnishings from more local cabinetmakers such as Matthew Egerton of New Brunswick.¹⁵

When a visitor first steps through the doors of the Covenhoven House, he would find himself in a wide center hall with a staircase rising to the second floor. While the plan of this house is not entirely English, it does have this central hallway with rooms opening off to each side. The bannister is elegantly carved, and rich paneling covers the side of the stairway. The major light source is the window on the landing of the stairs.

The inventory indicates that there was a desk in this room, so the hall most likely doubled as a farm office for William. When the front doors are shut, the bright light which shines in from the window hits the right wall of the hall, while the other areas of the room are dark and shadowy. Therefore, it can be concluded that this would have been the most practical location for the desk.

The inventory also lists a clock as being in the hallway. Priced at fifteen pounds, the clock was one of the most expensive items on the inventory, attesting to its prime importance. The Covenhovens probably would have placed it to the right or left of the doorway, so that their visitors could see it when arriving, and of course, be duly impressed. According to W. M. Hornor, Jr., "For three generations, [the Egerton] family made innumerable exquisite secretaries, clock cases, bureaus, chests, bedsteads, tables, and other articles of household use and adornment"¹⁶ It is quite likely that the Covenhovens could have acquired their furnishings, such as this elegant clock, from the Egerton cabinetmakers of New Brunswick.

One last important piece of furniture listed on the inventory for the hall, is "one Dutch cubbert," or kas-The kas, which was a massive piece, was used to store the family linen and clothing. According to Kettell, "every housewife prided herself on the quantity of linen she possessed, spun and woven by herself and her daughters."¹⁷ Kasten have an interesting design, being constructed in "four tiers or sections," as Joseph T. Butler puts it.¹⁸ At the top is a cornice, resting on a central section which consists of "... a rectangular box with shelves and two doors, which can be closed across the front."¹⁹ Beneath this is a low section with drawers, which rests on feet, either ball-turned or "bun" feet. Some later examples have claw-and-ball feet or brackets.

Despite its traditional Dutch origin, the kas fits in beautifully with the more sophisticated architectural decoration of the hall. The paneling in the hallway provides an effective backdrop and showcase for the richly paneled kas-Furthermore, the top of the kas was also a useful place to store and display expensive and large items, such as the "China bowls on cubbert," listed on the inventory.

The parlor is the room to the left of the hall, across from the kitchen. Again, as with the hall, the stylish architectural elements of the room create an elegance and beauty. According to Marshall B. Davidson, there was a "... close relationship between cabinetwork and architecture ... observed in the colonies."²⁰ On the far wall of the parlor is a large fireplace, encased in beautiful paneling, with built-in, shellback cupboards on either side. Fluted pilasters and classical moldings further enhance the wall's symmetrical and Georgian elegance. It is quite similar to other examples in the large colonial cities and the more sophisticated communities.

According to Davidson, "... the woodwork of colonial rooms was more often than not painted in rich and varied hues."²¹ The interior of the cupboards were pumpkin-colored, with a golden trim on the shellbacks. The beauty of these cupboards provided an elegant setting for what the inventory listed as, "some china and decanters in the lefthand cubbert," and "some plates and bottles in the righthand cubbert."

According to Frances Phipps, Dr. Hamilton noticed when he visited Albany in July 1744 that the descendants of the Dutch immigrants, "... set out their cabinets and bouffetts much with china."²² Furthermore, Northend points

out that, "China constituted an important part of the household equipment in colonial days, and while not as antique as pewter and wooden ware, it outrivaled both in beauty and popular favor."²³ They were most likely imported from places like Holland, England, and the Orient, and added color and elegance to the room. The Covenhovens probably treasured these fine items greatly and were proud to display them in their beautiful cabinets.

As farmers led rather hard lives, with long days, the parlor was probably used mainly on Sundays and special occasions. However, as the Covenhovens were rather wealthy and, according to the inventory, owned slaves, plus were rather advanced in age, they may have spent more time in this room. Furthermore, according to the inventory, they owned three dozen chairs, distributed throughout the house, a large amount for a farmer to own. This fact indicates that the Covenhovens must have done quite a bit of entertaining, both formal and informal.

Dr. Henderson related back in 1744 that "... the Dutch here keep their houses very neat and clean, both within and without ... Their chambers and rooms are large and handsome."²⁴ When the room was not being used, the furniture was pushed against the sides of the walls. Therefore, the chair rail was an important practical feature, as well as decorative, because it protected the walls from scratches and marks. According to need, the furniture was pulled out and rearranged. For this purpose, the furniture was designed to be lightweight and portable.

The kinds of chairs which the Covenhovens would have had were slat-back, or ladder-back chairs and fiddleback chairs. According to Wilson Lynes, "Slat-back chairs were made in Europe as early as the fifteenth century."²⁵ The type, which is rush-seated and consists of turned upright poles and horizontal slats, was adopted and adapted throughout the colonies. According to the Newark Museum, "Those made in Central Jersey were commonly "three-back" with turned posts and one turned stretcher in front, the slats having a curved lower edge."²⁶ Davidson points out that, "In the Delaware Valley local artisans were refining (this] traditional design ... by arching the slants and setting them in graduated sizes."²⁷ These chairs were very useful, and the design was used throughout the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth.

The fiddle back chair was a local and functional, turned variation on the Queen Anne style. According to Kathleen Eagen Johnson, "the chairs enjoyed a large and diverse market among late eighteenth and early nineteenth century families from many different economic and ethnic backgrounds."²⁸ Johnson explains, New Jersey chairs " ... display the suggestion of a "saddle" at the top of the crest rail, a tapering of the lower rail, and a flattened ball turning between the lower and seat rails on the rear stiles."²⁹ While not as elegant as the true Queen Anne style chairs in more sophisticated regions, this kind of chair would have well suited the purposes of a prosperous rural farmer.

While the Covenhovens would have had mostly practical furniture, they did, as previously noted, appreciate fine decorations. The most expensive item listed on the inventory for this room is a looking glass, valued at four pounds. It must have been quite an impressive and elegant piece for a farmer to own.

The inventory also lists a tea table, proving that the popular social ritual of tea drinking was observed by the Covenhovens. According to Davidson, "a visiting Frenchman noted in 1781 that the greatest mark of civility and welcome" the Americans could show a guest was "to invite you to drink it [tea] with them."³⁰ The Covenhovens' tea table was the second most expensive item on the list. It is likely that they had the tilt-top kind, which could easily be folded up, and placed aside. Owning a tea table of this stylish design indicated to guests that the Covenhovens were not only hardworking farmers, but also a family of taste and refinement.

Thus, the Covenhoven House is an interesting example of the transition to the higher style in architecture and furniture in the mid-eighteenth century, in a rural and relatively unsophisticated area in central New Jersey. The combination of Georgian style with traditional Dutch features reflects the increased prosperity of William and Elizabeth Covenhoven, their subsequent change in lifestyle, and their integration into the dominant English culture in New Jersey and the Colonies as a whole. Moreover, their elegant and new house set a valuable standard for their community, and for future architectural design in Monmouth County, New Jersey.

APPRAISEMENT OF THE ESTATE OF WILLIAM A. COVENHOVEN

This appraisal was made March, 17, 1790, by Joseph Clayton, James Tapscott, and Sam'l Forman

IN THE HALL

One Dutch cubbert	4	10	0
1 deske	5	0	0
The clock	15	0	0
China bowls on cubbert	0	4	6

IN THE PARLOR

1 looking glass	4	0	0
1 bilstead table	0	15	0
1 pine table	0	6	0
1 tea table	2	0	0
Some china and decanters in the lefthand cubbert	0	10	0
Some plates and bottles in the righthand cubbert	0	7	6
1 pr. andirons, 1 shovel, tongs	0	10	0
A box in the parlor	0	3	9
Sundries in a box	0	7	6

IN THE BACK ROOM

1 bilstead table in the back room	0	9	0
Books and bookcase	1	10	0
Sundries in cubbert in back room	3	0	0
Andirons and bellows in back room	1	0	0
A basket and sundries	0	2	6
A bed, bedding and curtains	15	0	0

IN THE REAR CHAMBER

A settle table	0	11	0
A chest, and sundries in it	1	10	0
A pair of stilyards	0	8	0
A bed, bedding and bedstead	12	0	0

IN THE LARGE CHAMBER

A looking glass, gilt frame	3	10	0
A dressing table	3	0	0
A long pine table	0	7	6
Some flax and tow	2	2	0
A bed , bedding and bedstead called Elizabeth's	10	15	0
3 table cloths and some towels	2	1	6

IN THE KITCHEN

Some rye and wheat flour & sundries	1	15	0
A barrel & sundries	0	9	0
The pewter of all kinds in the kitchen	2	16	6
A cubbert in the kitchen	0	5	0
The ironware in the kitchen	4	17	0
A small tub and sundries	0	10	0
A pine table	0	2	0

MISCELLANEOUS

3 doz . chairs (distributed throughout the house)	5	0	0
1 chest of drawers to Mrs. Herbert	6	0	0
1 chest of drawers to Mrs. Hankinson	5	0	0

EXTRACTS FROM THE INVENTORY OF WILLIAM A. COVENHOVEN

Taken on March 17 , 1790

Buildings

House
Smoke house
Barn
Corn crib
Some rye and wheat flour

Livestock

Bacon
7 hogs
Fowls and turkeys
3 horses
21 cows and calves
16 sheep and 13 lambs

Activities

Wool and flax spinning
Smoking meat
Making candles
Making butter

Slaves

1 negro man
1 negro wench
2 negro boys

Provisions

16 bushels of rye
4-1/2 bushels of flax seed
1 bushel of wheat
1 bushel of buck wheat
Turnips and potatoes
Meat
Butter
Hay
Corn in the crib (for fodder)
Flax and tow

ENDNOTES

¹ Richard P. McCormick, New Jersey from Colony to State 1609-1789 (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1964), p. 80.

² Adrian C. Leiby, The Early Dutch and Swedish Settlers of New Jersey (Princeton, New Jersey: D. Van Nostrand Company, Inc. 1964), p. 67.

³ McCormick, p. 81.

⁴ "The Covenhoven House: A Study in Cultural Transition," Library, Monmouth County Historical Association, Freehold, NJ, p. 5.

⁵ "The Covenhoven House: A Study in Cultural Transition," p. 6.

⁶ "The Covenhoven House: A Study in Cultural Transition" p. 9.

⁷ "The Covenhoven House: A Study in Cultural Transition," p. 13.

⁸ Russell Hawes Kettell, Early American Rooms (Penland: The Southworth-Anthoensen Press, 1936), p. 101.

⁹ Kettell, p. 99.

¹⁰ Hammond, p. 10.

¹¹ Kettell, p. 99.

¹² Kettell, p. 99.

¹³ William S. Hornor, This Old Monmouth of Ours (Freehold, New Jersey: Moreau Brothers Publishers, 1932), p. 152.

¹⁴ The Newark Museum, Early Furniture Made in New Jersey, with an Introduction by Margaret E. White (Newark, New Jersey: Hobby House, 1958), p. 2.

¹⁵ Suzanne Corlette, The Fine and Useful Arts in New Jersey. 1750-1800 (Trenton: New Jersey Historical Commission, 1975), p. 25.

¹⁶ William S. Hornor, Jr., "Three Generations of Cabinetmakers," Antiques, September 1928, pp. 217-219.

¹⁷ Kettell, p. 103.

¹⁸ Joseph T. Butler, "The Kast and the Schranck," in Early American Furniture: From Settlement to City, ed. Mary Jean Madigan and Susan Colgan (New York: Billboard Publications, Inc., 1983), p. 66.

¹⁹ Butler, p. 66.

²⁰ Marshall B. Davidson, The American Heritage History of Colonial Antiques (New York: American Heritage Publishing Co., Inc., 1967), p. 159.

²¹ Davidson, p. 261.

²² Frances Phipps, Colonial Kitchens. Their Furnishings, and Their Gardens (New York: Hawthorne Books, Inc., 1972), p. 82.

²³ Mary H. Northend, Colonial Homes and Their Furnishings (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1912), p. 172.

²⁴ Phipps, p. 82.

²⁵ Wilson Lynes, "Slat-back Chairs of New England and the Middle-Atlantic States," Antiques, December 1933, p. 208.

²⁶ The Newark Museum, p. 18.

²⁷ Davidson, p. 112.

²⁸ Kathleen Eagen Johnson, "The Fiddleback Chair," in Early American Furniture: From Settlement to City, ed. Mary Jean Madigan and Susan Colgan (New York: Billboard Publications, Inc., 1983), p. 92.

²⁹ Johnson, p. 95.

³⁰ Davidson, p. 140.

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