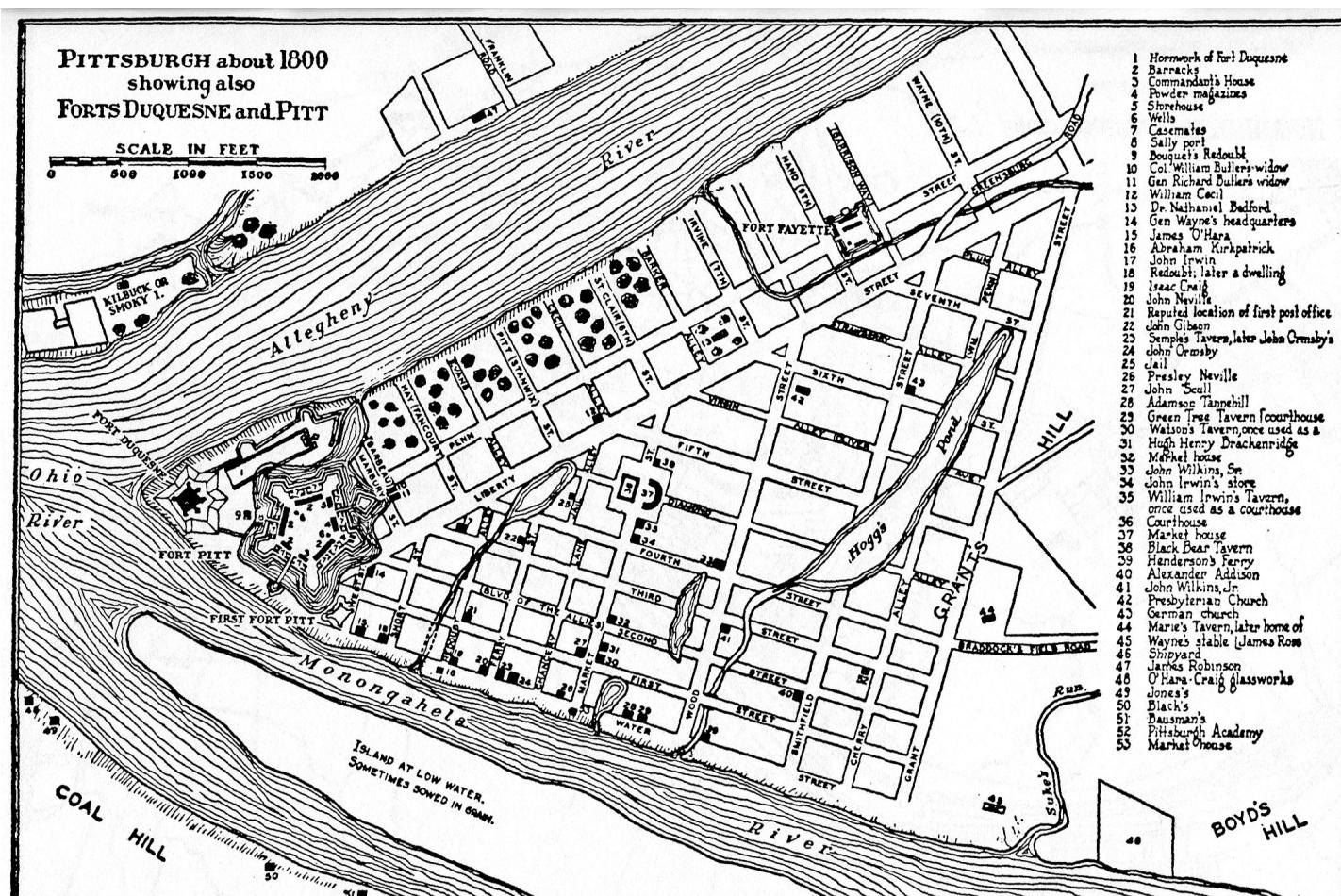


Squirrel Hill Historical Society

Squirrel Hill in 1816

When the borough of Pittsburgh was incorporated as a city on March 18, 1816, it included only the area from the Point to Grant's Hill. Squirrel Hill was not yet part of Pittsburgh. Read on to discover what was going on in Squirrel Hill in 1816.

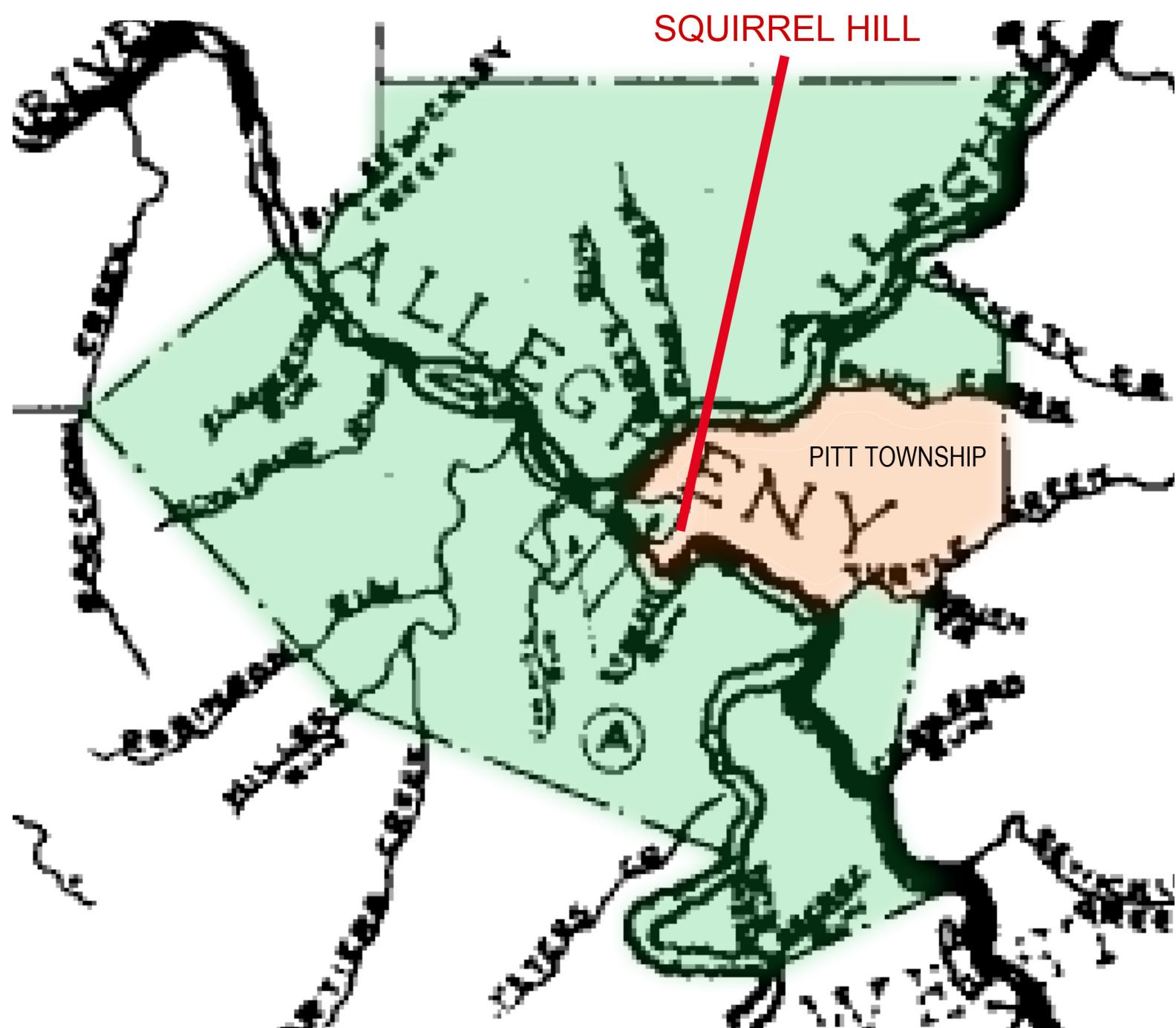


The City of Pittsburgh Around 1810

This display was written and designed by Helen Wilson with additional research by Wayne Bossinger.

Pitt Township

In 1816, Squirrel Hill was part of Pitt Township. The township was located between the Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers. Squirrel Hill was within its borders. It came into existence in 1788. As time went on, other townships, such as Peebles, Collins, Wilkins, Pine and Deer, were carved out of Pitt Township until the township itself eventually disappeared. Squirrel Hill became part of Peebles township until it was annexed by Pittsburgh in 1868.



DESCRIPTION OF PITT TOWNSHIP, 1788

December 16, 1788, at the first session of the court of quarter sessions for Allegheny County, Justice George Wallace presiding, the county was divided into seven townships, the most important of which received the name of Pitt, and was bounded as follows: *"Beginning at the mouth of the Pokety's creek, thence up the Allegheny river and by the line of the county to the mouth of Flaherty's run, thence up the Ohio river to the mouth of the Monongahela river, thence up said river to the mouth of Turtle creek; thence up Turtle creek to the mouth of Brush creek, thence by the line of Plum township to the place of beginning."* (From *History of Allegheny County, Pennsylvania*, by Thomas Cushing, 1889.)

Farms and Estates

In the early 1800s, Squirrel Hill was a place of large farms and estates. The map below is a simplified excerpt from the Warantee Map of Pittsburgh, showing the first owners of tracts of land in Squirrel Hill and the names they gave their properties. The Warantee Map was compiled in the early 1900s from records on file in the Department of Internal Affairs.

Notice how many of the names are familiar. Some are now names of Squirrel Hill streets.

The heavy black outline shows the border of Squirrel Hill today to give an idea of the location of the properties. The border didn't exist in the late 1700s.



Squirrel Hill's Roads in 1816

Squirrel Hill didn't have many roads in 1816. The map below is an excerpt from a map published in 1862, showing how few roads existed even 46 years later.

The oldest roads are now Saline Street and Shady, Forward, Hazelwood and Forbes Avenues, although their routes are not exactly the same as today. The large letters spelling "Peebles" show that Squirrel Hill became part of Peebles Township after Pitt Township was divided up.



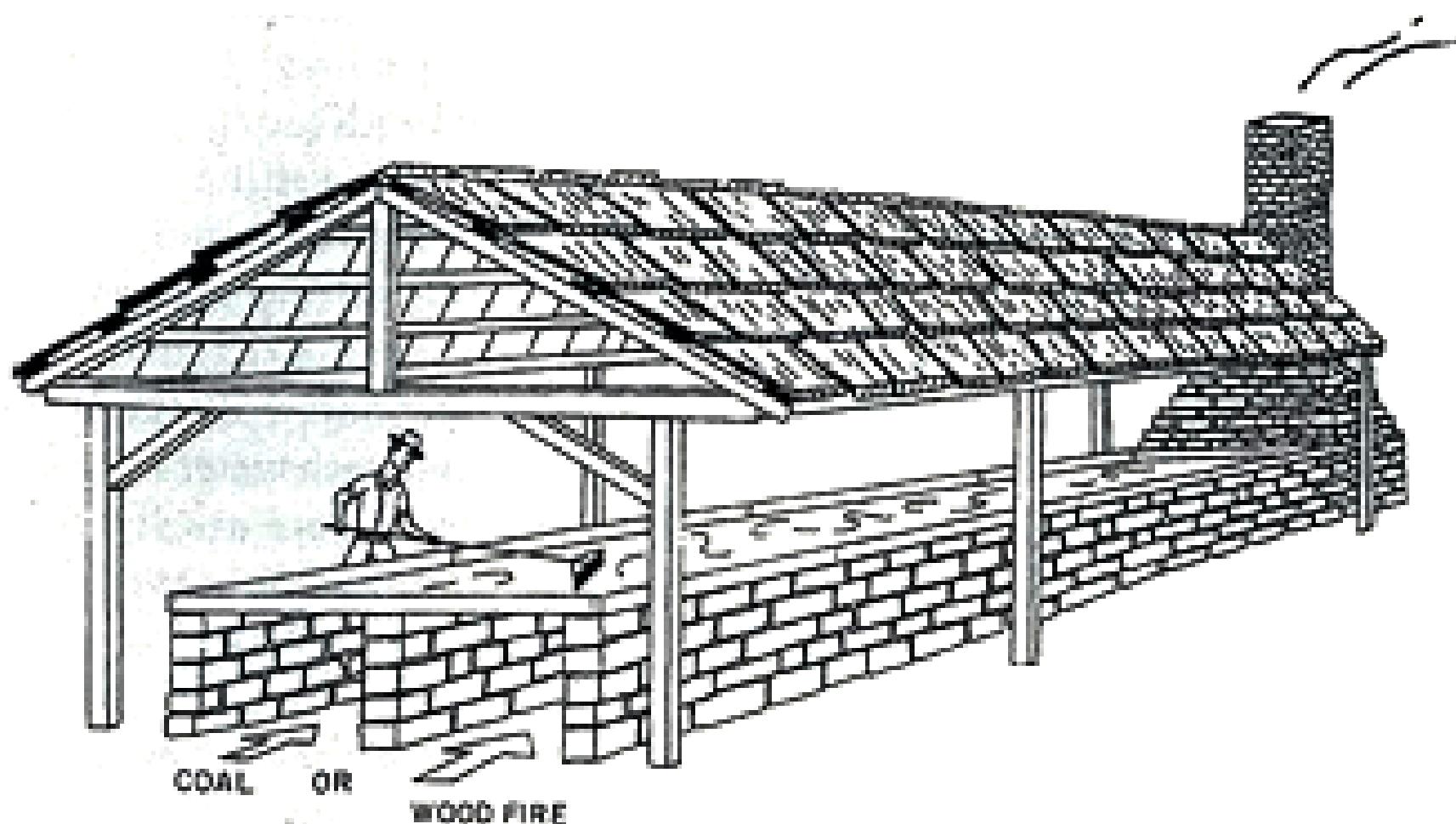
Salt and the Salt Works

Salt was a vital necessity in the days before refrigeration, used to preserve and season food. Only a few places around Pittsburgh had the right conditions for salt works to be constructed, and Nine Mile Run valley was one of them.

In order to make salt production economically viable, it was necessary to have both a source of salty water and also fuel to boil it off to produce salt crystals. When settlers came to Squirrel Hill, they found a salt lick in Nine Mile Run valley where brine seeped to the surface and attracted game. The settlers laboriously dug brine wells to bring large quantities of salty water to the surface, where it was processed in a salt works. The preferred fuel was coal mined in the nearby slopes of Squirrel Hill.

In 1829, the owner of the salt works, O. H. William Beall, reported that the works had been constructed about fifteen to eighteen years previously, just before Pittsburgh became a city.

The road leading down to the salt works from Squirrel Hill was called Salt Works Road. Today it is Saline Street, still referencing the salt that was once produced in Nine Mile Run valley.



The information and diagram are from the book, *Salt in the Conemaugh Valley*, by William C. Dzombak, Saltsburg Historical Society, 2004.

Transportation

When Pittsburgh was incorporated as a city on March 18, 1816, there were no trains, automobiles, or electric trolleys. People and goods came into Pittsburgh on Conestoga wagons, stagecoaches, horseback, and various kinds of boats, including rudimentary steamboats. The steam engine had been invented and was being used for Pittsburgh's budding industries. They were powered by coal mined around Pittsburgh, including in Squirrel Hill, and already by 1816 travelers remarked on the pall of black soot that hung over Pittsburgh.

At least one stagecoach route ran through Squirrel Hill. Greenfield historian Anita Kulina Smith says,

"The stagecoach route was along Squirrel Hill Road, now Bigelow Street. The coach took Bigelow Street from Hazelwood Avenue to Kearcher and then down Greenfield Avenue and along Second Avenue to downtown.

"From what I understand, the old roads often went along the bluffs because in winter the wind would blow the snow away, making the path easier, and in summer it was warmer and more dry. The route was coming from the river, up Brown's Hill [probably via Saline Street]. So it was only on Hazelwood Avenue for as long as it took to get to Bigelow."

Stagecoaches travelled faster than Conestoga wagons, so they were the preferred means of travel for people who did not need to take a lot of goods with them.



Farmers and Mechanics Turnpike



The northern border of Squirrel Hill runs along Fifth Avenue. Today Fifth Avenue is what that whole road is called from downtown Pittsburgh to Point Breeze, but that wasn't the case in 1816. In the book *Early Land Marks and Names of Old Pittsburgh*, published around 1924, Annie Clark writes,

Fifth Avenue has had a variety of names; originally it was called Braddock's Field Road. In 1806, when the Pittsburgh and Greensburg Turnpike road [now Penn Avenue] was built, the part [of Fifth Avenue] between Grant Street and Point Breeze was called the Fourth Street Road. The corporate name, however, was

the "Farmers and Mechanics Turnpike Road." Soon after a city ordinance gave the road west of Soho the name Pennsylvania Avenue; while the city end of the street was changed from Fourth Street to Fifth Street. After the enlargement of the city in 1867 the present name Fifth Avenue was given to the entire street from Liberty Street to Point Breeze.

PITTSBURGH FARMERS' AND Mechanics' Turnpike Road.

SEALED PROPOSALS will be received by the subscribers until Wednesday, the first day of April next, for Grading, Bridging, and erecting Culverts, on the Pittsburgh Farmers' and Mechanics' Turnpike Road, from the city line on Fourth street, continued until it intersects the Pittsburgh and Greensburg Turnpike Road, at or near the house of Thomas McKown, according to a grade as fixed upon by the managers of said Pittsburgh Farmers' and Mechanics' Turnpike Road, which, can be seen by a plan of said road, in possession of Mr. George Miltenberger, at his office, on Wayne street, at the Pennsylvania Rolling Mill.

GEO. MILTENBERGER,
REES C. TOWNSEND.

Feb. 27—1m

Excerpt from *The Daily Pittsburgh Gazette*,
March 16, 1835

Nancy Redding (1801–1816)

Early settler John Turner laid his mother to rest in the burial plot on his Squirrel Hill farm in 1785. He let other families bury their dead there as well. When Turner died in 1840, he bequeathed it to his community “to be used as a burying ground forever.”

Today, the little graveyard at 3424 Beechwood Boulevard is known as Turner Cemetery. It still holds the remains of many of the early settlers of Squirrel Hill. Burials took place until 1880.

One person buried in Turner Cemetery is Nancy Redding, whose name is sometimes spelled Reading. Carved on her gravestone are the words, *“In Memory of Nancy Redding, who departed this life Sept. 24, 1816, in the 15th year of her age.”* Her tombstone is the oldest one that still exists in Turner Cemetery.

In *Right Here in Squirrel Hill*, a book written by Hodge MacIlvain Eagleson in 1953, Nancy’s death is recounted this way:

A gathering of farmers made merry one September in 1816. Farmer youths and maidens played sweaty outdoor games but Nancy Reading, almost 16, did not join in. She sat on the big rock watching others play. By morning death had come to her.”

It’s interesting to realize that most of the people buried in Turner Cemetery were still alive in 1816.



The Gristmill in Nine Mile Run

It is not known when a gristmill for grinding grain into flour was first built in Nine Mile Run valley. Some accounts say it was built by the French as an outpost before the French and Indian War. Regardless of its early history, the gristmill and the land it was on were bought in 1808 by John Swisshelm, the eventual father-in-law of noted abolitionist, women's rights advocate and journalist Jane Grey Swisshelm. John Swisshelm built a stone barn on his farm in 1814 near Braddock Avenue. The gristmill was located several hundred feet downstream from the barn.

The gristmill was said to have been the largest in the area. It ground grain not only for flour but for whiskey-making.

Any trace of the gristmill is long gone except for some millstones in Frick Park. For years one of them was set in the ground outside the old Frick Park Nature Center. Other millstones are embedded in a stone patio in the park across the street from the Frick Art and Historical Center in Point Breeze.



Although no photographs exist of Swisshelm's barn and gristmill, the Swisshelm house was photographed sometime between 1885 and 1888.

The 1816 Flood

Floods were common in Pittsburgh, even after the rivers began to be dammed in the 1840s. The flood of February 1816 is noteworthy as one of only seven events for that year (along with Pittsburgh's incorporation as a city) listed in the timeline in Stefan Lorant's book, *Pittsburgh: The Story of an American City*.

Lorant says the 1816 floodwaters reached a stage of 36.2 feet. (By comparison, the St. Patrick's Day flood of 1936 reached 46 feet, and if it hadn't been for the ring of ten flood control dams ringing Pittsburgh by 1972, the floodwaters of Hurricane Agnes would have been higher than 35.85 feet.)

No images or descriptions exist of the 1816 flood, but an account of a bad flood in 1884 says, "*At Pittsburgh, the greatest apprehensions were felt of a disastrous flood, especially among those whose homes were along the banks of the Allegheny and Monongahela. Stocks of goods and household effects were at once taken in all haste to more elevated positions, and the day was spent industriously in endeavoring to meet what all felt certain now would come the highest water since a year before.*"

None of Pittsburgh's floods would have reached the heights of Squirrel Hill, but they would have come far into Nine Mile Run valley, which is only slightly higher than the river. The rushing waters would also have caused washouts, as shown in this picture of Beechwood Boulevard in Larimer (now Washington Boulevard) after a flood in 1910.



City Photographer Collection, Historic Pittsburgh website

The Robert Neill Log Cabin

Today you can catch a glimpse of what life was like in Squirrel Hill in 1816. Two log cabins built by early settler Ambrose Newton still stand in Schenley Park.

One of them, the Robert Neill (Neal) house, is believed to be the oldest house in Pittsburgh, dating to around 1769. It has a well-documented history starting from frontier days, when it withstood several Indian attacks. It was later the scene of much merrymaking and even an elopement. During the 1800s, the property the house stood on passed through several owners until it was bought by Col. James O'Hara, who left it to his granddaughter, Mary Schenley. She, of course, famously gave it to the city in 1889 for a park.

In the 1900s, the house, now on the edge of the new golf course, was used as a rest stop. It was later used to store equipment. Its condition deteriorated, but it eventually was rehabilitated and opened occasionally for tours. Its condition became precarious again, and it was closed to the public. Restoration work has begun, and hopefully it will be able to be visited in the future.

