

[Click here to return to Article Index](#)

February 2022 Update on the Friends of Neill Log House (FONLH)

February 2022

Tony Indovina, SHHS Board Member and FONLH President

As an activity to support the efforts of our standing committees, a small group of the FONLH board undertook a project to create a shorter, more readable narrative of the Neill Log House. The narrative starts at the very beginning, when Ambrose Newton, while stationed at Ft. Pitt, acquired the tract of land where the house would later be built. The story proceeds with the Neill family history concerning the land and log house and ends with how this land and the structure on it came to be part of Schenley Park. Along with this narrative is information presented to us by our board representative from PHLF, Bob Jucha, about the architectural features and significance of the Neill Log House.

All of this is meant to provide our grant reviewers and others we work with outside our organization with all the information we believe makes the Neill Log House historically significant and worthy of preservation and future use. Everything written was painstakingly edited for historical accuracy and grammatical correctness. In the process of submitting it for review by two professional editors, inside and outside our organization, we literally spent hours discussing such things as the appropriate use and impact of commas in the text. At the same time, we know that changes may be suggested, and agreed to be made, based on new information or interpretations of the history presented. For this reason, we have attached the words “Working Copy” to the brief history, to allow for changes that will be made and posted for sharing. The most up-to-date version will be entered by date and posted on our FONLH Google Drive for board and committee use, as well as on our SHHS website, squirrelhillhistory.org, linked to Neill Log House on our homepage menu. Look for this brief history to be put on the SHHS website soon.

Working Copy, February 2022

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE NEILL LOG HOUSE, BUILT C. 1787

Within the rolling, verdant hills of Schenley Park, located in the Pittsburgh neighborhood of Squirrel Hill, stands the Neill Log House—believed to be the city’s oldest domestic structure and one of only a few existing buildings in Pittsburgh from the 18th century.

History of Ownership

Ambrose Newton, a soldier stationed at nearby Fort Pitt, was first granted a claim to a 262-acre tract of land from the Penn Family in 1769 that came to be known as “Highland.” It is believed that Newton never developed his tract. The land eventually was acquired by a wagon driver named Robert Neill, who was “granted a patent for the consideration of 34 pounds, 8 shillings,” as recorded on December 10, 1787. Neill is said to have supported his family by hauling freight and passengers to and from Philadelphia. This site, approximately four miles from the Point, where Pittsburgh’s three rivers converge, benefitted from a spring close to the house. National Park Service research suggests Meriwether Lewis may have stopped to water his horses at this spring as he traveled on what was possibly a northwestern extension of the Nemaquin Trail on his way to Pittsburgh to begin his westward exploration. This would place the log house along the route of the Lewis and Clark Trail that begins in Pittsburgh. It is believed that Robert Neill built the house that bears his name based on the “handsome profit” he realized when the property was sold in 1795 for 360 pounds, 5 shillings, presumably for improvements he made on the land. Neill, his wife Elizabeth, and their five daughters had by then lived on the land for an estimated 21 years. The family eventually moved to a lot on what is now Wood Street in downtown Pittsburgh. When the Neill family sold their property, it passed through two more hands before it was acquired by James O’Hara, the Quartermaster General during the Revolutionary War and later a wealthy Pittsburgh entrepreneur. The property with the Neill Log House was part of a larger tract of land inherited by O’Hara’s granddaughter, Mary Schenley, in 1850. This land, which was then known as “Mount Airy,” was desired both by potential developers and those who viewed it as a promising location for a city park. In 1889, Pittsburgh’s then-director of public works, Edward Bigelow, persuaded Schenley to donate much of the land to the city and sell the rest at a reduced rate for what would become Schenley Park, Pittsburgh’s premier landscaped park.



Historic Status

The Neill Log House was designated a historic structure by the City of Pittsburgh in 1977. In 1985, Schenley Park was added to the National Register of Historic Places by the National Park Service. Though the Neill Log House does not

have its own national historic designation, it enhances the value of the Schenley Park Historic District because it is still at its original location and on land it has been on since before the park's beginning. As stated in the nomination for the park's historic designation, the Neill Log House "reinforces the consciously American character of the park and recalls the pre-park wilderness."

ARCHITECTURAL NOTES ON THE NEILL LOG HOUSE

The last major renovation and restoration of the Neill Log House was done in 1969 by the Pittsburgh History & Landmarks Foundation (PHLF). This was conducted under the supervision of noted Pittsburgh architect and preservationist Charles M. Stotz. The structure was carefully dismantled and reassembled except for the chimney and fireplace, which are original and in the same location as when the house was built. This fireplace has two hearths for cooking and heating. Some of the original logs that were salvageable were used in the reconstruction. The roof, second floor loft, and ground level floor are all newer replacements, as are the roof beams. A garden restoration was also supervised at that time by landscape architect Ralph Griswold.

In his landmark study, "Early Architecture of Western Pennsylvania" (1936), Charles Stotz called the Neill Log House one of the "most interesting" log houses in Western Pennsylvania. It is considered to be one of the finest examples of vernacular architecture of the early frontier and a testimony to the start of permanent settlement in what would become the city of Pittsburgh. It is also typical of the Midland log house style found throughout the Appalachians, revealing a period when settlers moved beyond the basic necessity of shelter. This style was first introduced by Swedes and Finns in the Delaware Valley during the 17th century. The Neill Log House contains all the elements that distinguish it from earlier, cruder log cabin structures. It is a one-and-a-half-room dwelling with a second floor, or loft, reached by a once elegant narrow stairway. Logs were saddle-notched at the corners, and hewn or squared with an ax rather than left round, as in cruder cabins. And, unlike log cabins with dirt floors, it has a puncheon one, made of log pieces split lengthwise and laid with the flat side up. Several distinctive features of the Neill Log House make it typical of early log house construction. Gable ends are covered in vertical clapboards. The roof is of modest pitch with overlapping vertical boards. The end chimney is made of fieldstone. Walls are parallel, indicating that the house was carefully designed and constructed. The spaces between the log beams were originally filled with chinking made of stone and clay. The feature that best indicates the more permanent state of the house is that the windows have glass panes. Whether these were original to the log house is unknown, but they could have been installed after first being manufactured locally about 1797.

G. M. Hopkins Company Maps

Helen Wilson

The article following this one takes a look at the service centers and gas stations of Squirrel Hill in 1939. Why that particular year? Because it's the year the G. M. Hopkins Company produced a volume of real-estate plat maps of Pittsburgh Wards 7, 14, and 15 (Squirrel Hill, Shadyside, Point Breeze, Greenfield, Hazelwood, and Glen Hazel). The maps are incredibly detailed, providing footprints of buildings, construction materials, lot numbers, landowners, street names, trolley routes, railroads, bridges, public steps, boundary lines, and much more.

The G. M. Hopkins Company produced plat maps for the greater Pittsburgh area from 1872 to 1940. The maps, including the 1939 volume, are online on the Historic Pittsburgh website, historicpittsburgh.org. The SHHS once owned two Hopkins plat map volumes, one from 1898 and the other from 1911 (*right*). They were massive hard-bound tomes, maybe 18 inches wide by 24 inches long and two inches thick. Because of their age and condition, the SHHS donated them to the Pennsylvania Department at Carnegie Library Main to prevent further deterioration.

Another website, Pittsburgh Historic Maps - arcgis.com, has Hopkins and other maps from 1842, 1872, 1882, 1890, 1903-1906, 1910 and 1923, layered on top of each other so you can see the development of an area over time. However, the website doesn't have the 1939 plat maps on it. Instead, it has aerial photography maps from 1939, 1957, 1967, and 1993, which unfortunately don't provide the information the plat maps do. The website also has a modern street layer that allows viewers to see what exists today in the same location.

When comparing the 1923 and 1939 Hopkins plat maps, one thing becomes startlingly clear: the rapidity of Squirrel Hill development between those years, as residential and commercial buildings were being erected on lots that land speculators had carved out from farmland and estates.

