

Click here to return to Article Index

December Update on the Friends of Neill Log House (FONLH): Moving Toward a Usage Plan—Caring for the Contents of the Neill Log House

Tony Indovina, SHHS Board Member and FONLH President

Mission Statement for the Friends of the Neill Log House (FONLH Inc.)

Adopted February 2022



"We secure funds to restore and maintain the Neill Log House, foster knowledge of its historic significance, and work with interested parties to ensure the continued educational use of the structure and its site for future generations."

Individual support for the FONLH restoration effort will always be needed. To make online donations by credit card or PayPal, go to the SHUC website, shuc.org, and click on the "Projects" link in the black menu bar at the top of the page. A pull-down menu will appear. Select "Friends of the Neill Log House." Alternatively, checks can be sent to SHUC (put FONLH in the memo line) at the following address: SHUC, 5604 Solway Street, Pittsburgh, PA, 15217.



An assessment of the contents in the Neill Log House was completed in October by the very comprehensive work of our conservators. This assessment lays the groundwork for the long overdue process of moving everything into a suitable storage setting prior to renovation. If the remaining grant funds needed are received, work could take place during the spring or summer of 2023.

The story of these contents has a history of its own, although no item is original to our log house. They were received from a variety of sources in 1969, with most donated by the Junior League of Pittsburgh. Many are original to the period, with value and sources we have documented in our archives. The original list is supplemented by the final inventories of all the contents from 1991 and again in 1993, about the time active usage of the Neill Log House ceased. Newspaper articles from the two decades the log house was open to the public show many of the artifacts on display. The next several decades that the log house was mostly locked up did not bode well for the structure or its contents, as they lay unused and largely uncared for. The contents, in particular, remained in a setting that was not climate-controlled and increasingly exposed to infestation by insects and wildlife. The pedestal table shown in the accompanying photograph from a 1970s newspaper article (*right*) has now not only lost its luster, but some of its legs were gnawed by animals. The neglect has taken a similar toll on many other items, along with the effects of dampness and larvae infestation. The second picture to the right shows the state of the table when the conservators began their work this autumn.



While the task of salvaging many of the artifacts is not insurmountable, it would be costly. A basic question that must be answered to help guide us is, which of them is typical for the period the Neill Log House was lived in, and which are worth the expense of restoring rather than replacing with reasonable facsimiles? Some of the documentation we have in our archives reveals that there were critics in 1969 who questioned whether Robert Neill or the tenants who later lived in the log house could have afforded the breadth of furnishings that were put on display. A counter point of view from one of our chief historians of the SHHS is that Robert Neill, as a wagoner who traveled often to Philadelphia, possibly had access to everything available in the 1790s.

Through the generosity of our friends at Guardian Storage who have partnered with us to provide space at their Centre Avenue facility, we will embark on a plan before the end of the year to begin moving what we believe is salvageable. From among all the items that can be moved, we will begin to make decisions both on the basis of what we can afford to have professionally restored and what is appropriate to the period of time we will be presenting to the public. We hope to enter the usage phase as early as 2024.



The report from our conservators lists a total of 116 items from the historic inventories, with 32 of these missing and another 20 in either poor or very poor condition. The total number of large and small items that are salvageable, about which we must make decisions, totals 60 or so, not counting those in poor condition. These include rope bedding and

furniture; cookware and implements, with many wrought iron fireplace pieces; home and farm tools from a plow to spinning wheel; decorative items; lighting devices; and a very handsome high-end replica Pennsylvania Long Rifle that hung on the fireplace during the two decades the log house was open. (Thankfully, this keepsake was stored outside the log house all the years it was closed and is currently in safe-keeping.)

Moving toward a usage plan for what can and should be displayed as typical for its time will be our challenge during the coming year. Charles Succop, board member of both the SHHS and FONLH, will chair our new Contents and Usage Committee. In this capacity, Charles will draw upon his professional expertise as City Archivist to begin “painting a picture” of what items are typical for Neill’s times.

The Squirrel Hill Urban Coalition—Celebrating 50 Years in Squirrel Hill

Helen Wilson

The Squirrel Hill Urban Coalition (SHUC) is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year. SHUC was formed on July 21, 1972. Since its inception, SHUC has consistently concerned itself with public safety, educational issues, residential quality, the vitality of the business district, and upkeep of public spaces and parks within its boundaries. Street fairs held in 1973 and 1974 (*pictured at right*) attest to the success of the organization.



The impetus for SHUC’s founding came from the United Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh and visionaries such as Elsie Hillman, Ed Grinberg, Larry Kaplan, and Richard Cohen, who were worried about the effects of urban flight on community stability. Documents about the founding of SHUC talk about urban flight causing “poor and ill-equipped people, aged and unkempt structures, obsolete neighborhoods and traffic congestion.” Since Squirrel Hill was then was 40 percent Jewish, the concern was driven in part by concern for the living conditions of the elderly Jewish population. The report goes on to say the 14th Ward Civic Association had asked the City of Pittsburgh to study Squirrel Hill and develop a plan for stabilizing it, but nothing had come of it. The proposal that was subsequently formulated recommended the formation of an urban coalition group. The result was the Squirrel Hill Urban Coalition.

The driving force in the Coalition’s efforts to stem what they viewed as the deterioration of the quality of life in Squirrel Hill was the City’s lack of attention to Squirrel Hill. The tension reached a head in 1976. Mary Hall, then-president of SHUC, was quoted in a Pittsburgh Press article as saying that “the city’s proposed six-year capital plan treats the eastern residential area of the city as if it’s a suburb—and maybe it should be.” She half-jokingly suggested at a Pittsburgh City Council meeting that Squirrel Hill and the rest of the 14 Ward secede because the “Squirrel Hill area has been systemically written off by municipal government.” SHUC’s concerns extended to the whole 14th Ward, which contained not only Squirrel Hill but also Point Breeze, Regent Square, and Swisshelm Park. At the time, fixed neighborhood boundaries hadn’t been drawn up by the city.

The SHHS’s book, *Squirrel Hill, A Neighborhood History*, says this about the effect the SHUC had on the rehabilitation of the neighborhood: “In 1975, the City of Pittsburgh obtained a federal grant to repair a three-block section of Forbes Avenue near Murray. The Squirrel Hill Merchants’ Council and the Squirrel Hill Urban Coalition (SHUC), which had been formed in 1972 as the prime community planning organization for the neighborhood, raised \$125,000 to augment federal funds. This reportedly was the first time in the Pittsburgh area that federal and city governments collaborated with local landowners and merchants on such an effort. Funds were used to widen sidewalks, move wiring underground and add trees, benches and new litter cans.”

A very visible recent effort on SHUC’s part is the completion of O’Connor’s Corner in the wide sidewalk area in front of the New Dumpling House, 2138 Murray. It’s now an inviting area for people to sit on the benches relaxing. Long ago the building behind it was a car dealership, explaining why the sidewalk was so wide there.

14th Ward Threatens To ‘Secede’

By DAVID WARNER

A “semi-serious” suggestion that Pittsburgh’s largest ward secede from the city was aired today in a City Council meeting as a citizen group complained that the Squirrel Hill area has been “systematically written off” by municipal government.

Mary Hall, president of the 5,000-member Squirrel Hill Urban Coalition, referred to the secession move while giving testimony before a council budget hearing.

She said the city’s proposed six-year capital plan “treats the eastern residential area of the city as if it’s a suburb — and maybe it should be.”