

Click here to return to Neil Log House Updates

March Update on the Friends of Neill Log House (FONLH): Monitor and Adjust—Preparing for Stage I and Beyond of NLH Work

March 2023

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.



A very good friend of mine often cites a basic principle of student learning that guided her through her public school teaching career—"Monitor and Adjust." Simply stated, it means to make changes in your basic plan or curriculum as necessary, by observing and adjusting to the daily needs of your students.

This adage is applicable in many facets of our lives, and is certainly evident in how the Friends of Neill Log House proceeds in its day-to-day activities in pursuit of its long-range objectives. The ultimate goal, of course, is to again open the Neill Log House to the public, with educational programming appropriate to different ages and populations, to instill an appreciation for the beginnings of Pittsburgh and those who settled in what was then wilderness areas outside the city, like Squirrel Hill.

A week doesn't go by when we aren't forced to address one or more issues that are necessary for us to proceed with our work. Phase I, Stabilization and Reconstruction, is on course to proceed this summer, as reported in our last update. But before authorizing work, we must finalize a form of lease the city is calling a License Agreement for us to assume such responsibilities as hiring contractors and maintaining the structure. And while negotiation of final details is proceeding well, they must be concluded by a certain date for us to assure that the contractor vetted by the city can anticipate being able to begin work by early this summer. At the same time, we must proceed through the host of city and state approvals, from the Art Department to Zoning and historic review. Separate from these approvals, we much put in place insurance policies for a physical structure and its contents, in addition to those policies we have maintained as a nonprofit organization.

Our Design/Build Committee, an impressive group of active and retired architects and preservationists, employs a tool called 'Pull Planning' to help us stay on schedule with all our activities. Very simply stated, it is a collaborative effort to create a graphic tool, what you might recognize as a flow chart, that allows us to work backward from any given objective, to anticipate and chart every activity that must occur beforehand. The details of this would be an article of its own, but just appreciate how constantly updating a tool like this in all our planning is a model of "monitor and adjust."

There are examples everywhere in our efforts that demonstrate doing this. The ongoing moving of all the contents from the NLH to the storage space generously donated to us by Guardian Storage (*right*) is proceeding very well. We have moved all the smaller items and those that could be easily carried into the larger space given to us, creating storage shelving, as shown on the right, to house these. Now we have to move the largest items by van and need to make a final assessment beforehand of how to place these within this space, to be able to access everything when it is time to select those items to be restored.

While everything is proceeding to realize Phase I work, our funding committee has very recently completed a grant submission that will carry us through Phase II of our work, site development—a major matching fund opportunity that will address everything from period-appropriate fencing to landscape gardening. This and everything else should culminate in Phase III of our work—opening the log house to the public



Tony Indovina (left) and Neill descendant Charlie Stewart III in the Guardian storage unit.

Click here to return to Neil Log House Updates

March 2023

for programming by the summer of 2024. Of course, we are constantly monitoring the kinds of support and help we need to realize all of this, from large grants and small donations to support from public officials. Most importantly, we are aware that we need a steady funding stream to keep a restored/reconstructed Neill Log House open to the public and conduct programming on a regular basis, and into the future.

While all of this is going on, we have to “listen to the student,” or monitor the house to make sure we’re not ignoring its needs before work begins. During the initial stages of preparing to move contents into storage, a few of us were inside during a heavy rain and observed that the reconstructed roof was leaking in multiple places. This was during a very temperate mid-winter, but there was concern for how this roof might withstand a heavy snow and what the implications to the structure might be. The very temporary solution agreed to was to secure a large enough tarp, 40’ x 60’, to cover the log house. We are grateful for a conscientious city maintenance crew that was persistent enough to secure the tarp we acquired to hopefully last until this summer. Their efforts to secure the tarp on the roof, without actually being able to stand on it, is a tribute to their efforts—adjusting the tarp over several attempts to secure it.



The last example in this update is all about the need to “adjust.” Our liaisons at the Dept. of Public Works were very patient with our revised submission for wording to our sign, and the sign was recently installed at the base of the steps adjacent to the Catahecassa fountain. We currently have a request in to the city to have the DOMI crew that installed it lower

it a foot or two so that the public can comfortably read it and reach up to scan the QR code on it that is linked to our website.


Looking for Photos for the SHHS Photo Archives

Helen Wilson



The SHHS will be working with the staff of Pitt’s *Historic Pittsburgh* website, historicpittsburgh.org, in the coming months to upload our photo collection onto the

website. Having a visual record of the buildings and streets in Squirrel Hill helps us see what our ever-changing community looked like at various times in the past. If you have original photographs of Squirrel Hill, please let us scan them for our archives and upload them to *Historic Pittsburgh*. We will return the originals to you. Contact us at sqhillhist@shhsoc.org.



Schenley Park

Neill Log House

5229 E Circuitt Rd, Pittsburgh PA 15217

The Neill Log House is Pittsburgh's oldest domestic log structure and one of only a few existing buildings in the city from the 18th century – a reconstruction around original fireplace and chimney.

1769: Ambrose Newton, a soldier stationed at nearby Fort Pitt, formalized his claim to American Indian land here that the Penn family had acquired and approved for European purchase, a 262-acre tract named “Highland.”

1787: Wagoner Robert Neill received a patent on the land, where it is believed he lived with his wife and five daughters for 21 years.

1795: The log house was built around 1795, as determined by core sample testing of original wood in the house.

1803: Meriwether Lewis may have stopped to water his horses at Snyder Spring near the log house on his way to Pittsburgh to begin his westward exploration, according to National Park Service research. The spring is now covered by Catahecassa Fountain.

1850: Robert Neill's property, “Highland,” was part of a larger tract of land inherited by Mary Schenley from her maternal grandfather, General James O'Hara.

1889: Mary Schenley donated 300 acres and sold another 120 acres at a reduced rate to the City of Pittsburgh to create Schenley Park.

1969: The Pittsburgh History & Landmarks Foundation undertook a major reconstruction of the log house on the original site.

1977: The Neill Log House was designated a Historic Structure by the City of Pittsburgh.

1985: Schenley Park was put on the National Park Service's list of National Historic Places, with the Neill Log House being a major contributing factor.

FRIENDS OF NEILL LOG HOUSE (FONLH Inc.)
A project of the Squirrel Hill Historical Society (SHHS) and the Squirrel Hill Urban Coalition (SHUC), in cooperation with the City of Pittsburgh, owner.

pittsburghpa.gov/citiparks squirrelhillhistory.org shuc.org

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