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VISITORS GUIDE TO THE NEILL LOG HOUSE



Preface

(Submitted by Friends of Neill Log House, FONLH, October 2024)

The Neill Log House is located at the edge of the Bob O'Connor Golf Course, Schenley Park, at 5229 E. Circuit Rd., Pittsburgh, PA 15217, in the city's Squirrel Hill neighborhood. It is considered to be an authentic reconstruction around the original fireplace and chimney of the log house built by Robert Neill on the exact location where first constructed circa 1795, based on scientific testing in 2022. It is one of only five 18th century structures remaining in Pittsburgh, and the oldest existing log residence.

For a more detailed narrative history of all that is now known, with references, go to squirrelhillhistory.org and click on "Neill Log House." FONLH, the organization directing the reconstruction, is a collaboration of the Squirrel Hill Historical Society (SHHS) and the Squirrel Hill Urban Coalition (SHUC).

History of the Land and the People Who Lived There

- In 1769, Ambrose Newton, an artilleryman stationed at Fort Pitt, laid claim to 262 acres of Native American land that became available for purchase by European settlers after a treaty with the Iroquois Confederacy.
- After Newton died in 1773, ownership of the tract of land, named "Highland," passed through other owners before Robert Neill acquired a Patent on it in 1787.
- It is believed that Robert Neill, his wife, and five daughters lived on the land as early as 1774 because Neill had made his own claim and eventually acquired a Patent on it in 1787. However, since the present house wasn't built until 1795, the Neill family likely lived in a different house on the property.
- Neill sold Highland in 1795 for much more than he paid. The considerable profit reflected his development of the land and construction of a new house and farm buildings. The family moved to the Market Street area in what is now downtown Pittsburgh.
- It is believed that none of the owners of the Neill Log House actually lived in the house, including Neill, who sold the house the same year it is believed to have been built.
- Final sale of the Highland tract and the log house was to James O'Hara, the grandfather of Mary Schenley, who eventually inherited all of his landholdings.
- Nothing is known of the early tenants of the log house after it was sold by Neill until the first tenants of James O'Hara, the Burchfield family, occupied the house for a number of years. They were to become a notable family in Squirrel Hill and Pittsburgh.
- James O'Hara consolidated Highland with several other contiguous tracts of land he owned, all of which came to be known as "Mt. Airy." Mary Schenley inherited the property in 1850. She eventually donated and sold the land to the city, which became Schenley Park.

During early years of the park, the log house was often referred to as the "Snyder (or Schneider) log cabin," named for the last family to rent the log house and live on the land. Their lease and others remaining on Mt. Airy were bought out by the city in 1889 as the park was being created. After the park opened, a golf course was constructed on the land adjoining the Neill Log House. A larger building was built next to the log house, and they were used as a rest stop and picnic area for golfers and as a storage shed.

Who Was Robert Neill?

Most of what is known about Robert Neill comes from public records. We believe he was born in Dauphin County, PA, in 1745 to immigrant parents from Northern Ireland who had eight children. At least one brother of Robert settled nearby, in Indiana County. Names of family members are spelled variously as Neal, Neil, and Neel. We know Robert served in the Revolutionary War with the Pennsylvania Regiment and lived with

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his wife Elizabeth and five daughters on the Highland property before moving downtown. It is believed a son may have moved away before then. Records show Neill developed his land in Squirrel Hill into a farm with livestock. He is said to have made his living as a wagoner, transporting people and goods between Pittsburgh and Philadelphia on the Nemaquin Trail by way of Harrisburg near where his father reportedly had a business. It was also noted that Robert did some land speculation in properties in Market Square before moving there. He died in 1804.

Historic Importance of the Neill Log House

The Neill Log House exemplifies the period in early Pittsburgh when settlers were moving from log cabins on the frontier to more permanent residences. The house possesses elements that distinguish it from a log cabin in the way the logs were hewn and joined, and having a loft, wooden floor, and a two-hearth fireplace, one for cooking and one for heating. The noted preservationist-architect of the 1969 reconstruction, Charles M. Stotz, called the house “one of the most interesting log structures in twenty-two counties.” Considered to be the more significant of the two log houses in Schenley Park, it contributed to the park’s National Historic Place Designation, which states that “both houses reinforce the consciously American character of the park and recall the pre-park wilderness.” Edward Bigelow, Director of Public Works, called “The Father of Schenley Park” for his efforts to encourage Mary Schenley’s donation and sale of land, stated, “That cabin will be preserved as one of the natural beauties of the place. ... This place will one day be the great point of interest to park visitors.”

From History to Lore

Current interest in restoring the Neill Log House began when SHHS was presented with research from the National Park Service suggesting that Meriwether Lewis may have stopped to water his horses near the house on his way to Downtown Pittsburgh before beginning his historic journey. Other interesting stories related to the log house that can’t be authenticated include attacks by Native Americans. Some reports that might lend credence to these stories are historic observations of bullet-pocked logs and arrowheads found on the site during the archeological dig there.

Restoration in the Modern Era

PHLF – In 1967, Pittsburgh History & Landmarks Foundation (PHLF) began restoration just before the structure collapsed. Reconstruction was completed in 1969, after a major excavation of the site and collection of artifacts was done by Carnegie Institute. The log house was periodically opened to the public in the following years by PHLF, supplemented by Preservation Pittsburgh’s efforts through the early 1990s. From that time until Friends of Neill Log House was formed by the Squirrel Hill Historical Society and the Squirrel Hill Urban Coalition in October 2021, the house and its collection of donated period furnishings became mostly degraded behind a chained cyclone fence, with the structure assessed to be in danger of collapsing again.

FONLH – In October 2021, under the leadership of SHHS and SHUC, Friends of Neill Log House was officially incorporated, with representation from all Pittsburgh historic and preservation groups. After raising funds, the new organization executed a 15-year lease with the City of Pittsburgh as owner, and entered into contracts with qualified contractors to restore the structure and site to historic standards. Work on the Neill Log House is considered to be a restoration to the authentic standards of the 1969 reconstruction.



For more detailed information about the FONLH board and its efforts, visit the Squirrel Hill Historical Society’s website, squirrelhillhistory.org, and click on the link to the Neill Log House.