

February Update on the Friends of Neill Log House (FONLH): New Timeline Appendix Challenges What We Know

Tony Indovina, FONLH President and SHHS Board Member



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.



As readers of our updates are frequently reminded, FONLH continues to manage multiple activities:

NFL Draft Activities

At the January Squirrel Hill Urban Coalition board meeting, it was recommended that we host visits to the Neill Log House for visitors coming to Pittsburgh for the upcoming NFL Draft on April 23-25. We responded that opening the log house to the public prior to the regular May start-of-season would absolutely be doable for tours by our docents and Park Rangers. A proposal will be sent to the NFL shortly, requesting that information about the log house be included in its visitors’ packets, and we will also advertise through the City Parks site and social media that we will be open for visits that week.

Timeline for Transferring Management of the Neill Log House

In addition to the NFL draft plans, all the planning that was outlined in our January update continues. The major undertaking is to begin a timeline of activities for the city to approve a process for transferring the management of the Neill Log House to a private entity. At the time of this writing, activities have begun and details will be announced when appropriate. We have also previewed log house maintenance and site improvement, and plans for these are advancing with gutter installation and garden fencing work to be scheduled in March through early spring.

Creation of Neill Log House History Appendices

The other major activity previewed in our January update was the creation of Appendices to the “Neill Log House History” on the “Neill Log House” link of the SHHS website. Over the past few months, we have received valuable research from our Neal/Neill family friends, mostly in the form of family genealogy. We received “The Timeline of Robert Neal (alternate spelling Neill),” from Stephen Neal, a sixth-great-grandson of William Neal, oldest brother of Robert Neill. It has now been added to the “Neill Log House History” as Appendix A. Stephen authored the article in last month’s newsletter, “The Neal Family,” about Robert’s brother William Neal through his family today in Indiana County. And, as stated before, we are grateful for all of Stephen Neal’s research contributions and this richly detailed “Timeline” chronology of the life of Robert Neal.

Like all of Stephen Neal’s research, the chronology in this Appendix is scholarly and well documented. It challenges some of the narrative in the Neill Log House’s history currently on our website, so we acknowledge that clarifications and revisions will be necessary. We will attempt to make our readers aware of these as they are made. It is expected that much will require some reinterpretation.

Because we are posting Stephen’s ‘Timeline’ exactly as he presented it to us, there will continue to be disparity in the spelling of the name Neal/Neill. We have previously acknowledged that “Neal” is the ancestral spelling of the family name and of Robert’s father, who emigrated from Northern Ireland. It is also the spelling used by most of Robert’s siblings and many of his descendants. Since the inception of FONLH, we have adhered to the spelling of “Neill,” since it was adopted by our predecessor organization, Pittsburgh History & Landmarks Foundation (PHLF). Their decision was



Pittsburgh History & Landmarks Foundation first used the Neal spelling when they restored the house in the late 1960s.

based on research done by one of their founding presidents, Charles Arensberg, who reported on it in a 1969 article in their journal. Although his research and conclusions are not universally accepted, there is the practical consideration that the "Neill" spelling has become incorporated into legal documents of the city, and we are entered into a legal agreement with the city. For these reasons, we will continue to use 'Robert Neill' and will add the words 'alternate spelling Neill' to references to 'Robert Neal' in other documents.

Among the many interesting facts in Stephen Neal's timeline is information on Robert Neill's only son, John Neal. There was never a record of him living on "Highland" (Neill's property in what is now Schenley Park), and others have concluded that this was because he was older by the time the family lived there and had moved out on his own. Stephen and others have pointed out that he was not listed in Robert's will. With the additional information provided in the timeline, we learn why he was not listed. This, and the record of the son's birth and death, challenges the speculation sometimes made that the son died before his father.

In our preface to Stephen Neal's article, "The Neal Family," in the January SHHS Newsletter, it was noted that Robert's life is somewhat more difficult to document than that of his brothers who also came to Western Pennsylvania in 1780, in part because he moved so much between Highland and old Paxtong Township outside Harrisburg, where he had inherited half his father's land. By contrast, his brothers, who settled and farmed in Mt. Pleasant and Indiana County, were part of church communities that their descendants also belonged to for many generations, and they benefitted from records maintained in their communities. The chronology of Stephen Neal's timeline lends clarity to why Robert appeared on census records in Paxtong even after he made his claim to Ambrose Newton's land on Squirrel Hill in 1781. He appears to have finally settled on Highland in 1783 after the Revolutionary War but before he received his final "Patent," or deed, on the land in 1787.

This research now allows us to definitively dispel prior claims that Robert and his family squatted on the land (some sources say for 20 years) before acquiring it. Research received earlier from Stephen has given us a much better understanding of the complicated and lengthy process settlers like Robert Neill went through to secure legal ownership. Once Robert's claim on the land was accepted, he likely felt entitled to settle on it before receiving his actual deed, as was common, but for a much shorter period of time than was originally believed. With Stephen's well-documented research, we are now able to more clearly understand Robert's presence in early Squirrel Hill and Pittsburgh and his relationship through the years to the Highland tract he owned.

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The Five Worst Snowstorms in Pittsburgh

Helen Wilson

Pittsburgh has had a lot of snowstorms in its winters, and the one we just experienced, named "Fern" by The Weather Channel, comes in fifth worst of all time. (The National Weather Service does not name winter storms.)

The "Epic Snowstorm" of December 16-18, 1890, dumped 25.9 inches of snow on the city, the second largest total accumulation on record.

The next was "The Big Snow" of Thanksgiving weekend, November 24-26, 1950. It remains the largest snowstorm in Pittsburgh's history, with a total snowfall of 27.4 inches. The storm so immobilized the city that the Pennsylvania National Guard was deployed, and Sherman tanks were used to pull stranded trucks and cars from impassible streets. The situation didn't improve for a whole week.

The "Storm of the Century" occurred on March 12-14, 1993. Its total snowfall of 25.3 inches set the all-time Pittsburgh record for the most snow falling in a single day.

The snowstorm most people remember now is "Snowmageddon" on February 5-6, 2010. The heavy, wet snow caused many power outages. Schools were closed for a week, and huge piles of snow remained for over a month.

The winter storm "Fern" that just hit Pittsburgh and a huge swath of the country, occurred on January 25, 2026. It officially dropped 10.7 to 11.2 inches of snow. Temperatures hovering around the zero mark this week are hindering cleanup.



"Snowmageddon on Beechwood Boulevard." (Photo by Todd Wilson.)