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The History of the Neill Log House

Helen Wilson, using information from "The Neill Log House Fact Sheet"

On September 9, members of the SHHS executive board had a chance to do what few people can nowadays—go into the Neill log house in Schenley Park. We met there with two Pittsburgh Department of Public Works officials to assess the house's condition and discuss ways to restore and preserve the historic landmark. The house was brought to our attention by a National Park Service contractor working on a project to connect historical sites associated with the Lewis and Clark expedition to communities along the route to highlight their historic sites. More information about the project is in Tony Indovina's article following this one.



The Neill house is the oldest extant domestic structure in Pittsburgh and one of the last few buildings left from the eighteenth century. It is owned by the City of Pittsburgh and was designated a City Historic Landmark in 1977. We found the house in relatively good condition except for the roof. I was surprised to see the period furniture that had been put in the house after its 1969 restoration still there, covered with dust and cobwebs.

The First Occupants of the Neill Log House

The house is believed to have been built and occupied by Ambrose Newton, a soldier at Fort Pitt, who laid claim to 262 acres in what is now Schenley Park. The house appears on a 1790 road survey. It is still on its original site. Today it is known as the "Neill Log House" after the family who lived in it from about 1774 to 1795—Robert Neill, his wife Elizabeth, and their five daughters, Nancy, Mary, Elizabeth, Jean and Marthew (or Martha).

Records show that Robert Neill bought the house and tract in 1787 for 34 pounds, 8 shillings. It was common back then for people to name their property, so Neill called his tract "Highlands." The land was patented to him by the Supreme Executive Council of Pennsylvania. However, it is likely the Neills were living on the property before 1783, even as early as 1774-1775. Since the Neills didn't pay for the land until 1787 they were undoubtedly squatters, as were most of the people to frontier Pennsylvania. Squatters are people looking for cheap land who settle on unoccupied land without paying for it, sometimes for years. This practice was condoned by both colonial and state authorities despite claims by absentee owners. Most properties in the Greenfield-Squirrel Hill area have deeds dated 1787 or 1788, probably because that was when the state caught up with the squatters and made them pay for the land they lived on. Squatters were usually allowed to assume ownership of a property (after paying for it) if they lived on it, farmed it, and built on it. Neill seems to have done just that—develop the land into a farm. Tax records show he owned the land, two horses, and three cows and probably had some sheep, hogs, and hens. Not much else is known about him except that he also bought land in what is now Downtown.

Neill was probably attracted to the site because water was available. An 1872 map shows a creek flowing past the house down the hill into a stream that runs into Panther Hollow. The creek is now culverted, but water seeping out around the nearby Catahecassa monument is supposedly from the creek.

The property is about four miles from Fort Pitt, where the family could go for protection in case of an Indian attack or to get supplies from merchants and traders around the fort. A 1915 article tells a possibly apocryphal story of an Indian attack in Squirrel Hill, when Neill, driver Jack Andrews, and two passengers were returning home one summer evening a few years before the Revolutionary War. They were riding in a Conestoga wagon pulled by six horses somewhere near present-day Forbes and Murray Avenues. The story goes that an Indian emerged from the bushes and threw a wasp's nest at the wagon, hitting a horse and breaking the nest. The wasps stung the horse and Andrews. The horses panicked and stampeded down Murray Avenue. The passengers were nearly tossed from the back of the wagon and lost their rifles because of the horses' sudden start. Andrews got the horses under control, but about six Indians chased them to Neill's home, firing rifles at them, and wounding some of the passengers. When they got to the house, Neill and the passengers ran inside while Andrews went on to Fort Pitt for help. Neill and his family fired at the Indians through the windows, and after an hour's siege, the Indians left.

This story is problematical because the roads over the mountains to the east were bad before 1800 and not wide enough for large wagons such as Conestogas, so Neill may have been a wagon driver only later in his life. Early on, he probably was a trader with packhorses, carrying goods over the mountains to trade and sell, making the family fairly prosperous and able to invest in real estate.

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In 1795, Neill sold the land for 365 pounds, 5 shillings to John Reed, who added an adjoining tract. The profit probably reflects the development of the land by Neill. Reed sold the tract to Brintnal Robins. He, in turn, sold 374 acres to James O'Hara.

An interesting side note is that O'Hara rented the property to the Burchfield family, who owned a lot of property in Squirrel Hill South. Adam Burchfield was born in the Neill house. His grandson, William, married Elizabeth Stewart, Neill's great-great-granddaughter. They lived in Squirrel Hill on Beechwood Boulevard. The Burchfields were executives of Horne's department store for decades. Elizabeth Stewart Burchfield may have been the source for the newspaper articles about the Neills.



James O'Hara's granddaughter, Mary Croghan Schenley, inherited the land. In 1889, she donated about 300 acres to the City of Pittsburgh "for the comfort of the people and recreation." That property, including the Neill house, became part of Schenley Park, which opened that same year. The land around the Neill house was made into a picnic grove, tennis courts, and not long afterward, a golf course. An addition was put on the house that was bigger than the house itself. The house was used for restrooms and a maintenance building for the golf course.

In the late 1930s, the house was designated as one of the "most interesting log structures in western Pennsylvania" by Charles M. Stotz when he conducted a survey of historic buildings in this part of the state.

Description of the Neill Log House

The Neill house is made of oak logs. Most of them are not original because the house collapsed in 1967 and was carefully and authentically restored in 1969 by Pittsburgh History & Landmarks Foundation. The wood was disassembled and the usable wood kept. The lower logs are probably original but may not be in their original positions. The new logs and beams were cut by hand to match the originals. The present roof, floors, and beams are new. The lintel over the fireplace is the original log. The fieldstone foundation, fireplace, and chimney are original. The chimney and fireplace have never been dismantled.

The house has a single room with a loft above. According to a 1966 report, the house was well built. The corners were square. The logs were held together by V notches and wooden pegs, the ends of the

roof rafters were beveled, and the floor was made of half-logs called puncheons. Nails were not used. Wood pegs simulating the originals hold the rafters together. They are visible in the loft and in the door and window frames.

The house originally had a ladder to the loft, which was replaced by stairs in 1969. The chinking between the logs and covering the fireplaces is mortar applied in 1990 to seal out weather. The original chinking would have been clay mixed with hair or some other strengthening material on a backing of stones and twigs.

The house is interesting because it has two fireplaces. The larger fireplace was used for cooking, and an unusual smaller fireplace to its left was probably used for heating at night to save firewood. The house is otherwise a typical frontier Pennsylvania log house. The furnishings, still in the house, are not original to the Neills, but except for the reproduction light fixtures and rifle, all were made in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century and are items a fairly prosperous family like the Neills could have owned.

Restoration

When Pittsburgh History & Landmarks Foundation was founded in 1964, one of its early goals was to restore and furnish the Neill house and open it to the public. The City had neglected its maintenance and closed it. During the period when PHLF was trying to raise funds to restore the building, an entire corner collapsed. A \$50,000 grant from the Richard King Mellon Foundation made it possible to proceed with restoration and carry out appropriate landscaping. Plans were made to add outbuildings to complete a full eighteenth century domestic complex. The architectural firm of Stotz, Hess & MacLachlan was retained, and Carl E. Schultz was named contractor. Griswold, Winters & Swain were appointed landscape architects.

The first step was a careful disassembling of the fallen structure, each piece being numbered for later identification. Since much of the wood had rotted, new pieces were cut to exact dimensions and allowed to age. During this period



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the Department of Archaeology of Carnegie Institute under the direction of Kirk Wilson conducted an archaeological dig of the site that turned up 19,000 artifacts, now in the collection of Carnegie Museum.

Restoration of the log house began in the late summer of 1969, after careful planning to allow the use of modern construction methods without destroying the eighteenth-century character of the house. For example, modern heating and lighting were employed for contemporary use, but as inconspicuously as possible. Otherwise, many of the construction methods of the eighteenth century were used, including cutting and preparing the logs by hand and reching between the logs by hand, using the original stones. An herb garden and other plantings were installed by the Junior League of Pittsburgh, and period furniture and tools were bought or obtained by donation.

In the early 1970s the house was opened to the public, with tours given by PHLF. However, the house was owned by the city, which did not keep up with needed maintenance. For years PHLF was unable to open the house for tours because the City didn't cut down the eight-foot high weeds around the house.

By 1990, the house had rodent damage, decayed chinking, and some vandalism. The house was repaired, and PHLF started to hold tours again. But again the city didn't continue to maintain the house and grounds. In May 1993, Preservation Pittsburgh cleaned up house and grounds and conducted tours as a Preservation Month project.

After another period of neglect, the weeds and brush have again been removed by the City, and the grass around the Neill house is kept trimmed. A high chain-link fence extends around the property to protect the house. The fence is unsightly but effective.

The historic importance of the Neill house is obvious. It is one of only a few eighteenth-century structures remaining in Pittsburgh. Interestingly, of these, three others are in or near Squirrel Hill. They include the Martin log cabin on Overlook Drive in Schenley Park (1769-1774), also built by Ambrose Newton; the Woods house at 4604 Monongahela Avenue in Hazelwood (1790?); and the house that was once a stagecoach stop at 423 Kaercher Street in Greenfield (1800?). The oldest building in Pittsburgh, in case you're wondering, is the Block House in Point Park (1764), but it was not a domestic structure.

The Future of the Neill Log House

At our meeting at the house in September, the officials from DPW Facilities told us they had tried to get a grant to restore the house but it was rejected, not because it was deemed not worthwhile, but because of lack of funds. Perhaps another grant can be applied for. The SHHS has just begun to get involved in the well-being of the house, and we have no idea yet where this project will take us. Members of the SHHS are welcome to make suggestions and volunteer to help.