



Neill Log House Restoration Project



The **Neill Log House** is located at 5229 E. Circuit Road, on the eastern edge of the Bob O'Connor Golf Course in Schenley Park. The park and golf course lie within the official City boundaries of Squirrel Hill.

In 2020, the SHHS initiated a major project to rebuild the Neill Log House. In the process, participants learned a lot about the house and gathered support for its restoration.

Both sides of this display highlight the progress that has been made and the future plans being put in place so that the Neill Log House can be reopened to the public and used for educational purposes to demonstrate what life was like on the western Pennsylvania frontier in the late 1700s.



Helen Wilson

See the back of this display for more about the Neill Log House restoration project.

For more information, scan the QR code or go to squirrelhillhistory.org and click on the link, "The Neill Log House." Updates are also provided in the SHHS Newsletters that go out to members monthly.





Neill Log House Restoration Project



The **Neill Log House** is Pittsburgh's oldest domestic log structure and one of the few existing buildings in the city left from the 1700s. The present house is a reconstruction built around the original fireplace and chimney.



Sketch by Natalie Stewart

In 2020, the Squirrel Hill Historical Society (SHHS), in partnership with the Squirrel Hill Urban Coalition (SHUC), undertook a project to restore the Neill Log House and reopen it to visitors and educational groups.

This display describes the progress of the restoration effort. See the other side of this display board for more information.

You can help the **FRIENDS OF THE NEILL LOG HOUSE (FONLH)** save and restore this unique Pittsburgh Historic Landmark, one of only a few eighteenth-century buildings remaining in Pittsburgh. For more information about the Neill Log House, scan the QR code or go to the Squirrel Hill Historical Society website, squirrelhillhistory.org.

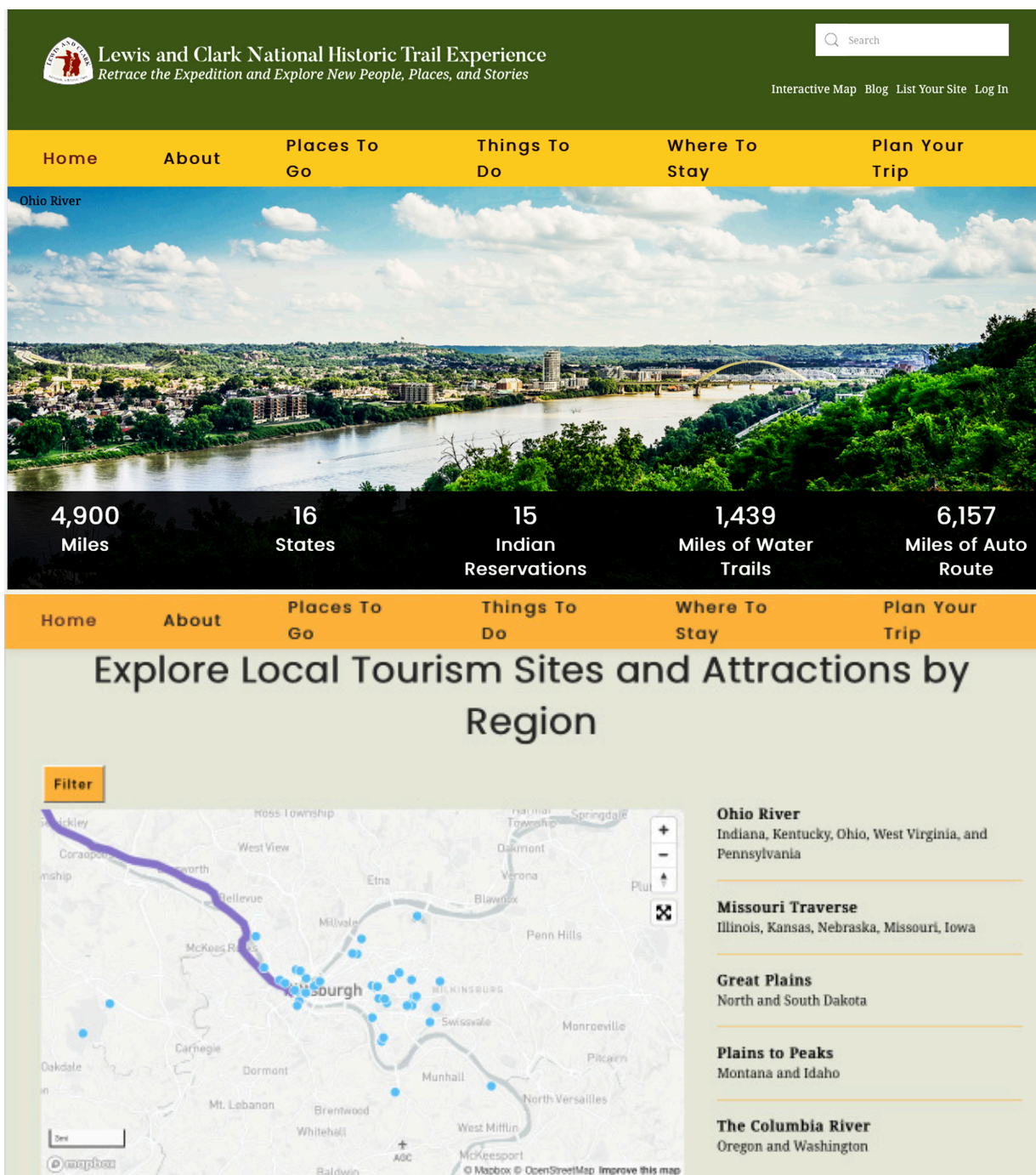
FRIENDS OF NEILL LOG HOUSE (FONLH Inc.) is a project of the Squirrel Hill Historical Society (SHHS) and the Squirrel Hill Urban Coalition (SHUC) in cooperation with the City of Pittsburgh, owner. All contributions are tax deductible. The Squirrel Hill Urban Coalition is the fiscal agent, assuming legal responsibility for reporting FONLH revenue and expenses. You can donate online through the SHUC website, shuc.org. (Click on "Projects.") or scan the QR code. Donations by check are also accepted. Make your check out to SHUC-FONLH and put FONLH in the memo line. Mail to: Squirrel Hill Urban Coalition, 5604 Solway Street, Pittsburgh, PA, 15217.



Impetus for the NLH Project

The Neill House restoration project was initiated after the SHHS was contacted by a contractor charged with creating a companion website to the National Park Service's website, *nps.gov* named the **Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail Experience**, *lewisandclark.travel*.

The *Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail Experience* website is designed to supplement the main National Park Service website by featuring attractions, businesses, lodgings, restaurants, and other experiences along the Lewis and Clark trail. The contractor wanted to include the Neill Log House on his list of historical attractions because research showed Meriwether Lewis likely stopped at the house on his way to pick up the keelboat in what was then the borough of Pittsburgh. The SHHS and Squirrel Hill Urban Coalition (SHUC) compiled a list of attractions and experiences in Pittsburgh for the website. In the process, they discovered that the Neill Log House itself was in poor condition and in danger of collapse. SHHS and SHUC decided to work together to form a new and separate organization to restore the historic old building.

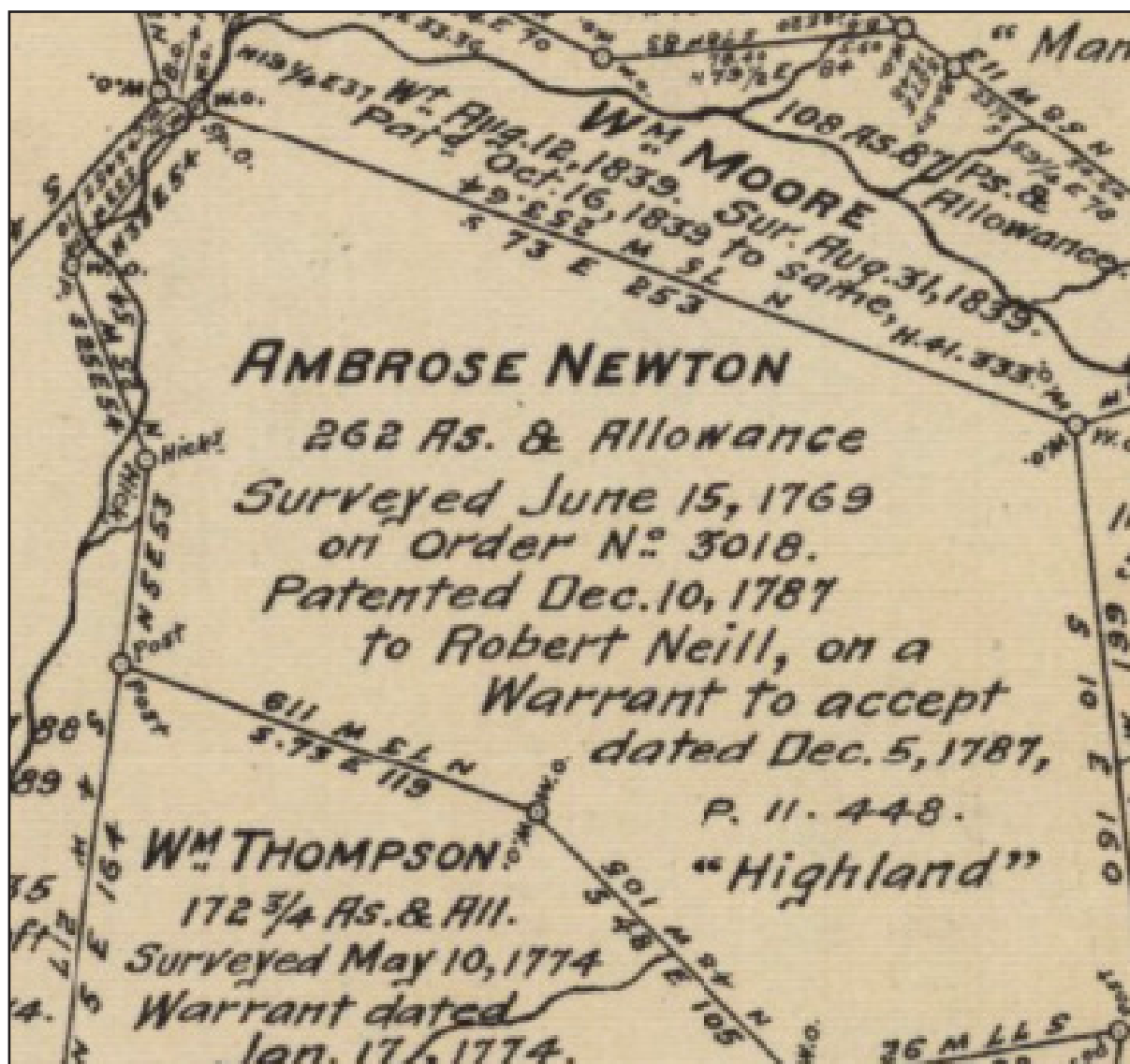


Origins of the Neill Log House

The SHHS has been doing extensive research on the early history of the Neill Log House, finding surprising deviations from long-held beliefs. It had been believed the house was built around 1769 by the first European to claim the land—**Ambrose Newton**, a British artilleryman stationed at Fort Pitt. Newton did file the first land claim, but he didn't build the house. Dendrochronology (tree ring) tests dated the house to 1795, after the land passed through several owners before it was acquired by a wagoner named Robert Neill.

Neill made improvements on the property, building a house for himself and his wife and five daughters and probably adding a barn, spring house, and other outbuildings. He sold the property for a large profit in 1795, the same year the current log house was built, so it is not likely he lived in this house for long.

The atlas, *Warrantee Maps constructed in 1914 by the Pa. Department of Internal Affairs from Records of the Earliest Land Grants*, provides important clues to early land ownership in Allegheny County. On the *Warrantee Map of Pittsburgh*, Robert Neill's name appears under Ambrose Newton's claim, which he named "Highland." Above it is Wm. Moore's tract, named "Mt. Airy."



Timeline of the Neill Log House

The SHHS has been researching not only the early years of the Neill Log House but also what has happened to it since then.

- 1769** – Ambrose Newton, a soldier stationed at Fort Pitt at the Point, formalized his claim to American Indian land 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 around 21 years. He might have been a squatter before becoming the official owner.
- 1795** – The Neill Log House was built, as determined by core samples of original wood in the house. That same year he sold the property and moved to Downtown Pittsburgh. The property was sold twice more before it was acquired by General James O’Hara, Mary Schenley’s maternal grandfather, in 1813.
- 1803** – Meriwether Lewis may have stopped at the house to water his horses on his way to Pittsburgh to begin his westward exploration, according to National Park Service research.
- 1850** – Mary Schenley inherited a large tract of land, including “Highland,” from her grandfather, General James O’Hara.
- 1872** – An 1872 Hopkins plat map shows five or six buildings around the Neill Log House. By then, the house might have been used for storage while a tenant farmer lived in a larger farmhouse nearby.
- 1889** – Mary Schenley donated 300 acres and sold another 120 acres at a reduced rate to the City of Pittsburgh to create Schenley Park. The area around the house was made into a picnic grove and tennis courts. A large addition with restrooms and a storage area was added to the house.
- 1896** – Schenley Park Golf Course was constructed by the private Shady Side Golf Club. Its name was changed to The Pittsburgh Golf Club the following year. The Neill Log House was used as a rest stop for golfers.
- 1910** – The City of Pittsburgh took over the golf course.
- 1967** – The Neill Log House wasn’t maintained, and its condition deteriorated so badly it collapsed in 1967.
- 1969** – The Pittsburgh History & Landmarks Foundation undertook a major reconstruction of the log house on its 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 contributing factor.
- 2020** – SHHS and SHUC began a project to restore the Neill Log House.



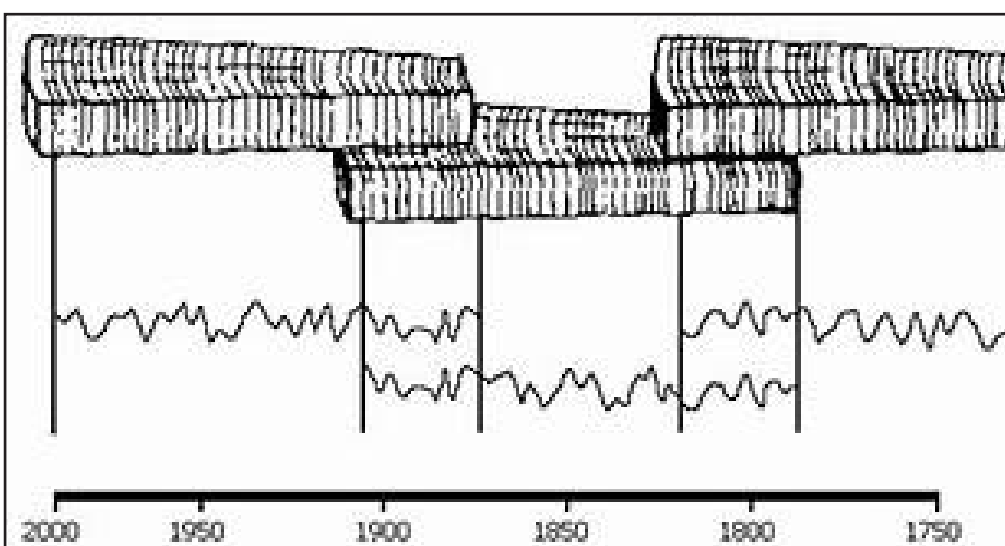
Dating the Neill Log House Using Dendrochronology

As part of the SHHS's research on the Neill Log House, it commissioned a dendrochronology study to determine the actual age of the house. The study was performed in 2022 by Nick Wiesenberg, chief technician of the Wooster Tree Ring Lab, from the Department of Geology at the College of Wooster, Ohio, a lab which specializes in dating artifacts through this technique.



Dendrochronology can be defined as “the science or technique of dating events, environmental change, and archaeological artifacts by using the characteristic patterns of annual growth rings in timber and tree trunks.”

Wiesenberg examined the Neill Log House to find the oldest wood in it. He determined the lintel in the fireplace and a discarded piece of door frame were original to the house. By comparing core samples of that wood with charts showing tree ring growth patterns through the years, he reported that the house most likely dated to 1795.



To the left is an example of a chart of tree ring core samples that matches patterns of growth to provide a timeline allowing scientists to date a particular piece of wood.

Who Was Robert Neill?

Little is known about Robert Neill or his family. What we know comes from census, tax, and property records and from newspaper articles from the early 1900s, recounting local lore.

According to a 1915 newspaper article in the *Pittsburgh Bulletin*, Neill was a wagon driver who took people and supplies between Pittsburgh and Philadelphia. Before road improvements allowed wagon traffic, he probably led pack horses on trading trips. He prospered and was able to invest in real estate. Tax records from that time show the Neills kept a few horses, cows, chickens, and probably pigs on their farm, which was named “Highland.”

Neill and his wife Elizabeth had five daughters. In 1795 Neill sold Highland for a profit and moved to downtown Pittsburgh. Perhaps they moved because farm work was too arduous for the family or that Neill was involved in land speculation.

The land the house stands on was first claimed by Ambrose Newton in 1769 and patented to Robert Neill in 1787. However, tax records show Neill was already paying taxes on it in 1783, so it is probable he and his family lived there before purchasing it legally, making them squatters, like most people moving to frontier Pennsylvania at the time. Squatters settled on unoccupied land without paying for it, sometimes for years.



Tony Indovina

The Neill Log House is still in its original location. Neill probably chose the site because 1) a nearby spring provided water, 2) it was near a major route to the Point, and 3) it was only four miles from Fort Pitt, where the family could go for protection in case of Indian attacks or to get supplies from merchants and traders around the fort.

Neill, Neil, Neal?

The spelling of Neill varies on different documents. FONLH had to decide which spelling to use as the official name for the house—Neill, Neil, or Neal. “Neill” was ultimately chosen.

FONLH Inc.

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

Adopted February 2022



**Friends of
NEILL LOG HOUSE**

Logo by Natalie Stewart

“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.”

The **Neill Log House** is one of the very few remaining buildings in Pittsburgh dating from the 1700s. Almost everything else was destroyed as steel making and other industries developed.

In 2020, the **Squirrel Hill Historical Society** initiated interest in saving the Neill Log House, by then in a deteriorated state and unused for over thirty years. The **SHHS** joined forces with the **Squirrel Hill Urban Coalition (SHUC)** to form a new, separate organization to restore the historic old building. Since almost all of Schenley Park lies within Squirrel Hill’s borders, SHHS and SHUC felt the restoration project would benefit the neighborhood by attracting visitors and disseminating knowledge about its history.

SHHS and SHUC assembled a stellar committee composed of members of major Pittsburgh historical preservation and conservation organizations and a descendant of Robert Neill and formed **Friends of Neill Log House, Inc. (FONLH)**, with SHUC serving as the non-profit fiduciary, to work with Pittsburgh’s Department of Public Works because the City owns the house. Tony Indovina, a SHHS board member, was elected president of FONLH.

SHUC applied for grants to fund the restoration and worked with the City to prepare legal documents giving FONLH the right to restore the house, provide funding for research efforts, conserve and store the antique artifacts from the house at a storage facility until the house is rebuilt, and develop and run educational programming after the house is reopened to the public.

Actual reconstruction of the Neill Log House is slated to begin sometime this summer. It is important to note that, technically speaking, the Neill Log House is a reconstruction around an original fireplace and chimney on the same exact site as first built. The house collapsed prior to the last major effort by the Pittsburgh History and Landmark Foundation to restore it. Today’s efforts are to restore it to the same standards as was done by PHLF in 1969.

Catahecassa Fountain

The Catahecassa Fountain is located on East Circuit Drive at the bottom of the stone steps leading to the Neill Log House. The granite fountain (now stopped up) has a portrait of a Native American chief carved on it.

The fountain was built around 1912 to honor a leader of the Shawnees who was born around 1721 and was reputed to have lived for more than 100 years. The bronze plaque on the fountain says,



“Catahecassa, Blackhoof, war chief of the Shawnees, was present at the defeat of Braddock in 1755 and took part in all subsequent wars until the treaty of Greenville in 1795, after which he remained a friend and ally of the United States.”

Catahecassa remained faithful to the terms of the treaty of 1795 all his life, becoming “the firm ally and friend of those against whom his tomahawk had been so long raised ... in obedience to a necessity which left no middle course, and under a belief that submission alone could save his tribe from destruction.” (From a 19th century journal, *Life Among the Indians*, by the Rev. J. B. Finle.

Catahecassa visited Washington, D.C., four times. On one of those occasions, in 1802, he personally delivered a speech to President Thomas Jefferson, asking help in obtaining agrarian supplies for his people.



Postcard from 1909 showing Catahecassa Fountain and the Neill Log House without the stone steps in place. The tip of a large shed can be seen about the house's roof.

Martin Log Cabin



Another log structure stands in Schenley Park—the **Martin Log Cabin.**

It is called a log cabin rather than a log house because log cabins were generally smaller and simpler in design than log houses like the Neill Log House.

The Martin log cabin is located on Overlook Drive, leading up to Schenley Oval. It is not open to visitors.

Little information is available about the Martin log house. In *Historical Data, Pittsburgh Public Parks*, by Howard Stewart, published in 1943, the only reference to the cabin says, “A man by the name of Martin lived in this cabin. He conducted a dairy farm in this vicinity and died in the 1880s. He was the last occupant to actually live in this shelter. At the present time this cabin is being used as the Girl Scouts Headquarters.”

Various items in the society pages of early 1900s newspapers mention social events held in the cabin. An article in the *Squirrel Hill News*, May 19, 1938, says that the “hundred year old Martin’s Cabin in Schenley Park will be reconstructed and placed in original condition by National Youth Administration workers. ... The cabin went unoccupied for many years and gradually deteriorated. ... When completed, the cabin will be converted into a nature museum.

NYA youths will also be employed in preparing and caring for this museum.”

Unfortunately, the cabin is now permanently closed.

Several sources mention the story of an Indian attack on the cabin while a wedding was in progress. (right)

EIGHT—THEATRICAL AND PHOToplay SECTION THE PITTSBURGH PRESS

History of Log Cabin In Schenley Park Reveals Story of Indian Battle Fought During Wedding

Captain Jack, Famous Scout, Prevents Massacre While Nuptial Fete Is at Height.

There was the first suggestion of autumn in the air on the night of the wedding. The ceremony over, guests were making merry with the dance. The dim flicker of the lamps shone out into the night from open doors and windows and the air of youthful frontier gaiety and abandon prevailed.

Capt. Jack managed to gain an entrance and mingled with the guests unobserved. With no show of emotion, the scout whispered to the host—father of the bride—that a band of Indians was approaching and meant to attack the house.

Quietly the word was passed around. One by one the men dropped out of the dance and took positions with guns loaded, ready for instant action. Women went on with the dancing. The sound of laughter and gaiety still floated out on the air. To the outside there was no change in the conduct of the party. Capt. Jack, taking a position on one side of the house, saw the stealthy forms of more than a score of Indians emerge from the woods and make their way across the cleared garden plot to ward the house.

BATTLE WITH INDIANS.
The lights went out doors were barred and women dropped flat on the floor. Flashes blazed into the darkness. Redskins dropped here and there—some dead, some wounded. Others fled.

There was no more dancing in the cabin at night. Darkness and silence reigned. The groom, the pretty bride, the wedding guests all stood watch, ready for another attack. Daybreak came at last. There was no sign of the Indians. The dead and wounded had been carried away by braves who, covered by the darkness, crept into the garden while those inside kept vigil.

No, it isn't fiction. It is fact—much stranger than fiction, and more thrilling—one of the stories of front-

All is quiet and peaceful around the old log cabin in Schenley park today. No one bothers about it. But in the frontier days when it was an outpost of civilization, it was the scene of many bloody battles between the white settlers and the Indians.

FIFTH AVE. FRIENDSHIP GIRLS 'ADOPT' FRESHMEN

The Fifth Friendship Girl Reserve held a meeting at which the topic for discussion was "Our Quest for Health." The meeting opened with the singing of the songs led by Blanche Katz. The discussion was led by Lois McGregor, who was aided by Freda Reisman, Dora Jarelsky, Sylvia Kopp, Ellen Shifrin, Pauline Hirsch, Theresa Quinn, and Sylvia Aronson. The program closed with

Snyder House and Spring

The Neill Log House was referred to as the “Snyder house,” (sometimes spelled “Schneider” in old documents). Plus, the spring that fed Catahecassa Fountain is still called Snyder Spring today. So who was Snyder?

We were able to find only a little information about Snyder, showing he was a tenant farmer on Mary Schenley’s land just before she donated it to the City for a park in 1889. Snyder’s lease was purchased by the City under the direction of Director of Public Works Edward M. Bigelow. Other tenants were also displaced (*right*).

Snyder probably didn’t live in the log house. Sketches in newspapers and plat maps show larger buildings in place, which could have been a farmhouse, barn, and other farm buildings.

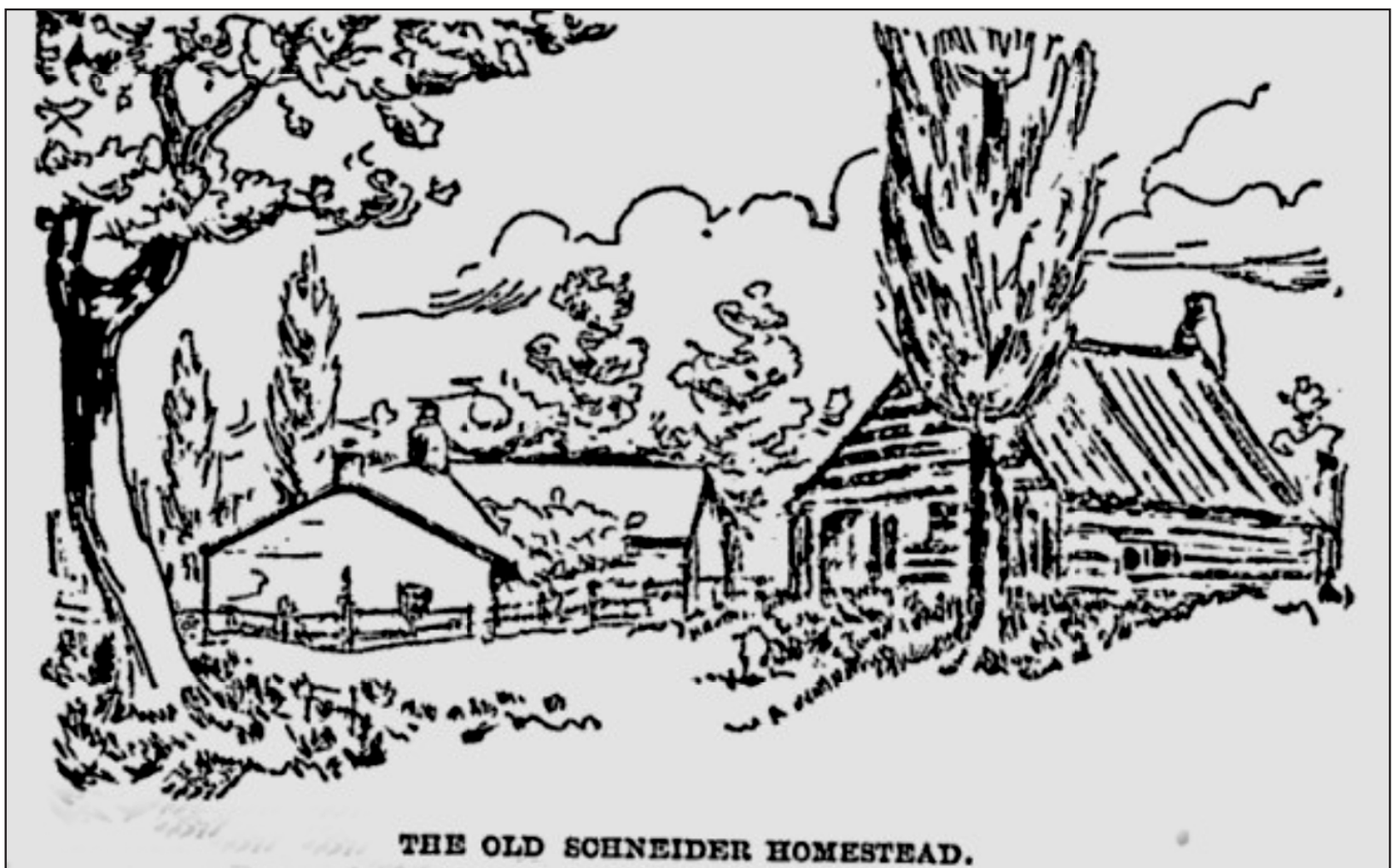
TO BUY SCHENLEY LEASES.

The Finance Committee Will Consider a Resolution Giving Tenants \$1000 a Year.

A special meeting of the finance committee has been called for this afternoon to consider a resolution offered at a recent meeting of councils for the purchase of the leases held by tenants of the farms included in Schenley park. Several meetings of the park committee and the tenants have been held with a view to fixing upon a fair consideration for the release of the property. Through the efforts of Chief Bigelow the tenants have finally consented to accept \$1000 per year for their leases. Thus John Schmitt, who has a six-year lease will get \$6,000 to give up possession of his farm on April 1; Louis Biers will get \$3000 for a three-year lease; Adam Schneider and Adam Zender, \$1000 each, they having only one-year leases.

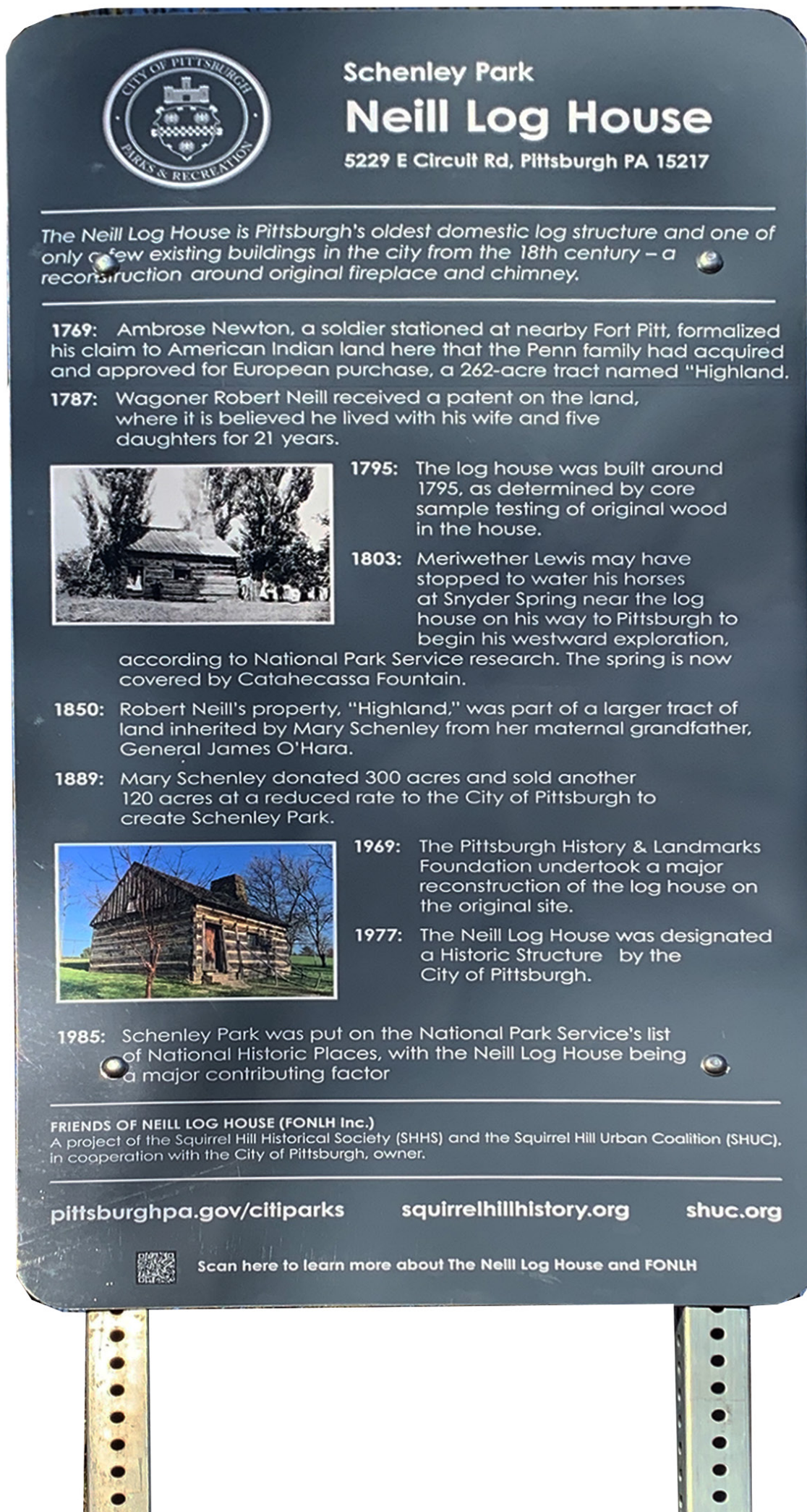
The resolution authorizes the payment of those amounts and provides that the money shall be taken from the park appropriation.

Pittsburgh Daily Post, March 7, 1890



THE OLD SCHNEIDER HOMESTEAD.

The Neill Log House Placard



FONLH worked closely with the Pittsburgh Department of Public Works to prepare an informational placard to be installed near the Neill Log House.

FONLH composed the wording for the placard, which was created in a DPW facility and installed in early 2023.

The placard is just the first step in making the history of the Neill Log House better known.



Future plans call for the Neill Log House to be open for tours and visits when it is restored. Informational materials and curriculums for school visits will be prepared by educators serving on the FONLH committee.

[Click here to return to SHHS Museum Board Exhibits](#)

Driving Tour of Squirrel Hill



Squirrel Hill North and South together cover almost four square miles, with over 200 streets, bridges, and other roadways. The neighborhood has a thriving business district, two large city parks, various types of residential areas, and a number of religious and educational institutions. What better way to get a full picture of Squirrel Hill than by driving around it to see its diverse sections?

SHHS member and geographic information systems specialist Lauren Winkler worked with SHHS Vice-President Helen Wilson to create an interactive driving tour with information and pictures about what you'll see along the route. Click on **"Driving Tour of Squirrel Hill"** on our website's main menu.

