

The Neyhards: Columbia County Surveyors

By William M. Baillie

Imagine: at age 12 you are tilling your family's farm field behind a four-horse team when the plow point strikes a large root and the plow handle whacks you in the ribs. The injury is severe and the doctor says that you are disabled from manual labor for life. Your family is poor and you've had almost no education. What to do?

This incident in about 1810 led the injured boy, Solomon Neyhard, as an adult to become a surveyor, an outdoor job that didn't require heavy lifting. He started a business that was prominent in Columbia County for nearly a century, continued by his son Samuel and grandson Solomon D. The plow accident, however, was only the first in a long string of mishaps that dogged the Neyhard family through three generations. The surveying firm prospered at times, but the family often struggled against crushing debts. In their continued pushing on, the Neyhards were typical of many pioneer Columbia County families who by grit and determination overcame daunting obstacles.

Solomon Neyhard was born near Allentown on May 8, 1798. He was the great-grandson of a German immigrant, George Frederick Neuhart, who landed in Philadelphia and took the oath of allegiance to the British king on September 26, 1737. Solomon's father, named Christian, ran the family's gristmill north of Allentown for years, then in 1812 bought 200 acres in the "Shamogin" region—later South Centre township in Columbia County—and settled into farming there with his family of nine children.

Young Solomon, after his accident, went to Allentown to take up an apprenticeship as a stocking-weaver. He continued in the trade for some years, but even this sit-down occupation was too taxing for his injured ribs and he rejoined his family in Columbia County. There he married a neighbor's daughter, Sarah Achenbach, and with his wife's small inheritance he bought ten acres and a small house at Lime Ridge, where they struggled to raise enough food to feed themselves.

Seeking a non-farming occupation, Solomon boarded local schoolmaster Oliver Kahler for two winters in exchange for the teacher instructing him in the rudiments of surveying. Solomon then set up as a professional surveyor and had "all the business he could handle" for nearly three decades, until failing eyesight forced him to give up the profession at age sixty in 1858.

Solomon and his wife Sarah had four children, but only one of them, a boy named Samuel (1833-1914), lived past four years of age. We know this son's life in considerable detail because he wrote a 4,000-word autobiography in about 1909 in a letter to his grandson Ray. This document is included in the Society's Everett Papers, a large family-history collection which included the Neyhard survey documents.

As a boy, Samuel began schooling at the Keefer Lane one-room school, a two-mile walk from his home, but he seldom attended because his father constantly “let” him or rented him out as a day-laborer to neighboring farmers. He would tie up sheaves in the fields, or turn the crank of a wind machine at the threshing floor. (The crank was above his head and his arms felt ready to drop off after a long day of steady turning.)

At age 13 he began to carry the measuring chain in his father’s surveying crew. Then his father developed a limestone quarry on his land and installed Samuel, at age 17, as the manager. The young man carried on this business for over a year until he strained his back severely on the job, an injury that plagued him all his life—the second generation afflicted with a maiming injury while at work.

When Samuel recovered somewhat, his father sent him to Bloomsburg to the select high school of famed teacher Joel Bradley. After “getting educated”—in just seven weeks at the school—Samuel began to operate the surveyor’s compass for Solomon. To his father’s delight, Samuel showed a talent for the precise measurements and complicated arithmetic calculations required for surveying.

Meanwhile, in a slack season for surveying, Samuel took up a bottling business in Bloomsburg with a partner named Swartz. Samuel was the distributor: with a team and wagon he peddled ales and mineral water on long routes from dawn to nightfall, visiting each week in rotation Benton, Millville, Jerseytown, Danville, Shamokin, and many villages on the way. Business boomed and the partners bought more wagons and teams on credit until the banking panic of 1857 caused the business to crash. Samuel sold out, leaving him \$300 in debt.

By this time Samuel was married. His tale of how he happened to wed shows his sense of humor in difficult times. His day-long sales trips meant that he had to leave his boarding house before breakfast was served and return after supper was over. Desperate for decent meals, he thought of his distant cousin, Henrietta Neuhard. Some months earlier, he had brought this cousin to Bloomsburg when the family of his bottling partner needed a domestic servant; for a while Samuel and Henrietta both boarded with the Swartz family, and they grew into affection and then love. So he “screwed up [his] courage & proposed” and she “replied that she was not sure she could get any one else,” so she “hooked on” and they were married January 27, 1857.

Samuel now was responsible for feeding not only his nearly-blind father and his mother but also his wife and a growing family—eventually there were nine children. Samuel took over his father’s surveying business in 1858. He could earn \$2 a day at this trade, and when business was slack he hired out as a laborer for 50¢ a day plus board. In the inflation years during the Civil War he was able to raise his price as a surveyor to \$5 per day—good money at the time. Still, surveying was mainly a winter-season business that did not provide a year-round income. Samuel, incidentally, in 1863 was drafted for service in the Union army, but he was never mustered in, presumably due to his old injury.

Even in good years, the family struggled. In 1862 they had to sell their house to pay off debts. They bought 17 acres “on the ridge” (now Coleman’s Nursery on Hidlay Church Road in North Centre township). Later, Samuel often served as administrator of estates, and in one case as a trustee he had \$4000 to invest. He “invested” much of this money, along with his own earnings and bank loans, on his 17-acre farm: \$2000 for more land, \$500 for soil improvement, \$900 for additions to the house, \$1000 to build a bank barn. Then after the financial panic of 1877 his surveying business dried up, his loans were called in, and the farm—with all its improvements—was auctioned off in a sheriff’s sale.

In 1882 Samuel, \$2000 in debt, moved with his wife and six children to a rental house in Bloomsburg. Two grown sons, John and Fred, lived at home and had no regular jobs. In 1892 Samuel bought a sandy town lot on credit and signed a contract to ship sand to the Philadelphia and Reading Coal & Iron Co. (a subsidiary of the Reading Railroad), F.O.B. Bloomsburg, for 50¢ a ton. The two young men set to work shoveling, and the business prospered at first. But soon other entrepreneurs undercut the price, and Samuel was left with more debts for the land and for two wagons and teams.

Despite his bad luck or poor management in various financial matters, Samuel was able to obtain several official positions. For many years while living in Centre Township he served as township clerk; he also was elected Justice of the Peace and continued for fifteen years. In 1870 he was named Engineer for the Town of Bloomsburg, a post he held for twenty years. He surveyed and drew the town’s official street map, which was published in 1870 as a wall map identifying every building and householder. He supervised the grading of East Street and most of the other streets in Bloomsburg. He also designed the town’s first sewer system and surveyed for pipes that, in some cases, are still in service. In 1877 he was elected County Surveyor and held that office for fifteen years.

Samuel also was hired to stake out the right-of-way for two different railroads. In 1869 Rev. D. J. Waller of Bloomsburg set out to build a railway down the east bank of the Susquehanna River from Wilkes-Barre to Catawissa. Though neither man had ever had anything to do with building a railroad, Waller and Neyhard scouted the route and determined that a track was feasible. After long delays, that rail line was completed in 1882 and was leased profitably to the Pennsylvania Railroad. (The Neyhards were so grateful for Rev. Waller’s confidence in Samuel that they named their next child D. J. Waller Neyhard, and he went by the name “Waller.”) In 1886 Neyhard’s crew laid out the line for the Bloomsburg and Sullivan Railroad, from Fifth Street in Bloomsburg northward up Little Fishing Creek to Jamison City on the border with Sullivan County. A photograph of thirteen men and boys in that survey crew includes Samuel and his sons S. Dallas and John.

When the surveying business grew thin in his home region, Samuel took on jobs far afield. He expanded his business to cover all of the North Branch region from Northumberland to Towanda. Then he won contracts even further away, for estimating timber values of forests in

southern states. His meticulous notebooks from these trips permit us to follow his journeys day by day. In the fall of 1891 with a crew of six helpers he trekked across a 2,500-acre tract in Monroe County, Tennessee. He sent an estimation of the board-feet of various species of hardwood to capitalist Charles Hebard of Philadelphia.

The next February he returned to Tennessee to do a lumber survey along the Tellico River, also for Hebard. In the fall of that year he journeyed to Arkansas to survey virgin timberlands on 5,000 acres across three counties for investor J. G. Sawrey of London, England. Neyhard's estimates figure prominently in the later investment prospectus of the Woodruff Land & Timber Co., Ltd., of Glasgow, Scotland, where he is mentioned as one of the experts on whose knowledge the prospectus relied. The pamphlet predicts that the firm can cut and sell timber in Arkansas worth \$32,875 per year.

Samuel joined the Grange, a then-new farmers' organization, in the early 1870s and soon set out to organize an insurance company for Grange members. His efforts led to the founding of the Briar Creek Farmers' Mutual Insurance Company. By 1919 the firm expanded to cover town and village properties as well as farms; the company is still in business more than 140 years after its founding



The Neyhard Family, circa 1907. Henrietta and Samuel, seated 2nd and 3rd from left; John Rutter standing left. Other identifications are uncertain

While occupied with these various projects in his profession, Samuel with his wife Henrietta managed to rear a family of nine children: Solomon Dallas (born 1857), Reuben F. (1859), Mary M. (1861), Sarah E. (1864), Emma Amelia (1867), John Rutter (1869), C. Fred (1872), Cora (1874), and D. J. Waller (1881). A family photograph in the Everett Papers identifies only John Rutter at left in the back row, but almost certainly the photo shows the nine adult children clustered around Samuel and Henrietta in about 1907. At least for this occasion, the group appears as a solidly middle-class American family. Samuel was prominent enough in the

community that a few years after his death he was accorded an extended biographical sketch and a full-page engraving in the Beers county history of 1917 (see photo); the family probably paid for the engraving block.



Engraved portrait from Beers' *History of Columbia County*

At least three of Samuel's boys aided him from time to time at surveying, as Samuel had done for his father. Son Solomon Dallas opened his own firm in Bloomsburg, doing business in the 1890s as "S. D. Neyhard, Civil Engineer & Surveyor. City and Railroad Work Executed." Solomon, however, in 1897 pleaded guilty to charges of forgery and was sentenced to four years in Eastern Penitentiary outside Philadelphia, despite the jury's request for leniency. His young family lived with his parents while he served his time. When he returned in 1900, he moved his family to Williamsport, where he worked as a civil engineer for a railroad.



A Neyhard survey crew, from *The Morning Press* of May 8, 1937, a “Do You Remember” item headlined “WHEN THE B. & S. WAS BEING BUILT” and dated 1887. Samuel Neyhard is seated center, son John front left, son Solomon D. standing left. John (born 1869) appears to be only age ten or eleven, which would make the date around 1880.

Samuel meanwhile continued his surveying business until near the time of his death, which came on October 27, 1914, in his eighty-second year. Henrietta died two years earlier, and the couple are buried side by side at Old Rosemont Cemetery in Bloomsburg. Samuel’s office papers and genealogical data passed through his daughter Amelia to her grandson Gene Everett. In 2011 these papers—about a cubic foot of deeds, surveys, genealogies, and other records—were donated to the Society, where they now comprise an important part of the Land Records. Thus the three generations of Neyhards, Surveyors and Engineers, continue to serve Columbia County even after their actual business has passed into history.
