

History of the Washington Golf and Country Club

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The records of the Club were lost in a fire that gutted the clubhouse in 1936. Due to the efforts of the late Dick Westwood, a member who researched, summarized, and compiled data, a history of the Club is available.

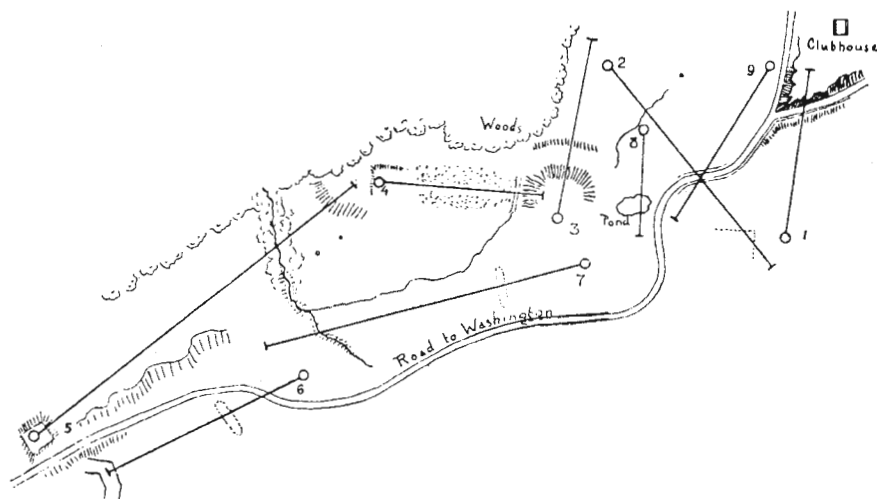
The Washington Golf and Country Club was organized as the Washington Golf Club in February 1894 by a group of members of the Metropolitan Club of Washington. Henry May was its first president. Included among its earlier members were Judge John Davis; Senators Wolcott, McMillan, and Brice; Sir Julian Pauncefote, the British Ambassador; the Swedish Minister and other members of the Diplomatic Corps. By 1897 there were 175 members.

Originally the nine hole golf course layout was situated on a 165 acre tract of land at Ft. Myer Heights just above and north of Rosslyn. Prior to the Civil War this property was owned by a family by the name of Hoover. The clubhouse was an old-fashioned, square, two-story frame building whose only claim to fame was the great fireplace at the end of the central hall. It is noted that one "Jackson," also formerly the property of the Hoover's, was the major domo of the clubhouse, performing all duties necessary to the comfort and pleasure of the members. Somewhat mystifying is a statement that the golfing season was from October to May, which is almost exactly the reverse of today's golfing season which runs from April to October. One tradition that still holds is the special club days, Wednesday and Saturday. However, there is one marked difference as in the past an omnibus ran from Farragut Square in the City to the clubhouse, where luncheon was served by "Jackson" and a fifty cent assessment was levied for failure to turn up for the bus ride. At that time the club had a regulation costume, strictly enforced, consisting of knickerbockers and scarlet coat with green collar. The annual dues were \$25; it is uncertain whether there was an initiation fee.

Locally, the Chevy Chase Club was organized for golf in 1893 with a nine hole course. St. Andrews in New York and Onwentsia in Chicago certainly were earlier, however; an old issue of *Golfing* lists 17 clubs, among which is Washington, as members of the United States Golf Association at the end of 1896, with 13 applications on file pending final acceptance. This should prove rather conclusively that the Washington Golf and Country Club was among the earliest of the pioneer clubs.

* Based on a talk before the Arlington Historical Society, January 12, 1968.

In order better to orient ourselves as to the physical location of the old golf course, the first tee was approximately where Woodrow Wilson School is today; it ran n/w along, and sometimes crossed, what was then known as the "Road to Washington" (now Wilson Boulevard) on the property where Colonial Village and adjacent shopping centers are now located. No trace of the original clubhouse remains, nor any signs or outlines of traps, bunkers, or greens, but thanks to the publication *Golfing* of that era, we are confident of the location.



Map from *GOLFING*, Vol. 4, No. 12, January 23, 1897, page 191

Apparently each of the holes was named as well as numbered. The first hole was "Arlington," the second, "River," giving an idea of the direction in which it lay. The third hole was known as "Round Top" because of the location of the green. The fourth was "Wood," the fifth, "Far," the longest of the course, and the sixth, "Meadow" where the tee was on the parapet of one of the Civil War forts (Fort Corcoran). The seventh hole was known as "Monument" because it afforded a fine view of the Washington Monument. The eighth or "Tarn" hole derived its name from a pond, a fine trap, and the last hole, not unnaturally, was "Home." Par for the course was 39 or 78 for 18 holes, a goal which it was reported had not been reached in the first three years of the Club's existence.

Golfing terminology was different at that time: "bogey" then meant par, and "foozle" meant lost ball. The ball of the times was better known as "guttie" and had all the resilience of a wadded-up sock that often had to be pressed back into shape; a 150-yard drive with that ball had to be a tremendous drive. The rubber center ball did not come into play until after the turn of the century.

In 1907, the owners of a portion of the land on which the course lay, decided to subdivide and build. A committee was appointed to find a suitable new location, and on March 7, 1908, the "Washington Country Club" was incorporated, and eight days later acquired by deed, 74.09 acres of land from Admiral Presley M. Rixey at \$200 per acre, at that time considered a rather high price. Ownership was then, as now, vested in the active members. The change in the name of the Club came about due to the diversity of interests of its members: golf, tennis, horseback riding, and even in gliders. On this acreage, a short 18 hole golf course was laid out and play soon began. A magnificent clubhouse, costing the staggering sum of \$1,500, served the membership for little more than a year. With the construction of a rustic type clubhouse, it was demoted to the status of golf shop and caddy house.

The new clubhouse placed added responsibilities on the Board of Directors, and they were forced to adopt house rules, two of which are rather interesting. One provided that "no member shall be permitted to recline at length or sleep in the public rooms of the club house." The other stated that pipe smoking is permitted only in the men's locker room, grill room, and on the porches.

It was discovered that the transfer of the Rixey property did not include the tract where the swimming pool now is, nor where the 17th tee had been built. This oversight was solved in a rather unusual but very satisfactory way, in favor of the Club. A Club member, Dr. Taber Johnson, made Admiral Rixey a proposition that they play for the plot; if the Admiral lost, he would hand it over to the Club; if he won, the Club would pay for it. Neither of the contestants expected to break 120; nevertheless, a considerable gallery assembled for the match. Both parties were unaccustomed to audiences, and after much pleading, prevailed upon the crowd to let them go it alone. Dr. Johnson won, and the Admiral was as good as his word.

An addition was made to the clubhouse in 1913. By the start of 1914, membership in the Club had grown to 305; 143 active and 162 associate members. Listed among the honorary membership were Theodore Roosevelt, who cared little for golf, and William Howard Taft, who loved it. Appearing modestly in the listing of active members was the name of Woodrow Wilson whose application had been presented in the routine, normal fashion by club member Cary Grayson and approved by the Board of Directors.

A. Colt Yates, Club President, 1907-08, recalled to Dick Westwood that Mr. Wilson, following his election to the Presidency, was invited to become an honorary member of the Chevy Chase Club. The incoming Chief Executive is reported to have observed that he had heard of the Chevy Chase Club and that if he joined a club, he would pay his initiation fee

and regular dues. He did, and from all accounts thoroughly enjoyed playing the game and climbing the hills of the early layout. Mr. Yates also recalled that Earl Wheeler, son-in-law of Dr. Johnson, once achieved a certain distinction, thanks to the President. Mr. Wheeler, broad of beam and well padded, was playing one day when he heard a roar of "Fore!" which if you are not familiar with the game, means "duck." Mr. Wheeler turned broadside and received on his rump, a sound thwack from the ball sliced off of Mr. Wilson's drive. Mr. Wheeler cherished and bragged about the black and blue mark.

In 1915 a new and revised charter of incorporation was obtained to correct financing deficiencies of the earlier charters, and to change the name to Washington Golf and Country Club, Incorporated, with principal office at Jewell Station, Alexandria County, Virginia.

In 1919, 47.25 acres of the Grunwell tract were purchased to allow for the building of the present 4-5-6-7-8 holes. Also two-and-one-half acres were acquired to provide for tennis courts and additional parking.

On August 26, 1921, the National Press Club held its first annual golf tournament at the Club with President Harding as a star entry. An attempt was made to handicap the President so that his name would lead all the rest on the National Press Club's President's Cup. All went well until the 18th hole when Mr. Harding could get down in three putts to win, but, said the report, the President putted himself right off the Cup.

In 1927, Congressman R. Walton Moore of this District, a charter member, was elected Club president. In 1935, the swimming pool was built, but despite the nearness of this pool of water, fire gutted the clubhouse September 15, 1936. Emergency arrangements included meals at Rixey Mansion (by then a tourist home and restaurant), and a room with adjoining shower for the ladies contributed by Mrs. Thomas DeLashmutt. The Alexandria Bank, holder of the mortgage, was most helpful in allowing some of the insurance money for rehabilitation; this permitted limited operations during reconstruction. The clubhouse was completed in October 1937. This structure served for the next 20 years when it was replaced with the present building, officially opened on Thanksgiving Eve, 1958.