

History of the Washington Golf and Country Club

This material was compiled and edited from a History of Washington Golf and Country Club given to me by the current club manager; this history was the result of extensive research and countless contributions of material from members and friends over the years.

Submitted By Joan Hitt

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 course was located on 165 acres "on Arlington Heights at Rosslyn, Virginia." 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 difficult to reconstruct the exact location of the original course, which ran along, and sometimes crossed, what is described on a map that was found as "Road to Washington" known to us now as Wilson Boulevard. It seems established however, that the first tee and the clubhouse were about where the Woodrow Wilson school on Wilson Boulevard now stands, and that the course lay over the land on which the nearby shopping center and Colonial Village Apartments have been located. No trace of the original clubhouse remains, or any definite relic of trap, bunker or green.

In 1907 the owner of a portion of the land upon which the course was laid out decided to subdivide and build. A. Colt Yates, who had been elected to membership in the Washington Golf Club in 1902, was chosen president and head of a committee to find a suitable new location. A temporary meeting place was provided at the Willard Hotel. From this vantage point a group of about 25 members of the original Washington Golf Club, under the leadership of Mr. Yates, sought a site on which to continue the club. One location that was considered was known as the Saegmuller Property, a tract of 250 acres, less than a mile from the club's present location. A second location considered was where Lyon Village now stands, but no deal was made because it meant paying a profit to an agent. Finally, negotiations were started with Admiral Presley M. Rixey, then Naval Surgeon; although some of the group felt that the price of about two hundred dollars an acre was high, the negotiations were completed, and, on March 7, 1908, the Washington Country Club was incorporated with Mr. Yates as its first president. Eight days later Admiral Rixey deeded to the club 74.09 acres, and, with 129 members, the club was under way again. The change in the name of the club came about because of the diversity of

interests of the members. Ownership of the club was vested in the active members, who qualified by purchase of one or more shares of stock at fifty dollars a share.

For a little more than the first year a Clubhouse, costing the staggering sum of \$1,500.00, served the membership and stood where the golf shop now stands. A short 18-hole course with a par of 68 was laid out by the members on the Rixey acreage and play soon got under way.

The original little clubhouse was demoted to the status of golf shop and caddy house in 1909. Work was started on the rustic-type clubhouse which cost \$11,000, and tennis courts were built where the putting green now lies.

Possession of a clubhouse imposed new responsibilities and the early Board of Directors adopted rules for the use of the building, two of which are interesting: one provided that "no member shall be permitted to recline at length or sleep in the public rooms of the clubhouse." Another stated that "pipe-smoking is permitted only in the men's locker room, the grill rooms, loggia, and on the porches."

At a date that has been impossible to fix precisely, but early in the days of the new club, it was discovered that the transfer of the Rixey property had not included the tract where the swimming pool is now located, or where the 17th tee had been built--this still belonged to Admiral Rixey. So, Dr. Johnson proposed that he and the Admiral play a round of golf for the plot. If the Admiral lost, he would hand it over to the club; if he won it would be paid for. Dr. Johnson won and the Admiral was as good as his word.

An addition to the clubhouse was made in 1913 and by the start of 1914 membership in the club had grown to 305, of which 143 were active and 162 associate members. Listed as honorary members were Theodore Roosevelt, who cared little for golf, and William Howard Taft, who loved it. Appearing modestly among the active members was the name of Woodrow Wilson. 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.

Due to a fire in 1936 in which many club records were destroyed, gaps occur in available factual information up to 1918 although the club seems to have functioned prosperously during the first World War. The address of the club seems to have been varied in character and included Cherrydale, Rixey, Jewell and R.F.D. 1, Rosslyn. Access by road was better by way of Chain Bridge, and the Great Falls trolley was extensively used.

The year 1918 saw a wartime increase in membership in the club, with Washington being a WW I boom city. A committee was appointed to consider recommendations for the acquisition of land northeast of #4 tee extending to Military Rd. to increase the length of the course.

Improvements were made to the clubhouse and grounds in 1919, and 47.25 acres, the Grunwell tract, were purchased to allow the building of holes 4,5,6,7 and 8. Also 2½ acres of ground, providing space for tennis courts and added parking, were acquired.

The year 1920 was marked by the election to the Presidency of the United States of one of the active members of the club, Warren Gamaliel Harding. One necessary expenditure at this time was the construction of additional locker space "under the

tennis court porch", the courts then being where the putting green now lies. Work also progressed on the new holes and the rearranged course. A golf architect who looked over the layout is quoted as saying: "The Washington Course, when completed, will be one of the most beautiful, enjoyable, and sporting in the world. There will be few better anywhere." Directions for reaching the club indicated that many came by trolley to Rosslyn and on the Great Falls and Old Dominion Line to Jewell Station. In September it was impossible to reach the club on the "Cherrydale Road" because of construction.

In the spring of 1922 the new 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th, and 8th holes were put into play and reconstruction was completed on the 15th and 16th. In view of the improved course and increased expense, an increase in the initiation fee and annual dues was recommended by the board; in addition the membership limit was raised from 400 to 500. Late in the year the board of directors reported that a contract had been signed for still further improvements in the course including the 2nd, 3rd, 9th, 14th and 18th holes. This and other construction on course and buildings meant an expenditure of \$20,000.

The club became an active member of the U.S.G.A. on January 13, 1925. Several sites including the top of "Mount Rixey" were considered for a new clubhouse but it was finally recommended that a "modern" and "fireproof" addition to the existing clubhouse be made.

Proposal for a swimming pool first came up at the meeting of March, 1926 but was promptly set aside as not feasible. Architect Frank Upman, was instructed to draw up plans for 1) an addition to the present clubhouse; 2) remodeling of present clubhouse; and 3) a new clubhouse. There was considerable argument about installing electric refrigeration as some expressed doubt that it was "here to stay." Admiral Rixey suggested that he might sell his house and some 15 acres for a clubhouse and Mr. Upman subsequently submitted plans for same; however, as the year ended the board decided that finances would not permit the acquisition of the Rixey Place or a new clubhouse and so they would have to repair and add to the existing structure.

The years 1928-1936 saw only small changes in the club and grounds due to events in the stock market. During this time a petition for installation of a swimming pool was tabled for lack of funds; membership fell off sharply from the peak of 500 in 1929; the Annual Spring Invitational Golf Tournament died, victim of the depression, and resignations continued to outnumber new memberships by a wide margin. The German Embassy occupied Rixey Mansion for the summer, 1929. The club faced its worst financial crisis by August, 1933 and had \$17,000 outstanding in unpaid dues and house charges. Salaries were cut and the greenskeeper relieved of his duties.

The big event of 1935 was the construction of the swimming pool. After several insurance companies had turned down a refinancing proposition, the First National Bank of Alexandria came through with a loan which permitted paying off liens of the club property and refinancing to allow construction of the pool which was formally opened in August. It cost more than originally estimated so life memberships were sold to take up the slack. Another achievement of the year was a successful membership drive which brought in 179 new members.

On the night of September 15, 1936 fire engine sirens shrieked and flames leaped high above the clubhouse. By the time the fire was brought under control the whole central portion of the building from roof to foundation was destroyed. The golf shop, being in a wing, escaped serious damage, as did the locker rooms, but there was left only a shell of a clubhouse and many problems. At the November board meeting the members voted to seek a loan to reconstruct the clubhouse. An appraisal was made of the club property, and, armed with this, the board set out to find the necessary funds. Banks and insurance companies, one after another, turned thumbs down on the ground that it would be a "single purpose loan."

As 1937 began, two club members made personal pleas for loans and in response to these pleas, loans were secured from the Shenandoah Life Insurance Co. and Continental Life Insurance Co. of Washington. After cleaning up various obligations, the remainder was earmarked for the rebuilding of the clubhouse and erection of a bathhouse at the pool. On October 14, 1937, with many distinguished guests present, the newly remodeled clubhouse was given its official housewarming.

The years 1938-1947 saw only internal changes in the operation of the club and course including a refinancing of the mortgage in 1940 for a better interest rate; installation of watered fairways and completion of the golf shop. Early in 1947 the mixed grill became a reality.

1948-1957 proved to be a decade of development. The active membership limit was increased to 600 and the wading pool was built. Many new social and golfing events were initiated and a program of repairs on the clubhouse was approved. The new tennis house was built in 1951. Things began to move toward the new clubhouse in 1956. At a special meeting in October the members approved a loan for the program to build a new clubhouse and revamp the course; a minimum amount was allotted to fix up the pool bathhouse. At the end of the 1957 swimming season it was apparent that the pool would not pass inspection for another season and the members voted to seek another loan for the construction of a new pool; it was dedicated on Labor Day, 1958. Then on December 6, 1958 a celebration dedicating the new clubhouse culminated with a christening using a bottle of water from the old spring to the right of the 14th hole.

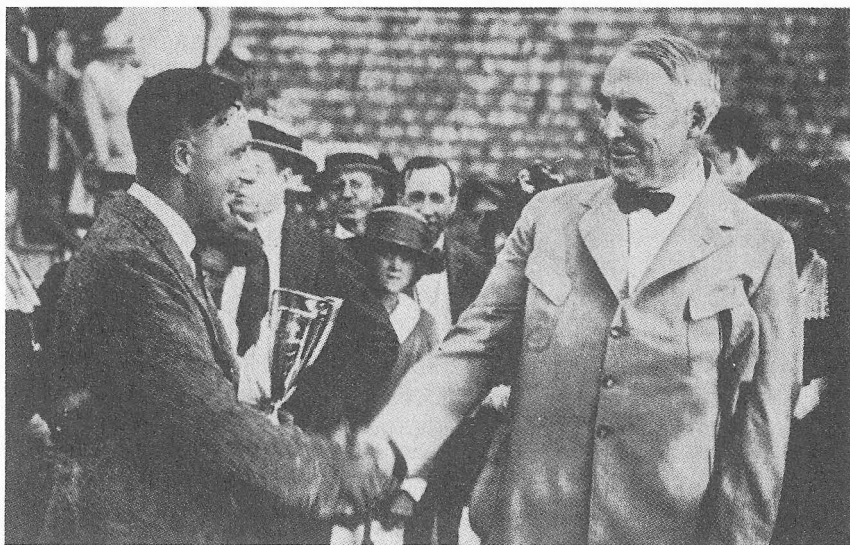
In 1960 the club purchased the Coxen property on Old Dominion Drive and in 1963 the Yount property. These properties blended into the building program across Glebe Rd., creating an outlet on Old Dominion Dr. from the parking lot. The Beck house was demolished in 1963 and the Buckley house remodeled into a tennis shop together with tennis facilities for both men and women. In 1964 all of the work on the project across newly-widened Glebe Road under the rebuilding program was completed. This resulted in a new parking area, erection of the new tennis courts, one of which was all-weather, and completion of the tunnel under Glebe Rd. into the clubhouse. In 1965 a new putting green of 10,000 square feet was built between the clubhouse and Rock Spring Rd. and in 1970 the unveiling and lighting of the club initials (planted in Japanese yew) on the clubhouse side of the 15th green added to the beauty of the course.

From 1972 to 1978, 394 new members were admitted bringing the total membership to 1,130 - resident, non - resident, senior, widows and juniors. New indoor tennis facilities were completed in 1973, a factor in keeping the membership at

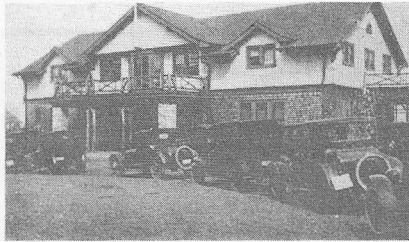
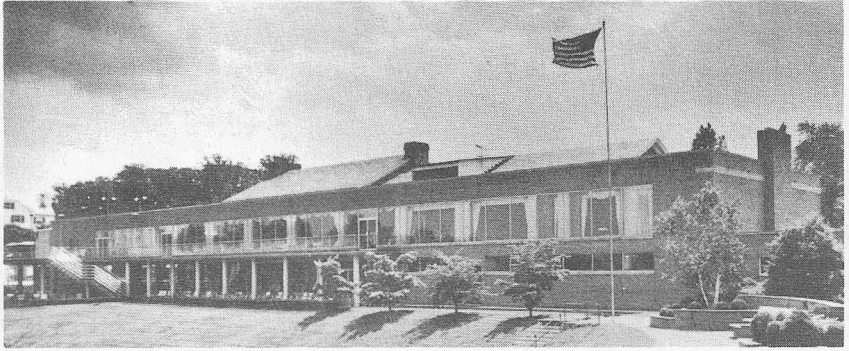
capacity. The Campbell property, adjacent to the tennis courts, was acquired in 1976 with future expansion in mind. On the golf front, the club hosted three major amateur tournaments plus the Middle Atlantic Open. Continuing improvements on the golf course included new greens built at 4, 9, 11, 17 and 18; new tees at 5, 6, 7, 8, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16 and 17. An average of 25 new trees a year were planted in addition to the 600 evergreens, oaks, hickory and fruit trees planted in the late 1950's.

Extensive improvements were made to the pool in 1981 including new surfacing and decking, brick terrace and bathhouses; and, at this writing, June 1983, construction is underway on the "Campbell tract" adjacent to the existing tennis courts, to complete six new outdoor courts, four soft-surface and two hard-surface.

Forty-seven men have served WGCC as president and countless others have, by their untiring and unselfish effort, made the club, in its beautiful setting, a source of enjoyment and pride, not only for its members and their guests, but for all Arlington County citizens as well.

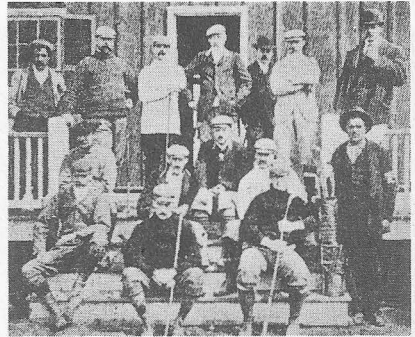


Warren G. Harding was a playing member of the Club, both before he was elected President and afterwards. Following his election he refused any special quarters in the locker room. Here Mr. Harding is congratulating Bob Bender of the United Press on winning the National Press Club's President's Cup, first played for on our course in 1921. In hope that the name of a President of the United States would lead all others on this cup Mr. Harding was thus handicapped liberally. He needed only three putts on the eighteenth green to win, but, with movie cameras grinding noisily, the President took five putts to lose by one stroke.

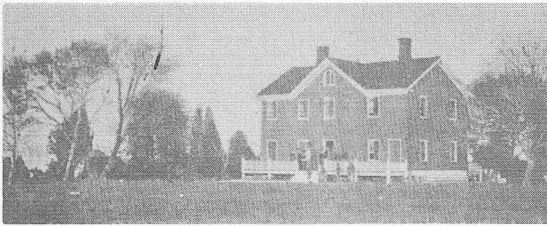


The clubhouse in the early twenties. Note the high-class jalopies of the day. At the extreme left is the original clubhouse, after it became a golf shop. Photo by Dave Thomson.

The original clubhouse on the Roslyn site. The building stood about where the Woodrow Wilson School on Wilson Boulevard now stands. The clubhouse belonged to a family named Hoover, who also owned the property on which the original course was built. The chief glory of the clubhouse was a great fire-place at the end of the central hall.

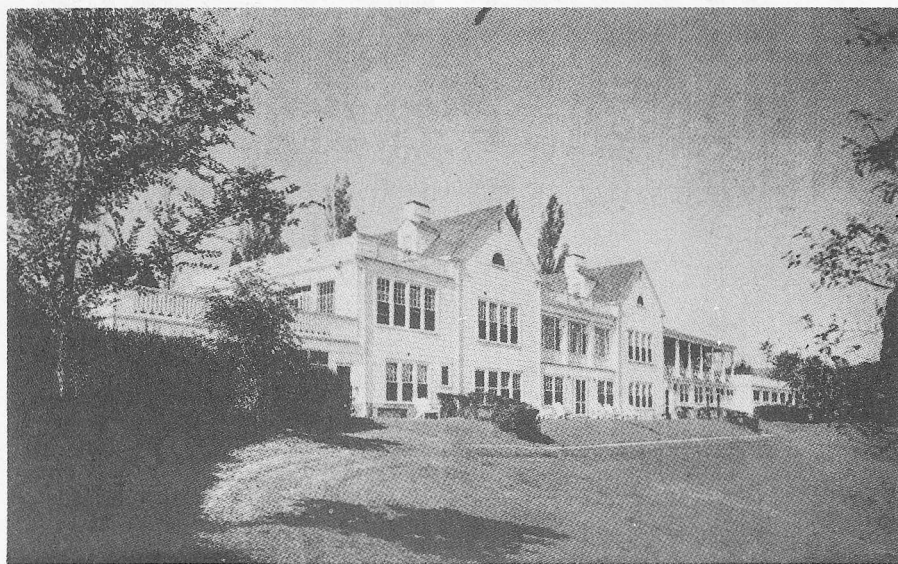
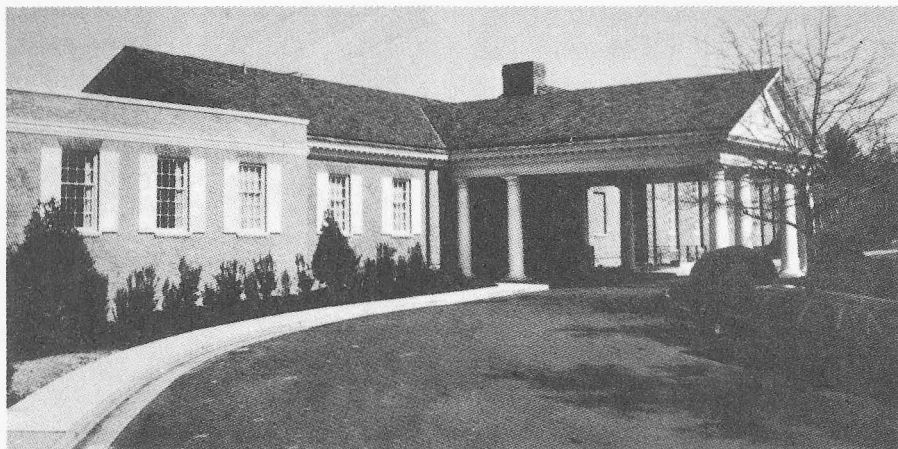


Members of the Golf Club, 1896. The bearded and bemoustached gentlemen in the picture include Dr. R. Jenkins, Edward F. Riggs, Dr. Whiting, F. May, Henry May, George Hellen, J. F. Leech and Philip Carroll. There are also some unidentified members. Note the one tough-looking caddie embracing a bag that appears to hold all of six clubs.



Bobby Jones played in a friendly exhibition match on our course in 1926. He was most enthusiastic about the layout and the variety of shots and holes. Here Bobby is putting on the eighteenth green, while a considerable gallery looks on. Al Howard is holding the pin. With arms on his hips and wearing white knickers is Walter McCollum, long a member of the Club and golf writer for the *Washington Star*. Note the sylvan setting along Rock Spring Road.





From the ashes of the old clubhouse, and not without considerable difficulty and financial planning, rose the clubhouse of recent memory. It will always have nostalgic meaning to many, even as we luxuriate in our new quarters.