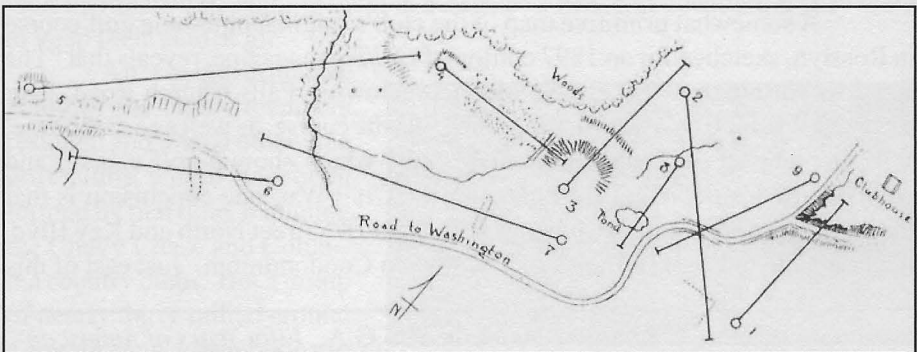


Washington Golf & Country Club: The Beginnings

BY JOHNATHAN THOMAS

Having conducted extensive research about the Washington Golf & Country Club over the past six years, I have noticed two mysteries regarding its history: When was the club officially established, and where exactly was the first clubhouse? Even though the club was blessed with some outstanding club historians – Dr. Charles V. Piper in the 1920’s and 30’s (records he organized were destroyed in the 1936 clubhouse fire); Dick Westwood in the 1940’s and 50’s; Lee Dieter in the 1960’s, 70’s, 80’s and 90’s; and Dave Dodrill in the 1990’s and 2000’s – the exact answers to the two mysteries remain elusive. So, in part, making use of a tool these gentlemen lacked – the internet – I share the following observations.

Much of the historical lore about the club’s “inception” has been based on an 1897 article written by golfing legend Arthur H. Fenn that appeared in *The Golfer* magazine. Fenn opens the article with, “The Washington Golf Club was organized in December, 1892.” This statement seems to be substantiated by a 1904 *Evening Star* article mentioning Col. Henry May who, upon returning from Europe in the fall of 1892, is said to have gathered fellow Metropolitan Club members to suggest starting a golf club. Fair enough. But after sifting through hundreds of old articles, the year of the golf course’s inception seems to point to 1893. Thus, they may have had a golf club in 1892, but they didn’t have a course until 1893. For what is a golf club without a golf course?



1897 *Golfing Magazine*

Nine-hole layout of the original Washington Golf Club in Rosslyn, Virginia.

As we know from the club's current logo, the year for the club's establishment has been listed as 1894 for as long as anyone alive can remember—most likely because it is believed that it was this year--when the earliest members first incorporated the club as Washington Golf Club. In early 1895 their



1899 Official Golf Guide

Back of the original Washington Golf and Country Club clubhouse in Rosslyn, Virginia facing the first tee.

initial application to become a member of the United States Golf Association was accepted.* While there had been more than eight “golf clubs” developed in the United States older than Washington Golf, many no longer exist and/or their owners did not apply for membership to the U.S.G.A. But the U.S.G.A. certainly does not rule on when a club is established. So what exactly does all this mean? As the club's current acting historian, I prefer to use the year when the club and golf course were “established” rather than the “incorporated” year; thus it is safe for members to boast that the club it was fully established in 1893.

The second mystery which continues to elude the members is the exact location of the first clubhouse. We know it was in Rosslyn, Virginia, which most historians agree was an area named after a farm inherited by Carolyn Lambden Ross and named using a combination of her name and that of her husband, William Ross. The 1994 book, *A History of Washington Golf and Country Club: A Century of Tradition* mentions the location of the clubhouse as being “at the rear of what is now the grounds of the Woodrow Wilson School” property off Wilson Boulevard. But this is where the clues have always faded, especially since the school was torn down in 2017.

A somewhat primitive map of the club's original nine-hole golf course in Rosslyn, sketched for an 1897 edition of *Golfing* magazine, reveals that “The Road to Washington” (likely the old Georgetown – Falls Church Road, later renamed Wilson Blvd) was running alongside the course, as well as a clubhouse. With the help of old maps of Rosslyn (none which show a golf course) and detailed articles depicting the area after the Civil War, one conclusion is that the old clubhouse possibly sat between today's 18th Street North and Key Blvd, likely next to or on the grounds of The Atrium Condominium. Just east of this

*Author's note: A 1936 article about the U.S.G.A., *Fifty Years of American Golf* by H.B. Martin, rationalizes that the club was considered the ninth oldest in the country.

Admiral Rixey carried Washington Golf through its worst financial times, restructuring notes and forgiving interest so the fledgling club could survive.

location was Fort Corcoran, built by Union soldiers at the start of the Civil War. This observation ties into a quote from Henry H. Fry’s article, ‘Golf in the District of Columbia,’ in *Spalding’s 1905 Official Golf Guide*, “rifle pits and trenches are seen rising from the ground [on the golf course.]” Further east, down the steep hill, is the Potomac River,

which gave early members a majestic view of the river and Washington, D.C. from the clubhouse and golf course.

Also, as written in the 1994 club history book, the land, along with an old house, once belonged to the Hoover family, and both were initially leased by the members. But a 1904 *Evening Star* article states that this property was once owned by the Ross family and describes the house as a small, rundown place later purchased by the members for \$200 from the Marshall estate, with another \$3,000 spent to turn it into a fine clubhouse. It is believed the Ross family’s grand home was a couple hundred yards or so away from this “small” house and might have been a guest home used as the clubhouse or, as my friend Dudley Chapman theorizes, the clubhouse was the Ross’ grand home rundown by that point. Both the original Hoover and Ross families of Rosslyn were long gone by 1893 so it is logical to conclude that the land and house had been owned by both families at different times. Complicating matters further is the fact that at some point all the land was sold to a group of investors, led by Colin H. Livingston, who had their sights set on a residential development to be named Colonial Heights. In 1906, the investors finally pushed the Washington Golf members out, sending them in search of a new club location, if they were to keep their club at all.

After being displaced, many of the club’s members resigned and joined other area golf clubs which had been formed by that time, including the Chevy Chase and Columbia country clubs. But a group of nearly thirty rallied around a young man named Alonzo Colt Yates, a Washington Golf member since 1902, and began



January 1899 Harpers Weekly; Dieter Thomas Collection

Players at the first tee at Washington Golf and Country Club; the Potomac River in the background.

holding regular meetings at the Willard Hotel to outline plans for a new location. On March 7, 1908, the club finally reincorporated with 129 members as the Washington Country Club, a name deemed necessary because members wanted more than just golf. The task of finding a location was especially difficult because the club would have to be moved further west into Virginia and further from the residences of many members in Washington.

After turning down two land opportunities, one at the Saegmuller Farm (current location of the Knights of Columbus on Little Falls Road) and the other in what would become Lyon Village, the members needed a guiding light. Enter Rear Admiral Presley Marion Rixey, Surgeon General of the United States Navy, White House Physician

to Presidents William McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt, and a prosperous landowner in Alexandria (later Arlington) County.

If Col. Henry May is considered the Father of Washington Golf, then Admiral Rixey must be the club's Godfather. He was an imposing figure with a burning drive for getting things done. Around the time the club members were arguing over the location of their next golf course, Rixey might have been found riding horseback on his Alexandria County estate with his good friend, President Roosevelt, or traveling with him around the world reviewing health procedures. The Rixey estate, known as Netherfauld Farm, was purchased by the Admiral in 1888 from the estate of D.C.'s most notable madam, Mary Ann Hall.

In Rear Admiral William C. Braisted's autobiography, *The Life Story of Presley Marion Rixey*, the author dedicates an entire chapter to his contributions



Marymount University Collection

Portrait of Rear Admiral William C. Braisted.

towards helping create the new “Washington Country Club.” Chapter fourteen of the book states that the club was officially reorganized on March 7, 1908 with A.C. Yates initially as president, but he later resigned in June to make way for Dr. Joseph Taber Johnson to become president.[§]

We further learn from Rixey, “The first land purchased by the club of me was 75 acres for \$46,377.91; to be paid as follows: \$1,000 cash and 150 shares of stock (\$7,500), first mortgage notes, 18, each \$2,000, and one \$1,877.91; these notes were payable one each year with interest every six months.” Dr. Johnson quickly appointed Rixey Chairman of the Greens Committee, not because Rixey had an ounce of experience building or maintaining a golf course, but because of his “ability to get work done”. Using four of his own employees, including his foreman, Richard Wallace, Rixey laid out the first nine holes for play by September 1908. In his book Rixey listed club members John Davidson and A.C. Yates as the course designers. By the following spring, the eighteen-hole course was completed to less than stellar reviews. Sometime that year, the club hired famed golf course architect Donald Ross to walk the course and lay out something much better.*

Admiral Rixey carried Washington Golf through its worst financial times, restructuring notes and forgiving interest so the fledgling club could survive. It is even rumored that he lost a golf match to Dr. Johnson and the wager resulted in his donating additional acres to the club. The Admiral attempted many times to get the members to purchase additional acreage from his estate at a discounted price, but without success. He continued to be a loyal club member and next-door neighbor until his death in 1928. The remainder of his estate eventually became home to Marymount University.

Through the years, the membership at Washington Golf has included five U.S. Presidents – Theodore Roosevelt, William H. Taft, Woodrow Wilson, Warren G. Harding, and Calvin Coolidge – as well as nineteen Supreme Court Justices, many U.S. Senate and House members, and dignitaries, including Red Cross president Mabel Boardman, flying innovator Samuel Pierpont Langley,

[§]Author’s note: Dr. Johnson owned Lorcom Farm at the intersection of today’s Lorcom Lane and North Quincy Street – the farm was named after his sons Loren and Bascom.

*Author’s note: It was reported in an old *Northern Virginia Sun* article written by Eleanor Lee Templeman that Rixey’s foreman, Wallace, took the liberty of redirecting the course’s original number 10 green – about where number 12 green is today – in order to save the old Birch cabin. Rixey later deeded Wallace the cabin, known as Birchwood, and today it is located on 26th Street North.

retail magnate Mrs. Levi Z. Leiter, first British Ambassador Sir Julian Paunceforte, Gen. John J. Pershing, entrepreneur George Westinghouse, Smithsonian Institute head Cyrus Adler, and even two-time Horse Racing Jockey of the Year Sonny Workman. Thanks to the early efforts of Col. May and Admiral Rixey, the club has been an Arlington treasure since its inception in 1893.

About the Author

Johnathan Thomas is past President of the Arlington Historical Society (2016-2018). Like his father and grandfather before him, he is a long-time member of the Washington Golf and Country Club, where he serves as “acting” Club historian.

Sources

¹ Arthur H. Fenn, Article in *The Golfer* magazine, 1897.

² Henry H. Fry, “*Golf in the District of Columbia*”, in *Spalding’s Official Golf Guide*, H.B. Martin, Article in “Fifty Years of American Golf,” U.S.G.A., 1936.

³ *Evening Star*.

⁴ *Northern Virginia Sun*.

⁵ *Washington Post*.

⁶ Carl Charlick, M.A., *The Metropolitan Club of Washington – The Story of Its Men and of Its Place in City and Country*. (Washington, DC: Judd & Detwiler, Inc., 1964).

⁷ Rear Admiral William C. Braisted, M.C., U.S. Navy and Captain William Hemphill Bell, M.C., U.S. Navy, *The Life Story of Presley Marion Rixey – Surgeon General, U.S. Navy* (Strasburg, VA: Shenandoah Publishing House, Inc. 1930).

⁸ Tim Hackler and Amanda Robb, *A History of Washington Golf and Country Club: A Century of Tradition 1894–1994* (Arlington, VA: Washington Golf & Country Club, 1994).