The William Flynn Society Newsletter

Volume 1

Wayne Morrison
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William Stephen Flynn (September 28, 1890 - January 24, 1945)

My good and dearly departed friend, Jack Whitaker, was kind enough to write the foreword to my biography of Flynn, **The Nature Faker—William S. Flynn, Golf Course Architect.** I've attached it here for your reference as The William Flynn Society ("WFS") dedicates its first Newsletter to an introduction to this brilliant and influential golf course designer, constructor, turf specialist, and golf course superintendents in U.S. history.

"The origins of this obsessive game we call golf are so murky and slippery that it is impossible to say where and when man first hit a small ball with a stick. Was it a lonely shepherd on the windy shores of Scotland, or a Dutchman on the frozen canals of Holland? Even, perhaps, an ancient Roman soldier in a far-flung province of the empire? What we do know is that the game took root and flourished in Scotland on the springy seaside turfs known as links land.

The first golf courses emerged from those seasides naturally at first, and then, as the game progressed, they were helped or hindered by man and his machines. The first designers were Scottish professionals. Old Tom Morris of St. Andrews was one of many who reworked nature and, in some cases, designed new courses. He passed his knowledge on to his assistants, one of whom, Donald Ross came to America, and, like a golfing Johnny Appleseed, sprinkled golf courses across the United States. However, the father of American golf architecture was not Donald Ross. He was Charles Blair Macdonald who learned the game while a student at St. Andrews University under the tutelage of Old Tom Morris. Macdonald was a fine player, the driving force behind the formation of the United States Golf Association and a talented course designer. In 1911 he was putting on the finishing touches on the National Golf Links of America on eastern Long Island when he was visited by a young man named Hugh Wilson.

Mr. Wilson was a former captain of the Princeton University golf team and had been chosen to design a new eighteen-hole golf course for the Merion Cricket Club in suburban Philadelphia. Wilson sought advice from Macdonald. Apparently, the advice was good for Hugh Wilson, without any previous design experience, brought forth Merion's East Course, a design that nearly 100 years later remains classic, challenging, and enduring.

The course opened in 1912 at the beginning of the Golden Age of American golf architecture that lasted until World War II. A lot of glow from that Golden Age came from the Philadelphia area and the Philadelphia School of golf architecture. Hugh Wilson was a member of that incredibly talented group, all good amateur golfers, none of whom would take money to design a course lest they lose their amateur standing. Along with Hugh Wilson was George Crump, George Thomas, A.W. Tillinghast and William Flynn.

It is quite possible that many golfers have heard of A.W. Tillinghast and his great designs at Winged Foot, Baltusrol and Bethpage; or of George Thomas and his legacy of Riviera in Los Angeles, and of George Crump, the instigator and force behind Pine Valley Golf Club. But, whom, pray tell, is William Flynn? Thanks to the brilliant research of Wayne S. Morrison and Thomas E. Paul, You are about to find out.

William Flynn, like many before him, left his native Massachusetts to find his true calling in Philadelphia. He was an excellent amateur golfer who had competed against Francis Ouimet in high school. He came to the Philadelphia area to help in the construction of Hugh Wilson's East Course at Merion. He remained in Philadelphia until he died in 1945. He and Wilson became great friends and collaborators until Wilson's untimely death in 1925."

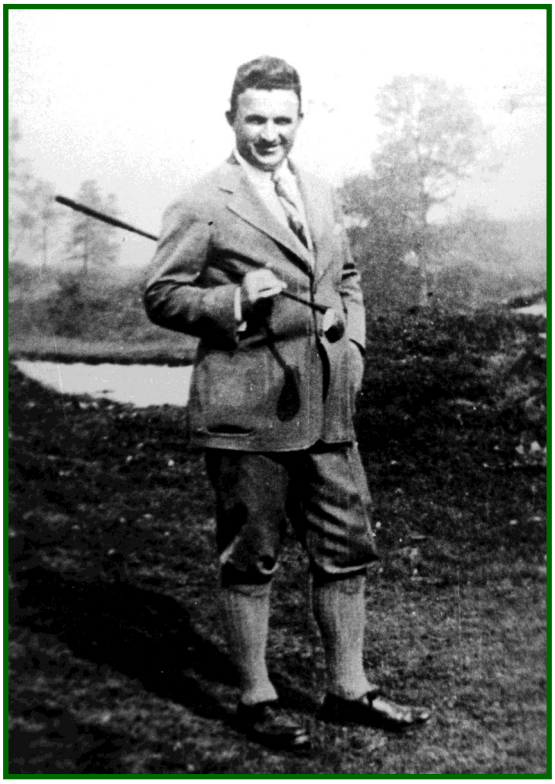
"In addition to his construction and design work, William Flynn was ahead of his time in developing new grasses for golf courses and new ways of maintaining them, of which we are the benefactors today. His work in agronomy alone would have earned him a special place in the history of the game.

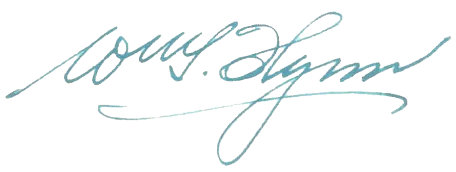
The authors have given us as complete a collection of Flynn's original drawings as it is possible to assemble. From them we can realize the full effect of his work, his philosophy of the game and his routing of holes, a segment of his talent that set him apart. These drawings also give us a record of which courses Flynn actually designed. In later years, some people took credit for designs that were Flynn's. Now the record is straight.

I was fortunate to be a member of the Shinnecock Hills Golf Club when the U.S. Open was held there in 1986. This is one of Flynn's finest efforts. Most of the field had never seen the course before and they were very impressed. I asked one of them after a practice round what he thought about the place. He paused for a moment and then said with more than a hint of wonderment, "Everything is where it should be." Perhaps that is the perfect compliment for a golf course architect.

William Flynn's professional career occurred at a time of exploding growth in American golf. It encompassed two World Wars, a catastrophic flu epidemic, the Roaring Twenties and the Great Depression. There were good times and bad, boom or bust, high or low. Out of these turbulent times came some of our finest golfing grounds and William Flynn's contribution was enormous, not so much in the number of his designs, but in the quality of them. Unlike the misty origins of golf, William Flynn emerges clearly and definitely in these pages and takes his honored place among those wonderful men who have left us legacies of beauty and pleasure."

Jack Whitaker
Merion, Pennsylvania
August, 2006

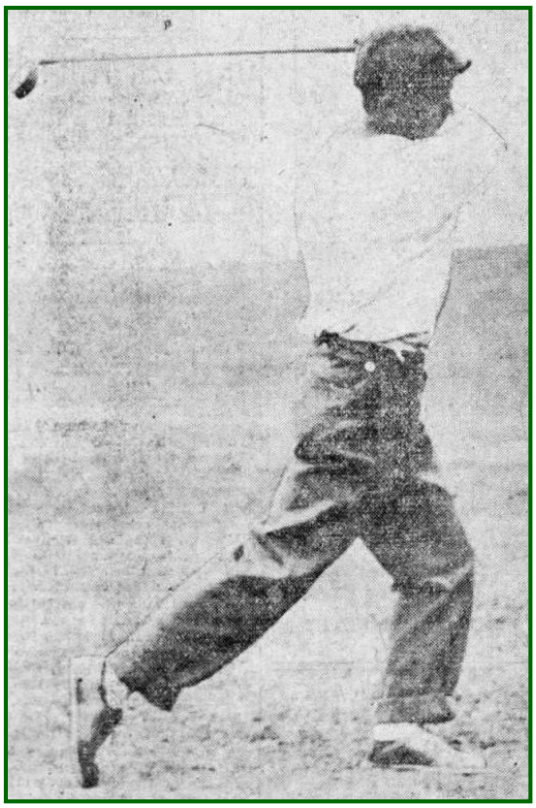




Life and Career

At an early age, William Flynn showed a love of the outdoors and a gift for athletics and academics. The proximity of the family home to the original Wollaston golf course enabled the young man to work in the outdoors as a caddie and access to a sport he would otherwise not have. William Flynn also had a love for nature, especially plants. This interest served him well in his earliest days in golf, as he became one of the first great golf course superintendents in America.

In an article entitled "It Happened at Wollaston," Francis Ouimet, Flynn's old friend, fellow caddie, and competitor out of Brookline High School, reminisced on one of his early golf competitions, the Greater Boston Interscholastic Championship of 1908, a mere five years prior to his dramatic win versus Vardon and Ray in the 1913 U.S. Open at Brookline. *"The championship flight took in the sixteen low qualifying rounds of scores at medal play and a Milton High School lad named Bill Flynn easily led the field with a 74. Bill Flynn later became a golf architect and had much to do with putting the finishing touches on Pine Valley and the Merion Cricket Club—two very famous courses - to say nothing of developing other fine tests for the game."*



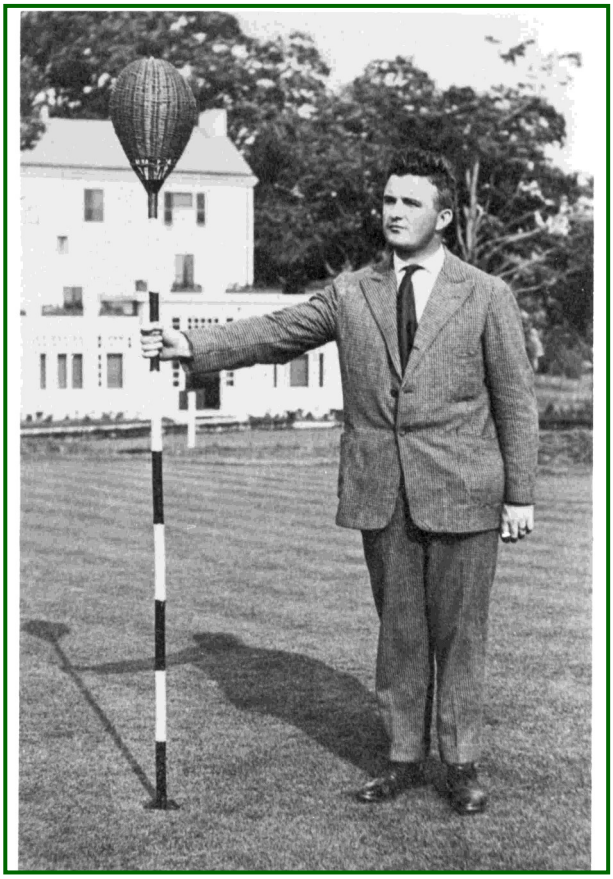
William Flynn
June 29, 1908 Boston Globe

As Flynn was born in December 1890, he must have been around 17 years of age during this scholastic championship. Flynn went on to finish second that year, falling to Charles Anderson in the championship match. One of Oumet's hardest fought victories in 1909 came against the previously unbeaten Flynn from Milton High School. These two schoolboys would find different paths in golf. Ouimet had one of the most outstanding amateur careers in US golf while Flynn pursued a career in golf course design, construction, turf science, and maintenance practices.

Flynn was an outstanding all-around athlete. He captained his high school football and basketball teams. He taught tennis at the Lake Placid Club the summer prior to his senior year in high school and maintained a full golf schedule captaining the Milton High School golf team.

Williams College, in Williamstown, MA offered Flynn an academic and football scholarship during his senior year. At the last minute, Flynn declined the offer. Instead, he proposed and married Lillian Gardner, a member of an august Boston family, on August 3, 1909. The two newlyweds temporarily moved to the small town of Hartwellville, Vermont. It was here that Flynn was asked to

Design his first golf course, the Kilkare Golf Club, for William Plunkett, the owner of the nearby Berkshire Cotton Manufacturing Company. Flynn's brother-in-law, Frederick G. Pickering, constructed the course for Mr. Plunkett. Pickering was born in Yorkshire, England and was married briefly to Flynn elder sister, Margaret. When Pickering, at that time the most experienced golf course builder in America, was hired to build the new course for the Merion Golf Club in Ardmore, PA, Pickering brought Flynn with him to work on the construction crew. During the construction of Merion's West Course, Pickering was fired for excessive drunkenness and Flynn took over construction and assisted Hugh Wilson in the design of the course.



Flynn at Merion with Basket Standard he Patented

Flynn was warmly welcomed to Philadelphia by Hugh Wilson, the club member in charge of laying out the two new golf courses for the Merion Cricket Club (the golf operations separated from the Cricket Club in 1942 and was renamed the Merion Golf Club). Flynn and Wilson developed a close personal relationship as their interests in golf course design, turf science, and maintenance standards aligned perfectly. Flynn was appointed to oversee the golf course operations of both courses.

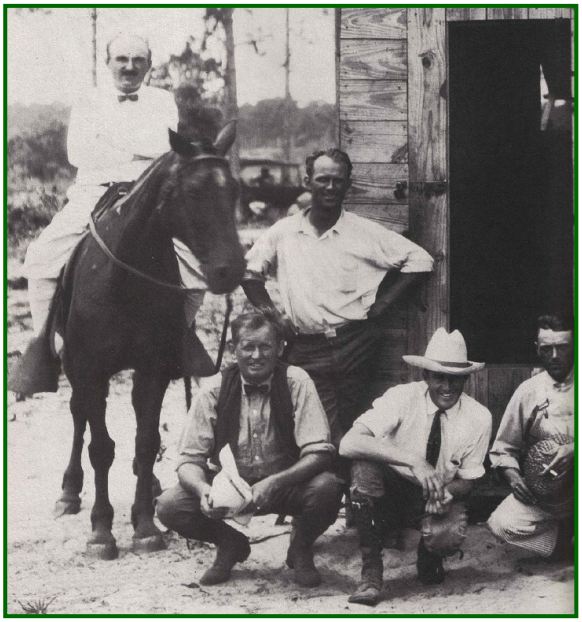
It is doubtful that Wilson ever had an interest in going into golf course design as he ran his family's insurance business and remained a life-long amateur golfer. During the fifteen or so years that Wilson and Flynn worked together, they developed an almost father and so relationship and the two would become two of the few experts in America on turf grasses for golf.

William an Lillian Flynn had two children, a son Gardner born in 1917 and a daughter, Constance. We know very little about Flynn's personal life. What we do know comes mainly from reminiscences from his daughter who was twenty-three years old when her father died. Connie recalled her father with great fondness, remembering many Sunday drives with the entire family and the ever-present dogs with Flynn lying in a meadow and discussing all matters relating to trees, flowers, and grasses.

Flynn Business Model

William Flynn organized his businesses into two entities. The design studio, William S. Flynn, Golf Course Architect, was a one-man operation. While Flynn is highly regarded as the mentor of such outstanding architects as Dick Wilson, William Gordon, Red Lawrence, and Ellis Maples, he was the sole designer for his firm. Though Howard C. Toomey is often given co--design credit with

Flynn, Toomey in fact did no design work at all. Toomey, twelve years Flynn's senior, was a partner with Flynn in their construction company, Toomey and Flynn, Contract Engineers. Toomey and Flynn built most of Flynn's designs with Toomey handling the engineering work, business administration, and oversight of the construction crews led by Gordon and Lawrence.



Toomey and Flynn Construction Crew
Lawrence, Gordon, and Wilson

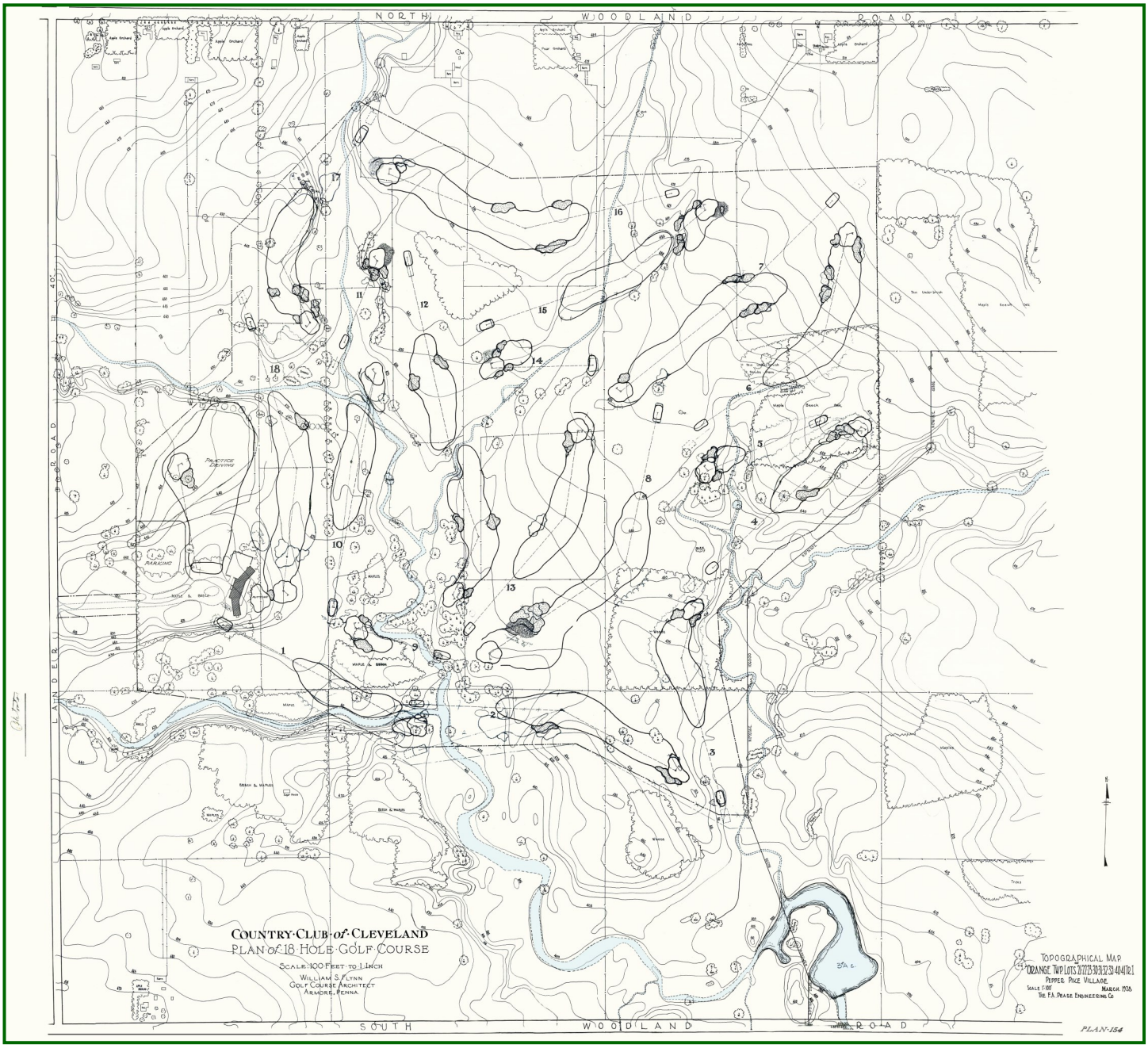
Unlike many of his contemporaries, Flynn chose to devote himself to each project, spending a great deal of time on site while developing detailed plans that were to be precisely implemented by his core group of construction crews. The result is a relatively small portfolio of courses compared to others in his era. Yet most of his course designs are little changed from their original iterations and have stood the test of time better than most of those by his competitors.

A dominant feature of Flynn's design work is his sense of naturalism. Unlike C.B. Macdonald, Seth Raynor, Langford and Moreau, and others, Flynn took extra care and expense to tie in his architectural features into the surrounds in a manner that made the man-made work appear natural. Flynn tied the architecture on his courses both on the property and with distant features . He convinced his clients that the added expense of using vast quantities of fill to create natural angles would be recovered over time as the features would require less maintenance and stand the test of time better than man-made abrupt features. Flynn's daughter, Connie Lagermann, said her father referred to himself as "The Nature Faker" because he liked to mimic natural features as much as possible to create interesting and beautiful golf courses. Where man-made features and plantings were necessary, he took careful pains to make them seem natural.

Flynn's Theory and Practice of Golf Course Architecture

William Flynn was a transitional architect in many ways. His design process was a modern approach, one that he termed "Scientific." Flynn would limit is annual output so as to spend sufficient time on each site to develop several iterations of routings and hole designs on paper until he came up with the ideal course according to the client's mandate and budget and what the site topography and engineering would allow. While the far more prolific Donald Ross would draw detailed plans, they would often have to be modified since he spent little or no time on site.

Flynn's plans were drawn to accurately dictate what was to be built. He did not allow his construction crews to deviate from the plans. Detailed construction instructions were provided on the individual hole drawings (10 yards to a square) with the green features depicted in detail to the side (10 feet to a square). With stakes in the ground at the exact locations indicated by Flynn's plans, the tees, fairway lines, bunkers, hazards, and greens were constructed in the exact manner in three dimensions as Flynn envisioned.



Routing Map for the Country Club in Pepper Pike, Ohio March 1928

The first element of golf design to consider is the routing. Flynn's skill as a course router might well be unsurpassed in American golf. The routing demands at the Cascades and the two courses at Eagles Mere are but a few examples indicative of Flynn's ability to route golf holes on difficult terrain in a bold and original fashion yielding excellence in strategic golf. Without the underpinning of an excellent routing, a golf course can never be great.

Another element that is vital to the overall design is the balance of golf hoes and the resulting rhythm and flow of as the routing progresses. Design balance is found in the variety and combination of length, angle, and design features including hazards and greens. Flynn was meticulous in creating a variety and balance of holes, whether this meant an unusual combination of par sets or par three finishing holes.

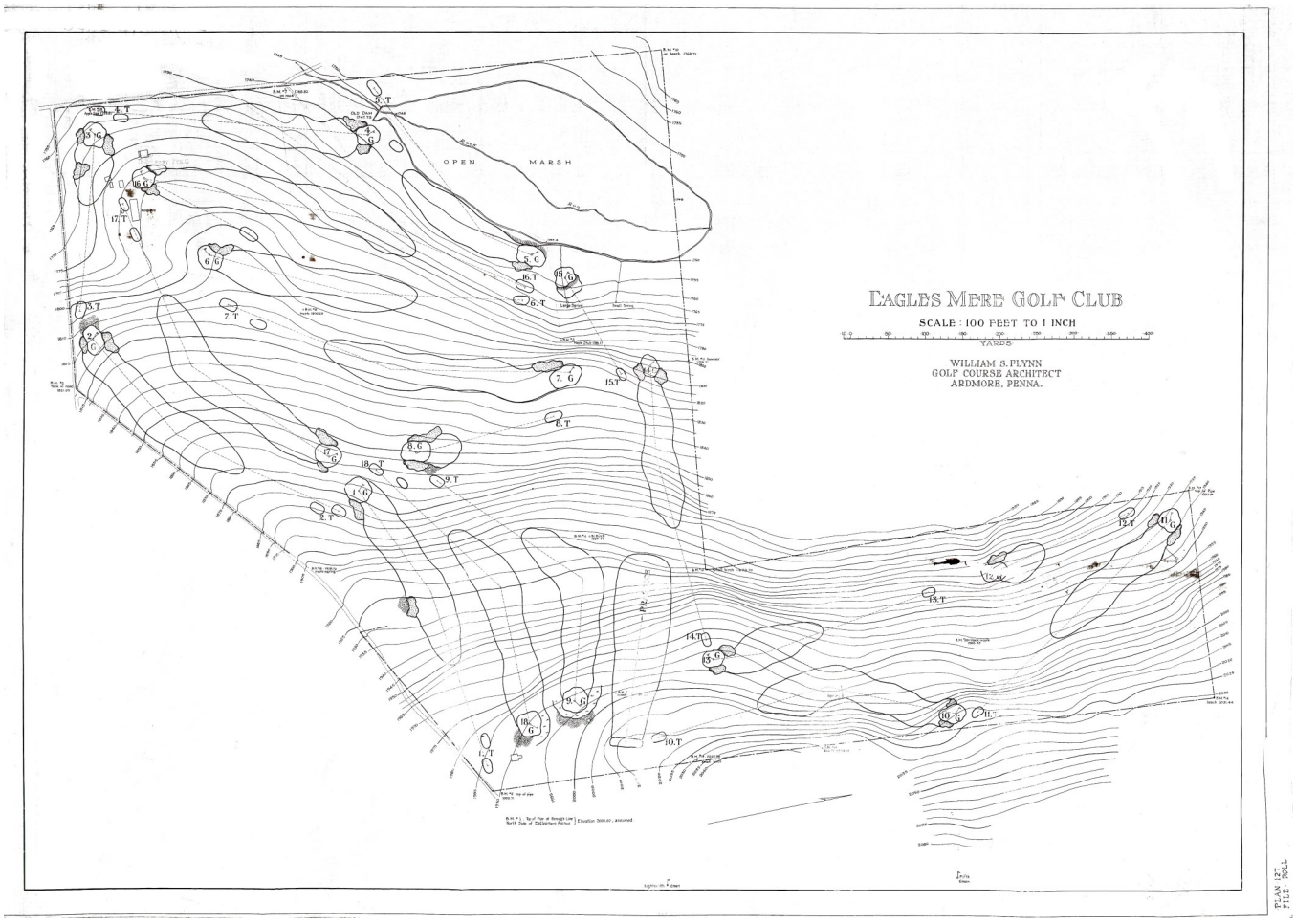
General Design Principals

William Flynn's championship courses were often designed so that holes would test a variety of specific shot demands. His notion of "scientific" design if you will. Flynn tested the player with a full variety of shot requirements throughout the round in a manner that flowed with the terrain and often reached a crescendo on the final holes of the back nine. We are fortunate that Flynn left us

Many of his thoughts on design and we quote from these in order to gain a first-hand insight into his design philosophy. *"The principal thought in designing a golf course is to produce 18 interesting holes with variety of play. A course which has variety of play and character in its natural state can readily be made even more interesting by the installation of a limited number of man-made hazards. During the tying in process the architect always has in mind the question of the sequence of the various types taking care not to have holes of similar length and character coming too closely together. The most interesting course is one where the lengths and types of holes are broken up, where two or three drive an pitch holes or any other type for that matter do not follow each other. The principal thought in mind is to fit the best possible holes to the ground while the custom is to have four short holes there is no reason why this number should not be reduced to three or increased to five if conditions warrant it.*

In order to get the best possible layout on any property, the architect must have a topographical plan of the ground on which he is working. In gently undulating or hilly country the contours should be shown in five-foot intervals while in flatter country two-foot intervals. A topographical map is also of inestimable value in determining drainage problems, in designing the water system, locating the clubhouse site, and other important facilities. Armed with this topographical plan the architect then proceeds to make a study of the ground familiarizing himself with all its variations. First of all he follows along the boundaries so as to know exactly what the limitations of the property are, then he crosses and recrosses, stopping here and there to locate himself until he is thoroughly familiar with the ground. Following this he settles upon the club house site and the starting and finishing points of the course around it, as well as the other necessary facilities.

The problems which should be developed on the various holes in the order of their importance are first - accuracy; second - carry; third - length, which includes carry and roll. The premium on accuracy should carry the greatest reward for this is the essence of any game. Carry, while slightly less valuable than accuracy is important in that it promotes boldness. Length may be considered least important but this becomes quite a factor when a player is able to mould all three tests together."



Eagles Mere New Course - Some Holes Have 200' of Elevation Change

Greens

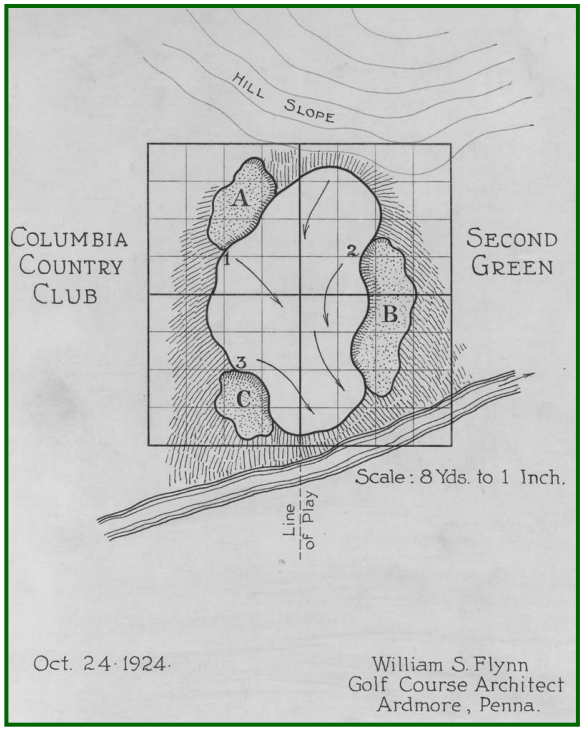
Flynn had this to say on the subject of greens: *"The most important point in designing golf holes is to select proper green sites. The first condition in in selecting a green site is its adaptability to the game on a particular type of hole. The second is the question of the cost of constructing the green on any particular site. The third is the beauty to be had both in the background and vistas.*

The most important consideration in conjunction with the designing of a modern green is to create naturalness. Of course this condition can only be brought about as construction progresses, but the framework must be right in the beginning .

Naturalness should apply on all construction on golf courses, greens, tees, mounds, and bunkers alike. It is much more expensive to construct a natural looking golf course on account of the tremendous amount of material that must be moved, but the money saved in subsequent maintenance greatly offsets the original cost.

It quite frequently happens that the architect will select perhaps 30 or 40 different green sites on a property when his ultimate job is to secure only 18. This is done to exhaust all the possibilities of securing good holes. It often occurs that an architect lays out perhaps three different courses on paper before he definitely decides which, in his estimation, is the best.

"Contrary to the way the course is played, that is from tee to green, the architect selects his greens first and then works backward to his tees radiating in all directions from the green until he eventually secures what he is after."



Bunkers

"By arranging the green bunkers in such a way as to invite play in from one side or the other he can also put a premium on placing the tee shot on the proper side of the fairway. When a test of length off the tee is presented the best type is the cape or elbow where it takes a really big tee shot past a corner to permit reaching the green in par. The problems may be diversified using one test off the tee on one hole, the same on the second shot of another hole; sometimes two of the same kind on the first and second shots of a hole; perhaps all tests, accuracy, carry and length on another but always juggling so as not to get sameness on succeeding holes.

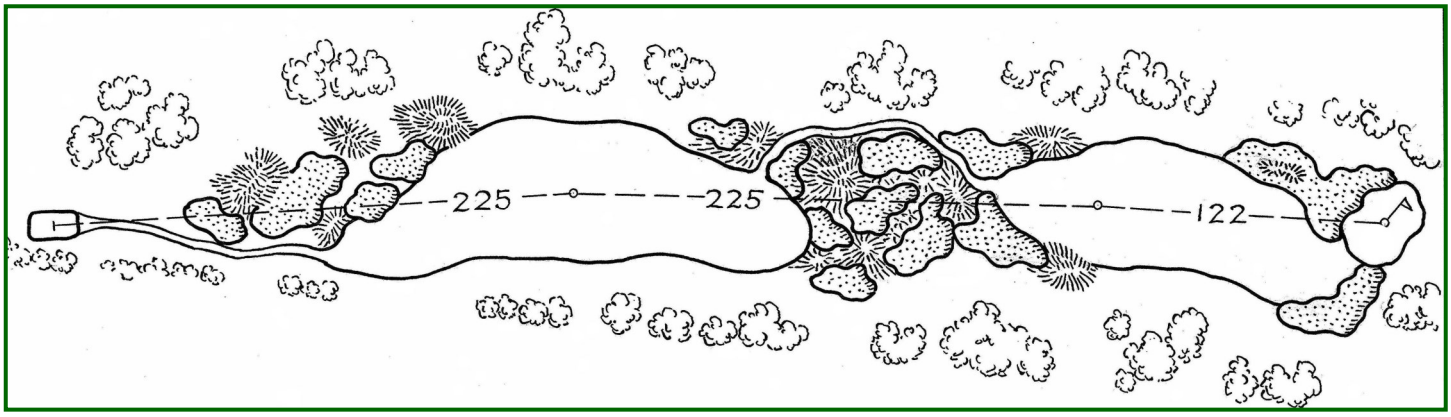
...The plans first submitted by an architect should cover what might well be termed the framework of the course, but should be flexible in the matter of pits and bunkers. Those around the greens and certain traps off the fairways may be fairly well determined in advance, but the location of the others can be determined better after the course has been completed and played on for a while. In this connection it would be well for a club to retain its architect in an advisory capacity for a year or so after the actual

capacity for a year or so after the actual work of construction has been finished. He will then be able to better determine the definite location of a complete bunkering system for the course and wHI be able to advise in the treatment of the course in preparing it for play.

The design for bunkering the course is tremendously important and the architect should spend a great deal of time going over the various holes determining the exact location of his fairway bunkers. It is important in locating fairway bunkers to place them in positions where they are also visible. A concealed bunker has no place on a golf course because when it is concealed it does not register in the player's mind as he is about to play the shot and thus loses its value.

The best looking bunkers are those that are gouged out of faces or slopes. particularly when the slope faces the player. They are much more effective in that they stand out like sentinels beckoning the player to come on or keep to the right or left."

Flynn's bunker styles and the numbers used varied depending upon the site. Grounds for golf that had less topographic features would have a far greater nun1ber ot bunkers and undulating sandy waste areas to add interest and strategic implications. His seaside courses exhibited a more natural and rustic bunkering style in harmony with the surroundings, while his parkland courses often had a simpler bunker outline, though highly strategic in their placement.



Boca Raton South 17th
On Flat Ground, Flynn Used Angles and Bunkers to Incorporate Strategy

Tees

"In fitting a course to all classes in everyday play it is necessary to maintain relative values in the holes. This can only be done by using two and in some instances three tees to a hole-the various players using the tee that tits their particular game. The value of the hole is immediately lost when the 200-yard drive uses the back tee on a normal 420-yard hole.

It is impossible for him to get home in two, whereas had the forward tee 40 to 50 yards ahead been used he would then have played a long iron or spoon shot to the green with a resultant thrill of satisfaction and at the same time be within his limitations."

Flynn was an early practitioner of designing separate tees for use on a given day. Donald Ross and other early architects practicing in America would build more than one tee but that was to rotate teeing ground to save wear and tear and for use under different weather conditions. All classes of players were expected to tee off from the same ground. The notion of greens in regulation mattered little as most contests were under match play formats and the notion of par was not as compelling. Flynn did not design squared or rectangular tees. His superintendent background influenced his use of rounded corners and few if any straight lines. Tees were not always designed to point the player in the correct direction. Misdirected tees reward the thinking golfer in control of his ball flight.

''A great many players are averse to using forward tees perhaps because they were originally christened "ladies tees'' but regardless of that fact it seems that a great deal more enjoyment could be had it golfers used the tee on the various holes that really suited their game."

Standards of Design and Play

William Flynn believed he was part of a revolution in golf design, an American version of the ancient game. He followed a scientific approach to architecture and construction meant to have a profound impact on how the game was played. While some today decry standardization in golf design. Flynn was committed to a wide variety of shot testing and a range of challenges he thought best presented under a standardized formula.

His genius was not in using machinery to create the challenge by moving millions of cubic yards of earth, but rather in using the land as much as possible to create the interest and hiding his manufacturing with construction techniques that mimicked nature.

"While there is no rule as to the number of the various types of holes to be incorporated in an eighteen-hole layout yet there are certain customs that most architects follow...The rule most generally adhered to is to have four holes of the course one-shotters. To the majority of golfers the one-shot holes are the most interesting and there is no real reason why there should not be five one-shotters particularly when such holes provide interest in the play and are of varying character.

On the other hand a course with three outstanding one-shotters is much more desirable than one with four mediocre ones. It was also formerly thought that each course should have a three-shotter in each nine. Today however, the thought prevails that one good three-shotter is sufficient unless some outstanding natural feature warrants putting in a second. Good three- shotters are the exception rather than the rule and unless the player has a specific thing to do on each shot other than slug, this type of hole becomes rnonotonous.

The principal consideration of the architect is to design his course in such a way as to hold the interest of the player from the first tee to the last green and to present the problems of the various holes in such a way that they register in the player's mind as he stands on the tee or on the fairway for the shot to the green."

The PGA and the USGA has adopted the notion of a tournament course in the last twenty years, whether or not they were aware the idea was first put forward by Flynn nearly eighty years ago in an October 1927 USGA Green Section article: *"The United States Golf Association might develop, sponsor and subsidize sectional courses, say six in all, which could be used for all major championships and which could be developed to the nth degree. Should these courses be operated on a membership basis, it would be understood that the conduct of the course would be entirely under the Jurisdiction of the National Golf Association. The above courses could be developed by arrangement with existing clubs or could be built entirely new, the latter perhaps being the better plan. In this way it would be possible for the best architects collaborating with the Golf Association to develop these courses and thus establish a standard from which other clubs might profit.*

Under this arrangement it would also be possible to modify or improve each course for any condition that might come up in relation to the development of the game such as the ball question or other important factors that might have a bearing on the case without creating controversy among the members. Experiments supervised by the United States Golf Association Green Section might be carried on under actual playing conditions and the experience gained distributed to member clubs. In a measure this would eliminate the misnomer 'championship course' as used at present. There would actually be six championship courses and not the great number that are now so-called perhaps by an overzealous architect or enthusiastic members."

Flynn's objective was to keep costs of constructing and maintaining golf courses in a range that would not overly tax the membership of those clubs. Longer courses with more bunkers and other hazards would not be necessary as there would be a rota of true championship courses to be venues for tournament play. New courses would not have to be built at greater expense for tournaments that might only be held once every ten or twenty years. Older courses would not have to undergo costly redesigns to keep up with technological advancements in order to attract championships. Great course designs would not have to be altered for modern tournament play. Unfortunately, developers and governance at classic courses have more often than not ignored Flynn's objective.

Trees

Flynn had a modern outlook on the use of trees on golf courses. His theories and practical use of trees were a radical departure from that of architects in the Old World. Flynn's ideas represented a new approach to golf design and one that remains controversial to this day. In America there probably is no greater source of dispute on classic course restorations where trees have proliferated. There are tree huggers and tree haters and few philosophies in between. The fact is that Flynn spent a great deal of time studying trees and using them in both strategic and aesthetic ways on golf courses. Flynn adopted the segregation of holes as a design philosophy although not in all instances. The setting determined his use of trees. Flynn appreciated vistas and the effects of wind on play and did not wish to exclude these factors from play. Yet, where the golf course was being laid out on a forested property, Flynn would cut hole corridors through the trees and not raze the woodlands in favor of golf. Where courses were laid out on open farmland, Flynn often planted trees to create enhanced angles of play and segregation between holes.

"The pleasantest type of course is one where the holes are segregated, that is where the hole you happen to be playing is well apart from the others. In order to have this kind of course It is necessary to secure property that is already wooded or to do considerable planting of trees. The old idea was to have golf courses as free from trees as possible. This notion, no doubt, was imported from Scotland because when golf was first taken up in the United States we knew very little about the game and modeled our courses on those of the Scotch which were, for the most part, built along the seashore where there were no trees. It is impossible to conceive that the 'Canny Scots' would have denuded their courses of trees if there had been any there originally. As a race they are entirely too thrifty for any such waste as that."

300-Year Old Oak at Pocantico Hills

Summary

Merion East and Pine Valley strongly influenced the design philosophy of William Flynn - he also had a good deal to do with the final designs at both courses as well. Although Flynn only designed or redesigned 79 original courses in his lifetime, with only 59 still in existence, many are found on most lists ranking the great American courses. A remarkable 101 USGA championships have been held on courses where Flynn worked with another 14 planned including Lancaster Country Club, host of the 2024 US Women's Open. Any list of Flynn courses must begin with the complete redesign for the Shinnecock Hills Golf Club on New York's Long Island. Flynn's routing genius, ability to design on varying topography, soil and climates is demonstrated on a short list of his finest remaining work including The Cascades, Kittansett Club, The Country Club in Pepper Pike, Cherry Hills, The Country Club in Brookline where many of the original holes were redesigned, and the innovative design for the Rockefeller family course at Pocantico Hills. Philadelphia, Flynn's home base, has no less than nineteen course designs and redesigns that includes Merion West, Huntingdon Valley, Philadelphia Country, Lancaster, Rolling Green, Manufacturers, Lehigh and others. It is no wonder that students of golf architecture find the Philadelphia School a required study and the works of William Flynn among the finest ever created.