

Bethpage State Park's long-awaited U.S. Open arrives next month, and no person's legacy figures to be celebrated more than architect A.W. Tillinghast. After all, he designed four of the five courses at Bethpage, right?

Well, some will argue that the Black Course is actually a Joe Burbeck design. The great Tillinghast only routed the course and supposedly lost interest during its construction when Burbeck decided to build things his own way in the early 1930s. Since Tilly didn't inspect the final Black Course design, some golf historians say the design isn't his.

If that's how we're going to determine who gets credit for a design, then there are plenty of modern giants who haven't been doing as much designing as thought. So it's unclear why older architects — like Tillinghast at Bethpage or Alister MacKenzie at Augusta National — lose credit for their works if it's proven they missed their courses' opening-day schmoozefests or weren't around for the construction of their designs as much as previously thought.

Tilly routed Bethpage's four courses, spending many days walking the Black Course property and laying out what may be one of the top five routings in America. If you prefer a course sequenced in such a way that it takes the golfer on a journey unlike anything else in golf, you'll love the Black Course. The property is impressive and Tillinghast took great advantage of its features.

As for the rest of his career, Tilly was a giant of all things in golf when the game was still new to America. If his portfolio of classic courses were matched up against other famous American architects, it wouldn't be a close contest. Tilly could give any of our modern masters three courses aside and still have the match closed out by the 12th tee.

Tilly was everywhere. He lived golf, and he wrote about it with insight and wit. Tilly took beautiful photos of golfers and courses before people did such things. He collected early golf art and even dabbled in it himself.

Frank Hannigan, golf writer and USGA's former senior executive director, says Tilly was the "patron saint" of the USGA Green Section. After watching Pine Valley GC and Merion GC grow into classics, Tilly translated his eye for art, his

A Worthy Toast to A.W. Tillinghast

BY GEOFF SHACKELFORD



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sense of beauty and his nose for interesting golf into a wide portfolio of interesting designs.

Tillinghast toyed with a variety of styles, but kept his courses consistently compelling despite the quirks he presented golfers. Contrary to myth that has since been retracted by the man who spread it, Tilly built some brilliant par 5s along with plenty of awesome par-4s. Take note of holes four and five at Bethpage Black. They are classic Tilly — beautiful, bold, tough and fun. And because the holes use the terrain so beautifully, they feel completely original.

Later in life, Tillinghast grew disenchanted with architecture and life in general. After he quit designing, he journeyed the country as a consultant to make ends meet. (He told PGA pros that their courses could save money by filling in unnecessary bunkers.) Later, he set up an antique shop in Beverly Hills, Calif., before dying in obscurity in 1942.

Thanks to several people, we know more about Tilly than ever before. Hannigan penned an epic 1974 article that awakened us to the man's accomplishments. Golf writer Ron Whitten and architect Geoffrey Cornish figured out which courses were his, clarifying the man's travels and legacy even further. Recently, golf historians Rick Wolffe, Stuart Wolffe and Bob Trebus started the Tillinghast Society, complete with a Web site devoted to the man and capped off by three books compiling Tilly's timeless essays.

Add the USGA's idea to bring the Open to Bethpage along with the rejuvenation of this world-class facility, and the full picture of Tillinghast as an architect is becoming complete. Through his writings, his courses and his love for golf, we now know he was a giant. He's first team All-American in golf — the greatest designer of courses this country has ever produced.

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