

# The Best OF THE Best?

Many architecture aficionados insist that Shinnecock Hills could be the most complete design in the world

**STORY AND PHOTOS  
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Shinnecock's par-3 seventh hole is arguably the most severe and unusual Redan derivative ever created.

**S**hinnecock Hills Golf Club can compare with any American design. Pair it up against any other course in hole-by-hole match play and Shinnecock, located in Southampton, N.Y., on Long Island, will close out the proceedings by the 15<sup>th</sup> tee.

Pine Valley could take the course to sudden death, as might Cypress Point (but we know who will win the argument about finishing holes between those two). Some counter that Shinnecock's design is *too* perfect. Is that even possible?

Such a claim implies the course is too polished and lacks the quirky breather holes that make repeat rounds fun for everyone. And even Shinnecock admirers concede that the course is relentless with encroaching fairways on a windy links-like site.

But most architecture aficionados insist that Shinnecock is the most complete design in the world, calling on every conceivable shot. And until recently, few people realized who engineered this American masterpiece.

## **A late bloomer**

In 1891, golf professional Willie Davis laid out 12 holes that established Shinnecock Hills as one of the first American courses. The club's original pro, Willie Dunn, extended the course into the first full 18-holer around 1894 when Shinnecock was about to become one of the USGA's five founding member clubs.

With coffin-shaped bunkers and holes bisected by the nearby Long Island Railroad line, Shinnecock looked nothing like the great links of Scotland. And at just under 5,000 yards, it was short even by late-19<sup>th</sup> century standards.

Following the 1896 U.S. Open at Shinnecock, design features were updated based on competitor comments. But the reworked 5,800-yard course still did not take full advantage of the grassy, rolling Southampton terrain. It was land of such beauty that it would soon be made famous by American impressionist William Merritt Chase's idyllic paintings portraying socialites strolling through the grassy fields overlooking Peconic Bay.

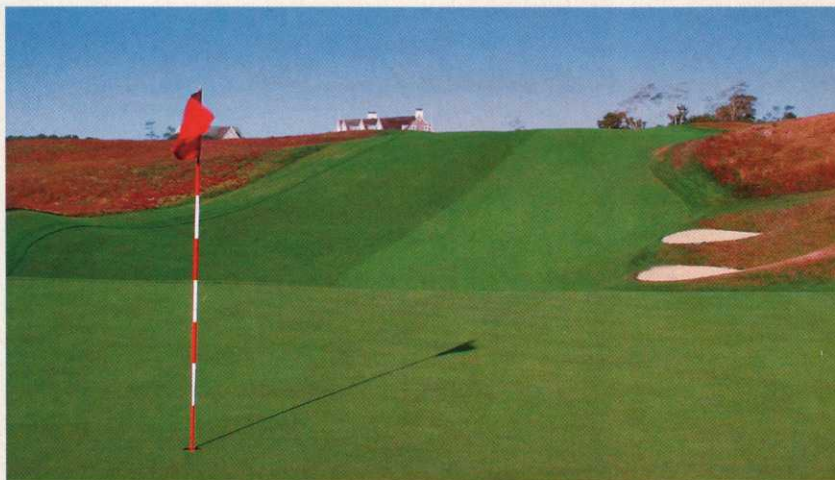
Though the original design wove its way through the sandy scrublands with Stanford White's world-famous clubhouse looming over the course, the golf holes proved forgettable.

Matters were made worse by the odd relationship Shinnecock developed with its new neighbor, the National Golf Links of America. That ingenious design slowly emerged under C.B. Macdonald's guidance until its completion in late 1910.

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Macdonald tried to buy Shinnecock Hills to create his dream course (the membership obviously rejected him). Since National Golf Links was an architectural marvel, it siphoned many of Shinnecock's members and, most egregiously of all, hired away its renowned chef.

Motivated by the National's emergence and the obvious design issues fostered when fairways played through the Long Island Railroad line (not to mention the annoying grass fires ignited by locomotives), Shinnecock Hills enlisted Macdonald and his engineering associate Seth Raynor to build 13 new holes while keeping five of Dunn's originals.

The new-look Shinnecock opened in 1917 and lasted about 10 years, until word of a soon-to-be-built highway required the members to consider yet another redesign. The club had grown weary of fellow member Macdonald's strong-willed and authoritative personality. And since Raynor died in 1926, the redesign job went to the design firm of Toomey and Flynn.

### **In like Flynn**

Emboldened by an endorsement from renowned architect C.H. Alison after the Englishmen thoroughly examined William Flynn's plans for Shinnecock

**From 1928 to 1931, William Flynn created the back nine, including the 10th hole.**

Hills, the club moved forward with construction of 12 new holes on 108 newly acquired acres. From 1928 to 1930, Flynn created the entire back nine along with today's fourth, fifth and sixth holes.

When he completed the holes, members played six remaining Macdonald-Raynor holes south of the clubhouse. (These holes would later be taken out of the rotation after Flynn redesigned today's one to three and seven to nine sets.) The final remodeling phase took place over the winter of 1930-31, and Flynn charged the club a total of \$32,250 for his services.

William Gordon, who went on to create several renowned courses, supervised the Shinnecock Hills reconstruction. Future architect Dick Wilson worked under Gordon and later consulted for the club, but Wilson took credit for designing the course when he consulted for the club during the 1960s.

Flynn retained only one hole from the old Macdonald-Raynor course, today's devilish par-3 seventh. It's arguably the most severe and unusual Redan derivative created, leading some to wonder if Flynn didn't touch up even that hole.

Most Redans are crafted out of terrain

suited for the sweeping right-to-left ground shot. Shinnecock's Redan literally pops up out of a field. Yet it works beautifully, calling on an aerial attack that still rewards the player using the severe right-side slope.

Flynn's 1931 version of the course measured 6,755 yards, played to a par 73 and featured virtually no trees. The nines as viewers will see them during this year's U.S. Open were originally reversed, but switched when golfers got a taste of the brutal opening holes that will surely lead to swollen back-nine scores again this year.

The nines were mysteriously reversed again in the early 1950s until some wise soul settled on today's sequence in 1953. Other minor changes occurred, and nearly 400 yards of length were added.

Flynn's original design featured more extensive bunkering along with sandy waste areas, since replaced by the tan native grasses seen today (look hard and you can see the outlines of some of the old hazards). Flynn's design also included much wider playing corridors than we'll see during the Open. But his brilliantly conceived greens, bunker placement and overall genius remain intact.

### **Who was William Flynn?**

Born in Massachusetts where he played high school golf with amateur great Francis Ouimet, Flynn designed his first course at 19, then moved to the Philadelphia area and worked under Hugh Wilson at Merion Golf Club. After helping with the original Merion East Course's construction prior to World War I and staying on briefly as the superintendent, Flynn supervised a 1924 redesign that led to the version of the American classic we know today.

Flynn started his own practice prior to the war, joining with engineer Howard Toomey, who handled engineering and construction. They also worked on other

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# Flynn's design style was fairly simple, but slightly outlandish at select times.



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design projects under the Toomey and Flynn Construction Engineers banner.

Flynn's design portfolio is impressive: Besides Shinnecock Hills, he planned the underrated Kittansett in southern Massachusetts, Cherry Hills Country Club in Denver, Atlantic City Country Club in New Jersey, the Cascades Course at The Homestead Resort in Virginia and two courses named The Country Club (the first is a renowned original Flynn creation near Cleveland; the second is his rarely heralded redesign of The Country Club in Brookline, Mass.).

In Pennsylvania, Flynn's many classic designs are better appreciated thanks to several recent restorations: Lehigh Country Club in Allentown; Lancaster Country Club in central Pennsylvania; and Manufacturers, Huntington Valley and Philadelphia country clubs in the city of brotherly love.

Typically dressed in plus fours and sporting a strange clutter of vertical hair

à la Kramer from *Seinfeld*, Flynn's design style was fairly simple, but slightly outlandish at select times. It's hard to tell looking at his courses today that he was anything but a very conservative designer whose courses were solid and large in scale. His bunkers featured subtle and irregular boundaries, a stark contrast to the capes and bays seen in the work of his friends and fellow Philadelphian's A.W. Tillinghast and George C. Thomas.

The quirky side of Flynn went unnoticed because many sandy features have been grassed over or trees have suffocated Flynn's courses to the point that they are unrecognizable. However, he was never shy in his use of vast sandy areas or envisioning dramatic alternate route designs.

His dynamic plans were meticulously drawn, yet Flynn insisted "the ultimate character of the course must be developed as the construction progresses." Flynn was also notoriously precise with budgets.

Flynn preached strategic design with an emphasis on the incorporation of nat-

ural features. He never embraced the all-out quirkiness that his counterparts Tillinghast and Thomas enjoyed, but Flynn did base his strategy on the same principles that fed his mentor's success — place greens at peninsula-like angles with room for a run-up approach, and let players decide how much risk they want to take with approach shots.

"The best way to whet the appetite and improve the game of any golfer is to offer an incentive and provide a reward for high-class play," Flynn wrote in the late 1920s.

### **Shinnecock: America's masterpiece?**

Many of golf's movers and shakers say Shinnecock Hills hails as one of America's greatest designs.

"It's about as good as we have," says retired USGA Executive Director Frank Hannigan, who was largely responsible for convincing the executive committee to bring the 1986 U.S. Open to the course.

Architect Tom Doak wrote in his *Confidential Guide to Golf Courses* that Flynn's design "is one of the game's great examinations in using the wind, as the two prevailing winds (which are 90 degrees opposed), combined with the frequent changes of direction in the routing, ensure that you'll have your fill of the wind from all quarters." Doak also noted that Shinnecock Hills is "a great course to play every day, as well as a proven championship venue. Not many courses can claim both."

USGA Championship agronomist Tim Moraghan says he "would be hard pressed to find a combined package of better playing conditions, layout and challenge" than Shinnecock Hills.

Yet Flynn was too modest to tout his own work. He said, "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."

No course in America reflects such a lofty goal better than Shinnecock Hills. ■

## **U.S. Open Shines Light on Shinnecock**

Oak Hill Country Club and Inverness Club were redesigned for the U.S. Open, with generally negative reviews for the work undertaken. Other clubs such as Olympia Fields Country Club (low winning score) and the Olympic Club (dreadful USGA setup) will be remembered by events that had little to do with the quality of the courses themselves.

But Shinnecock Hills stands out as the one design "discovered" and revered thanks to its decision to host the U.S. Open.

Flying well under the radar as many of today's most revered courses did during the mid-20th century, Shinnecock Hills accepted the 1977 Walker Cup. Then-USGA executive director Harry Easterly also wondered if the course could host the Open and assigned part-time staffer Frank Hannigan to look into the possibility.

When Hannigan became executive director in 1983, he appointed Long Island native Tony Zirpoli to figure out how to make the Shinnecock project work. Zirpoli solved key logistical issues while also realiz-

ing it was time for the USGA to run its own event instead of relying on the host club for help with outside-the-ropes issues.

The USGA paid the club \$450,000 to rent the course, and the 1986 Open was officially awarded to Shinnecock Hills. It was an enormous success and created a blueprint for future Open operations.

Then-Shinnecock Hills superintendent, the late Pete Smith, and former USGA agronomist Al Radko guided the club through that first Open despite limited resources.

"I almost died when on Labor Day weekend of 1985 we came within hours of losing all the greens," Hannigan says. "It got to 98 degrees or so, and there was nobody from the crew [at the course] on the weekend."

By contrast, Shinnecock Hills will get \$5 million to host the 2004 U.S. Open. In return, the USGA is getting a far more polished course from the notoriously frugal membership, thanks to the efforts of superintendent Mark Michaud and his crew.

— **Geoff Shackelford, Contributing Editor**