

# Early Golf in Virginia: The Pioneering Clubs

by Lee Dieter

The golf books and memorabilia that I have collected over the years were a major source of my research into early golf in the Old Dominion State, reinforced by my many years as superintendent at Washington Golf and Country Club in Arlington, one of the pioneering Virginia clubs. New information is still coming to light, as I shall explain later.

The first mention of organized golfing activities in Virginia appeared in the *Alexandria Gazette* for November 9, 1792, over the signature of Jonathan Swift, who has been identified as a merchant who served as treasurer of the city of Alexandria. This information was uncovered by Victor Vaughn of Arlington, a fellow member of the Golf Collectors Society and a longtime friend. Many Scots had settled in and around Alexandria in the 18th century and before, and they apparently were playing golf in North America at about the same time as were their fellow countrymen in Charleston, South Carolina, and Savannah, Georgia. Swift's notice read:

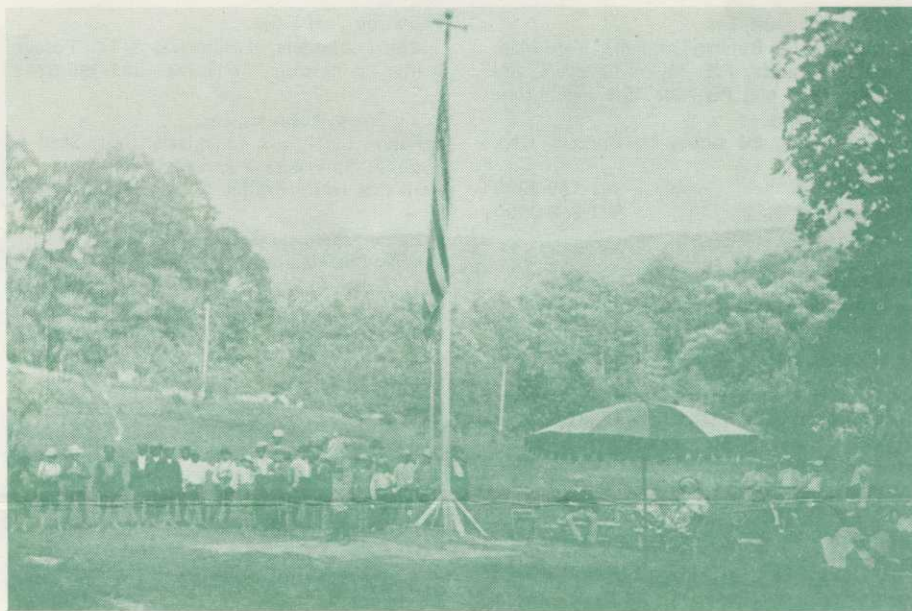
"Meeting of the Golf Club to be held in their rooms at Gadsby's Hotel."

The old tavern known as Gadsby's has been restored and still functions in the old town portion of Alexandria, but it is likely that the War of 1812 and the prevailing anti-British sentiment served to discourage the growth of golf activity in the former colonies until later in the 1800's.

Still, it seems improbable that golfing Scots and their descendants in Virginia would give up club and ball, and 1894 found a group of these men who owned



This photo of members of the Washington Golf Club was taken in 1896. Last year the author located and purchased a putter with silver head and grip given as a prize in competition at this club in the 1890's; two of the men whose names are engraved on the grip of the prize putter, Edward Riggs and Frederick May, are in this picture. The man in the hat holding the bag of clubs at the right is a caddie.



An early golfer tees off at the Homestead in Hot Springs, where this original 1st tee is still in use. Note the crowd of caddies on the left and the well-dressed spectators on the right.

country estates and engaged in fruit growing and lumbering in the White Sulphur Springs area playing a regular competition for the Oakhurst Medal. Among them were Alexander and Robert McLeod, George Grant, and Lionel Turrin, who with their friends and compatriots played at Oakhurst, the home of Russell Montague, a transplanted New Englander. Summer vacationers from White Sulphur and Hot Springs would stop by to watch the activity, and some even tried their hand at the game themselves. This may well have been the forerunner of the Hot Springs Golf Club, where golf started in 1896 and where the oldest tee in continuous use in Virginia, the first tee at the Homestead, is still in play. Fay Ingals, whose family ran the Homestead for many years, played at Oakhurst in those early years and wrote about it in his book, *Valley Road*.

The *Harpers Golf Guide* for 1901 lists 1893 as the founding date of the Lakeside Club in Richmond, along with the following courses and the year they came into existence: Washington Golf Club (1894), Hampton Roads Golf and Country Club (1894), Hot Springs Golf Club (1896), Norfolk Country Club (1896), University of Virginia Golf Club (1897), Charlottesville Golf Club (1898), Bedford City Golf Club in Norfolk (1899), Lynchburg Golf Club (1899), Mettawn Golf Club (formerly Paradise Creek) (1899), Alexandria Golf Club (1900), and Hermitage Golf Club (1900). The guide notes that Virginia

Beach Golf Club was in a state of dissolution in the late 1890's and would reorganize in 1901 with a new course.

Also in 1894 an article on golf appeared in a Richmond newspaper, featuring men and women in proper golf attire of those times. Similar articles in magazines like *Outing*, *Harpers*, and *Century* helped to generate increased interest in the game. But, golf did not develop as fast in Virginia in the early 1900's as it did in the rest of the country, perhaps because of problems with growing grass in the state. The heavy prescribed attire may have discouraged many possible players, and the history of the Washington Golf Club notes that the golf season in northern Virginia was October through May, with one major competition being held over the Christmas holidays. Golf was clearly not a warm weather sport in Virginia, except at the highland resorts where the affluent spent their summers.

Evidence for this slow early growth can be found in the fact that by 1920, the Virginia State Golf Association had less than 20 members. Golf did not grow suddenly in Virginia, by leaps and bounds; it started slowly, delaying its growth until much later in the century.

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