

# THE COUNTRY CLUB OF ROCHESTER ~ 1895—2020

By Paul F. Wold

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There is a small-framed blueprint in the trophy cabinet in Hagen Pub, which shows the layout of the original nine holes of the Thistle Club. The Thistle course opened in 1896, one year after the club was founded on February 20, 1895.

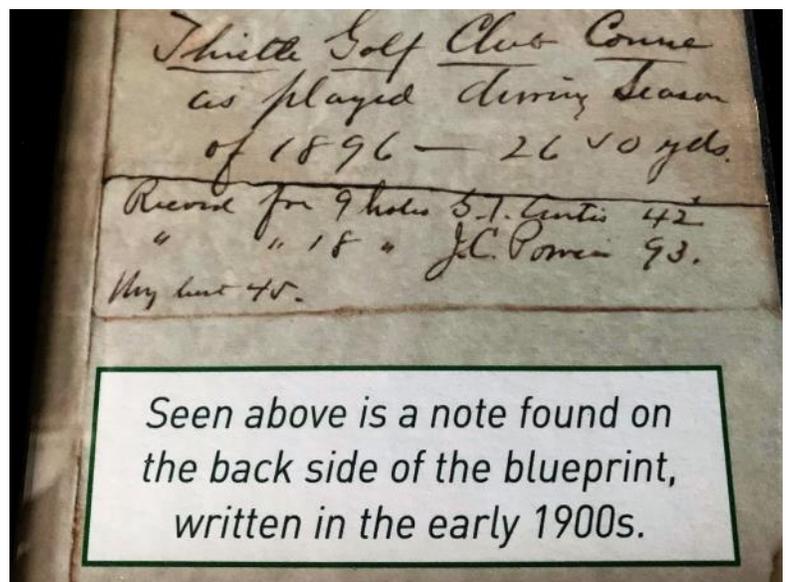
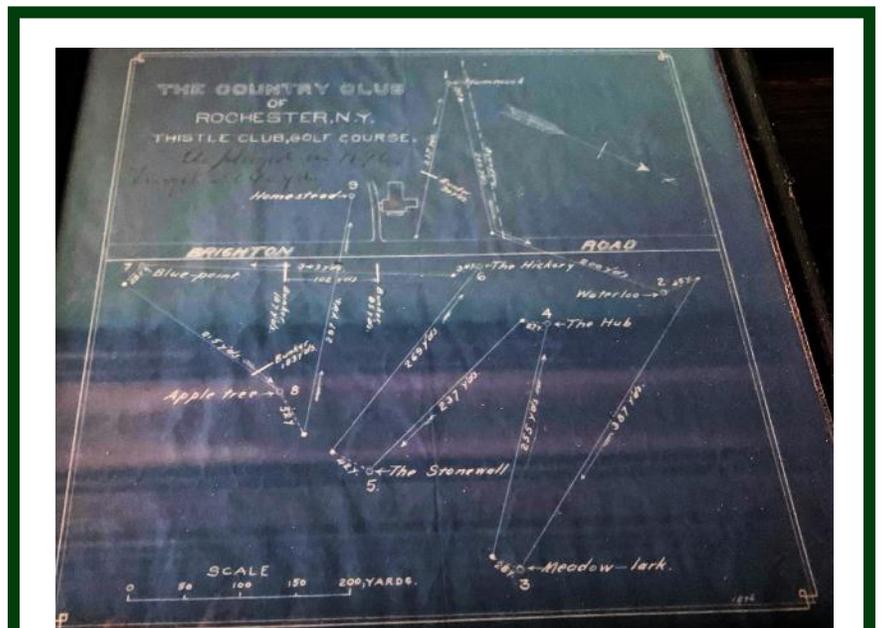
The Country Club of Rochester was the first golf club in Rochester and one of the first fifty in the United States. The game of golf was very new in America in the later part of the nineteenth century. The United States Golf Association was formed in 1895, the same year our club was founded. Also, the first golf book printed in the USA, "Golf in America -A Practical Manual" by James P. Lee was printed in 1895. Golf was not the sophisticated game it has become. The implements were rather crude and balls were made out of gutta percha. Members or the club professional frequently designed golf courses. They tended to be rather short; the Thistle course's first nine holes measured 2630 yards in length.

There has been much speculation that our first course was designed by Donald Ross, clearly it was not. Ross did not immigrate to America until 1899. There is recent evidence that a Scot by the name of Alexander Findlay has been given credit for design of an early golf course[s] for CCR.

Findlay was one of the genuine pioneers of golf in this country. Like Ross, he immigrated to America from Scotland in the late 1800's. Alexander Findlay has been credited with designing over 100 courses in America, including Aronimick, Miacomet, and the Greenbrier.

A professional golfer, Findlay toured the United States with the great Harry Vardon in a series of exhibition matches. He is also given credit for playing over 2400 courses, worldwide ... not an insignificant feat considering the relative difficulty of travel and the much smaller universe of golf courses.

Based on the blueprint of the Thistle course, it would appear that our first design was of the home grown variety. This design is known as the geometric style ... typical of the very early designs found in America. Notice that two of the original fairways intersect with other holes. Golf architecture during this period [ 1890' s] has been described as primitive. If an architect was used, the going rate for a course layout was \$25.00. The fee basically provided for the architect to come in and stake the course, identifying tee, bunker and green locations. Course construction was almost always done by the club. Golf courses at this time were built quickly and inexpensively.



Most likely, Findlay was brought in to upgrade our original design in 1898. The connection between CCR and Findlay is unclear. Findlay did design the Siasconset course on Nantucket Island, the summer residence of four of the County Club's founding fathers-Josiah Anstice, John Stedman, William Webb and Frederick Allen. They could have gotten together there one summer afternoon and talked about golf in Rochester.

By 1910 the practice of mowing the fairways with a team of horses, shod in leather boots, and pulling a gang of mowers had become popular. By the end of WWI, the use of multi-blade push mowers on the greens was also commonplace.

In the spring of 1912, Donald Ross came to Rochester to design a new golf course. Golf in America had grown and become more sophisticated. The Haskel ball, introduced in 1900, the first rubber core ball, rendered many courses obsolete from a length perspective. Additionally, it has been said that the opening of the National Golf Links of America [NGLA] on Long Island [1907] designed by Charles Blair Macdonald, forever changed the face of golf architecture in America. Macdonald recreated many of Scotland's famous golf holes in the design of National Golf Links. NGLA was critically acclaimed on both sides of the ocean. This raised the awareness of the opportunity and importance of golf course design and cemented the influence of Scotland's many links designs ... the standard for golf design, in America, was now raised significantly.

The Country Club's founding fathers invited Donald Ross to address this new higher standard. At that time, Ross had already established himself as one of, if not, the leading golf architect in America. He had re-designed the three golf courses at Pinehurst including his most famous work, Pinehurst #2. By 1912, Ross had designed over 20 courses, of an estimated 400 courses, completed during his lifetime. It is important to note that we have a golf course that Donald Ross walked and designed himself. At the height of Ross's career [1920's] it is estimated that he had over 3000 employees and that it was not uncommon for Ross to design a course without ever seeing it or having the design done by one of his subordinates. But in 1912, Ross was working alone and clearly submitted a design to the Country Club that was 100% Donald Ross. Records also indicate that Ross stayed involved with our course over the years. This seems quite plausible since he was involved with other courses in our area all through teens and twenties; Irondequoit CC [1916], C.C. of Buffalo [1926], Oak Hill [1924] Monroe Golf Club [1923] and Brook Lea [1926]. Donald Ross also maintained a summer office in Little Compton, Rhode Island during this period.

Ross is given credit for being one of leading proponents of the "strategic golf design philosophy" which was an outgrowth of the earlier penal and heroic design philosophies. Basically, the Strategic philosophy believed that a golf course should be enjoyable for all skill levels and that golf holes should have alternative routes, so a golfer is not forced to carry hazards. It should encourage the golfer to think about the amount of risk that he is willing to take. He also believed a golf course should maximize the existing terrain that it had available to it... now called site-specific design. Ross also placed high value on the second shot and believed the true test of a golfer's skill was his ability to hit the long irons.

Finally, Donald Ross was not a believer in vertical hazards [trees]. He said "we must not lose sight of the fact there is a limited place for them [trees] in golf. We must not allow our sentiments to crowd out the real intent of a golf course, that of providing fair playing conditions. If it in any way interferes with a properly played stroke, I think a tree is an unfair hazard and should not be allowed to stand."

## 125TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATIONS

**FOUNDER'S DAY  
HAPPY HOUR  
& WINE TASTING**

Friday  
February 21

**HISTORY  
DINNER**

Thursday  
April 16

**GOLF TOURNAMENT,  
ANNUAL MEETING  
& DINNER**

Friday  
May 29

**SUMMER BASH  
WITH LIVE MUSIC**

Friday  
July 17

**125TH  
ANNIVERSARY  
GALA**

Saturday  
October 17

***ONLINE REGISTRATION IS OPEN FOR ALL EVENTS***