



Philmont deciphers mystery golf course architects

Architect Andrew Green, who is working to rebuild Philmont Country Club's North Course, and Matthew Brookman, a Philmont member and avid historian, worked to uncover the unclear past of the Huntingdon Valley, Pa. venue. The following is an excerpt from their research findings.

FOR YEARS, the two courses at Philmont were attributed to a pair of men: Willie Park, Jr. (South) and William Flynn (North). When developing the club's centennial book in 2006, research led authors Bob Labbanace and Patrick White to the conclusion that the original (South) course was created by Philmont's first professional, John Reid. Additional documentation pointed to the assistance of Hugh Wilson of Merion Golf Club fame.

However, as Labbanace and White investigated the North Course, the claim that it was laid out by Flynn could not be proven. They

did, however, find a letter in the 1924 Philmont Annual Report from J. Wood Platt, one of the most respected players in the history of the GAP, to Philmont's President Ellis Gimbel. In the letter, Platt praised the newly founded North Course as "one of Willie Park's masterpieces, and for scenery and real golf it should be a course for the Philmont members to be proud of for many years to come."

White knew that more information must be out there, but the lack of accessible documents made that discovery impossible at the time. Labbanace devised a theory that Park was most likely commissioned to design the course, but subsequently fell ill, so Howard Toomey and Flynn must have come in to finish the job. This

made sense because of the proximity of Toomey and Flynn's office to Philmont and their breadth of work. The connection to Toomey and Flynn was also linked to a photo hanging in the men's locker room featuring architect William F. Gordon with Arthur Davis (the original greenkeeper) and Henry Strouse (the club's Vice Greens Chairman). Most associated Gordon with Toomey and Flynn, where he worked from 1925-41.

What most don't know is that before joining Toomey and Flynn, Gordon was a construction supervisor for Carter's Tested Seeds, during which time he oversaw construction for a number of well-respected architects, including Park, Donald Ross and Devereaux Emmet. Gordon was a native New Yorker who arrived in Philadelphia to oversee the construction of Philmont for Park.

The Philmont connection to Park has been further corroborated with the help of golf



surrounding its
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historians Joseph Bausch and Bradley Klein of *Golfweek*. Their assistance led to various periodicals prior to 1930 mentioning Park as the designer of the North Course and Carter’s Tested Seed advertisements proclaiming Park’s work at Philmont (he was a sponsored architect for the company).

Furthermore, Philmont is referenced as one of Park’s courses in the book “The Parks of Musseleburgh – Golfers, Architects, Clubmakers” by John Adams. While some may contend that the mention in the biography was in reference to Park’s building of the South Course, the timeline of his career would have made it impossible for him to design the South. Park was not in the country when the course was originally built.

By late 1924, Park’s health began to fail; some say he suffered some sort of a nervous breakdown. He died in 1925. An obituary written July 5, 1925, in the *Brooklyn Eagle* read, “Now Park has gone to meet his reward in the mysterious beyond, leaving behind as fitting monument to his creative genius such superb examples of golf course architecture as Sunningdale (England), Woodway (Stamford), Sylvania (Toledo), Royal Montreal (Montreal),

Sylvania (Toledo), Philmont (Philadelphia), and Olympia Fields (Chicago).”

PHILMONT FORMED IN 1906 and opened in 1907, with a nine-hole golf course that was built by Reid. Strouse, Chairman of the Green Committee, oversaw a transformation of the course, as the initial layout lacked many bunkers as well as a succession of parallel holes. Strouse reached out to Wilson to assist with the redesign of the course, along with the construction of two new holes, which became Nos. 10 and 11.

On July 4, 1914, the newly revised course and the two new holes opened to Philmont’s membership. The two new holes were greeted with acclaim and brought modern golf construction to the club. Walter J. Travis visited Philmont in 1914 and carded a low score of 74. The course

continued to be improve, with three more holes redesigned by 1915. By 1916, new Nos. 12 and 13 would be designed, as well as revisions made to Nos. 3, 5 and 7. All of this work was overseen by Strouse, who was a visionary in the growth of golf at Philmont. By 1916, it became apparent that the club was growing overcrowded, and discussion of the need for additional holes began. Ellis Gimbel announced the following in Philmont's 1917 Annual Report:

"While it has no part as yet in the official activities of our Club, mention should be made of the purchase, last summer, by a small group of our members of the Jackson Farm adjoining our property. This splendid estate comprises 137 acres, upon which there is a splendid opportunity for an 18-hole golf course."

The Jackson Farm was purchased by a group of members led by Jules Mastbaum in 1917, but it took some time before any construction would begin on a new 18 holes. In 1918, the club decided to take title of the Jackson Farms tract, securing the plot for \$25,000, which was the original purchase price of the land.

In order to pay for the land, it was recommended to sell off bungalow sites, which would still leave ample acreage for a golf course. By 1920, some progress had been made in the development of the new course, as reported by Milton R. Katzenberg, Golf Chairman, in the Philmont Annual Report: "Mr. A. W. Tillinghast has been over the ground and advises that we have a wonderful piece of ground for the new course."

"A complete survey was made for the new course and everything is in readiness for the beginning of work, which is contingent on the raising of funds," according to the 1921 Annual Report. The 1922 Annual Report continued, "A



From left; architect William F. Gordon with original greenkeeper Arthur Davis and Henry Strouse.

contract for 20 new golf holes was signed on July 6, 1922, and being favored with favorable weather, we were enabled to make great progress ... most of the holes will be opened to play by next June, and it is probable that the course can be played on by fall."

The 1923 Annual Report of Greens Committee deems three Philmont members largely responsible for affording the North Course life.

"We take this opportunity of calling to the attention of our members the untiring efforts of Ellis A. Gimbel, whose dream of 36 holes at Philmont and vision constantly inspired enthusiasm in our members; of Jules E. Mastbaum, who in his inimitable manner and by sheer dint of personality made possible the getting together of needed funds; of Henry Strouse, who gave unsparingly of his time in order that the work might receive constant and thoughtful consideration and supervision."

BY THE LATE FALL OF 1923, Philmont's North Course was ready for play. A special event invited prestigious members from other local clubs for a gala in honor of U.S. Amateur Champion Max Marston. The Oct. 17, 1923 edition of *The Philadelphia Inquirer* reported, "Many of Philadelphia's famous pairs teed off during the course of the day, and some splendid scoring resulted over the new course, rated as among the best in the country." According to the 1924 Annual Report, "Max Marston spoke, commending our various holes, mentioning especially the second and the long ninth and

the short holes, which compare favorably with those at Pine Valley; the course he ranks second to none."

Philmont's North Course opened to the membership in June 1924. Green was charged with developing a Master Plan for the layout's preservation. He started by enlisting Brookman's help in obtaining historical data. Green then embarked on a complete bunker restoration in 2016-17. Fairway bunkers were reviewed with regards to location and impact. If any bunker changed position or adjusted significantly, Green and his team left historic clues by grassing over a ridge or bump remaining in the landscape.

The 18th hole on Philmont's North Course was also addressed as part of the Master Plan. Improvements included the green's relocation to the right side of the hole along a natural ridge, the placing of a bunker on the inside corner of the dogleg right and the shaping of guarding greenside bunkers. The space that once held the 18th green was converted into a Park-inspired practice green.

Moreover, Green and his team made every effort to showcase the greens on the North Course. As a set, he asserted that Park's Philmont creations may be the most interesting putting surfaces in the Golf Association of Philadelphia. Their imposing platforms, unique shapes and inspiring contours make for fun and challenging shots to, around, and on their surfaces. Park wanted the bunkers to enhance these elements of the greens, and the restoration worked to accentuate the natural position of the targets. ○



Ellis Gimbel