

Unsung Architects, Vol. 1: Devereux Emmet

One of golf architecture's true godfathers, Emmet left his mark all around the Met Area.

Devereux Emmet was the first prominent golf course designer in the Met Area, and a native son as well. Born in Pelham, N.Y., in 1861, his father was a judge and his family had been prominent in New York since emigrating from Ireland, so Devereux was born into enough wealth that he was free to pursue his passions.

One of Emmet's passions was breeding hunting dogs; he would raise and train them in America, and then go to Ireland to sell them before traveling on throughout Europe. It was during a visit to North Berwick in 1884 that he was first exposed to golf, as part of the gallery for a challenge match between Willie Fernie and Willie Park, Sr. Emmet and his wife loved the town of North Berwick and used it as a base of operations for their European excursions for many years thereafter.

> Ultimately, being friends with two of the titans of golf's early days – **Macdonald and Travis** – combined to keep Emmet from getting the recognition he deserved.

His first foray into golf architecture came when the heirs of the Stewart family (another prominent Irish-American New York family) wanted a golf course for their Garden City Hotel, on Long Island. Emmet's nine-hole Island Golf Links opened in 1897. The original design was quite low-key, with most of the greens lying naturally at ground level but many of them tilting away from the line of approach. Its touch of drama was an old gravel quarry that one had to play across on the first two holes.

Two years later Emmet expanded the course into what was then the longest golf course in America, and it was reincorporated as the Garden City Golf Club. It immediately became the hang-out for the Met Area's elite golfers, including Charles Blair Macdonald, who moved from Chicago to New York in 1900, and Walter Travis, who won the 1900 U.S. Amateur and finished second to Laurie Auchterlonie in the 1902 U.S. Open championship on his now-home course. It was Emmet who introduced Travis to his infamous Schenectady putter after being given a prototype by the inventor, and Emmet was one of six Americans to play at Sandwich (reaching the third round himself) when Travis became the first non-British player to capture the Amateur Championship, in 1904.

New York resident Mark Chalfant, who is currently working on a biography of Emmet, has documented a total of 170 courses designed or revised by Emmet. Though he worked as far away as Ohio, Bermuda, the Bahamas, and Cuba (plus the original 18 holes at Congressional, outside of Washington, D.C.), the great majority of his work was concentrated on Long Island, in Westchester County, and farther up the Hudson into upstate New York. In some parts of Long Island it seems like every other course is one of Emmet's; from Garden City you can hopscotch to Cherry Valley, to the small Rockville Links with its wild bunkering and greens, and on to the expansive Eisenhower Park, where Emmet's Red Course (then known as Salisbury Golf Club) hosted the PGA Championship in 1926, before failing in the Depression and being taken over by Nassau County.

Many of these early courses were confined to the relatively flat ground of west-central Long Island, but as Emmet started to stretch farther afield, his style of working with the natural undulations flourished. Wheatley Hills is a fine example of how he wasn't married to a particular rhythm of golf holes – the original routing started out with two short par-4s, a long three, and then back-to-back par-5s of well over 550 yards each. Nor was he afraid to end the course with a run of shorter holes: St. George's Golf and Country Club, laid out in 1917 on part of his family's estate, is a marvelous mid-length course, sort of a mini-Shinnecock, with a very short par-3 17th and then a reachable par-5 18th. It's also worth remembering that Emmet ended Garden City with a par-3, and he used the same gambit at Hob Nob Hill in Connecticut, one of his last design projects. He wasn't held back by the conventions of modern design; he let the nature of the property determine his layout.

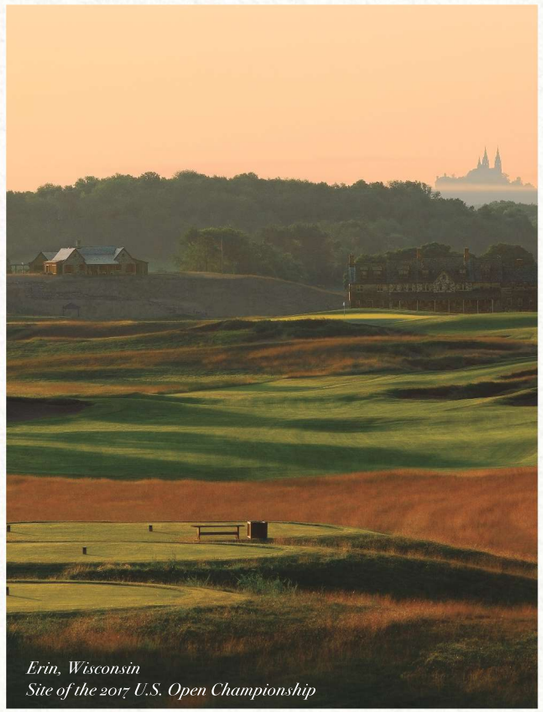
Huntington Country Club, first opened in 1911 and then redone by Emmet in the 1920s, is full of thrills and big bunkers and even a wild homage to the green of the Road Hole at St. Andrews - but in general, Emmet demurred from copying famous holes as his friend C.B. Macdonald had done. The irony is that Emmet had been a stalwart of Macdonald's steering committee for his National Golf Links project; as an annual visitor to the U.K., Emmet was enlisted to help obtain detailed maps of some of the famous holes Macdonald was considering for use at the National.

Two of Emmet's later projects were among his finest work, but the timing of the Depression kept them from aging well. The Macgregor Links, laid out through the woods of Saratoga Springs, was perhaps the grandest-scaled of Emmet's designs, but the club ultimately failed and the current course has been compromised by lack of funds and by the introduction of housing. Likewise, what is now Glen Head Country Club is mostly overlooked, but its original incarnation was as the Women's National Golf Club, an offshoot of its nearby neighbor The Creek Club. It was founded by the young Long Island native Marion Hollins (in her pre-California days), and Emmet collaborated with Hollins, Alexa Stirling, and Seth Raynor to produce a championship-level test for the best women golfers in America. The club survived less than twenty years, and it was later sold to the group that formed Glen Head CC.

In the late 1920s, in his mid-sixties, Emmet formed a partnership with his son Devereux Jr. and Alfred Tull. There is no evidence that Devereux Jr. participated in the business, but Tull went on to design many courses under his own name in the post-war period.

As with any architect who worked before 1920, the advent of modern equipment—beginning in the 1920s with the steel shaft and continuing through the distance growth of the last thirty years—was particularly unkind to courses that didn't have additional land with which to extend the holes. Nor did it help Emmet's legacy that Walter Travis's additions to Garden City Golf Club dilute his credit for one of his most famous projects. Ultimately, being friends with two of the titans of golf's early days—Macdonald and Travis—combined to keep Emmet from getting the recognition he deserved.

But a closer reading makes it plain that Emmet was one of the true godfathers of golf architecture, someone who did his early work without remuneration (although later in life he did pursue golf design as his profession). Anyone who plays a lot of golf around the Met Area has probably enjoyed some of his work and can call favorite holes to mind even if they can't do the same with his name. ■



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