



THE
RIDGEWOOD
COUNTRY CLUB

A MEMORABLE HISTORY OF THE RIDGEWOOD COUNTRY CLUB

June 15, 2012 – That Tillinghast Style



Tillinghast at Work

Ridgewood, Bethpage Black, Winged Foot and Newport among many others certainly owe a debt of gratitude to Tillinghast for their beautiful and timeless courses. It can be argued that a tip of the cap should also go to Baltusrol.

Albert Warren Tillinghast was born 1857 and grew up in Philadelphia. He learned to play golf on a family vacation at St. Andrews in Scotland in 1895. An accomplished amateur, he also became interested in golf architecture. Among his earliest design work in NJ is Pine Valley in Clementon. Lead architect, Harry Colt, accepted AWT's design for 7th and 13th holes without revision.

Colt, along with Charles Blair "CB" Macdonald, Donald Ross, Alistair McKenzie were among the leading architects of what would be called the Golden Age of golf architecture. Unlike American-born Tillinghast, they were transplanted from the United Kingdom. Many of the leading architects sought to build replicas of the finest golf holes in the British Isles. Tillinghast, however, dismissed these "rank imitations" in favor of creating original golf holes. His goal was to create pleasing-to-the-eye features that blend in with the natural terrain. His message to the imitators: "It takes imagination to create, but certainly none to copy."

Tillinghast's 1919 triumph at Baltusrol vaulted him into the ranks of golf's top designers. Chosen over his better-known rivals, he was tapped to create for Baltusrol Golf Club the first contiguous 36-hole design built in America. Although originally hired to design a second 18-hole golf course, Tillinghast persuaded Baltusrol to gut the old course and allow him to build two "equally sought after" 18-holes courses from scratch. The Tillinghast style was in full bloom; no artificial mounds, no bunkers built above the ground. Fairways and greenside bunkers were constructed down into the ground as if placed by nature.

His Baltusrol success would over the next ten years help the Harrington Park, NJ resident land contracts to design and build Ridgewood's 27-holes, Winged Foot's 36-holes, Beth Page Black and Alpine (formerly known as Aldecress.)

The Great Depression was a blow to golf in general and Tillinghast in particular. Course construction ground to a halt and he was forced to close his practice. Tillinghast was on the brink of ruin when his old friend, George Jacobus, the head professional at Ridgewood CC and president of the PGA, hired him to be consulting course architect for the PGA of America. For no fee he provided design assistance to courses around the country. At Ridgewood he recommended the construction of a new lake which was built on the right of 9 East.*

Tillinghast's designs were a blend of nature and his imagination. He believed a golf course should "Produce something which will provide a true test of the game, and then consider every way to make it as beautiful as possible."

On many of his par-4 holes, greens are open in front to allow the option of bouncing a ball on to the green. Par-3 holes, he believed, should be the most feared of any holes. He considered par-5 holes the hardest to design because the best players could often reach them in two shots. His answer was tightly trapped greens, twisting doglegged fairways and the location "of a formidable hazard across the fairway." 3-East and 4-West at Ridgewood are prime examples.

Tillinghast loved trees and would often design his fairways around prominent specimens. He was against letting the rough grow too long "into the matted grass variety, where balls are rather sure to be lost and vexatious, irritating delays occasioned." His courses were designed to allow a round of golf to be completed in less than four hours.

Luckily, eight Tillinghast original designs survive in New Jersey.

The Spring 2012 NJSGA Golf magazine features Tillinghast on the cover. Much of the material for this article was taken from their story.

*The lake on the border of 9-East and 1-East was not part of the original Ridgewood design. Previous to the lake the area was a marsh that players in the dry, summer season could walk into and play a shot. The problem was that the salty soil in the marsh would stick to the players' shoes and wreak havoc when it was tracked on the 9-East and 1-East greens and fairways.

Which architect actually designed the lake is a matter of dispute. The above-referenced Golf magazine credits Tillinghast. The 2009 *The Ridgewood Country Club, A History* by William Quirin gives credit to Robert Trent Jones, a young architect hired as a consultant. Their belief is that it must have been Jones, explaining that by the time of the lake's creation Tillinghast had moved to the West Coast. But Tillinghast supporters say that sketches for the lake were in the club's possession before Jones was retained.

