

The Golf Chronicles

The story of golf at Reading Country Club and in Berks County

Byron Nelson
RCC Pro
1937-39



Number 7 • June 15, 2015



Golfers must hit across Antietam Creek eight times as they traverse Reading Country Club. The most treacherous crossing is the tee shot on the par 3 15th hole. Many a golf ball has gone to a watery grave.

Name Game

Before the Civil War, the stream that runs through Reading Country Club was known as Stony Creek because of the numerous boulders found along its upper course. The name Antietam was adopted to honor the many Berks County soldiers who participated in the battle fought at the Antietam Creek in Maryland on September 16 and 17, 1862. (Source: *Reading Eagle*, January 20, 1918, page 18)

The word Antietam is believed to come from an Algonquian phrase meaning "swift-flowing stream".



This view from the 8th green shows the Antietam Creek crossing the 7th fairway. The natural flow of the creek was about 50 yards to the north, or to the left in this photo, of its present location.

A Creek Runs Through It, A Mine Runs Under It

Antietam Creek, at one time known as Stony Creek, winds through the eastern end of the Reading Country Club golf course. It provides great beauty, a home to assorted wildlife (fish, foxes, reptiles, birds) and a source of frustration to the golfers. The creek is in play on seven holes: the 4th, 5th (two times), 6th, 7th, 8th, 15th and 16th.

Alex Findlay, the course architect, said this about the waterway:

"The land is quite undulating and abounds in natural hazards, is surrounded by huge trees and a swift running stream adds beauty to the course and many of the putting greens are placed in the most unique and sporty way.

"Golfers meandering around in quest of golf land are usually eager to find brooks or rivers. The Reading Country Club was fortunate in securing the Esterly estate, with its numerous water hazards. The stream is crossed eight times. Every well placed shot will find its just rewards. The steam, of course, awaits the poorly played shots." (*Reading Eagle*, October 22, 1922)

The creek flows just 10 miles from Alsace Township to the Schuylkill River. But length isn't everything. The creek was once an economic powerhouse. An 1836 map of the Reading area (see page 3) shows 16 mills and forges on the Antietam from Spies Church to the Philadelphia Pike, a length of about nine miles. The flowing water powered a variety of manufacturing sites.

Fulling mills. Fulling is the beating and cleaning of cloth in water. The process shrinks the loose fibers of the cloth, making it a denser fabric. Superior cloth was usually fullled, dyed, brushed to raise the pile, and finally trimmed of loose threads to produce a finished surface of great quality.

Carding mills. These mills prepared wool for spinning by brushing the fibers to align them evenly. Farm families sheared, sorted, picked and scoured wool before bringing it to the mill. Then wool was prepared for the carding machine, which brushed the wool into rolls for spinning or into batting for quilts.

Grist mills. These mills used heavy stones to grind grain into flour.

Oil mills. These grinding mills crushed or bruised oil-bearing seeds, such as linseed, or other oil-rich vegetable material. The ground material is pressed to extract vegetable oils, which may be used as foods, for cooking, as a lubricant or as a fuel. The remaining solid material could be used as a food or fertilizer.

Forges. A tilt hammer forge used a pivoting lever – the hammer – that was raised up – tilted – by mechanisms driven by a water wheel, then dropped. The business end of the hammer had a die that would strike a metal billet with enough force to form a part.

The creek also powered saw mills and paper mills.

Changing course. The creek was re-routed in the 1980s when Meme Filippini owned RCC. The Antietam was shifted to the south where it crosses the 5th and 7th fairways. The most feasible explanation for messing with Mother Nature is that golfers playing the 7th had difficulty hitting their tee ball over the old creek position; they were forced to hit a lay-up, leaving a shot of 200 yards to the green. The re-positioned creek provides more fairway and a shorter second shot. Alex Findlay probably would not approve, because he designed the 7th as a par 5. But then Findlay built the golf course in the era of hickory-shafted clubs and balls that did not carry nearly as far as today's computer-designed wonders.



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An undated photo of Bishop's Mill.



The John Bishop house (foreground) stands at the RCC entrance. The building, now a law office, was the clubhouse when RCC opened in 1923. The house in the background, across Route 422, is the second Bishop home and is now a private residence.



The miller's home, a portion of which predates the Revolutionary War, stands across Shelbourne Road, opposite the 5th hole. The house is barely visible from the road, as is shown in the photo below.



Bishop's Mill. Bishop's Grist Mill stood at what is now the corner of Shelburne Road and Route 422 in the area of the present-day 4th and 8th holes and the 5th and 7th green.

Although the mill carried his name for most of its existence, John Bishop did not build it. Bishop purchased the mill in 1768 from George Henton, who built it after he purchased the land in 1761. The mill became known as Wamsher's Mill when George Wamsher purchased the property in 1897. Bishop's Mill no longer stands but three buildings associated with John Bishop remain.

Original clubhouse. According to George Meiser, who with his wife, Gloria, writes *The Passing Scene*, "The three Bishop houses miraculously survive; the one, fronting on Shelbourne Road, only barely. The nicest of the Bishop homes sits at the entrance to the Reading Country Club and serves as an attorney's office. The second Bishop home is the large brownstone dwelling across Route 422. It sits right against the road, a stone's throw from MacDonald's. The third Bishop house, which predates the Revolutionary War, fronts on Shelbourne Road, next to Dunkin' Donuts. The back portion is the oldest section. This was a miller's house. The mill stood on the opposite side of Shelbourne Road. Its mill race, using Antietam Creek water, ran through what is now Club property and paralleled Shelbourne Road."

The house at the entrance served as the clubhouse when RCC opened in 1923. The wing that was added for locker rooms was removed when the current clubhouse opened in 1931.

The miller's house at 25 Shelbourne Road is offered at a price of \$225,000 as of June 2015. The building is described as being in poor condition and is marketed for the commercial value of the land.

Mine that ore. The golf course also supported underground activity. From *The Passing Scene*, volume 13, page 205: "The golf course property was once mined for iron ore. The main shaft of the Bishop Mine, indicated on the *Second Geological Survey of Pennsylvania* in 1882, was located off the east side of present-day Gibraltar Road. The abandoned mine tunnels may still exist."

The following report is from the *Second Geological Survey of Pennsylvania*, page 218: "...south of Althouse's forge [near present-day Jacksonwald], a shaft 50 feet deep is located, close to road, known as Bishop's mine. It has been abandoned for some time, but is said to have yielded about 1,000 tons of ore." The mine shaft observed in 1882 is no longer visible.

A map of Berks County published in 1876 (see pages 4 and 5) shows J. Bishop's Mine about half-way between Shelbourne and Gibraltar roads.

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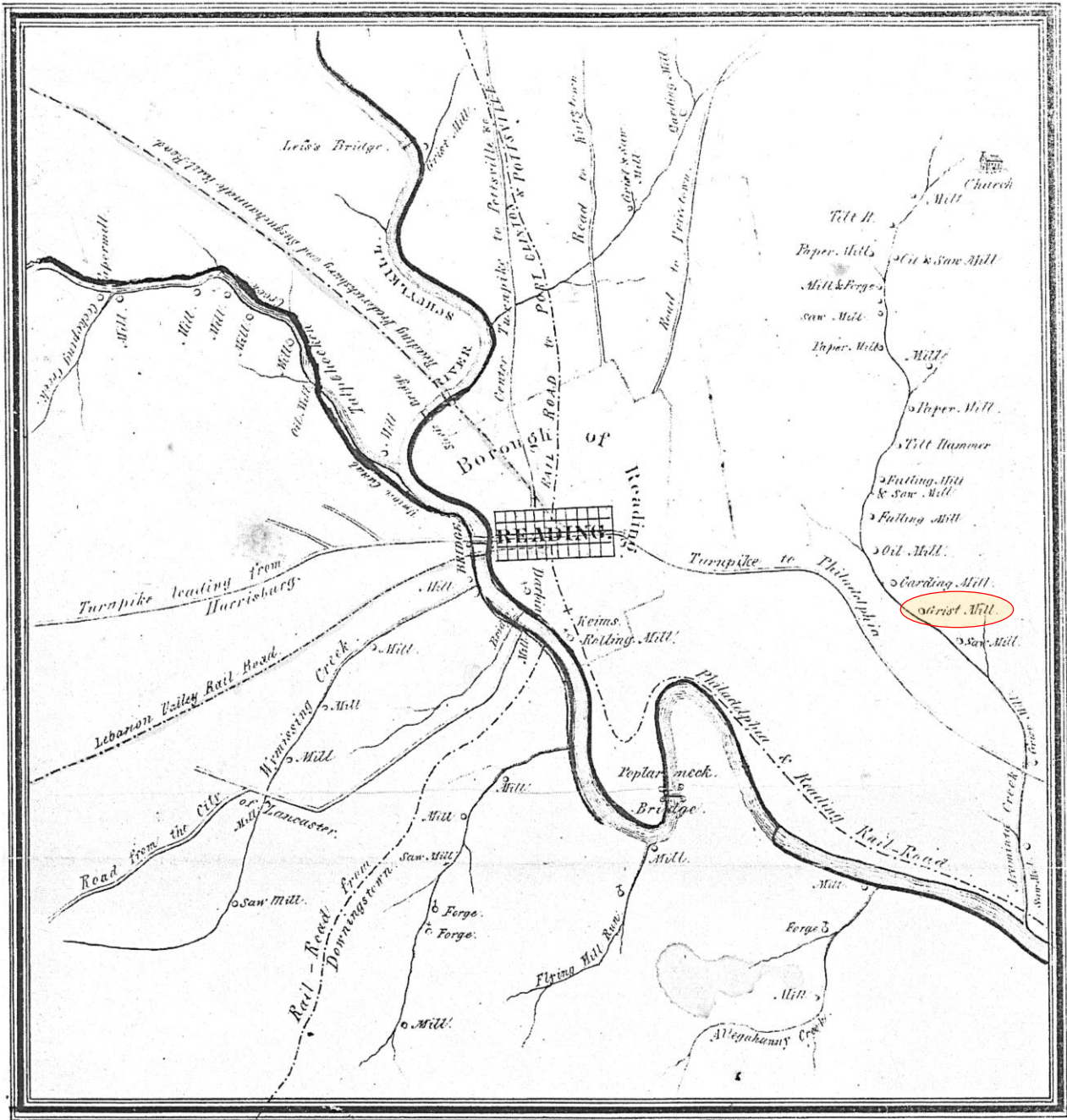
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This map from 1836 shows the mills and forges located on Antietam Creek. Bishop's Mill is indicated by the ellipse.
The map was reproduced in *The Passing Scene*, Volume 6, page 190.



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This map of Exeter Township is from the *Illustrated Historical Atlas of Berks County*, Reading Publishing House, Reading, Pa., 1876. Turn the page for a close-up view.



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The map locates the J. Bishop Mine between Gibraltar and Shelbourne roads, which would put it in the area of the present-day 7th and 9th holes. The map also shows the mill race that powered Bishop's Mill.

