



The Golf Chronicles

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



An undated photo of a young A.W. Tillinghast.

Tillinghast is Coming to Town

Offered advice for improving the 6th green at RCC

Albert Warren Tillinghast – known as A.W. or Tilly – is one of golf’s renowned course architects. He was born in 1874, the only child of a prosperous Philadelphia family. Many of his design principles were shaped in the 1890s during visits with his father to Scotland, where he learned from Old Tom Morris in St. Andrews. His first course, Shawnee on the Delaware in the Pocono Mountains, which opened in 1911, launched a career that produced some of the most acclaimed golf design work in the United States.

His designs include Winged Foot Golf Club, Quaker Ridge Golf Club, Fenway Golf Club and the Bethpage State Park golf courses, all in New York; San Francisco Golf Club; Baltusrol Golf Club, Ridgewood Country Club and Somerset Hills Country Club in New Jersey; and in Pennsylvania, Sunnehanna Country Club, the Wissahickon Course at Philadelphia Cricket Club and Wyoming Valley Country Club. Although most of his work was on the East Coast, he also designed golf courses in Texas, Illinois, Minnesota, Tennessee, Kansas, Oklahoma and Canada.

Major venues. Tillinghast courses have hosted multiple U.S. Open and PGA championships (Baltusrol, Bethpage Black and Winged Foot, for example) and the 1935 Ryder Cup matches (Ridgewood Country Club). The Sunnehanna Amateur, first played in 1954, is one of the country’s leading amateur tournaments and is contested on a Tillinghast course. Winners include Tommy Aaron, Leonard Thompson, Howard Twitty, Ben Crenshaw, Jay Segal, John Cook, Bobby Clampett, Brad Faxon, Scott Verplank, Billy Andrade, Lucas Glover, Webb Simpson and Ricky Fowler. Tiger Woods played twice, finishing 5th in 1992 and tied for 12th in 1993.

Tilly was also no slouch on the course. He played in the 1907 and 1910 National Open championships (finished 25th in 1910) and qualified for the round of 32 in the U.S. Amateur championships of 1903, '04, '09 and '12.

Family fortune aside, Tillinghast became a rich man through his course design business; he claimed to have made more than \$1 million in the 1920s, which was a considerable sum in that era. But he was a profligate spender. He drank. He gambled. Tillinghast insiders say he lost heavily backing failed Broadway shows. What’s more, like many, Tillinghast lost his source of income when the golf design business dried up during the Great Depression.

Tilly visits the ‘Ding. That’s what propelled Tilly to Reading in 1935. That same year, his friend George Jacobus, golf professional at Ridgewood Country Club, Paramus, N.J., and president of the PGA, hired Tillinghast as a consulting architect. Any golf club employing a PGA professional could request a visit from the traveling Tilly at no cost. He visited more than 400 private and public golf courses between 1935 and 1937. His mission was to recommend improvements to eliminate what he called “duffers headaches,” features that were costly to maintain and that made playing the game difficult and frustrating for amateurs.

Tilly traveled to Berks County in October 1935, visiting Reading Country Club and the now-defunct Riverside Golf Club. He reported his findings and recommendations in a letter to Jacobus.

The Nelson Connection

George Jacobus, a golf pro at age 16, was head of the New Jersey PGA Section before becoming the first American-born president of the PGA. He was instrumental in bringing the 1935 Ryder Cup to Ridgewood, a course designed by his friend Tillinghast.

Jacobus has a Reading connection. In 1935, he hired a skinny 23-year-old from Texas named Byron Nelson as an assistant at Ridgewood. Nelson credited Jacobus’ teaching skills with helping him master a new swing that was better suited to the steel-shafted clubs that were changing the game and how it was taught.

Jacobus served as PGA president for six years. He was inducted posthumously into the PGA Golf Professional Hall of Fame in 2005.



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Tillinghast traveled to Scotland in the 1890s where he met Old Tom Morris, who taught the young American about golf course design. This photo shows Tilly playing the Old Course in St. Andrews.



Tillinghast was also a renowned golf photographer. He took this photo of Old Tom Morris in St. Andrews in the 1890s. Old Tom won the Open Championship in 1861, '62, '64 and '67. He played in every Open save one (1882) between the first event in 1860 and 1896 and is still the oldest winner at age 46. His son, Young Tom, won in '68, '69, '70 and '72. Young Tom is still the youngest winner at age 17 and is the only player to win four consecutive championships (there was no tournament in 1871).

In Tillinghast's own words:

Today I continued the Reading service by first visiting the Riverside Golf Club and the request of PGA member A.L. Heron. This is another public golf course, operated by Carl Bauer, who with his greenkeeper, Thomas Canto, accompanied Heron and myself around the course, I gave them general advice and considered all problems, which they presented for my views. Chief among my recommendations was a new green for the seventeenth, a perfectly natural site to replace a wrongly located green, which does not drain and is generally bad. In some instances, they have been giving unnecessary care to greens because of wasted areas. I believe that the various suggestions at this place will greatly reduce the cost of maintenance.

In the afternoon, at the request of PGA member James S. Young, I visited the course of the Reading Country Club and was accompanied by Young and the greenkeeper, Harry Scott, both of whom have been with the club for more than the years, a fine example of understanding between pro and greenkeeper. Their cooperation is reflected by the fine condition of the course. I gave particular directions for the contouring of a new sixth green, which they propose building. The old green has been subjected to wash from surrounding slopes, and as a consequence is plentifully sprinkled with knot-weed. Grassed hollows will divert this in the new scheme. However most of the greens present a good turf of Metropolitan bent, which seems to be particularly satisfactory in this region.

The key comments from the Tillinghast letter are "...a new sixth green..." and "The old green..." There is no evidence indicating that the current 6th green has been relocated from Alex Findlay's design. The aerial photos from 1924 and 1932 show the 6th green in its current location. Tillinghast's comments may be explained by asserting that the consulting architect used the terms old and new to describe the green as it existed during his visit and his proposed revisions to the contouring of the green and surrounding slopes.

Tilly moved to Beverly Hills, Cal., in the late 1930s where he opened an antiques shop. Following a heart attack in 1940, he moved in with his eldest daughter in Toledo, Ohio, where he died on May 19, 1942. Ironically, Tillinghast died a month after Alexander Findlay (April 17, 1942), who designed Reading Country Club.

Tillinghast, along with Laura Davies, David Graham and Mark O'Meara, will be enshrined into the World Golf Hall of Fame and Museum on July 13, 2015. The ceremony will be held at the University of St. Andrews, just blocks from the Old Course, host site of that week's 144th Open Championship.



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The editor thanks **Pete Trenham** for preserving A.W. Tillinghast's letter reporting on his visit to Berks County. [Click here](#) for Pete's Philadelphia Section PGA history web site.

