

Donald Ross – The Early Years in America

This is the second in a series of Newsletter articles about the life and career of Donald J. Ross, the man who designed the golf course for Monroe Golf Club in 1923. Ross is generally acknowledged as the first person to ever earn a living as a golf architect and is credited with the design of almost 400 golf courses in the United States and Canada.

In April of 1899, at the age of 27, Donald Ross arrived in Boston from Dornoch, Scotland. This was not only his first trip to the United States; it was likely his first trip outside of Scotland. He arrived in the States with less than \$2.00 in his pocket and with only the promise of a job as keeper of the green at Oakley Golf Club. Oakley was the new name for a course founded by a group of wealthy Bostonians who decided to remake an existing 11-hole course. Ross had been the greenkeeper at Dornoch Golf Club in Scotland and was hired to be the new superintendent, golf pro and to lay out a new course for Oakley.

Situated on a hilltop overlooking Boston, Oakley Golf Club enjoys much the same type land as Monroe; a gently rising glacier moraine, very sandy soil and excellent drainage. Ross put all his experiences to work. With the help of a civil engineer and a surveyor, Ross proceeded to design a virtually new course. It was short, less than 6,000 yards, typical for courses of that era. And to fit it into a tight spot, it required some routing that would be viewed as odd today (such as a blind tee shots and a long hole that literally crossed over the club's main driveway). Blind shots and even tricked up holes were considered a challenge and a unique element of this new game of golf, a sport that was quickly gaining popularity in the United States. His design was well received and many of the holes have stood the test of time very well. In fact, at Oakley today, 11 of their 18 holes are played on holes from the original Ross layout, now more than 100 years old.

After the design work Ross settled into the job, not as greenkeeper, but rather as golf professional and instructor. He was a popular teacher and became an even more accomplished golfer, winning the inaugural Massachusetts Open. Albeit, with a un-Tiger like score of 320 for four rounds. He was also true to his Scottish heritage. He made a salary of only \$60 a month and received 50 cents a lesson, but still managed in the first 2 years to save and send home, to his mother in Scotland, a total of \$2,000.

While golf was quickly gaining popularity in the U.S., there were still only a few dozen courses in New England. Ross was able to visit and play many of them. He began to develop the design concepts that would guide him over his entire career. He kept a diary that was only discovered and published in 1996. In his diary, in a remarkably few words, he described his "standards for laying out a golf course."

- Make each hole present a different problem.
- So arrange it that every stroke must be made with the full concentration and attention necessary to good golf.
- Build each hole in such a manner that it wastes none of the ground at my disposal and takes advantage of every possibility I can see.

While these seem almost simplistic in reading them today, they turn out to be words that guided him to the design of golf courses in 30 states. Courses which to date have hosted an incredible 108 professional majors or national amateurs, the ultimate tests of championship golf. In the last 2 years alone, Ross courses hosted the PGA at Oak Hill, the US Senior Open at Inverness in Toledo, the US Amateur at Oakland Hills in Detroit, and the US Women's Amateur at Philadelphia Country Club. The next 2 years will bring the US Open to the Ross masterpiece, Pinehurst #2, the US Women's Open to The Orchards in Massachusetts, the US Women's Amateur to the Kahkwa Club in Erie, Pennsylvania, and the Ryder Cup to Oakland Hills—all of these Ross courses. It seems Donald Ross still casts a giant shadow over all of American golf.

Next Chapter: Ross is asked in 1900 to go to Pinehurst, North Carolina, to design the expansion of a golf course. He accepts and so begins a 48-year association with a resort and a course that he would make literally make famous around the world. In 1900, it would still be another 23 years before he would come to Pittsford to design the course at Monroe Golf Club.

Donald Ross excerpts from his Diary: *Golf Has Never Failed Me*.
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Caption for picture:

Donald J Ross on the golf course about 1900, a year after arriving in the United States. Golfers at that time wore shirts, ties and typically a belted coat, allowing them to swing their arms and shoulders while still maintaining that "Victorian fashion look".