

Banks-Raynor-Macdonald

By Bill Brightly

Introduction

If you are like me, you may have played Hackensack for many years without fully understanding the history of our great course. Thanks to the excellent articles written by Don Caste, many of us have begun to learn about our rich lineage to Seth Raynor and C. B. Macdonald, two of the greatest golf course architects in American history. To me, the important point is not simply that Banks learned his craft while working for Raynor, who learned from Macdonald, and these men built National, Chicago GC, St. Louis CC, Carmargo, Old White at the Greenbrier, and so many other great courses. The critical point is that before building National, Macdonald traveled to Europe to visit all the top courses and carefully diagramed each of the strongest holes. He then returned to the U.S. and re-created the best features of these holes on National, and on all of the courses he subsequently designed. Macdonald courses are bold, beautiful and playable for golfers of all abilities; he created a style of course that has withstood the test of time.



Macdonald's beautiful 17th at National



11th Hole at Fishers Island, Raynor's Eden

Seth Raynor, hired as an engineer on the National project, was a dutiful student of Macdonald. While Raynor was a skilled engineer, he barely played golf and never traveled to Europe to see the great courses as Macdonald had. Raynor once commented that he wished he had the ears of a donkey so that he could hear (and learn) more from Macdonald. As time went on, Macdonald did not desire to be involved in building as many courses as his reputation demanded, so Raynor began to take on many of the projects. His courses were unfailingly true to the Macdonald-style. Almost all Raynor courses have the par three styles that we know so well: the Short, the Eden, the Redan and the Biarritz. He built "Road Holes" modeled after the 17th at St. Andrews, Cape holes, Alps holes, Long holes and others, just as he had learned from Macdonald.

Charles Banks was an English professor at the prestigious Hotchkiss School in Connecticut when Raynor arrived to build a golf course. Hired as summer-time help in the early 1920's. Banks became friends with Raynor and joined him full-time the following year. They worked together on Fishers Island, Mid Ocean, Essex County, Waialae and other courses that were in varying phases of construction until Raynor suddenly died in January of 1926 at the age of fifty-one. Charles Banks would take over the business, finishing many of the courses that they had worked on together, but he also lost a number of projects where the members had hired Raynor. That's how the famous Cypress Point, routed by Raynor, came to be built by Alistor MacKenzie. It is quite likely that Hackensack Golf Club first approached Raynor and allowed Banks to finish the course after Raynor died. We may well speculate that Seth Raynor routed our course!

The large, elevated, multi-tiered green complexes, surrounded by steep-faced bunkers that we see at Hackensack were replicated time and again by Macdonald and Raynor. These men were superbly adept at routing their courses to take best advantage of the land. (It is no accident that our 6th hole, without any trees or houses behind, would give you the impression that a ball flying the green might run for a mile down the hill!) Perhaps most importantly, they built courses that allowed for multiple options when playing a hole, including a "safe way" to access greens and play around bunkers for less-skilled golfers, at the same time they tempted the better golfer to flirt with danger in order to gain the best angle to approach the greens.

On his own, Charles Banks certainly did not attempt to "re-invent the wheel." With only a few years of experience before Raynor died, it is only natural that Banks would adhere to the same Macdonald-Raynor philosophies, re-create similar holes, and build bunkers and greens in the same fashion. If you were Charles Banks in 1926, arriving in Oradell to build a new course (with a dozen other major projects going on at the same time) wouldn't you follow the drawings that had been followed so successfully to build National Golf Links, Fishers Island, Chicago GC and St. Louis CC?

Banks did not have a protégée. The Great Depression literally put a halt to his work in the United States. He did build four courses in South America between 1928 and 1931. When Charles Banks died on April 21, 1939, followed two days later by Macdonald, it was the end of an era.

Over the next few issues of the Hackensack newsletter, I'll try to provide you with a little more of the history of these great men and the courses they built. It's a rich history indeed, and I hope it adds to your enjoyment as you play our course.

Note: Much of the information in these articles comes from The Evangelist of Golf, written by George Bahto, who has graciously allowed us to draw on his great work for these articles. This truly is a must read if you wish to fully appreciate our history!

Charles Blair Macdonald

From His Early Years To The Construction Of National

By Bill Brightly

C.B. Macdonald is unquestionably one of the most important forces in the development of golf in the United States. Born in Chicago, he was sent to study at St. Andrews University at the age of 16. He was introduced to the game of golf at St. Andrews, where his grandfather was a member. Too young to enter the Royal and Ancient locker room, he was given a locker in the golf shop of Old Tom Morris. The young Macdonald quickly became enthralled by the game and practiced endlessly. He would become an accomplished player, winning the first U.S. Amateur Championship on his third try, but that's a story for another day... His time in Scotland would also be when the impressionable youngster gained his reverence for the manners and traditions of the game.

When he returned to Chicago in 1875, there were no real golf courses where he could pursue his hobby. Golf was played in America at the time, but only on crude layouts that contained only a few holes. Over the next seventeen years, he rarely played except on an occasional trip to Europe. In 1892, Macdonald was asked to help layout a 7-hole course on the estate of Senator Charles Farewell. As George Bahto writes, it is at this point he became convinced that he was divinely chosen to promulgate the game of golf in America. This would be the beginning of an endeavor that would last for the rest of his life.

He was not thrilled with his first attempt at golf course design and shortly thereafter he helped organize the Chicago Golf Club. Two Scotsmen, James Forgan and Lawrence Tweedie, were selected to oversee the construction of the first 18-hole course in the United States. As the popularity of the game started to rapidly increase, the Chicago G.C. determined that a more suitable course was needed. They purchased a lovely 200-acre tract in Wheaton, Illinois, where Macdonald would build his first 18-hole course. His efforts quickly drew praise as one of the finest in America. For the next twenty years the course would be largely unchanged, until Seth Raynor was hired in 1922 to assist Macdonald renovate the layout. It remains one of the most highly rated courses in the United States.

While Macdonald must have appreciated the praise his course received, it was a "parkland course" and not built on the type of ground required for a first-class golf links, like the courses he had played in Scotland. Macdonald would move to New York in 1900 and begin his search for the ideal land upon which he could build a truly great course, one that would be on a level with the great courses in England and Scotland. He also traveled to Europe on numerous occasions, forming the design for his ideal golf course, carefully sketching plans from the best holes, or best parts of holes, that he visited. While he loved the great courses in Europe, he felt that all contained at least a few weak holes, and he determined that his ideal course would have 18 strong holes.

Macdonald would spend the next several years scouting the east coast for the right site, finally deciding upon a parcel of land adjacent to Shinnecock Hills Golf Club, where he was a member. In 1906, Macdonald and a handful of wealthy friends acquired 205 acres in Sebonac Neck, Long Island, and his long-held dream would go forward.

The land seemed ill-suited for development; described by Bahto as a "worthless mess of brambles, swampy areas and murky bogs." Macdonald had no background in engineering, so he hired Seth Raynor, a local surveyor and engineer, to create a detailed map of the land. Using Raynor's survey, Macdonald sketched the holes he wished to build, tinkering endlessly with the routing. Raynor, a non-golfer, assumed his work was done. However, Macdonald wisely recognized how valuable a skilled engineer could be and he persuaded Raynor to stay on for the construction of the course. For the next twenty years they would be a prolific team, highly sought after by the many newly forming golf clubs, as the "Golden Age" of golf course construction took full swing.

While natural sites existed for the Alps, Redan and Eden holes that Macdonald wanted to build, swamps were drained and massive amounts of earth were moved to shape the course that Macdonald envisioned. Raynor's skill as an engineer made this result possible. Over 10,000 truckloads of soil were imported. Raynor, and later Banks, would go on to take earth-moving to a new level to achieve the desired results.

Macdonald had meticulously recorded the exact dimensions and specifications of the best greens in the U.K. but growing the grass he envisioned would be a problem. At the time, little was known about the best seed to plant for a putting green. Macdonald trusted heavily in local seed merchants, planting what they recommended, with terrible results. The greens grew in as thick tufts of grass, with bare spots between, wholly unsuitable for putting. It delayed the opening of the course for 18 months and Macdonald was furious. He began a thorough study of numerous types of grasses and even built a second turf nursery at his residence. Macdonald learned that the soil had to first be properly prepared before seeding and he developed a system of turning blocks of meadow sod into the soil. Limestone was added to the mix to "sweeten" the soil. Through trial and error, he came up with a seed mix that would produce the best greens. This was the beginning of modern turfgrass agronomy in the United States.

That Macdonald would have the confidence to call his course the “National Golf Links” says much about the man. To his detractors, he was egotistical, bombastic and overly opinionated. He surely exhibited all of these characteristics to some degree. But what matters most now is that he had a crystal clear vision of how golf courses should be built and he would be meticulous in seeing that his plans were followed. Born into a wealthy family, he never took a fee for his work, but he did accept lifetime membership in the clubs where he built his courses.

While he borrowed heavily from the greatest holes in Europe, Macdonald certainly had his own strong opinions about how each hole should be laid out. Prior to Macdonald, most bunkers and hazards placement can be described as following a “penal approach” which is to say that a poor shot was heavily punished. Most courses constructed bunkers that spanned the fairway, so the golfer had no choice but to attempt to carry the obstacle. Macdonald was to lead a change to a more strategic design to bunker and hazard placement:

“The object of a bunker is not to punish a physical mistake, but to punish pride and egotism. I believe in leaving an opening for the player who can only drive 100 yards, if he can keep his ball straight. But the one I am after is the golfer who thinks he can carry the ball 180 yards when 160 yards is his limit. So I believe that the best arranging of bunkers is to let the player make his own choice, from either the shorter and longer route, and go for that.”



The 3rd at National, Alps bunkering

Macdonald also had strong opinions on the length of holes:

“There should be a variety of distances; some of the best holes at National are under 300 yards. Nothing could be more monotonous than a stretch of long holes from 400 to 500 yards in length. Fine short holes and drive and pitch holes are nearly always more interesting to play, for skill is a greater factor than physical power.”

While Macdonald, and later Raynor and Banks, would be known for the boldness of their green complexes, he knew there were limits:

“I believe each course should have four or five practically flat greens...One gets tired of putting on nothing but mounded greens with sudden dips and rises to work out. A few of these, when not overdone, are well enough, but there should be a variety.”

In many ways, Macdonald was a visionary, ahead of his time. Here is what he had to say about tees:

“I believe in at least three sets of tees for every hole. With a variety of tees, it is possible to have a test for all classes (of golfers.) You can have a simple course, a moderate one, or a hard one as you select. This is quite an important point, a point that does not receive near the attention it deserves”.

Armed with these guiding principals, and dutifully following the hole models he brought back from Europe, MacDonald would go on to build National and many other outstanding courses. Then and today, his courses are “must sees” for serious students of golf architecture. How fortunate we are to see these concepts on display at Hackensack!



*But when punishment was called for...he was not shy.
National's “Road Hole” bunker*

Seth Raynor

By Bill Brightly

At age 31, Seth Raynor had a moderately successful engineering practice in New York City when C. B. Macdonald asked him to prepare a site survey for a new golf course that was to be built next to Shinnecock Hills. This was to be a one-time service for a set fee, but Macdonald quickly recognized how valuable Raynor could be to the project. Charles Blair Macdonald had extremely exacting ideas on how his holes should look and play, so while he skillfully looked for the best sites to place certain holes such as his Redan, Eden and Short, he also was not afraid to re-shape a tremendous amount of land to get the desired result. Raynor's engineering ability became critical. If Macdonald was the visionary behind the National Golf Links, Raynor surely was the one who provided the practical means to allow the vision to become reality. Until Raynor died at the age of 51 in 1926, the pair would work together building some of the finest golf courses in America, and their work is still highly praised today.

Unlike Macdonald, Raynor was not a wealthy man. While Macdonald never took a fee, golf course construction became Raynor's livelihood. While Macdonald could afford to selectively choose the projects he would take on, Raynor would become a much more prolific architect, building or renovating over 60 courses in a twenty year period. Born to wealth, Macdonald was accustomed to dealing with other wealthy men, and was not troubled if his projects required additional funding from the members, or even a contribution from Macdonald himself. Raynor was much more pragmatic, yet he developed a real talent for dealing with the wealthy industrialists and financiers who were his clients. In the mid 1920's, as the members of Hackensack Golf Club were coming the conclusion that a new 18-hole golf course was needed, it would only be natural that they would want to hire Seth Raynor, and his assistant, Charles Banks.

By all accounts, Macdonald was extremely demanding and difficult to work for. Raynor clearly possessed great patience and was a dedicated learner. One can only imagine the hours he spent listening to Macdonald wax poetic about the great courses in Europe, how Providence had directed Macdonald to be the one to bring the true game of golf to America. A non-golfer when first hired, Raynor was smart enough to gather all the knowledge he could from Macdonald, and skillfully apply what he learned to build courses on his own that remain some of the finest in the world.

Construction of The National was Macdonald's sole project for four years. In 1911, the course opened for play, and Macdonald began work on two new courses, Piping Rock and Sleepy Hollow, retaining Raynor on both projects. They would go on to build St. Louis CC, White Sulfur at The Greenbrier, and the now defunct Lido Club, a victim of the Great Depression. Sadly, the Lido Club is the only known course to have built "Raynor's Prize Dogleg", his award winning hole design entry in Country Life Magazine.



MacDonald/Raynor re- designed Alps Hole at Chicago GC, with Punchbowl green

By 1914, Macdonald's desire to build was waning (he preferred to socialize with friends and tinker with The National) so he encouraged Raynor to strike out on his own. Macdonald was always there to provide advice and assistance, so it is impossible to precisely determine how much influence old C.B. had on each course. Raynor would go on to build over 50 more courses, including Westhampton (NY), Carmargo (Ohio), Mid Ocean (Bermuda) , Deepdale (NY), Rumson (NJ), Shoreacres (near Chicago), Yale, The Thousand Island Club, Yeamans Hall (SC), CC of Charleston, Lookout Mountain (GA) and Hotchkiss (CT), where Charles Banks would be hired as part-time summer help. Raynor would also work with Macdonald to re-design the Chicago Golf Club, thereby by applying Raynor's touch to the only course Macdonald had built on his own.

Raynor's masterpiece is probably Fishers Island, a true links style course, which includes all of Macdonald's favorite holes: Redan, Biarritz, Eden, Cape and a great Road Hole. Placing only one fairway bunker on the course, Raynor skillfully used the Long Island Sound as a border on many holes, creating a gem of a course that would make any Scotsman feel at home!



Raynor's Punchbowl 4th green at Fishers Island

Distinguishing a Raynor hole from a Macdonald hole takes a skilled eye indeed. George Bahto writes that Raynor's versions of Redan, Alps and Cape holes tended to be more understated and less defiant, like Raynor's personality. Macdonald holes tended to be "more theatrical, with brooding appearances, like the man himself." It does not seem important to decide which influence was greater: Macdonald's vision or Raynor's engineering ability to bring the vision to life. Serious students of golf course architecture have coined a most fitting phrase for these courses: "MacRaynors." Their work is inexorably linked in some of the most beautiful and enjoyable golf courses in the world.



Raynor's Eden, the 5th at Carmargo

Note: This article contains information obtained from The Evangelist of Golf, written by George Bahto.

Charles Banks

By Bill Brightly

When the Hotchkiss Preparatory School decided to build a golf course, they asked for faculty volunteers to serve the Construction Committee. One of the volunteers was Charles Banks, an English teacher at the school and a graduate of Yale University. While interested in golf, Banks certainly had no intention of becoming a golf course designer. Seth Raynor was hired as the architect and Banks immediately became enraptured with the construction process. They developed a strong friendship, and Banks was hired as a field supervisor during the summer. The nine-hole course opened in 1924, a time when Raynor was in his heyday, with over 20 courses under construction. Two years earlier, Raynor had hired Ralph Barton, a professor at the University of Minnesota to perform field supervision. As his business was booming, Raynor was fond of hiring academicians, so he persuaded Banks to leave teaching and join his company on a full-time basis.

In 1925, Banks assisted Raynor on a number of projects, including Fishers Island, Yale University, Fox Chapel (Pittsburgh), Carmargo (Cincinnati), Greenbriar #3, Mid Ocean in Bermuda, and the Dunes Course at the Monterey CC. The routing for Cypress Point was completed, as was the Waialae course in Hawaii. They also would start work on Essex County Country Club and Rock Spring in New Jersey. Ralph Barton left Raynor that year to start his own business in New England, so Banks became the top assistant. Raynor worked himself tirelessly, crossing the country by train and the ocean by ship. Sadly, Raynor's frantic work pace and the difficult cross-country travel took its toll: he died of pneumonia in Florida in January of 1926 at the age of 51.

Charles Banks took over Raynor's business and immediately faced the problem of retaining clients and finishing over 20 projects. By all accounts, he performed skillfully but he did lose some projects, most notably Cypress Point when Alistor McKenzie was hired to replace Raynor. Banks would finish Fishers Island, Yeamans Hall (SC), Deepdale, Mid Pacific, Carmargo, Waialae and many other courses that Raynor had started.



Yale's 9th, a full Biarritz

In 1927, Banks was hired to build a new course for the members of the Hackensack Golf Club. As discussed in previous articles, the courses built by Banks and Raynor all follow the design of holes crafted by C.B. Macdonald, who copied features of the best holes in Europe. This is clearly what Banks would do for the members of Hackensack. It's not hard to envision Banks observing our site, first looking for the best site to build the par threes. He needed a naturally sloping site for the Redan (#12) and intimidating locations for the Short (#6) and Biarritz (3#) holes. As you may know, our third hole was originally built with a double green with a deep swale separating the two halves

When Raynor and Banks did not have the natural feature to re-create one of the great European holes, they would use bunkers. For example, the River Eden was simulated by a bunker that extended behind the green, and this is how our 17th was built.

Road Holes are staples of all Macdonald-Raynor-Banks courses, and our 18th is one of the best. The trap between our 9th and 18th greens was originally more than double its current size, extending to the back of 18 in a straight line to replicate the road behind the 17th green at St. Andrews. The front greenside bunker copies the famous "Road Hole" pot bunker. Banks even wanted to construct a high bunker on the left side about 120 yards off the tee to mimic the railroad shed that you must carry when playing St. Andrews, but it was never built.



The view behind Banks' Eden Hole at Essex C.C.



The 18th at Rock Spring

The other possibility is the story that while working on a re-design of Whippoorwill Club in Armonk, NY, one of the steam shovels sank into a pond, never to be recovered. A similar legend exists at Fishers Island, where a team of mules hauling muck supposedly drowned in a pond.

In 1928, Banks would finish Hackensack, The Knoll, Tamarack, Essex County CC and nine holes at Montclair. In 1929, work would begin on Castle Harbor in Bermuda and Forsgate in New Jersey. Sadly, Forsgate would be his last course in the United States. The stock market crash in 1929 and the Great Depression that followed would virtually bring an end to golf course construction in the United States. Seeking to keep his business alive, Banks would travel to Venezuela and Columbia to build four more courses. He would die of a heart attack in 1939 at the age of 47, followed two days later by Charles Macdonald.

While our course has undergone many revisions over the years, our green complexes have remained largely unchanged. The dramatic tiers on our fifth and eighth greens are classic “MacRaynor” greens. The “rim” in the back of our sixth hole is all part of the architect’s desire to test our short iron game. Our greenside bunkers, while softened over the years, remind us that Macdonald, Raynor and Banks truly wanted to penalize the golfer who failed to avoid these hazards. In their minds, par from a bunker was an unlikely outcome. Macdonald once commented that a team of horses should be used to properly prepare bunkers for play!

It is debatable how “Steamshovel” Banks came by his nickname. Some believe it was given to him by other architects because of the tremendous amount of dirt that was moved to build green complexes and create the deep, steep-faced bunkers that became his trademark.



The 9th at Essex C.C.



Side-view of #2 at Rock Spring

For the past 15 years we have continued to honor the work of Charles Banks in the annual Banks Cup, a four-way stroke play match between Forsgate, Rock Spring, Essex County and Hackensack. Having been fortunate enough to play in several of these events, it is extremely interesting to see the similarities in these great courses. The classic Macdonald-Raynor-Banks style is unique in golf architecture and has produced courses that provide a perfect combination of challenge, enjoyment and beauty.