

Yankee Doodle Dandies

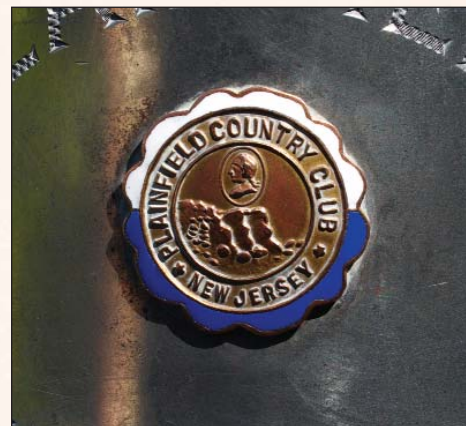
The seeds of American independence were sown more than 230 years ago on ground that is now occupied by many MGA clubs and courses

BY MERRELL NODEN

It is now all but certain that the Duke of Wellington never uttered the famous line attributed to him, that “the Battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton.” When those words first appeared, Wellington had been dead for almost 40 years. To speak so long after one has died seems a tall order — even for the man who conquered Napoleon.

So, with no fear of offending Wellington, we will borrow the line. There is no doubt that the American Revolution was fought and won on the playing fields — golf courses, that is — that today make up dozens of MGA member clubs.

In some ways, this should not surprise us. That war, which dragged on for eight years (1775–83), was a crazy quilt of surges and skirmishes, of hungry, shoeless men marching back and forth across the same muddy terrain. The corridor from New York, which the British used as a base for much of the war, to Philadelphia, where the Continental Congress sat, was especially busy. Given all that tramping, the real surprise would be if there were a piece of land that one or both of the armies did *not* march across, pitch tents on, or soak with their blood. Of course, they were not golf courses back then. Many were farms or orchards, since the generals



Above: A trophy medallion on display at Plainfield Country Club depicts George Washington and nearby Washington Rock State Park. **Opposite page:** An 18th-century cannon at Battleground Country Club.

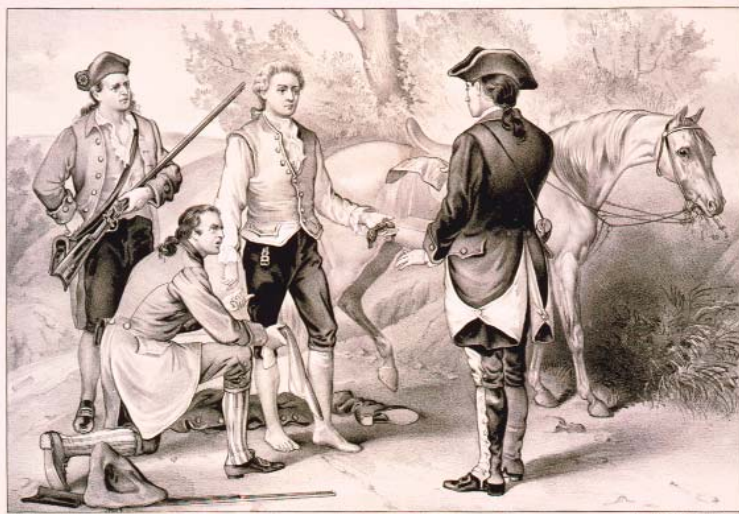
REVOLUTIONARY GOLF

of the 18th century looked for pretty much the same thing in a battlefield that the founding fathers of American golf looked for in a golf course site — open land.

Some two dozen Met Area clubs are known to have links to the war. A handful, notably Springdale in Princeton and Plainfield Country Club, were actual battlefields. Others served as campgrounds while still others, like Hudson National and Garrison Golf Club, which sit on bluffs high above the Hudson River, were used by Continental lookouts to monitor the movement of British ships up and down the waterway. Siwanoy Country Club in Bronxville, N.Y., was laid out on land that was awarded by the Continental Congress to the Revolutionary War hero John Paulding and his compatriot David Williams for their role in capturing Major John André, who was nabbed while transporting papers from Benedict Arnold in his stocking.

Others have a connection that is a bit more tenuous: Fenway Golf Club was originally named Fenimore Golf Club, after James Fenimore Cooper, who wrote his Revolutionary War novel *The Spy* while living nearby, in Scarsdale. Some of the novel takes place on the same land that would become Fenway. (See page 78 for the Club Focus article on Fenway.) Interestingly enough, Winged Foot makes a similar claim and as justification can point to the proximity of Fenimore Road, which forms part of the club's western border. Winged Foot also served as a campground for both armies, presumably at

John Paulding and David Williams turned in the traitor John André, and were awarded land that later became Siwanoy Country Club.



THE CAPTURE OF ANDRE.

By John Paulding, David Williams and Isaac Van Wart, at Tarrytown, N.Y. Sept. 23rd 1780.

different times; the same is true for Wykagyl.

What is surprising about all these connections with American independence is how few of the golfers at the various clubs seem to be aware of what is, after all, not exactly inconsequential history. Call their pro shops and ask about the history that was made on their property and you are greeted mostly by puzzled silence and then a sheepish acknowledgement of “that’s pretty cool.”

“It’s mostly just a few history buffs who

Some two dozen Met Area clubs are known to have links to the war, and a handful were actual battlefields.

pay attention,” says Mike Rutkin, one of the owners of Battleground Country Club, which abuts Monmouth Battlefield State Park, near Freehold, N.J. It’s the older members who tend to be the keepers of the flame, perhaps because they are more likely to have served in the military themselves and to feel a connection to those earlier soldiers.

So, to celebrate this Independence Day, here are four places in the Metropolitan Area where golf and the war overlapped.

Central Westchester County

The New York campaign of mid-1776 had been pretty much a disaster for the Continental Army, and that’s probably being generous. It was beginning to look as if the only thing the colonials could hope for in any battle was to live to fight another day against the better-equipped, better-trained British troops. In the summer of 1776, with the words of the Declaration of Independence ringing in their ears, they were badly humiliated trying to defend Manhattan, driven back to Harlem Heights and then to White Plains, which Washington seems to have chosen because he knew it would be hard to surround.

Marching north to meet the Americans at what would become known as the Battle of White Plains, the British passed through New Rochelle. One column marched up what is now North Avenue, past the little farmhouse and 300 acres that Congress would award to Thomas Paine, author of *Common Sense* for his inspirational services and, a bit farther up the road, the Wykagyl property. A second column proceeded up Weaver Street, camping on the rugged land that is now Bonnie Briar.



They camped there long enough to leave clear evidence of their stay: To the right and just short of Bonnie Briar's first green is a long, low mound, perhaps three feet high and 40 yards long, which runs through the rough and out across the 9th fairway. It is an earthen revetment built by the British as a windbreak. Interestingly, the term "revetted" today applies to deep bunkers whose faces contain layers of turf stacked on top of one another. These bunkers are commonly seen on the links courses of Scotland.

Washington himself is said to have slept about a mile away, under the "Quaker Ridge Oak." It's a fantastic tree, 250 years old and as twisted as one of Macbeth's visions. It still stands to the right of the par-three 10th hole. While this is where he slept according to the club's official history, Quaker Ridge head pro Rick Vershure did some research of his own and draws a different conclusion: "To get from Quaker Ridge to Mamaroneck without roads, you have to walk across what is now our golf course. Washington and his men were camped farther north and west. It's more lore than anything that he slept here."

The two armies eventually met at the Battle of White Plains on October 28, 1776. This battle represented a critical juncture in the war. According to David Hackett Fischer's *Washington's Crossing*, a strong push by

General William Howe, the British army commander (his brother Richard was in charge of the British navy), might well have meant the end of the revolution. For some reason, perhaps because Howe seems personally to have sympathized with the colonists, he held back. Washington fled White Plains and began a long march south through New Jersey towards Philadelphia.

Later in the war, Washington again found himself in Westchester County. In fact, French troops brought in to assist the Continental Army bivouacked on the property of what is today the clubhouse at Sunningdale Country Club in Scarsdale. Washington and his men camped on nearby Ridge Road, beyond the site of Sunningdale's 12th green.

Princeton, New Jersey

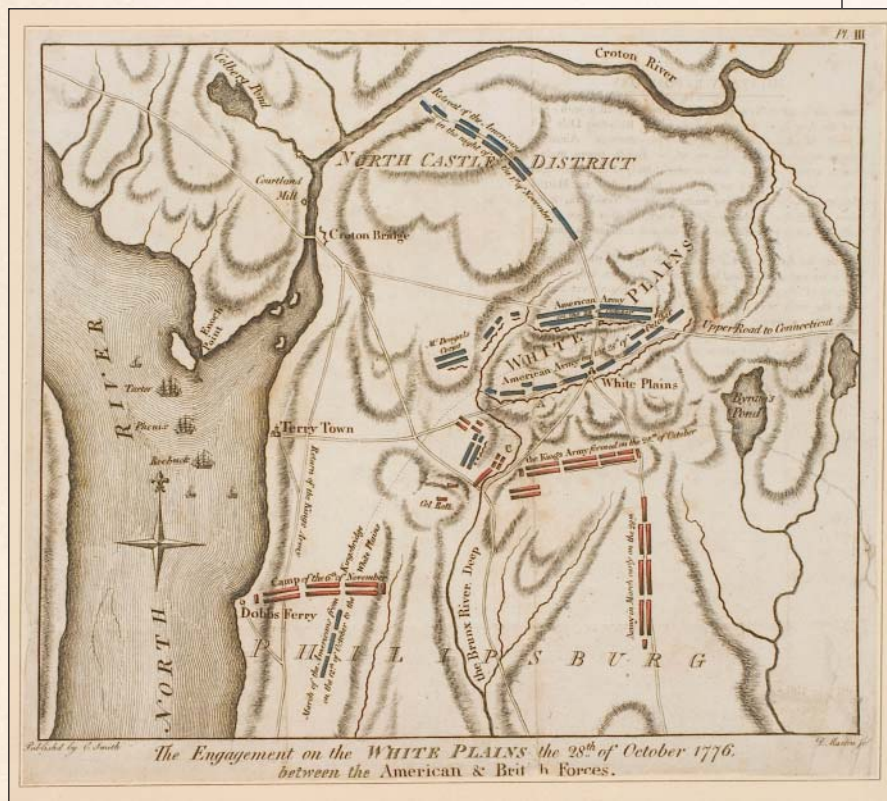
In December of 1776 a perfect storm of troubles again faced the American commander in chief: His troops were shoeless, their supplies dwindling. The period of enlistment for many soldiers was almost up. Many were planning to return to their farms. "If every nerve is not strained to recruit a new Army with all possible expedition, I think the game is pretty near up," wrote a despairing Washington to his brother Augustine.

The Americans needed good news fast. They got it on Christmas day, in Trenton, when the Continental Army routed a garrison of Hessian soldiers. There was more encouraging news eight days later when they held off British troops led by General Howe himself at the less well known second battle of Trenton.

That same night, Washington decided to launch a surprise attack on Princeton, where the British were garrisoned. Marching all night by a circuitous route to the east in order to avoid alerting British scouts, they approached Princeton. Early on the morning of January 3, at what is now the Princeton Battlefield State Park, they spotted British general Charles Mawhood a few hundred yards off to the west. Mawhood, who was on his way to support Howe in Trenton, decided to force the fight, which was, by all accounts, an especially gruesome one, with blood leaving a ghastly slick on the icy snow.

Washington spent the battle riding back and forth just 40 yards from the front line, in full view of the enemy. Somehow he went unscathed, and his bravery inspired his men. As the British

Troop movements during the Battle of White Plains traversed land that is now occupied by some of Westchester County's finest golf courses.





took to their heels, Washington could not contain his glee, shouting, “It’s a fine fox chase, my boys!”

The American troops — reportedly led by a young Alexander Hamilton — pursued the fleeing British away from the battlefield proper and north towards the village of Princeton. There, 200 British soldiers had been left to guard Nassau Hall. Upon hearing dire news of the battle, those soldiers decided not to wait for the oncoming Americans. They made their way to some high ground about half a mile west of Nassau Hall, above a little brook that still runs through the Springdale Golf Club. In his 1947 study *The Campaign of Princeton 1776–1777*, Alfred Hoyt Bill writes that “The brook that drains what was locally known as Frog Hollow ran across [the hill’s] front, as that brook, channeled today for the exasperation of golfers, does today.”

These days that little brook bedevils golfers on eight of Springdale’s holes. The par-three ninth is a dramatic downhill of about 190 yards, its green fronted by that same brook

which waits to catch any ball that comes up short. As players pursue their tee shots here, their thoughts may turn to Revolutionary troops who came over the crest of the nearby hill and raced down toward British troops waiting on the opposite bank of the brook.

The British barely had time to set up their defenses. Their resistance did not last long, writes Bill: “When a couple of American regiments scaled the slope unseen and appeared suddenly within sixty paces of them, they fled in panic” back to Nassau Hall, from one window of which there soon appeared a white flag of surrender. Thus, the final shots of the Battle of Princeton were fired almost exactly on the spot where today golfers fire the last shots of their rounds. This victory was crucial for American morale. “Suddenly,” writes Fischer, “the momentum had broken.”

Washington briefly considered proceeding straight on to New Brunswick. But sensing his men’s exhaustion, he wisely pulled back to a



Top: American soldiers sprung an attack in Princeton near the narrow brook that today runs across the first hole at Springdale Golf Club. Above: A lithograph depicts the Battle of Princeton’s fierce fighting.

camp just south of Morristown, where they spent the winter and spring.

Plainfield, New Jersey

By the beginning of the summer of 1777 General Howe was anxious to force the action. Upon learning that Washington had moved most of his army out of their stronghold in the Watchung Mountains of central New

the land drops off sharply into a heavily wooded swamp. "It's kind of a neat spot," says Tom Castronovo, the genial 71-year-old pharmacist who serves as Plainfield's club historian. "It almost looks like a fortification."

At the top of that rise, near the fourth green, the Americans hunkered down to meet the oncoming British. They certainly didn't beat them, but



The legendary Molly Pitcher aided troops at the Battle of Monmouth.

Jersey and down onto the plain below, which better suited the British style of open-field fighting, Howe sent two columns west from Perth Amboy in hopes of pinching the American troops. Observing all this from an observation post now designated as Washington Rock State Park, Washington sent General William Alexander out with a force of some 2,000 men to harass them. The Battle of the Short Hills — the name refers not to the town but to a series of low hills running north from Piscataway — started on Oak Tree Road in Edison and moved slowly north through Plainfield.

The same landforms that make great golf holes also offered great tactical advantages for Revolutionary War fighting forces. Plainfield's fourth hole is a 355-yard par four whose fairway rises sharply some 250 yards out. From this upper plateau,

managed to slow their advance, giving Washington's brigade a chance to escape back up into the Watchungs. It also forced Howe to abandon his aim of crossing New Jersey on foot, and he instead sailed to Philadelphia.

The same landforms that make great golf holes also offered great tactical advantages for fighting forces.

The battle continued right on up the Old Raritan Road, before ending in Scotch Plains, on the Ash Brook Golf Course, one of Union County's municipal courses. A cannon sits atop a monument at the club's entrance on Raritan Road.

Try as Castronovo might to pre-



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Top: The plateau that forms the fourth green at Plainfield Country Club was the site of the Battle of the Short Hills.

Right: Author Thomas Paine lived just down the road from what is today Wykagyl Country Club.

serve these memories, the echoes of that battle are fading. For many years, an old barn stood on the nine-hole course Plainfield members know as the “West 9.” It had a cannonball hole clearly visible in one of its walls, a souvenir of the battle. Some of the club’s early trophies bore a small raised medallion, roughly the size of a quarter. It showed Washington in profile and below him, the rocks at Washington Rock State Park, five miles west of the club and plainly visible on clear days from the club’s 18th green. When in 1997 a group of Revolutionary war buffs sought permission to reenact the battle, including sleeping on the club property, the club considered it and then turned them down. It wasn’t just the risk of damage to the course, says Castronovo. “We worried that it might draw attention to the fact that a major battle was fought here and that might mandate public access.”

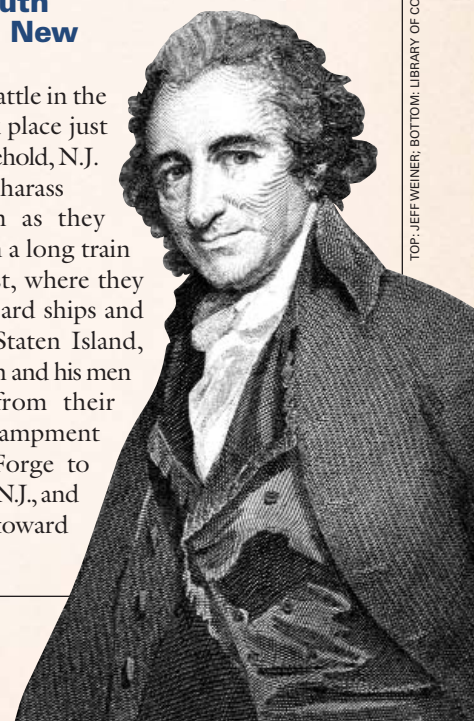
One more thing: Just 12 days earlier the Continental Congress had approved Betsy Ross’s design for a new flag. Thus, the men

who fought on ground that is now the fourth hole at Plainfield were the first American soldiers ever to fight under the Stars and Stripes.

“Now, *that’s* pretty cool,” says Castronovo.

Monmouth County, New Jersey

The final battle in the north took place just west of Freehold, N.J. Aiming to harass the British as they marched in a long train to the coast, where they were to board ships and return to Staten Island, Washington and his men marched from their winter encampment at Valley Forge to Hopewell, N.J., and then east toward Freehold.



TOP: JEFF WEINER. BOTTOM: LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, PRINTS & PHOTOGRAPHS DIVISION



REVOLUTIONARY GOLF

The site of Sunningdale's clubhouse once housed French troops near the end of the war.

ON THESE GROUNDS
FRENCH TROOPS UNDER
COUNT DE ROCHAMBEAU
SENT TO AID THE CONTINENTAL ARMY
UNDER GEORGE WASHINGTON
MADE THEIR CAMP
JULY 6th TO AUGUST 19th, 1781

At one point they marched across what is now Cherry Valley Country Club, just north of Princeton.

As they neared Freehold, Washington's troops proceeded down a shallow, tree-lined ravine that runs along the edge of Battleground's parking lot and then continued on, past the front of the clubhouse. Washington spent the actual Battle of Monmouth standing on top of the large mound situated behind the 12th green. It must have been quite a sight. In terms of the number of combatants, it was the largest of the war, and the temperature that day reached 100 degrees: 97 soldiers died from heat exhaustion.

As Plainfield discovered when it looked into allowing that reenactment, it's not always an easy thing to have historic property. When Battleground underwent a renovation ten years ago, there was talk of removing the mound and pushing the 12th green all the way back to the tree line. That would have added 125 yards to what's now a 390-yard hole. But the club discovered that an entire new group of restrictions applies to historic sites. "[Without those restrictions,] we'd have chopped down that hill and a

green would have been tucked with hazards all along the tree line where the road is," says Rutkin. "Instead, we had to find that 125 yards elsewhere on the property, which wasn't easy because we are landlocked by the development and the battlefield."

The Battle of Monmouth is also famous for the heroism of one American woman, known as Molly Pitcher, who began the battle carrying water to the thirsty soldiers. When her husband was wounded beside the cannon he'd been working, she took over. You could say she went from being cart girl to player.

This battle did not end the Met Area's involvement in the war. Marching south to Yorktown in October of 1781, the Continental Army camped on the South Course at Canoe Brook.

What such ancient history means to a club depends of course on one's interest in history. But it's hard to imagine that golfers don't feel a shiver of real excitement upon realizing that their shots are echoes of others that really did mean something. At so many of our history-rich MGA clubs, we are playing among the ghosts of the Revolutionary War. ■

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