

Women's Open becomes latest chapter in Charleston's rich golf history

By Tommy Braswell Special to The Post and Courier, May 18, 2019



The Country Club of Charleston will be on the world stage when it hosts the U.S. Women's Open beginning May 30. Photo by Keen Eye Marketing

When you walk through the front doors of the stately clubhouse at the Country Club of Charleston, one thing becomes readily apparent. Golf is important to these people.

Prominently displayed in the lobby are life-size portraits of Henry Picard, Frank Ford Sr. and Beth Daniel. Picard, the 1938 Masters champion, got his professional start here and returned in retirement. Daniel, the winner of 33 LPGA titles and a two-time U.S. Women's Amateur winner, learned the game at the Country Club of Charleston. They both are members of the World Golf Hall of Fame. Ford, who won 18 club championships, was certainly the best amateur golfer in South Carolina during his heyday and is a member of the South Carolina Golf Hall of Fame.

Straight ahead through the large windows on the back of the clubhouse is a spectacular view of the 18th green.

Turn left into Champions Hall and there are framed photos accompanied by the accomplishments of golfers Daniel, Frank Ford III, Bert Atkinson, Russell Henley, Lea Anne Brown and Alberta "B" Bower, along with tennis star Diane Fishburne Barker. Daniel, Ford III, Atkinson and Brown are members of the South Carolina Golf Hall of Fame. Henley is a three-time winner on the PGA Tour and Bower won the 1975 U.S. Women's Senior Amateur.

A showcase holds Daniel memorabilia, including her two U.S. Women's Amateur medals. Two other cases display various trophies. Honor Boards recognize winners of championships held at the club. There are photos of all the Azalea winners along with a photo of 2013 U.S. Women's Amateur winner Emma Talley. A photo of the 2019 U.S. Women's Open champion will go up after the event is played here May 30-June 2.

"Golf is the backbone of this club," said longtime member Frank Ford III, a six-time winner of the Azalea Invitational, the club's nationally recognized amateur event held in the spring. "When we have our initial party for prospective members, we tell them golf is what we do and we're going to continue doing."

“This club has shared itself through the years,” Ford continued. “There aren’t many clubs that have three major stroke-play golf tournaments every year (Azalea, Senior Azalea, Beth Daniel Junior Azalea). It asks a lot of your membership. But I think you have to stay true to your heritage. If you lose that you lose something really important.”

Golf comes to Charleston

The Country Club of Charleston recently published a coffee table-styled book that not only traces the club’s rich golf history but also the history of golf in the Charleston area. Golf was first played in this country on Harleston Green, now a public park occupied by the College of Charleston.

A document dated June 29, 1739, and discovered at the University of Edinburgh (Scotland) indicates golf clubs were shipped from Andrew Wallace of Edinburgh to his brother, William Wallace of Charleston, at a cost of one pound, eighteen shillings. Another document dated May 12, 1743, shows that David Deas, who immigrated from Scotland to Charleston, received “two boxes of eight dozen golf clubs and three gross of balls.” The South Carolina Golf Club dates to 1786.

[Birthplace of American golf: Charleston’s Harleston Green was first golf club](#)

All this was well-known to Country Club of Charleston members, but there were gaps in the club’s history. When was the club founded? Who won the professional tournaments played in the 1930s? Much of what the club’s Heritage Committee might have been expected to uncover disappeared when Hurricane Hugo destroyed their clubhouse in 1989.

The present golf course, along with Yeamans Hall Club in Hanahan, both were designed by Seth Raynor and both opened in 1925. The Country Club opened in May while Yeamans Hall would open its course in the fall. Prior to moving to James Island, the Country Club played golf at Belvidere Plantation near Magnolia Cemetery.

But when did the Country Club of Charleston officially come into existence? Club historian John Boatwright and club archivist Forrest H. Norvell IV, along with other members of the Heritage Committee, began their detective work and eventually established its origin as 1900.

“Starting about 10 years ago, I started getting real interested in the club’s history,” said Boatwright, who has been a member of the club for 30 years. Much of the club’s golf history was known after World War II, but there was a lot of missing information from its formative years. The Carolinas Golf Association was formed here in the early 1900s. A professional tournament was held in the 1930s. Other tournaments were played. But the details were missing.

“I just wanted to document all of that, to let the members and new members know how special a heritage we had,” Boatwright said.

Boatwright also is a summer golf member at Yeamans Hall and developed a friendship with Charlton deSaussure Jr., who had done similar work for that club. deSaussure’s help was immeasurable. He pointed Boatwright and Norvell to the Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site in Brookline, Mass., where the Olmsted Brothers’ work had recently been digitized. Through their research, they found documents, plans and photographs. Norvell found aerial photographs of the club from the early days at its present site. All of this research has helped in restoration projects the club has undertaken.

Chicora Golf Club

There is evidence that a golf course existed at the Pine Forest Inn in Summerville in the late 1890s. Golf also was played in Aiken, Columbia, Greenville, Asheville, Linville and Pinehurst.

“A lot of the history we’ve been able to compile is thanks to The Post and Courier archives,” said club archivist Forrest H. Norvell IV. “Back in 1895, (Mildred R. Marshall) the wife of the editor of the Evening Post wrote an editorial saying how great it would be to bring golf to Charleston, that it was a fantastic sport that can be enjoyed by men and women alike.”

Norvell said that sparked an interest in building a golf course. A gift to the city helped finance the purchase of what would become Chicora Park, now the old Navy Base. The Olmsted Brothers, the country’s preeminent landscape architecture firm (think New York’s Central Park and Biltmore Estate in Asheville), were hired to do the planning. A golf course was suggested for the property and on Oct. 1, 1900, the Chicora Golf Club was formed in a meeting at Carolina Yacht Club.

Less than a year later, the U.S. Navy made the city an offer it couldn’t turn down for the Chicora property. Chicora Golf Club had to look for a new site, although Navy personnel continued to play on the nine-hole layout until the base was closed in 1996.

A new course at Belvidere

Members of the Chicora Golf Club met again at Carolina Yacht Club to form a new club, Charleston Country Club, at Belvidere Plantation. It opened in Nov. 28, 1901, again a nine-hole course with tees and greens made of a sand-clay mixture. In 1909, clubs from Charleston, Greenville, Columbia, Wilmington and Georgetown gathered at Belvidere for a competition and afterward met and formed the Carolinas Golf Association. The club also began acquiring additional property leases and in 1913 expanded to 18 holes with grass greens.

The leases for the second nine holes were running out in the 1920s, and members didn’t want to revert to a nine-hole course. So they began exploring options and found property on James Island owned by the McLeod family and the Frampton family.

“They closed on the property, secured the Olmsted’s assistance, Raynor’s assistance, hired an architect out of Boston to work on plans for the new clubhouse,” Norvell said. “While the old club was still in existence, they formed a new club called Ashley Country Club. This course opened on May 9, 1925, after close to two years of construction.”

Donald Vinton was hired as the head pro at the new course in 1925 and brought in a lanky 18-year-old, Henry Picard, from Plymouth, Mass., as an assistant. The Carolinas Open was held that year and Picard was inserted into the field and beat his boss. When Vinton left in 1930, the club named Picard as its head professional, a post he would hold until 1934.

Picard won the Charlotte Open in 1932. He then beat Walter Hagen by 10 shots in the Carolinas Open. Later that year Hagen came to Charleston to play an exhibition and Picard won by three strokes. The club president at the time asked Hagen if the Country Club of Charleston could host a professional tournament. Hagen responded enthusiastically and said he would help promote the event.

The Tournament of the Gardens began in 1933 and would be played for five years. Hagen won the inaugural tournament, Paul Runyan won the next year and Picard finished first the final three years. Other participants included Craig Wood, Horton Smith, Byron Nelson and Sam Snead.

Soon after the Tournament of the Gardens ended, the U.S. became involved in World War II.

Row, row, row your boat

While the effects of war were felt everywhere, the golf course was not forgotten. Instead of using precious gasoline to drive from the peninsula to James Island, members rowed a boat to the club’s marina, vestiges of which can still be seen near the 10th green.

“My grandfather (Ford Sr.) definitely told me the story that they would save their rationed gas and row a boat over to the club from the Coast Guard base,” Ford III said. “They would wait for a flood tide, and it didn’t take that long, maybe 20 or 30 minutes. They would gas

up the lawnmowers and cut the grass on the greens. Then they would play, and they played fast. They had to so they could catch the tide back.”

Southern hospitality

After the war, the Country Club renewed its interest in hosting tournaments. In October 1946, the Southern Amateur Invitational was played here. The tournament soon became affiliated with Charleston’s Azalea Festival, moved to the spring and has flourished.

Ford Sr. won the first two Azalea tournaments and a total of four. Ford III won a record six Azaleas. Golfers who would go on to win on the PGA Tour made their mark at the popular amateur event. Webb Simpson, the 2012 U.S. Open champion, won the Azalea twice. C.T. Pan, who last month won the Heritage on Hilton Head Island, was the 2011 Azalea winner.

In 2011, the U.S. Golf Association was looking for a site for the 2013 U.S. Women’s Amateur after another club backed out. The Country Club of Charleston stepped in and quickly put together a showcase event that impressed USGA officials.

Two years later, the announcement was made that the 2019 U.S. Women’s Open would be played at the country club, which sits just across the Ashley River from the site known as the birthplace of American golf.