

# Williamstown Historical Museum

## Newsletter

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### Taconic Golf Club Grew Out of Old Tomato Cans

One sure sign of the changing seasons in Williamstown is the arrival and departure of the flags on the greens of the Taconic Golf Club. This has been true now for 116 years, ever since “three men with tomato cans” gave birth to the Club in 1896. That year William Howard Doughty, James M. Ide and Edward C. Gale received permission from Williams College to install those cans on Weston Athletic Field, adjacent to the present 18<sup>th</sup> fairway, creating a rudimentary golf course. The trio had picked the game up while serving as Army officers at the Watervliet Arsenal.

Later that summer Henry N. Sabin and James Bullock joined the group. A few weeks later a “real” course was laid out. There were seven 125- to 150-yard holes between South and Hoxsey Streets. Included was the present 17<sup>th</sup> green, one of the oldest in the country still in use in its original form.

The course started on Main Street just west of the Alpha Delta Phi (now Perry) House. It zig-zagged south and east to the present 17<sup>th</sup> and then back along a parallel path to the starting point on Main Street. A small building off Main Street belonging to the Bullock family stood near the McMahon livery office and Zeta Psi (Wood). It was used as a clubhouse. Later the Taconic group, most of whom from a colony of summer residents from Troy, N.Y. The club rented clubhouse space in the rear of the Kellogg house. Charles Van Horn, a local jack of all trades, was greenskeeper and J. Fred Walden (later proprietor of the College Pharmacy on Spring Street) was a caddy.



**Stanley Tworig and Dick Baxter with the old South Street clubhouse.**

In 1954 Walden recalled, writing for the *Williams Alumni Review*:

“When I was a boy, I delivered telegrams, sold papers and was general errand-boy for Spring Street. I lived where the theater is, so was available...

“One summer day in 1895 a fellow asked me if I knew where he could find three empty tomato cans. I told him I could, so I asked my mother and she sent me to the garbage barrel. I asked her if she could cut the tops off. She did and wanted to know if I was going fishing.

“I said, ‘No, some fellows are starting a new game called *golf*.’

“‘What’s that,’ she answered.

“I told her I didn’t know but would find out. Then I borrowed a carving knife to cut holes for the cans, and our lawn mower to trim around the holes, and that’s how the first golf links in these parts started.”

In 1897, with the addition of several members,

the club laid out a longer, 9-hole course on land formerly part of the Meacham property but owned by W. H. Doughty—the western half of today’s course.

That year Edward Gale drew up plans to convert the Whitney Sampson house on South Street into a more suitable clubhouse. The building, with views to the east from broad verandas, stood on a rise west

of what is now the second green. Gifts from Robert Cluett (Williams Class of 1892) made possible additions and modifications.

In 1924 Taconic hired a Canadian, Dick Baxter, as the club professional and greenskeeper. He would serve until 1963 and, with Stanley Tworig, who took over greenskeeper duties in 1927 and oversaw the emergence of the present course.

In 1926 a committee had been formed to investigate expanding the course to 18 holes and in 1927 George A. Cluett, (Williams Class of 1896) one of those Troy-based summer residents, was elected president. He negotiated several expansions of the property available to the Club. Alice C. Doughty, widow of W.H., contributed 47 acres already being used by Taconic to the College on the condition that it be leased to the Club to be used as a golf course.

Next Cluett secured, as a gift to the College, property owned by John H. Denison, Williams Class of 1890, where the present clubhouse is located. Denison purchased the nearly 1,800-acre Amos Lawrence Hopkins estate on Northwest Hill (now the Hopkins Memorial Forest). The College completed the Taconic



In 1954 the present Taconic Club House opened.

## Tournaments and Course Records

Several leading tournaments have been held on Taconic including the 2004 Massachusetts Amateur (the fourth), the 1999 NCAA Championship (the third), the 1996 USGA’s Senior Amateur Championship, the 1992 Massachusetts Open, the 1963 USGA Women’s Amateur, and the 1956 USGA Junior Amateur Championship in which Jack Nicklaus scored a hole-in-one on the 14th hole.

Before the recent restoration the individual course record of 66 was held by Chad Collins of the Methodist College Golf Team, playing in the 1999 NCAA Division III Championship on his way to the Individual Title which he won in three of his four undergraduate seasons.

Following the restoration project club member Bill Hadden shot a 68 in the 2010 Club Championship tournament. Club Professional Rick Pohle on two occasions had carded a score of 64 from the membership tees in the annual Pro/Member tournament.

ic site by purchasing the 17-acre Dillon lot in the southeastern section of the present course.

With the land in hand, Wayne Stiles of the Boston firm of Stiles and VanKleek was hired to design and construct an 18-hole course. Work as begun in 1927 and completed by Labor Day 1928. The architect envisioned the start and finish of the course as they are today. However the club house remained on South Street with the first hole, playing to the present third green from an abandoned tee farther back, and the 18<sup>th</sup> playing as a par 5 over the present 2<sup>nd</sup> hole to an old green, also closer to South Street.

John P. English (Williams Class of 1932), a former Mass Golf official, College Alumni director and president of Taconic from 1972 to 1975, writing *Three Men, Three Tomato Cans – and The Taconic Golf Club is Born* in 1963, noted “the land on which

## Taconic Has Had Only Three Golf Pros

Taconic Golf Club is situated on land owned by Williams College. It is a semi-private club whose regular resident membership stands at about 500.

In Taconic’s 116-year history the club has had only three PGA professionals, all of whom have also served as coach of the Williams College’s Golf Team. Dick Baxter served for 40 years, from 1924 to 1963; Rudy Goff, for 20 years, from 1964 to 1983; and Rick Pohle, for 29 years, since 1984. Pohle will retire at the end of the 2012 season.



## A One, a Two, a Three, and a Four

Several years before Baxter retired (in 1964) he was playing with club members Tommy Danaher, Jim Keith and A. V. Phillips.

Writing in his “About the Berkshires” column in the Aug. 30, 1964, *Berkshire Eagle*, Golf writer Ed Toole reported that Danaher hit his tee-shot on the par 3, 215-yard 17<sup>th</sup> (in those days it was the ninth) to within two feet of the flag. Turning to the pro: “Let’s see you beat that, Dr. B.”

Baxter’s retorted: “I haven’t let you down yet, Tommy, I’ll see what I can do.” With that he hit his drive to the green where it landed, bounced over Danaher’s ball and rolled into the cup for Baxter’s first and only ace as a professional.

Keith hit to the green and went on to garner his par 3 while Phillips, shaken up with all the excitement, drove to just off the green and took a bogey 4 before Danaher rolled in his birdie 2. The results for the foursome: an ace, a birdie, a par and a bogie: 1, 2, 3 and 4.

the present course was constructed was practically treeless in 1928.”

In a recent email exchange English recalled: “The Current Stiles and Van Kleek course opened in 1928 and I entered Williams that fall so I in effect came with it—and with Dick and Denise Baxter (Dick having come down from Montreal, with a wonderful Scottish accent, to supervise the construction and to continue as professional and greenskeeper).

“When the course opened, with its clubhouse on South Street, Dick was confronted with, in effect, a large open pasture spotted with golf holes. I could go up there, stand on the clubhouse porch, and see where my friends were playing and join them.

“The immediate problem was to get some trees growing and Dick took this on, with Scottish thriftiness. His principal source of supply was the markets of North Adams, which often offered seedlings in the spring. Dick took full advantage of this, and I especially recall accompanying him on the purchase of willows which he wanted to place beside the brook on what is now the 4<sup>th</sup> hole (trees which had aged to the point that they were removed during a major course renovation two years ago).”

By 1954 the need for a new club house had to be addressed. Nearly \$50,000 was raised from members and College alumni, to build a new facility on Meacham Street on the site of a large red barn/house which had been the home of greenskeeper Tworig and his family.

In accordance with an agreement with the Dougherty family, the old club house and the few acres on which it stood reverted to the family when the new facility was built, “east of the brook running through

the course.” The old clubhouse was moved down South Street to become a staff cottage of Buxton School and the present hole layout was adopted.

The new building contained office space, a dining room and bar, men’s and ladies’ locker rooms, a pro shop and a club storage area. Within ten years the popularity of the course and increasing use by an expanding membership necessitated an enlargement of the men’s locker room and the dining room/bar area.

By her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday Taconic was showing her age. While the new irrigation system and meticulous maintenance had kept fairways lush, bunkers and greens needed some rejuvenation and the New England forests had begun to reclaim those open expanses enjoyed by John English in the late ’20s.

Dick Baxter’s saplings had grown up—to the point of impeding play to several of the greens and severely shading parts of the course. The bunkers had been over worked and needed deep therapy.

The club hired course architect Gil Hanse in 2008 and over the next two seasons his restoration crews worked. They took on three or four hole sections at a time so play could continue around and between workers and construction equipment. Tree lines were trimmed and wood lots thinned. Bunkers were rebuilt. Fairways were reshaped to better reflect the original Stiles design. Drainage was improved by installing new drains and re-contouring fairways.

Taconic, back in full-out operation since the start of the 2010 season, has returned to its lofty position on the “bucket lists” of golfers nationwide and the “best lists” of golf publications. Consistently rated as one of the most demanding courses in the country, the course frequently appears on golf magazine lists of “select” courses to play. This year it is 39<sup>th</sup> on *Golf Magazine’s* “Top 100 Courses You Can Play.”



**Taconic’s third hole with Dick Baxter’s row of Willows along the stream on the left of the fairway.**