

Hugh I Wilson - PU Class of 1902

By William M Crane



If you read through my Springdale History and GEO quiz you may have noticed several references to Merion Golf Club in Ardmore, PA – the seminal course design credited to Hugh Wilson that is often recognized as one of best routed courses in the world and the site of more USGA Championships than any other venue.

Springdale is fortunate to have a connection to Merion through Hugh Wilson who played his college golf at Princeton from 1898 through his graduation in 1902. Wilson actually served on our Greens Committee in 1900 as the club planned to move the course from its original site near Mountain Avenue.

So, “Who was Hugh Wilson”? {1} - Springdale’s friend Mike Cirba posed this question as the title of his My Opinion article on GolfClubAtlas.com in June of 2013.

Born in Trenton (yes, NJ) on November 18, 1879 he attended Penn Charter and the Hamilton School in Philadelphia matriculating at Princeton in 1898 and graduating in 1902. While noted as experiencing poor health during much of his life he did manage to play Baseball and Golf at PU and served as Captain of the Golf team. He was also President of the Sophomore Club and a member of the Ivy Club.



After graduating from Princeton Wilson joined his family's Insurance brokerage firm becoming a partner in 1905 the same year that he married Mary Warren. Mike Cirba notes that Wilson continued to be a competitive golfer in his 20s "representing Philadelphia in the prestigious "Inter-City" matches held annually between the best players in Philadelphia, Boston and New York the predecessor to today's Lesley Cup".{1}

As noted, Hugh Wilson joined Springdale's greens committee in 1900 as the club prepared to move the course to a new location. During that process he may have been exposed to Golf Architect Willie Dunn Jr. and his original design for the new course. I pointed out to Mike Cirba and another friend of Springdale – Wayne Morrison (who wrote THE book on Golf Course Architect William Flynn {2}), that newspaper article maps of our original 9 hole course included at least two holes that traversed quarries, an interesting fact in the context of Merion's classic and demanding three finishing holes that prominently feature carries over a quarry.

Perhaps because of his experience at Springdale, in 1910 Wilson was chosen to join and head the committee at Merion Cricket Club to design and build the new golf course. William Flynn was hired to help build the course and in time Wilson became a mentor to Flynn who eventually served as Merion's first Greenskeeper. Wilson and Flynn discussed going into business together designing golf courses, but that never materialized possibly due to Wilson's poor health.

Merion opened in 1912 with almost no bunkers, which Wilson and Flynn designed later after they noted where players hit the ball, and in preparation for the 1916 US Amateur at the course.

If you were fortunate enough to attend Wayne Morrison and Tom Paul's lecture at Springdale in November 2013 you would know that Wilson and later William Flynn are included in what has become known as the prominent "Philadelphia School" of Golf Course Architecture, which also includes George Thomas, A W Tillinghast, and George Crump at Pine Valley, and in allied sense William Fownes of Oakmont. Characterized by a collegiality among these six friends who were interested in the possibilities of golf course architecture as it matured during the "Golden Age" that climaxed in the 1920s, they also had an affinity for naturalism versus the earlier geometric nature of course features. The seminal designs were Merion and of course Pine Valley – still usually recognized as the finest golf course design in the world. Interestingly, after Crump's death Hugh Wilson and his brother Alan helped to build the final four unfinished holes of Pine Valley (#12 - #15) from George Crump and Harry Colt records with Flynn consulting and supervising the construction.

Springdale hired William Flynn to re-design the course possibly through his connection to Wilson. Ted Hoyt wrote an article for the January 14, 1927 edition of the Evening Public Ledger: "Flynn, took a great interest in the proposition because the late Hugh I. Wilson was a Princeton graduate. Hugh Wilson started Flynn on his career as a golf-course architect, and now that he has arrived, he wanted this new Princeton course to be a memorial to a man who did much more for the game of golf, not only in Philadelphia, but in the country as a whole, than is realized, save by those who were his intimates." {3}

Despite being an amateur and not paid for his golf design work, Wilson would go on to design or help revise: Merion East and West Courses, Seaview Bay Course, Cobb's Creek with AH Smith and George Crump (and serve on the committee to create the Philadelphia City public courses), Philmont, North Hills and assist Flynn on the delightful Kittansett course in Marion Mass.

As recognition of his contributions to the game of golf, Hugh Wilson was nominated to the USGA Executive Committee in 1920, and is credited with helping to establish the USGA Green Section.

Hugh I Wilson passed away at the age of 45 on February 23, 1925. Mike Cirba notes the USGA's eulogy of him included: " He was a member of our Advisory Board, and in a large measure was responsible for the formation and success of the Green Section of the United States Golf Association. He was properly considered one of the best-informed men in the country on problems relating to the construction and maintenance of golf courses. Not only did he have a wealth of practical, first-hand experience, but he was also a close student, and in his research work he visited the principal courses abroad in seeking

complete information. Probably no one has been consulted more frequently by those interested in his work. His passing represents a distinct loss, not only to the Green Section but to golf interests everywhere.” {1}.

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Much of the information in this article was derived from work done by friends of Springdale – Mike Cirba and Wayne Morrison - listed below and from Springdale’s Long Range Plan. I encourage anyone interested in the topics mentioned in this article to purchase Wayne Morrison’s book on William Flynn – The Nature Faker (available on disk), and read Mike Cirba’s articles on Hugh Wilson accessible on GolfClubAtlas.com. Mike mentioned Springdale as a hidden gem in Ran Morrisett’s April 2019 Feature Interview on GolfClubAtlas.com.

{1} Mike Cirba, “Who Was Hugh Wilson”, GolfClubAtlas.com, In My Opinion - June 2013.

<https://golfclubatlas.com/in-my-opinion/cirba-mike-who-was-hugh-wilson/>

<https://golfclubatlas.com/in-my-opinion/cirba-mike-who-was-hugh-wilson-part-ii-2/>

{2} Wayne Morrison and T E Paul, ***William Flynn The Nature Faker***

To obtain a copy of the William Flynn book contact Wayne Morrison at wsmorrison@hotmail.com or view the Nature Faker Facebook page.

{3} Springdale Golf Club Long Range Plan – 2015, prepared by Ian Andrew Golf Design, Inc. Historical Section written by Wayne Morrison.