

Baton Rouge's first public golf course was completed in 1926 and officially opened in 1928. It is a short, 34-par, nine-hole course with a clubhouse that combines the Colonial Revival with a tile roof in the Spanish Revival taste. With the obvious exception of the maturation of trees and other vegetation, the course looks much as it did upon completion.

Golf Course:

Located east of downtown Baton Rouge outside what were then the city limits, the twenty-five acre course occupies part of former Richland Plantation. As the course was being conceived and built, various subdivisions were being developed in the immediate area. Roads define the course on three sides. Perkins Road to the north and Dalrymple to the west were country lanes when the course opened. Although still two lanes, they are today major traffic arteries. Lakeshore Drive, immediately to the east, is lined with 1920s and '30s homes facing the fairways. Lakeshore Drive takes its name from the course's southern boundary, City Park Lake, which was created at the same time as the course. Immediately to the south of City Park Lake, and separated from it by a short causeway, is University Lake, created in the 1930s. The lakes create an appealing vista from many parts of the course – a vista compromised in the 1960s with the construction of Interstate 10 across City Park Lake.

A pre-existing rail line bisects the course at an angle. On the south side are the remnants of a bayou. Serendipitously, the course straddles a meandering escarpment. The design, done by prolific Tom Bendelow of American Park Builders in Chicago, takes advantage of the escarpment to provide a notably hilly course in a part of the state known for its flatness. While certain holes are on flat ground, others occupy terrain Baton Rougeans might consider mountainous. Indeed, ground levels vary on the course by as much as twenty-five feet. Most notably, the eighth hole is blind from the tee due to a high hill.

Because of the numerous mature (mostly live oak) trees that define many of the fairways, the course is known for its overall tightness. Also contributing to the tightness is the fact that the fairways are placed closely together. Thus the course does not provide for much in the way of traditional rough. The notable exception is along the rail line, which is sometimes level with the course, sometimes below grade and sometimes on a high embankment. Its overgrown environs create an interesting out-of-bounds situation.

Generally speaking, the trees and the changing elevation provide the greatest challenges. Also present are sand traps (about half of the original) and water hazards on some of the holes (via the remnants of a bayou in the southwest corner).

The layout of the course is shown on the attached map. The clubhouse is located at the northern end, facing Perkins Road. (Originally there was a quite large swimming pool immediately behind the clubhouse. Its outline is still clearly discernible.) The putting green is in the front and to the east.

Holes will be described proceeding from tee to green, with features noted on the right or left hand side as the golfer approaches the green. Most tee boxes are approximately two feet above grade.

Hole #1

This is a short, straight, level par-3 of 160 yards. It is relatively featureless, with a round green set off by trees.

Hole #2

This is a long to medium, straight, level par-4 of 376 yards. The fairway features slight undulation with a flat chipping area in front of the green. The fairway is tightly defined by oak trees to create what is known as an oak hazard. Mature trees set off the round green, which is guarded by a small sand trap on the right side.

Hole #3

This is a relatively long, straight, level par-4 of 400 yards. It parallels residential Lakeshore Drive and is screened from the street by a more-or-less continuous line of trees to the golfer's left. The complex mounded green has a four-corner design guarded by a sand trap on the right and a grass bunker on the left.

Hole #4

This is a relatively short, straight par-4 of 317 yards. The undulating fairway descends the escarpment about 150 yards from the tee, after it crosses the rail line rough. (This is the only hole that is actually interrupted by the rail line.) At

the base of the escarpment is a recently added retention pond/water hazard (small and round) on the right side of the fairway. The green is set on a relatively high and broad mound which is stadiumed at the back. The green is guarded by a sand trap on the left.

Hole #5

Traditionally rated by golfers as the hardest par-4 in Baton Rouge, Hole #5 is a relatively long, dog-leg to the right of 410 yards. Golfers must clear a water hazard (bayou) about a hundred yards from the tee. This same bayou extends generally north to guard the right side of the fairway in the shank of the dog-leg. Another hazard is an intermittent line of trees following the bayou. The small flatish green is guarded by a sand trap on the left.

Hole #6

Hole 6 is a straight, mostly level, medium length par-4 of 375 yards. It is blind from the tee due to an oak hazard approximately 100 yards out. The round green is guarded on the left by the previously mentioned retention pond (see Hole 4).

Hole #7

This medium length par-4 is a slight dog-leg to the left of 383 yards. It has a double tee box – two teeing levels, one about six feet above the other. It is a blind hole, due to trees, but more importantly, due to a high crest approximately 100 yards out. After the crest, the shank of the dog-leg descends precipitously to the green, which is guarded on the right side by the railroad rough embankment. The small, low green is now set off by a relatively recent line of cypress trees (3).

Hole #8

Hole #8 is a tough, short, straight par-3 of 212 yards. It is blind due to a steep hill beginning about twenty yards from the tee. The right side of the fairway is guarded by railroad rough for all of its length. There is a marked indentation guarding the front of the three-corner, mounded green.

Hole #9

This par-4 is a short to medium, hilly, dog-leg to the right of 320 yards. It descends sharply towards the shank of the dog-leg, after which it ascends sharply to the much elevated small green, which is set off by mature pine trees. The old pump house for the pool can still be seen as a feature of the right side rough.

The Clubhouse:

The clubhouse consists of a large central block with a gable end roof and an unequally sized pair of flanking wings recessed from the main block. The construction is stucco on masonry over a poured concrete basement. The roof is of red tile in the Spanish Revival taste. A four-bay gallery embracing much of the main block features coupled Colonial Revival columns (replaced) and a simplified Chinese Chippendale balustrade. The gallery shelters four sets of French doors set in blind arches opening into what was mainly one large space. Used for a dining room and other social events, the space originally had an openwork truss ceiling and a mantel described at the time as resembling one found in "old Southern homes." To each side of the main clubroom were spaces containing a lounge, kitchen and a lady's dressing room.

This, the main floor of the clubhouse, opens to the rear onto an extended basement which provides for a spacious terrace or patio. The terrace once overlooked a large irregularly shaped pool. The ground falls away to the rear of the clubhouse allowing the basement story to be accessible at grade. Historically the basement housed changing rooms, locker rooms, showers and ticket sales.

The main floor of the clubhouse has for years been the home of a local art gallery and various changes have been made. In addition to the replacement of the columns, the fireplace has been walled in and the mantel discarded. The ceiling has been lowered, obscuring some of the open trusswork, and planks have been nailed to the lower beams to carry track lighting. Finally, within the last few months a fairly large wing has been added at one rear corner. Its roof is of asphalt. But even with these alterations, the clubhouse, at least on the exterior, looks much as it did during the historic period. At least the wing does not affect the principal (head-on) view of the building. There is no question that someone

from the early days would recognize the clubhouse.

SIGNIFICANT DATES: 1928

ARCHITECT/BUILDER: Course architect: Tom Bendelow, American Park Builders, Chicago
Clubhouse architect: L. A. Grosz

CRITERION: A

The City Park Golf Course is locally significant in the area of recreation because it was Baton Rouge's first public golf course, and in fact, the only public course until the mid-1950s. As such, it represents an important chapter in the history of golf – the game's democratization in America as it spread from private clubs and rich men to public courses open to anyone for a nominal fee. (Anyone, of course, for the most part meant Caucasian.) The course dates from what is termed "The Golden Age of Golf," when courses were being built at quite a rapid pace and the game was wildly popular from high society to the middle class.

Golf's origins in the United States are just as disputed as its birth in Europe. It is generally agreed that the first courses, crude as they were, appeared in the 1870s and '80s. The sport moved fairly quickly from a rich amateur's hobby played on rough open land to an organized game on a designed course (but still a plaything of the Gilded Age wealthy). John Reid, a Scottish immigrant turned American industrialist living in Yonkers, New York, is considered to be the "father" of golf in America. Prosperous enough to have free time for leisure activities, he turned his attention to golf, and in 1887 obtained equipment from the legendary links at St. Andrews in Scotland. In 1888, he and some friends formed the St. Andrews Golf Club, considered the first permanent club in the United States. They began playing using three holes laid out in a cow pasture.

With but very few exceptions, the class system of Old World golf characterized the game's early days in America – i.e., wealthy men playing at private clubs. Various exclusive clubs were established soon after St. Andrews, and in 1894 five of them formed the United States Golf Association, an organization open only to private clubs. Other upper class venues for golf were resorts in mainly the East, and in some cases large private estates with their own courses.

Like Reid's three holes in a cow pasture, early courses were equally haphazard. But by the early years of the twentieth century, numerous Britishers, seeing an opportunity, came to the United States to design courses. And design they did. The Roaring Twenties, "The Golden Age of Golf," witnessed rapid interest in the game, and courses were being built at a dizzying pace. By 1930, there were 2.25 million Americans playing the game. In 1916 there were 742 golf courses in the United States. By 1930, the number had shot up to 5,691 – an almost 800% increase.

It is little wonder so many people, men and women, were playing golf in the 1920s. Its promoters and enthusiasts certainly sang its praises. Myron West, the owner of American Park Builders of Chicago, which designed hundreds of courses, made various claims for golf in a 1926 publication: "It is a game in which husband and wife or parent and child can play together. Golf tones the muscles, makes the mind keener, develops the highest in sportsmanship, engenders a delightful social relationship and brings about the full appreciation of the beautiful out-of-doors; it builds up broken arches, reduces obesity, cures indigestion, retards senility and is good for the soul."

By the 1920s the democratization of West's cure-all game was well underway, as cities across the country acquired their first public course. Prior to circa 1920, they were in the distinct minority. Some golf enthusiasts would point to New York City's Van Courtland Park, a public course established in 1897, as proof that golf in America from almost the very beginning had shed its British upper class persona. But Van Courtland was a rare exception. Golf in turn-of-the-century America remained "the coddled crush of the gilded set," to quote one observer. But in the 1910s and 1920s, particularly the latter, there was a notable increase in public courses as golf spread through the social classes. Even the exclusive American Golf Association got on the bandwagon, so-to-speak. Reacting to charges of snobbery, in 1922 the AGA inaugurated the U. S. Public Links Championship.

As Baton Rouge entered the Roaring Twenties, the only golf course was at the Baton Rouge Country Club. The City Park course traces its origins to 1923 when taxpayers voted for a bond issue to finance the acquisition of sites "inside and outside of the city limits and of improving same as public parks." On December 10, 1924, the City of Baton Rouge signed an agreement with Myron H. West, president and owner of American Park Builders of Chicago, to develop a design for a City Park Community Golf Course for the cost of \$3,000. The designer on West's staff was Scotsman Tom Bendelow, who designed hundreds of courses over his long career. (Over 700 are listed in a 1926 publication.) As was typical at the time, Bendelow took his cue from naturalistic Scottish designs. The overall goal in such a design aesthetic was to take advantage of natural conditions, altering them as little as possible. How much time Bendelow spent in Baton Rouge is not known. At this time, a designer was often on site just a day or two to stake out a layout, leaving the actual

implementation to locals. It is known that local horticulturist Steele Burden was responsible for the landscaping, presumably to Bendelow's instructions.

The golf course was but one component of a recreational mecca fondly remembered by long-time Baton Rougeans. There was a large, popular swimming pool behind the clubhouse, a zoo across Perkins Road from the golf course, and a large amusement pavilion with a merry-go-round located to the northwest of the clubhouse. Today, the golf course (with clubhouse) survives to represent a first in public recreation in the city – a golf course for anyone who could pay the nominal fee. The sport had indeed come a long way from rich amateurs playing three holes in a cow pasture. (Today one can play all day long at City Park for a mere \$5 – cart extra.)

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