

Golf in Groton: The Forgotten Story of the Birth of a Sport

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Where did golf start in Massachusetts? The answer to this question is shrouded in legend, but it was more than likely in Groton. An article in the *Boston Globe* from May 1894 trumpeted that “Boston Swells at Golf,” and proclaimed that the sport had come to stay, writing, “From a few improvised links on Mr. James Lawrence’s country place at Groton, where the game in this part of the country started some four years ago, the golfing interest in and about Boston has now reached a” fever pitch.¹

Golf was well established in Great Britain long before it was imported to America in the late nineteenth century. Opinions vary as to which golf course was the first in the United States, or the earliest on which the sport is still played today. The earliest courses date their beginnings to the late 1880s, and include courses in New York and Pennsylvania. The oldest course in Massachusetts on which the game is still played is at The Country Club in Brookline. While the exclusive club, the oldest country club in the U.S., was founded in 1882, its course was not laid out until 1893.² But three years earlier, a family that epitomized the Boston Brahmin circle that created The Country Club had brought golf to Massachusetts in Groton.

James Lawrence, who was referenced in the *Boston Globe* article, was the country squire of Groton. A Harvard-educated millionaire from one of Boston’s most elite families, Jim Lawrence, as he was known in the family, had chosen the life of a country gentleman after finishing his education and marrying. This was made possible by the fortune created by his grandfather, Groton native Abbott Lawrence, the great merchant industrialist for whom the city of Lawrence, MA, is named, and who died in 1855 as the wealthiest person in New England (see the author’s article in the January 21, 2022 edition of the *Herald*).

Jim Lawrence had married Caroline Estelle Mudge, daughter of a prominent merchant, in 1875, the same year that his father, also named James, passed away, leaving him in the possession of an ample fortune and the Lawrence family’s homestead at the corner of Farmers Row and Long Hill Road in Groton. Jim decided to base his life in Groton, and in 1876, he commissioned the fashionable Boston architectural firm of Sturgis & Brigham to more than triple the size of the old house, making the Lawrence Homestead the largest residence in Groton. He also bought adjoining land, bringing the Homestead estate to nearly 400 acres – it ran from Long Hill Road on the south to Jenkins Road on the north, and from Farmers Row on the west to the Nashua River on the east. The Lawrences subsequently would spend most of the year at the Homestead, with winters spent in Boston, and summers later spent near Bar Harbor, ME.

Due to the presence of the Lawrences, a community of wealthy seasonal residents began to form in Groton. This process was dramatically accelerated when, in 1884, Jim Lawrence

¹ “Boston Swells at Golf,” *Boston Globe*, May 20, 1894, <https://bostonglobe.newspapers.com/clip/83114529/golf-becoming-popular-starting-with/>.

² Brendon Elliot, “A Look at America’s Oldest Golf Courses,” PGA, July 14, 2022, <https://www.pga.com/story/oldest-golf-courses-in-america>; “The Country Club, Brookline, MA, USA,” Golf Club Atlas, <https://web.archive.org/web/20020220092230/http://www.golfclubatlas.com/thecountryclub1.html>.

assisted his brother-in-law Endicott Peabody in founding the Groton School, which shortly became the most prestigious secondary school in the country. Thus, by the end of the 1880s, Groton was well-known across the state as a country retreat for elite Bostonians and the home of the Groton School – which made it the perfect place for a new sport to be introduced.³

There is little information about what influenced Jim Lawrence to create a golf course on the Lawrence Homestead estate; he and his family traveled regularly, including to Europe and around the U.S., and it is likely that he played golf on a trip and wanted to try it at home. Regardless, at some point in 1890, he had estate employees create a few improvised holes, and named it the Homestead Links. By 1895, the course had expanded to nine holes, and scorecards, with the course rules on the back, had been printed. The holes took their names from parts of the estate. First was “Ha-ha,” 179 yards, named after a landscape feature where a terrace is created that is invisible when looking down a hill – something that had been done on the hill behind the Homestead. After that was “Plantations,” 218 yards; “Blueberry Hill,” 291 yards; “Bones,” 308 yards; “Pine Tree,” 468 yards; “Sullivan’s,” 351 yards; “The Pool,” 282 yards; “Stone Wall,” 570 yards; and finally “Homestead,” 254 yards. The course was enjoyed by the Lawrences and their friends and guests for several years, but never became permanent.⁴

Not long after the Homestead Links was established, the Groton School caught the golf craze then sweeping Massachusetts. In the autumn of 1893, an improvised six hole course was laid out behind the School stable on the east side of Farmers Row, opposite the main campus. A year later, in the fall of 1894, the newly established Senior Golf Club tried to lay out a nine hole course, close to Joy Lane. Neither of these courses lasted more than a couple years. In the fall of 1896, another attempt was made to lay out a nine hole course, this one further south on land between Farmers Row, just north of Culver Street, and what is now the rail trail. This land was owned by Theophilus Smith, a gentleman farmer who lived in the yellow house at the corner of Culver Street and Smith Street (the latter named after him; his estate was called Meadowview). Smith lent the property to the School, but the following spring of 1897, he withdrew this favor due to the damage done to his property by the schoolboys. But the School did not give up. In 1899, it bought this portion of Smith’s farm, and the course was reestablished – it remained in use until World War II, at which time it became overgrown and was abandoned.⁵

Despite having these early courses, it took quite a while before Groton had a place where the wider public could enjoy the sport. What became the Groton Country Club was first opened

³ Information on the Lawrence family and Groton in the late nineteenth century comes from the author’s extensive research in these areas, including for his recently completed undergraduate thesis on Abbott Lawrence, and for his as yet unfinished book on Groton’s historic houses.

⁴ The Homestead Links scorecard, vol. 5, Dr. Samuel A. Green Collection, Lawrence Academy Archives, Groton, MA; “Boston Swells at Golf,” *Boston Globe*, May 20, 1894, <https://bostonglobe.newspapers.com/clip/83114529/golf-becoming-popular-starting-with/>. The scorecard cited here appears to have been dated 1895 by Dr. Green, but the date of 1897 is also written followed by a question mark. Information on when the course ceased to be used has not been found; however, James Lawrence died in 1914, and his wife passed away in 1921, after which the estate was not maintained in the same fashion, so it may have grown over during the 1910s or 1920s.

⁵ Henry Howe Richards, *A Schoolmaster’s Scrapbook: Half a Century at Groton* (Self-published, Groton School, 2010), 89, 104, 107, 118.

as a privately run golf club in 1924 by Mr. Dana C. Sherlaw, who was also the proprietor of the old Groton Inn, and initially ran the club in conjunction with the Inn. The club operated out of a very old house, dating to about 1708, which sat on the site of the present function hall and was taken down in 1982. Over the years, the club and golf course have gone through several changes. In the 1930s, Sherlaw found that skiing was attracting as many people as golf, and set up a ski tow on part of his property in 1937, making the property one of the first ski areas in southern New England – this was a part of the club’s business for decades. Sherlaw sold the place in 1954 after running the club for 30 years, at which time it began to be called the Groton Country Club. The club was closed to the public for a few years after it was purchased in 1981 by Wang Labs Inc., the one-time computer giant headquartered in Lowell, for their employees’ use. They tore down the old house and replaced it with the present function hall. When the company ran into financial difficulties, the property was conveyed to the town in 1989, and once again became a public golf course.⁶ Those who play at the Groton Country Club today are continuing a tradition of golf in Groton that dates back to 1890, and the state’s first golf course at the Lawrence Homestead.

⁶ Middlesex South Registry of Deeds, Cambridge, MA: Fletcher to Sherlaw, July 3, 1924, bk. 4746 pg. 429; Virginia A. May, *Groton Houses* (Groton, MA: Groton Historical Society, 1978), 225-226; Virginia A. May, ed., “Tercentenary” (Groton, MA: 1955), 86; Barbara Murray, Deborah E. Johnson, and Jayme Kulesz, ed., *Groton at 350: The History of a Massachusetts Town, 1655-2005* (Groton, MA: 2005), 176-177, 194, 212-214; Middlesex South Registry of Deeds, Cambridge, MA: Sherlaw to Elwood et al., July 30, 1954, bk. 8298 pg. 466. The author was informed of the year of demolition of the old house at the country club by Earl Carter, who has pictures of the house as well as some wood from it in his collection of Groton memorabilia. Additional information on the house, called the Woods-Farrington House, comes from the author’s research for his book on Groton’s historic houses.