

# Golf's journey from Scotland to Franklin Park

by Anthony Sammarco

**W**ebster's dictionary describes golf as "an outdoor game played with a set of clubs and a ball, in which the ball is driven with the fewest strokes into a succession of holes."

Simple enough. However, when the first game of golf was played in Dorchester in 1890, few rules, let alone residents, existed to explain the new outdoor phenomenon.

Golf was "invented" in Scotland, and the mecca of golf is considered to be St. Andrews, where the Royal and Ancient Golf Club of Saint Andrews was founded in the seventeenth century. For a long time, it seemed to be a wholly British sport. Even in the last decade of the nineteenth century, few Americans had heard of or participated in the sport.

In Boston at that time, the firm Wright & Ditson supplied much of the sporting equipment used by local athletes. The firm imported cricket bats and balls, which sold well, but a principal in the firm decided to include a dozen golf balls with an order to England. When the golf clubs arrived, they came without instructions, and neither he, nor anyone he knew, understood the game. As a result, the golf clubs were put on a shelf, where they sat until the fall of 1890.

George Wright, for whom a golf course was later named in Hyde Park, was employed at Wright & Ditson, and he decided to exhibit a few of the golf clubs and balls in a window display. Though he didn't know how to play the game, it obviously made for an eye-catching window setting. He is quoted in Webster's book *Fifty*



The golf house at Franklin Park (above) was depicted on a colored postcard postmarked 1910.



*Years of American Golf* as saying.

"ONE DAY A SCOTCHMAN PASSED THE STORE and noticing the clubs came in and asked where he could find a golf course. I told him that we had no course, but explained how we happened to have the clubs. The Scotchman became interested and sketched on a piece of paper how a course should be laid out and gave a description of the game. About a week later I received from him a book of rules with pictures of a full set of clubs and their names underneath."

Excited, George Wright looked for an open space to play golf, and he seized upon the open rolling land at Franklin Park, recently laid out by Frederick Law Olmstead. When he started to dig holes, a policeman informed Wright that he required a permit from the Parks Commissioners to play golf at Franklin Park. After applying for the permit in writing, the commissioners denied permission due to the danger of people being hurt by flying balls. Undaunted, Wright petitioned the commissioners in person and succeeded in securing the required permit.

Consequently, in the fall of 1890, George Wright and his friend John Smith went to the southern slope of Franklin Park and laid out holes with a yard stick fashioned with a red flannel pennant for flags. With



A turn-of-the-century golfer enjoys a game at Franklin Park (left), as hundreds still do today in Dorchester's jewel of the Emerald Necklace.

this crude, makeshift course, Wright and a group of friends enjoyed the first game of golf in Boston.

Not only were these first golf players in Boston destined to create a trend, but it was, according to *Fifty Years of American Golf*, "undoubtedly...the first golf ever played in a public park in this country."

Today, one hundred years later, the Franklin Park golf course, so crudely laid out by Wright, can once again be enjoyed by golfers. Drive through the park any Sunday morning and you will see dozens of golfers enjoying the clean air and open vistas available in the heart of the city. The course is under the direction of the City of Boston's Parks and Recreation Department and recently saw extensive renovations which will ensure its place in history.

*Award-winning historian Anthony Sammarco's column is a regular feature of Dorchester Community News.*