

Cobb's Creek Golf Course

Cobb's Creek Golf Course in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania is a unique venue of great significance and historical prominence in the story of African-American golf in the United States. Opened in 1916 to bring the game of golf in the City of Brotherly Love to common "men of slender purses", Cobb's Creek was exceptional in the fact that from its inception, there were no playing restrictions for race or gender. The attached 1924 article from the "New York Age" as well as the additional supplementary material enclosed shows how delightfully well this has worked in the almost 100 years since in achieving multi-racial sportsmanship and fellowship.

By the late 1930s there were over 5,000 golf courses in the US, but fewer than 20 permitted African Americans to play in any manner. Most of these were ramshackle, rough-hewn tracks that were woefully lacking in challenge and conditioning, many not much better than open fields. Cobb's Creek was vastly different in this regard as it was built to be a championship course that would help Philadelphia to develop championship-ready golfers among all classes of people. Designed by a team of home-grown volunteer architects led by Hugh Wilson of Merion fame and George Crump who built Pine Valley, Cobb's Creek opened to immediate national acclaim and was generally regarded as the best public golf course in the United States before the Great Depression.

In those early years, Cobb's Creek hosted a number of prestigious tournaments including the 1928 USGA Public Links tournament. Even in the 1950s the course hosted the PGA Tour's "Daily News Open" twice, where men like Arnold Palmer and Billy Casper competed alongside Howard Wheeler, Ted Rhodes, Charlie Sifford, and other UGA stars.

Over the years, Cobb's Creek hosted the United Golfer's Association (UGA) National Open tournaments three times (1936, 1947, and 1956) as well as numerous regular events on that tour. African-American golfing pioneers John Dendy (1936), Howard Wheeler (1947), and Charlie Sifford (1956) won the National Opens held at Cobb's Creek. From the 1940s on, both Wheeler and Sifford considered Cobb's Creek their home course, and gravitated there for its challenge, beauty, and welcoming atmosphere of racial inclusion.

Wheeler was the Negro National Champion 6 times - 1933, 1938, 1946, 1947, 1948, and 1958 (no tournament 1942-1945). Sifford also won 6 times - five in a row from 1952 to 1956 and 1960. Although Sifford's story is now well known, Wheeler was a local legend who never fully received the recognition he deserves.

Howard (Butch) Wheeler was born in Atlanta in 1911 and after completing elementary school went to work as a caddie. He carried clubs for Bobby Jones and eventually rose to Caddie Master at East Lake Golf Club. In the late 1930's, the cross-handed star moved to Philadelphia, qualified for the US Open in 1950 and 1951, and was a daily fixture at Cobb's Creek until his death in 1968.

We've enclosed considerable supplemental material about the course and its historic role in African-American golf that appears in our book, "Cobb's Creek Golf Course – Unearthing a Treasure". Also please find more about our groups efforts at the following websites:

http://xchem.villanova.edu/~bausch/focc/Friends_of_Cobbs_Creek/Welcome.html

<http://trenhamgolfhistory.org/PTHGCobbsCreekRestoration3.html>

The land Cobb's Creek was built on is also historically significant as a by-way route for the Underground Railroad during the 1800's. The land Cobb's Creek Golf Course occupies today was originally owned by Samuel Rhoads (1806-1868). He was a cousin of famed abolitionists Thomas and Edward Garrett and he was a Quaker as were the Garrett's, Abraham Pennock, and John Sellers. They all worked together to help runaway slaves traveling north.

Rhoads, in addition to having an Underground Railroad station on his property, was a stockholder in the Underground Railroad and provided financial and physical support. Rhoads traveled to England in 1834 and met many Quakers who were actively engaged in the anti-slavery movement. On a second visit to England in 1847 he was able to raise considerable sums of money in addition to his own contributions.

Abraham L. Pennock and Samuel Rhoads were close friends. Pennock owned the Howard House, a temperance inn, at the corner of West Chester Pike and Pennock Avenue a few blocks south of the golf course. The inn served meals and rented rooms to travelers. The Howard House played a major role in the Underground Railroad as a meeting place for abolitionists. Tunnels from the building were found that led directly to Cobb's Creek. Southern businessmen traveling to Philadelphia often stopped at the inn and left their slaves there while they conducted business in Philadelphia. Upon their return to the inn they would discover that their slaves were gone! On maps from the mid 1800's the roads bisecting today's golf course property were named Rhoads Road, Pennock Street, and Sellers Street. Cobb's Creek itself was valued as a shallow enough water route for escaping slaves to travel where they could not be tracked by bounty hunters with their dogs who'd lose the scent at the creek's edge.

Enclosed please find additional materials on all of these matters. We wish to humbly submit this application for your careful consideration and we'd be honored to answer any additional questions or concerns you may have. We wish you the best in helping to preserve the great heritage of the game of golf and the heroic role of African-American pioneers and stars of the game.

Sincerely,

Mike Cirba and "The Friends of Cobb's Creek Golf Course"