

Courses with CHARACTER

A handful of truly quirky, unusual courses exist well under the radar screen in the Met Area

BY CHUCK STOGEL

At first glance, the listing looks and reads like other real estate particulars for luxurious homes with sizeable property in the Hamptons: “60 acres. 20,000-square-foot manor house, eight bedrooms, 12 baths. 14 gardens. Three ponds, stocked with bass, perch, pickerel. Grass tennis court. Guest cottage. 75-foot flush-edge pool.”

On closer inspection, the write-up for Three Ponds Farm in Bridgehampton, New

York, also lists the house and grounds as being “a magnificent collaboration between three brilliant architects, each a master in his field.” There’s Allan Greenberg, the architect of record, whose résumé includes work at The White House, Princeton University and Rockefeller Center. There’s landscape architect Edmund D. Hollander. Finally, there’s “golf course architect Rees Jones.”

Yes, that’s right. Three Ponds Farm, situated



John D. Rockefeller Sr. (above) was the visionary behind Pocantico Hills at his family’s Westchester estate.

on Scuttle Hole Road directly across the street from Atlantic Golf Club (another Rees Jones design), boasts its own course, of sorts. It's a four-green layout with a nine-hole, multiple-tee routing, bearing an official USGA Course Rating and Slope.

Three Ponds Farm is one of the few non-membership private estate courses left in the Met Area, along with the Rockefeller family's Pocantico Hills Golf Course in Sleepy Hollow, New York, and the now-dormant, but also for sale, 350-acre Hammersley Hill estate in Pawling, New York.

This trio headlines a fascinating but obscure subset of golf domains: quirky courses, rarely seen by everyday golfers, that boast intriguing histories and sublime design characteristics. In the early 1900s, there were up to a dozen or more estate layouts in the region. Some have survived as golf clubs today with memberships, others have simply disappeared. Such baronial courses of long ago include Julius Fleischman's Harbor Hills in Sands Point, N.Y.; Montgomery Maze's nine-holer in Pearl River, N.Y.; Adolph Zukor's Dellwood in New City, N.Y.; Otto Herman Kahn's Oheka course in Cold Spring Harbor, N.Y.; William K. Vanderbilt's Deepdale forerunner in Lake Success, N.Y.; the Walter W. Law course in Briarcliff Manor, N.Y.; and J. Kennedy Tod's private layout in Greenwich, Connecticut.

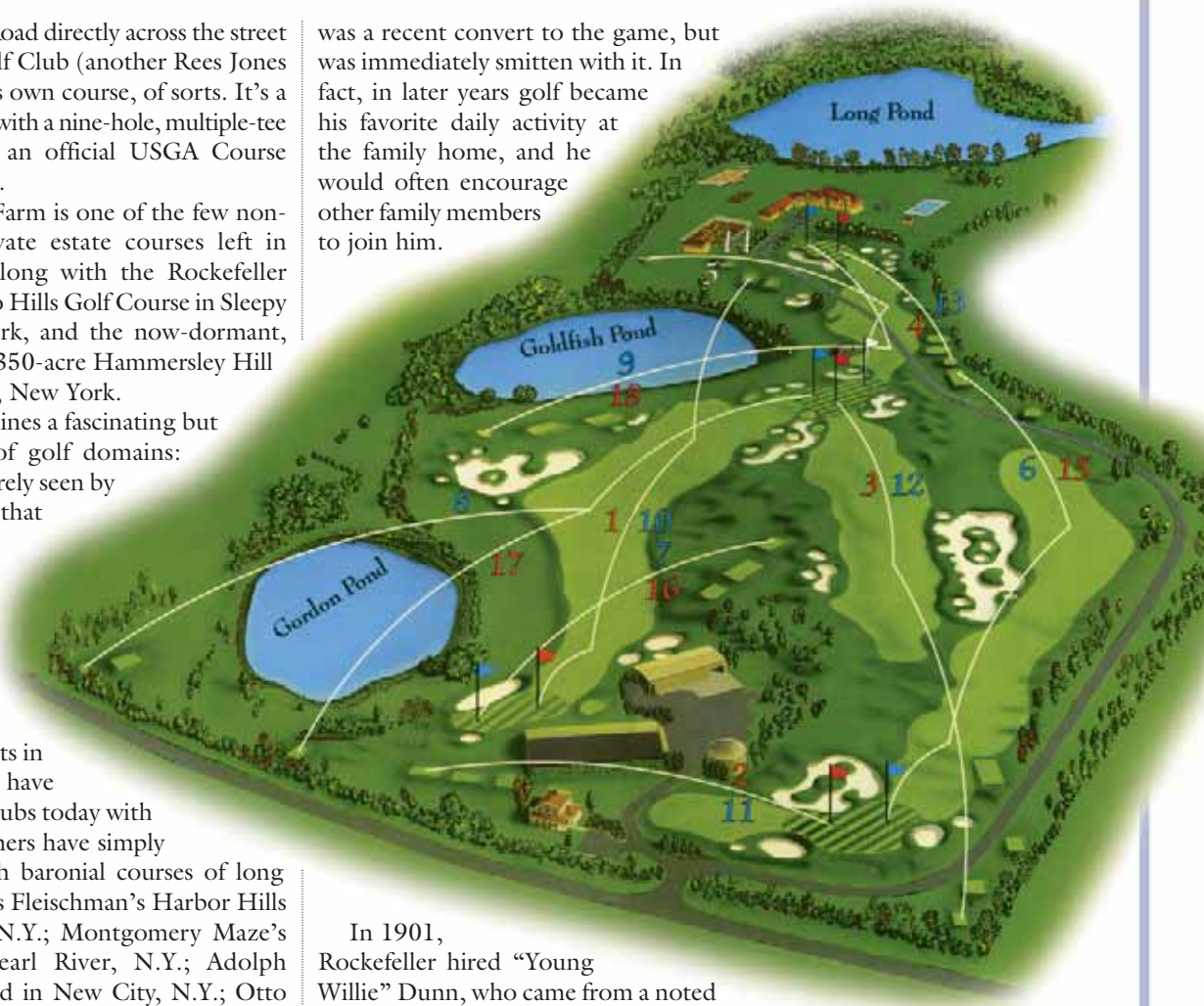
Here's a closer look at some of the Met area's more charismatic layouts.

POCANTICO HILLS

Originally part of an enormous 3,400-acre family estate northeast of the Village of Sleepy Hollow, Pocantico Hills Golf Course is adjacent to Kykuit, the Classical Revival mansion built in 1913 for John D. Rockefeller. Although the mansion and surrounding grounds are now open six days a week for public tours as part of Historic Hudson Valley, the golf course is strictly off limits except for select family members and an occasional outside group.

As a history of Pocantico Hills notes, golf first came to the Rockefeller estate after John D. visited Lakewood, New Jersey, at that time a lively tourist and winter golf destination. He

was a recent convert to the game, but was immediately smitten with it. In fact, in later years golf became his favorite daily activity at the family home, and he would often encourage other family members to join him.



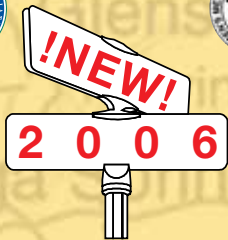
In 1901, Rockefeller hired "Young Willie" Dunn, who came from a noted family of Scottish professionals, to build him a course at Kykuit. Dunn's credits include expanding the original 12-hole layout at Shinnecock Hills to a full 18, along with creating the courses at Apawamis, Scarsdale and Ardsley. Dunn designed a 12-hole course that served the Rockefeller family for nearly four decades.

In 1937, architect William S. Flynn was contracted by John D. Rockefeller Jr. to provide a more "modern" course at Pocantico Hills. Flynn also came with an impressive résumé, having worked on the original East course at Merion near Philadelphia and, with construction engineer Howard Toomey, built the present course at Shinnecock Hills in 1931.

At Pocantico Hills, Flynn built a nine-hole "reversible" course that stretches out in the shape of a "C." The routing has nine fairways and 13 greens, but is played as an 18-hole course. Five greens are played twice, from opposite directions.

The course became a favorite place for several generations of Rockefellers. In the book

The innovative routing at Three Ponds Farm (above) was conceived by Rees Jones.



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The Rockefeller Family Home: Kykuit, Steven Rockefeller Jr. recalls the times he spent with his grandfather on the course. "Riding with him on the golf cart was one of the great treats; you always got a series of terrific hugs and slaps on the back – it was very special." Steve Jr. also recalls the informality of the course. "We often played without shoes or shirts. We even played with our dogs. It lends itself to beginners. You don't feel the pressure of playing in front of a huge membership."

Overall, Pocantico Hills covers 5,673 yards with a par of 36-34-70. Scenic views of Kykuit, the Rockefeller Playhouse and glimpses of the Hudson River abound from the golf course, making it a very special experience. Should you ever receive an invitation to play, accept it.

THREE PONDS FARM

When real estate broker Edward S. Gordon and his wife, Cheryl, wanted to add a few golf holes to their 60-acre expanse in Bridgehampton, Rees Jones got the call. Built in 1996, four years after Atlantic opened, the course covers 45 acres. With four greens being used multiple times, there are numerous tee boxes and a surprisingly fluid routing that totals 18 holes with a par of 35-35-70, including several crossings of both Gordon Pond and Goldfish Pond.

From the championship tees, Three Ponds Farm measures 6,307 yards. Although the sequence of pars mirrors each other for the front and back nines, only the par-four fifth and 14th holes measure the same, at 280 yards from the back tees.

"Three of the greens are played as double greens, and one green is played three times, to make up the basic nine holes," said Jones. "Still, you play from so many different directions, with different pars, you don't realize you've played any of the greens before."

Overall, there are more than 25 tee boxes, a multitude of bunkers that serve several holes from various directions, and a few doglegs. Greens have multiple flags, for front and back. The sides of the four greens are

more sloped than other Jones layouts for two reasons: to help accept approach shots; and because with minimal play, only a few hole locations are needed.

Should this be considered one of Jones' finest works?

"Well, it may be my most creative challenge," said the architect.

Gordon died in 2000 at age 65, and Three Ponds Farm has subsequently been listed for sale with Hamptons realtor Allen M. Schneider Associates. Asking price: \$75 million.



QUAKER HILL & HAMMERSLEY HILL

Nestled on an elevated, fertile plateau in eastern Dutchess County, N.Y., the hamlet of Quaker Hill sits three miles east of Pawling Village. It was here that the late Lowell Thomas, a world-renowned traveler, adventurer, collector, broadcaster, writer and editor, set up his home and base of operations.

A sports devotee – he sponsored a

traveling softball team called the Nine Old Men – Thomas was likewise an avid golfer who in the early 1940s engaged friend and architect Robert Trent Jones to design two separate courses for himself and guests.

The first of the two layouts is now known as Quaker Hill Country Club. It's a nine-holer, with distinctly separate teeing areas to form 18 holes, which opened in 1941. Overall, the course measures 6,110 yards with a par of 35-35-70.

"It's a very playable, but very challenging course," said Tony Vos, who's been the head pro since 2000. "You never get bored. The greens, particularly, require a lot of local knowledge."

With a membership of just 150 families, the club prides itself on its friendly atmosphere, "affordability" and not having advance tee times. Facilities include tennis, a well-manicured croquet layout surrounded by ladder-back benches and, perhaps most notable of all, a 19th century barn converted into a clubhouse and museum.

The upstairs level of The Barn, as it is called, features a History of Civilization Fireplace in a great room with a stage and former projection room, and a well-preserved,

intact, wood-paneled Studio Museum from which Thomas, who died in 1981, broadcast many of his radio commentaries. His signature sign-on was, "Good evening, everybody," and his traditional sign-off was, "So long, until tomorrow."

If Quaker Hill was Thomas's playground and broadcast studio, Hammersley Hill was his residential estate. It too has, or had, a golf course. And just like Three Ponds Farm, it's also for sale.

Now owned by Edgar Bronfman Jr., the Seagram heir and entertainment entrepreneur, Hammersley Hill is less than a mile from the Quaker Hill club. Although the original mansion is gone, this is where Thomas lived and, in 1944, where architect Jones often stayed while he was crafting the IBM course now called Casperkill Country Club in nearby Poughkeepsie. Jones laid out six holes at Hammersley in 1944 and the parcel was expanded to a nine-hole routing 25 years later.

"It's quite a course. It really had excellent greens and some long, long holes," said Michael Liffland, the property manager who was hired in 1969 and has been on the scene ever since.

Babe Ruth was a regular at scenic Quaker Hill, and one photo in the clubhouse shows him arriving on a motorcycle (opposite page, middle).

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According to Liffland, one hole measured 870 yards with a par of 7½, another hole stretched 640 yards, and with other holes bearing pars of 3½ and 4½, the nine holes had a cumulative par of 37½. “Mr. Thomas assigned some unusual pars, with half-pars counting,” said the property manager.

Apparently, a ball within a club length was a gimme for a half-stroke, or so legend has it. And who’s to argue? Thomas was the owner and rules maker.

Liffland said he is still mowing 85 acres that comprised a portion of the course, and several greens are puttable, but nobody really plays there. The course, however, could easily be resurrected. Listed with realtors Houlihan Lawrence of Brewster, N.Y., the asking price is a modest \$15 million.

MOREFAR

Not too far south of Quaker Hill is secluded and clandestine Morefar, whose crafting was inspired by lone entrepreneur and insurance magnate Edwin Cornelius Vander Starr.

C.V. Starr, as he was known, established the first insurance venture in Shanghai in 1919. He became a devotee of Asian culture and artwork, and went on to found the current firm known as American International Group (AIG).

Morefar, which is sometimes called Back O’ Beyond, occupies 500 acres amidst a landscape of stone walls and wooded hillsides acquired by Starr in 1941. The course, which is not visible from the pillared entranceway, was built in two segments: The front nine is credited to architect Val Carlson and the

Golf Comes to Governors Island

When the U.S. Coast Guard abandoned Governors Island in 1996 after a 30-year stay, it left behind the remnants of a short course with six greens that is being resurrected and renovated for a four-day event in October called the Manhattan Golf Classic.

Various competitions and clinics from October 19 through 22 will feature professional stars Tom Watson, Annika Sorenstam and Natalie Gulbis, actors Craig T. Nelson, Dennis Quaid, William Shatner and Bruce McGill, teaching guru Hank Haney and Donald Trump.

Golf was first played on Governors Island around 1903, and since the island is situated a mere 800 yards off the southern tip of Manhattan, golfers who played the previous course report there is virtually no better or more impressive view of the Big Apple. Site of the 1988 summit meeting between U.S. President Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, 150 of the property’s current 173 acres are under the domain of a joint city/state agency called the Governors Island Preservation & Education Corporation. The remainder is controlled by the National Park Service.

Governors Island originally consisted of a six-hole course situated on just under 10 acres. For the one-time golf event, architect Robert McNeil of Northeast Golf in Saunderstown, Rhode Island, was employed to design a nine-hole, multiple-tee routing using the six existing greens, and Jim Basiliere of East Coast Shaping in Plainville, Conn., handled the renovation. Under tight restrictions, both were faced with tasks they’ve never encountered previously.



“This is a significant challenge, with a lot of different entities to deal with,” said McNeil. “We spent one entire day with [a] bomb squad, just to make sure the course was safe. There were a lot of unidentified [ordinance] situations we had to avoid. We’re just not sure what’s down there [underground]. It’s a very delicate situation.”

After a half-dozen locations were marked, Basiliere moved in with the restriction that he could only move dirt around and not add any to the property.

“It’s the first time I’ve had to deal with any possible bombs in the ground,” he said. “We were a little nervous at first. We resurfaced the tees, changed their positioning a bit and reshaped all the greens using a small, multi-terrain loader and no bulldozer at all.”

At one location, Basiliere & Co. hit what

appeared to be an underground brick structure. Stopping at that point, and calling in an archaeologist, it was determined the edifice was once a walkway connecting one of the forts to another. That necessitated a little more reshaping of one of the greens.

“It took a little creative juice to make it all work,” added McNeil, whose plans called for sodding tees and greens, and seeding fairways. “But it’s a breathtaking location.”

Because of the crisscrossing nature of the course, only one foursome will play at a time. In fact, they may be the last foursomes to ever play there. Since there is no commitment to the Manhattan Golf Classic beyond this year, there is no official word what will happen to the temporary course at the conclusion of the event.



The memorable bronze statues at Morefar are situated throughout the golf course.

back nine, which was added in 1964, was designed by Edward Ryder, who also did the public Richter Park layout in nearby Danbury, Conn. Coincidentally, Richter Park and Morefar have long-distance views of each other, across a lake called Boggs Pond.

According to one story, Morefar got its name because C.V. Starr hired Chinese laborers to work on the property and, when visitors from New York would ask where the location was, they were told: “More far. More far.” Back O’ Beyond, meanwhile, is an Australian term meaning the middle of nowhere.

Starr died in 1968 at age 76, and since then AIG or related entities have controlled the club and course. Membership was limited to executives and a few selected locals, and tee times were at first restricted to one group on the course at a time (now since increased to a leisurely four groups an hour, if that).

As a course, Morefar is tree-lined, with rolling terrain and numerous elevation changes. Most notably, the tee box for the 13th hole, a 150-yard par three, actually sits just off shore in Boggs Pond, and plays back over water to the mainland.

Between the 14th green and 15th tee, overlooking the lake and nestled among trees and flowers, is a reverent burial site containing

the ashes of C.V. Starr where golfers may pay their respects. In keeping with the founder’s Asian fascination, many of the buildings at Morefar are decorated with Asian designs and the club logo consists of three Chinese characters which, roughly translated, mean “faraway place.”

Still, it’s the on-course sculptures that most visitors continue to talk about after a visit to Morefar. There are dozens of bronze sculptures, and the artwork includes nymphs, nudes, animals, a boy fishing in a pond and, in a bunker fronting the par-four fifth green, a boy and girl at play. By rule, if any of the statues interfere with a player’s stance or swing, they are considered an “immovable obstruction” and the golfer is allowed to drop within a club length.

“The sculptures are remarkably life-like and usually appear animated,” said Howard Munck, who has played the course. “It can be a little unsettling when you’re standing on the tee box, overshadowed by the sculptures. But they are unforgettable.”

Unforgettable is a word often used by those lucky enough to have played any of these quirky courses of the Met Area. ■

Chuck Stogel is a frequent contributor to *The Met Golfer*. He lives in White Plains, New York.