

The second century of golf in Randolph began with a devastating flood—but Montague is back, better than ever.

By Gordon Harding

“Golf links have been laid out at Montague Place, and this game will soon become the rage.”

That simple sentence from the pages of the June 29, 1897, edition of the *Herald and News*, a weekly paper published in Randolph, Vermont, marked the beginning of what has been more than a century of golf being played on the same turf.



(left) There are several green sites at the Montague Golf Course that have been in use for more than 70 years.

Photo by Bob Labbance

(above) Colonel Robert J. Kimball was the father of golf in Randolph.

From the collection of Bob Labbance

(background) Randolph's clubhouse in its heyday.

From the collection of Bob Labbance



This is what was left of the tee and fairway of the ninth hole after the flood of '98.

Photo by Bob Labbanca

The name 'Montague' and the game of golf remain linked today under the banner of the Montague Golf Club of Randolph, a club formally organized in 1913 and now entering its 86th continuous season of play. As a club, it is the eighth-oldest in the state—but its venue, which began as the Montague Place links, is the second-oldest golfing grounds in Vermont. Only the private Dorset Field Club can claim greater longevity.

None of this history, however, was in the minds of the Montague

members who, on a Saturday morning last June, stood on the high bluff that is the blue tee for the first hole and watched the roiling, boiling waters of the Third Branch completely destroy the fairways of the first and adjacent ninth holes.

A normally placid stream, the Third Branch of the White River essentially bisects the 18-hole Montague layout, coming into direct contact with seven holes and having the potential to impact on three others under extreme conditions.

The conditions couldn't have

been more extreme than Saturday, after more than six inches of rain fell in a torrential downpour condensed into eight hours. The banks of the Third Branch couldn't contain the freakish deluge and the resultant floodwaters wreaked havoc on a course that superintendent Brian Smith and staff had just brought to peak condition. It was a catastrophe.

The first estimate of damage to the course was pegged at a quarter-of-a-million dollars—an estimate that proved to be far too conservative. Smith, at an emergency meeting of

the Montague Board of Directors just two days after the flood, said, "I've never in all my experience seen anything like this. I don't know where to begin."

But the catastrophe of 1998 is only a small chapter in more than a century of golf in Randolph. And if there's an irony to be found in that disaster, it is that the only part of the present Montague course that was not damaged were the six holes laid out on the original turf of the Montague Place links.

Two colonels and their families were important contributors to the beginnings of golf in Randolph. Col. Robert J. Kimball and Col. Albert B. Chandler were men born in Randolph who went on to great financial success; Kimball as an investor, Chandler in communications with the telegraph and the telephone industries. Both men lived in Brooklyn, N.Y., and both summered in their beloved Randolph where they built estates in 1887. Chandler's 'Mari-Castle' was rivaled by Kimball's 'Montague

Place,' and both homes still are prominent in Randolph more than 100 years later. Cols. Chandler and Kimball expressed their philanthropy similarly, Chandler giving his hometown Chandler Music Hall; Kimball gifting the Randolph Kimball Public Library. Col. Kimball, however, had another gift for the town of his youth—he gave Randolph the game of golf.

In truth, the links laid out at Montague Place in 1897 were probably a gift to Kimball's children—daughters Clara and Annie, and son

Instead of a 300 yard par-4, the ninth was shortened by the angry Third Branch of the White River to 75 yards.

Photo by Bob Labbanee

William Eugene. Over the course of the next 25 years, Annie and Clara loaned the grounds on which the game was played and supported every tournament by giving loving cups to the winners. The Montague Golf Club was established in 1913 and held its first medal play handicap tournament that September, the winner's trophy going to Clarence Hodges of Schenectady, N.Y.

Although the *Herald and News* had reported as early as 1909 that "a golf club was in process of formation," it was not until the June 5, 1913, edition that the paper finally declared: "A golf club has been organized to be called the Montague Golf club, which is allowed to use for links the meadows back of Montague Place, through the courtesy of the Kimball family." It further was reported that dues for men would be \$3; boys \$1; women and out-of-towners free. However, "Strangers will be given the privileges of the club on payment of \$3 a season."

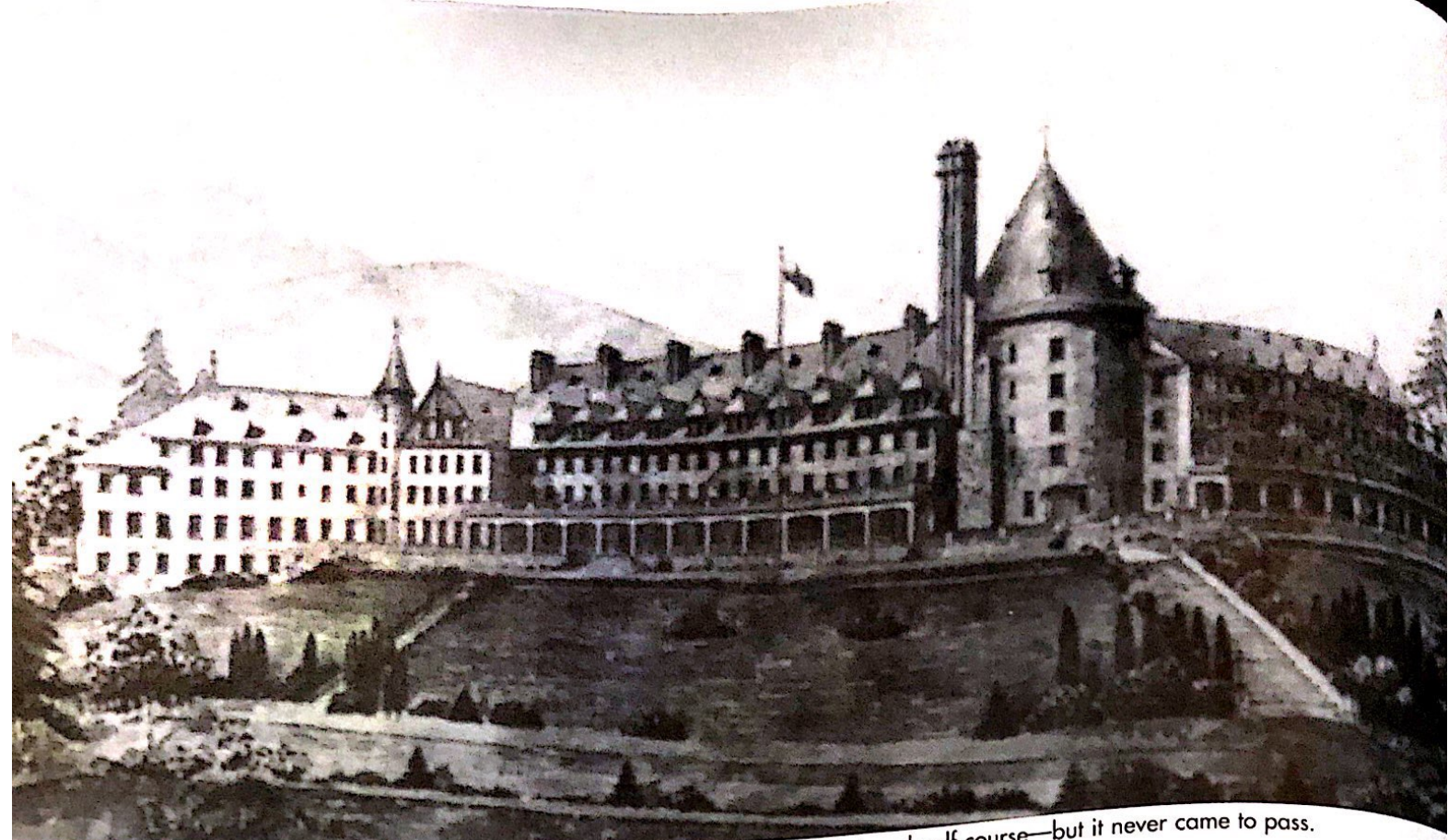
The enthusiasm surrounding the formation of the Montague Golf

Club did not escape the eye of one of Randolph's most active entrepreneurs, A. E. Chandler, son of Col. A. B. Chandler. Young Chandler's dreams were extravagant, and they included plans for a million-dollar, 200-room resort hotel near his 'Greystone' residence in Randolph. Included in those plans was an 18-hole golf course.

Construction of Hotel Chandler was supposed to begin in the spring of 1917, but World War I took priority. The day the contract was set to be signed, the head of the contracting

firm advised Chandler that he had just tendered, "the entire facilities of his concern to the government for war purposes, and until a reply was received, he did not feel free to accept the Randolph project." Chandler persisted, and scaled back his grandiose plans to a smaller endeavor—the Stedman Inn—with an 18-hole golf course on the grounds in front of the Inn. The Walabac Country Club was incorporated in 1920 to build and operate the golf course. Despite initial enthusiasm, the Walabac course was never completed.





The proposed Hotel Chandler was to include an 18-hole Wayne Stiles-designed golf course—but it never came to pass.
 From the collection of Bob Labbanche

After several years of play on a rudimentary nine-hole layout, noted golf course architect Wayne E. Stiles was hired in 1923 to lay out an 18-hole course, but the project never got beyond nine holes. This was a busy period in Vermont for the Boston-based Stiles, who would revamp the Woodstock layout in 1924, add the upland nine to Rutland in 1927 and complete several other projects. There is no record of his design of the Walabac, an enterprise which did not live beyond 1925. The Stedman Inn likewise failed to live up to expectations and was under new ownership by 1926, the new owner selling off parcels of land that once were part of the Walabac course. (Today the Stedman Inn is known as Windover House. It is located at the junction of Route 66 and Windover Road. The golf course fronted the Inn on the west side of what is now Windover Road.)

Historically, 1925 was a pivotal year for the Montague Golf Club. The 12-year-old club was to become the beneficiary of the last great gift the

Kimball sisters would bestow. Annie and Clara were both in their 50s, and had decided to divest themselves of their Randolph holdings. Their first act was to give to Montague Golf Club the land they had 'loaned' to the club for the previous dozen years. This was a parcel of about 15 acres, which included the seven acres on which the original 1897 links had been laid out. In order for the Club to receive the gift, they had to incorporate, thus giving rise to the mistaken notion that the Club was formed in 1925, rather than 1913.

They also sold Montague Place at a greatly reduced price to a group of local investors calling themselves the Randolph Country Club, Inc. The investors intended to operate a "civic center for gatherings and entertainment" that "may help to put Randolph on the tourist map." Unfortunately all attempts to establish a successful "civic center" at Montague Place failed. In time, the former Kimball estate would enjoy over four decades as Tranquility Nursing Home, now Gifford Elder Care. But the golf course continued

to prosper.

The original Montague Place links had a playing length of 1,844 yards. The members began to refine and expand the course shortly after the formation of the Club in 1913, building a small clubhouse, as well. The first big push to design new links came in the fall of 1925, after receiving the gift from the Kimball sisters. Andy Freeland, the pro at Montpelier, was asked to come to Montague and lay out a new course. Freeland's plans covered "the entire tract, avoids the necessity of driving across fairways and introduces a number of new locations for tees and greens that will make the course much more sporty and interesting to play."

The Freeland design was frequently refined, tees were enlarged, sand bunkers were added to five holes and the course that was played from the late 1920s through to a major addition in 1965 was a par-31 layout set over 2,145 yards.

The next major change, and a momentous one for Club members, both emotionally and financially,

was the purchase from Robert L. Knight's estate of 65 acres of land on the west side of the Third Branch. This had been part of Knight's Green Mountain Stock Farm holdings and would represent the first step off the bluff on which the Montague Place links had been laid out. A highly-regarded golf course architect was engaged to design the three holes 'down below,' but he refused to have his name attached to the final work because Montague members cut a \$60,000 budget in half and managed to pass the \$30,000 sum by only one vote. The design was compromised to fit the reduced budget.

The lower three holes—a 415-yard fifth hole; a roughly 400-yard sixth hole; and 140-yard seventh hole—became part of a 2,764-yard revamped course that played to a par-34. It would play to this par for most of the next 26 years, and was a challenging test of one's game. Famed British Open champion Bobby Locke needed an eagle on the par-4 18th hole to shoot a 71 the last time he played the Montague course in 1973.

A move to expand the Montague course to 18 holes came in 1990 when Green Mountain Stock Farm owner Jesse Sammis III offered a 99-year lease on some 90 acres of land he owned on the easterly side of the Third Branch, contiguous to the 'lower' three holes of the Montague layout, and extending northerly all the way to Route 66. Jumping through the Act 250 hoops took most of two years, but work was underway in 1991 and the 'Lowland' nine was put into play in 1992.

Originally earmarked as the back nine, the Lowland is now the front side, a Scottish links type layout that stretches 3,149 yards from the tips, and plays to a par 36. The contrast from Lowland to Highland nines is marked, offering the golfer extremes in venue and challenge. The new nine holes were designed by Marty Keene—but continue to be refined by Geoff Cornish.

The expansion to 18 holes

marked a major departure in focus for the Montague Golf Club, making green fees a more vital part of the Club's finances. Up to the expansion, Montague operated much like a private club with an active social program. Visitors were always welcome—but they were not sought after. Despite being located just two blocks from the heart of Randolph's downtown, the course was tucked off the beaten path. Until expansion offered a view of the golf course from Route 66, it was not even possible to drive by and see the course. This physical isolation did much to establish and reinforce the private character of the Club.

PGA pro Matt Gidney-Engberg arrived for the 1992 season. Under his management, the growth in play and revenue had been steady—until the catastrophe of 1998. Ironically, the catastrophe will probably turn out to be a blessing. Because it was flood damage, the golf club became eligible for disaster relief, and has been able to secure \$600,000 at low interest through the Small Business Administration. Those funds are not only repairing and enhancing the course, but have enabled the Club to pay off higher-interest loans as part of the total funding package. Golfers will find a course that is vastly improved over the pre-flood layout when they visit in 1999.

Many people and players have been significant parts of this first century of golf in Randolph, but several deserve special mention. The Misses Kimball, Annie and Clara, already have been extolled. They both passed away just five years after giving Montague Golf Club the meadows east of Montague Place.


Another extraordinary and legendary figure was Miss Laura Wedgwood, who, it is claimed, played on the original Montague Place links in 1898. She would have been just six years old, but she lived less than a block from Montague Place and would have been welcome. She was still playing the game she loved in her 80s. She found that she enjoyed the game

more if she reduced the number of implements in her bag, playing most of her later years with just a three wood and a putter, later getting rid of the putter. She played a round with Mildred Blackmer in November of 1973—thus achieving 75 years of play on the Montague Place turf. She was 81 at the time, and would die 10 years later.

Robert ("Bobby Hutch") Hutchinson was the first multiple Club champion, dominating play in the early '50s with four successive titles, then adding the 1959 and 1961 crowns for a total of six. And although he didn't win again, it is important to note that he was a finalist a dozen years later, losing the 1973 crown to David Barnard.

Dave Barnard, nick-named "Digger," is unquestionably the most significant Montague member as far as competition is concerned. Over a span of 28 seasons beginning in 1955, he won the Club championship a total of 14 times, his last victory coming in 1983. His victories span four decades, and he still hopes to garner that elusive fifth-decade win.

Bob Soule began playing golf at Montague in 1932 at age seven. As a youngster, he was at the golf course every day, earning free play by raking sand traps and whipping greens to get rid of the worm casts. Those early years of play and practice would later translate into a Club championship in 1956, and he would serve Montague in a variety of ways, including as president in 1954-55. He still plays virtually every day, and plays the game well and with elegance. He is just three years shy of entering his eighth decade of play at Montague and has no intention of quitting. Nor should he.

While it's true the second century of golf in Randolph began with a catastrophe, there's every reason to believe the game, the course and Montague Golf Club will prevail. 

Gordon Harding has been writing about Randolph as long as any scribe in the state.