

OAKMONT RESTORED

A Record of Oakmont Country Club's Architectural Transformation

W. Dunlop White III

When the 116th United States Open comes to Oakmont Country Club in June, tree removal will continue to generate a buzz. As a crucial part of a 20-year restoration plan, Oakmont – home of an unprecedented 9 U.S. Open Men's Championships – removed more than 12,600 trees in what will long be regarded as one of the most definitive architectural renaissances in golf history. The USGA Architecture Archive, the world's primary repository of historically significant materials on golf course architecture, offers a glimpse at this evolutionary transformation through



The iconic Church Pew bunkers on hole 3 in 2007



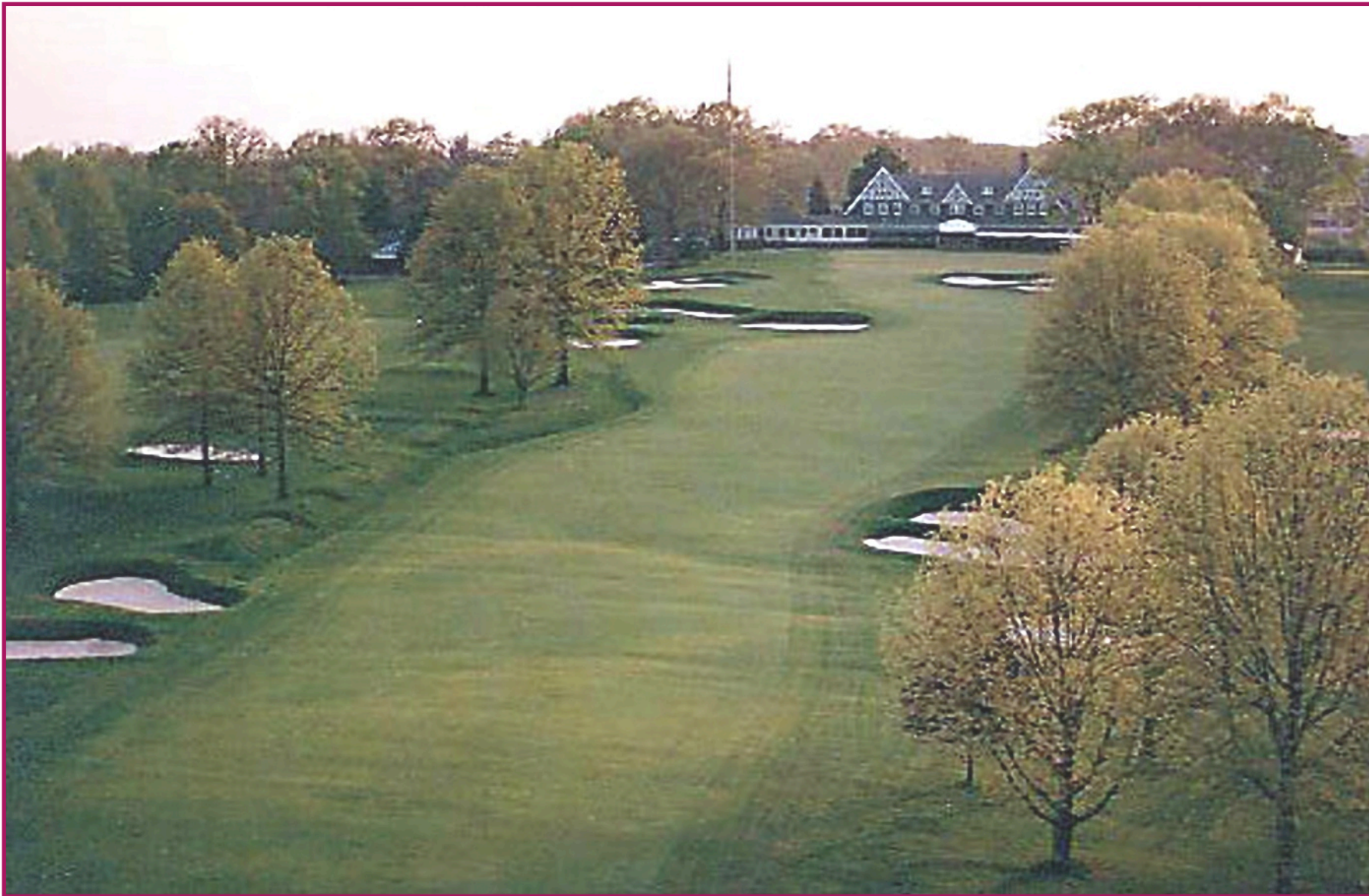
A panoramic view of hole 18 during the 1927 U.S. Open

The open, barren nature of Oakmont was central to Henry Clay Fownes' vision for his "Hades of Hulton" from 1903 until his death in 1935. This vision was maintained by his son and successor, William C. Fownes, Jr., until he resigned as President in 1946.



From left to right, hole 1, hole 9, hole 10 and hole 11 in 1973

The post-Fownes' era coincided with the emergence of a nationwide tree-planting trend. Oakmont was among hundreds of golf clubs that believed high volumes of newly-planted trees could enhance the golf course aesthetic. Oakmont officials responded by planting thousands of ornamental saplings in virtually every open space on the golf course as part of their newly-adopted orchard program. At the 1973 U.S. Open Championship, Oakmont's official press release revealed that 3,200 trees had been added to the golf course.



Hole 9 in 1983

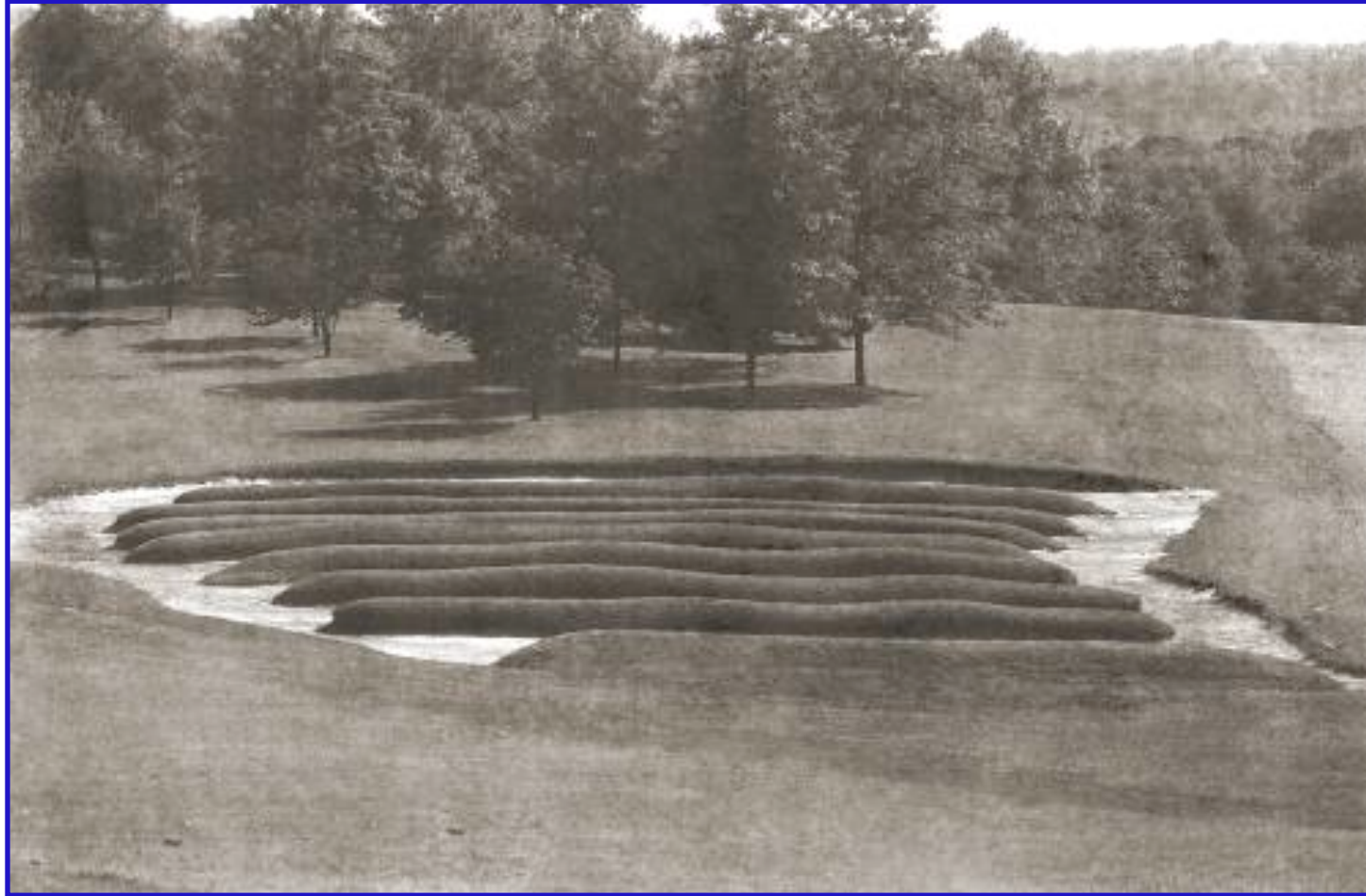
In the early-1980s, Oakmont hardly resembled its original open and rugged identity. A vertical framework of trees enveloped each hole. Fairway corridors shrunk, and tree shade promoted lush and soggy conditions. Golfers, who once enjoyed long sweeping vistas, as indicated by numerous sportswriters, could no longer see from one hole to the next.



1950 Aerial Photograph

In the early-1990s, club officials discovered a 1950 aerial photograph (above) revealing that Oakmont was virtually treeless at the time of W.C. Fownes' death in 1950. As a result, Oakmont officials quickly converted the aerial into their design template for restoration, since the year 1950 represented the best approximation of the Fownes' family vision for the golf course. *"The issue was never about the virtues or liabilities of trees",* said one Golf Committee member. *"Our sole motivation was to reclaim the Fownes' legacy and protect his vision for the golf course."*

Hole No. 4



Hole 4 in 1992



Hole 4 in 2005

Between 1993 -1995, while club members were home asleep, former superintendent Mark Kuhns and his team convened regularly before daybreak with a large brigade of chainsaws. Utility trucks beamed light toward the trees tagged for removal, while chippers and stump grinders methodically discarded their parts. Topsoil and fresh sod camouflaged the leftover holes, while high-powered vacuums and large tarps hid remnants of sawdust and debris. Every sunrise, a handful of trees mysteriously disappeared without any clues to tip off the membership.

Hole No. 6



Hole 6 was girdled by vegetation in 1978



Trees continued to pinch hole 6 in 1983



Sweeping view of holes 5 and 6 in 2008

Hole No. 13



Crowds gather around hole 12 green (background) and hole 13 green (foreground) during the 1927 U.S. Open



Holes 12 and 13 were divided by a row of tree plantings in 1978



Holes 12 and 13 remained buffered by a row of tree plantings in 1983

“It was the tree work between holes 12 and 13 (above) that gave us away,” said Kuhns. “As we reduced the single file row of pin oaks from nine to about three, members started noticing and asking questions.”



The restored view of Holes 12 and 13 in 2005

Hole No.14



In 1983 tree plantings surrounded hole 14



Hole 14 restored in 2007



Hole 14 in 1927 with the clubhouse standing prominently in the backdrop of the hole.



Hole 14 restored in 2007

Hole No. 17



Hole 17 in 1992



Hole 17 in 2007



Hole 1 and the Turnpike wall are located in the foreground, while Hole 2 and the east part of the golf course is now visible in the distance.

Grantland Rice, one of America's prominent, early-twentieth century sportswriters, once wrote that he enjoyed seeing 17 of Oakmont's 18 flags from the clubhouse porch. In an effort to recapture these cross-course vistas, superintendent John Zimmers and his assistant Mike McCormick have removed more than 3,000 additional trees along the perimeter banks of the Pennsylvania Turnpike and railroad line, which effectively bisect the golf course into two distinct parts. For years, this feeling of separation was magnified by tree growth since golfers could not clearly see from one side of the Turnpike and railroad to the other. In all, more than 2-acres of trees have been removed since the last U.S. Open Championship in 2007. As a result, holes 2 through 8 on the east side of the Turnpike and railroad are no longer visually obscured from the clubhouse and the rest of the golf course. If Rice returned today, his comment might plausibly be - "what's all the hype, it looks just like it did when I was last here."



Looking back across the Turnpike at hole 12 from hole 7 green

In preparation for the 2016 U.S. Open Championship, Zimmers and McCormick also removed a stand of 4,000 trees to the right of hole 12, which opened up views of holes 6 and 7 across the Turnpike. Oakmont continues to play a crucial role, more than any other course, to serve as a definitive example of tree management. Today many of the world's most treasured venues point to Oakmont for inspiration as they attempt to recapture their architectural heritage.

*Dunlop White is a member of the USGA Museum Committee, who has been developing the **USGA Architecture Archive**, the world's primary repository of historically significant materials on golf course architecture. Photo contributions are courtesy of Oakmont Country Club and Joe Bausch of The Bausch Collection.*