

# Links to the Past

THE STATE OF FLORIDA IS RICH IN GOLFING HISTORY AND HOME TO SOME OF THE FIRST COURSES IN THE COUNTRY

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In 1895, a three-hole course opened on the grounds of the Castillo de San Marcos in St. Augustine. Of the initial 200 club members, each paying 50 cents to join, 70 were women.

It took four centuries for golf to make its way to Florida, but once it did, there was no stopping it. A two-hole course in Sarasota was the first, in 1886, followed by three holes surrounding a 17th-century Spanish fort in St. Augustine. Soon there were a dozen courses in the state, then 50, and today the total stands at more than 1,250, the most by far of any U.S. state – and trailing only four foreign countries. Indian River County alone boasts 19 golf courses, two of which date back 100 years.

The origin of golf is as clear as a Scottish fog bank. Several similar games preceded its invention, most notably a Chinese pastime known as chuiwan (“hit ball”), which dates back to the 10th century. A player would place a small wooden ball on a raised base and use an iron-headed club to hit a chip shot toward a hole marked with a flag. Follow-up shots to get the ball in the hole were made from a kneeling position. But there’s no existing proof that chui wan traveled westward and/or influenced the development of golf in Europe.



Mid mashie  
3 iron with a  
hickory shaft,  
circa 1920

The one thing that is certain is that the modern game of golf originated in Scotland. But the exact timing is vague, with the earliest written reference being a 1457 ban of the game by Scotland's James II. He felt his subjects should be spending less time on golf courses and more time practicing archery, given the kingdom's ongoing wars with England. It would be another 45 years before James IV lifted the ban when he took up the game himself.

As for the word "golf," the professional golfer Raymond Floyd once explained, "They call it golf because all the other four letter words were taken."

The origin of golf in America is murky as well. And, again, it was a ban of the sport that provides the earliest known reference. In 1659, an ordinance was issued by the Dutch authorities at Fort Orange (later Albany, New York) to address "the practice of playing golf along the streets, which causes great damage to the windows of the houses, and also exposes people to the danger of being injured." However, the "golf" being mentioned was actually "kolven," a Dutch game in which a heavy curved bat was used to swat a large ball back and forth across a small court.

A few records indicate that golf

equipment existed in America early on. In 1743, a shipment of 96 clubs and 432 balls was sent from the port of Leith in Scotland to South Carolina. And a 1779 ad in *The Royal Gazette*, a New York newspaper, offered "excellent clubs and the veritable Caledonian balls" for sale. But where were these items being used? The South Carolina Golf Club was established in 1786 and the Savannah Golf Club in 1795, but there's no written evidence there was a golf course at either site – or anywhere else then in the United States, for that matter.

As it turns out, the first North American courses, three holes each, were built by Scottish military officers in Montreal and Quebec. The Montreal Golf Club, the first nine-hole course, was founded in 1873.

It would be another 11 years before the U.S. had its first golf course – in a place not usually associated with golf. In 1884, Scotsman Russell Montague enlisted a few friends to help him build a nine-hole course, Oakhurst Links, on his farm in Charleston, West Virginia. As was the custom in those days, a small tower of wet sand would be used instead of a wooden tee.

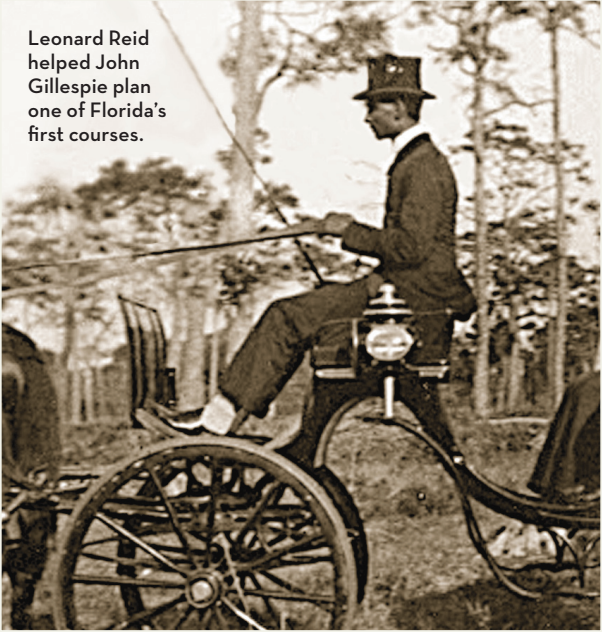
And then came Florida. In 1886, a recent Scottish transplant, Colonel

John Hamilton Gillespie, carved out a two-hole course in the not-yet-incorporated town of Sarasota. He would expand it to nine holes after the turn of the century with the assistance of his butler, coachman and good friend, Leonard Reid.

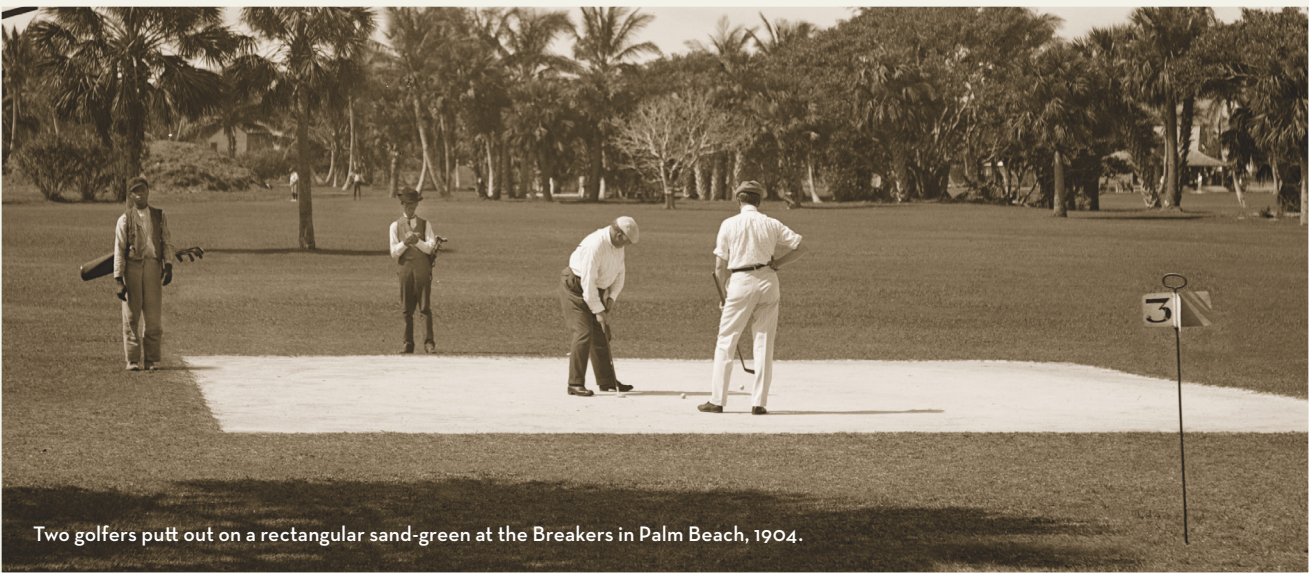
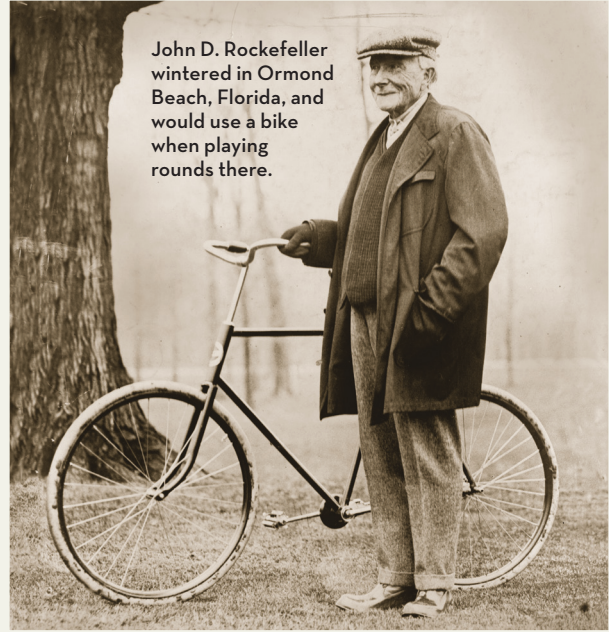
Florida's second golf course was an unusual one, created by Henry Flagler in St. Augustine in 1895. Flagler was in the process of extending his railroad line down Florida's East Coast and recognized golf as a big draw for wealthy snowbirds. He struck a deal with the U.S. Army to build a course on the grounds of the Castillo de San Marcos, a 17th-century Spanish fort that sat across from Flagler's 540-room Ponce de Leon Hotel. There was room enough for only three fairways, but by playing each hole three times, a nine-hole round could be completed. Amazingly, when the St. Augustine Golf Club course opened, the fort it surrounded also served as a prison! In 1886, 500 Apaches were held there, including Geronimo's wives and children. And in 1898, over 200 deserters from the Spanish-American war sat inside the fort's 12-foot-thick walls while golfers played outside. Six more holes would later be added on an adjacent site.



Leonard Reid helped John Gillespie plan one of Florida's first courses.



John D. Rockefeller wintered in Ormond Beach, Florida, and would use a bike when playing rounds there.



Two golfers putt out on a rectangular sand-green at the Breakers in Palm Beach, 1904.





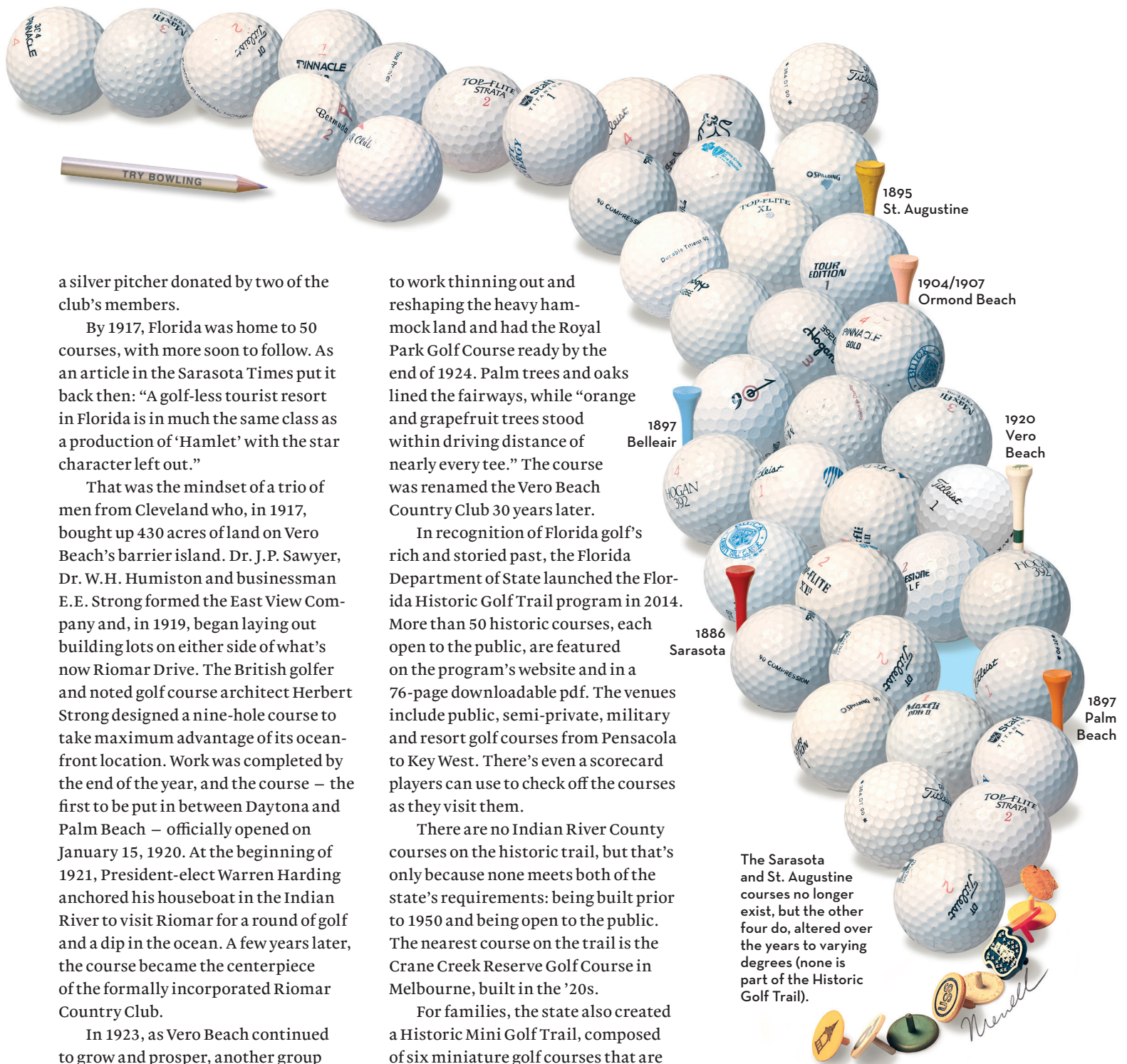
The Vero Beach Country Club started life in 1924 as a nine-hole course known as the Royal Park Golf Course. It was expanded to 18 holes in 1938.

Henry Flagler continued building hotels and golf courses along the East Coast, including a six-hole course at the Breakers hotel in Palm Beach and another across from his sprawling hotel in Ormond Beach. For several seasons, John D. Rockefeller rented an entire floor of the Ormond Beach Hotel and played golf daily, sometimes riding down the fairways on his bike. Across the state, Henry Plant, built the six-hole Belleair Country Club in 1897, and more resorts followed as his railroad expanded southward along the Gulf Coast.

Although men made up the majority of early golfers, women also took part from the get-go, both as players

and, sometimes, club members. When the United States Golf Association was formed in 1895, it held its first three tournaments that same year: the Amateur and Open Championships for men, and a month later, the Women's Amateur Championship. The 13 women competed in windy and rainy conditions, playing from the men's tees at the Meadow Brook Club in Hempstead, New York, one of the toughest courses in the country. The tournament consisted of nine holes in the morning and nine in the afternoon, with a lunch break in between. Since there hadn't been time enough to have a trophy made, Lucy Barnes Brown, the winner with a score of 132, was presented with





a silver pitcher donated by two of the club's members.

By 1917, Florida was home to 50 courses, with more soon to follow. As an article in the Sarasota Times put it back then: "A golf-less tourist resort in Florida is in much the same class as a production of 'Hamlet' with the star character left out."

That was the mindset of a trio of men from Cleveland who, in 1917, bought up 430 acres of land on Vero Beach's barrier island. Dr. J.P. Sawyer, Dr. W.H. Humiston and businessman E.E. Strong formed the East View company and, in 1919, began laying out building lots on either side of what's now Riomar Drive. The British golfer and noted golf course architect Herbert Strong designed a nine-hole course to take maximum advantage of its ocean-front location. Work was completed by the end of the year, and the course – the first to be put in between Daytona and Palm Beach – officially opened on January 15, 1920. At the beginning of 1921, President-elect Warren Harding anchored his houseboat in the Indian River to visit Riomar for a round of golf and a dip in the ocean. A few years later, the course became the centerpiece of the formally incorporated Riomar Country Club.

In 1923, as Vero Beach continued to grow and prosper, another group of men, including Arthur McKee and Waldo Sexton, formed the Royal Park Development Company. The goal was to develop properties on the mainland "in an artistic and reasonable fashion" but also to build a golf course – with "the first nine holes to be put in as soon as possible."

Golf course architect W.G. Eager, with input from Herbert Strong, set

to work thinning out and reshaping the heavy hammock land and had the Royal Park Golf Course ready by the end of 1924. Palm trees and oaks lined the fairways, while "orange and grapefruit trees stood within driving distance of nearly every tee." The course was renamed the Vero Beach Country Club 30 years later.

In recognition of Florida golf's rich and storied past, the Florida Department of State launched the Florida Historic Golf Trail program in 2014. More than 50 historic courses, each open to the public, are featured on the program's website and in a 76-page downloadable pdf. The venues include public, semi-private, military and resort golf courses from Pensacola to Key West. There's even a scorecard players can use to check off the courses as they visit them.

There are no Indian River County courses on the historic trail, but that's only because none meets both of the state's requirements: being built prior to 1950 and being open to the public. The nearest course on the trail is the Crane Creek Reserve Golf Course in Melbourne, built in the '20s.

For families, the state also created a Historic Mini Golf Trail, composed of six miniature golf courses that are more than 50 years old. The oldest is Ripley's Bayfront Mini Golf in St. Augustine, which opened in 1949. Alas, there's not a windmill, loop-de-loop or tacky sculpture in sight – just concrete and green carpet. So skip the trip and visit instead the 36 holes of jungle animals and tropical landscaping, plus a waterfall cavern, at Safari Mini Golf right here in Vero Beach. 🌿

The Sarasota and St. Augustine courses no longer exist, but the other four do, altered over the years to varying degrees (none is part of the Historic Golf Trail).

## Florida HISTORIC GOLF Trail

Home page:  
[www.floridahistoricgolftrail.com](http://www.floridahistoricgolftrail.com)

List of courses:  
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