

## **Fishers Island**

**By: George Peper**

*Appeared in Fall 2011 LINKS*

From Manhattan Island to Cape Cod, the distance as the crow flies is exactly 200 miles. At the precise midpoint of that route lies the most captivating golf course on the East Coast—and arguably in the world—Fishers Island.

It's not an easy course to get onto, not an easy club to get into, and (unless you're a crow or have a private plane) not an easy place to reach. Although Fishers Island is part of New York State—in fact, in the same county as Shinnecock, National, and Maidstone—the nearest point of land is Rhode Island and the best way to get there is by ferry out of Connecticut. But the trip—no matter how long it may take—will be worth it.

Fishers is the work of Seth Raynor, the C.B. Macdonald disciple whose formidable portfolio includes Camargo (Ohio), Fox Chapel (Pa.), Shoreacres (Ill.), and Yeamans Hall (S.C.). In 1925 Raynor was invited to this idyllic little island (just one mile wide and nine miles long) to determine whether it could accommodate a golf course. He found room for a course he promised would “compare favorably with the best in the country and abroad.”

Raynor was blessed with an extraordinary piece of land at the eastern tip of the island—full of dramatic elevation changes and jaw-dropping views of Long Island Sound—and he took full advantage, routing a succession of holes that rivet the mind, quicken the heart, and stir the soul. This 6,616 yards of golf would be a memorable walk no matter where it was situated, but set as it is against a backdrop of water and sky, buffeted by salty sea breezes, and accompanied by the rhythmic toll of a lighthouse bell, it is nothing short of magical.

Raynor's devotion to his architectural mentor is evident throughout. The cover piece of this issue details eight of the classic hole designs Macdonald favored, and Fishers Island has most of them. Indeed the par-four fourth is an example of both the Alps and Punchbowl holes. On a course full of stunning two-shotters, this one heads the list—imagine the sixth and seventh holes at Pebble Beach compressed into a 400-yard par four and you'll have the idea. From that point forward unfolds a stretch of non-stop enthralling golf—the seaside fifth, playing 229 yards to an enormous Biarritz green; the roller-coaster par-five sixth; the slender seventh, climbing to an infinity-edge green perched above the sea; the tautly snaking par-five eighth—pond left, beach right, Road Hole bunker at the green; and the ninth, which begins blind, then unveils the most spectacular view of all.

The challenge and charm continue on the inward side which starts with two holes played straight into the prevailing breeze, the second of them a par three that pays homage to the famed 11th hole at St Andrews. This is a links golf environment and for much of the year it plays that way—hard and fast—as the members have staunchly resisted installing an irrigation system. Most of the greens have entries that allow a running approach, but that assignment is complicated a bit at the 13th and 14th, a pair of picturesque par fours where ponds and marshland must be negotiated on both the tee shot and approach.

The home hole, a par five that begins with a drive over a reedy inlet, then bends slightly rightward toward an elevated green, has drawn criticism because it's only 452 yards, by modern standards barely a long par four. The original design called for a 433-yard par four, but the members favor the idea of closing with an opportunity for birdie rather than a struggle for par, and it's hard to argue with that.

Sadly, Seth Raynor died in early 1926, just a few months before his masterpiece debuted. Perhaps even more regrettable, however, is the fact that Raynor had routed a second golf course on Fishers Island, on land even “more varied and spectacular,” and that course was never built.

On the other hand, it's fitting that this course stands alone.