

Early colf in America

We suppose that most American amateurs of golf history know that golf started to be played in America when in Yonkers, New York, the first golf club was founded in 1888, the Saint Andrews Golf Club.

We suppose that some golf history amateurs know that at least hundred years earlier Scottish settlers and military played golf, witness the fact that in 1779 the following advertisement as put in the Rivington's Royal Gazette reads as follows: "To the GOLF PLAYERS: The Season for this pleasant and healthy Exercise now advancing, Gentlemen may be furnished with excellent CLUBS and the veritable Caledonian BALLS, by enquiring at the Printer's."



Many battles were fought between the English (later the British) and the Netherlandish fleets during the four naval wars in the 17th and 18th centuries, involving hundreds of warships. Thousands of seamen lost their lives in the fights for the supremacy on the world seas. – ‘The Netherlanders burn down the English fleet before Chatham’, Peter van den Velde (1634-after 1723) – www.rijksmuseum.nl

However, we wonder how many readers are aware of the fact that more than hundred years earlier the Scots started to sway their clubs here, Netherlandish settlers played the game of ‘colf’, the European continental golf-like game, on American soil.

It was at the end of the 16th century when the Netherlanders were at war with the English that an exploratory expedition went from Amsterdam westward to find a route via the north of America to the Netherlandish trade settlements in the Pacific Ocean and so avoid clashes with the English maritime fleet.

The expedition failed but the crew discovered a bay on the east coast where they settled for a profitable beaver fur trade with the local Indians. In the course of the years when more settlers came over, ‘New Netherland’ was founded with New Amsterdam as the capital. More to the north of the Hudson Bay a village developed with the name ‘Beverwijck’ (1646).



Colonists involved in the fur trade business settled near Fort Oranje. In 1647, the small settlement officially received the name Beverwijck. Several documents show that the people of the little town were active colf players. – Historical painting of Leonard F. Tantilto, ‘The return of the Experiment’, 1994 – KeyBank Collection

It was here that for the first time documents refer to people playing ‘colf’. The first references date from 12 December 1650. The records in the Court of Justice tell us that after a game of colf an argument began in the tavern about cheating. When the four players (match play) started fighting one was stabbed with a knife. On the same day a player in the tavern was hit with a colf club. In 1657, two men were condemned to pay a fine because they were seen playing colf on the ice on the day of prayer.



Drawing of the village of Beverwijck with on the right the house of the first Netherlandish governors. In the streets of the village (later called Albany) the Netherlandish settlers played the game of colf. –

After Gérard Milbert's View in Albany, 1694 – New York State Library

In 1659, the magistrates forbade all persons to play colf in the streets. This after hearing complaints ‘against the practice of colf along the streets which causes great damage to the windows of the houses and exposed people to the danger of being injured’.

After the defeat of the Netherlanders in the Second Anglo-Dutch War (1667), the British took over the New Netherland colony and changed the name of Beverwijck into Albany, now the capital of the State of New York. This was the end of colf in the Americas.

If the Netherlanders had won this war it could well have been that you were playing Netherlandish colf now and not Scottish golf.

What was colf?

Colf was an early form of golf played from the 13th century until the end of the 18th century. In this game a ball was hit with a club towards a target, not unlike the much younger Scottish golf. The game was played in the streets, in the open fields and in winter on the frozen lakes, ponds and rivers.



If you are interested in the early history of colf (kolf), crosse (choule) and pall-mall (jeu de mail), the possible ancestors of Scottish golf, please search our website www.ancientgolf.dse.nl or contact us at ancientgolf@wanadoo.fr.

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