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## ***The Myth of First Origin: The Growth of Golf in Nineteenth-Century America***

The myth of golf's origin in America began on February 22, 1888, when John Reid invited his cronies over to his house for what he believed was the first game of golf in America in hopes that he would be making history. But golf had been played and was widely known in the United States prior to that date. There were also numerous golf clubs at one time or another in existence in the United States. The Reid story appears to be the golfing equivalent of baseball's Doubleday myth. On the surface the only apparent difference is that Reid and his friends actually played the game of golf and started an early golf club. Reid does deserve credit as one of golf's early pioneer proponents. He was instrumental in founding one of the early important clubs in the United States, as well as the ruling United States Golf Association. The problem with quickly accepting this popular story of golf's origins, is that it not only oversimplifies American social history, but also ignores the way cultural traditions in the United States were co-opted from the other ethnic group.

This paper examines golf's growth in nineteenth century America. The Joyce Sport Research Collection housed on the campus of the University of Notre Dame was used to obtain much of the primary source evidence for this paper. The Joyce Collection is one of the largest known collections of golf monographs in North America, and contains nearly every English monograph published on the subject prior to the twentieth century, as well as all of the important historical works of the twentieth century. Two of the world's leading newspapers, *The New York Times*, and *The London Times*, were also examined to identify the point of golf's exponential growth both in the United States and England.

Progress in transportation, technology that dramatically changed the construction and care of golf courses, as well as a growing middle class with an increasing amount of leisure time were essential ingredients putting golf in a position ready to explode in popularity. Despite this Americans were not quick to accept golf. The evidence suggests that the game's growth came to resemble its growth in England. There golf was viewed as a sport for old men, and not one that contributed to the masculinization of young men, a common concern at that point in history. Growth in urbanization appeared to minimize traditional opportunities for male masculinization, such as hunting, fishing, and outdoor work. Golf needed a popular figure to contradict the commonly held cultural stereotypes. That figure in England was the immensely popular English diplomat, James Balfour, who is often regarded as the father of golf in England. Balfour faced his adversaries with immense courage and joyfully continued playing golf amidst death threats while serving as secretary of Ireland. Not only a popular diplomat, but also regarded as masculine athletic hero, Balfour had a direct affect on the ideological currents in England, destroying many of the stereotypes the English had regarding golf as an effeminizing influence. Balfour's

influence also had an affect on golf's growing popularity in the United States. Nineteenth century Americans quickly copied English cultural practices, and adopted them as their own.

Rather than one man starting a flame that quickly spread across the continent from Scotland, golf spread in the United States more like the seeds blown from a dandelion. Some withered and died, and others slowly took root. A change in the way golf was perceived ideologically in England led to tacit approval for its popularity in the United States. Fundamental changes in the American social fabric — a growing middle class and advancements in technology — provided the fertile soil in which golf could take root. It is easier for Americans to believe that golf began through the efforts and zeal of one man. In spite of the zeal of John Reid, and the members of St. Andrews, Yonkers, within one year of the February outing, golf was played right across the river at Shinnecock without either members being aware of the others. Since Reid was one of the founding members of the USGA, the story not only was the politically expedient story of the day, but also is a simplistic explanation that puts a face on golf's early history in the United States.