

Early Colf in America



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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 a hundred years earlier Scottish settlers and military played golf. In 1779 the following advertisement appeared in the *Rivington's Royal Gazette*:

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."

Yet more than a hundred years earlier, Netherlands settlers in America were playing *colf*, the European continental golf-like game.

It was at the end of the 16th century when the Netherlands 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 Netherlands 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. Over time, as more settlers came over, "New Netherland" was founded with New Amsterdam as the capital. North of the Hudson Bay, about 1646, a village named Beverwijck was begun.

It was here that documents refer to people playing colf.

The first references date from Dec. 12, 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



Drawing of the village of Beverwijck. On the right, the house of the first Netherlandish governors. In the streets of the village (later called Albany) the Netherlands settlers played the game of colf.

Above – After Gérard Millbert's *View in Albany*, 1694
New York State Library

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.

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

If the Netherlands 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 look at our website www.ancientgolf.dse.nl or contact us at ancientgolf@wanadoo.fr.



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