



EPISODE 12, 2004: SHIPPEN GOLF CLUB SOUTHAMPTON, LONG ISLAND

Gwen: Our last investigation reveals the unexpected story of an African American sports pioneer. It's July 18, 1896, the first day of the second U.S. open national tournament. At Long Island's Shinnecock Hills Golf Course, players from across Europe have come to compete. But the event is almost canceled when they discover a young black golfer is scheduled to play. Ignoring their protests, the 16-year-old tees off and makes golfing history. John Shippen becomes the first American to compete in professional golf.

Elyse: Over 100 years later, we've learned about an old golf club that could be a rare relic of that remarkable day. The club is in the care of Hanno Shippen Smith, who has a very personal connection to it. Hanno is John Shippen's grandson. Hanno first came across the club when it was donated to a foundation named after his grandfather, which teaches mostly minority kids to play golf. Hanno has never seen a club connected to his grandfather, but when he saw this one, he knew it was something special.

Hanno Shippen Smith: When I felt the club, it's just unusual. Yeah. It's the only way I can explain it. Wondered if or not it could have been used in the 1896 Open.

Elyse: I'm Elyse Luray. Gwendolyn Wright and I have come to Southampton, Long Island, to help Hanno uncover the truth about the golf club. We're meeting him at the Shinnecock Hills Golf Course.

Gwen: Well, I'm excited to see this club.

Elyse: It's in excellent condition.

Gwen: It's a very handsome piece of craftsmanship.

Elyse: So tell me, what do you want to know about this club?

Hanno: Well, my grandfather, John M. Shippen, played in the 1896 Open right here on this golf course at Shinnecock Hills. What I'd really like to know is if he owned this club and if or not he actually used it, at 16, in the 1896 Open.

Gwen: But what makes you think it was his, Hanno?

Hanno: Well, it looks old and his name appears to be on it, embossed in the blade here. So that's what makes me think that this might be his club.

Elyse: Well, the name is very worn, but I can see it says, "J. M. Shippen."

Hanno: If this club could be connected to my grandfather, it would be wonderful.

Elyse: It's a great story. We'll see what we can find out for you.

Gwen: When the second U.S. Open was held here at Shinnecock Hills in 1896, golf was still a new game in America. The first courses had only been built some 20 years earlier. From the start, though, golf was a game for America's wealthy elite, and the first American country clubs were for whites only. When African Americans tried to play, editorial cartoons viciously satirized them, so John Shippen's participation in the 1896 tournament is astonishing. If this club was his, it's a very special object, indeed. My first step is to find out the club's provenance, or origin. I've come to meet the director of the John Shippen foundation and the club's current owner, Thurman Simmons.

Thurman Simmons: Well, a guy from Ohio sends me a collector. He heard about the John Shippen foundation and he just mailed it to me. The man who donated it says it's from the turn of the century and has Shippen's name on it, and that's all I know.

Gwen: This isn't a great start. But what about John Shippen? What can Thurman tell me about him?

Thurman: well, he was born in the Washington, D.C., area, 1879. His father was a

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Presbyterian minister. He went out to Shinnecock Indian reservation to minister Shinnecock Indians.

Gwen: Now, when did he begin playing golf?

Gwen: Thurman explains that in 1890 John Shippen was hired, along with Shinnecock Indians from the nearby reservation, to help clear land for a new Long Island Golf Course. When the Shinnecock Hills club opened in 1892, Shippen began working there as a caddy and quickly began to learn the game. He soon was teaching the club's new white members, and according to Thurman, it was actually the Shinnecock Hills members who entered John and one of the Shinnecock Indians into the 1896 U.S. Open, as their representatives, which must have caused controversy.

Thurman: Well, Europeans didn't like the idea that they were playing with these two colored boys, as they said.

Gwen: What did they do?

Thurman: Well, they boycotted it; they walked out.

Gwen: However, the U.S.G.A. President told the boycotting players that the tournament would proceed with or without them.

Gwen: So he was tossing out a challenge to these European golfers. So what happened then?

Thurman: The disgruntled Europeans came back the next day and they played.

Gwen: And how did John Shippen do?

Thurman: He was winning the first day, and the second day they came back, and he -- he got stuck in the sand. He couldn't get out. It took him 11 strokes to get out of there.

Gwen: So how'd he finish the game?

Thurman: He finished the game fifth.

Gwen: Even though he finished fifth, Shippen earned national attention.

Gwen: This is an amazing feat of character. This is a 16-year-old young man who was holding up, knowing the other players don't want him on the course, having one bad hole and finishing fifth.

Thurman: Yeah, that's the significance of John Shippen. He did something amazing. He was the first American-born golfer to play professionally.

Gwen: It's an extraordinary story and I hope I can tie these two together.

Elyse: To find out more about the golf club, I've come to meet collector Joseph Tiscornia. Joseph has spent over 15 years acquiring hundreds of antique clubs. His specialty is the 19th century. I'm hoping he can confirm our club was made before the 1896 Open. First of all, let me just say that you have an incredible collection. And I was hoping that you could help me with this golf club. Now the legend behind this was that this putter was used in the 1896 U.S. Open. What do you think about the date?

Joseph Tiscornia: Well, that's an interesting story. There are several things we would look for. The first thing is, it does have a wooden shaft.

Elyse: Okay.

Joseph: It also has a leather grip, and the shape of the club head indicates that it's probably in the 1892 to 1910 time

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period.

Elyse: This sounds hopeful, but we need a more precise date.

Joseph: Well, we look at several things, one of which is the nicking on the hozzle, and that's where the neck of the club attaches to the shaft.

Elyse: Joseph shows me a club from his collection that was made before 1896. He points out that the nicking on the club is very crude because it was made by hand. Then he looks at our putter.

Joseph: You'll see that the nicking is very even and very regular, which indicates to me that it was a machine-made nicking.

Elyse: Okay.

Joseph: And that didn't start till probably the 1895, '96, '97 time period.

Elyse: This is cutting it close. But there's still a slight chance John Shippen used it in 1896. For final confirmation, Joseph examines the club head, a key element in determining age. Again, he shows me his pre-1896 club.

Joseph: You'll see that there is no bent neck to it at all. The particular club that you've showed me, the putter, is a bent-neck hozzle and a very severe bent neck. This particular club, because it has a very thin hozzle, would indicate to me that it would be in the late 1890s, maybe 1898-99.

Elyse: So our club is a couple of years too late for John Shippen to have used it in 1896. So you don't think that this was used in the Open?

Joseph: It's my opinion that it was not used in the 1896 U.S. Open.

Elyse: That's a real disappointment. But what about after the second U.S. Open? Could Shippen have used it then? I showed Joseph Shippen's name stamped onto the club.

Joseph: There are several reasons why someone would stamp a name on a club. It's possible a particular golf professional would stamp his name on there to indicate that he put the club together.

Elyse: Golf professionals were employed to manage courses, organize tournaments, give lessons and more.

Joseph: Typically, in that time period, golf pros sold golf clubs.

Gwen: To confirm that our club was made by John Shippen, I need to establish that he worked as a golf pro. I've come to New Jersey, to Scotch Hills Country Club, to meet someone who actually knew Shippen, retired golf instructor Ralph Wise.

Gwen: So tell me, how did you come to know John Shippen?

Ralph wise: I was John Shippen's last professional caddy.

Gwen: During what years, do you remember?

Ralph: Well, roughly we're talkin' about '47, '48.

Gwen: Ralph caddied for Shippen here at Scotch Hills, then called Shady Rest. Established in 1921 to cater to the area's growing African American middle class, this is considered to be the nation's first African American country club. According to Ralph, John Shippen spent the last years of his life here, playing the club's 18-hole course.

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Gwen: Can you tell me what kind of man he was?

Ralph: A lot of people brag on themselves, the achievements that they make in life. Mr. Shippen was nothing like that. He was a man that kept to himself. He was a man that didn't talk about himself.

Gwen: But what happened to Shippen after the events of 1896? Ralph says that Shippen entered a few more U.S. opens and other events, but racial discrimination on the fairways limited his opportunities to play.

Ralph: There was one time in particular that I know for a fact that Mr Shippen was turned away. It was a tournament, and we went up there and I -- he told me to stand by the car. Him and a few other gentlemen went inside the clubhouse. The owner came out and told them, there will not be a golf match here today. The expression that Mr Shippen had on his face to tell me to get in the car, let's go, he was very angry and very upset. Here was a man that's supposed to be number one in the world and this -- what happens to him.

Gwen: Racism clearly frustrated Shippen's career, but it didn't drive him from the game altogether. So did he ever work as a golf pro?

Ralph: Yes, he was. At various golf courses, he was a pro, mostly black courses.

Gwen: But this was in the late 1940s, when Ralph knew him. For John Shippen to have made our club, I need to prove he was a golf pro some 40 years earlier. I'm calling the archivists of the oldest golf courses in the New York and New Jersey areas.

Gwen: Hello, I'm trying to find some information about an early American golfer by the name of John Shippen. I'm trying to find some information... John Shippen. Shippen. Shippen. You don't? Hmm. Nothing at all. Could you check again? No archives? Early golfer by the name of s-h-i-p-p-e-n. Okay. Thank you very much. I'm not giving up. I've pulled all the golf periodicals I can find from the turn of the century. I'm looking for any mention of John Shippen. And here in America's oldest golf magazine, "The Golfer," from October, 1897, I think I've found something.

Gwen: "A professional match was played at Ardsley, USA., between v. FitzJohn, The assistant professional, and John Shippen, the well-known former Shinnecock Hills caddy, now professional to the Highland Country Club." so just a year after the 1896 Open, John Shippen was working as a golf pro. And in that capacity, he could have made our golf club.

Gwen: But this is still circumstantial evidence. We need proof.

Elyse: I've arranged to meet Pete Georgiady, the author of several books on antique clubs and club makers. He's told me that he has something that could help our investigation, and he's asked me to join him at the U.S.G.A. Museum in Far Hills, New Jersey.

Elyse: All right, I have this golf club, and I'm trying to find some hard evidence that John Shippen sold golf clubs.

Pete Georgiady: Well, Elyse, that's part of the reason that I brought you here.

Elyse: Okay.

Pete: Please take a look at this.

Elyse: Pete shows me another club from the turn of the 20th century, which also has a name stamped onto it.

Elyse: Let's see. Ah, "J.M. Shippen," the same as our club.

Pete: That's correct.



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Elyse: But what does that mean?

Pete: Well, this club has his name stamped on it.

Elyse: Uh-huh.

Pete: And that's a die-cut stamp and that would probably cost him a good \$10.

Elyse: And \$10 was a lot of money in those days.

Pete: But if you were making a lot of clubs, you would have a stamp with your name on it. John Shippen was making golf clubs. He had a club-making business and was selling clubs.

Elyse: To prove our club was one that John Shippen made, Pete compares the markings on his club with the one on ours.

Pete: The names are the same, "J.M. Shippen." the stampings are very, very similar, but the stampings are a little irregular.

Elyse: What Pete tells me next will be of special interest to Hanno. I wonder how he'll react to the news.

Gwen: Elyse and I have come back to Shinnecock Hills with Hanno. It's a few days before the U.S. Open, and the course is packed with spectators watching the practice rounds. First we break the bad news. We tell Hanno that his grandfather couldn't have used this putter in the 1896 Open.

Hanno: Well, that's disappointing to a certain extent, but, hey, was it his? That's the question.

Elyse: Then we tell him what Pete had concluded about the markings on our club.

Pete: They were stamped one letter at a time. John Shippen stamped that club early in his career, before he had a die-cut name stamp with his name on it.

Elyse: So this isn't just an authentic John Shippen club; it's probably one of the first he made.

Pete: This piece is an exceedingly important part of American golf history.

Hanno: How about that? That's great.

Elyse: What does it feel like to know that your grandfather held this club in his own two hands?

Hanno: Well, it makes me feel real good, to tell you the truth.

Gwen: In appreciation for your bringing us the story of John Shippen, here are tickets to this year's U.S. Open.

Hanno: Oh, wow. Thank you very much.

Elyse: Well, we have one more surprise for you.

Hanno: Uh-oh.

Gwen: Okay, Hanno, here we are. This is the first hole of the course your grandfather played for the 1896 Open.

Hanno: It feels awesome to be standing on the hole.

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Elyse: Well, not only are we on the green, but you're gonna putt on the green.

Hanno: I'm gonna putt? Oh, I'm gonna wreck the hole.

Elyse: Are you ready?

Hanno: Yeah.

Elyse: All right, let's go.

Hanno: [putts] All right.

Elyse: Hooray!

Gwen: Congratulations.

ends