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HISTORIC HAVENS by Lori Draz



Seabright Lawn Tennis and Cricket Club

The oldest lawn tennis and cricket club in the nation is located in Rumson. Founded in 1877, Seabright Lawn Tennis and Cricket Club has a long, rich history and an active current membership. The club has 16 lawn tennis courts, 15 Har-Tru courts, one hard court, and four platform tennis courts.

Lawn tennis was introduced to America in 1875, when a tennis set was imported from England by the Staten Island Cricket & Tennis Club for installation. Months later, the residents of Sea Bright started ordering tennis equipment, which was delivered in the spring of 1877. It was just a matter of time until the sport got its permanent home. Before the club was formed, area athletes played on the private courts of the many mansions throughout Rumson and Sea Bright. At that time, the game of cricket was also quite popular, and so, the club was named the Seabright Lawn Tennis and Cricket Club. Among the many other amenities, people could practice archery there, which is where the bullseye logo of the club originated. Even though cricket is no longer played, the club retains its original name, which includes "Cricket" in the title.

The centerpiece is the massive wooden clubhouse, painted a recognizable green, that is almost exactly as it was when it was built. The clubhouse and grounds have stood the test of time, due largely to its original design. The architect for the clubhouse was the New York City firm of James Renwick, who had also designed the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC and St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City. Even the original turf was shipped over from England, giving it truly historic roots.

Although the club's main use was athletics, it also served as the social hub of its time. Members sipped refreshing beverages under the shade of the verandas, played friendly games, organized formal tournaments that attracted national athletes, and even enjoyed the arts. A stage was built under the direction of Mrs. Kate Shippen Roosevelt for amateur theatrical productions put



on by the Round Robin Club. The stage is still there, although a trophy case that guards the club's silver loving cups and tournament prizes stands in front of it.

The club hosted its first invitation tournament in 1884, and the event quickly became one of the most important tennis events in the country. At first, only men's events were held, but in 1920, a women's tournament was held, with men's singles and doubles, women's singles and doubles, and mixed doubles to be played. The club's spectacular reputation, its perfectly manicured lawns, and its elegant location soon began attracting the greatest singles players and the most famous doubles teams in the early history of the game. Players included Richard Stevens, Beals C. Wright, Maurice E. McLoughlin, Raymond D. Little, and William A. Larned, who was the number one ranked player at the turn of the century. The women players included Mrs. Thomas C. Bundy, Mrs. Molla Bjurstedt Mallory, Elizabeth Ryan, and Helen Wills, to name a few.

In addition to the club's storied heritage, one its greatest treasures is the collection of memorabilia, considered one of the finest in the nation. There are more than 300 photographs of all the legendary players who have competed there. Also on display are trophies, old tennis racquets, and artifacts that trace the history of the sport in the U.S. There is even the cricket bat used by George Wright of the Longwood Cricket team when they played a match with the club in 1887.

In December 1992, the club was named a National Historic Landmark. This is the nation's highest designation for buildings or sites that "possess national significance in commemorating the history of our country." Thus, Seabright joins only three other famous tennis clubs as a National Historic Landmark: the Newport Casino in Rhode Island, the Merion Cricket Club, and Germantown Cricket Club in Philadelphia.

The club is private, but should you have the opportunity to walk into the property, pause on the porch, look at the memorabilia, or be lucky enough to play on the court, you are immersed

in the historic energy of a bygone era. It is a jewel that is gratefully still cherished by the community, its members, and the nation.

Seabright Lawn Tennis and Cricket Club is located at 5 Tennis Court Lane in Rumson.

