Polo Fields at Reynolda

After the 1918 death of Katharine Smith Reynolds’ first husband, R.J. Reynolds, she was solely responsible for managing and expanding Reynolda according to her vision. Between the major land assemblage during 1909 and 1910 and R.J.R.’s death in 1918, only 4 ½ acres had been added to the estate. Katharine began to enlarge Reynolda in 1920. That year, H.A. Nading sold a 95-acre parcel northeast of the house to Katharine. The land included fields, several springs, and peach and apple orchards. Another 1920 land purchase, which later became a part of the Old Town Club golf course, added pastures, houses, and fields to Reynolda, bringing its eastern boundary to Cherry Street/University Parkway.

In May 1923, Thurmond Chatham organized a competitive polo team in Winston-Salem. In a letter to Katharine written that month, her second husband and president of the polo team – J. Edward Johnston – wrote, “Had a nice game of polo although I couldn’t hit the ball at all.” Katharine gave the newly formed team permission to use fields and stables on the estate. By June, the polo complex at Reynolda was complete enough that Katharine entertained the wives of local industrialists at a “Polo Game played on Reynolda Polo Field.” In August, Reynolda Inc. officially purchased the 87 acres on which the complex was located.

The parcel along Mt. Tabor Road, approximately ¾ of a mile northwest of the main house, bordered the north side of Five Row, a row of houses - five to each side of the road - for Reynolda’s African-American employees.

Including Johnston, three members of the team had strong personal ties to Reynolda and Katharine, so it is perhaps no surprise that the polo complex was lavish, including stables, a barn, a paddock, an exercise area, a practice field, and an exhibition field with a grandstand designed by Charles Barton Keen. After serving in World War I, Johnston had come to Winston-Salem as headmaster of the Reynolda School. He and Katharine had married in June 1921, and he subsequently worked as a trust officer for Wachovia Bank. The team secretary, Benjamin F. Bernard Jr., was employed as Katharine’s secretary. He was also the brother of one of her college friends and later married Bowman Gray Sr.’s widow, Nathalie Lyons Gray. Reynolda’s farm superintendent, Albert Clinton Wharton, also played for the team.

The team included several wealthy and influential industrialists, too. Founder Thurmond Chatham’s family owned and operated Chatham Manufacturing Company, the world’s largest manufacturer of blankets. James G. Hanes, mayor of Winston-Salem from 1921-25, was a member of the team. During his tenure as mayor, he also served as...
president of Hanes Hosiery Mills, which by 1929 was the largest producer of seamless women’s hosiery in the state. His teammate and brother, Dr. Frederick M. Hanes, was a local physician who became head of Duke’s Department of Medicine in 1933.

The polo team played matches against teams from cities in the southeast, including Fort Bragg, Pinehurst, Charlotte, and Camden, North Carolina; Aiken, South Carolina; and the Maryland Polo Club based in Greenspring Valley outside of Baltimore. In July 1923, the team beat Pinehurst, the state champions. Spectators were advised that the complex offered “plenty of parking space for all those who expect to attend on the edge of the spacious field.” Admission cost 50¢. The Winston-Salem Journal gave the following directions to the field: “After passing Reynolda church and village, take the first turn to the left before crossing the concrete bridge below the blacksmith’s shop and follow the dirt road across [Silas] creek to the top of the next hill.”

Tragically, Katharine died on May 23, 1924, from an embolism caused by the birth of her youngest son, J. Edward Johnston Jr. During a period of mourning following her death, Johnston did not play in any polo matches. He returned to the field in a match against Pinehurst on May 2, 1925. In March 1926, Northrup & O’Brien, architects from Winston-Salem, were commissioned to design a club house for the polo complex. It included a locker room with showers, a club room attached to a large pantry and kitchen, bedrooms, a dining room, a living room, and a ladies lounge.

Johnston left Reynolda and moved to Baltimore with his son after Katharine’s death. In early 1928, he married for a second time and moved into Charlcote House, a neoclassical mansion in Baltimore designed by John Russell Pope. In 1929, the stock market crashed. During the austerity of the Depression, the popularity of polo waned throughout the nation – and at Reynolda. The costs to maintain the animals, fields, and buildings necessary to support a polo team were very high, and Johnston was no longer in residence. The era of polo at Reynolda had ended.

In 1935, Katharine and R.J.R.’s daughter, Mary, and her husband, Charles Babcock, purchased her siblings’ interests in Reynolda. During her lifetime, Mary donated much of the land her parents had acquired, including the 1951 gift of the current Wake Forest University campus. In keeping with Mary’s example, after her death, the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation, Charles Babcock, and his second wife transferred the land on which the polo complex had been built to the Forsyth County Board of Education. Two years later, in 1959, Speas School was built on the site. Nevertheless, the legacy of Katharine and her polo complex lives on in the name of Polo Road.