Game of Privilege

Demas, Lane

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Bruised and bloodied, fifteen-year-old orphan Beau Jack tried to gather himself in the midst of a violent brawl. There were nine other black kids, all bigger than him and all trying to be the last standing. Beau reached within and told himself he wasn’t going to go down. For a split second he remembered how his grandmother said that one day he’d either become a preacher or a fighter.

Looked like that day was here.

Sensing the crowd of gathered spectators, Beau listened for supporters. He thought he heard Mr. Jones say something but wasn’t sure.

He wised up and drifted quietly to the outskirts of the carnage, while the other boys punched, kicked, and grappled themselves into fatigue. Then Beau pounced. He swung and hit everything near him with an anger and ferocity that stunned the onlookers, even those who saw this type of thing often.

And just like that it was over—or at least that’s what he heard someone say. Then he heard the clink-clink of coins hitting the ground. That’s when he really knew.

Beau took off his blindfold and picked up his money.

It was a scene that evoked the poverty, violence, and trauma many at the bottom of society faced in the Deep South during the Great Depression. But this was no gang fight on a hardscrabble roadside.

Beau Jack was on duty at the world’s most famous golf club. And his boss, Bobby Jones, was the world’s most famous golfer.¹
“There has been a very noticeable increase in golf,” reported the Associated Negro Press in its 1927 annual survey of black progress. The brief line—buried in a lengthy, wide-ranging report outlining African American achievements in politics, business, education, and entertainment—was nevertheless important, for golf in America experienced a significant increase in popularity following World War I, the very moment the black community underwent dramatic change. The growth of public golf links and private country clubs in the North and South, as well as the game’s expansion in the West, coincided with the initial wave of the Great Migration, in which nearly 2 million African Americans left the South. Both the game and the black community were on the move, and as golf continued to grow in American society, African Americans from all walks of life—from W. E. B. Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson to Miles Davis and James Brown—connected with it in unique ways. In doing so, a new generation helped shape golf’s complicated relationship to the black community and American race relations.

After World War I the capital of black golf remained Chicago, the city that attracted the most southern migrants during and after the war. And just as they had earlier in the century, Chicago’s black golfers not only continued to play the game but also wrote thoughtfully about its symbolism, introduced southern migrants to the links, and fought hard for greater access to the city’s white courses. A group of dedicated writers maintained coverage of the game in the Chicago Defender, the city’s popular black newspaper with a national circulation that included the South. Both Walter and Nettie Speedy continued writing regular golf columns, Nettie covering female golfers and Chicago’s golf-related socials. At Marquette Park’s course, black women outnumbered black men on certain days: with “at least a dozen or more foursomes . . . our ladies have gone in for golf in a big way.” E. L. Renip, dubbed the Defender’s “golf editor,” also published a weekly column with lessons and tips for average players. Led by Renip, the publication also began to report regularly on the world of white professional golf, including PGA tournaments. Later in the 1930s sportswriters Eneil Simpson and Jimmie Williams provided the newspaper’s weekly golf columns.

Golf in Chicago’s growing black neighborhoods, and particularly access to the city’s municipal courses, embodied northern opportunity, a higher standard of living, and the optimism of the Great Migration. Walter and Nettie Speedy enjoyed taking migrants and visitors to Jackson Park, where newly arrived southerners had their “first experience watch-
ing Race people play golf.”4 Men in the city’s black barbershops shared
golf anecdotes and playing tips alongside talk of the day’s news and other
sports. African American women frequenting public courses were par-
ticularly powerful images of opportunity, for both black southern mi-
grants and northern white observers, as countless advertisements in
white publications during the 1920s presented golf as the ideal leisure ac-
tivity for the modern woman of means.5 But Renip reminded readers that
the game was not cost or time prohibitive and was well in reach for many
black Chicagoans. “For many years the impression has obtained that golf
is a rich man’s game,” he wrote in 1921. “True, practically every wealthy
man is a golf devotee, at the same time a vast majority of those who play
the game are people who work for moderate salaries.”6 That same year a
poem included in William Harrison’s book Colored Girls and Boys Inspir-
ing United States History celebrated golf as a symbol of black optimism.

While it is called rich people’s game
Poor folks should learn it just the same;
And tramp the meadows and the hill
To let fresh air their lungs to fill:
But if too poor to hire a caddy
Then use instead your sweetheart’s Daddy.7

Chicago featured the most visible black golfing scene during the Great
Migration, but the game also grew rapidly in New York City’s black neigh-
borhoods, especially Harlem. The most important private black golf club
during the 1920s and 1930s—Shady Rest Country Club in Scotch Plains,
New Jersey—served Harlem’s elite golfers, many of whom were contribu-
tors to the period’s dynamic cultural movement: the Harlem Renaissance.
Established in 1922 by an investment group led by Howard S. Brock, a
Philadelphia doctor, Shady Rest was originally Westfield Golf Club, a
white country club built in 1897. The purchase of the thirty-one-acre
site about fifteen miles from Manhattan drew backlash from some local
whites who feared a subsequent decline in property values and generally
directed their scorn at Westfield’s white members for agreeing to sell the
land to African Americans. Yet Shady Rest surprised even the most opti-
mistic investors: by the end of its first year the club had 200 members and
a lengthy waiting list, with many members purchasing (or building) cot-
tages near the course in order to spend extended time there during the
summer.8 While the club’s popularity and economic success tempered
white fears of plummeting land values, they failed to completely elimi-
nate tension surrounding the site. In a passionate defense of Shady Rest, the *New York Tribune* denounced the racism directed at the club and argued that it had much more to do with the specter of black golf, not property values. “This course . . . will cause a million giggles to sizzle across the country. Cartoonists will make funny pictures of it. Vaudeville artists will do sketches about it,” lamented the *Tribune*. “Something exquisitely funny seems to excite the white race when it sees the colored race doing things which are ordinary parts of the day’s work and play to the white people. . . . Why should not the black man play golf if his economic status gives him leisure for golf?” Black newspapers from as far as Dallas, Texas, reprinted the *Tribune’s* fiery editorial.9

The success of Shady Rest was tied to both the economic growth of the region’s black neighborhoods and the community’s burgeoning spirit of optimism. Members came “from Harlem, the Bronx, Brooklyn, Jersey City, Newark, and countless other New Jersey and New York cities,” read one description. “Prosperous Negro doctors, lawyers, merchants, Pullman porters and barbers flock there by automobile and trolley car on Saturdays and Sundays to play golf . . . and enjoy the luxurious ease of country club life.”10 Throughout the 1920s and 1930s the club advertised itself alongside popular Harlem entertainment venues, such as the Apollo Theater and Connie’s Inn, as well as New York’s Negro League baseball teams. It also advertised nationally in various black publications and solicited members from across the country. The club was popular with both men and women; Shady Rest’s female golfers formed a Ladies Auxiliary, and by 1930 the club was hosting regular women’s tournaments. Like most private clubs, its caddies were generally young black children, although Shady Rest did employ a few white caddies to carry bags for its black patrons.11

In addition to Shady Rest, other private, black-owned courses were established after World War I, including more clubs that sought to meet the demands of New York City’s black golfers. In 1924 a Brooklyn manufacturer opened Manaqua Country Club in nearby Amityville, while two other New York–based groups purchased land in attempts to establish black clubs: the first was near West Hampton, Long Island, and another was in Bar Harbor, Maine (apparently both of these developments were never completed).12 Three African American courses were located directly north of the city in the Hudson Valley; the most successful, Shangri-La Resort, was established when black investors purchased a 775-acre property in Napanoch after World War II. The group included Brooklyn
real estate dealer Richard Simon and Harlem café owner Luther “Red” Randolph. At the height of its popularity in the 1950s and early 1960s, Shangri-La appeared regularly in both Jet and Ebony. The club’s social director, Edward Perry, was a former actor who was a close friend (and likely lover) of Harlem Renaissance poet Countee Cullen and who led the USO’s touring unit of Porgy and Bess during World War II.13

If Shangri-La was the most successful black country club in the Hudson Valley, one of the more unique in American history was located nearby: a private, nine-hole layout enjoyed by followers of spiritual leader Father Divine. That course was on a 177-acre commune near Kingston purchased by the group at the height of Divine’s popularity and named “the Promised Land” in 1937. (Eventually Divine’s organization also purchased the Brigantine Hotel and Golf Course in Atlantic City.)14 That same year, white residents in Westchester County complained when a group of African Americans bought a course in New Castle, renamed it the Rising Sun Country Club, and announced plans to develop an adjacent 60-acre black resort. According to the New York Amsterdam News the move sparked a “furor of protest” from whites; when asked for a list of those who lodged complaints with the town’s council, one councilman replied, “If you took the telephone book . . . you’d have the list of those who have objected to the proposal.”15 The bold plan, all the more notable in the midst of the Great Depression, even drew criticism from some African Americans. The previous white club had failed financially, and the economic downturn placed black golfers (and their perceived extravagance) under renewed scrutiny. “I don’t doubt that the Rising Sun Golf Club out here in Westchester is a good thing for us to have,” wrote one local black dentist. “But . . . I think that with $200,000 Negroes would do much better investing it in small loans and mortgages on property for Negroes: making money, and at the same time aiding some worthy colored people to acquire their homes. I believe that when enough of us have made fortunes large enough to afford that kind of expensive recreation, we ought to have it. Right now we ought to be spending our time and our money strengthening our economic position.”16 Rising Sun opened under black ownership but continued to struggle financially and failed to draw attention away from other black country clubs, including Shady Rest. In addition, the development’s broader plans never came to fruition. At some point (it is unclear when) the only African American golf course in Westchester County’s history quietly passed back into the hands of white owners. A more successful private venture was the Booker T. Washington Coun-
The Great Migration and the Harlem Renaissance

The Great Migration and Harlem Renaissance

The Great Migration and Harlem Renaissance

Although black country clubs exemplified the opportunity for social and economic advancement in the North, some of the earliest black-owned clubs appeared in the South. Hundreds of black businessmen in Richmond, Virginia, built the region’s first, Acorn Country Club, in 1924. The two most important black-owned courses in the South, located in Atlanta, Georgia, and Jacksonville, Florida, were both named Lincoln Country Club. The Jacksonville club was the brainchild of Abraham Lincoln Lewis, Florida’s first black millionaire, who in 1935 founded American Beach, a black resort town. Notably, Lewis first established Lincoln Country Club nearby in the 1920s. The course predated the broader development, so the success of his private black golf links likely encouraged him to establish the larger beach community. The Lincoln course hosted its first major tournament in 1928, which sought to crown Florida’s best black golfer (the winner, eighteen-year-old high school student Ralph Dawkins, later served as the club’s teaching professional in the 1940s). Inaugural tournaments for black women and southern black colleges came two years later, solidifying the club as the center of black golf in Florida, a southern state that would lead the nation in advancing the game. “Golf has become one of the favorite pastimes in Florida,” noted the Chicago Defender in 1930. “So much so in fact that the citizens of Jacksonville have built one of the finest clubhouses in Dixie, which is equipped with tennis courts, croquet courses, trap shooting, rifle range, boating, and fishing.”

Atlanta’s first black course was a nine-hole layout at the private Piney Wood Country Club, built sometime before 1928. It was soon supplanted in popularity by a new course established in 1930, eventually named the New Lincoln Country Club, built on land left vacant by the all-black Lincoln Cemetery. Although the Lincoln course was relatively meager, the private club also included a swimming pool, a dancing pavilion, tennis courts, and a clubhouse rebuilt twice after fires destroyed it. In 1951 black journalist Carl Rowan described the neighborhood around Lincoln as the center of Atlanta’s black middle class: “Fine homes and fine cars lined the streets. There were sidewalks, and houses painted in pastel colors, with gay green shutters, red-shingled roofs, and attached garages. Stone houses with arched façades had lawns and stone-lined driveways. All this belonged to Negroes. . . . Here were homes with carpets on the floor and running water in the kitchen and Scotch in the den. Here one could find
three-speed phonographs and a tuxedo or two. Negroes had a separate country club and a nine-hole golf course all their own.” Lincoln became a key oasis for black golfers in the South’s largest city, as Atlanta refused to open any municipal courses to African Americans even for segregated use. In the 1930s and 1940s Lincoln also hosted the Southern Open, the South’s most important golf tournament for black professionals.

Most private African American golf facilities were owned and operated by relatively wealthy men; however, black women also financed private courses, including New Jersey’s Apex Country Club. Established during World War II, Apex was founded by millionaire Sarah Spencer Washington, who made her fortune investing in black hair salons and manufacturing beauty products for black women. The club, later renamed Sandale Golf and Country Club, featured a racially integrated membership.

While many black clubs struggled during the 1930s (Shady Rest, for example, was forced to close in 1938), some managed to survive the Great Depression, including Booker T. Washington in Pennsylvania, Acorn in Virginia, and Lincoln in Atlanta. Following desegregation, by the late 1960s there were few fully private, segregated black clubs remaining in America. Meadowbrook Country Club, founded in 1958 near Raleigh, North Carolina, was a premier private club and important social hub for the local black community. It had nearly 200 members by the 1970s, yet soon it fell into disrepair, membership dropping dramatically after the city’s white clubs desegregated. (St. Augustine’s University, a nearby black college, purchased Meadowbrook in 2007 and reopened the course).

Along with private and semiprivate courses there were also important black-owned public facilities that helped increase interest in the sport among African Americans. One was Freeway Golf Course in Sicklerville, New Jersey. Established by four African Americans in 1967, Freeway branded itself as catering uniquely to African Americans while it remained public and open to white golfers. In Chicago, African Americans continued to play most often at municipal courses, particularly Jackson Park, Marquette Park, and Palos Park inside the city, as well as nearby Sunset Hills Country Club (Kankakee, Ill.) and Casa Loma Country Club (Powers Lake, Wisc.).

Yet many years of whites and blacks playing alongside one another at Chicago’s most popular courses did not necessarily make it easier for the establishment of a black-owned country club. In 1947 a predominately black Methodist church purchased 1,500 acres in Kankakee and established Kankakee Shores Country Club. Some local whites balked at the
Table 1. Significant African American–Owned Golf Courses, 1916–1967

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Year of Inception</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Idlewild Resort</td>
<td>Idlewild, Mich.</td>
<td>1916</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheshire Country Club</td>
<td>Cheshire, Conn.</td>
<td>1917</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shady Rest Country Club</td>
<td>Scotch Plains, N.J.</td>
<td>1922</td>
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<tr>
<td>Acorn Country Club</td>
<td>Richmond, Va.</td>
<td>1924</td>
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<tr>
<td>Booker T. Washington Country Club</td>
<td>Buckingham, Pa.</td>
<td>1924</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manaqua Country Club</td>
<td>Amityville, N.Y.</td>
<td>1924</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Val Verde Resort</td>
<td>Val Verde, Calif.</td>
<td>1924</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Capital Country Club</td>
<td>Laurel, Md.</td>
<td>1925</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mapledale Country Club</td>
<td>Stow, Mass.</td>
<td>1926</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuskegee Institute Golf Course</td>
<td>Tuskegee, Ala.</td>
<td>1926</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parkridge Country Club</td>
<td>Corona, Calif.</td>
<td>1927</td>
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<tr>
<td>Groves Center Golf Course</td>
<td>Kansas City, Mo.</td>
<td>1928</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lincoln Country Club</td>
<td>Jacksonville, Fla.</td>
<td>1928</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Piney Wood Country Club</td>
<td>Atlanta, Ga.</td>
<td>1928</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Lincoln Country Club</td>
<td>Atlanta, Ga.</td>
<td>1930</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rising Sun Country Club</td>
<td>New Castle, N.Y.</td>
<td>1937</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crescent City Golf Club</td>
<td>Harahan, La.</td>
<td>ca. 1940s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apex Country Club</td>
<td>Galloway, N.J.</td>
<td>1943</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shalimar Country Club</td>
<td>Omaha, Neb.</td>
<td>1944</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wayside Country Club</td>
<td>Homer Glen, Ill.</td>
<td>1946</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cedar River Golf Club</td>
<td>Indian Lake, N.Y.</td>
<td>1947</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kankakee Shores Country Club</td>
<td>Kankakee, Ill.</td>
<td>1947</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clearview Golf Club</td>
<td>Canton, Ohio</td>
<td>1948</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silver Rest Golf Club</td>
<td>Glen Allen, Va.</td>
<td>ca. 1949</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lee Haven Beach Club</td>
<td>Greenwich, Conn.</td>
<td>1949</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shangri-La Resort</td>
<td>Napanoch, N.Y.</td>
<td>ca. 1954</td>
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<tr>
<td>Meadowbrook Country Club</td>
<td>Garner, N.C.</td>
<td>1958</td>
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<tr>
<td>Freeway Golf Course</td>
<td>Sicklerville, N.J.</td>
<td>1967</td>
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majority-black ownership despite the resort serving both white and black patrons. “Six of every eight golfers on weekdays are white people,” wrote one black sportswriter, challenging the “disturbing element in Kankakee” that threatened to purchase the land for a segregated, white-only resort development: “If this place is sold and is split up or even run as a country club for whites only it will be a black eye to the Negro race.” It is unclear how long the resort remained under black ownership, but it did host black
tournaments in the late 1940s and a number of notable black players, including heavyweight boxing champion Joe Louis. Wayside Country Club, another black-owned course that served Chicagoland golfers, was established in 1946 in nearby Homer Glen.25

White criticism of black-owned courses was common nationwide; however, the most dramatic example of large-scale resistance to a black country club took place not in the Midwest or even the Deep South but, rather, in Corona, California. One of the country’s best resorts, Parkridge Country Club, was opened in 1925 to an exclusively white membership. Perched on a hill with spectacular views, Parkridge boasted a large hotel and clubhouse, indoor spa, shooting range, and private airstrip. Its first member, silent-film star Clara Bow, was awarded her membership after winning a Hollywood dance contest; visitors also included actors Henry Fonda and Burt Lancaster. The golf course at Parkridge was among the best in southern California, yet within two years of its opening the club was struggling financially. In 1927 three black businessmen purchased the resort: one, Journee White, was awarded the Croix de Guerre for service in World War I and made his fortune in Los Angeles real estate. Another, Eugene C. Nelson, was a physician who had just married white actress Helen Lee Worthing.

News of the purchase came right as the Ku Klux Klan experienced the height of its popularity in California (three years earlier the organization had won control over the city council in nearby Anaheim), and the Klan organized an immediate, vitriolic response. Parkridge’s white members also sued its white owner in order to stop the sale, attempting “to prevent the club from falling into the hands of the negroes” and leaving “a black spot on Corona’s forward progress.” The campaign culminated in a dramatic incident of racism directed at black golfers: a burning cross on the club’s front lawn. The Klan’s threat to wage “race war” against the 663-acre estate (“the best view property in southern California,” boasted the Chicago Defender) eventually worked: in 1929 the black buyers were forced to withdraw their bid, and Parkridge Country Club soon became a sanitarium.26

On the opposite end of the spectrum, some black-owned or black-operated courses evolved over time from sympathetic white-owned courses that welcomed black golfers and specifically targeted the African American community. Such was the case in Boston, where wealthy merchant Charles M. Cox encouraged African Americans to visit his Mapledale Country Club, a 196-acre country estate located twenty-five miles
outside the city in Stow, Massachusetts. Cox hired a black man, Robert Hawkins, to operate Mapledale, which featured a large mansion, tennis and equestrian facilities, and a nine-hole golf course. Hawkins had considerable experience in golf management, rising up the caddie ranks at courses in Vermont and Massachusetts. In 1926 he purchased Mapledale, providing a highly visible site for black golf in the 1920s and 1930s. On weekends, white residents noticed caravans of black golfers making their way out from Boston. That same year Mapledale also hosted the first national tournament of the black United Golfers Association (UGA). Like Kankakee Shores and other black-owned facilities, Mapledale continued to be popular with white golfers. By the 1930s it hosted key African American outings and national tournaments even as most of its daily players were white.27

In addition to the dramatic growth of black-owned-and-operated golf facilities, golf—as a leisure activity with strong class and racial connotations—emerged in the debates associated with the Harlem Renaissance, a profound cultural movement in the 1920s and 1930s that questioned the fundamental concepts of black identity, art, and culture. The nation’s preeminent black intellectual, W. E. B. Du Bois, recognized not only the significance of golf’s emergence in black America but also the game’s association with white colonialism in Africa and the Caribbean. After attending the 1923 Pan-African Congress in Europe, Du Bois traveled to

Parkridge Country Club in Corona, California, ca. 1927 (Used by Permission of the Board of Trustees of the Corona Public Library).
Africa for the first time and observed the proliferation of white country clubs. He bemoaned how whites in Sierra Leone contributed to residential and social segregation by carving out “beautiful English suburbs” with “tennis courts and golf links” that insulated them from Africans. “I am morally certain . . . that more is spent by the government on tennis and golf in the colony than on popular education,” he wrote. And Du Bois was unaware of what likely would have incensed him even more: the first golf holes built in Africa were constructed in the eighteenth century by Scotsmen manning the British slave castle on Sierra Leone’s Bunce Island, with African slaves in kilts serving them as caddies.28

Despite his cynicism about the game in Africa, Du Bois still affirmed the symbolism of black Americans taking up golf and moderately praised the proliferation of black golf clubs. Under his editorship the NAACP’s Crisis magazine celebrated the 1925 opening of the all-black National Capital Country Club outside Washington, D.C.29 Like nearly all of Harlem’s black elite, Du Bois also applauded the establishment of Shady Rest in New Jersey and visited the club. Still, after receiving promotional literature urging him to join in 1923, his response was lukewarm. “In all this development . . . Negroes are evincing tremendous energy and esprit de corps,” he wrote. “Pictures of new organizations and buildings appear in their pictorials, groups of officers and employees, figures of income. White people, too, express, on seeing and hearing of such enterprises, great gratification, and, upon the slightest pretext, make glowing speeches to prove that this is the way to the millennium.” Yet a black country club, no matter how successful or swanky, still represented the advancement of racial segregation.

In truth, the development is not nearly as satisfactory and inspiring as such persons say or think. It is not a direct advance, it is a great flanking movement . . . the attempt of the Negro to develop as an American citizen, and the attempt, on the part of his white fellow-citizens, to stem that development and hold it within definite and unyielding limits of low wage and semi-peonage; the consequent escape of the ambitious and talented and venturesome, together with a large and larger following of the black masses into a segregated economy. The segregation is developing, and its future development is going to be tremendous.30

Over time Du Bois grew increasingly pessimistic whenever he invoked golf, even as he drew closer to country club life, which for him came to
represent little more than elite, conspicuous consumption for whites and a false sense of security for blacks. He nevertheless signed up for membership at Atlanta’s New Lincoln Country Club soon after he returned to the South in 1933. There is no evidence the game appealed to him, but Du Bois undoubtedly interacted with many players, as Lincoln’s golf scene was one of the largest in the South. The fact that he did not take up golf (or address it more often) was telling, considering his long-standing call for African Americans to participate in more sports and recreational activities. In his 1897 essay “The Problem of Amusement,” Du Bois argued that “especial attention” be paid to sports in black schools: “Here again athletic sports must in the future play a larger part in the normal and mission schools of the South, and we must rapidly come to the place where the man all brain and no muscle is looked upon as almost as big a fool as the man all muscle and no brain; and when the young woman who cannot walk a couple of good country miles will have few proposals of marriage.” However, as Du Bois grew more militant, he saw little value in golf as a recreational or athletic endeavor: its association with middle-class, white elitism was simply too strong. By the 1940s, as black colleges led their white counterparts in establishing intercollegiate golf teams, Du Bois deemed it a frivolous use of alumni donations: “We pay on the nail for . . . golf clubs, but for a college training? I do not know.”

In New York City, other leading artists, authors, and intellectuals associated with the Harlem Renaissance noted that golf marked one’s status in elite social circles, both white and black. The movement’s definitive text, Alain Locke’s 1925 anthology *The New Negro*, featured an essay by educator Elise McDougald exploring class divisions among urban black women. In particular, McDougald noted how golf and clubs like Shady Rest offered Harlem’s elite women social standing with whites while isolating them from the city’s other black women. “Negro wives find Negro maids unwilling generally to work in their own neighborhoods, for various reasons,” she wrote. “It is in these homes of comparative ease that we find the polite activities of social exclusiveness. The luxuries of well-appointed homes, modest motors, tennis, golf and country clubs, trips to Europe and California, make for social standing. The problem confronting the refined Negro family is to know others of the same achievement.”

As in Chicago, migrants to New York from the South or Midwest, including key contributors to the Harlem Renaissance, encountered golf when they sought to enter the world of Manhattan refinement. Zora
Neale Hurston came to New York City in 1925 to enroll at Barnard College, where she struggled to set aside money for books, academic fees, and other Barnard necessities like a “spring golf outfit.” Florida transplant James Weldon Johnson did not play until after he moved to New York. “To get outdoor exercise I took up golf,” he wrote in 1933. “For four or five years I was a votary of the game—though remaining a dub.” Johnson played regularly during the late 1920s while leading the NAACP and providing a key voice for the Harlem Renaissance. In his memoir he recalled being “on the links of a club over in New Jersey” (likely Shady Rest) in September 1925 when a colleague ran out with news that Detroit police had arrested physician Ossian Sweat for murdering a white man while defending his house from a mob. Johnson rushed to the clubhouse, where he counseled Detroit’s NAACP officers via telephone on how to respond to the incident.

Golf was both a backdrop to important events during the period and a subject of debates over racial segregation inspired by the Harlem Renaissance. The movement’s most prominent black critic, George Schuyler, rejected the notion of “Negro Art” and debated its proponents in the press. In 1936 he criticized African Americans in the South for their lack of physical fitness. “There ought to be sport clubs, thousands of golf clubs with courts and courses owned, operated, and maintained by colored people in the South, and in the North too, for that matter,” wrote Schuyler. To his critics such comments were entirely tone deaf and represented a deep misunderstanding of black life in the South. One of James Weldon Johnson’s top literature students, Nashville poet Herman J. D. Carter, responded vehemently in the Pittsburgh Courier. “I am disgusted with that man Schuyler,” wrote Carter. “I think he should have first attacked those whites who employ the Negroes at such long hours and such low pay, that they don’t have time to play golf and tennis, rather than attack the people who couldn’t help themselves.”

White journalists and intellectuals also commented on the rise of black golf, some echoing Du Bois’s cynicism. In a 1929 column popular journalist H. L. Mencken warned that black golf did not represent advancement and opportunity, nor did it offer any solution to the “old divisions” between the ideologies of Du Bois and Booker T. Washington. Instead it typified an increasingly disjointed black community, with out-of-touch black elites who led lives “of easy contentment, of antinomian opportunism, of well-fed complacency, of black Babbitry.” Amidst the celebration of black identity and optimism fueled by the Harlem Renaissance, two
very different public figures—one a leading champion of black civil rights (Du Bois), the other a white provocateur and racial elitist (Mencken)—nevertheless shared similar concerns over black golfers. “One hears of Negro luncheon clubs, Negro country clubs, Negro golf matches . . . and all the rest of it,” Mencken wrote. “A naïve and imbecile class consciousness, grounded upon money, wipes out the old race consciousness, which becomes furtive and discreditable.”³⁸

This debate over the merits of golf played out within black organizations nationwide. Some black fraternal groups supported the game, including the largest: the Improved Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks of the World (the Black Elks). In Pittsburgh, Black Elks hosted regular golf tournaments at the public South Park Golf Course, while in 1940 the Elks’ national convention in St. Louis featured a golf tournament at Forest Park. Golf within the organization was particularly significant because, as historians note, the fraternal order attracted not only “elite professionals” but also “masses of working-class men.”³⁹ Meanwhile, some within the NAACP, such as Ella Baker, echoed the cynicism of Du Bois or Mencken toward the game, while others, like James Weldon Johnson, played regularly and considered golfing part of their civil rights activism. State legislator T. Gillis Nutter, president of the West Virginia NAACP, built a regulation course outside Charleston on which he proudly hosted prominent organization members from around the country.⁴⁰ Roy Wilkins, who in 1955 would take command of the NAACP during the critical postwar period, fought to desegregate municipal courses as a young college graduate living in Kansas City in the early 1920s. After he graduated from the University of Minnesota, Wilkins took his first job with the Kansas City Call and later remembered how golf exemplified the different reception African Americans received in Kansas City versus Chicago: “In Kansas City, Negroes were not permitted to use the four municipal courses,” he wrote. “Because, the head of the park board announced, ‘Negroes don’t like to play golf’—and that was that.” Meanwhile, a young black man who moved North “was still a Negro, but he could fly higher and in wider circles than I could in Kansas City. . . . If he wanted to play golf, he didn’t have to go to court to prove he was a citizen and entitled to play on municipal links maintained with the taxes of black people.”⁴¹ Denied access, Wilkins and other African Americans in Kansas City still found a unique opportunity to play. In 1928 the wealthy family of Junius Groves, a former slave dubbed the “potato king” after he made millions growing potatoes on his farm outside Kansas City, built a course on the
estate and invited blacks from the city. The course at “Groves Center” proved so popular that the family was overwhelmed with visitors and began investing in upgrades. For over a decade Groves Center was the only place where Wilkins and other blacks in Kansas City “went to do our hacking and slicing.” By 1940 the Fair Employment Practices Committee reported that African Americans had been granted limited access to municipal golf in Kansas City with “discriminatory privileges,” meaning only one of the city’s courses was reserved for segregated black use.42

Unlike Johnson and Wilkins, others in the NAACP abhorred golf and the elitism of members who played. Once she began working for the organization in 1940, Ella Baker struggled to connect with local branch leaders who frequented country clubs, rejecting what she considered snobbish behavior—especially in the Jim Crow South, where to her nothing signaled barriers to more militant, mass action than blacks who embraced country club society. “I am stopping at the home of three women of leisure whose major past time [sic] is idle chatter . . . [and] who were too busy to attend the meeting last night,” she wrote from Georgia in 1942 to Lucille Black, the NAACP’s national membership secretary. Baker was again frustrated while organizing in Florida, where she reported how one campaign chairman “is experiencing a slight let down in that I am not a social elite, and cannot join her in a game of bridge or golf at the ‘Country Club.’”43

Baker was introduced to the game while traveling widely in the South and working with relatively elite NAACP members, whereas many civil rights leaders encountered golf as they migrated to black neighborhoods in the Midwest and Northeast. Still others, however, first experienced golf in poorer, more rural southern locales. In 1927 eight-year-old James Farmer worked briefly as a caddie in Marshall, Texas. Although his family was well off, the childhood experience helped introduce him to racism and relations between poor whites and blacks in East Texas. The future head of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), Farmer witnessed racial tension between white and black caddies and was introduced for the first time to Marshall’s working-class white children. “There were about equal numbers of white and black boys,” he recalled. “There had to be more to the enigmatic white world than the caddy yard. Those ragtag boys didn’t live in the fancy houses I’d seen.” Farmer’s father (a professor at Wiley College) soon forbade his son from working at the course after a racially charged fight broke out between the children.44

Black political, social, and cultural leaders thus had dramatically different experiences with golf during the interwar period, and they found
no consensus on the game’s usefulness or meaning to the black community. But the growing popularity of golf in black urban neighborhoods sent a far clearer message: black golf, like few other leisure activities, embodied the optimism and opportunity of the Great Migration and the Jazz Age. The comparison with jazz was more than conjecture, for golf even contributed directly to the developing jazz scene in northern black neighborhoods. Dashy’s Inn Golf Club was a popular early jazz spot in the Bronx, located near Van Cortlandt Park, the municipal course popular with African Americans. New Orleans blues singer Lizzie Miles performed regularly at the club, where she made her New York debut in 1922. One of Baltimore’s most celebrated jazz venues was the Coney Island Golf Links and Dancing Pavilion, where patrons could play the city’s first miniature course while listening to leading jazz men like Fess Williams and Ike Dixon: “Colored people flock there,” wrote one observer in 1930.45

Of course, many entertainers also lent their fame to black courses, and some regularly played golf themselves. Pioneering bandleaders Cab Calloway, Duke Ellington, Chick Webb, and Count Basie all performed at New Jersey’s Shady Rest, as did singers Sarah Vaughan and Ella Fitzgerald. Calloway and singer Billy Eckstine were also noted as regular players at the predominately black Langston Golf Course in Washington, D.C., after it opened in 1939.46 After moving to Chicago from Louisiana in 1918, clarinetist Jimmie Noone took up golf and played regularly while headlining at the South Side’s Apex Club. And the most influential musician to emerge from St. Louis, Miles Davis, grew up caddying for his father on the city’s Forest Park course in the 1930s. Percussionists seemed especially drawn to the game: one of Chicago’s popular bandleaders, drummer Floyd Campbell, frequented amateur tournaments, as did Nat King Cole’s drummer Lee Young (Cole himself also participated in celebrity tournaments during the 1950s). Legendary trumpeter Louis Armstrong showed little interest in golf, but members of his orchestra were hooked, particularly drummer Fred “Tubby” Hall, who found opportunities to play while touring with Armstrong and competed in amateur tournaments around the country. Female musicians also took up golf, including members of the racially integrated, all-women International Sweethearts of Rhythm. Originally from Piney Woods, Mississippi, the big band toured nationally in the 1940s (including New York’s Apollo Theater and Chicago’s Regal Theater) and posed for golf-themed promotional photos.47

Northern entertainers also played while on tour in the Deep South,
both at black private courses and as guests at white clubs. Bandleader Jimmie Lunceford brought members of his orchestra to Atlanta’s New Lincoln Country Club between gigs, while Billy Eckstine once performed all night in Charleston, South Carolina, then went straight to the links and finished a round by 7:00 A.M.: “That boy has gone stark, raving crazy about golf,” wrote journalist James Hicks. Eckstine is most notable for hiring a twenty-four-year-old Charlie Sifford to be his personal valet and golf instructor in 1946. Golf even showed up in the music itself: pianist and comedian Billy Mitchell’s 1936 tune “A Hole in One” features a man who challenges anyone (including Bobby Jones) to a match and tries to seduce a woman with his golf prowess. She rebuffs him, and the two banter back and forth with plenty of sexual double entendre:

M: Golf course momma, your golf course papa is gonna play on your private course today. . . .
W: I got several reasons for not playing with you at all. Reason number one, your putter is too small. . . .
M: My driving shaft is made out of good old flexible timber. . . .
W: I don’t like to play with you because you lose too many strokes. . . .
M: Well I do lose my temper, at times I have recalled, but I’ve played with you for several years and I have never lost a ball.
W: You played with a girlfriend of mine, and this girl claimed you’re growing old, and it’s likely taken you half a day just to play one hole.
M: Well I don’t see how she could tell you that, because I can truthfully say, that I could have made a hole in one but the flag was in the way.

Recorded in Chicago, the song was a minor party hit. 48

Even in urban settings, African Americans found opportunities to play regulation golf courses, either at facilities located in their neighborhoods (such as in Chicago) or with day trips to nearby courses inside and outside the city (such as in New York City or Philadelphia). Organizations that served these neighborhoods also provided lessons and outlets to the game; in 1940 Harlem’s YMCA branch established a club for young black golfers. Barred from a city course on Staten Island and a semiprivate course in Englewood, New Jersey, the club fought back legally while successfully locating other facilities that were willing to allow black youth on the links. 49 The game also reached the inner city with help from a quirky, little-known phenomenon in American history: a boom in the popu-
larity of miniature golf courses that swept the country in the late 1920s. In North Carolina, Pinehurst Resort’s “Thistle Dhu” was the nation’s first “mini” golf course, installed in 1919. John Garnet Carter, a white inventor and businessman from Tennessee, took the idea further in 1927 when he patented a “mini golf” game (which he dubbed “Tom Thumb Golf”) and installed a course at a hotel he owned on Lookout Mountain. Soon after, a large number of mini-golf courses were built around the nation; a long-forgotten fad (many courses did not survive the Great Depression) but an important one nonetheless, they helped make golf more accessible to black urban neighborhoods during the Jazz Age. Thousands of new “midget golf” facilities had appeared by 1930 when golf club manufacturers announced that sales of putters in America rose by 40 percent in just one year. Moreover, many of these facilities were quite opulent and offered a much more dynamic experience than the standard mini-golf fare that reemerged after World War II. One course in Queens, New York, featured a live caged bear cub that tried to stop patron’s golf balls. Another, Whispering Pines Miniature Golf Course in Rochester, New York, was impressive enough that today it is listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

New York City alone had 150 miniature golf courses by 1930, including many in Harlem. One popular black course was built upstairs at the decrepit and ill-used Harlem Opera House, often called the “Old Apollo” theater, four years before the refurbished Apollo opened half a block away. Featuring “winter golf indoors” with “tricky traps and harassing hazards,” it was built in the same facility where Joe Louis later put on boxing exhibitions for throngs of fans. The “Savoy Golf Club” was another miniature course built alongside an iconic Jazz Age ballroom. Opened in the Savoy building on Lennox Avenue in 1930, the course dubbed itself the “finest in Harlem.” Although it never featured an actual miniature course, Harlem’s Golden Gate Ballroom hosted social gatherings and galas put on by the city’s various black golfing organizations.

Beyond Harlem, nearly every black enclave in the North experienced the miniature golf fad. African Americans in Philadelphia frequented several locations, including the B.T.W. course (47th Street and Aspen Street), the Cherry Inn Golf Course (55th Street and Cherry Street), and Alabama Golf Club (in the basement of the Olympia Theater). In the 1930s there was even an outdoor course at Mill Creek Park, a site in the heart of Philadelphia’s “Black Bottom” neighborhood that gave way to a public housing complex in the 1950s. Pittsburgh boasted three mini-golf courses cater-
ing to black patrons: Egyptian Golf Gardens (next to the Burke Theater), Lincoln Links (on Penn Avenue in the East End neighborhood), and the Dixie Land Golf Course (in nearby Monessen, Pa.). The course names, and the fact that all three advertised heavily in the black community, make it likely they were owned and operated by African Americans. By 1931 the *Pittsburgh Courier* was celebrating “the craze which has swept the city” and calling for black businessmen to open even more facilities: “25,000 of these miniature golf courses have sprung up. . . . Negroes themselves should take advantage of this opportunity . . . before shrewd whites step in.”53 However, just as important jazz venues and black gathering spots were often owned and operated by whites, so too were many of these

urban golf facilities. “Why is it that Baltimore Negroes always wait for some white individual or corporation to enter an open field of business among negroes?” complained one Afro-American reader about the success of Baltimore’s Coney Island Golf Links. “It remained for white people to open the first infant golf course here. Colored people . . . never seem to realize that their money is forever going into the hands of another race, who use the same money to make boots to kick you with.”

Nevertheless, because serious golfers frequented these miniature courses seeking lessons from top-notch instructors, the mini-golf boom helped African Americans succeed as professionals in the industry, even at white-owned facilities. Michigan native Jimmie DeVoe taught at a Cleveland miniature course in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Later in the decade he partnered with Shady Rest’s John Shippen, and the two organized numerous black golf tournaments. By 1936 DeVoe was spending significant time in Harlem, where he ran his own golf school and shop, operating first out of a local pharmacy before moving into the L. M. Blumstein department store on West 125th Street. He also frequented Los Angeles to offer instruction for a wide range of black athletes, entertainers, and politicians. His golf students included the Mills Brothers, Nat King Cole, Althea Gibson, Jackie Robinson, and future Los Angeles mayor Tom Bradley. DeVoe went on to become the first African American to gain PGA membership in twenty-seven years after the organization desegregated in 1961.

Another black instructor, Dorsey Adams, worked at a unique New York City miniature facility. When promoter Tex Rickard opened the new Madison Square Garden in 1925, the venue included a rooftop miniature course. According to the Chicago Defender, two years later Rickard recruited the twenty-five-year-old Adams, a former caddie from Florida, to offer golf lessons on the Garden’s roof “teaching the big town folks.” Chicago’s most talented black professional, Robert “Pat” Ball, also spent time running a mini-golf operation on Wabash Avenue, and two of the city’s top black female players—Marie (Jones) Thompson and Geneva Wilson—honed their skills at miniature facilities. Thompson encouraged novices to take up mini-golf because it was cheaper and fun, but she also described its popularity with Chicago’s serious players: “One may drop around the peewee course almost any night and there they will find the sharpshooters and near sharpshooters making matches for the next day or week.”

African Americans also took up mini-golf in the South, from lavish
facilities to more rudimentary courses. Baltimore patrons combined jazz and mini-golf at the Coney Island Golf Links, while in Washington, D.C., the Prince Hall Masonic Lodge built a popular course that stayed open until 2:00 A.M. In addition, a course constructed in D.C.’s East Potomac Park in 1930 was the nation’s first public mini-golf links open to black players. The fad also made it easier for individuals to build impromptu courses on their own, carved out of city byways, neighborhood alleys, and abandoned properties. A 1941 Works Progress Administration (WPA) description of the poorest black neighborhood in Little Rock, Arkansas, noted how “neighborhood clubs” supplemented the public school’s meager extracurricular offerings with activities such as sandlot baseball games and “persons play[ing] golf with odds and ends of equipment on a crude miniature course on Johnson street.” African Americans in Atlanta had no access to that city’s municipal links, yet a makeshift, three-hole course still showed up in one of its roughest neighborhoods during the Great Depression. It was not for the faint of heart, either: one player was stabbed to death over a ten-cent bet in 1936, and in 1953 a teen was stabbed ten times during a “tiff over golf balls.”

Black secondary schools and colleges also helped popularize mini-golf in the South. Alabama’s Tuskegee Institute opened its miniature course in 1930, four years after it became the first black college to build a regulation nine-hole track, and in 1931 Little Rock’s Shorter College became the first school in Arkansas (black or white) to construct a mini-course on its campus. Nationally recognized educator Charlotte Hawkins Brown brought mini-golf to her Palmer Memorial Institute in North Carolina; the course was “beautifully located on a wooded part of the campus.”

America’s infatuation with mini-golf had faded dramatically by the late 1930s; most early courses did not survive past World War II. In Chicago’s black neighborhoods the novelty began to wear thin even sooner. “Last year about this time the country was overcrowded with pee wee courses of all descriptions,” reported the Defender in 1931. “And this season they are forgotten about.” Still, the fad’s influence on African American golf was tremendous, for mini-golf helped bring the game directly to urban neighborhoods at a crucial, formative time during the Great Migration. It would also return following the war, and eventually courses would again be within reach of America’s inner-city neighborhoods. Yet the most interesting black mini-golf course constructed after World War II, and perhaps the most race-conscious of them all, was built not in Philadelphia’s Black Bottom neighborhood or inside the Harlem
Opera House but, rather, at a castle deep in the countryside of southern France. There in 1955 Josephine Baker, the iconic entertainer of the Harlem Renaissance, constructed a miniature course at her Château des Milandes castle for her “rainbow tribe” of multiracial adopted children.64

As a cheaper option for golfers unable to afford standard courses outside the city, mini-golf reached a different group of black players: dilettantes and working-class patrons who were less likely to encounter full-scale golf. “Millions wanted to play golf but were too poor to belong to golf clubs or to trudge out to them,” remarked the Pittsburgh Courier about the fad in 1930. “The golf craze had reached the masses of people and they craved to be satisfied. What’s more simple than to bring the golf course to them instead of trying to bring them to the golf course?”65 By the 1950s black neighborhoods in many cities were served by golf shops offering instruction, equipment, and occasionally miniature courses—including Tyler’s Golf Shop (Los Angeles), Northrop’s Sport Shop (Norfolk, Va.), and Ray Mitchell’s Golf School and Sport Shop (Harlem).66 It thus appears that the golf-related advertisements and images that flooded popular publications in the 1920s were not as aspirational or out-of-touch as once thought. “Advertising men, it seems, didn’t notice (or didn’t care) that their mania for playing golf, talking about it, and picturing it in their ads was not shared by the majority of Americans at the time,” wrote Roland Marchand in his landmark study of American advertising.67 The popularity of urban golf facilities in black neighborhoods, the growth of high-profile black country clubs, and the constant discussion of the game in the black press all suggest otherwise.

Miniature courses also made golf a quick and attractive date night for young, working-class black couples. Many facilities, including the Apollo course in Harlem, featured weekly “ladies nights” and promotions for youth and students, regularly advertising themselves in black newspapers alongside country clubs like Shady Rest. Charlotte Hawkins Brown specifically cited golf as a quality, wholesome dating activity for young black men and women, perhaps one reason why she installed a course at Palmer Institute.68 The advertisements and encouragement seemed to work, as young people overwhelmingly fueled the popularity of mini-golf in both black and white neighborhoods. Black personal ads in Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Cleveland routinely mentioned golf as a favorite past-time or potential dating activity.69

Black-owned public courses, private country clubs, and miniature facilities helped increase the game’s visibility in black neighborhoods
and challenged the stereotype that golf was the domain of rich, white men. In addition, civil rights activists and black organizations continued to fight for the desegregation of municipal courses in cities around the country. One important confrontation took place in Washington, D.C., where the black community led a highly visible campaign to integrate golf courses in the nation’s capital. Segregation on D.C.’s public links was complicated by the fact that some courses were operated by the local parks department, while others were built and maintained by the federal government. In 1914 a small, three-hole practice course opened in West Potomac Park; it was enlarged to nine holes in 1921. Two additional nine-hole layouts opened in East Potomac Park, the first in 1920 and the second in 1924. Players showed immediate interest; park superintendent Lt. Col. Clarence O. Sherrill, a North Carolina native, reported 155,000 annual rounds between the three courses, and that included strong demand in the black community.

In 1920 Sherrill provided African Americans limited, segregated access to East Potomac on Monday afternoons and West Potomac on Wednesday afternoons (when there was less white demand). Nevertheless, white golfers quickly balked at having to give way to blacks at any time in Potomac Park, and two groups of black golfers—the Citizens’ Golf Club (later Royal Golf Club), formed in 1922, and the Riverside Golf Club, formed in 1924—pressed Sherrill and the parks department to provide a stand-alone course exclusively for African Americans. The groups succeeded in 1924 when the city constructed Lincoln Memorial Golf Course, a nine-hole “colored” course directly northwest of the new memorial, which itself opened two years earlier in 1922. Subsequent accounts have placed this course southeast of the memorial (in today’s West Potomac Park) or east of it (north of the memorial’s reflecting pool, currently Constitution Gardens). But in 1927 Howard University sociologist William Henry Jones described the course as “bordered on one side by the monument grounds, on another by the Potomac River and on still a third by the Naval Hospital [23rd and E Streets, NW].” The Washington Post also described the location as “between Lincoln memorial and the Naval hospital, west of Twenty-seventh street,” which would place it northwest of the memorial, where today Interstate 66 and the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts are located.

The opening of the Lincoln Memorial Golf Course codified segregation, as African Americans were no longer allowed to use any of the other Potomac Park courses. But the black press still celebrated it as a major accomplishment, in part because the new black course was as good as or
better than any of D.C.’s white links. Moreover, the significance of an all-black golf course directly adjacent to the memorial was undeniable. “The grounds are in good order and comprise one of the most beautiful spots in Washington,” Jones wrote. “The course has its situation in an attractive and unique environment.” Noting that the course logged “more than one thousand rounds” in its first three months alone, he even reported that the white starter had to turn away disappointed white golfers who sought to access what they felt was a superior black course.73

The clubs that successfully lobbied the city included some of Washington’s most successful African Americans. They were led, however, by a young author who had just moved to the capital. Victor Daly was a World
War I veteran who spent time in Harlem after the war (he lived in an apartment adjoining James Weldon Johnson’s) and graduated from Cornell University in 1919. By 1924 he had moved to D.C. and was at work writing Not Only War, which would become the only World War I novel written by a black veteran. Daly’s enthusiasm for golf was matched only by his love of bridge: he was a founding member of the all-black American Bridge Association, which formed in 1932 after the American Contract Bridge League barred African American players. Yet the young Daly was a rather unlikely individual to be founding president of Washington’s Riverside Golf Club and leading spokesmen for black golfers in the nation’s capital, a group that included the highest-level African Americans in the federal government and some of the wealthiest black people in the country.74

Even as they fought for the construction of Lincoln Memorial Golf Course, the golfers also sought to organize an elite private course outside the capital. In 1925 they succeeded with the founding of the National Capital Country Club, a twenty-three-acre parcel in Laurel, Maryland. A group of black investors constructed a nine-hole course, six tennis courts, and an impressive clubhouse at the site. In addition to Victor Daly and other advocates for African American golfers in Washington, National Capital’s membership was perhaps the most elite in the history of black country clubs. Its first president was Texas native Emmett J. Scott, the highest-ranking African American in Woodrow Wilson’s administration. Scott was chief aid to Booker T. Washington before moving to the capital in 1917 to serve as special advisor of black affairs to the secretary of war. Another club leader was Harry McCard, a cofounder of the all-black American Tennis Association, which had formed in Washington nine years earlier. And the group also included James Cobb, whom President Calvin Coolidge had just appointed as the only African American judge on the District of Columbia Municipal Court. As Jones wrote, National Capital’s members were “drawn from the most prominent people in the city.”75

The successful battle for access to Potomac Park only emboldened Washington’s black golfers, many of whom immediately called on the federal government (which operated most of the city’s links) to desegregate the courses completely or construct a regulation, eighteen-hole course for African Americans. Government officials grew more open to the idea of satisfying Washington’s black golfers by constructing a black course farther from the National Mall. Led by black architect John Lang-
ford, the black community in 1927 began lobbying for a course at the new Anacostia Park. In 1934 the government acquiesced to the idea, and two years later construction began on the west side of the Anacostia River; the bulk of the first nine holes were constructed by the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and the WPA. Opened in 1939, Langston Golf Course was named in honor of John Mercer Langston, founding dean of the Howard University School of Law and Virginia’s first African American congressman. Two years later the U.S. Army supplied golf clubs to black soldiers at the adjacent Anacostia Recreation Camp for Negro Soldiers so the men could play at Langston.76

Open to both white and black golfers, Langston became one of the most important black golf courses in America, with many African American politicians, celebrities, and leading social figures visiting the course and its clubhouse. As in Chicago, the fight for desegregated public links in Washington also highlighted the interest many black women had in the game. The all-female Wake Robin Golf Club, formed in 1936, was a leading proponent of the Langston project; the group also petitioned Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes in 1938 for greater access to Potomac Park, as its courses were then managed by the Interior Department’s National Park Service (NPS). Langston also became a key stop for African American professional players and the site of several important national black golf tournaments. In 1991 its first nine holes were added to the National Register of Historic Places.

From access to segregated links at Potomac Park in 1920 to the estab-
lishment of Langston Golf Course in 1939, black golfers continued to fight for full and equal access to all of Washington’s courses. The women of the Wake Robin Golf Club were particularly emboldened after their petition to Ickes helped bring segregated access and the Langston project to fruition. One of the club’s leaders, Paris Toomer, was married to Edgar George Brown, the founder of the National Negro Council and a member of President Franklin Roosevelt’s “Black Cabinet.” Brown served as an administrator with the CCC, where he compiled reports on African Americans in the agency’s work camps and advocated against discrimination on their behalf. Brown is well known to historians for confronting CCC leaders on segregation, but his most dramatic, public confrontation actually took place on a golf course in 1941. Joining his wife in protesting discrimination at East Potomac Park, Brown surreptitiously arranged tee times for three black players: Asa Williams (the president of the Royal Golf Club), Cecil Shamwell (a professional golfer), and George Williams (a local schoolteacher). On a hot and humid Sunday in June, Brown and the group attempted to play the course. Paris Brown and two other women from the Wake Robin Golf Club also joined the protest and walked alongside the golfers, as did six officers from the NPS’s U.S. Park Police department, which feared the protest could incite violence. According to the Chicago Defender, “The men played without interruption until they came to the tenth hole, near the swimming pool. Jeers from the spectators did not stop the game, however.” Followed by one of the more unorthodox galleries in American history, including police, reporters, antagonistic whites, and black supporters, the three not only finished their round but managed excellent scores, considering the circumstances (George Williams, the teacher, shot 76). The spectacle marked the first instance of a direct-action protest in the world of golf, the kind of demonstration that would typify the postwar civil rights movement.

From Chicago to Atlanta, Edgar Brown’s brazen display made headlines in the black press and drew a response from his top boss, Harold Ickes. It came soon after Ickes had arranged the NPS’s most significant contribution to the black civil rights movement: singer Marian Anderson’s concert in 1939 before 75,000 white and black listeners at the Lincoln Memorial. Now, two years later, Ickes once again was pressed to address segregation in the heart of the nation’s capital. Yet this time the discrimination was not occurring at the privately owned Constitution Hall; it was even more blatant, as Brown and the golfers were challenging racism on the NPS’s own golf course, within sight of the very memorial
where the Roosevelt administration had registered its strongest opposition to segregation in D.C. Not surprisingly, Ickes reacted fast, indicating that the Interior Department would seek to desegregate all of Washington’s park facilities under its jurisdiction, including the East Potomac Park Golf Course. “I can see no reason why Negroes should not be permitted to play on the golf course,” he wrote. “They are taxpayers, they are citizens, and they have the right to play on public courses on the same basis as whites. To be sure, we have maintained a golf course for Negroes in Washington, but the cold fact is that we haven’t kept it up and it is not surprising that Negroes do not care to play on it.”

It was a moment long since overshadowed by the administration’s support for Anderson in 1939, as well as A. Philip Randolph’s threatened March on Washington in 1941, both of which became defining moments in the history of the civil rights movement in D.C. But for some African Americans at the time, Ickes’s call to desegregate Washington’s parks in the face of local white resistance, and with it his tacit approval of Brown’s direct, brazen protest, was a more dramatic victory. “Too much praise cannot be accorded Secretary Ickes for his laudable order . . . [to] serve all Americans who apply for play on the golf, tennis and other recreation fields of the capital of the nation,” wrote one Afro-American reader. “This is one of the strongest anti-Hitler strikes of this administration.”

Moreover, while the 1939 Anderson concert was a one-time moment when the NPS staged an integrated event to denounce the segregation of a private organization (the Daughters of the American Revolution), permanently desegregating D.C.’s parks proved to be a much longer, drawn-out struggle. Opponents, in both the city’s local government and the U.S. Congress, immediately tried to circumvent the move by calling for the NPS to transfer control of the parks to the District of Columbia’s Recreation Board. Meanwhile, in 1942 sympathizers in Congress (led by Representative John F. Hunter and Senator Harold Burton, both from Ohio) sought to formalize integration with passage of a recreation bill denouncing segregation in D.C.’s parks. The measure was vigorously opposed by pro-segregationists in Congress, especially Senator Theodore Bilbo (Mississippi) and Representatives F. Edward Hebert (Louisiana) and Aaron L. Ford (Mississippi). Seeking to avoid this very tension, President Franklin Roosevelt himself had proposed transferring some parks to the city as early as 1939, but by 1949 the fight between the NPS and D.C.’s Recreation Board reached a breaking point. That year the Interior Department offered once more to hand over the parks in exchange for a guarantee
that the board would eliminate all rules requiring racial segregation at the sites: in a 4-2 vote, the board rejected the offer. In the end, not until 1955 were all of Washington’s public golf courses (including East Potomac Park) fully desegregated in the wake of *Bolling v. Sharpe*, the Supreme Court’s decision to integrate the city’s public schools—thirty-five years after African Americans had first gained access to segregated links in the city, and fourteen years after Edgar Brown’s protest at the golf course nearest the U.S. Capitol and the White House.\(^8^0\)

The NAACP and the Urban League both supported the fight to desegregate Washington’s public golf courses, but they played a much larger role in Baltimore, where local branches took the fight for golf into the courtroom. As in D.C., African Americans in Baltimore began calling on the city to provide access to municipal links in the 1920s. Anger escalated after the city raised fares on all streetcar riders in order to pay for the expansion of its white-only parks. “Taking dimes from Negro car riders to purchase golf courses for the rich and well-to-do is worse than robbery,” complained the *Baltimore Afro-American*, the city’s largest black newspaper.\(^8^1\) Both Edward S. Lewis, head of the Baltimore Urban League, and Lillie Jackson, president of the Baltimore NAACP, took an active interest in confronting segregation on the city’s golf courses (although it is uncertain if either actually played the game). By 1930 Baltimore had acquiesced to an arrangement similar to that of Potomac Park in D.C.: the city opened one of its four public courses to African Americans during certain periods of the week. Clarence M. Mitchell, a nineteen-year-old black journalist, was on hand when the park commissioner confronted angry white residents in the working-class Carroll Park neighborhood and informed them that blacks would have a right to play their neighborhood’s golf course (Mitchell went on to be the NAACP’s chief lobbyist from 1950 to 1978). “That again is a reflection of the attitude in the city, in those days,” he later recalled. “Because that was the section where poor whites lived, whereas in the other areas of the city which had better golf courses, the city did not agree to have them play.”\(^8^2\) Although Carroll Park Golf Course was far worse than Baltimore’s three other courses—nine shabby, poorly maintained holes with no sand traps, flagsticks, practice greens, or professional staff—African American players quickly took advantage of the limited access to it. Delegates from the city’s black Morgan College frequented the park in subsequent years and hosted school visitors at the course. Another group of black golfers, calling themselves the Monumen-
tal Golfers Association, also played regularly and organized men’s and women’s tournaments at Carroll Park.83

Like golfers at Washington’s Potomac Park, Baltimore’s black players were not satisfied with limited, segregated access to one city course. (Perhaps they were even more dissatisfied, as many in Baltimore criticized D.C.’s black leaders for adopting Jim Crow “willingly” after they participated in dedication ceremonies for the black Lincoln Memorial Golf Course in 1925.)84 Whereas black golf clubs in D.C. turned to petitioning the federal government, golfers in Baltimore rallied with more help from the local NAACP. The city was already a testing ground for the organization’s renewed efforts to confront segregation in the South via a series of coordinated legal challenges. With financial assistance from the Monumental Golfers Association, Lillie Jackson and the NAACP joined a lawsuit filed against the park board in 1934 attempting to eliminate segregation at Baltimore’s remaining three public golf courses. After an initial victory, the case dragged on into the 1940s after the city filed a number of appeals. In 1942 a Baltimore jury seemed destined to support the city when jurors polled 9-3 in favor of segregation, only to reverse their sentiment and support the black players after deliberating through the night. For one month the color line fell, and African American players streamed onto the city’s other courses for the first time, especially the Mount Pleasant Golf Course. Responding to white protest, however, the parks board soon reversed itself, and the city again appealed the court’s ruling. The following year Maryland’s Court of Appeals overturned the verdict and affirmed segregation on Baltimore’s courses.85

By the end of World War II, African American golfers in Baltimore were turning to more direct, confrontational tactics, as was the NAACP. In 1948 a federal court deliberated another case brought by black golfer Charles Law with the organization’s help. Law’s attorney was Robert McGuinn, who in 1935 had used his lighter skin to pass as white and help Thurgood Marshall investigate racial discrimination in Maryland’s public schools. McGuinn was also aided by Charles Hamilton Houston, Marshall’s mentor and the architect of the NAACP’s legal plan to dismantle school segregation nationwide.86 As the legal battle escalated, so too did tension on the ground in Baltimore’s parks. While the federal court considered Law’s case, a group of protesters from the Maryland Progressive Party staged a demonstration at the city’s larger, more upscale Druid Hill Park. A group of twenty-one party members (fourteen black and eleven white, most of
whom were students) walked into the park, pulled out tennis rackets, and began playing interracial matches. By the time police arrived and began to drag them from the park, a crowd of 500 sympathizers had assembled: “Is this America or Nazi Germany?” one spectator reportedly shouted at police.87

The tennis sit-in served its purpose: desegregating Baltimore’s parks became a national story right as a federal court deliberated the NAACP’s golf lawsuit. Days later the court ruled in favor of the black golfers, and the city was once again told to grant African Americans access to all of its courses. Instead of desegregating, however, the parks board responded with more segregation: opening the courses to black players on certain days of the week (they were actually emboldened by the federal court’s decision, which freely admitted that such an arrangement would technically satisfy its ruling.)88 By this point, after nearly fifteen years of court battles over integrated golf, the board’s intransigence was beginning to rankle more whites in Baltimore. Another federal lawsuit was filed challenging segregation in the parks, this time with mostly white plaintiffs that included Martin Dean, a white player who was turned away at Clifton Park’s Golf Course on a day when the city had set it aside for black play.89

As African Americans confronted Baltimore in more militant ways, whites in favor of segregating the parks responded in kind. Working-class residents in South Baltimore continued to resent the city for opening Carroll Park’s shoddy course to black players in 1930, and the park remained a site of considerable racial tension in the ensuing decades. In 1949 a group of fifty white teens chased seven black teens out of the park. When the black youth returned, a vicious brawl ensued, and black teen Linwood Matthews was stabbed to death. Civil rights leaders and black residents blamed the violence directly on the city’s park board and its long-standing refusal to integrate the parks fully. To them, the board had Matthews’s blood on its hands, especially those members who had voiced the strongest disapproval of integrating Baltimore’s recreation space. In D.C. the struggle to integrate public golf courses had elicited strong feelings; in Baltimore it was met with violence. “The killing of a young Negro in a boys’ gang fight in Carroll Park . . . has brought to the front again the issue of segregation in the city park system,” lamented Baltimore’s largest newspaper, the Sun. “Segregation on the links has been reduced to an absurdity; and it must be obvious that before long the Park Board will reconsider its position and abandon segregation so far as the ancient Scottish game is concerned.”90 Nevertheless, Baltimore’s black golfers (as in D.C.)
had to wait until after the Supreme Court’s 1954 ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* to gain full access to all of the city’s courses. In November 1955 the court upheld a lower court’s ruling that the legal basis for Baltimore’s segregated parks was “swept away by the school decision.”

Baltimore was not alone, as violent encounters over integrating municipal golf courses occurred elsewhere in the South. Like segregation itself, the level of tension surrounding race and city parks often depended on the whims of local administrators and political leaders. The South’s first private black country club (Acorn Country Club) was built in 1924 and located in Richmond, Virginia, and Richmond’s city council was open to developing park land for black residents in the 1930s. Unlike in Baltimore, Richmond’s African Americans were encouraged to share requests for park and golf space at council meetings and faced little objection from whites. However, in nearby Norfolk, “we have not been quite so fortunate,” exclaimed the black *Journal and Guide*. There the “mere suggestion” that a municipal course be open to black use and potentially developed as black park space was met with “violent protests” from neighboring white property owners. Norfolk’s black residents also protested that their tax dollars were paying for the expansion of white courses at a time when there was little public park space for African Americans, let alone golf facilities. Even sympathetic council members hinted that tax funds should be used to meet more fundamental needs, such as repairing decrepit roads and infrastructure in black neighborhoods. Such an argument in an era of extreme austerity held weight with some black residents even as resources seemed readily available for white parks and golf courses. Yet others insisted that the fight for public investment in black recreation was of equal value to fighting for roads, schools, and businesses in black neighborhoods. “How shameful it is . . . that the things which are essential for the health and happiness of one race are not considered equally essential for the other race in the same city,” wrote one resident in 1930. Another letter supporting the fight for a black golf course was signed, “A Citizen and Taxpayer.” In 1946, Norfolk did start allowing African Americans to play its Memorial Park Golf Course, but only on Wednesdays and Fridays. “Few, if any of the city’s colored golf devotees will ever be able to use the golf course,” lamented the *Journal and Guide*, “for the simple reason that they must work for a living.” Yet once again, anyone who doubted the availability of golfers when presented with the chance to play or the level of demand for golf in the black community was proved wrong. Over the next three years Norfolk’s African Ameri-
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cans took immediate advantage of the access, particularly many women who signed up for lessons at Memorial Park seeking to play for the first time. African Americans from Richmond also traveled to play the course, and Memorial Park even hosted the Virginia-Carolina Open Championship, an all-black professional and amateur tournament that drew players from around the country as well as white spectators (including Norfolk’s mayor). The explosion of black golf at the park proved that access and opportunity stimulated demand; nevertheless, the course did not last long. In 1952 the city gave up the fifty-acre site so it could be developed into a new campus for the black Norfolk Polytechnic College (Norfolk State University).95

In contrast, some African Americans in the South found access to regulation-sized public courses at surprisingly early dates. Golf grew slowly in Texas; by 1900 there were still only five courses in the state, compared with hundreds in New York and Massachusetts. San Antonio's Brackenridge Park Golf Course, the first municipal links in Texas, opened in 1916. Although black players were generally barred from such public courses, some found ways to circumvent segregation, often by serving as caddies, waiters, and attendants at the facilities or by building their own courses. By 1927 a group of black enthusiasts in Dallas had formed the Dixie Golf Club and reported that they played regularly at a nine-hole course "open to the public" (it is unclear if this was a municipal course). In 1931 four of them were even allowed to play Brook Hollow Golf Club, an elite private course designed by A. W. Tillinghast that opened in 1920 and has never had a black member. The Pittsburgh Courier was surprised to learn that plans for a black housing development in Dallas included "a golf and country club with a professional Negro instructor. Yes, sir, in Texas!"96

Federally funded infrastructure projects in the South, including New Deal programs and World War II developments, also provided some African Americans access to the game for the first time. Black golfers in Houston found a consistent place to play in 1942 after the Federal Housing Administration included a nine-hole course at its Clinton Park housing project, built to house over 500 families of black war workers.97 President Franklin Roosevelt knew firsthand the problems and possibilities when constructing golf courses in ailing southern districts: he built one himself. Roosevelt played golf voraciously before paralysis disabled him (he was arguably better at the game than any other president in American history). When he purchased a resort in Warm Springs, Georgia, he immedi-
ately arranged to construct a course in 1926. The president later noted in a 1937 speech that the golf project opened his eyes to the South’s low wages:

So I began expanding my economic philosophy. I started in the next year . . . and let a contract to build a golf course. The contractor, who was an honest efficient contractor, got his labor, partly white and partly colored, around Warm Springs and he paid them seventy cents a day and eighty cents a day—when the weather was good. Figure out the purchasing power of the families of these workers in the course of a year. Could the local stores sell enough to keep the wheels of the factories in the North running?

Nevertheless, Roosevelt conceded that golf course work paid better than growing “five cent cotton.”

Whether or not the president himself saw economic uplift in golf course development, New Deal agencies and many African Americans certainly did. Washington’s Langston Golf Course was built by workers from the CCC and WPA, while City Park No. 1 in New Orleans—one of the courses former caddie Joe Bartholomew helped construct in 1933—was financed by the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA). Federal projects like these particularly helped the game grow in the South and West, but black neighborhoods in the North also benefited. The most popular municipal course for African Americans in Cleveland was the Highland Park Golf Course, which in 1940 the WPA refurbished using black workers. Call and Post, Cleveland’s black newspaper, celebrated the WPA’s hiring of “many skilled Negro workers” and noted that local white-only unions would not have employed black laborers if the city had managed the project itself.

The South remained the region where African Americans most forcefully called on the federal government to provide recreational space, including golf courses. In 1933, black residents in Norfolk wrote letters petitioning the Civil Works Administration to construct the black park their city leaders had failed to provide. Unlike many southern cities, Atlanta provided black golfers no access to its municipal courses and denied the community’s requests for a separate course of their own. Black leaders in turn launched a lengthy campaign aimed at convincing the federal government that Atlanta’s African Americans needed a federally built golf facility. The city’s Negro Chamber of Commerce petitioned FERA for a course in 1935, while the black Atlanta Daily World called on the WPA (which replaced FERA later that year) and continued to press
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the New Deal agency for black access to municipal links: “If the city is to receive thirty-four parks it is but fair that the colored people get at least six parks and one municipal golf course.”101 Despite the sustained effort, neither the city nor the federal government came through; Atlanta’s African Americans would have to wait longer than blacks in any other major city for sustained access to municipal golf. By 1949 Atlanta’s five municipal courses remained completely closed to black players. According to the Atlanta Daily World, the lack of golf access was the “biggest complaint” among the city’s African Americans regarding recreational opportunities and the integration of Atlanta’s parks. The city had even allowed black residents access to one of its municipal swimming pools, typically one of the greatest taboos in the Jim Crow South. (Atlanta was perhaps the only large city in America where public pools were integrated before public golf courses.) The city’s refusal meant that its courses would eventually be subject to the most important legal challenge to golf segregation in American history, the Supreme Court’s 1955 decision in Holmes v. Atlanta.102

As in Atlanta, black golfers in New Orleans struggled to access municipal courses as segregation hardened after World War I. Joe Bartholomew, the New Orleans professional barred from playing the Metairie Country Club he built in 1925, continued to design courses in Louisiana. He built private tracks in Hammond, Covington, Abita, Algiers Springs, Slidell, and Baton Rouge, along with a course in neighboring Mississippi—all of which, like Metairie, he never played due to segregation. Yet it was in New Orleans where Bartholomew made his largest contributions to the game. He worked briefly as head greenskeeper for the New Orleans Country Club and designed three landmark city courses: City Park No. 1, City Park North, and Pontchartrain Park. Although public, the City Park courses continued to enforce segregation, while Pontchartrain Park was the centerpiece of a privately financed black housing project completed in 1956 (Bartholomew had first designed the layout in 1924). Remarkably, all accounts indicate that Bartholomew received no compensation for building any of his three New Orleans courses. At some point in the 1940s he also constructed Crescent City Golf Club, a seven-hole, all-black course on property he owned in nearby Harahan.

By 1934 Bartholomew had stopped playing golf competitively and founded Bartholomew Construction. Along with building golf courses, the firm contributed to the city’s most important construction projects of the 1930s and 1940s, including the campuses of Dillard University and Xavier University, the Parkview Gardens housing project, the repaving of...
Tulane Avenue, and the new Charity Hospital (the nation’s second-largest hospital when it opened in 1939). In a period when most construction sites were segregated, the company’s willingness to employ white and black workers side by side drew attention. Through the success of Bartholomew Construction, real estate investments, and additional companies he purchased, Bartholomew became one of Louisiana’s richest African Americans. The former caddie “all but cornered the golf industry in New Orleans,” proclaimed *Fortune* magazine in 1949, “perhaps the prize local example of a highly prosperous Negro enterpriser.”103 Although he worked with both whites and blacks (“Joe’s got fine equipment—build with him, you save money,” remarked New Orleans mayor Chep Morrison), the dark-skinned Bartholomew was never fully accepted by the city’s elite mulattos, making his success all the more noteworthy. Amidst the Great Migration and the hardening of Louisiana segregation, the young caddie-turned-businessman stayed in New Orleans, navigated the city’s complex racial politics, and used an unlikely resource—golf—to become one of Louisiana’s richest men. Shortly after his death in 1971, he became the first black inductee into the Greater New Orleans Sports Hall of Fame. Seven years later the city renamed Pontchartrain Park the Joseph M. Bartholomew Golf Course.104

As was the case in Bartholomew’s life, caddying remained the most common way African Americans in the South interacted with the game after World War I. Many continued to face harsh treatment and rigid racial discrimination, made worse as the region spiraled further into economic depression and as competition heated up between white and black caddies, attendants, and course maintenance workers. (As President Roosevelt noted, menial golf-course work in the South did not pay well, but it nevertheless became a more attractive opportunity as agricultural jobs worsened.) A series of violent encounters before World War II highlighted the harsh reality many caddies faced and typified how degrading the experience could be. Even worse than the caddie fights in Texas recalled by James Farmer, several disturbing incidents of murder, theft, and racial tension made headlines in the South. In 1927 a black caddie at Highland Park Golf Course in Birmingham, Alabama, was gunned down on the first green by his white caddiemaster. The man supposedly was “caddying out of turn” and threatened his boss with a golf club after he was confronted (the dead caddie’s white client came to his defense and denied that the man had wielded a club against his boss).105 An even more dramatic incident occurred in 1942 at Atlanta’s Black Rock Golf Course in Adams...
Left, the opening of Pontchartrain Park Golf Course in 1956. Joe Bartholomew is second from left; second from right is New Orleans mayor Chep Morrison. Below, inside the clubhouse (Louisiana Division/City Archives, New Orleans Public Library).
Park. John Thomas Russell, a twenty-seven-year-old caddie and talented player, attempted to steal golf clubs from the course at night but was caught by George Thomas, the club’s white manager. Panicking, Russell asked Thomas for twenty dollars, then walked him out onto the course at gunpoint. Thomas lunged for the gun, the two tussled, and Russell shot Thomas dead. Over the next year the case quickly made its way through the legal system and exacerbated the racial animosity within Atlanta’s already tense world of segregated golf. The city’s leading black golfers distanced themselves from Russell and told the white press that he never actually played in any tournaments at the black New Lincoln Country Club. After a highly charged trial in a courtroom “packed with colored and white persons” with “many unable to gain admittance,” Russell was found guilty and executed via electric chair in August 1943.106

At times even normal encounters between caddies and their handlers devolved into a kind of exploitation where violence was encouraged by wealthy whites and made a part of the caddie’s job. During the 1930s it was common at southern country clubs for members to organize fights between caddies for entertainment and gambling. So-called battle royals featured five to ten caddies or clubhouse attendants (usually young men, and almost always black) who brawled for money while white members looked on, the last boy standing declared the “winner.” Such displays occurred at the finest clubs in the South, including the most exclusive: Georgia’s Augusta National Golf Club.

From its inception in 1932, Augusta National was as open about its policy of only employing black caddies as it was secretive about its membership. “As long as I’m alive,” said Clifford Roberts, who founded the club alongside famed amateur Bobby Jones, “all the golfers will be white and all the caddies will be black.”107 One of Augusta’s early black caddies was Beau Jack, the orphan who impressed Jones and the other members whenever the club put on battle royals. Working first as a shoe-shiner, Jack was promoted to caddie but told anyone who would listen that he really wanted to be a prizefighter. Soon Jones gathered a group of supporters who arranged for Jack to begin training as a boxer. Within six years the former caddie, who first honed his skills in Augusta’s battle royals, had captured the world lightweight boxing title in Madison Square Garden. Jack fought a series of major fights at the Garden during World War II, including one that brought in $35.9 million in war bond purchases, considered by some the largest gate in boxing history.108

In 1946, at the height of his fame, Jack made a high-profile return to
his humble roots. He went back to Augusta National during the Masters Golf Tournament, where he was pictured in the press reenacting his role as shoe-shiner and caddie. The Afro-American criticized the move: “The last couple of years he has made a million dollars, and last week he was back at the Augusta golf club ‘Uncle Tomming,’ shining shoes, serving drinks, ‘Mistering’ everybody in sight. With all the opportunities for ad-
vancement and culture that has come . . . he still thinks on the level of a shoe shine boy.”

By 1948 Jack had lost his world title, and his career faded quickly; soon the money was gone just as fast as he had made it. He moved first back to Georgia, then to Miami Beach, where he spent many years shining shoes for unsuspecting patrons at the Fontainebleau and Doral hotels. In his spare time he trained fighters at Miami’s famed Fifth Street gymnasium.

Beau Jack’s unique story faded into obscurity, along with his experience working at Augusta National Golf Club during its formative years. Yet he likely inspired Ralph Ellison’s description of a battle royal in chapter 1 of Ellison’s 1952 novel *Invisible Man*. Ellison began writing the iconic scene in the summer of 1945, around the height of Jack’s popularity in the press. Jack also influenced up-and-coming boxers and caddies back in his native Georgia. One was a young Augusta teen named James Brown: the future Godfather of Soul also wanted to be a prizefighter, participated in battle royals, and considered Jack his hero.

Along with stories that revealed the tense dynamics between black caddies and their bosses, clients, or white counterparts, incidents off the course also highlighted the harsh lives of southern caddies. In 1939 a caddie at Atlanta’s elite East Lake Golf Club was sentenced to life in prison for stabbing another black man in a gang fight. That same decade, millions followed the trial of the “Scottsboro Boys,” the sensational legal case in which nine African Americans from Alabama were accused of rape. Americans learned that one defendant, Clarence Norris, was the son of an abusive slave-turned-sharecropper; Norris fled his father at age fifteen and had desperately turned to caddying in rural Alabama.

Unlike Norris, other caddies in the South had exceptional experiences that were quite positive, including some who forged genuine bonds with their employers and club members. In 1928 Frank Ivory was a fifteen-year-old caddie at Edgewater Gulf Resort in Biloxi, Mississippi, when he was assigned to carry the bag of millionaire John J. Raskob. Raskob was vice president of General Motors, chairman of the Democratic National Committee, and principal financier of New York’s Empire State Building. He bonded immediately with the “barefoot and ragged caddie”; after Ivory started crying as Raskob prepared to leave, the executive asked the teen to “come along.” The two drove off, and Raskob telegraphed his wife back in Delaware: “Am bringing something home.” Both the white and black press celebrated the story of the impoverished caddie who “caught a break” and stumbled onto “lady luck,” and Ivory appeared
to live happily at Raskob’s estate for several years. The two exchanged
kind notes as the caddie, like Beau Jack, set out to become a professional
boxer in 1937 (he found little success). Ivory later served in World War II,
then went to tailoring school on the GI Bill before disappearing from the
historical record (the last letter from him preserved in Raskob’s archive
is from 1950).113

A golfer adopting his caddie was exceptional, but black caddies often
forged respectful, meaningful relationships with white players. In 1930
the members of Atlanta’s private Ansley Golf Club honored one beloved
caddie who died unexpectedly, arranging for a prominent white minis-
ter to perform an integrated funeral service: “Scores of rich white golf-
ers attended the impressive ceremonies,” noted the Pittsburgh Courier.114
Caddying continued to serve the needs of racial segregation and discrimi-
nation in the South but also provided opportunities for African Ameri-
cans to shine as players. Earl Hill, a young caddie at Georgia’s Jekyll Island
Club during the 1920s, recalled having the exclusive resort course all to
himself most of the time: “That’s where I got my jump in golf, because
the millionaires would use the golf course three months out of the year,
the other nine months I would use it.”115 In 1914 the exclusive Oakwood
Country Club in Lynchburg, Virginia, recruited Morris Alexander, a black
player from Philadelphia, to move down and become its new caddie-
master; he went on to set the course record in 1928 and served as a golf
pro there until 1967.116 As the game continued to develop, so too did the
complicated racial dynamics between white players and black caddies,
especially in the South. The distinction between demeaning abuse, racist
patronizing, and genuine friendship was never quite clear: whereas Beau
Jack took positive memories from his experience at Augusta National, the
Afro-American and Ralph Ellison saw little more than exploitation and
“Uncle Tomming.”

Both golf and African Americans migrated steadily to the western
states during the interwar period. In some western cities black golfers
found more opportunities to play municipal courses. Such access was
spotty, at times curbed arbitrarily by racial restrictions. Denver’s first mu-
unicipal layout, City Park Golf Course, was generally open to black players
and home for the black East Denver Golf Club, but the black press still
reported instances of African Americans being turned away.117 The most
sustained interest in golf among black westerners came in southern Cali-
ifornia, where Los Angeles’s growing African American population was
able to access a number of courses in the 1920s and 1930s, including the
municipal courses in Griffith Park. Yet the Western Avenue Golf Course proved more popular with black patrons. Located on the corner of Western Avenue and El Segundo Boulevard in southwest L.A., the course was in a barren field when it was first opened by the city in 1928 but was eventually surrounded by a growing black neighborhood. By the 1940s, Western Avenue had become a key center of black golf in America; Hollywood’s black celebrities frequented the course, as did visiting black entertainers, athletes, and stars—including Joe Louis, Jackie Robinson, and Muhammad Ali. In 1982 the city renamed the course Chester L. Washington Golf Course in honor of the longtime editor of the Los Angeles Sentinel, L.A.’s largest black newspaper. While Western Avenue became a de facto black municipal course, African Americans also frequented other public golf facilities in southern California. L.A.’s first organized group of black golfers, the West Coast Golf Club, hosted their tournaments at a municipal course in Santa Monica during the early 1930s. The group was also among the largest of the many black golf clubs in America: a 1934 gala in Pasadena had more than 700 participants. One of the best black players in L.A. during this early period was amateur Oscar Clisby, who in 1931 won a Los Angeles public links tournament, becoming the first African American to win a major golf event in California.118

As in a number of cities, notably Chicago and Washington, black women in Los Angeles played an important role in increasing the game’s popularity. Male or female, perhaps the greatest advocate for L.A.’s black golfers was Maggie Mae Hathaway, an actress and singer who migrated to California from Louisiana in the 1940s. (She was Lena Horne’s stand-in for the 1943 film Stormy Weather.) In 1955 Hathaway took up golf after winning a bet with Joe Louis, and she never looked back. She was a talented player who immediately resented the many courses in Los Angeles that restricted African Americans, and she organized several rallies in response. Most importantly, Hathaway’s direct action in the world of golf spread to broader issues, and she became a leader in the national civil rights movement. In the 1960s she served as president of the NAACP’s Hollywood chapter and, along with Sammy Davis Jr., organized the first NAACP Image Awards in 1967. Still, Hathaway maintained a strong presence in the game that helped launch her activism. In 1963 she founded Minority Associated Golfers, one of the first organizations to identify and support young black golfers interested in becoming professional players. A longtime fixture at L.A.’s Chester L. Washington Golf Course, she also taught the game at Jack Thompson Golf Course, another municipal course.
two miles away (among her white students was future Los Angeles mayor James Hahn). In 1997 the city renamed the course Maggie Hathaway Golf Course in her honor, making Los Angeles the only city with two municipal courses named for African Americans. For thirty years Hathaway penned a regular golf column for the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, giving her a sustained, national voice in the game that few other black women ever had (save perhaps Chicago’s Nettie Speedy earlier in the century).  

As its golf scene quickly expanded, Los Angeles became a key destination for black golf professionals. Jimmie DeVoe, who in 1962 became the first African American to reintegrate the PGA, was drawn increasingly to L.A. in the 1940s, where he developed his reputation not only as a player but also as an instructor to Hollywood’s African American stars. DeVoe helped organize L.A.’s black Cosmopolitan Golf Club in 1944, which hosted monthly tournaments at the private Brentwood Country Club. Three years later the Vernondale Golf Club was formed, California’s first black women’s club.

All across the country, by World War II golf to many black Americans was no longer a distant concept or foreign activity. The game was everywhere—from urban street corners in black working-class neighborhoods and the fields of rural black farmers to the more elite, private black country clubs. In every instance a common sentiment emerged, fueled by the period’s broader social and political contexts: it was one of urgency, not privilege. The opportunity was at hand for African Americans to truly influence the game’s national development and, at the same time, make the sport uniquely their own. One *Afro-American* reader put it succinctly in 1936: “Golf is a game that we must get into.”

In many ways the black community had already done just that. What remained was a sustained fight to break down the game’s most formidable barriers. The first step would be the creation of a remarkable organization long since forgotten by most Americans: a national, professional African American golf tour.