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I WILL TAKE YOUR OWN GOLF STICK AND WHAM THE WORLD

Golf and the Postwar Civil Rights Movement

DECEMBER 11, 1960—AUGUSTA NATIONAL GOLF CLUB, AUGUSTA, GEORGIA

“Wrong Will Fail, Right Will Prevail,” read one sign.

Over sixty students from the local black college had demanded to meet President Dwight D. Eisenhower. Turned away, they were now starting to picket. Secret service kept the crowd as far away as possible, hopefully out of hearing range for Ike and his fellow golfers. His press secretary insisted the president “was unaware of their presence.”

Eisenhower golfed quietly as the demonstration continued outside. It was the last of the president’s twenty-nine visits to Augusta National during his eight years in office (1953–61), yet this trip was different. This time he was confronted with the largest golf protest he ever faced, the first of many demonstrations at the iconic course.

This time the movement had finally reached the gates of Augusta National.¹

World War II was a watershed for the twentieth-century civil rights movement. The war disrupted American society, emboldened many of the 1.2 million black Americans who served around the world, and prompted all citizens to redefine the nature of their democracy. For the same reasons, the war played a major role in expanding the black community’s interest in golf. The segregated U.S. Army provided occasional opportunities for black soldiers to play, and some of them encountered the game for the first time during the conflict. Arizona’s Fort Huachuca housed the largest number of black soldiers in the country and
offered golf lessons to its 14,000 black troops. In Washington, D.C., the army also made clubs available for the 500 black men at its Anacostia Recreation Camp for Negro Soldiers, located adjacent to Langston Golf Course. Even black soldiers stationed at installations farther south found opportunities to play. At North Carolina’s Fort Bragg, the army appointed a local black golf pro, Pfc. Eugene Levette, to organize summer athletic events for the black troops: not surprisingly they included a popular golf tournament. When African Americans campaigned in 1951 to end segregation at the base, they specifically highlighted local golf facilities. Texas native Martin Guillory caddied for white professionals, including Jimmy Demaret, before he enlisted in 1940. While stationed at Virginia’s Fort Lee, Guillory practiced on the base’s course and was granted leave to compete in UGA events; he eventually won the amateur title at the 1950 UGA National. Golf was also an important part of Joe Louis’s many visits with troops around the world, just as it was when white stars like Byron Nelson, Bob Hope, and Bing Crosby staged exhibitions for soldiers. When the War Department solicited black leaders for athletes to include on its troop tours, the most-wanted list included big names like Jesse Owens, Jackie Robinson, and Satchel Paige, but also the crowd-pleasing Howard Wheeler.

Golf was also a part of the wartime “Double V” campaign supported by the black press, one that linked fascism abroad with discrimination at home and called on black Americans to confront both. The UGA canceled many events during the war but staged an “All Out for Victory” tournament in 1942 (which Wheeler won) at Washington’s Anacostia Park. Shady Rest Country Club continued to stage its annual tournament on the Fourth of July, an event that took on even more patriotic overtones during the conflict. The war interrupted many PGA and USGA events, allowing new tournaments, like the Tam O’Shanter Open, to step in with more liberal policies on black participants. It also emboldened black players as they attempted to integrate white events. In 1942 former Northwestern University golfer Horace McDougal and other UGA players, including Pat Ball, Clyde Martin, and Joe Louis, tried to qualify for the Hale America National Open at Chicago’s Ridgemoor Country Club. The event was organized by the USGA, the PGA, and the Chicago District Golf Association as a replacement for the canceled 1942 U.S. Open. When club officials informed the players of its white-only policy, they appealed to the USGA, which indicated it was unwilling to overrule a private club’s policies. The organization had “Hitlerized” the players, lamented the Chicago
Defender. McDougal, himself a World War I veteran, penned a series of patriotic letters protesting the USGA that appeared in black newspapers nationwide. “While we are at war with an enemy who overlooks nothing that will reduce the morale of our men and their loved ones,” he wrote, “is it patriotic and American-like to give that enemy additional material for his fiendish work? . . . In spite of such treatment in many lines of endeavor, this noble race of people remain steadfast in their loyal support of the stars and stripes which we all love.” Meanwhile, a group of black ministers in Cleveland denounced what they called the “fascist action” of Ridgewood Country Club after it refused to host them.

Charges that the USGA “Hitlerized” black players or Joe Louis calling PGA president Horton Smith “another Hitler” were controversial but not entirely off target. Just as the Germans slandered African Americans (the Nazis banned jazz music in 1935), fascist propaganda in Italy used golf to demean black GIs. One poster featured a racist image of a black American soldier wielding a golf club, echoing Edward Kemble’s nineteenth-century golf drawings that lampooned social advancement and refinement in the black community. Black sportswriters noted that America’s enemies (fascists and, eventually, communists) saw no place for black golfers and yet were welcome themselves to compete in PGA events if they qualified. As one complained, the PGA “slammed the door in the faces” of African Americans like Bill Spiller and Ted Rhodes, while “most foreigners are allowed to compete, including any of Uncle Joe Stalin’s followers.”

Nevertheless, the war provided some black Americans access to golf they otherwise would not have had. An increasing number of educational institutions also established golf teams and clubs, another current that helped the game grow in postwar black communities. Early examples signaled that the advent of golf programs in schools would influence African Americans. In 1929 a black high school student nearly won the Oregon state golf championship at Portland’s white Multnomah Country Club. At the collegiate level a few black golfers competed for predominately white universities, including Horace McDougal at Northwestern University (1923) and George Roddy at Iowa University (1930). Roddy was Iowa’s top player and one of the best in the Big Ten Conference, although he did not compete in the 1930 conference championship under mysterious circumstances (rumors swirled it was because the event took place at Chicago’s Westmoreland Country Club, where African Americans were not welcomed). Roddy went on to win several amateur titles on the UGA tour.
"As they would like us": this 1944 poster invoked the specter of African American golf in fascist Italy (Published with the permission of The Wolfsonian—Florida International University [Miami, Florida]).
and became a professor and golf instructor at North Carolina A&T College. Elsewhere in the Big Ten, in 1930 two black undergraduates vied in the finals for the University of Michigan student golf title. The winner, A. D. V. Crosby, was club champion at Atlanta’s black Piney Wood Country Club and later served as president of the UGA from 1946 to 1952. After World War II the number of black golfers at predominately white universities remained low, but the growing visibility of collegiate golf made their participation important. Forrest Jones Jr., a black standout at Douglass Park in Indianapolis, joined Indiana University’s golf team in 1956 and became its number one player. That put him in matches against top college golfers like Jack Nicklaus and Tom Weiskopf at Ohio State University.

Some black schools even predated their white counterparts in establishing golf clubs and building courses. In the early 1950s a few black secondary schools in the South, like Atlanta’s Booker T. Washington High School, had already established golf teams before nearby white schools. Alabama’s Tuskegee Institute was the first black college to build a course, which it opened in 1926. Two other black colleges, Lincoln University in Pennsylvania and Lincoln University in Missouri, also had on-campus links by 1932; the students in Pennsylvania laid out their own rudimentary course surrounding the football stadium. Intercollegiate contests took place as well; the black Lincoln Golf Club in Florida hosted one of the first in 1930. Beginning in 1938 Tuskegee also hosted a golf championship for the Southern Intercollegiate Athletic Conference, drawing teams from Morehouse College, Fisk College, Clark College, Morris Brown College, Florida A&M College, Alabama State College, and Xavier University (Louisiana). Tuskegee’s course even hosted a UGA professional event the following year, yet another tournament won by Howard Wheeler.

In Ohio, black Wilberforce University formed a golf team (one of the school’s football coaches, Ed Ritchie, was a big fan of the game) and in 1937 played a series of matches against predominately white Ohio Northern University. These were the first integrated golf competitions in intercollegiate history and perhaps even the first intercollegiate athletic contests between historically black and white schools. The first match was hosted by Wilberforce at Dayton’s Fairmont Golf Course, followed by Ohio Northern hosting the black collegians at Lima’s Lost Creek Country Club. Golf continued to grow at black colleges after World War II, with student demand increasing even where there were limited opportunities to play. “The interest level was there,” recalled Wendell Davis,
who coached golf at rural Prairie View A&M in Texas. “We didn’t have a golf course. But out there . . . was prairie and we’d go out there and drive.”

Black fraternities and sororities, including the women of Alpha Kappa Alpha, also propagated the game among collegians by organizing tournaments and social outings. The majority of black college golfers drew little attention except for the few who competed for predominately white universities or who went on to win UGA tournaments. Yet these forgotten collegians all had unique stories of how and why they embraced the game in the crucible of the postwar civil rights movement. One was Joseph “Singlewing” Williams, who joined Florida A&M’s golf team in the early 1950s. For a small-college golfer, his 220-yard drives and scores in the 70s were typical for the period: the fact that he played with one arm was not (his left arm was severed in a gun accident when he was eight years old.)

College golf and military service were thus important developments that helped advance the game in the black community. Both helped William Powell develop his unique passion for golf. The grandson of slaves, Powell was born in Alabama and moved with his family to Minerva, Ohio, near Canton. He started caddying at age nine, became an accomplished player in high school, and joined the golf team at Wilberforce University with his brother Barry; they both participated in the unprecedented 1937 matches against Ohio Northern. During the war Powell served with the U.S. Army Air Force in Europe and returned in 1946 with a renewed disdain for American segregation. “A sick feeling came over me,” he later wrote, recalling how he and fellow returning soldiers stepped off a train in Louisville and were forced to divide themselves by race on the platform. “After all we’d been through, after all we’d seen, and after all we’d done for our country it was worse than a slap in the face.” The disrespect continued when he returned to Ohio. Working first as a janitor and then as a security guard, Powell could not find a public golf course in the Canton area that allowed him to play, despite his collegiate accomplishments and his experience golfing with whites while stationed in England during the war. Undaunted, he refused to give up on the game: “I was ready to move on with my life and golf was going to be a part of it.”

So Powell came up with an ambitious plan: “I’d had enough,” he remembered. “I decided, ‘I’ll just build my own.’” Denied a bank loan and turned down for a GI loan as well, he went forward anyway with help from two black physicians, a loan from his brother, and a second mortgage on his house. Working eighteen-hour days, Powell purchased
a 78-acre dairy farm in East Canton, cleared the land, and by 1948 had opened a nine-hole track: Clearview Golf Club. Despite some initial episodes of vandalism and hostility, the layout welcomed golfers of all races and flourished. In 1978 Powell expanded the course to eighteen holes on 170 acres. Clearview was a testament to the singular effort of the Powell family; William’s wife, Marcella, helped build and operate the facility and his son, Larry, became the course superintendent. William and Marcella’s daughter, Renee, grew up on Clearview (she first played at age three) and later served as the club’s professional. In 1967 she would also become the second black woman to compete on the LPGA Tour. Dubbed “America’s Course,” Clearview was significant beyond the fact that Powell was the only African American in history to design, build, and operate his own golf course. It was a truly integrated facility, drawing a substantial number of white golfers from the moment it opened: in 2001 it was added to the National Register of Historic Places.

While Clearview was unique, William Powell’s willingness to challenge golf segregation after the war echoed the broader context of his times, as many African Americans launched more direct, emboldened attacks on racism during the late 1940s and 1950s. For most black golfers this meant
increasing demands for access to public facilities. Thousands around the
country petitioned local governments to either build black courses or let
blacks use white courses. The largest appeal was in Miami, where 3,000
African Americans signed a petition calling for access to the city’s lone
municipal course in 1948. Similar petitions were submitted in Charlottes-
ville, Virginia (1949), Shreveport, Louisiana (1950), Atlanta (1951), Jackson,
Mississippi (1952), Columbus, Georgia (1954), and Macon, Georgia (1960).
In a few cases these requests were enough to gain segregated access to
facilities and eventually even full integration: a petition from black resi-
dents prompted Macon to integrate its public course “without incident”
in 1961.20 Yet in most places they sparked bitter conflicts, with integration
taking place only after a few dedicated individuals filed lawsuits and en-
gaged in years of legal wrangling. Sometimes locals initiated these peti-
tions on their own with little organization, while in other cases civil rights
organizations were involved. A 1964 petition to integrate courses in Alex-
andria, Louisiana, was put together by the Southern Christian Leadership
Conference (SCLC), the organization founded by Martin Luther King Jr.21

While petitioning for access to public courses at home, postwar Afri-
can Americans also showed more interest in playing the game on the
road. As more Americans hit the highways in the 1950s, black travelers
sought facilities that welcomed those who wanted to incorporate golf
into their travels. Postwar guide books and pamphlets for black readers—
such as Grayson’s Travel and Business Guide, The Negro Motorist Green
Book, and Travelguide—featured listings of golf courses nationwide that
welcomed black patrons. (The cover of the 1952 Travelguide featured a
smartly dressed black woman loading a set of golf clubs into a convert-
ible.)22 These were especially helpful in the West, a popular destination
for road trips where it was hard to predict how course owners would re-
spond to black patrons. The 1949 Travelguide, under the tagline “Vacation
and Recreation without Humiliation,” reminded readers that two of Den-
ver’s municipal courses allowed black golfers. (Meanwhile, another Den-
ver public course, Park Hill Golf Club, excluded them until a lawsuit from
four players forced its integration in 1962.)23 In postwar California, Afri-
can Americans could access many courses, especially in the Los Angeles
area, but there remained public facilities that discriminated. In 1957 San
Francisco’s famed Harding Park Golf Club refused membership to a black
patron, reversing its decision only after it faced heavy criticism.24

Notably, coverage of golf in black guidebooks indicated that the
game’s appeal was rising in black communities even as its popularity
waned among whites. More accessible than ever to new segments of black America, golf was growing not only in Chicago and Philadelphia but also in newer black neighborhoods and unlikely locations. A 1951 study in Omaha, Nebraska, surprisingly found that a larger share of black union workers (20 percent) frequented the public golf course than their white counterparts (15 percent). Some golfers applauded the diversity they witnessed developing on local links. Unlike many forms of public recreation, municipal golf was a potentially intimate social experience; if the course was busy enough, players were asked to spend the entire day paired with others they had never met. “I enjoy teaming up and playing golf with total strangers. Talk about a study in human nature!” wrote one white man to the *Pittsburgh Courier* in 1946 after he was placed in a foursome with three black golfers. “I never saw such good sportsmanship,” he exclaimed. “I learned a lot about golf . . . but more about real companionship on a golf course that day.” Contrary to the popular notion of golf elitism, persons who utilized public parks, beaches, tennis courts, and swimming pools could expect at least a modicum of privacy—but not golfers on a busy municipal course. The political implications were significant, especially in smaller towns with only one or two public courses. Instead of enforcing separation and exclusion, municipal golf was actually poised to mix the races better than other forms of public amusement and recreation. The mayor of Gary, Indiana, recognized this in 1947 when he called for more golf tournaments and outings between the city’s two public courses, one that generally served black golfers and the other whites.

Alfred “Tup” Holmes also recognized the social implications of integrated public golf. Although there is no evidence they met, Holmes shared a lot in common with William Powell: both came from golfing families known for their love of the game, both played golf for black college teams in the late 1930s, and both confronted segregation on courses in ways that shaped the broader civil rights movement in their communities. The son of Hamilton M. Holmes, an Atlanta physician and golf aficionado, Tup Holmes was a standout golfer at Tuskegee, where he won the school’s first intercollegiate tournament in 1938 and again in 1939. (The two-time Southern Intercollegiate Athletic Conference champion was nevertheless turned away from the inaugural National Collegiate Athletic Association [NCAA] national golf championship in Des Moines, Iowa.)

Having reached the highest level of college golf available to a black student, Holmes returned to Atlanta after graduating and became a top UGA
amateur while pursuing work, first as a funeral director and eventually as a union steward at Lockheed Aircraft. He won several amateur titles on the circuit, including events at Tuskegee in 1938, 1939, and 1940; the 1939 Forest City Open in Cleveland; and the Southern Open in Atlanta, where he was amateur champion three consecutive years from 1938 to
1940. “‘Tup’ is now without a doubt the most outstanding amateur in the South,” proclaimed the Atlanta Daily World.29

After the war Holmes’s golf career peaked. He won amateur titles twice at the UGA National (1947 and 1958) and sparked a fierce rivalry with golf’s most popular black player, Joe Louis. Holmes was unfazed by Louis’s fame whenever he faced off against him, eliminating the heavyweight champion directly in a head-to-head match en route to the 1947 title at Philadelphia’s Cobbs Creek. He and his family were among the 150 members at Atlanta’s New Lincoln Country Club, and all of them were fierce competitors, especially Tup; his father, Hamilton; and his brother, a local minister named Oliver Holmes. Once while driving home after a bad round, the seventy-year-old Hamilton stopped his car in heavy traffic so he could swing his clubs beside an Atlanta highway. “Some folks are getting old and no good,” he told his sons. “I’m getting old and good.”30

Despite the family’s golfing prowess and prominence—“Everybody in Atlanta, from top to bottom, knew my husband,” Tup’s wife, Isabella, recalled—they had no access to courses other than Lincoln. Atlanta barred African Americans from its five municipal links and provided no segregated facilities for black players. A leading family in one of the region’s largest cities, the Holmes clan nevertheless joined black Atlantans in traveling elsewhere to play on public courses and participate in the broader, regional black golf scene. “We went almost every weekend to some facility out of the city—Nashville, Columbus, Birmingham,” remembered family friend Charles T. Bell. “There were a number of cow pasture courses that blacks maintained. We had this camaraderie. They’d come visit us; we’d go visit them. We’d leave Sunday morning, drive 200 miles, play golf and then drive back that night.”31

Throughout the 1940s blacks in Atlanta had demanded that the city either integrate its courses or build a black municipal facility. In July 1951 the Holmes family went a step further and directly petitioned the parks department to play Bobby Jones Municipal Golf Course. Named for the famed Augusta National founder (and Beau Jack patron), Bobby Jones was Atlanta’s best public course and the one whites favored most. Denied access, the family and Charles Bell then sued the city on behalf of 300 black golfers dubbed “the Atlanta Golf Committee,” double the membership of the New Lincoln Country Club. With help from Atlanta’s NAACP chapter and a local black attorney, Roscoe Thomas, the lawsuit would make its way through the legal system over the next four years, a critical period in the national legal battle over civil rights.32
Not only did the case, *Holmes v. Atlanta*, eventually reach the U.S. Supreme Court; it also helped reveal the limits of *Brown v. Board of Education*, the landmark civil rights decision handed down in May 1954. Two months later, Atlanta’s public schools were as segregated as ever and its federal district court behaved as if *Brown* had never happened: the court ruled in favor of the Holmes clan but only because the city did not have a separate, equal facility for black golfers. It instructed Atlanta either to build one or to provide black residents segregated access to existing municipal courses. Atlanta’s white city council had already debated proposals for a $75,000, tax-funded black course supported by Mayor William Hartsfield. “Let the boys in the high income bracket go out to Lincoln Golf Course,” urged one councilman in 1953. Responded another, “They’ve got as much right to a golf course as white people, and they’re going to get it, too.” Atlanta eventually set aside two days per week (Mondays and Tuesdays) for black residents to play its municipal courses. Georgia’s attorney general praised the federal court’s decision for “reaffirming the separate but equal doctrine” and “properly snubbing the psychological theory followed by the U.S. Supreme Court in the school segregation cases.”

Presented with the option of accepting limited, segregated access to white courses, the Holmes clan was pressured to give in and drop the case. The moderate *Atlanta Daily World* saw little significance in the *Brown* decision and urged the family not to appeal the case to the Supreme Court. Some family members also worried about the implications of continuing the legal battle. “I took calls from a lot of black people who thought this was folly,” remembered Tup’s sister, Alice Holmes Washington. “They kept saying, ‘Why are ya’ll doing this? Don’t rock the boat. Try to talk Tup out of this; he’s the hothead.’” Isabella Holmes also urged her husband not to continue: “My reaction as wife and mother was don’t do it. We did go through those days with a lot of harassment. Telephone calls, things so ugly that I wouldn’t dare repeat it. It was a pitiful thing for the family. It was something I lived with, but something that was very hurtful.” Already the case had forced the city to respond to a civil rights lawsuit in a way no other decision had, including *Brown*. For some blacks in Atlanta, that was enough.

The case was also becoming divisive within the NAACP. A federal decision affirming segregation was not sufficient; however, to continue devoting resources to an appeal—potentially taking it all the way to the Supreme Court—once again raised the specter of golf elitism within the organization. Constance Baker Motley, a key member of the NAACP’s
Legal Defense Fund (LDF), recalled that by the 1950s the LDF had decided “to bring cases that would benefit blacks as a whole”—one rationale behind the strategy of attacking segregation in public education. Motley noted that her boss, LDF director Thurgood Marshall, expressed skepticism over *Holmes v. Atlanta*. “Thurgood’s response was loud and clear: ‘No, we are not going to spend any money on a golf course case because we could not justify spending money for a few doctors in Atlanta to play golf. We are going to use the money to get the black kids admitted to white schools.’”36 Marshall’s hesitancy was echoed by many elite white liberals who supported the NAACP, such as University of North Carolina sociologist Thomas J. Woofter. Woofter, who led the Commission on Interracial Cooperation, also belittled the idea of national organizations helping fight golf discrimination. “It is more important that the masses of underprivileged children have decent recreation facilities than that a few who want to keep up with the Joneses be allowed to play golf with the white people,” he wrote.37

Yet the response from the Holmes clan was clear: “I want to play golf anytime I want to, on any city course I want to,” Tup told reporters as NBC’s *Today* show filmed Oliver being turned away again from Bobby Jones Municipal.38 They promptly filed an appeal. From that point on, although the national NAACP remained an important party to the case, *Holmes v. Atlanta* reached the Supreme Court in November 1955 largely through the generosity of a few black lawyers in Atlanta, funding from the Holmes family themselves, and $1,800 from the NAACP’s Atlanta chapter. Meanwhile, the family was well known and respected in black Atlanta, but there were still concerns over its ability to handle the scrutiny of national media, especially the elder Hamilton Holmes, who was unafraid to speak his mind despite admonishments from NAACP leaders. “Due to Dr. Holmes’s inexperience in handling newsmen, he was inveigled into talking, after having been warned repeatedly,” wrote Atlanta chapter president John Calhoun to the NAACP national office.39 Benjamin Mays, the president of Morehouse College and a member of the NAACP National Board of Directors, was on hand when the chapter agreed to continue supporting the appeal, but at the national level the organization moved on to other cases.40

As the suit headed to the Supreme Court, it became clear that Thurgood Marshall was wrong: vigorous reaction from both whites and blacks made *Holmes v. Atlanta* far more than just a case about “a few doctors.” Instead, it was one of the first instances in which all Atlanta citizens con-
fronented segregation in post-\textit{Brown} America. To Marshall, the perception of elitism attached to golf devalued its importance to the civil rights movement. But the opposition felt otherwise: “To what extremes will they go next?” asked Georgia governor Herman Talmadge in his 1955 book \textit{You and Segregation}. The answer was not suing to desegregate schools, water fountains, or bus terminals but, rather, Bobby Jones Municipal.

“The first such suit involved the use of public golf courses,” Talmadge continued. “The \textsc{naacp} and its Negro members were not satisfied with the decision [segregated access two days a week]. They appealed to the United States Supreme Court. They do not want to play on golf courses where only Negroes are playing that day. They want to play with White men and women and they are determined to force themselves on the white players.”

Roy Harris, another key segregationist who served on Georgia’s Board of Regents and fought to block integration at its universities, agreed that yielding to black golfers was a threat to white schools. “Negroes are determined to break down segregation through the invasion of the fields of entertainment and sports first,” he warned the board.

The fears of Talmadge and Harris were realized in November 1955. Citing both \textit{Brown} and a case that integrated public parks in Baltimore earlier that year, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the Holmes family and ordered Atlanta to open its municipal courses to black patrons immediately. It was the first time in Georgia’s modern history a court had ordered desegregation, and the decision reshaped one of the city’s most visible arenas of racial separation. As historian Kevin Kruse notes, Atlanta’s golf courses offered “the most glaring discrepancy” between white and black public space in the city. The significance of the ruling was therefore dramatic: in Atlanta the movement of “massive resistance” among pro-segregationists would be an ideological reaction to \textit{Brown} fueled by the practical, visible implications of \textit{Holmes}.

The fallout over the ruling also revealed the booming popularity of golf in postwar Atlanta. Mayor Hartsfield rejected calls to close the courses rather than desegregate them, noting that 70,000 white players would be denied golf with such a move. Over 200,000 rounds were played on the courses in 1953, more than one round for every white person in the city (Atlanta’s total population in 1950 was 331,000, of which 41 percent were black).

Completely shuttering public courses was a more likely response in smaller towns and rural locations, such as tiny Danville, Virginia, which simply closed its course immediately after four black residents first played it in 1956.
For Hartsfield, public golf was far too popular with white Atlantans to close the courses, and the only other option was full integration. As the holidays approached, he attempted to ready the public and assuage anxieties. The mayor assured whites that his office had contacted other southern cities, like Dallas, Louisville, and Houston, and was told that courses in these locales were integrated without any “untoward incidents” between the races. He also insisted that blacks in Atlanta had no interest in golf, arguing that “only a few dozen Negro players” would be seen. And like observers on all sides of the conflict—from Thurgood Marshall to Herman Talmadge—Hartsfield invoked golf elitism to support his most unique argument: that the game itself would allay white anxieties. “Golf by its very nature is a segregated game,” he told the press, “and neither necessary nor compulsory.”

In the end, Hartsfield’s decision to integrate the courses as quietly as possible, on Christmas Eve 1955, belied his optimistic statements. And fears of “untoward incidents” on Atlanta courses were entirely justified. In Montgomery, Alabama, a local black boycott of public buses, prompted by the arrest of Rosa Parks on December 1, was in its third week and starting to receive attention outside the region. Less than a month later, the home of Martin Luther King Jr. in Montgomery would be bombed, the first instance of violence directed at the budding civil rights leader. In that city the lack of black faces on the buses was the flash point of the controversy. In Atlanta it was the arrival of black faces on the links. National media outlets clamored to document the story, including some that had yet to send representatives to cover the Montgomery boycott. CBS, NBC, and the Associated Press all contacted the Holmes family and asked when the players would head to Bobby Jones Municipal on Christmas Eve. Media and family members fielded violent threats from anonymous callers as rumors swirled that white and black players would pack “guns inside their golf bags.” The most outspoken of the plaintiffs, Dr. Hamilton Holmes, decided to avoid the media attention and not play. “I certainly don’t fear them,” he told the press when asked about the anonymous threats. “It’s a bunch of the rabble who don’t play golf causing all the trouble. They wouldn’t know a golf club if they saw one.” Tup, Oliver, and Charles Bell also shunned the limelight. Instead of showing up at Bobby Jones, they quietly went to another course, North Fulton Municipal, where they played a historic round of golf. Their attorney, Roscoe Thomas, walked alongside them. “Naturally, there was a lot of tension that first day,” recalled Bell. “We teed off just like anybody else. The fun
came on the fourth or fifth hole. That’s when the news media came running at us . . . but we didn’t panic. There were catcalls and the ‘N’ word spread around the course, but it died down after a little bit.” Tup noted that the 150 whites on the course were cordial: “The white golfers in front of us stopped, asked how we were doing and compared scores with us.”

Integration of the public courses immediately highlighted the pent-up demand for golf among Atlanta’s 135,000 black residents. On that Christmas Eve another group of blacks also played the North Fulton course, a third brave group showed up at Bobby Jones, and several more called another course, James L. Key Municipal, for Monday tee times. “By the third or fourth week, everyone was grabbing a set of clubs and going to play,” recalled Bell. Four years later Tup would again threaten to sue the city (and Mayor Hartsfield) after the Black Rock Golf Course in Adams Park forced the cancellation of a black tournament out of concerns over
large galleries of black spectators and players. In 1960 black golfers were on the sixth hole at Black Rock when a group of white men drove a car up the fairway firing gunshots into the air: “Negro get off our golf course,” one yelled.52 By that point it was clear that both Thurgood Marshall and Mayor Hartsfield were wrong: the appeal of golf to Atlanta’s black community and the passion stirred in whites by the specter of integrated courses made *Holmes* far more than an inconsequential, elite lawsuit. Moreover, such violent displays of white supremacy on public golf courses were occurring elsewhere in the country, not only in the South. In 1953 two white men in a car fired a shot at a black foursome while the men were on the ninth tee at Chicago’s Pipe O’ Peace golf course.53

Georgia’s leading white politicians also recognized the threat of golf integration and denounced Hartsfield for complying with the Supreme Court’s order. To them *Holmes* was the opening battle over *Brown*, and whites had lost in dramatic fashion. “If the city has chosen to throw in the towel there is nothing I can do about it,” lamented Marvin Griffin, the state’s new governor. “This is but a foretaste of what the people can expect in those communities where the white people are divided at the ballot box and where the NAACP element holds the balance of power on election day.”54 Ardent segregationists, like Governor Griffin and Georgia attorney general Eugene Cook, told their constituents to fear the potential legal ramifications of golf integration in no uncertain terms. “It seems the NAACP is able to get most anything it wants from the Supreme Court . . . that is designed to force inter-marriage of the races,” said Cook.55 The LDF’s lukewarm support for the case and doubts about it being a significant attack on Georgia segregation made little difference. Opponents identified *Holmes* as a substantial victory for the NAACP because it struck down an important symbol of social segregation: white-only golf. As word spread and images of black golfers stepping onto Atlanta courses circulated nationwide, reaction heralded the significance and encouraged the NAACP to emphasize the case. “As you may know this is NAACP’s first decision in Georgia. . . . It will certainly help with decisions to come in other areas,” wrote John Calhoun, Atlanta’s chapter president, to the national office.56 Three months after he attended the Emmett Till murder trial in Mississippi, U.S. Congressman Charles Diggs praised the ruling in an Atlanta speech and joined Calhoun in calling *Holmes* the chapter’s biggest accomplishment of 1955, celebrating the black golfers two weeks after the courses were integrated.57

More moderate African Americans also praised the ruling but saw it
as a victory of conservatism, not a launching pad for increasingly militant campaigns. The black Atlanta Daily World, which had earlier criticized the Holmes clan for appealing the case and rejecting the city’s offer of limited, segregated access, now celebrated the ruling: “This decision to permit Negroes to play on their city-owned golf courses may open the way for the development of future golf champions.” Yet by the summer of 1960 the paper was using Holmes to rebuke NAACP leader Roy Wilkins for supporting plans for mass sit-ins at public beaches and parks. Calling public recreation “one of the more sensitive aspects of the segregation question,” it argued instead for more “simple, well-planned, test cases” like Holmes: “Why endanger the lives of innocent women and children by urging them to go out in great numbers to test the laws that obviously are illegal?”

The fallout reverberated nationwide, as some celebrated Holmes while others agreed with Georgia’s governor that the decision, unlike Brown, would be difficult to circumvent and force the integration of public parks and recreational facilities as a prelude to integrating schools. “The Supreme Court’s decision probably will end all segregation cases in Kentucky,” Louisville’s city attorney ominously announced. Florida’s attorney general concurred: “It will add to the problems of Florida and its communities.” Elsewhere in the South official reaction was even more abrupt. “There will be no mixing of the races in our state parks,” said South Carolina governor George Timmerman. In Alabama, Birmingham mayor James Morgan joined many in vowing to close down public courses rather than integrate them: “We must either bow in meek obedience to this decision or we must take steps to prevent the cramming of this policy—so alien to our way of life in the South—down our throats.” When Georgia state legislators convened in Atlanta after the holidays, they immediately tried to circumvent Mayor Hartsfield, introducing a series of bills to force the segregation of all public recreation, revoke municipal charters for towns that integrated their parks, and grant cities the right to privatize facilities.

Thus from NAACP leaders to rabid segregationists, everyone debated what, if any, link existed between Holmes and the broader struggle to integrate schools and voting booths. Meanwhile, the answer was clear to the Holmes family. Emboldened by their success in the golf suit, they set out to integrate another public entity: the University of Georgia. Tup’s son, Hamilton Holmes Jr., was fourteen years old when his grandfather, father, and uncle won their case before the Supreme Court. Five years
later, he successfully sued the University of Georgia with help from Constance Baker Motley and the NAACP, becoming one of the first two black students to integrate the university in 1961. Concerns about the Holmes family’s suitability with the press were now long gone: “The plaintiffs . . . were among the best we had in any case,” Motley wrote in her memoir.62 Significantly, she failed to note that Hamilton came from the same family that had brought the earlier golf suit.

The Holmes clan had nevertheless linked the integration of golf and education in Georgia’s history. Hamilton Holmes Sr. lived long enough to watch his grandson graduate from the University of Georgia and become the first African American admitted to the medical school at Emory University. One day in 1965 the eighty-one-year-old patriarch went out to the golf course, shot his age, and then returned home and died peacefully; two years later Tup died of cancer. Fittingly, both men are now buried in Lincoln Cemetery, the same ground where Atlanta’s most important black golf course emerged in the 1930s. With New Lincoln Country Club long gone, Mayor Andrew Young went to Adams Park in 1983 and participated in ceremonies to rename Black Rock Country Club the Alfred “Tup” Holmes Memorial Golf Course. In ten years the course where African Americans were threatened with gunshots was transformed into the most popular links for black Atlantans from all walks of life. “Tup Holmes played a significant role in the birth of the civil rights movement,” said Young at the dedication, “and in doing so contributed to the growth, vitality and spirit of this city.”63

Holmes was the most visible golf desegregation suit but many were filed during the modern civil rights movement, at least twenty-eight significant cases from 1941 to 1969 alone. They came from all over the nation (including the North) and featured lawsuits from top NAACP leaders and former caddies alike. One of the first was filed by Roy Wilkins in New York. By 1940 Wilkins had relocated from Kansas City to Harlem and was the NAACP’s second in command under Walter White. He continued to fight golf segregation in New York the same way he had in Kansas City, this time suing Orange County’s Central Valley Golf Club for excluding him and his associates (including New York City commissioner Hubert Delaney, a close friend of Mayor Fiorello La Guardia). The prominent positions of the black men and their powerful white friends meant little to Central Valley; the small, privately owned course was open to the public but argued in court that it was “not a place of public accommodation, resort, or amusement” and therefore was exempt from state antidiscrimi-
nation laws. Numerous signs along the highway advertising the course as “open to the public” were not enough to sway the judge: Wilkins and Delaney lost the case.64 However, the embarrassing slight prompted sympathetic lawmakers to clarify that golf courses open to the public were indeed “public amusements,” and in 1942 New York governor Herbert Lehman signed the “Falk Bill,” specifically adding golf courses to the list of public spaces where discrimination by “race” and “creed” were outlawed (the bill was championed by a prominent Jewish attorney in Manhattan, Alexander Falk, and also helped Jewish golfers access courses).65

Three years later the state passed its comprehensive “Law against Discrimination,” considered the first human rights law in American history. Although they lost their case, Wilkins and Delaney had used golf to help New York close gaping loopholes in its antidiscrimination laws and adopt the most comprehensive legislation of its kind.

Moreover, New Yorkers also saw the implications of these stronger antidiscrimination bills through the lens of golf. Courses that openly advertised to the public increasingly asserted that they were actually private clubs. In 1947 a group of black players sued the Westchester Hills Golf Club in White Plains, just outside New York City. A ritzier, “semi-private” course than Central Valley, Westchester Hills was nevertheless available for public use; its lawyers even argued that the club was fully private despite having a hotel on site. Unlike in the suit filed by Wilkins and Delaney seven years earlier, the course lost this time, and the plaintiffs were awarded $1,000 in damages, at that point the largest judgment for an antidiscrimination violation in state history.66

African Americans nationwide applauded New York’s progressive legislation and the victory over Westchester Hills, noting that courses there were not alone in trying to subvert state antidiscrimination ordinances. Yet attempts to desegregate courses elsewhere did not fare as well. Black leaders in Illinois and California unsuccessfully lobbied for similar legislation in their states. The same year as the Westchester Hills decision, a black accountant from Chicago, Theodore Jones, lost his case in Massachusetts when he sued Martha’s Vineyard Country Club for turning him away during a vacation. His attorney failed to convince the court that the course was a “public amusement” despite numerous advertisements stating the club offered “a cordial welcome to all Vineyard visitors.”67 Two other cases in Illinois and Michigan also failed in the late 1940s; both targeted courses run by the Methodist Church that claimed to be private yet were open to the white public.68

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Northern courses, such as Central Valley and Westchester Hills, thus manipulated distinctions between “public,” “private,” and “semiprivate” long before southern leaders responded to Brown and Holmes by privatizing municipal links. Before 1950 there were numerous instances of deceptive privatization on northern courses, as well as city courses leased to private entities to avoid integration; examples included prominent courses in Massachusetts, New York, New Jersey, and Ohio. Two men who had served as president of Cleveland’s NAACP branch, Clayborne George (1923–28) and Chester Gillespie (1936–38), filed a lawsuit against suburban Lake Shore Country Club in 1942. The case was significant because most people (including blacks in Cleveland) assumed the course was fully private: it was a well-known property that had just been sold by the city’s most exclusive country club. The new manager, a white professional who regularly played with Joe Louis, argued in court that Lake
Shore remained a private course. Initially the judge ruled in favor of the club, yet eventually the plaintiffs won on appeal after a long legal battle exposed how the course used membership merely as a “ruse” to exclude black patrons. Foreshadowing the civil rights movement’s open housing campaigns of the 1960s, Gillespie and George recruited white sympathizers to approach the club. All of them testified that they were welcome to play after paying a simple fee in line with any public course: “membership” at Lake Shore simply meant being white and asking to play. The court reversed its decision and ruled in favor of Cleveland’s black golfers in 1950. Even Thurgood Marshall, cynical as he was about the broader influence of golf cases, congratulated Gillespie and George for sticking with the case and exposing the club’s blatant racism: “I have been watching for the opinion since you talked to me about the case and it is a real victory,” he wrote Gillespie. Gillespie soon expanded his legal assault, targeting golf facilities throughout the region that operated as public while using private membership to exclude black patrons. This included Epworth Heights Golf Club in Ludington, Michigan, which turned him away in 1947 even though it advertised itself as a public links.

Holmes was therefore not the first NAACP golf lawsuit, nor was it the first case to emerge in the postwar South. In New Orleans, Mandeville Detiege, a black soldier who had just returned home after the war, was still in his winter uniform when he decided to seek shade under an oak tree while waiting for a bus. He was arrested for being in white-only City Park. In 1949 Detiege sued in federal court for full access to the park’s “golf links, picnic grounds, tennis courts, and other recreational facilities.” The case proceeded for a decade before the U.S. Supreme Court affirmed a lower court’s decision to integrate City Park in *New Orleans City Park Improvement Association v. Detiege* (1958). Ironically, there is no evidence that Joe Bartholomew’s name was brought up in court. Nevertheless, the decision meant that African Americans for the first time were allowed to play the park’s four public golf courses, twenty-five years after Bartholomew designed City Park No. 1. In nearby Baton Rouge it was six more years before blacks were allowed to play municipal golf, after a federal court ordered the capital to integrate its parks in 1964.

Unlike Detiege, two other early lawsuits in the South—in Portsmouth, Virginia, and Houston, Texas—centered specifically on golf. The growing black population in Portsmouth (and adjacent Norfolk) supported a thriving golf scene for many years, gaining access to Memorial Park’s municipal course in Norfolk two days a week and organizing tournaments...
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that attracted blacks from around the region. Black golfers in Portsmouth sued in 1951 and were allowed to use that city’s two municipal courses one day per week. But soon a new generation of players demanded an end to segregated golf in the region. They were led by twenty-nine-year-old James Holley, a 1955 graduate of Howard University who sued Portsmouth the following year after course managers told him he could only play golf on Fridays. He won the case in April 1957, prompting full integration not only of the courses but also of Portsmouth’s parks and swimming pools. Moreover, the legal victory emboldened Holley and put him squarely on a path to leadership in his community. In 1968 he desegregated the city council, and in 1984 Portsmouth’s majority-white population elected him mayor, the first African American to hold that office in the region. “He was an icon,” recalled Portsmouth state senator Louise Lucas. “He thought there was nothing that this city couldn’t accomplish, his Portsmouth Family, as he used to call us.”

In Houston, the legal battle began when four former caddies returned from military service in 1945 and established the Lone Star Golf Club, an organization to advocate on behalf of the city’s black golfers. Three years later the group held a large protest at a municipal course that drew crowds of onlookers and the police. Eventually, five other black players, including a jeweler, a funeral director, and a doctor, sued the city in 1950. They were represented by two white attorneys in Houston, Herman Wright and Arthur Mandell, as well as black attorney William Durham, in whose home Thurgood Marshall and LDF leaders had spent many hours working on *Sweatt v. Painter* (1950), a landmark Supreme Court case that struck down segregation at the University of Texas Law School. (*Sweatt* also prompted Austin to integrate its Lions Municipal Golf Course later that year, making it likely the first municipal course in the South to desegregate.) Meanwhile, Houston’s golf case (*Beal v. Holcombe*) received little national attention but was still a significant victory for black Texans. One reason was because Houston, like Atlanta, used golf to signal its immediate response to *Brown v. Board of Education*. In 1951 a federal judge reversed a lower court ruling and ordered Mayor Oscar Holcombe to come up with a plan to desegregate Houston’s municipal courses. The city at first appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court, but in 1954—just days after *Brown*—the new mayor, Roy Hofheinz, abruptly ordered the case dropped and opened Houston’s golf courses to all. It provided the first indication of how city leaders would respond to the landmark ruling on public schools. Black observers were encouraged, as that same week
Baltimore announced it was desegregating its public schools: “Two of the South’s biggest cities have joined the march of progress,” proclaimed the Pittsburgh Courier. In the eyes of the press the integration of Houston golf courses and Baltimore schools went hand in hand.

Within weeks a number of Texas cities followed Houston’s lead and voluntarily integrated their courses, including Dallas and Corpus Christi (San Antonio, Fort Worth, and Galveston all followed by 1956). One popular Dallas municipal course, Cedar Crest Golf Course, even hosted the 1954 UGA National in September, drawing top black professionals (and stars like Sammy Davis Jr.) to a facility that four months earlier had completely excluded African Americans. Within a few years 70 percent of Cedar Crest’s golfers were black, as are half its patrons today. In Fort Worth eight black players showed up to golf on the first day after integration, while post-Brown changes on the links reverberated in smaller towns as well: “I had never seen a Negro playing on the municipal golf courses,” remarked the school superintendent in rural San Angelo. “Until after we integrated, and I had a foursome in front and one behind me one day right after that.” Still, Beal and Brown were not enough in Beaumont, Texas. There, six black golfers had to win their own federal lawsuit to open the municipal course in September 1955.

While some golf-related suits emerged from a small cadre of enthusiasts or a single individual (like Mandeville Detiege in New Orleans), an important case in Miami began with the golf petition signed by 3,000 black residents in 1948. The city responded by allowing them to play Miami Springs Golf Course one day a week (Mondays), making it the first municipal course in Florida open to black players. Yet the fight for integration in this important golf mecca was far from over. Segregated access to Miami Springs and the city’s plans to build a separate black links were not enough for most in the community, who noted that popular municipal courses in nearby Coral Gables and Miami Beach also continued to ban black patrons. With help from the NAACP, a group sued the city, and in 1950 the case (Rice v. Arnold) became yet another that went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, five years before Holmes. Victory seemed assured at first; the court ordered Florida’s top court to review its support for segregation at Miami Springs in light of two important school integration decisions from earlier that year: Sweatt v. Painter and McLaurin v. Oklahoma State Regents. Harry Moore, head of the NAACP in Florida, boasted that the decision would ultimately “permit Negroes to play on the Miami municipal golf course any day in the week.” Hopes were dashed,
however, after Florida’s supreme court ruled in favor of the city. A second appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court was denied in 1952.87

Rejected even after legal help from the national NAACP and a hearing with the Supreme Court, Miami’s black golfers pressed on. In January 1956 retired pharmacist Elmer Ward and another group of players sued in federal court after they were once again turned away from Miami Springs. This time the case featured one unique fact: Ward had never played golf in his life and showed up at the course without golf clubs. “Clubs are of no use when you don’t know how to play the game,” he told the press. “My purpose was, and is, to establish my rights as a citizen.” Ward’s stand emphasized the importance of municipal access to cultivating the game in the black community. “I am interested in learning to play,” he said, “and I know that would be next to impossible under the limitations imposed by the city.”88 Miami fought the case vigorously—even countersuing Ward and four other black players—before finally bowing in April 1958 and integrating Miami Springs, a full decade after the 3,000 petitioners first demanded access and three years after public courses in nearby Miami Beach had already integrated. Immediately, Palm Beach opened its public course to African Americans as well, while Coral Gables came last in 1959.89 Residents in southern Florida soon discovered that the largest black petition for public golf in U.S. history was more than a coordinated civil rights campaign: it represented real interest in the game. Managers at Bayshore Golf Course in Miami Beach immediately reported seeing as many as thirty-two black players on the course at any given time.90

Elsewhere in Florida, Constance Baker Motley and the NAACP offered more support as local activists fought valiantly to open public courses. In Jacksonville, the Holmes decision and a long history of black golf at Lincoln Golf Club did little to sway city officials. One golfer, Frank Hampton, emerged as a local civil rights leader during the 1950s. After a long fight he was named the city’s first black policeman in 1955; however, three years later he left the force in order to wage a new legal battle: suing the city after he and fellow black golfers were banned from a tournament at one of Jacksonville’s two municipal links. As in Miami, victory seemed straightforward in the wake of Brown and Holmes, especially after a district court ruled in his favor and a timeline for desegregation was set. Yet shortly before integration, the city made a surprising announcement: it was closing the courses and putting them up for sale—“to prevent disturbances and problems,” according to the mayor. (Jacksonville’s parks commissioner put it more bluntly: “If we integrate these courses there
will be trouble . . . there will be bloodshed.”)91 With help from Motley and NAACP attorneys, Hampton fought vainly in federal court to prevent the sale. Fortunately, the judge found that a reverter clause indicating that the land would return to the city if its private owners failed to use it for golf was enough to deem it public space. Integration was ordered and achieved in 1963.92

Motley also worked closely on a golf suit with St. Petersburg’s NAACP president, Ralph Wimbish, who joined black residents in petitioning to play the city’s municipal course, the most popular links in East Florida. As in Houston and Atlanta, St. Petersburg also used golf to signal its initial reaction to Brown v. Board of Education, only this time the city closed the course within days of the ruling. Two years later the county quietly leased a large tract of land by the airport to a private corporation to build another course. Yet the attempted “white flight” of public golf fooled no one, as the course was quickly overwhelmed when black golfers from around the state began to show up. “We have taken the ‘public’ off our sign and have made it a private golf club,” the manager complained to the press. “The first day we were open we had four Negroes drive up in a Miami-licensed car and play. They insisted on using a restroom which hadn’t even been hooked up for plumbing.”93 By 1965 those very words helped incriminate the county in federal court (the ruling specifically cited the manager’s interview) after Motley and Wimbish sued. Ten years after Holmes, the NAACP was still winning important golf suits in the South despite ever-more-complicated attempts by local authorities to hide public courses.

Despite his criticism of golf lawsuits, Thurgood Marshall found himself getting more involved in some of them. Most notable was the case to integrate courses in Nashville, Tennessee, significant because it was home to Ted Rhodes, the period’s most popular black pro golfer. Rhodes had taught himself to play swinging clubs in Nashville’s black public parks, constructing his own makeshift golf holes. As in Atlanta, the case also exposed how the postwar civil rights movement divided local black leaders and pitted moderates against progressives. In Nashville that tension first emerged over golf after a Baptist minister and a student were both turned away from two municipal courses, Shelby Golf Course and McCabe Golf Course, and sued the city in 1951. Nashville’s two black councilmen, Z. Alexander Looby and Robert Lillard, were both attorneys but diverged over how the city should respond to black demands for public golf. With the support of white leaders, Lillard advocated that Nashville build a segregated black links, while the Caribbean-born Looby was more militant.
and opposed appeasing whites on the issue. He had just served on two important NAACP cases: defending twenty-five black men charged with starting a 1946 race riot in Columbia, Tennessee, and helping Marshall with a U.S. Supreme Court case in 1951 defending four black men accused of raping a white woman in Groveland, Florida. Looby eventually was a leading advocate for integrating Nashville’s schools later in the 1950s.94

Yet in 1952 Looby’s biggest fight was over golf, and it was not going well: the case, *Hayes v. Crutcher*, seemed doomed after a federal judge ruled against the golfers with a shocking opinion that wholly supported Lillard’s call for segregated golf. “Nature has produced white birds, black birds, blue birds, red birds and they do not roost on the same limb or use the same nest,” read the opinion issued by Nashville’s federal district court. “Such recognition and preference for their own kind prevails among all other animals.”95 It was one of the starker defenses of segregation to come from a federal court in the 1950s. Looby and Nashville’s NAACP chapter organized the black community in response, and an overflow crowd arrived at the next city council meeting and denounced Lillard and plans for the black links. Meanwhile, Looby asked NAACP executive secretary Walter White directly for help on the issue. Lillard and the city’s white leaders had conspired to block the case and stifle the majority of blacks in Nashville who denounced segregated golf: “That is the type of opposition that I have been having every [sic] since I took office,” he wrote to White, sending information and press releases to the national office.96 The unrest, and Looby’s direct help in other LDF cases, was enough to draw support from New York City, including from Thurgood Marshall. Looby and Marshall appealed the case and in 1954 won an injunction to open Nashville’s municipal courses to black players on certain days of the week. On the first day, seventy-five black golfers showed up to play at Shelby Park, where they found a six-foot-high wooden cross planted in the ninth hole, where it had burned the night before.

Two years later, following *Brown* and *Holmes*, a federal court ordered the full integration of Nashville’s public courses. Considering the fierce opposition from whites (and moderate blacks), the subsequent change was dramatic. Within fifteen years of Nashville having no separate golf facility for African Americans, let alone an integrated links, black players were frequenting its municipal courses by 1969, and that year the city renamed one in honor of Ted Rhodes.97 While extreme, the cross at Shelby Park was not unique. Massive resistance to black golf in Nashville was echoed in Memphis, only there it erupted in response not to a legal deci-
sion but, rather, to a UGA tournament. In 1956 local members of the White Citizens’ Council and other pro-segregation groups flooded a Memphis city council meeting and “created a furor” after officials announced plans to allow the black tournament to take place on the city’s Audubon Park course. Fierce resistance in Memphis continued into the late 1950s and delayed integration for longer than other cities in the region. Four of the city’s seven municipal courses were still segregated when the UGA returned in 1962 to hold its national championship at Fuller Park Golf Course.98

Through Constance Baker Motley and, more reluctantly, Thurgood Marshall, the LDF thus found itself supporting a number of golf suits around the country. The man who replaced Marshall as the NAACP’s chief counsel in 1956, Robert L. Carter, worked closely on a case in Louisville, Kentucky. In 1949 a local black dentist, P. O. Sweeney, organized black residents to file a lawsuit after he was denied access to one of the city’s municipal courses. *Sweeney v. City of Louisville* soon became a broader case as the group sued for the complete integration of all “recreational, athletic, swimming, golf, park, and entertainment facilities.”99 When Carter began arguing *Sweeney* in 1951, he had just served as the NAACP’s lead counsel in *Sweatt v. Painter*, and four years later he would present

P. O. Sweeney and his wife in Louisville, Kentucky (*Ebony*, June 1969).
part of the NAACP’s oral arguments in *Brown*. In Louisville, however, his golf case struggled. Even as African Americans protested at town hall meetings and the mayor’s office, the city argued forcefully in court that there was not enough black demand for golf to justify a “negro course,” an argument that prevailed in the Kentucky Court of Appeals. Yet in federal court the group achieved partial victory, as the court saw few options for providing separate—but-equal golf facilities other than allowing blacks to use the existing links. “How this shall be done presents a problem for the Director of Parks and Recreation,” read the opinion in *Sweeney v. City of Louisville*, “to determine what shall be done to afford substantially equal facilities to Negro golfers, necessarily having consideration for the number of Negro golfers.”¹⁰⁰

Notably, the plaintiffs failed in their bid to desegregate Louisville’s other public amusements, including the amphitheater. Instead of the last bastion of white privilege, golf in Louisville was thus among the first public facilities to integrate and led the way for subsequent challenges in other arenas. Moreover, the court recognized that this was due in part to the uniqueness of the game: for residents, white or black, it required substantial space and investment no matter the level of interest. Louisville desegregated its courses in February 1952, and demand from black golfers immediately increased: within three years the city had a UGA-affiliated club. Other Kentucky municipal courses desegregated later, including in Paducah (1956) and Frankfort (1961).¹⁰¹

Just as a golf lawsuit emboldened the Holmes family to fight for integration at the University of Georgia, in Florida yet another resident used golf to become a local civil rights leader and integrate public schools. Charles Augustus and two other black players sued Pensacola in 1955 for access to the municipal Osceola Golf Course, a case they won the following year. *Augustus v. City of Pensacola* received some national attention (including in the *Chicago Tribune*); but it did not involve Motley or the national NAACP, and the course integrated quietly.¹⁰² However, the victory was an important experience for Augustus and his family, one that encouraged him to fight a larger legal battle on behalf of his ten-year-old daughter, Karen. With help from Motley and the LDF, Augustus sued again in 1958 to desegregate the schools, and he won in 1962. *Augustus v. Board of Public Instruction of Escambia County Florida* allowed Karen to attend O. J. Simms Elementary School (she was the first African American to integrate the region’s schools) and was an important victory for the LDF. “The *Augustus* case was the first in which we sought, under *Brown*,

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“The reassignment of teachers on a nonracial basis,” wrote Motley in her memoir. “Up to this point, all school desegregation cases had focused on pupil assignments.” Once again, Motley overlooked her plaintiff’s earlier successful golf suit (it is not clear if she even knew about it). Nevertheless, Pensacola joined the list of cities where golf played a key role in advancing the black community’s local fight to integrate schools.

Largely through her connection to some (but not all) of these Florida cases, Motley seemed to be the LDF insider most sympathetic to golf lawsuits, some of which did receive considerable help from the national office. Yet other important suits remained in the hands of local plaintiffs and lawyers, including the case of six black golfers in Greensboro, North Carolina, who went all the way to the Supreme Court in 1960 with little support. Greensboro’s segregated municipal course was built in Gillespie Park by the WPA in 1940. By 1949, black residents were regularly showing up at Gillespie with golf clubs and forcing the course to turn them away. Reluctantly, the city council built a separate black links but only after some council members demanded to know exactly how many of Greensboro’s African Americans were interested in playing. Black leaders, arguing that interest would expand once access was provided, chafed at the question and noted the irony of the city trying to calculate black people’s interest in a game it systematically denied them. The new arrangement—a municipal course for whites at Gillespie Park and another for blacks at Nocho Park—did not satisfy George Simkins, a Greensboro native who left town for college and returned in 1949 to set up his own dental practice. What he found was a city bending over backward to separate its golfers by race. “The city had two golf courses,” he recalled. “We tried to get them to fix up Nocho, and they never would do it, yet they were slipping out and fixing up Gillespie.”

On December 7, 1955—in the same week the Montgomery Bus Boycott began and two weeks before Atlanta desegregated its municipal courses—Simkins and five other black golfers attempted to play Gillespie Park. After the course manager rebuffed them, the players left their greens fees on the counter, walked out of the clubhouse, and started golfing anyway. By the third hole, police had arrived and arrested them for trespassing, sparking another case that eventually reached the U.S. Supreme Court. As Greensboro moved to sell both its white and black courses in response to the protest, Simkins contacted his local NAACP chapter after the men were convicted in February 1956. Unlike the Holmes clan in Atlanta, he found little support at first; the chapter declined to take the
case and offered only $100 in support. Simkins sent a five-page, handwritten letter pleading for help from the national office. “I have just about come convinced that the local officers of the Greensboro chapter of the N.A.A.C.P. are either afraid to tackle this golf course case or are unwilling for personal reasons to do so,” he wrote. “If my request is not possible, my group intends to struggle on by ourselves as we have done in the past.”107 Yet NAACP state leaders in North Carolina, citing rumors that some Greensboro golfers believed the organization’s involvement would “prejudice the case in court,” successfully urged officials in New York to hold off. “There is little else the National Office can do about the local situation,” read the response to Simkins’s appeal. “It remains for you and the members of the Branch to work out something.”108 Without help, the resources required would be significant (for instance, the lawsuit to integrate municipal courses in Baltimore had taken ten years and cost $10,000).109

True to his word, Simkins carried on the fight, and the men, dubbed the “Greensboro Six” by the press, successfully funded their own defense on appeal to the North Carolina Supreme Court. However, threatening the sanctity of white golf with a bold display of trespassing was not easily forgotten in Greensboro; prosecutors immediately retried them on slightly different charges, and they were convicted again, this time sentenced to thirty days in jail. In 1957 Simkins sought an injunction against the course in federal court and prevailed in Simkins v. City of Greensboro. The decision, which forced Gillespie Park to open its course to black people, is long forgotten to most Americans but made legal history regardless: it was the first time a federal court clearly indicated that Plessy v. Ferguson was overturned. “[Brown v. Board of Education] merely rejects Plessy’s reasoning as applied to public education,” wrote legal scholar Jack Balkin. “Most people believe that Brown did overrule Plessy, and certainly the Justices understood in 1954 that this was the consequence of their decision. Nevertheless, it was not until 1957 that a federal court held that Plessy was overruled [Simkins v. City of Greensboro].”110

The players had prevailed in forcing the course to open, but they still had to fight to overturn their convictions and avoid jail. That battle, Wolfe v. North Carolina (Leon Wolfe was another of the Greensboro Six), reached the U.S. Supreme Court in 1960. Once again Simkins sought help from the NAACP’s national office to no avail, but for a different reason: Thurgood Marshall insisted Simkins’s local lawyers had bungled the case by not including the Simkins v. City of Greensboro federal trial and injunc-
tion in the record. “The lawyers had made a mistake,” Simkins recalled. “I went up to Thurgood, that’s how I met Thurgood Marshall and Jack Greenberg. I went up to New York and asked Thurgood, ‘We need you, because I can’t fight these lawyers, and the city and everybody by myself. I need the NAACP to help us.’ He looked at the record, and told me, ‘Your lawyers ought to be the ones to go to jail. . . . They have screwed this case up. I’m not going to mess my record up by taking a case like this, because you cannot win. You’re going to lose it by one vote.’”

This time Marshall was correct: in 1960—six years after Brown and five years after Holmes—the U.S. Supreme Court upheld jail sentences for the Greensboro Six in a 5-4 ruling. The players had hired a respected black attorney in North Carolina, Jasper A. Atkins, to argue the case; but it was not enough, and Chief Justice Earl Warren’s impassioned dissent did not help either. The men were saved from jail only after North Carolina governor Luther Hodges commuted their sentences and ordered them to pay a fine. A five-year legal saga that began with three holes of golf at Gil-
lespie Park was finally over, but not before it had rekindled racial tension in the city and laid the groundwork for more militant civil rights agitation. Press reports noted that one of the Greensboro Six, Elijah Herring, was the victim of “telephone threats, dynamiting attempts, and hurled missiles,” while an arsonist burned down the golf course’s clubhouse one week after Simkins v. City of Greensboro ordered it to integrate. “Everything was dangerous back then,” Simkins later said. “Anything you tried to integrate was.”

While the Greensboro Six awaited the Supreme Court’s ruling in Wolfe v. North Carolina, four black college students walked into Greensboro’s Woolworth’s Five-and-Dime department store on February 1, 1960, and launched the most famous sit-in movement in American history. The Greensboro sit-ins soon overshadowed golf at Gillespie Park and became a symbolic turning point in the history of the civil rights movement. For most historians they mark the arrival of more militant, confrontational black protest in postwar Greensboro, but not all residents forgot the significance of the golf agitation that came before. George Roach, Greensboro’s mayor from 1957 to 1961, reminded an interviewer in 1978 that white leaders had already dealt with “a test of segregation” years before the sit-ins. “It had started with . . . the Gillespie Golf Course,” he said. A Greensboro Record reporter, credited in 1960 with breaking the story of the Woolworth’s sit-in, agreed: “My first detailed association with any of the civil rights movement was in 1955 when six black men . . . played nine holes of golf at Gillespie Park Golf Course,” she remembered.

George Simkins’s subsequent life and career also highlighted the significance of the golf protest. He embraced the newfound access to Greensboro’s parks and recreation facilities with glee. Ironically, in 1961 he made the finals of the city’s tennis championship and won what was surely an awkward match: his opponent was the white city attorney who had prosecuted him six years earlier for trespassing at Gillespie Park. The man who insisted on playing golf and tennis with whites used those victories to continue fighting segregation in a variety of public facilities, schools, and housing, including an important victory in federal court over Greensboro’s public hospital that helped integrate medical facilities nationwide. Initially rebuffed by local NAACP leaders over his golf case, Simkins became president of the Greensboro chapter in the late 1950s and led it until 1985, never forgetting how the moment he refused to leave the first tee at Gillespie Park started it all. That was the day “I had gotten involved in civil rights,” he said four years before his death in 2001.
Compared with the rest of North Carolina, the battle to integrate Greensboro’s links showed how support from the NAACP and the lengths whites would go to in preserving segregated golf were both uncertain. In nearby Charlotte the LDF supported sixteen golfers who sued to integrate the municipal Bonnie Brae Golf Course in 1951. They quietly won the case in 1956 when the state’s only female judge ordered the city to integrate all of its courses. The black press celebrated how “feminine wisdom” had prevailed in Charlotte while golf in Greensboro descended into chaos. Six years later golf at Bonnie Brae was a fixture in Charlotte’s black community, and the judge, Susie Sharpe, was the first woman elected to a state supreme court in U.S. history. In 2011 the course was renamed Dr. Charles L. Sifford Golf Course to honor the city’s famed black player (the University of St Andrews awarded Sifford an honorary doctorate in 2006). Moreover, the integration of Bonnie Brae came before most other facilities were desegregated in Charlotte, including public buses. Both North Carolina’s NAACP chairman and Charlotte’s lone black city councilman agreed the case was “a forerunner that broke the back of hardcore resistance to the use of public run facilities.” Just outside Charlotte, the integration of golf in Gastonia went even more smoothly, as black players reversed stereotype and invited whites to play the course with them. Beginning in 1950 Gastonia set aside Mondays for African Americans to play its municipal course. When whites showed up anyway, the black golfers welcomed them, and the players quietly integrated themselves. “We just worked it out,” the course’s white pro explained to the press: national civil rights organizations trumpeted the example of interracial cooperation.

By 1957 integrated public golf had spread to much of North Carolina, including Asheville, Asheboro, High Point, Thomasville, Wilmington, and Winston Salem (twenty whites in Asheboro resigned their membership at the municipal course rather than play alongside black citizens). Meanwhile, most black golfers in neighboring South Carolina were still banned from public courses. In 1958 a group of fourteen petitioned Charleston for access to its municipal course, noting they had to drive to Wilmington to play (a round-trip of nearly 400 miles). After the players went to the course directly and were turned away, they filed a lawsuit. In 1961 they won the case, Cummings v. City of Charleston, and that June the course was integrated without fanfare, at the very moment Charleston’s citizens awaited a similar ruling on integrating public schools. Applauding the peaceful transition, African Americans urged the city to use Cummings as a model for school desegregation. “It can be done!” exclaimed the Afro-
American. “Charleston’s Municipal Golf Course was integrated quietly Friday without fuss or fanfare—the first such step in South Carolina. . . . A similar suit is pending seeking the abolition of segregation in Charleston’s public schools.”

From Atlanta to Greensboro, blacks throughout the South were using golf cases to help them become leaders of the civil rights movement in their communities. Like George Simkins, Thomas Brewer was another local NAACP head who made golf integration a central component of his chapter’s activism. Unlike Simkins, it cost him his life. Brewer was a black physician who moved to Columbus, Georgia, in the 1920s and established the city’s NAACP chapter in 1939. By the 1950s he was already a well-known activist in the region; he had worked to provide more opportunities for black soldiers at nearby Fort Benning, organized publicly for black voting rights and school integration, and helped Columbus integrate its police force. Yet none of these accomplishments drew as much press as his January 1956 attempt to integrate Columbus’s municipal golf course. Brewer and four other players (including a local gas station owner and lumber dealer) threatened to file a lawsuit after the city turned them away. Unlike some golf agitators (like Elmer Ward in Miami), these men were accomplished golfers who played regularly at Fort Benning. All five shot in
the high 70s and low 80s, including Eddie Walker, a black employee at the base who had one arm. With help from the black press, Brewer’s campaign was Columbus’s headline civil rights issue in early 1956. “The whites are closed mouth. The colored people are enthused,” he told national reporters when asked to describe how the golf fight was affecting the city. One month later a white department store owner shot him seven times during an argument. Brewer died instantly, and his death was reported around the country. Local residents insisted he was targeted because of his civil rights work, while the black press reported that another NAACP leader in the South had been assassinated for his militancy, this time leaving his battle to integrate the golf course unfinished. “I prevailed on him last Saturday morning to stop his campaigning,” Brewer’s wife told reporters through tears. “He gave his life for his people.”

While nearly thirty golf-related lawsuits influenced the legal battle for integration, the game also seeped into the national civil rights narrative outside the courtroom. The movement exploded during the administration of Dwight D. Eisenhower, a man who loved golf more than any U.S. president in history and who traveled to Georgia’s Augusta National Golf Club twenty-nine times while in office. By far it was golf, not civil rights or any other domestic issue, that most often prompted him to visit the South. The two courses Eisenhower commonly played—Augusta National and Burning Tree Club in Bethesda, Maryland—had no black (or female) members, and there is no evidence he ever played alongside black golfers anywhere. The president did play public courses while in office, including one of his favorites: Atlanta’s Bobby Jones Municipal, which he visited with friends after the Holmes decision and afterward embarrassed his private secretary by sharing “the latest nigger jokes” he heard while on the course. E. Frederic Morrow, one of the few African Americans in Eisenhower’s administration, served as an advisor to the president and loved golf. He played with prominent golfers like George S. May (who welcomed him to Tam O’Shanter in 1957) and his friend Jackie Robinson. Yet in 1955 Vice President Richard Nixon seemed surprised when Morrow told him that he was unable to golf at private courses in the Washington, D.C., area. Nixon, who frequently joined Eisenhower at Burning Tree, assured Morrow that they would hit the links: “Well, as soon as this pressure permits, I’ll get two or three of our gang together and we’ll play at one of the local clubs.” In the end, apparently neither Eisenhower nor Nixon ever invited Morrow to play.

Golf was also major fodder for Eisenhower’s opponents: “Ben Hogan
for President. If We’re Going to Have a Golfer, Let’s Have a Good One,” read one critical bumper sticker. In 1957 his Georgia golf trips rankled critics after the Little Rick Nine incident forced him to wade directly into the civil rights crisis. Telegrams to the president poured in from both opponents and supporters of integration, many needling him over golf. “I think this is more important than a game of golf,” wrote one woman from Birmingham, Alabama, reminding him that “the white people of Birmingham Ala and of the south disapprove of your decision in sending troops to Little Rock.” Meanwhile, a pro-integration telegram urged the president to “throw away golf clubs” and go to Little Rock to “lead negro children into school yourself.” Letters to the black press agreed: “It would be much healthier for the President’s conscience if he does something about this rather than play golf,” wrote one reader. Eisenhower eventually dispatched federal troops in September and forced Arkansas governor Orval Faubus to integrate Central High School (six years before a federal court integrated Little Rock’s municipal golf courses in 1963).

The president’s next trip to the South came two months later, in November 1957, when he again traveled to Augusta National. This time tension swirled before the visit. The radical pro-segregation Augusta Courier denounced “the butcher of Little Rock” for sending the troops to Arkansas: “He didn’t like it when they interrupted his golf game long enough to sign the order.” Yet Eisenhower still received a warm welcome from most whites, dodging reporters’ questions as he stepped off the plane to cheering crowds at Augusta’s Bush Field and hurrying off to the golf course: “Let’s get going,” he said. “I’ve got to get in nine holes.” Even the moderate black Atlanta Daily World, which supported Holmes earlier in 1955, celebrated Eisenhower’s many trips to the course, including another the following year: “Welcome again, Mr. President. Let golf continue to make Augusta famous.”

Yet the November 1957 visit was the president’s fifteenth in five years, and for many civil rights advocates his golfing escapades and friendly dealings with the elite course exemplified his apathy toward a growing movement. “The world has noted your eloquent pleas for freedom in Europe, South America and Asia,” read one civil rights petition. “Yet your only southern trip has been to play golf on the segregated Augusta Golf Course.” Others put it more bluntly: “You are little more than the highest salaried golf pro in the country,” wrote a Pennsylvania college student. Another from Ohio’s Oberlin College demanded that Eisenhower answer for segregation at both Augusta National and Burning Tree. Several
times Langston Hughes used his bombastic character “Jesse Semple” to assail both the president and Augusta National. “I wish Eisenhower would not go golfing in Georgia. . . . He is about the most golfingest, goofingest President I ever seen,” Semple remarked in one column. In another he mockingly described plans for celebrations of a “White History Week,” culminating with Eisenhower “teeing off at Augusta, down in Georgia. Every TV screen in the country would show our great President knocking a golf ball all the way from Georgia to Alabama—Go, Jim Daddy!—right into Reverend King’s Montgomery backyard.” And in a third column Semple imagined himself delivering a rousing speech to the United Nations, imploring the world “to contend with what Harlem thinks.” He ended with the poetic jab, “I will take your own golf stick and wham the world so far up into orbit until you will be shaken off the surface of the earth and everybody will wonder where have all the white folks gone.”

The movement’s frustration with Eisenhower escalated after he declined a series of meetings with prominent African Americans and worsened the snubs by heading to the links instead. In February 1957, months before the crisis in Little Rock, Martin Luther King Jr. and the SCLC asked for a meeting with the president in Montgomery, where the victorious bus boycott had just ended but supporters still faced violent backlash from whites. King urged Eisenhower to deliver a speech on civil rights in the South and denounce the violence. When the president declined and instead traveled to Augusta National, African Americans penned angry letters in response. “If anyone doubts the second class citizenship status of the American Negro, let him consider the following: President Eisenhower could not leave the golf course in Georgia to visit Montgomery, Alabama,” wrote one man from Harlem. Another in Philadelphia was less surprised: “He didn’t give up his golf for the other countries. Why would he for the Negro?” Even back in Washington, D.C., Eisenhower continued to play segregated golf rather than meet with civil rights advocates. In November 1958, 10,000 people descended on the capital for a civil rights march led by Coretta Scott King, actor Harry Belafonte, A. Philip Randolph, and Jackie Robinson. Eisenhower declined to meet with any of the delegates and instead spent the day at Burning Tree, as Belafonte and a group of students picketed the White House. Three weeks later he again chose golf at Burning Tree over a meeting with Dorothy Height and representatives from the National Council of Negro Women.

Notably, one black organization did have better luck getting a response from President Eisenhower: the United Golfers Association. During the
In 1959 UGA National in Washington, the White House allowed delegates to visit while the president was away. In a small ceremony one of Eisenhower’s aides accepted gifts on his behalf, including an honorary UGA membership and a citation signed by Charlie Sifford wishing Ike “might someday enjoy the thrill of a hole-in-one.” The president responded with a letter indicating he was “truly grateful” for the membership and wished for UGA members “many hours of the sport we love so much.”

By the time students from nearby Paine College picketed Eisenhower’s final trip to Augusta National in December 1960, it was clear that increased civil rights agitation was prompting more direct, militant challenges to golf segregation outside the courtroom. This included the student sit-in movement, which at times targeted public golf facilities. “Like the sit-in demonstrations, desegregation of public owned golf courses is showing signs of spreading in Southern states,” exclaimed the Atlanta Daily World in 1961. After the Eisenhower protest, students in Georgia employed more pickets and sit-ins at Augusta National, as well as in local campaigns elsewhere in the state. Savannah’s sit-in movement, which began in March 1960, successfully targeted the municipal golf course, prompting the city to integrate the facility in 1961 and appoint a black representative to the parks board.

Tactics also escalated in adjacent Mississippi, especially its capital, Jackson. There black residents were angered after the city proposed a segregated, black municipal course in 1955 (many white golfers voiced opposition as well, upset that their city planned to use public dollars for black golf). Jackson’s African Americans had long found sporadic opportunities to play golf on private courses, including while working as caddies and support staff at Colonial Country Club and Millsaps College. Colonial was a well-known club that hosted an LPGA event in 1957 and 1958, while the course at Millsaps, opened in 1901, was the oldest in Mississippi. “Growing up around Millsaps College, I grew up on the golf course,” recalled Fred Clark, who was born in 1943 and caddied at both Colonial and Millsaps during the 1950s. “And they wouldn’t allow black students to play on the golf course. Although I played out there.” In 1968 Jackson’s other private club, the Country Club of Jackson, was the first to formally invite an African American after Mississippi NAACP chairman Aaron Henry, a pharmacist, was welcomed to a meeting of the Mississippi Pharmaceutical Association. “So I went down to the meeting and went down to the country club—ain’t never played golf in my life,” Henry recalled. “I swung my stick—ain’t no black guy here ever been out there either.” Henry was
not intimidated and ruffled feathers by bringing as his guest Myrlie Evers, the widow of slain activist Medgar Evers: “And out of about 400 persons present there were only two black people present and that was me and Myrlie.”

As for public golf, Jackson’s NAACP Youth Council took on the issue with more assertiveness in the late 1950s, demanding access to the city’s municipal courses. The persistent youth were turned away for a myriad of reasons (including not having golf shoes), but in 1963 two black students were finally allowed to play under police surveillance. The city faced white backlash after the news broke and immediately attempted to re-segregate the links. Black golfers in the North showed their solidarity for such bold tactics. In July 1961 the Philadelphia NAACP hosted a golf tournament at Cobbs Creek to raise funds for the hundreds of Freedom Riders jailed in Mississippi that summer; the UGA’s Fairview Golf Club helped organize the event.

In the South golf also intersected directly with the local movements led by King and the SCLC. Just as the game received a mixed reception from top NAACP leaders, from Ella Baker and Roy Wilkins to Constance Baker Motley and Thurgood Marshall, so too did its symbolism differ among SCLC leaders. The SCLC was an organization led primarily by southern black ministers, who at times embraced golf but also signaled that recreation was less important in the crusade for divine justice and equal rights. The stereotype of golfers as church escapees was strong: during a Thanksgiving Day sermon at King’s Ebenezer Church in Atlanta, Rev. Ralph Abernathy bemoaned those who golfed on Sunday “instead of worshipping and praising God.” Yet SCLC ministers understood that the movement was about equality in secular life, and in many southern towns municipal golf courses remained the largest swath of white-only space; that alone made them visible, symbolic battlegrounds even without golf. When the sit-in movement reached Sewanee, Tennessee, in 1962, the Ku Klux Klan burned a large cross on the golf course in response. SCLC ministers likewise recognized the need to take the fight to the links. “We must find ways to carry our objectives and the nonviolent movement to the people not only in the churches,” remarked Rev. Joseph Lowery in his keynote address at the SCLC’s 1964 convention, “but in the pool halls . . . golf courses, barber shops, checker games, tennis set and domino set—the middle class, lower class and those with hardly any class.”

The organization’s leadership featured one prolific golfer: Rev. Wyatt Tee Walker, King’s chief of staff and SCLC executive director from 1960 to
1964. As a young, flamboyant pastor in 1950s Virginia, Wyatt had a fondness for yachting, golf, and Bermuda shorts, which set him apart from most southern preachers. Once he became executive director, he continued to play with supporters, including Jackie Robinson. However, when a local municipal course in Virginia was leased to avoid integration, Walker chose to downplay his interest in the game for fear of being branded an elitist, a decision he came to regret. “I’m an avid golfer,” he told an interviewer in 1967. “I always felt that we should have made an attack on that, but I didn’t want to lead it because everybody knew I like golfing; that would be selfish. So I always worked on the schools or something other than the golf course. To this day, I understand it hasn’t been worked out.”

The SCLC started dealing more directly with golf after turning its attention to Georgia in 1962. That April King made his first visit to Augusta, strategically scheduled to take place one week before Augusta National hosted the most important golf tournament in the world, the Masters. King spoke at Tabernacle Baptist Church, where he called for “a second emancipation proclamation” in the South. He was joined by Rev. C. S. Hamilton, leader of Augusta’s NAACP chapter, who encouraged the congregation “to integrate and attend” the Masters “on Sunday.” (This was a significant statement coming from a minister.) The audience cheered, and Atlanta’s WSBTV aired footage of Hamilton’s call and King’s speech, interspersed with clips of white patrons at Augusta National. Although local groups had already picketed the course for two years, King’s visit helped legitimize Augusta National (and golf in general) as a worthy target of the civil rights movement. “King ‘Masters’ Augusta,” headlined the SCLC’s press release. “King was accorded an unprecedented response in this western Georgia resort city prior to the internationally famed Masters Golf Tournament.”

In 1962 the SCLC focused most of its attention on Albany, four hours south of Augusta. Don White was eleven years old when the movement came to his county. He lived on a cotton plantation twenty-five miles outside Albany when King arrived to conduct one of the more iconic civil rights campaigns in history. That year King, the SCLC, and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) spent significant time in the city, facing off against local police chief Laurie Pritchett. Ultimately, the Albany Movement achieved little success (some even called it King’s biggest failure), but for White it helped produce important opportunities.

The campaign targeted Albany’s segregated municipal course, but
rural black kids like White tended to have less knowledge of the game: “I’d seen a putter, I think, and a driver, too,” he recalled. “But I had no idea what they were used for.”\textsuperscript{154} Yet Albany was headquarters for MacGregor Golf, one of the world’s largest manufacturers of golf equipment. MacGregor was a major contributor to the local economy and growing rapidly; in 1961, just months before the movement started, it opened a massive, 175,000-square-foot production facility in Albany. The company also signed an endorsement deal with Jack Nicklaus, then a promising, twenty-one-year-old player who had just turned professional that November.\textsuperscript{155} Meanwhile, White had no experience with golf but did have a special gift for craftsmanship, spending countless hours working on projects with his grandfather in the family’s shed. After high school he got a job grinding iron heads at the plant. “When I started at MacGregor, I had never picked up a golf club in my life.”\textsuperscript{156}

By 1972 Nicklaus was the world’s top player, and his clubs were handcrafted by Don White; by 1980 many considered White the best clubmaker in the industry. “Using only a lathe, White is able to transform nine chunks of steel into the best-looking, softest-feeling, most evenly balanced set of forged irons money can buy,” proclaimed \textit{Sports Illustrated}. For twenty-five years he made clubs for dozens of top professionals, from Arnold Palmer and Nancy Lopez to Greg Norman and Ben Crenshaw. “Don has a gift from God,” said pro Chi Chi Rodriguez. “It’s what the greats like Ruth, Picasso and Mozart all had—genius.”\textsuperscript{157} Nicklaus visited the Albany plant the week before he won his first Masters in 1963, presenting Georgia governor Carl Sanders with a set of his signature irons produced at the facility. “Thanks, Jack, for a real fine Georgia product,” the governor quipped.\textsuperscript{158} In 1978 Nicklaus met with White personally before he decided to purchase MacGregor Golf.

It was a remarkable journey for White, one that began with an opportunity at the Albany plant and was helped by the movement. However, it ultimately provided few economic benefits. His clubs were used to win twelve major championships and tens of millions of dollars, but until 1988 he made $10 an hour; in 1996 his salary was only $35,000. “Maybe it hasn’t been fair,” said one MacGregor representative. “But we’ve sort of kept Donny under wraps so nobody steals him.”\textsuperscript{159}

Sites like Augusta National, Bobby Jones Municipal, and MacGregor’s Albany plant made Georgia an important meeting ground for race and golf, but the game did not go away when the movement turned its attention back to Alabama. In 1963 the SCLC launched a campaign in Bir-
Birmingham that became the largest, most visible in its history. Wyatt Walker spent a week in California before heading to Alabama: “playing a little golf, relaxing, and getting myself strong for Birmingham.” Meanwhile, King had a good friend in the city, John Drew, in whose home he usually stayed whenever he visited. Drew was a black real estate executive and neighbors with Arthur Shores, Birmingham’s NAACP attorney. Both Drew and Shores were crucial to the 1963 campaign and hosted King throughout that year, and they were also close friends who loved golf. Their infatuation prompted regular golfing vacations to Jamaica, excursions that were well known in Birmingham and drew adverse attention. (Ralph Abernathy wrote that the duo’s golfing drove “whites wild with envy.”) Yet as in Atlanta, Greensboro, and elsewhere, golf also divided Birmingham’s NAACP chapter, well before the SCLC arrived. Some moderate members emphasized the issue in the late 1940s and privately encouraged the city to build a black golf course. They included the branch’s president, W. C. Patton, as well as its former president, E. W. Taggart. Others in the leader-
ship were appalled: resigning in 1952, branch secretary Emory Jackson denounced the “elitist” move as “a shocking and disgraceful departure from NAACP principles.” In 1953 Patton, Taggart, and the moderates prevailed, and the city opened its black-only golf course, which it named for a white man: Birmingham mayor Cooper Green.

The move came just in time to help Birmingham’s white officials justify segregated golf in the wake of the Supreme Court’s landmark rulings. In 1954 voters passed a referendum banning whites and blacks from participating together in “games of cards, dice, dominoes, checkers, softball, basketball, baseball, football, golf and track.” While cities like Houston responded to Brown and Holmes by integrating municipal links, the black press noted that Birmingham was doing the opposite: emboldened by its black course, it was redoubling efforts to segregate public recreation. Enforcement of the ban was up to Birmingham’s outspoken, pro-segregation police commissioner, Eugene “Bull” Connor. The city was later joined by Selma (1956) and Montgomery (1958), which also specifically listed golf in their ordinances barring integrated recreation.

Meanwhile, as Birmingham drew a harder line on segregated golf, its more militant black activists began to exert more influence. Local minister Fred Shuttlesworth, an SCLC cofounder who later encouraged King to launch the 1963 campaign, laid the groundwork in 1959 by organizing a lawsuit of fifteen black residents who sued for access to Birmingham’s recreation facilities. In 1961 they prevailed in Shuttlesworth v. Gaylord. Notably, it was a federal ruling that drew primarily from previous cases specifically focused on golf, including Holmes v. Atlanta, Holley v. City of Portsmouth, Fayson v. Beard, Ward v. Miami, Moorhead v. City of Fort Lauderdale, and Simkins v. City of Greensboro. Birmingham’s white leaders responded within hours of the ruling: “So far as I am concerned, all white and colored parks, swimming pools and golf links will be closed,” Bull Connor announced.

Birmingham thus closed its four municipal courses before King and the SCLC launched their movement in April 1963, making it the largest city in the country to shutter its public golf facilities in response to the civil rights movement. Shuttlesworth and the local NAACP debate over the black golf course quickly faded into the background as the world watched Connor battle with hundreds of student protesters in the city. Yet many whites, including Mayor Arthur Hanes, vividly remembered the golf issue and yearned for the moderate NAACP that had supported segregating public courses ten years earlier. “You talk about economics for
Negroes, their standard of living in Birmingham is higher than that of 100 per cent of the black people throughout the world outside the United States,” an exasperated Hanes pleaded as the city descended into chaos. “Have a golf course for ‘em. Cost the taxpayers $22,000 a year to subsidize it, for the Negroes to play golf. Now what is so wrong to ask them to play golf on their own golf course, which is the same as the ones the white people have?” That night a bomb went off at Birmingham’s Gaston Motel, where King had been staying hours before. Another damaged the house of his younger brother, A. D. King. Birmingham’s 1952 municipal course for black golfers was now fueling white resentment of the movement, helping turn Birmingham into Bombingham. And it remained a particular sore spot with city leaders: integrating courses was one of the movement’s demands during the demonstrations but was not a part of the unofficial agreement that ended the unrest in May. Not until June 27 did the city finally reopen and integrate three of its four municipal courses, more than seventeen months after they were closed.

Events in Montgomery and Birmingham overshadowed those in other black communities in Alabama that fought to integrate their public links. In Shuttlesworth the coalition had sued to integrate all public facilities, while that same year blacks in Mobile won a similar lawsuit that specifically targeted the municipal golf course. Unlike Birmingham, Mobile did not build a separate black links and instead argued in court as late as 1958 that it wanted to do so but lacked the money. In 1961 a federal judge ordered the integration of the course in Sawyer v. City of Mobile, handing victory to the players but denying them the $5,000 in damages they sought as compensation for years of driving to Pensacola and New Orleans to play. The case made few headlines but was noteworthy for a different reason: it was the first time golf desegregation drew the attention of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). An FBI field report from Mobile noted the ruling and mentioned that integration was subsequently “confined to the Golf Course and no mention was made of its facilities, such as the Club House and rest room.” The report also indicated that Mobile’s African Americans immediately took advantage of the court-ordered access, even though the city was intent on continuing segregation of the nongolf amenities: “Negroes are using the Municipal Golf Course in segregated groups,” it read. “It was reported that the golf pro . . . said that a separate apartment in the Club House will be set aside for the use of Negro players.”

The FBI’s interest in everyday life on an Alabama municipal course
signaled what was to come. By the late 1960s the civil rights movement—which for some was a unified, simple call for dignity in the South—grew more complex and contentious, as battles over race, identity, and integration raged nationwide. An increase in more militant, violent confrontations threatened to fracture the movement (and America) beyond repair. For most historians it is the point in the story where recreation and amusement truly take a back seat: surely nothing is more incompatible with golf than groups like the Black Panthers and the Revolutionary Action Movement. Yet by the 1970s a new generation of African Americans were as interested in the game as ever; many of them had no problem reconciling golf with the times and bringing Black Power to the links.