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Black Bridge Clubs: A Game Changer Charles “Teenie” Harris

Above: At the height of its popularity, bridge was played at business and academic gatherings and at society functions, including this 1937 game at Pittsburgh’s Loendi Social and Literary Club.

Dr. Joseph L. Henry looked down at his hand: a queen of hearts, a six of clubs, and an eight of diamonds. Not promising. But the Howard University professor of dentistry hadn’t become a renowned bridge player without knowing how to handle a few bad cards. He glanced at the three other players at his table, took a sip of ice water, and waited for his turn. Surrounding Henry’s table were 189 other tables, each seating four people divided into teams of two, all playing in quiet concentration. Twenty teenage waiters moved silently around the cavernous room, filling glasses, emptying ashtrays, and occasionally pausing to watch Larry Edwards, who, at 15, was the youngest player in the room and who was already being lauded as “the future of bridge.”

Henry and approximately 750 of the world's best African-American bridge players were gathered in Detroit's Sheraton-Cadillac Hotel to test their mettle at the 1962 [American Bridge Association](#) (ABA) annual national tournament. Over the course of eight days the competitors would play at least two games each per day, use 750 decks of cards, mark up 100,000 score cards, smoke approximately 300 packs of cigarettes, and drink 3,200 pitchers of water, 100 gallons of coffee, and 1,000 bottles of Coca-Cola.

Then, after the last hand was played and all the entry fees were tallied, the ABA's leaders would announce they were donating \$3,000 (\$28,000 in today's dollars) to "national organizations that are devoted to civil rights, employment, and educational opportunities for minority groups."

It was the golden era of bridge, a time when, according to some estimates, the card game was played in nearly 50 percent of American homes. Like golf and tennis, bridge had become associated with social and economic opportunity. But, just as country clubs and tennis courts at the time were segregated, bridge tables were sharply divided by race. The way African-American communities embraced the game and made it their own, and then used its popularity to support civil rights causes, is a story that still resonates today.



American Bridge Association players at a picnic in 1946 in South Park, PA. Charles "Teenie" Harris/Carnegie Museum of Art - Getty Images

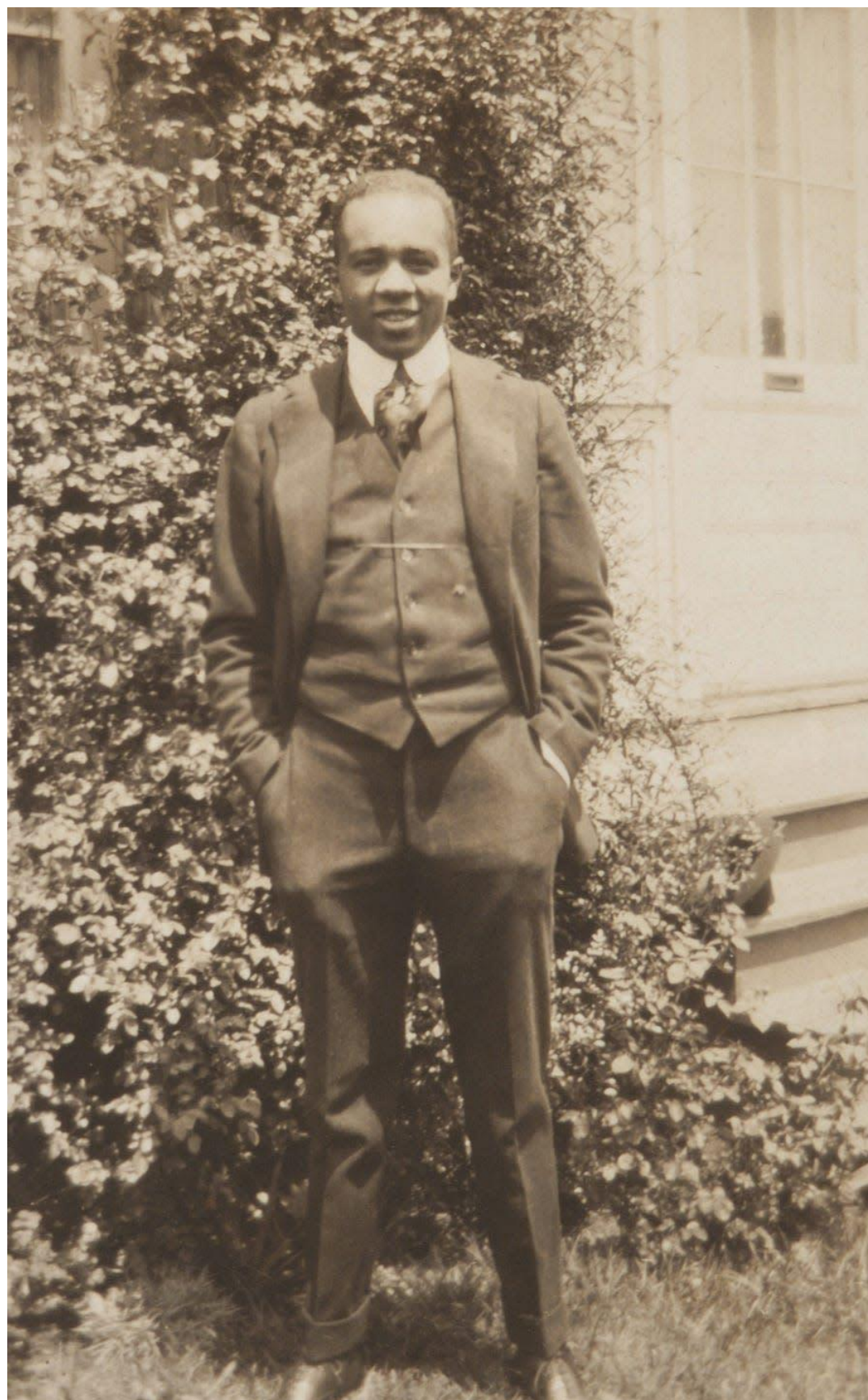
Bridge is an outgrowth of the English game of bid whist and the Russian game of biritch—some would say it was an unexpected byproduct of a clash of empires and cultures. The rules began to take shape in the 19th century, as early versions spread throughout the British empire. Bridge became its own distinct game in the late 1800s, when it was embraced by the English and American

upper classes. Contract bridge, which is still the most popular style in the U.S., was created in 1925 by railroad heir Harold Stirling Vanderbilt. “It’s like playing chess with cards,” says Lynda Straker, vice president of the ABA’s eastern section. A full game takes about three hours, and “each hand is different, requiring its own thinking, inferences, and strategy.”

Founded in 1932 in Buckroe Beach, Virginia, the ABA started out as a loose constellation of independent bridge clubs formed in African-American communities out of necessity, because at that time white associations banned Black participants. ABA members from across the country began meeting to play competitively and to introduce the game to others. Black bridge clubs with names such as the Aces, the Duplicettes, Les Jolie Huit (the Pretty Eight), and Parmi Nous (Among Us) flourished around the U.S. In a September 1935 article in the *Chicago Defender*, bridge pioneer Roger Margerum estimated that nearly 400,000 African-Americans were playing the game “and hundreds are being added to the list daily.” Margerum likened bridge to golf. “Thousands of business deals have been completed over the bridge table.”

ABA players adhered to the international standards of the game, but the way they played bridge was connected to their style of dress, their culinary practices, and their commitment to racial equality. “Card playing is one of the things we formed our culture around,” says Michael Harriot, a cards enthusiast and author of *Black AF History: The Un-Whitewashed Story of America*. “We took a social activity and removed capitalism from it. You can buy a deck of cards and have unlimited amounts of fun.” According to Harriot, spades, bid whist, and tonk (or tunk) are the “big three in card playing” for Black Americans today. In the middle of the last century, however, bridge dazzled. Gloria Hobbs, a native New Yorker and retired college professor, remembers that time fondly. Her parents were bridge enthusiasts before and after they immigrated to the U.S. from Jamaica, around 1918. Hobbs began playing bridge seriously just after World War II with her colleagues at St. Philip’s College, a historically Black school in San Antonio, Texas. She, like Joseph Henry, was part of a Black brain trust of professors who gravitated to the game. “It was a major part of our entertainment and social life,” Hobbs says. Young professors would gather at someone’s home to play and enjoy finger foods and beverages. The game would travel from house to house each week. Hobbs delved deeper into bridge when she moved to Houston to teach at the HBCU Texas Southern University in the early 1950s. The game’s popularity was expanding among other Black professionals—doctors, lawyers, accountants, teachers—and she remembers being awed at the strength of the new social network. Suddenly, she recalls, it felt as if we were “a unified group of people.”

The movers and shakers joining ABA bridge clubs in droves were also defining the contours of a livelier, more social version of the game that was often played at home. “Party bridge” was particularly popular with Black society women: sorority and club leaders, socialite wives of influential men, and power-brokering professional women. They came from places like Westchester County, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Atlanta, and they created a new social order around bridge. Society columnists in African-American newspapers chronicled the comings and goings of women like Pearl Johnson Clement, wife of Atlanta University president Dr. Rufus E. Clement, who hosted party bridge games at the president’s residence. In January 1942 the doyenne of Atlanta society, Josephine Harreld, hosted a spectacular “breakfast bridge” party that the *Atlanta Daily World* society editors covered in grand detail. The “colorful and pretty” tally sheets (which matched the invitations guests had received days earlier), the cups of “piping hot” coffee, and the “delicious breakfast” were all praised. As was Josephine’s “charming” transparent green wool ensemble. And, of course, the fabulous prizes. “They always dressed up... It was sort of expected of you if you were a certain kind of professional,” says Hobbs, who joined the Zeta Phi Beta sorority while living in Texas.



ABA co-founder Victor Daly encouraged member clubs to raise money for civil rights. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections/Cornell University Library

As the ABA expanded, its members began steering the organization toward social and political action. "It's not surprising that, with the clientele that made up the ABA, it would be putting a great amount of resources to help promote what were called civil rights organizations," Hobbs says. The most prominent voice behind this push was ABA co-founder and president Victor R. Daly, a high-ranking executive of the Department of Labor's United States Employment Service, who took the helm of the ABA in 1949. Under Daly's leadership, the ABA began raising funds for organizations including the NAACP, the National Urban League, and the United Negro College Fund. On average, local tournaments raised \$500 (approximately \$5,000 today), while national ABA competitions could raise more than \$3,000. By the time of the March on Washington, in 1963—Daly's penultimate year as ABA president—the *Atlanta Daily World* estimated that the ABA had given more than \$21,000 (about \$200,000 today) to aid the civil rights movement during his tenure.

It was often women who spearheaded these local fundraisers, using a network approach wherein card playing became a way to support racial justice initiatives. In 1955 the Duplicettes, a club in Pittsburgh, hosted a gala tournament for the NAACP that combined the glamour of the cocktail party with the excitement of contract bridge. Marjorie Jarvis of Philadelphia, one of the most lauded women in ABA tournament bridge, was also the president of the Clubwomen, a social organization of African-American professional women who raised money for various social causes. Jarvis used her influence in both organizations, encouraging the Clubwomen to host their own bridge tournaments to raise money for the movement.

To broaden the political power of the ABA, Daly and other ABA leaders pushed to democratize the game of bridge by welcoming more working-class members. The *Amsterdam News* reported that Black bridge masters from the local Metropolitan Bridge Unit were teaching classes for a "nominal fee" at the Harlem YMCA to introduce folks to the "fabulous and glamorous world of tournament bridge." In just 12 classes, a day laborer or elevator operator could learn to play the game from ABA master instructors Kenneth Cox and James Garcia.

The ABA's other mission was to desegregate the American Contract Bridge League (ACBL), a group founded in 1937 when two all-white bridge associations merged. The first breakthrough came in 1958, when the Chicago branches of the ABA and the ACBL decided to form what the *Chicago Defender* reported was the first integrated players' group, the Duplicate Bridge Club. Members from both organizations served in leadership roles, and the organization met at the YMCA in Hyde Park, a Black neighborhood on the South Side. By 1960 the *Afro-American* reported that the Baltimore and Washington, DC, chapters of the ACBL had also tossed out their racist membership clauses.

Joseph Henry was an outspoken leader in this effort. The national body of the ACBL would follow suit by eliminating racial restrictions on its books in 1967. This meant that the top Black bridge players were finally able to play against the top white players in the country and be recognized in national rankings.

Even after the white clubs opened their doors, the ABA continued to attract a broad membership, especially since integration was slow and uneven across the country. But this cross-organizational play had lasting effects. Today Black players, particularly in parts of the rural South that don't have an ABA-affiliate club, play at ACBL clubs or have memberships in both organizations.



Trophies at an ABA tournament. Charles "Teenie" Harris/Carnegie Museum of Art - Getty Images
Ironically, the ABA's success in motivating social and political action among its members may have undercut bridge's popularity in the Black community. By the late '60s college students and young professionals were no longer clamoring to join bridge clubs. Some rejected the bourgeois lifestyle

and striver mentality that bridge playing had come to represent, while others were swept up in the anti-war, pro-woman, and queer rights movements that animated the late 1960s and early '70s. But even though the prominence of bridge in the public discourse began to wane, the game remained popular among those already converted, especially African-Americans who were just beginning to bust down the barriers of corporate America and valued the game as a professional networking tool.

Today the ABA has roughly 1,500 members, mostly African-American, who play in hundreds of local bridge clubs across the country. Most of its members are people who have found a love for the game in retirement. ABA membership chair Rita Thompson, who learned the game when she was 60 years old from her retired mother and stepfather, says, "It has become the all-consuming post-retirement hobby, because it brings together so many exciting elements for seniors: socializing, competition, travel, and brain exercise." Though today ABA members represent a range of professional and class backgrounds, most are college-educated and have a disposable income that allows them to travel to the national tournaments, which are held twice a year (spring and summer).

Lynda Straker's parents were among the first generation of bridge enthusiasts who started playing after retirement. They constantly encouraged Straker and her sister to learn to play, but both were too busy with careers and raising children to take up the game. On their parents' 50th wedding anniversary, the only gift they wanted was to teach their daughters bridge, for one hour a day for five days. "By Friday we were hooked! We have been playing the game ever since," Straker says.

Hobbs, who recently celebrated her 100th birthday, is circumspect about the game's changing popularity. "In the 1950s, I would say, we were laying the groundwork for what we're doing now." The ABA still raises funds to make an annual donation to civil rights organizations such as the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund. It still offers annual scholarships to college students who they hope will take an interest in the game. They're also planting seeds for the future, Hobbs says: using online bridge platforms to play virtually with thousands of people around the world. Preparing for a moment when the cards are right and bridge once again takes center stage.

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