

# The History of Poker



The history of Poker is thought to have evolved over more than ten centuries from various games, all involving the basic principals of ranked card or domino combinations and the use of 'bluffing' to deceive opponents.

One popular belief is that a game similar to poker was first invented by the Chinese sometime before 969 A.D, when The Emperor Mu-tsung is reported to have played "domino cards" with his wife on new years eve.

Egyptians in the 12th & 13th centuries are known to have used a form of playing cards, and in 16th century Persia "Ganjifa" or "Treasure Cards" were used for a variety of betting games. A Ganjifa deck consisted of 96 elaborate cards, often made of paper thin slices of ivory or precious wood. The Persians played "As Nas" which utilized 25 cards, rounds of betting and hierarchical hand rankings.

A French game named "Poque" and a German game named "Pochen" became very popular in the 17 & 18th centuries, both developed from the 16th century Spanish game called "Primero" which involved three cards being dealt to each player. Bluffing, or betting high stakes whilst holding poor cards to deceive opponents, was an integral part of the game. Primero dates back to 1526 and is often referred to as "poker's mother" as it is the first confirmed version of a game directly related to modern day poker.

French colonials imported the game to the new world when they arrived in Canada. Their beloved poque was the national card game of France and from the beginning of the 18th century, when a hardy group of French-Canadian settlers founded New Orleans, it spread from the state of Louisiana up the Mississippi river and then throughout the whole country.



In 1834, Jonathan H. Green made one of the earliest written references to poker when in his writing he mentions rules to the "cheating game," being played on Mississippi riverboats. The "Cheating Game" quickly began to supplant the popular cardsharp game of 3-card monte on the gambling circuit. Gamers embraced the new game as it was perceived as a more challenging and 'honest' gamble than the notoriously rigged 3-card game. Green took more than a passing interest in the new game and took it upon himself to formally name and document the

'Cheating Game' in his book 'An Exposure of the Arts and Miseries of Gambling': Poker was born.

During the Wild West period of United States history, a saloon with a Poker table could be found in just about every town from coast to coast. It was extremely popular during the Civil War when the soldiers of both armies played. European influence of poker ended when the joker was introduced as a wild card in 1875.

In just over two centuries, poker has never looked back. Since its humble beginning on the banks of the Mississippi, the popularity of this widely played game has grown in leaps and bounds to evolve numerous variations and sub-variations.

There have been three games that have, in turn, dominated the modern poker scene:

- [5 Card Draw](#) rose from relative obscurity during the American Civil War to the most popular game for almost a century.

Nevada made it a felony to run a betting game. However the Attorney General of California declared that [draw poker](#) was based upon skill and therefore the anti-gambling laws could not stop it. But [stud poker](#) was still deemed illegal as it was based solely on chance. With this decision, draw poker games developed and grew. This caused Nevada to reverse itself in 1931 and legalize casino gambling.

- [7 Card Stud](#) then took over the throne shortly before WWII and maintained its position for about 40 years with the help of the new and thriving Las Vegas casino industry.
- [Texas Hold'em](#), christened the 'cadillac of poker' rose to prominence in the 1970's when it was featured as the title game in the [World Series of Poker](#). Today, Texas Hold'em is indisputably the most frequently played and most popular poker game in the world, played in casinos and on home game tables the world over.

Other variations such as [Omaha](#), [Stud Poker](#), [Manila](#), [Draw Poker](#) and [Razz](#) are also popular, but nothing can compete with the thrill of No Limit Texas Hold'em.



No Limit Texas Hold'em played at The World Series of Poker and the World Poker Tour have been captivating American television audiences to the point that there are now made for TV events such as the National Heads Up Poker Championship and the World Series of Poker Tournament of Champions being filmed especially for TV and shown in prime time.

Poker looks like it is here to stay and it's popularity has never been as widespread nor growing as quickly as it is right now. With the wealth of poker information available online, and the relative

ease of logging on and playing with other poker players from around the world, there is no time like the present to join the poker craze.

## The History of Poker

There seem to be differences of opinion on the origin of Poker. Moreover, there seems to be no clear or direct early ancestor of the game. It is more likely that Poker derived its present day form from elements of many different games. The consensus is that because of its basic principal, its birth is a very old one.

Jonathan H. Green makes one of the earliest written references to Poker in 1834. In his writing, Green mentions rules to what he called the "cheating game," which was then being played on Mississippi riverboats. He soon realized that his was the first such reference to the game, and since it was not mentioned in the current American Hoyle, he chose to call the game *Poker*.

The game he described was played with 20 cards, using only the aces, kings, queens, jacks and tens. Two to four people could play, and each was dealt five cards. By the time Green wrote about it, poker had become the number one cheating game on the Mississippi boats, receiving even more action than Three-Card Monte. Most people taken by Three-Card Monte thought the 20-card poker seemed more a legitimate game, and they came back time and time again. It would certainly appear, then, that Poker was developed by the cardsharps.

The origin of the word Poker is also well debated. Most of the dictionaries and game historians say that it comes from an eighteenth-century French game, *poque*. However, there are other references to *pochspiel*, which is a German game. In *pochspiel*, there is an element of bluffing, where players would indicate whether they wanted to pass or open by rapping on the table and saying, "*Ich Poche!*" Some say it may even have derived come the Hindu word, *pukka*.

Yet another possible explanation for the word poker, is that it came from a version of an underworld slang word, "poke," a term used by pickpockets. Cardsharps who used the 20-card cheating game to relieve a sucker from his poke may have used that word among themselves, adding an r to make it "poker." The thought was that if the sharps used the word "poker" in front of their victims, those wise to the underworld slang would not surmise the change.

There are those who also believe that "poke" probably came from "hocus-pocus", a term widely used by magicians. The game of Poker later evolved to include 32 cards, and eventually the modern day deck of 52, not counting the two Jokers.

The game of Poker has evolved through the years, through many backroom games to the present day casinos around the world. Its history is rich with famous places and characters. For example, during the Wild West period of United States history, a saloon with a Poker table could be found in just about every town from coast to coast.

Today, Poker is carefully regulated by gambling laws, and saloons have given way to casinos and cardrooms, but Poker is played more than any other card game in the world. It has grown into a sporting event, with competitions and tournaments all around the world. Tournaments take place almost every week of the year somewhere in the world.

If you compare the prizes of major sporting events around the world, you will find that the monetary outcome of any given event in Poker would (pardon the pun) stack up. Poker today is one of the fastest growing, but hardly recognized sporting events. The pinnacle of the poker world, [The World Series of Poker](#), attracts players from all over the world every year to compete for money and titles as the world's top Poker players.

Poker will always be around and will continue to grow and flourish like so many other past times. There will always be a game to play, money to be won, and crowns to be worn.

## Birth and growth

The birth of Poker has been convincingly dated to the first or second decade of the 19th century. It appeared in former French territory centred on New Orleans which was ceded to the infant United States by the Louisiana Purchase of 1803. Its cradle was the gambling saloon in general and, in particular, those famous or notorious floating saloons, the Mississippi steamers, which began to ply their trade from about 1811.

The earliest contemporary reference to Poker occurs in J. [Hildreth](#)'s *Dragoon Campaigns to the Rocky Mountains*, published in 1836; but two slightly later publications independently show it to have been well in use by 1829. Both are found in the published reminiscences of two unconnected witnesses: Jonathan H. [Green](#), in *Exposure of the Arts and Miseries of Gambling* (1843), and Joe [Cowell](#), an English comedian, in *Thirty Years Passed Among the Players in England and America* (1844).

Green and Cowell describe the earliest known form of Poker, played with a 20-card pack (A-K-Q-J-10) evenly dealt amongst four players. There is no draw, and bets are made on a narrow range of combinations: one pair, two pair, triplets, 'full' - so called because it is the only combination in which all five cards are active - and four of a kind. Unlike classic Poker, in which the top hand (royal flush) can be tied in another suit, the original top hand consisting of four Aces, or four Kings and an Ace, was absolutely unbeatable.

Twenty-card Poker is well attested. In 1847 Jonathan Green mentions a game of 20-card Poker played on a Mississippi steamboat bound for New Orleans in February 1833, and in *The Reformed Gambler* (1858), a new edition of his earlier book, another session played at a Louisville house in 1834. A vivid account of a Poker game played on a Mississippi river boat in 1835 appears in Sol [Smith](#)'s *Theatrical Management in the West and South for Thirty Years* (New York, 1868), with an anecdote hinging on the two players' switching from 'low' cards to 'large cards', i.e. Tens and over.

This provides evidence that the 20-card game was being challenged by the 52-card game in the mid-1830s. The gradual adoption of a 52-card pack was made partly to accommodate more

players, perhaps partly to give more scope to the recently introduced flush (the straight was as yet unknown), but chiefly to ensure there were enough cards for the draw - another relative novelty, and one that was to turn Poker from a gamble to a game of skill. These novelties were regular features of Poker's English relative Brag as played in its early 19th-century American form. (Brag is no longer played in America, and modern British [Brag](#) differs substantially from 19th century American Brag.)

It was in this form, but as yet without the draw, that Poker first reached the pages of American 'Hoyles'. The earliest mention occurs in the 1845 edition of Hoyle's *Games* by Henry F. Anners, who refers to Poker or Bluff, 20-deck Poker, and 20-deck Poke. In a Boston Hoyle of 1857 Thomas Frere describes 'The Game of "Bluff", or "Poker"', with a reference to the 20-card game so brief as to suggest it was becoming obsolete. [Dowling](#), however, points out that it was apparently still played as late as 1857 in New York, for "In that year the author of a guidebook to the metropolis issued a warning against playing 20-card poker, which was described as one of the most dangerous pitfalls to be found in the city".

Between about 1830 and 1845 Poker was increasingly played with all 52 cards, enabling more than four to participate and giving rise to the flush as an additional combination. The end of this phase saw the introduction of the draw, already familiar from contemporary Brag. This increased the excitement of the game by adding a second betting interval and enabling poor hands to be significantly improved, especially the worthless but potentially promising fourflush. The first printed mention of Draw Poker occurs in the 1850 American edition of *Bohn's New Handbook of Games*, p.384.

The introduction of Poker into English society is often credited, if only on his own claim, to General [Schenck](#), the American ambassador to Britain. [Blackridge](#) quotes a letter from Schenck to General Young of Cincinnati describing a weekend retreat to the Somerset country home of a certain 'Lady W.' in the summer of 1872, when he was prevailed upon by the other guests to teach them this peculiarly American game. As part of the exercise he drew up a written guide for them. Some of his pupils subsequently had these rules printed in booklet form, much to Schenck's surprise when he received a copy upon his return home. Schenck notwithstanding, a probable earlier reference to the game in England dates from 1855 when George [Eliot](#) is reported (in her second husband's 1885 biography) as writing 'One night we attempted "Brag" or "Pocher"' [sic].

## Coming of age

From the middle of the 19th century Poker experienced rapid changes and innovations as it became more widespread through the upheavals of the Civil War. Stud, or 'stud-horse' Poker, a cowboy invention said to have been introduced around Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois, first appears in *The American Hoyle* of 1864. More contentious was the introduction of Jack Pots, which originally meant that you were not allowed to open unless you held a pair of Jacks or better, and were obliged to open if you did, though the second half of this rule was subsequently abandoned. (At a table of five, at least one player will normally be dealt Jacks or better.) This device was intended to impose discipline on the game by driving out wild players who would bet on anything, while encouraging cautious players who did have something not to be frightened out of

the pot by openers who didn't. Blackridge opposed Jack Pots, pithily declaring it 'equivalent to a lottery except that all players must buy tickets'. He added that the rule reportedly originated at Toledo and was common in the west, rarer in the east, and absent from the more conservative south. In 1897 [Foster](#) complained that 'The jack-pot, with its accompanying small-limit game, has completely killed bluffing - that pride and joy of the old-timer...' Nevertheless, he adds, self-contradictorily, 'The two great steps in the history and progress of Poker have undoubtedly been the introduction of the draw to improve the hand, and the invention of the jack-pot as a cure for cautiousness... It has come to stay.'

Draw, Stud, and Jack Pots, all appear in the 1875 edition of *The American Hoyle*, together with [Whiskey Poker](#), a form of [Commerce](#) based on Poker combinations, and *Mistigris*, which was Poker with a 53rd card 'wild', namely 'the blank card accompanying every pack'. (This borrowed from a variety of [Bouillotte](#) in which the Jack of clubs appears under that name as a wild card.) By this time, too, the full range of Poker combinations was widely recognized, though not universally so. The 1875 edition notes that four of a kind is the best hand 'when straights are not played', and repeats it as late as the 1887 edition.

It is curious how unstraightforward was the introduction of the straight. The 1864 edition gives the hands as: one pair, two pairs, straight sequence or rotation, triplets, flush, full house, fours. It adds 'When a straight and a flush come together in one hand, it outranks a full' - not fours, be it noted, in defiance of the mathematics, and probably for the following reason. Without straights and straight flushes, the highest possible hand is four Aces (or four Kings and an Ace kicker), which is not just unbeatable but cannot even be tied. Traditionalists clinging to the unbeatable four Aces of Old Poker were opposed by innovationists, who found the game more interesting with straights. In this light, the acceptance of straights ranked in the wrong order may be seen as a temporary compromise. As late as 1892, John [Keller](#) defended his view that the straight 'should be allowed. My authority for this is the best usage of today, and my justification is the undeniable merit of the straight as a Poker hand.' He clinches this with the moral argument that has prevailed ever since - namely, that it is unethical and ungentlemanly to bet on such a sure thing as four Aces. If the best hand is a royal flush, there is always the outside chance that it may be tied. However minute that measure of doubt, it has to be morally superior to betting on a certainty.

Under the aegis of the United States Printing Company and, subsequently, the New York Sun, a great deal of research was conducted into the origins and varieties of Poker with a view to drawing up a set of definitive rules, which first appeared in 1904. In 1905 R F [Foster](#) published his book *Practical Poker*, summarizing the fruits of all this research plus additional material gleaned from the Frederick Jessel collection of card-game literature housed in the Bodleian Library, Oxford. Amongst other things, it would appear from this that Dealer's Choice began attaining popularity about 1900, according to [Dowling](#). Subsequent developments can be traced through successive editions of *Hoyle's* published by the United States Playing Card Company.

Following Draw and Stud, a third major structural division of the Poker game, represented today by Texas Hold 'em, is that of varieties involving one or more communal cards. The earliest of these appears in the 1919 edition under the name *Wild Widow*, whereby a card was dealt face up to the table immediately before each player received his fifth card, and the winner was the player

making the best five-card combination from his own hand plus the turn-up. In the 1926 edition this is replaced by Spit in the Ocean. Here only four cards each are dealt, but the turn-up and the three other cards of the same rank are all wild. Deuces wild first appears in the 1919 edition.

High-Low Poker, in which the pot is divided equally between the highest and the lowest hands, is attested as early as 1903 (according to [Morehead and Mott-Smith](#)). It first appears in the 1926 edition and achieved its greatest popularity during the 'thirties and 'forties, subsequently giving rise to Lowball, in which only the lowest hand wins.

The rise of modern tournament play dates from the [World Series of Poker](#) started in 1970.

## Ultimate origins

So many ridiculous assertions are made about the antiquity of Poker that it is necessary to point out that, by definition, Poker cannot be older than playing-cards themselves, which are only first positively attested in 13th century China, though some arguable evidence exists for their invention a few centuries earlier. Playing-cards first reached Europe in about 1360, not directly from China, but from the Islamic Mamluk Empire of Egypt through the trading port of Venice. Mamluk cards themselves also do not derive directly from Chinese cards but bear obscure relationships to the geographically intervening cards of India and (even more obscurely) Persia (Iran). Surviving specimens of Mamluk cards come from an original 52-card pack consisting of four suits (swords, polo sticks, goblets, coins) of 13 ranks each (numerals one to ten, junior viceroy, senior viceroy, and king). The only known Chinese card games of that period were of the trick-taking variety; and, while we have no contemporary account of games played with the Mamluk pack, it too was clearly designed for trick-taking.

Fourteenth century Europe saw an explosion in the variety of designs, suit-systems and structures of playing-cards, culminating before 1500 in the establishment of the principal European suit systems (Italian, Spanish, Swiss, German, French) and a correspondingly wide variety of accompanying games. A major European contribution to the realm of card play was the concept of a trump suit, first embodied in the Italian invention of [tarot](#) cards (at first called *triumphi* or triumph cards) in the 1420s, though also prefigured in the German game of [Karnöffel](#). Also developed during the same period were a number of gambling games based on acquiring or betting on card combinations such as flushes (Flusso, Flüßlen, etc), sequences (Quentzlen, etc), matches (pairs, triplets, quartets), and numeration (as in [Thirty-One](#), the ancestor of [Twenty-One](#) and perhaps [Cribbage](#)). Melding and numerical games were probably derived from, or modelled on, dice games of the period, though we lack sufficient information to be able to reconstruct the actual forms of dice play.

It is hard to imagine a process of Poker-style vying operating in dice games of the time, as vying originally depended entirely on being able to hide the identity of the cards you hold or draw by exposing only their plain sides to the other players, whereas the outcome of dice throws is necessarily open and visible to all. (As [Cardano](#) famously noted in 1564, 'There is a difference from play with dice, because the latter is open, whereas play with cards takes place from ambush, because they are concealed.') Nevertheless, whether originating in Europe or imported from elsewhere, there can be no doubt that vying card games were in use by 1500. This should

not be taken to imply Poker-style vying, however, which may be a very late development. The earliest style of vying may more closely have resembled that traditionally followed in the English game of Brag.

It is possible that vying developed in trick-taking games as an extension of the process of ‘doubling’ now seen in modern Backgammon. In ancient card games such as [Put](#) and [Truc](#), two players each received three cards and played them to tricks, but either player at any point could offer to double the stakes before playing a card. The other could then either accept the double and play on, or decline it and concede defeat for the existing (undoubled) amount.

A problem endemic in card-game history is that contemporary descriptions of vying are never unambiguous, partly because they find it easier to give an example of a round of vying without detailing the principles on which it is based, thus giving rise to irresolvable ambiguities, and partly because it never occurred to them that there could be more than one possible way of doing it. Two fundamentally different types of vying may be categorized as the Equalization method (Poker style) and the Matching method (English Brag style).

**Equalization method.** A player wishing to stay in the pot must increase his stake by the amount necessary to match the total so far staked by the last raiser, and may also raise it further. If unwilling to do either, he must fold. In the following example, column 3 shows the total staked so far by each player, and column 4 the total in the pot.

A	1	1	1
B	1 to stay, raise 1	2	3
C	2 to stay	2	5
D	2 to stay, raise 1	3	8
A	2 to stay	3	10
B	2 to stay, raise 1	4	12
C	fold	(2)	12
D	1 to stay	4	13
A	1 to stay, raise 1	5	15
B	fold	(4)	15
D	1 to stay	5	16

A and D have now equalized, thus calling for a showdown. Whichever of them wins it gains a pot of 16 less his total stake of 5, making 11 profit.

**Matching method.** In this case a player wishing to stay in the pot must match the stake just made by the preceding active player, instead of merely making up the difference between his total stake and that of the last raiser. As before, he may then also raise it further, or, if unwilling to do either, must fold.

A	1	1	1
B	1 to stay, raise 1	2	3
C	2 to stay	2	5
D	2 to stay, raise 1	3	8
A	3 to stay	4	11
B	3 to stay, raise 1	6	15
C	fold	(2)	15
D	4 to stay	7	19
A	4 to stay, raise 1	9	24
B	fold	(6)	24
D	5 to stay	12	29

In this case the winner gains a pot of 29 less the amount of his own stake, which in A's case is  $29 - 9 = 20$  and in D's is  $29 - 12 = 17$ .

Further variations may be encountered, especially in Brag. For example, under what might be called a 'flat rate' system, each in turn must either add a fixed, invariable unit to his stake or else fold, and play continues until only two remain in the pot, when one of them can call by betting double. American Brag, as played according to an 1830 American Hoyle, used the equalization method, but an edition of 1868 points out that the game is played in various ways and describes a different vying procedure. In this, a player who brags when holding a pair (but not otherwise) may demand a private showdown with the next active player in rotation. They then examine each other's hands without showing them to the others, and the lower of the two must be folded. Play continues until only two remain and one of them either folds or 'calls for a sight [showdown]' upon equalizing. This procedure has the peculiar consequence that you can be forced into a showdown without having had a chance to raise. In [Bouillotte](#) there are circumstances in which

equalizing does not necessarily force a showdown but entitles the next active player in rotation to instigate another round of raising. It is also possible for a player who cannot meet the last raise to call a sight for the amount he has left and stay in the pot (without further betting) until a showdown, when, of course, he cannot win more than the amount he has staked even if he proves to have the best hand.

## Relatives and ancestors

Articles on Poker history mention a wide variety of earlier vying games, not all of them entirely relevant. For the sake of clarity, they may be grouped according to the number of cards dealt and listed as follows.

**Three-card games** include Belle, Flux & Trente-un (French, 17th - 18th centuries, known as Dreisatz in Germany), Post & Pair (English and American, 17th - 18th centuries) and its derivative Brag (18th century to present), Brehan (French, 17th - 18th centuries) and its derivative Bouillotte (late 18th - 19th centuries, French and American). Of these, Bouillotte and Brag are most relevant to the genesis of Poker.

**Four-card games** include Primiera (Italian, 16th century - present) and its English equivalent Primero (16th - 17th centuries), Gilet (under various spellings, French, 16th - 18th centuries), Mus (Spanish, specifically Basque, current, of unknown age), Ambigu (French, 18th century). None of these have much bearing, if any, on Poker.

**Five-card games** include the German Pochen or Pochspiel, which may be equated with a 15th-century game recorded as Bocken, and was played in France first under the name Glic and subsequently as Poque. Of all early European gambling games this one is most obviously germane to the genesis of Poker to the extent of having ultimately furnished its name. *Pochen* is a verb meaning to primarily to hit, strike, or knock on the table, and secondarily '(I) play' or 'bet' or 'raise'. Thus *Pochspiel* is the game (*Spiel*) of *poching*, i.e. knocking or betting. In its earliest form it appears as *boeckels*, *bocken*, *bogel*, *bockspiel* and suchlike.

[Pochen](#) has a long history in the German repertoire and is not entirely extinct today. It requires a staking board of special design and consists of three phases: payment for being dealt the best card, vying as to who holds the best combination, and playing cards out as in a 'stops' game such as [Newmarket](#) or [Michigan](#). A similar tripartite structure applied also to Belle, Flux & Trente-un, in whose second part the players vied as to who held the best flush, and to Post & Pair, in whose second part they vied as to who held the best pair or three of a kind. An early form of Brag was also played as a three-stake game, and a similar pattern underlies [Mus](#) - where, however, the first part has been split into two, thus turning it into a four-part game.

We may surmise that dedicated gamblers found the central section of these games - the vying - more interesting than either the first, where a stake was won for being dealt the best upcard ('belle'), or the third, where it was won for drawing cards totalling nearest to 31 (or, in some games, for playing a variety of Stops). If so, Brehan may be characterized as an extract of B-F-&-31, Brag as an extract of Post & Pair, and Poker as an extract of Poque.

Given that Poker originated in culturally French territory, its likeliest immediate ancestor is Poque, the French version of Pochen. Poque first appears under this name in the late 16th century, but was previously played in France under the name [Glic](#). It remained current until well into the 19th century, undergoing a brief mid-century revival under the spelling ‘Bog’. The French equivalent of ‘*Ich poche eins*’ is ‘*Je poque d’un jeton*’ (‘I bet one unit’), and poque itself denotes one of the six staking containers. The final ‘e’ is briefly pronounced as a neutral vowel, which may explain why non-Francophone Americans perceived and perpetuated the word as ‘poker’ rather than ‘poke’. Louis [Coffin](#) writes "The French name was poque, pronounced poke, and Southerners corrupted the pronunciation to two syllable to pokuh or Poker". This sounds more plausible than a fancied derivation from ‘poke’ as related to ‘pocket’.

Poque, however, was a tripartite game played by up to six players with a 32-card pack, whereas the earliest form of Poker was a one-part game played with a 20-card pack equally divided among four. If Poker was based primarily on Poque, we must assume that it developed naturally within a community that was already acquainted with a 20-card vying game and decided to use the same stripped pack for a new version of Poque based only on the vying section. A possible candidate for this influence could be its contemporary and equally French game of [Bouillotte](#), itself played by four with a 20-card pack, albeit with only three cards dealt to each and the top card of stock turned up to enable four of a kind. This, however, would have left a five-card vying game in which the only effective combinations were four or three of a kind. To account for the introduction of one and two pairs and the full house we must either assume that they were obvious additions that may already have been drafted into Poque itself, or else look for another game from which they could have been borrowed. Which brings us to ...

## The problem of As-nas

Contentious calls have been made on the possible contribution to Poker of a Persian five-card vying game called As-nas through the medium of ‘Persian sailors, or Frenchmen who had been in the French [service](#) in Persia’ - whatever that may mean. The problem with this theory is that it is based on no more than a strong resemblance and suffers from a total lack of contemporary evidence, since the earliest descriptions of As-nas do not occur until the 1890s. The first, very brief, is by ‘[Aquarius](#)’ in 1890; the second occurs in Stewart Culin’s 1895 catalogue for an exhibition of ‘games and implements for divination’ under the short title *Chess and Playing Cards*. Culin, in connection with several incomplete sets of Persian playing cards generally referred to as *ganjifeh*, consulted a certain General A. Houtum [Schindler](#) of Tehran and received a reply describing As-nas in terms remarkably similar to that of Poker.

The following table shows how the earliest form of Poker compares with Schindler’s game and the two most relevant contemporaneous French vying games:

	Bouillotte	Poque	As-nas	Poker I	Brag	Poker II
players	4 (3, 5, 6)	4 (3, 5, 6)	4	4	3-6	3-6

cards	20 (28)	32 (36)	20	20	52	52
deal	3	5	5	5	3	5
turn-up	yes	yes	no	no	no	no
draw	no	no	no	yes	yes	yes
hands	fours - - threes - point	fours - - threes - pair	fours full - threes 2 pair pair	fours full - threes 2 pair pair	- - - threes - pair	fours full flush threes 2 pair pair

The resemblance between As-nas and 20-card Poker is very close (though Schindler does not mention four of a kind - probably by oversight. Original descriptions of 20-card Poker unfortunately do not specify how combinations rank). Schindler's description also leaves open the possibility that raising could continue after equalization: it all depends on the precise meaning of 'when the stakes of all players are equal and no one raises any more'. (Does 'and' specify a second requirement for a showdown, or does it merely amplify the first?)

The question naturally arises as to which way round any borrowing may have taken place. Favouring the priority of As-nas is the fact that As-nas cards, a subset of the Persian ganjifeh pack, are attested as early as 1700 in Persia, though without any account of the game played with them. Against it are -

- the absence of any description of the game earlier than 1890;
- the fact that As is not a Persian word and obviously derives from the French for Ace; and (hence)
- the probability that As-nas derives from a European vying game rather than the other way around.

## The role of Brag

Research by Jeffrey [Burton](#) has thrown new light on the significance of Brag to the development of Poker. [Brag](#) is the English national vying game and remains popular in Britain today, though it has undergone considerable evolutionary development in the past 100 years and is restricted to a social stratum having no significant overlap with that of Poker. First described by [Lucas](#) in 1721, Brag is basically from the central section of the tripartite game of Post and Pair, or Belle Flux et Trente-un. For much of the 18th century it was popular with the same sort of society that played [Whist](#), especially with its distaff side, which accounts for the fact that [Hoyle](#) himself went so far as to write a Treatise on it published in 1751. Brag - which means 'vie' or 'bluff' according to

context - is a three-card vying game. The version described by Lucas, which has formed the basis of most printed descriptions until the last quarter of the 20th century, is actually of a three-stake model, but it had shed its two outer portions by the time of Hoyle's effusion. The latter describes a game played by five with a short pack of 22 cards, or by six with one of 26, four of which - the black Jacks and the red Nines - were known as 'braggers' and could represent anything, including themselves. The first round of betting was followed by a 'draw' to give each player a chance to improve a pair to a pair-royal or a lone card to a pair or pair-royal by discarding and 'taking in' fresh replacements from stock. However, given that the peculiar length of pack, leaving only seven or eight cards to draw from (implying a maximum of one each), is unique to this notoriously unreliable and muddled source, we may assume that Brag was mostly played with all 52 cards, and that Hoyle's reflected some local or temporary aberration.

Burton surmises that Brag reached America in the late colonial period at the hands of English emigrants, British colonial officials, and perhaps Americans returning from transatlantic visits. At first played mainly in the plantation colonies of the South - Virginia, Maryland, the Carolinas - by about 1800 it had caught on in New England, as well as in the southern states of the young republic. Its first description, in *The New Pocket Hoyle* (Philadelphia, 1805), continued to be faithfully reproduced in a succession of American Hoyles for much of the 19th century, though the game itself was well on the way out by 1850, having been replaced by - or, rather, merged into - the form of Poker to which it contributed the draw. Until that time, however, as Burton says, a multitude of contemporary memorabilia testifies that the rules and procedures were more or less the same in the California goldfields at the end of the 1840s as they had been in the gaming salons of Mobile or New Orleans in the 1820s and in the taverns of Washington or New York twenty years before that.

Brag, he continues, "disappeared during a period of no more than five or six years between, roughly, 1848 and 1853. What had happened is that the 'taking in' or draw feature of Brag was merged into the new game of full-deck Poker. The five-card Poker hand yielded a far greater range of distinctive combinations than the Brag hand, in which the pair-royal (three of a kind) and pair were still the only ones recognized by American players. Hence, when the draw was transplanted from Brag to Poker, the three-card game lost its following in next to no time. The result of the amalgamation could have been called Five-card Brag; instead, it became known as Draw Poker."

## Conclusion

Nobody ever knows how a classic card game really originates because at the time it does so its originators do not know that it is going to become a classic and so keep no record. In any case the process of origination rarely takes place at a single table but mostly among a group of players within a given locality, so gaming ideas and variations pass around without anyone being sure who thought of them first. By the time a game description appears in a book it has by definition settled down into some sort of fixity, and may be more than a generation old - especially in the case of games played by a community that circulates its cultural artefacts orally rather than in writing. The following summary of the genesis of Poker is therefore no more than a surmise, albeit at least consistent with the evidence outlined above.

Original Poker, a game in which four players received five cards each from a 20-card pack and vied as to who held the best hand, evidently originated in the New Orleans some time between 1810 and 1825. Its gaming milieu was that of French-speaking maritime gambling saloons, especially those of the Mississippi steamers. Its name suggests that its first players felt they were continuing the tradition of playing a game called Poque in which one said Je poque to open the betting. At this time and place, and before it underwent development, Poque probably denoted a five-card vying game consisting of the central section of a formerly tripartite game of the same name. Its ultimate ancestor must have been the substantially similar German game of Poch (Pochen, Pochspiel), which can be traced back to the 15th century.

Poque itself was played with 32 or 36 cards by up to six players. Its transition to one played with 20 cards by four players may have been influenced by the known contemporary French vying game of Bouillotte, or by the speculated Persian game of As-nas, or both. As-nas would be an ideal candidate were it not for the fact that there is no evidence for any knowledge of it at that time or place.

In the 1830s, having spread northwards along the Mississippi and westwards with the expanding frontier, Poker had adopted its anglicized name and become increasingly played with 52 cards to accommodate a greater number of players, thus also giving rise to the flush as an additionally recognized combination. Under the influence of Brag, its three-card British equivalent, it adopted the draw. This led to its further and more rapid expansion of popularity, as Poker-players preferred the additional round of betting after the possibility of improving a promising hand, while Brag-players preferred the wider range of combinations offered by a five-card hand. Draw Poker, first recorded about 1850, marks the coming of age of what Allen Dowling rightly calls 'The great American pastime' - a game which, as Burton observes, could equally well have been dubbed 'five-card Brag'.