

“Getting on the Negro History Bandwagon”: Selling Black History from World War II to the Dawn of Black Power

E. James West

In its Winter 1997 issue, the *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* staged a roundtable to address continuing disagreements over the significance of Black History Month. Founded as Negro History Week by Carter G. Woodson and the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History in 1926, and later expanded into a month-long celebration, Black History Month had become a well-established February tradition by the 1990s.¹ However, the journal’s editors expressed concerns over the celebration’s contemporary function. Was it still, as founder Woodson intended, an effective means of promoting Black historical literacy and “disabusing the Negro mind of the idea of inferiority”?² Or had its radical pedagogical potential been usurped by major corporations, whose “token efforts to promote an awareness of black history” were a

E. James West is a lecturer in US history at the University of York (United Kingdom).

1. The Association for the Study of Negro Life and History’s name was changed in the 1970s to the Association for the Study of African American Life and History. As this article makes reference to the organization during the period before this change, it will be referred to by its original name throughout. Pero Dagbovie, *Reclaiming the Black Past: The Use and Misuse of African American History in the Twenty-First Century* (London, 2018).

2. Carter G. Woodson, “The Celebration of Negro History Week,” *Journal of Negro History* 12, no. 2 (1927): 103; Jarvis Givens, *Fugitive Pedagogy: Carter G. Woodson and the Art of Black Teaching* (Cambridge, 2021).

The Journal of African American History, volume 107, number 3, summer 2022.

© 2022 ASALH. All rights reserved. Published by The University of Chicago Press for the Association for the Study of African American Life and History. <https://doi.org/10.1086/719961>

thinly veiled ploy to bolster their standing within the Black community? The editors admitted that they did not take kindly to what Black History Month had become—nothing less than a “public relations scam” designed to mollify African Americans and line the pockets of corporate advertisers.³

This sentiment was taken up by contributor John Hope Franklin, one of the nation’s preeminent Black historians. Denouncing the current state of Black History Month as a “desecration” of the Woodsonian ideal, Franklin declared that the month’s commercialization “provides the hucksters with a longer period in which to sell their trinkets and souvenirs [and] corporations a greater opportunity to display their special brand of ‘civic awareness.’”⁴ Against the annual onslaught of commemorative adverts, film screenings, book signings, and other activities, Franklin’s anxieties over the commercialization of Black History Month—and, indeed, of Black history as a whole—seemed well founded. These anxieties were also relayed in the national press, with *Washington Post* journalist Michele Norris tracing Black History Month’s evolution from “a largely educational event into a major corporate vehicle.” African American market specialist Ken Smikle was more direct, contending that Black history had “become big business.”⁵ However, while Smikle is certainly correct in his assertion that Black history had become “big business” by the 1990s, the business of Black history can be seen to have long preceded this moment.

Drawing on a diverse range of archival material, oral histories, market research literature, and Black periodicals, this article sheds new light on the development of Black history-themed advertising and public outreach campaigns by White-owned corporations from World War II to the dawn of Black Power. As I argue here, this corporate turn toward Black history between the 1940s and mid-1960s crystallized at the intersections of coalescing civil rights protest, growing demands for historical representation and educational reform, and transformations in mainstream American business and marketing culture. For many White-owned corporations eager to tap into the lucrative “Negro market,” Black history became a means of distancing themselves from the racism of earlier advertising campaigns and demonstrating “their insight into blacks’ role in America.”⁶ By 1966, the same year in which calls for Black Power were thrust into the national spotlight, this trend had become undeniable. At almost

3. John Hope Franklin, Gerald C. Horne, Harold W. Cruse, Allen R. Ballard, and Reavis L. Mitchell, “Black History Month: Serious Truth Telling or a Triumph in Tokenism?” *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* 18 (Winter 1997/98): 87.

4. Franklin et al., “Black History Month,” 88.

5. Michele Norris, “Putting Black History Month on the Market,” *Washington Post*, February 21, 1993, B1; “The Media Business,” *New York Times*, February 9, 1996, D2.

6. Jason Chambers, *Madison Avenue and the Color Line: African Americans in the Advertising Industry* (Philadelphia, 2008), 93.

the same moment that Black Power activists such as Stokely Carmichael were placing Black history at the center of the ongoing struggle for Black liberation, “Negro Market” specialists such as D. Parke Gibson were testifying to the newfound importance of Black history in “corporations’ communications with the Negro community.”⁷ Black newspapers such as the *Chicago Defender* quickly took up this refrain, informing readers that many of the nation’s leading White-owned businesses were “getting on [the] Negro history bandwagon.”⁸

It is tempting, as Franklin does in the *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, to frame this turn toward Black history as little more than a cynical money-making exercise for White-owned corporations. However, this stance downplays the collaborative and interracial nature of many such initiatives. Three decades earlier, Franklin himself had served as a historical consultant for Pepsi-Cola’s “Adventures in Negro History” campaign, an ambitious multimedia project that sought to recover “the full story of the Negro’s contribution to the flowering of this country” through the creation of educational LPs and other Black history artifacts.⁹ In using Black history as a marketing strategy, White-owned corporations took inspiration from earlier attempts by Black historians and business enterprises to sell the African American past and were guided by an eclectic (if overwhelmingly male) cohort of Black marketing specialists, journalists, and researchers, all of whom, in different ways, understood collaborations between African American experts and White-owned corporations to be a mutually beneficial endeavor. This included Franklin, who, at public launch events for “Adventures in Negro History,” praised the business community’s role in telling “the story of the Negro” and Pepsi’s place in the “vanguard” of this corporate endeavor.¹⁰

This stance also underplays the tremendous support such campaigns often received within Black communities. Far from rejecting the encroachment of White-owned corporations into the “Negro (history) market,” many African Americans appeared to embrace it. When the P. Lorillard Company unveiled a 1955 project on the history of African Americans in the tobacco industry, the *Negro History Bulletin* reprinted the series in its entirety, and an accompanying exhibit toured Black colleges to high acclaim. After Schenley Distiller’s introduced

7. “The Gibson Report, November 1966,” Box 151, Liggett & Myers Records, Industry Documents Library (hereafter LMR); Stokely Carmichael, “Black Power,” in *Black Nationalism in America*, ed. John Bracey, August Meier, and Elliott Rudwick (Indianapolis, 1970), 474.

8. “Leading Firms Getting on the Negro History Bandwagon,” *Chicago Defender*, December 31, 1966, 21.

9. “Adventures in Negro History,” vol. 1, author’s private collection.

10. “John Hope Franklin to William Payne, December 22, 1964,” box W25, John Hope Franklin Papers, Duke University (hereafter JHFP); “Chicago Premiere of ‘Adventures in Negro History,’” box W25, JHFP.

a Black history calendar in the same year, it was overwhelmed by mail order requests.¹¹ By the mid-1960s Pepsi's "Adventures in Negro History" kits had been distributed to thousands of schools and Black community organizations across the country, and the campaign had been credited with helping to transform the relationship between corporate advertisers and Black America.¹² Indeed, when measured against the continued under- and misrepresentation of Black history within the nation's educational, political, and popular culture, such corporate projects can be argued to have played an intriguing, if largely understudied, role in efforts to relocate Black history from the margins to the mainstream of American society.

Yet it is vital to note that through "celebrating" Black history, White-owned businesses also helped to curate it. To be sure, this was done in less problematic ways than the explicitly racist depictions of and relationships with Black people that had shaped American advertising and consumer culture during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Through embracing stereotypes such as the "Mammy," White-owned businesses helped to simultaneously entrench racialized mythologies of the nation's past, enforce racist assumptions about Black subservience, and extend the marginalization of Black consumers in the present. However, the more "positive" Black history projects of the postwar era came with their own problems and considerations. In seeking to elevate Black history, White-owned corporations crafted gendered and reconciliatory accounts of Black "pioneers" whose achievements reinforced the connections between racial progress, American democracy, and consumer capitalism. In the process, corporate advertisers and their collaborators arguably undermined the radical politics of postwar Black history organizing in ways that both preceded and would subsequently parallel the role of "white money" in shaping the institutionalization of Black Studies and the rise of "Black capitalism" as a moderating influence on Black Power activism.¹³ Perhaps more importantly, the corporate projects that emerged during the two decades following World War II laid the organizational and intellectual groundwork for an ever-increasing number of Black history-themed advertising initiatives and public outreach campaigns that flourished during and following the Black Power era, helping to normalize corporate engagement with, and commercialization of, the African American past.

11. "Requests for Schenley Calendar Reach New High," *New York Age*, April 30, 1955, 22.

12. "Pepsi Cola," *Chicago Defender*, February 23, 1966, 42.

13. For more on these trends, see Noliwe Rooks, *White Money/Black Power: The Surprising History of African American Studies and the Crisis of Race in Higher Education* (Boston, 2006); Lauren Warren Hill and Julia Rabig, "Introduction," in *The Business of Black Power: Community Development, Capitalism, and Corporate Responsibility in Postwar America*, ed. Lauren Warren Hill and Julia Rabig (Rochester, NY, 2012), 15-44.

WHITE ADVERTISERS AND THE NEGRO MARKET

For many African Americans, the promise of forty acres and a mule made by Union General William Sherman during the final months of the Civil War embodied the economic potential of emancipation. Over the previous two centuries, slavery had provided the backbone for American economic advancement. Beyond offering some measure of recompense, Sherman's proclamation reflected a legal transition from property to property owners, from commodities to American citizens. However, just as the promise of land redistribution and economic reparations was quashed by White backlash during Reconstruction, so too did African Americans quickly discover that emancipation failed to unsettle the racial logics of American capitalism.¹⁴ If the status of Black people as capital had defined their standing in antebellum America, then the denial of capital reinforced their continued marginalization during the postbellum era. As historian James Davis notes, racism was a feature, not a bug, in the nation's postwar economic development. The entrenchment of Jim Crow segregation during the late nineteenth century and the onset of mass consumption went hand in hand, denying African Americans equal access to the emerging consumer society that they had helped to create.¹⁵

The marginalization of Black workers, consumers, and citizens contrasted with the hypervisibility of Blackness within American consumer culture during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. One manifestation of this trend can be traced through the production of "Black collectibles"—toys or games, housewares, and other material culture artifacts that resembled or included images of negative Black caricatures.¹⁶ Similarly, scholars such as Marilyn Kern-Foxworth note how derogatory Black advertising stereotypes helped to sell products ranging from foodstuffs to household appliances.¹⁷ Just as earlier notices for slave auctions or runaways had reinforced the status of Black people as property, the popularity of advertising mascots such as the Gold Dust Twins demonstrates how the commodification of Blackness remained central to the development of American consumer capitalism during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. Moreover, by reinscribing racist fictions authored by white supremacist historians, politicians, and social scientists, Black advertising

14. Martin Ruef, *Between Slavery and Capitalism: The Legacy of Emancipation in the American South* (Princeton, NJ, 2014).

15. James Davis, *Commerce in Color: Race, Consumer Culture, and American Literature, 1893–1933* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2007).

16. Kenneth Goings, *Mammy and Uncle Mose: Black Collectibles and American Stereotyping* (Bloomington, IN, 1994).

17. Marilyn Kern-Foxworth, *Aunt Jemima, Uncle Ben, and Rastus: Blacks in Advertising, Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow* (Westport, CT, 1994).

stereotypes served an important historical and educational function. As historian Karen Cox asserts, mascots such as Aunt Jemima—a manifestation of the Mammy archetype—offered White Americans “a counterbalance to the changes brought by modernity” and a rationale for the continued subservience of Black people within contemporary American society.¹⁸

Such advertising stereotypes would persist well into the second half of the twentieth century; indeed, it would take until 2020 for Quaker Oats to finally “retire” Aunt Jemima.¹⁹ However, by the 1930s, major demographic and economic shifts meant that White attitudes toward Black consumers had begun to change. Drawn by the promise of work in the industrial heartlands of the Northeast and Midwest, an influx of southern migrants saw the Black population in cities such as Chicago and Pittsburgh dramatically expand.²⁰ Recognizing the emergence of a geographically concentrated and upwardly mobile consumer base, Black advertising executives such as Claude Barnett solicited White marketing publications to examine the viability of the “Negro Market.”²¹ These efforts were noted by *Advertising and Selling* and other trade journals, which published features on the “Negro as Consumer.”²² While the onset of the Great Depression disproportionately affected Black businesses and dramatically slowed Black economic advancement, it did not stop White-owned corporations such as Kellogg’s from pursuing advertising campaigns in Black publications as part of an early effort to tap a Black consumer market estimated by the US Department of Commerce to be worth around \$2 billion by 1935.²³

The outbreak of World War II, which revitalized the American economy and sparked a second and significantly larger wave of Black migration out of the South, reignited White corporate interest in the “Negro Market.” Further impetus was provided by Black publications such as *Ebony*, a monthly photo-editorial magazine founded in 1945 that aggressively promoted conspicuous consumption as a gateway to racial progress and mainstream acceptance for African Americans.²⁴ In order to expand their knowledge of prospective Black

18. Karen Cox, *Dreaming of Dixie: How the South Was Created in American Popular Culture* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2011), 36.

19. “Aunt Jemima Brand to Change Name and Image,” *New York Times*, June 17, 2020.

20. Robert Weems, *Desegregating the Dollar: African American Consumerism in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1998), 7.

21. Chambers, *Madison Avenue*, 29.

22. “The Negro as Consumer,” *Advertising and Selling*, September 3, 1930, 20.

23. “Purchasing Power of Negroes in the U.S. Estimated at Two Billion Dollars,” *Domestic Commerce*, January 10, 1935.

24. Jonathan Scott Holloway, *Jim Crow Wisdom: Memory and Identity in Black America since 1940* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2013); Adam Green, *Selling the Race: Culture, Community, and Black Chicago, 1940–1955* (Chicago, 2007).

customers, White-owned companies turned to a range of “special market” experts that included David Sullivan, a former adman for the *New York Amsterdam News*, and James “Billboard” Jackson, who became the first Black member of the American Marketing Association in 1940.²⁵ As early boosters of the “Negro Market,” Sullivan and his contemporaries drew attention to the growing economic power of Black consumers, prompting the hiring of greater numbers of Black consultants.²⁶ Some companies went a step further, with Pepsi establishing a dedicated “special markets” team tasked with selling its beverages to African American consumers.²⁷ This shift in corporate attitudes was documented through studies by academics and marketing specialists such as Joseph Johnson and Edgar Steele, who enthusiastically concluded that “the Negro market is worthy of cultivation.”²⁸

The question of how to cultivate the “Negro Market” was more complicated. For many Black consultants, their most immediate concern was simply ensuring that White advertisers avoided the most egregious racial missteps. In a widely circulated 1943 article for *Sales Management*, Sullivan offered a list of “do’s” and “don’ts” for corporate advertisers that cautioned against the use of racial epithets or “white people with blackface and a kinky wig.”²⁹ Many companies initially assumed that any form of advertising (so long as it was not overly insensitive) was enough to secure Black loyalty. As a result, early advertising campaigns that appeared in popular Black publications such as *Ebony* and *Our World* were reprinted from mainstream outlets, replete with White characters. However, it quickly became clear that Black consumers were a more judicious market than many White-owned companies, as well as some Black publishers and executives, realized. Far from being “easily satisfied with any kind of merchandise” and lacking a “discriminating taste for quality products,” African Americans were characterized by Joseph Johnson as a fastidious audience who valued representation and were quick to “resent any slight or patronizing attitude.”³⁰

In response, White-owned companies adopted a more targeted approach, employing Black models and celebrity spokespeople and developing advertising copy that provided information about notable Black figures. Unsurprisingly, companies that had taken a lead in hiring Black consultants were among

25. Delores Phillips, “James Albert ‘Billboard’ Jackson,” *Black Past*, January 26, 2015.

26. Weems, *Desegregating the Dollar*, 32; Chambers, *Madison Avenue*, 54.

27. Stephanie Capparell, *The Real Pepsi Challenge* (New York, 2007).

28. Joseph Johnson, *The Potential Negro Market* (New York, 1952), 97; Edgar Steele, “Some Aspects of the Negro Market,” *Journal of Marketing* 11 (1947): 399–401.

29. David Sullivan, “Don’t Do This—If You Want to Sell Your Products to Negroes!” *Sales Management*, March 1, 1943, 48–50.

30. Johnson, *Potential Negro Market*, 100.

the first to embrace targeted advertising initiatives. This included Pepsi, who hired former National Urban League employee Edward Boyd in 1947 to quarterback its “Negro Market” strategy. One of Boyd’s earliest and most ambitious advertising contributions was “Leaders in Their Field,” which celebrated high-achieving Black professionals in areas such as science, education, and diplomatic relations through a series of advertising vignettes that appeared in dozens of Black publications.³¹ Trade journals such as *Printer’s Ink* were suitably impressed, noting Pepsi’s efforts to provide “inspiration for the average reader,” and the series attracted widespread attention from Black schools and colleges across the country.³² Its success complemented other Pepsi initiatives such as the introduction of a scholarship program for Black students, as well as the efforts of corporate executives such as President Raymond Mack to emphasize Pepsi’s commitment to furthering educational opportunities for African Americans.³³

WHITE ADVERTISERS AND THE NEGRO (HISTORY) MARKET

Given the emphasis on public education maintained through projects such as “Leaders in Their Field,” it is perhaps predictable that White-owned companies soon turned to Black history as a marketing device. In this regard, they picked up threads laid down by earlier Black historians and business leaders, who had responded to the racist stereotypes of Black life and culture that dominated mainstream advertising by attempting to sell their own versions of the African American past. A key figure in this project was Carter G. Woodson, who assumed a leading role in the early Black history movement and helped to found the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History in 1915.³⁴ As journalism professor Burnis Morris notes, Woodson was a master of public relations who expertly leveraged his relationship with Black publications to popularize Black history.³⁵ In his travelogue, educator Lorenzo Greene outlines the elaborate marketing campaigns that he and other Woodson protégés embarked on to help raise funds and support for the association’s Black

31. “Leaders in Their Field,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, April 24, 1948, 2.

32. “Pepsi-Cola’s Campaign to the Negro Market,” *Printer’s Ink*, September 9, 1949, 38; Capparell, *Real Pepsi Challenge*, 109.

33. “Pepsi-Cola Head Hits Spot Too,” *Chicago Defender*, November 17, 1945, 13.

34. Pero Gaglo Dagbovie, *The Early Black History Movement, Carter G. Woodson, and Lorenzo Johnston Greene* (Urbana, IL, 2007); Jeffrey Aaron Snyder, *Making Black History: The Color Line, Culture, and Race in the Age of Jim Crow* (Athens, GA, 2018), 34.

35. Burnis Morris, *Carter G. Woodson: History, the Black Press, and Public Relations* (Jackson, MS, 2017).

history projects.³⁶ Perhaps Woodson's most successful public relations scheme was the introduction of Negro History Week in 1926, with the observance's success providing further evidence of his talents as a "newsmaker and CEO/publicist of black history."³⁷ Other prominent Black history boosters included journalist Joel Rogers, a "one-man commercial publishing firm" whose syndicated newspaper column "Your History" became a vital medium for disseminating information about African American and African diasporic history. By the mid-1930s, the pages of Black periodicals were awash with mail order advertisements for work by Rogers and other Black history entrepreneurs.³⁸

Just as African American historians and journalists strove to sell Black history to a popular audience, so too did Black-owned businesses embrace the commercial potential of the African American past. These efforts were part of a broader approach created by Black leaders that maintained the salvation of African Americans "could come through the development of black businesses" and that celebrated the accomplishments of individual Black entrepreneurs and business enterprises as a collective victory for the race.³⁹ The unveiling of new corporate headquarters often played an important role in such efforts, with the opening of landmarks such as the Binga State Bank and the Overton Hygienic Building in Chicago characterized as "history-making event(s)" in the chronology of Black America.⁴⁰ Over time, Black businesses would directly engage with Black history through their own marketing campaigns, with the Madam C. J. Walker Company just one enterprise to employ Black history as a means of advertising its wares. In trade catalogs, the company effortlessly interposed beauty products with vignettes of abolitionist Frederick Douglass and other Black leaders who "stand high in our race history."⁴¹ Such material demonstrates an approach that would become central to White corporate campaigns, namely, a willingness to tie Black history, and its significance, to the value of an individual company and its products.

One of the first White-owned companies to incorporate more positive Black history messaging into its "Negro Market" campaigns was American Tobacco, one of the nation's largest and most influential tobacco companies. In 1948, American Tobacco introduced a new campaign for its Lucky Strike brand titled

36. Lorenzo Greene, *Selling Black History for Carter G. Woodson* (Columbia, MO, 1996).

37. Morris, *Carter G. Woodson*, xxi.

38. Thabiti Asukile, "J. A. Rogers: The Scholarship of an Organic Intellectual," *Black Scholar* 36, no. 2 (2006): 35; Donald Joyce, *Black Book Publishers in the United States* (Westport, CT, 1991), 187.

39. Dagbovie, *Early Black History Movement*, 76.

40. "The Opening of Binga State Bank," *Broad Ax*, January 8, 1921, 1.

41. "The Key to Beauty, Success, Happiness," Published Collections Department, Hagley Museum and Library (hereafter PCD).

“Famous Firsts in Negro History,” which was serialized through advertisements in Black periodicals such as *Ebony* and the *Pittsburgh Courier*. Beginning with a profile of noted Black intellectual and civic leader Booker T. Washington, the adverts followed a pattern that echoed the layout of Pepsi’s “Leaders in Their Field” series. Each advert included a portrait or photograph of a prominent Black figure that was accompanied by a vignette outlining the figure’s historical significance and notable accomplishments. Washington, who was celebrated as “one of America’s greatest educators,” headed a group of Black notables that included George Washington Carver, recognized as the “First Negro to pioneer in agricultural science,” and Matthew Alexander Henson, who was applauded as the “First explorer to reach the North Pole.”⁴²

Another company quick to use Black history, albeit in a different way, was the Calvert Distillers Corporation, a subsidiary of Seagram’s, a major North American distillers and alcoholic beverage company. Like other liquor producers, Seagram’s began to hire Black sales representatives during the 1940s before creating a “special markets” team to help deepen its engagement with Black consumers.⁴³ One of the company’s most popular advertising campaigns, created for premium whisky brand Lord Calvert, was titled “Men of Distinction.” Introduced during World War II, the campaign celebrated the achievements (and alcoholic tastes) of White notables such as actor John Boles and author Stuart Cloete.⁴⁴ It appears that Seagram’s began exploring the idea of including African Americans within its “Men of Distinction” campaign during the late 1940s in collaboration with *Ebony*, with the magazine’s advertising manager William Grayson promoting the initiative’s “tremendous” potential to influential Black leaders such as W.E.B. Du Bois, who was sent sample advertising copy and campaign layouts for feedback.⁴⁵ In 1951, CBS art director George Olden became the first African American to feature in the “Men of Distinction” campaign, with an *Ebony* advert celebrating his professional accomplishments and well-refined tastes.⁴⁶ Within months, Olden was joined by historian Joel Rogers, whose “Your History” column continued to be read by huge numbers of African Americans on a weekly basis.⁴⁷

42. “Lucky Strike,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, August 28, 1948, 24; September 25, 1948, 24.

43. “Seagram’s Special Market Staff,” *Seagram Spotlight*, 1952, Seagram Museum Collection, Hagley Museum and Library (hereafter SMC).

44. “Calvert Men of Distinction Party, 1950,” box 49, SMC.

45. “Ebony Magazine ad campaign sample, ca. September 1948” and “William Grayson to W.E.B. Du Bois, September 23, 1948,” W.E.B. Du Bois Papers, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts.

46. “Calvert,” *Ebony*, October 1951, 43.

47. “Your History,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, December 1, 1934, 11; “Calvert,” *Ebony*, December 1951.

That tobacco and liquor companies were at the forefront of the corporate turn toward Black history reflected the perceived value of Black consumers to these markets. A 1950 study produced by *Ebony* contended that around 70 percent of Black men and more than half of all Black women smoked, suggesting the existence of a lucrative market.⁴⁸ Similarly, market research reports claimed that Black families spent 25 percent more per capita on alcohol than White families, with increased rates of Black liquor consumption bucking a national decline during the 1940s and early 1950s.⁴⁹ It is important to note that such trends are difficult to verify and arguably reinforced anti-Black stereotypes that portrayed African Americans as drunkards and social reprobates.⁵⁰ It is also important to note, however, that White-owned corporations took these claims seriously, alongside indications that African Americans were more brand conscious and brand loyal than the average consumer.⁵¹ In response, industry publications such as *Corrado's Liquor Handbook* stressed the need for "special attention to and direct coverage of" Black consumers. This belief, coupled with continued Black migration to urban centers, growing economic clout, and the apparent concentration of the Black dollar among a limited number of brands, meant that tobacco and liquor companies were more willing to experiment with Black history-themed campaigns and other innovative advertising projects.⁵²

In addition to providing a valuable new marketing strategy, appeals to Black history offered White-owned businesses a chance to reshape their own historical relationship to, and representation of, African American consumers. Few White-owned corporations chose to avoid Black stereotypes during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For tobacco manufacturers, the industry's historical associations with the South exacerbated racial concerns and contributed to the persistence of racist brand names and advertising campaigns. One egregious example was American Tobacco's "N——— Head" brand, which was finally discontinued in 1945 following protests by civil rights activists.⁵³ Even after this controversy, American Tobacco continued campaigns such as "Sold American," which celebrated "the glories of the southern

48. Cited in Johnson, *Potential Negro Market*, 117.

49. Raymond Bauer, Scott Cunningham, and Lawrence Wortzel, "The Marketing Dilemma of Negroes," *Journal of Marketing* 29 (1965): 3.

50. Frederick Harper, *Alcohol Abuse and Black America* (Alexandria, VA, 1976).

51. "Sullivan Marketing Study, 1946," box 10, folder 6, Madam C. J. Walker Papers (hereafter MCJWP), Indiana Historical Society.

52. "Corrado's Handbook of Liquor Marketing, 1954," PCD; "The Liquor Handbook, 1960," PCD.

53. "Lucky Strike Makers Rescind," *Arkansas State Press*, December 18, 1942, 1.

plantation culture . . . [as] part of the ‘heritage’ of even the most ignorant negro.”⁵⁴ The widely publicized introduction of “Famous Firsts” provided American Tobacco with an opportunity to reorient public attention away from such unsavory content, with the campaign applauded in the Black press as a “fine investment for advertising dollars.”⁵⁵ Similarly, earlier advertisements from many White-owned liquor companies had leaned heavily on assumptions of White wealth and Black servility, something most clearly seen through the popularity of the Black butler archetype among brands such as Schlitz and Hiram Walker. By contrast, the inclusion of Joel Rogers in Calvert’s “Men of Distinction” project both celebrated the achievements of “real members of the African American community” and positioned Black history education as an important and respectable endeavor.⁵⁶

SAVED FOR THEIR HISTORICAL VALUE

Campaigns such as “Famous Firsts” and “Men of Distinction” are also significant for helping to establish a thematic and ideological framework for subsequent advertising initiatives. In the first instance, Rogers’s role in “Men of Distinction” indicated a potential willingness among White-owned corporations to lean on Black historians as participants in their marketing campaigns. Rogers’s status as a man of distinction was clearly predicated on his role as a historian, with adverts championing his reputation as a “famous chronicler of great Negroes” and contending that Rogers’s column “Your History” was “read faithfully by millions.”⁵⁷ Rogers subsequently became a prominent brand ambassador for Calvert, appearing at public events and receptions such as a December 1953 testimonial dinner for Black lawyer Thurgood Marshall held at the Hotel Astor in New York City.⁵⁸ This relationship served as a precursor to later and more significant collaborations between corporate advertisers and prominent Black historians such as John Hope Franklin and John Henrik Clarke. Calvert also decided to hire leading Black photojournalist Arthur de Mille to help direct the campaign, establishing a precedent for using Black

54. Robert Proctor, *Golden Holocaust: Origins of the Cigarette Catastrophe and the Case for Abolition* (Berkeley, 2011), 84.

55. “Tribute Paid to American Tobacco Co.,” *Plaindealer*, November 12, 1948, 1.

56. Rochelle Pereira, “Distinguished Men: Respectability and Responsibility in Whisky Advertisements for the African American Consumer,” in *Biographies of Drink: A Case Study Approach to Our Historical Relationship with Alcohol*, ed. Mark Hailwood and Deborah Toner (Newcastle, 2015), 194.

57. “Lord Calvert,” *Ebony*, December 1951, 67.

58. “Along the NAACP Battlefront,” *Crisis*, February 1954, 94.

cultural producers as a means to bolster the perceived “authenticity” and educational value of Black history-themed projects.⁵⁹

In the case of Lucky Strike’s “Negro Firsts” campaign, the public response demonstrated the receptiveness of Black community leaders to Black history-themed corporate initiatives. S. J. Phillips, the head of the Booker T. Washington Memorial in Virginia, applauded American Tobacco for its significant contribution “to the dissemination and preservation of American history as well as increasing respect for our racial achievements.”⁶⁰ Given the mission of the memorial’s staff—to preserve and uplift Washington’s legacy—it is unsurprising that they would celebrate an advertising campaign that bolstered Washington’s reputation as “a distinguished author” and “a brilliant public speaker.”⁶¹ However, the campaign also received keen support from Black businessmen and educators such as C. C. Spaulding, the president of the North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company and a trustee of Howard University, who championed the initiative as “an outstanding educational campaign.”⁶² It was not only Black businessmen or civic leaders who appeared to be impressed; around a year after the introduction of “Negro Firsts,” the *Pittsburgh Courier* contended that Black students across the country were reportedly saving the advertisements “because of their historical value.”⁶³

The enthusiastic response of many African Americans to such campaigns was indicative of the continued neglect of Black history within the nation’s educational system. As scholars such as Alana Murray and Jonathan Zimmerman note, Black history remained a peripheral topic in school and university textbooks well into the second half of the twentieth century, and, where references to Black history did appear, they were primarily used as a means of rationalizing past and present racial inequities.⁶⁴ In response to such sustained educational failures, a flurry of local Black public history movements emerged in cities such as Chicago during and following World War II, with African American teachers and sympathetic White allies pushing to create alternative curricula.⁶⁵ Against this backdrop, a more positive representation of Black history by White-owned companies—in the sense of recognizing and celebrating

59. “Calvert Photog Gets Them at Their ‘Successful Best,’” *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 5, 1952, 3.

60. “Tribute Paid to American Tobacco Co.,” 1.

61. “Lucky Strike,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, August 21, 1948, 24.

62. “Praises Lucky Strike,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 2, 1948, 19.

63. “Lucky Strike Ads to Give Public Vital Information,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 18, 1949, 3.

64. Jonathan Zimmerman, *Whose America? Culture Wars in the Public Schools* (Cambridge, 2002); Alana Murray, *The Development of the Alternative Black Curriculum, 1890-1940* (Basingstoke, 2018).

65. Ian Rocksborough-Smith, *Black Public History in Chicago: Civil Rights Activism from World War II into the Cold War* (Urbana, IL, 2018).

Black historical achievements and the impact of individual Black historical actors—helped to fill “a long existing need in the Negro community.”⁶⁶ Beyond this specific function, Black history-themed advertising campaigns complemented progressive hiring practices and other “good merchandising principles” employed by White-owned corporations to help bolster their reputation among Black consumers.⁶⁷

Nevertheless, it is clear that the inclusion of Black history in corporate advertising campaigns was framed in specific ways. In the case of Rogers, his status as a historian was rooted in classed notions of racial respectability and good taste, with Calvert noting that Rogers was not only a “successful historian” but also a “successful host . . . [and] a great connoisseur of fine food and drink.”⁶⁸ More broadly, White-owned businesses appeared careful to tailor their employment of Black historical figures in ways that largely reinforced the relationship between individual excellence, moderate racial politics, and Black progress. It is telling that Lucky Strike began its “Negro Firsts” campaign with Booker T. Washington, whose accommodationism and emphasis on industrial education and Black entrepreneurship had drawn widespread White support but had also attracted the ire of progressive Black activists and intellectuals. Similarly, the inclusion of figures such as scientist George Washington Carver provided space to celebrate Black achievement through the lens of an industrial economy and the growth of consumer capitalism.⁶⁹ While later campaigns would attempt to grapple with the radical politics of notable Black historical figures, this tension remained a prominent part of Black history-themed advertising campaigns into (and beyond) the 1960s.

The lineup of Black notables in popular advertising initiatives such as Pepsi’s “Leaders in Their Field,” Calvert’s “Men of Distinction,” and Lucky Strike’s “Negro Firsts” also reinforced a gendered connection between Black history and African American achievement. Of the eleven Black “Leaders” included in Pepsi’s campaign, just two were women—Texas-based social worker Rachel Ratcliffe Wilson and Mildred Blount, a hat designer and Hollywood costume expert—and their occupations sat comfortably within preexisting notions of “women’s work.”⁷⁰ Echoing such disparities, a single Black woman appeared in Lucky Strike’s “Negro Firsts” campaign: Hattie McDaniel, an African American actress most well known for her portrayal of Mammy in the 1939 blockbuster *Gone with the Wind*. While McDaniel’s role allowed her to join Lucky

66. “The Gibson Report, November 1966,” LMR.

67. “Tobacco Co. Names Five,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, November 11, 1950, 3.

68. “Lord Calvert,” *Ebony*, December 1951, 67.

69. “Lucky Strike,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, August 28, 1948, 24.

70. “Pepsi-Cola,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 10, 1948, 21.

Strike's list of "Negro Firsts"—in this case becoming the "First Negro to win the Academy Award"—it is galling that the extent of Black women's historical participation, at least in the eyes of Lucky Strike, was condensed into McDaniel's embodiment of a pernicious historical stereotype.⁷¹ These gendered disparities of representation provided a historical rationale for the continued neglect of Black women within contemporary American society and were likely exacerbated by the continued marginalization of Black female historians within the academy.⁷²

TO SEARCH INTO THE BLACK PAST

Over the decade following these early campaigns, a number of interconnected factors helped to foster a closer engagement with Black history by White-owned corporations. Most prominent among them was the coalescing Black Freedom Struggle. Just a few weeks before Joel Rogers and other Calvert representatives attended the 1953 testimonial dinner for Thurgood Marshall, the lawyer had offered his concluding arguments as the NAACP's chief counsel in the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court case. Several months later, the court handed down a unanimous verdict that racial segregation in public schools was unconstitutional and inherently unequal, a decision that sent reverberations through the American cultural and political landscape. If the *Brown* decision was not enough to convince White-owned businesses that change was coming, then the impact of the Montgomery Bus boycott of 1955–56 powerfully demonstrated how economic sanctions levied by the Black community—in this case, against National City Lines, Inc., the company that operated the municipal transit system for Montgomery, Alabama—could have a devastating impact on both an enterprise's bottom line and its public reputation.⁷³

For White-owned businesses, the Black Freedom Struggle provided a carrot and a stick. As historian Stacy Sewell demonstrates, the "not-buying power" of the Black community quickly became a vital weapon in the fight for racial justice, with White business owners eager to avoid the wrath of civil rights campaigners.⁷⁴ At the same time, progressively minded companies saw the crisis

71. "Lucky Strike," *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 9, 1948, 23.

72. Stephanie Evans, *Black Women in the Ivory Tower, 1850–1954* (Gainesville, FL, 2007).

73. Michael Ezra, *The Economic Civil Rights Movement: African Americans and the Struggle for Economic Power* (New York, 2013).

74. Stacy Sewell, "The 'Not-Buying Power' of the Black Community: Urban Boycotts and Equal Employment Opportunity, 1960–64," *Journal of African American History* 89, no. 2 (2004): 136.

engendered by the Civil Rights Movement as an opportunity to cement their credentials as an ally to African Americans and the “Negro Market.” Heading the Calvert contingent at the 1953 testimonial dinner was the company’s executive vice president Tubie Resnik, who applauded the efforts of Black activists to “revitalize our Bill of Rights.”⁷⁵ From a similar perspective, Pepsi executive Raymond Mack believed that the brand’s perceived receptiveness to civil rights provided a critical advantage over industry rival Coca-Cola, whose image was dealt a major blow by its president Robert Woodruff’s decision to publicly endorse Georgia governor and strident segregationist Herman Talmadge in 1950.⁷⁶ Of course, these progressive credentials should not be overstated. Mack’s contention that the brand needed to avoid being labeled as “a n—— drink” at a public event in 1949 prompted Black salesmen to walk out in protest and highlighted the fine line that many White-owned companies attempted to tread between their growing need for, and continued disdain of, Black consumers.⁷⁷ Nevertheless, for Resnik, Mack, and other White executives, the struggle for racial justice provided a perfect opportunity to “look to the future . . . not look to the past.”⁷⁸

Ironically, the past was quickly becoming a key means of ensuring a positive future relationship with African American consumers. As Vincent Harding astutely notes, the emergence of the postwar Civil Rights Movement was intimately and dialectically connected to “the resurgence of interest in, demand for and the writing of black history.”⁷⁹ The publication of John Hope Franklin’s *From Slavery to Freedom* in 1947, which became one of the first Black-authored history texts to be released by a mainstream book publisher, was just one example of this trend.⁸⁰ Ten years later, Franklin declared in the *Crisis* that “on almost every side there has been a remarkable growth of interest in the history of the Negro.”⁸¹ Demands for greater Black historical representation led to the creation of new African American community museums and historical organizations, while Black periodicals such as *Ebony* were inundated with requests from readers to “tell us of our past.”⁸² For White-owned corporations, it was increasingly clear that Black history represented a unique and valuable way of appealing to Black consumers and activists alike.

75. “Along the NAACP Battlefront,” 94.

76. Tristan Donovan, *Fizz: How Soda Shook Up the World* (Chicago, 2013), 163.

77. Capparell, *Real Pepsi Challenge*, 2.

78. “Along the NAACP Battlefront,” 95.

79. Vincent Harding, “Power from Our People: The Sources of the Modern Revival of Black History,” *Black Scholar* 18, no. 1 (1987): 40.

80. V. P. Franklin, “From Slavery to Freedom,” *Journal of Negro History* 85, no. 1 (2000): 6.

81. John Hope Franklin, “The New Negro History,” *Crisis*, February 1957, 70.

82. Rocksborough-Smith, *Black Public History*, 49; “Backstage,” *Ebony*, July 1961, 22.

Another factor contributing to a deepening corporate engagement with Black history was the nation's ever-growing band of Black consumer experts and advertising executives, many of whom harbored a keen interest in their own heritage. This included *Ebony* publisher John H. Johnson, whose exploits afforded him "an unprecedented level of authority among those who professed to be experts on the black consumer market."⁸³ Johnson's childhood interest in Black history was revitalized by a visit to Ghana during the 1950s, and he commissioned editor Lerone Bennett, Jr. to develop a pioneering "Negro History" series that was subsequently published in *Ebony* to widespread acclaim.⁸⁴ Eugene Morris Jr., who later became a senior vice president at Burrell Advertising, was inspired by his grade school teacher Frances Matlock, who emphasized the importance of Black historical literacy "at a time when nobody was talking about it."⁸⁵ Advertising executive Donald Richards was another keen history buff, receiving a BA in History from the University of Chicago before joining legendary advertising company Leo Burnett Worldwide, where he eventually became the company's first Black vice president.⁸⁶

Among the growing ranks of Black PR men, advertising agents, and "Negro Market" experts, two stand out for their role in shaping corporate engagement with the African American past during the 1950s. The first was D. Parke Gibson, who worked as an advertising representative and promotions manager for a variety of Black and White businesses before dedicating himself full time to the development of D. Parke Gibson Associates in 1960.⁸⁷ Nine years later, Gibson published *The \$30 Billion Negro*, which became a go-to manual for White business executives attempting to navigate the "Negro Market."⁸⁸ The second was Clarence Holte, who cut his teeth in sales at Lever Brothers during the 1940s before joining advertising agency Batten, Barton, Durstine and Osborn (BBDO) as an "ethnic market" specialist in 1952.⁸⁹ Holte's interest in Black history had been jump-started during his days at Lincoln University, a historically Black public college in Pennsylvania, and by the end of the 1960s he had amassed an extraordinary personal library of more than 7,000 volumes "dealing with every aspect of black life in America, Africa, and other

83. Chambers, *Madison Avenue*, 43.

84. "John H. Johnson," *The History Makers*, Library of Congress (hereafter THM); "Lerone Bennett Jr.," THM; E. James West, *Ebony Magazine and Lerone Bennett Jr.: Popular Black History in Postwar America* (Urbana, IL, 2020).

85. "Eugene Morris," THM.

86. "Donald C. Richards," THM.

87. "D. Parke Gibson," Black Journalists Oral History Project, Columbia University.

88. Marcus Alexis, "The \$30 Billion Negro," *Journal of Consumer Affairs* 4, no. 2 (1970): 135.

89. "Bio," Clarence Holte Advertising Portfolio, John W. Hartman Center for Sales, Advertising and Marketing History, Duke University.

parts of the world.” In a laudatory *Ebony* profile published in 1970, the magazine compared his collection to that of legendary Black bibliophile Arthur Schomburg, whose materials formed the basis for the Schomburg collection of Negro literature and art at the 135th Street branch of New York Public Library.⁹⁰

A REFERENCE PIECE ON NEGRO HISTORY

By the mid-1950s, Gibson was employed as a public relations counsel by the P. Lorillard Company, one of the nation’s oldest and largest tobacco firms. Entrusted with improving Lorillard’s standing among Black consumers, Gibson developed an ambitious project titled “Brown Skin and Bright Leaf,” which aimed to celebrate the historical role of African Americans in tobacco manufacturing.⁹¹ Alongside associate Brad Laws, Gibson authored eight chapters on “the story of the Negro’s role in the tobacco industry.” Looking to reframe the fraught historical relationship between race and tobacco in the United States, the series instead presented the industry’s development as a positive example of Black peoples’ “historical share in building the great American heritage.”⁹² Concurrently, Holte’s interest in Black history contributed to the development of new Black history-themed initiatives for BBDO clients. This included Schenley Distillers, which launched a campaign titled “Great Names of the Ages” in 1954. Featuring artwork by Black illustrator Charles Carter, the campaign provided upbeat profiles of “great men” who, like Schenley’s whiskey, were of “outstanding character” and “made with rare patience and skill.”⁹³

Both “Great Names” and “Brown Skin” represented a continuation of earlier Black history-themed corporate campaigns. Perhaps the clearest continuation can be seen through the gendered disparities in representation, with both campaigns heavily weighted toward the historical influence and achievements of Black men. When discussing its more recent history, Lorillard was quick to emphasize its progressive social attitudes, positioning itself as the first national tobacco manufacturer “to employ Negro women in sales promotion and . . . responsible posts.” However, earlier chapters of “Brown Skin” focused on the contributions of individual Black inventors such as Stephen Slade and Elijah McCoy, as well as the role of male bondsmen and farmers in the development of tobacco cultivation. Tellingly, one of the few references to Black women

90. “Clarence Holte’s Search into the Black Past,” *Ebony*, April 1970, 94.

91. D. Parke Gibson, *The \$30 Billion Negro* (New York, 1969), 225; Jonathan Adler, “‘Brown Skin, Bright Leaf,’ and Brand Image: Racial Discrimination and Public Relations at the P. Lorillard Tobacco Company, 1956–1970,” *North Carolina Historical Review* 95, no. 4 (2018): 427.

92. “Brown Skin and Bright Leaf,” *Ohio Informer*, February 19, 1955, 8.

93. “Schenley,” *Ebony*, January 1955, 69.

before the mid-twentieth century describes an unnamed “Negro farmer’s wife,” seen as “representative of the many Negro women throughout Tobaccoland who stand firmly behind their enterprising farmer husbands.”⁹⁴ Similarly, Black women were noticeably absent from Schenley’s “Great Names” series, which was populated by familiar figures such as Booker T. Washington and George Washington Carver.⁹⁵

At the same time, “Great Names” and “Brown Skin” marked an expansion of earlier corporate projects. Whereas campaigns such as “Negro Firsts” had been organized almost exclusively around Black press advertising, the Lorillard and Schenley campaigns were multifaceted and included a range of public history initiatives that complemented advertising features in *Ebony* and other popular Black periodicals. Lorillard financed the development of a portable exhibit that toured the Black convention circuit as well as Black colleges across the South.⁹⁶ Similarly, Schenley’s campaign included the production of a Black historical calendar and yearbook, which were released alongside and publicized through its print adverts. In anticipation of widespread public demand, Schenley ordered an initial print run of 100,000 calendars. The creation of such materials helped to position both campaigns as not just tributes to the historical achievements of African Americans but important educational and public service projects in their own right. This was emphasized further by corporate rhetoric, with Schenley officials suggesting that the calendars would find “permanent use as a reference piece on Negro history.”⁹⁷

The framing of “Great Names” and “Brown Skin,” alongside the historical figures included in each campaign, also suggests that White-owned corporations were becoming more pedagogically ambitious. On the one hand, the content of these campaigns appeared to more explicitly position White-owned companies as allies of both Black history and the ongoing fight for racial equality. In the opening chapter to “Brown Skin,” Gibson and Laws contended that “a new awakening” had seen African Americans throw off “a traditional stigma of inferiority for a proud awareness of their collective greatness.”⁹⁸ Similarly, the descriptions of figures such as abolitionist Frederick Douglass in “Great Names” offered a more activist-oriented reading of their accomplishments, with Douglass’s fight against the “evils of slavery” linked to a broader struggle for the “minds and hearts” of the American nation. This sentiment is even clearer in profiles of Black diasporic icons such as Haitian revolutionary leader

94. “Brown Skin and Bright Leaf,” *Negro History Bulletin*, October 1955, 8.

95. “Negro History Calendar,” box 31, folder 19, Black Print Culture Collection, Emory University.

96. Gibson, \$30 *Billion Negro*, 225.

97. “Schenley to Distribute Negro History Calendar,” *Alabama Tribune*, November 5, 1954, 5.

98. “Brown Skin and Bright Leaf,” *Obio Informer*, February 19, 1955, 8.

Toussaint L'Ouverture. On the other hand, however, both campaigns ultimately sought to reconcile such histories with the development of American democracy and consumer capitalism. In the case of "Brown Leaf," the story of coerced labor and racial violence that characterizes the historical role of Black people in the tobacco industry was reframed as a bootstraps story in which Black workers gradually became "more conservative-minded and profit-minded—and hence more prosperous." In turn, historian Andrea Johnson notes the majority of men featured in "Great Names" were "part of the established American system and had used it to succeed."⁹⁹

This expansion of corporate engagement with Black history was not welcomed by all. A useful example of such tensions can be seen within the offices of Black periodicals, which became key disseminators of Black history-themed corporate campaigns. This included *Ebony*, where the support of executives such as John Johnson and William Grayson was tempered by criticisms from editorial staff. Among the most vocal opponents of Black history-themed advertising was Era Bell Thompson, a talented writer and journalist who was one of the magazine's most senior and influential editors. Fragments from Thompson's unprocessed papers at Chicago Public Library provide an insight into the fractures between advertising and editorial staff, with Thompson and Grayson coming to blows on multiple occasions. In response to Grayson's concerns with an editorial layout in the July 1955 issue of *Ebony*, Thompson retorted that "the editorial department [is] even more concerned about offending our readers." The editor explicitly named the Schenley "Great Names" campaign as an example of the "continued flagrant use of Negro historical greats" by corporate advertisers, a trend that she contended was "most offensive to Negroes who look with pride upon their idols."¹⁰⁰

Despite Thompson's concerns, it appears that the Black public response to both projects was overwhelmingly positive. In later reflections on the success of "Brown Skin," Gibson boasted that the campaign was well received "by not only leadership but a wide cross section of the Negro national community" and that the touring exhibit was so popular that it proved difficult to stay on schedule, "as almost every institution wanted to keep it beyond the allowed date."¹⁰¹ Following its serialization in leading Black newspapers and magazines, the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History requested permission for "Brown Skin" to be reprinted in the *Negro History Bulletin*, a monthly newsletter

99. Andrea Johnson, "Mixed Up in the Making: Martin Luther King Jr., Cesar Chavez, and the Images of Their Movements" (PhD diss., University of Missouri—Columbia, 2006), 315.

100. "Era Bell Thompson to John Johnson, 8 June 1955," box 1, Era Bell Thompson Papers, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection, Chicago Public Library.

101. Gibson, *\$30 Billion Negro*, 225.

it produced that was oriented toward high school teachers. The nation's premier Black history organization applauded the initiative as a "colorful and inspiring story."¹⁰² Similarly, exhibitions of the Schenley calendar illustrations at institutions such as the 135th Street branch of New York Public Library were greeted enthusiastically by African American observers, while Black newspapers reiterated Schenley's contention that the project represented a "concrete expression of high regard" for Black history and the Black consumer.¹⁰³ Shortly after the introduction of "Great Names," Schenley advertising manager Mel Singer announced that the response to the initiative had proved "better than we dared hope," with mail order requests for the calendar arriving at a rate of 1,500 per day.¹⁰⁴

ADVENTURES IN NEGRO HISTORY

The impact of the Black Freedom Struggle and a resurgent Black history movement, rising Black consumer power, and the influence of Black marketing experts and history enthusiasts such as Gibson and Holte all ensured that, by the early 1960s, an ever larger number of White-owned businesses were getting wise to the public relations potential of the African American past. In the summer of 1963 American Oil released the *American Travelers' Guide to Negro Monuments*, a forty-page booklet that provided an overview of Black historical sites such as the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, Provident Hospital in Chicago, and the Schomburg Collection in New York City. The company stressed the guide's pedagogical value, informing readers that its content provided an insight into "major events and figures in American history not often included in ordinary textbooks."¹⁰⁵ In the same year the Scott Paper Company published another Black history booklet titled "Distaff to History," which presented "a chronicle of distinguished accomplishment" produced by Joseph V. Baker Associates, a leading Black-owned PR agency.¹⁰⁶

These campaigns are representative of how landmark events or anniversaries such as the centennial of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1963 provided White-owned businesses with an opportune moment to climb onboard the "Negro History Bandwagon."¹⁰⁷ Both American Oil and Scott Paper acknowledged the centennial as a catalyst for their campaigns and presented their booklets

102. "Brown Skin and Bright Leaf," *Negro History Bulletin*, October 1955, 3.

103. "Schenley to Distribute Negro History Calendar," 5; "Calendar Artwork," *New York Age*, March 5, 1955, 12; "Schenley Offers Negro Yearbook," *Pittsburgh Courier*, November 13, 1954, 10.

104. "Calendar Is 'Top' Success," *Alabama Tribune*, April 15, 1955, 2.

105. *American Travelers' Guide to Negro Monuments* (Chicago, 1963), 2.

106. "Distaff to History," box 12, folder 16, MCJWP; "Joseph V. Baker," *PR News*, January 20, 2020.

107. "Leading Firms," 21.

as a “contribution to the celebration.”¹⁰⁸ These campaigns were also significant in that they helped to buck the primacy of Black men in the design and presentation of corporate Black history initiatives. Much of the research for American Oil’s travelers’ guide was conducted by Sandra East, a recent graduate of Morgan State College in Baltimore, and Jane Pittman, a freelance writer based in Washington, DC, although neither of their names appeared in the final product.¹⁰⁹ “Distaff to History” went further, with the entirety of the booklet dedicated to the historical achievements of Black women. This included educator Mary McLeod Bethune, championed as a “matchless leader,” religious leader Nannie Burroughs, described as “one of the truly great speakers of her generation,” and abolitionist and women’s rights activist Sojourner Truth, applauded as “one of the most dramatic and forceful crusaders of freedom” in American history.¹¹⁰

Perhaps the most elaborate corporate Black history initiative to emerge out of the centennial celebrations was Pepsi’s “Adventures in Negro History” campaign. The impetus for this project came from Harvey Russell, a veteran of the company’s original “special markets” team, who was promoted to a role as vice president in 1962.¹¹¹ Like many of his contemporaries, Russell harbored a keen interest in the history of the African diaspora, something that aligned with his own ambitions to expand Pepsi’s international presence. Closer to home, Stephanie Capparell argues that Russell channeled his concerns over “how thoroughly black history had been left out of schools nationwide” into the development of “Adventures in Negro History,” which he envisioned as “a packaged minicourse in black history complete with film strip, record albums, and a booklet.”¹¹² To produce the records, Pepsi collaborated with Highlight Radio Productions, a small company based in Detroit and led by local DJ Jerry Blocker. In May 1963, Blocker filed copyright over the record’s script, and the first record was released at the end of the year, featuring a small cast of local voice actors.¹¹³ The sleeve artwork was created by Carl Owens, a talented Black illustrator who also provided artwork for an accompanying booklet.¹¹⁴

A fast-paced and lively dramatization, the record traced several hundred years of Black history from the colonial period to the present day. Like an

108. *American Travelers’ Guide*, 2.

109. “Negro History Sites Toured by Oil Firm’s Team,” *Carolina Times*, October 6, 1962, 11.

110. “Distaff to History,” MCJWP.

111. Chambers, *Madison Avenue*, 118; “Pepsi Elects Negro to Vice Presidency,” *Dayton News*, January 31, 1962, 38.

112. Capparell, *Real Pepsi Challenge*, 230.

113. “Highlights in Negro History,” Library of Congress Copyright Office, Washington, DC, 1963; Joshua Clark Davis, “When John Hope Franklin and Pepsi Made a Black History Record,” *Black Perspectives*, June 19, 2019.

114. “Toki Types,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, May 7, 1966, 7.

increasing number of corporate Black history projects, the record made clear its educational function from the outset, promising to recover “the full story of the Negroes’ contribution to the flowering of this country,” a story that Pepsi regretted to have been “rarely told and soon forgotten.”¹¹⁵ To do so, Blocker and his cast provided a series of vivid historical vignettes. Familiar faces such as Booker T. Washington, George Washington Carver, and Matthew Henson—by now staple figures within Black history-themed corporate advertising campaigns—were well represented, although the scope of the record also provided space for discussion of more radical and less well-known Black historical actors, including militant newspaperman William Monroe Trotter, who was recognized for his role in organizing the Niagara Movement.¹¹⁶ Indeed, when compared to the limited scale and ambition of earlier Black history-themed marketing initiatives, the diversity of Black intellectual and philosophical thought on display in the first volume of “Adventures in Negro History” was an impressive reflection of the project’s ambition.

This diversity may also have been encouraged by a cohort of Black history consultants whom Pepsi turned to for guidance. It appears that the first scholar Pepsi convinced to collaborate on “Adventures in Negro History” was Broadus Butler, an assistant dean in the School of Liberal Arts at Wayne State University in Detroit who would go on to become the president of Dillard University, a historically Black private college in New Orleans.¹¹⁷ Undoubtedly Pepsi’s biggest coup came through securing the support of John Hope Franklin, who by the early 1960s had emerged as the nation’s most recognizable Black historian. Neither scholar appears to have been involved in the production of the first “Adventures in Negro History” LP, although both were involved in its promotion. Butler appeared alongside Russell and Blocker at early launch events, while Franklin was a special guest at the Chicago premiere of the LP in 1964.¹¹⁸ Tellingly, Franklin began his remarks by reflecting on the civil rights revolution, a broadening social and cultural interest in Black history, and the centrality of the latter to the former’s ultimate success. The historian mused that, in order to preserve “the strength and vigor of the movement for equality,” it was necessary for Americans of all races to develop a “more profound knowledge” of the African American past. In the pursuit of this goal, he applauded Pepsi’s efforts in “getting together the story of the Negro” and suggested that the company’s Black history campaign had “merited the respect and gratitude

115. “Adventures in Negro History,” vol. 1, 1963, author’s private collection.

116. Kerri Greenidge, *Black Radical: The Life and Times of William Monroe Trotter* (New York, 2019).

117. “Broadus Butler, 75, Ex-Tuskegee Airman and College Leader,” *New York Times*, January 13, 1996.

118. “On Record,” *Jet*, February 20, 1964, 6.

of all who appreciate the necessity of this and similar contributions.”¹¹⁹ Even as Franklin stood on the stage of Chicago’s Pick-Congress hotel, “unprecedented demand” for the record had accelerated plans for a second LP. This time, the historian would play a central role.¹²⁰

Comparing the first and second LPs in Pepsi’s “Adventures in Negro History” series makes clear the benefits of having professional Black historians heavily involved in the project. Franklin helped to lead Blocker away from a generic assessment of the “contributions and problems of Negroes” during the nineteenth century and toward a more compelling historical narrative focused on the life of Frederick Douglass.¹²¹ In his feedback, the historian helped to weed out factual errors and offered guidance on the inclusion or exclusion of important historical anecdotes and public addresses. He also ensured that Pepsi avoided naming faux pas that may have alienated Black listeners, tersely advising Blocker: “don’t ever call it the ‘War Between the States.’”¹²² Perhaps most importantly, Franklin’s involvement prompted a shift away from the occasionally glib tone of the first “Adventures in Negro History” LP, something best surmised by his contention that the record needed less “Negro cowboys” and a more rigorous discussion of the slave economy.¹²³ Pepsi’s willingness to incorporate Franklin’s feedback led to the final version of the “Douglass Years” being warmly received, with the historian informing Blocker that he found it to be “satisfactory in every way.”¹²⁴ Similarly enthused were Harvey Russell and H. Naylor Fitzhugh, a former Howard University professor and a recent addition to Pepsi’s corporate staff, who were both involved in the production as executive consultants and uncredited voice actors.¹²⁵

Aside from Franklin’s professional expertise, Pepsi understood the broader benefits of having a leading Black historian connected to the project. Franklin featured prominently on the record’s sleeve, which identified him as a “historical consultant” and celebrated his status as “one of the nation’s foremost authorities on American history.”¹²⁶ Franklin’s rationale for collaborating with Pepsi is less clear, particularly given his later criticisms of the role played by

119. “John Hope Franklin to William Payne, 22 December 1964,” box W25, JHFP; “Chicago Premiere of ‘Adventures in Negro History,’” box W25, JHFP.

120. “Pepsi’s Second Album on Negro History Available,” *Chicago Defender*, March 2, 1966, 25.

121. “Jerry Blocker to John Hope Franklin, 27 March 1965,” box W25, JHFP; “Adventures in Negro History,” vol. 2, author’s private collection.

122. “John Hope Franklin to Jerry Blocker, 4 May 1965,” box W25, JHFP.

123. “John Hope Franklin to Jerry Blocker, 24 August 1965,” box W25, JHFP.

124. “John Hope Franklin to Jerry Blocker, 15 November 1966,” box W25, JHFP.

125. “Jerry Blocker to John Hope Franklin, undated,” box W25, JHFP.

126. “Adventures in Negro History,” vol. 2, author’s private collection.

corporate advertisers in the “desecration” of Black History Month.¹²⁷ While the financial details of the collaboration are unavailable, Franklin was paid, and he was likely paid well.¹²⁸ Superficially, it appears that Franklin enjoyed the clout that came with his role, with the historian informing Bill Payne, one of Pepsi’s ever-growing band of Black executives, of his delight in seeing “that my picture has at long last made the cover of a record album.”¹²⁹ Pepsi’s willingness to let Black corporate representatives lead the project and to hire Black historical experts, a Black production and acting team, and a Black illustrator may also have influenced his decision. On a deeper level, Franklin appeared to truly believe in both the specific educational value of “Adventures in Negro History” and the broader benefits of corporate Black history campaigns. In public addresses, the historian placed Pepsi in the “vanguard” of the struggle for greater Black historical representation and applauded “this great enterprise, for its imagination, skill, sensitivity, and understanding.”¹³⁰

CONCLUSION

Such support was indicative of the continued and systemic neglect of Black history within American educational, political, and popular culture. This was something that Black activists had rallied against for decades and that would be thrust further into the spotlight following the Meredith March in 1966, where demands for Black Power first reached a national audience. As Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton contended in their landmark study *Black Power*, released the following year, Black history was an integral part of the broader struggle for Black pride and self-determination that characterized the Black Power concept, with more and more Black Americans keen to “develop an awareness of their cultural heritage . . . a history not taught in the standard textbooks of this country.”¹³¹ Stung into action, Vice President Hubert Humphrey was among those to denounce the “Negro History gap” both inside and outside of the classroom, declaring that African Americans were “a people robbed of their rich history and culture by historians, through omissions, neglect, and the perpetuation of racial stereotypes and myths.”¹³² White anxieties over demands for Black Power would become more acute following the

127. Franklin et al., “Black History Month,” 88.

128. “Vincent Burke to John Hope Franklin, undated,” box W25, JHFP.

129. “John Hope Franklin to William Payne, 8 March 1966,” box W25, JHFP.

130. “John Hope Franklin to William Payne, 22 December 1964,” box W25, JHFP; “Chicago Premiere of ‘Adventures in Negro History,’” box W25, JHFP.

131. Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (New York, 1967), 38.

132. Hubert Humphrey, “Closing America’s History Gap,” *Negro Digest*, February 1967, 5.

assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in April 1968, with greater Black historical representation—be this on the page or on the screen—seen as one potential safety valve for spiraling Black rage.

The rise of Black Power, continued urban unrest, and the impact of King's death all helped to transform the movement for educational reform, accelerating the institutionalization of Black Studies at universities across the country and contributing to the creation of landmark television series such as *Black Heritage*, which was serialized on WCBS-TV.¹³³ In turn, corporate engagement with Black history exploded during the second half of the 1960s. By 1969, Gibson estimated that Pepsi had distributed more than 250,000 “Adventures in Negro History” records, filmstrips, and booklets, and more than 500 school systems had adopted the kits as part of their official educational materials.¹³⁴ After producing more than half a million copies of its travelers' guide, American Oil commissioned author Philip Drotning to write a book-length version that was published by Doubleday in 1968.¹³⁵ Alongside the expansion of existing initiatives came a flurry of new campaigns. This included “Ingenious Americans,” produced by Old Taylor National Distillers in collaboration with Clarence Holte and BBDO, which featured an embarrassment of Black history artifacts that included educational booklets and bronze busts of notable Black historical actors.

The scale and ambition of such projects demonstrates the extent to which attitudes toward Black history—and, by extension, Black consumers—had been revolutionized by the interconnected impact of the struggle for civil rights, a resurgence of Black history activism, and the growing power of the “Negro Market.”¹³⁶ For marketing historian Judy Foster Davis, the success of Old Taylor's “Ingenious Americans” campaign “spawned the use of black history . . . as a theme in other brand marketing efforts.”¹³⁷ However, as this article makes clear, such initiatives actually represented the continuation of a corporate strategy that we can trace back to at least the 1940s. Within a remarkably short period of time, many White corporate advertisers had largely (although by no means completely) jettisoned anti-Black historical caricatures in favor of more positive depictions of Black historical achievement. By the second half

133. Martha Biondi, *The Black Revolution on Campus* (Berkeley, 2012); Stefan Bradley, *Upending the Ivory Tower: Civil Rights, Black Power, and the Ivy League* (New York, 2018).

134. “Pepsi Premieres New Black History Album,” *New York Amsterdam News*, December 20, 1969, 21; Gibson, *\$30 Billion Negro*, 231–32.

135. Phillip Drotning, *A Guide to Negro History in America* (New York, 1968).

136. Harding, “Power from Our People,” 40.

137. Judy Foster Davis, “Realizing Marketplace Opportunity: How Research on the Black Consumer Market Influenced Mainstream Marketers, 1920–1970,” *Journal of Historical Research in Marketing* 5, no. 4 (2013): 485.

of the 1960s, it certainly appeared as if the “Negro History Bandwagon” described by the *Chicago Defender* was shifting into top gear.¹³⁸ Yet it is this same popularity that requires us to think seriously about both the immediate and long-term consequences of the corporate turn toward Black history during the decades following World War II.

That such projects were commercially motivated is hardly surprising; Pepsi representative John Bliss explicitly cited “Adventures in Negro History” as a means of extending the brand’s influence within Black communities, and historian Manning Marable suggests that the campaign generated a massive financial windfall for the company.¹³⁹ However, it is notable that, despite Pepsi’s aggressive marketing of “Adventures in Negro History” as a national education program designed to promote “better understanding among all people,” it was largely limited to Black periodicals and erratically enforced by individual franchisers.¹⁴⁰ Russell recalls that some distributors refused to support the initiative altogether, while one New Orleans’ bottler informed the company that he would only sell its records if Pepsi removed the names of more radical Black activists such as Paul Robeson from the album sleeve.¹⁴¹ By embracing Black history-themed campaigns, Pepsi and other companies were able to champion their awareness of Black history (and, by extension, Black consumers), while simultaneously leveraging such initiatives to offset continued criticisms of their hiring policies and to frame highly calculated marketing decisions through the lens of corporate social responsibility and public education.

More thought-provoking still is the apparent ease with which Franklin and other prominent Black consultants reconciled corporate Black history campaigns with the complex racial and philosophical politics of the postwar Black history “revival.” In his speech at the Chicago premiere of “Adventures in Negro History,” Franklin explicitly situated the project alongside curricular reform, the creation of Black “prose and poetry,” and other strategies aimed at addressing the continued neglect of Black history by “the more sensitive and responsible element of our community.”¹⁴² In doing so, Franklin minimized the significant ideological fractures between grassroots Black activists, left-wing historians, and American corporations. For many Black activists, the fight for Black historical representation remained an explicitly political and necessarily radical endeavor.¹⁴³ Similarly, for a new generation of Black nationalist historians such as

138. “Leading Firms,” 21.

139. “Pepsi Cola,” *Chicago Defender*, February 23, 1966, 42; Manning Marable, *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America* (Cambridge, 1983), 160.

140. “Pepsi Joins A&P Promoting Albums,” *New York Amsterdam News*, April 11, 1970, 44.

141. Capparell, *Real Pepsi Challenge*, 230.

142. “To Introduce ‘Adventures in Negro History,’” box W25, JHFP.

143. Rocksborough-Smith, *Black Public History*, 2.

Vincent Harding and Lerone Bennett Jr., a “re-evaluation of the part that the people of African descent have played in the making of America” was rooted in a critique of both the nation’s founding principles and the relationship between consumer capitalism and continuing racial inequality.¹⁴⁴ By contrast, corporate advertisers had a vested interest in presenting the story of Black America in ways that reconciled these tensions and connected the promise of racial progress to an embrace of conspicuous consumption.

As the long-term consequences of the corporate turn toward Black history during the decades following World War II became increasingly clear, so too did Franklin’s own opinion on corporate engagement with Black history appear to shift; something most forcefully articulated through his rejection of Black history “hucksters” in the *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* some three decades after his initial collaboration with Pepsi.¹⁴⁵ This trend toward commercialization has only accelerated during the years since Franklin’s remarks, confirming Ken Smikle’s contention that Black history has “become big business.”¹⁴⁶ Today, we live in a world where public engagement with Black history is inextricably tied to corporate America—from the dozens of White-owned companies who helped to fund the opening of the National Museum of African American History and Culture in 2016, to the role of corporations such as Bank of America, Coca-Cola, and McDonalds in subsidizing Black history programming and exhibitions, to the now annual blizzard of Black History Month marketing campaigns. The first corporate Black history projects that appeared during the years following World War II laid the groundwork for this contemporary relationship, helping to normalize corporate engagement with, and commercialization of, the African American past.

144. John Henrik Clarke, “Lerone Bennett: Social Historian,” *Freedomways*, Fall 1965, 481.

145. Franklin et al., “Black History Month,” 88.

146. Norris, “Putting Black History Month,” Br.