

# Black History Month Reflections

by Gretchen Eure, Former Director of Education and Outreach

There were many struggles of identity for African-Americans, and persons of other races. The terms "Colored," "Negro," "Black," and "African-American" were only some of the racial names either applied to African-Americans by African-Americans, or applied by a predominately White society.

Unfortunately, many in the dominant society also combined caricatures with derogatory racial terms aimed at defeating the dignity and worth of African-Americans. Those images invaded newspapers, television and radio broadcasts, and advertisements. Some became icons for products that were the mainstay of our food choices, and were ever present to denigrate African-Americans and their contributions to the growth, development, and wealth of the United States.

These images included African-Americans eating watermelon or avoiding work (being "lazy and shiftless" or "slothful"). Terms such as "Coon" were not thought to be derogatory by businesses that chose to use the term in their product. On the other hand, images of an African-American cook or maid were thought by some to be flattering images to a society that attempted to permanently assign the work it did not want to do to the "lower class" or "riff-raff".

While many of those images have disappeared, some were only modified and remain as a constant reminder of the ugly past of blatant racism. Many baby boomers remember well how important the portrait of African-Americans was in defining image. The portrait is changed and is always changing, but the stereotypes still exist. The buttons and advertisements seen here force us to recall how it was, and how it may continue if we turn our backs to the caricatures now displayed in the media and on products.







