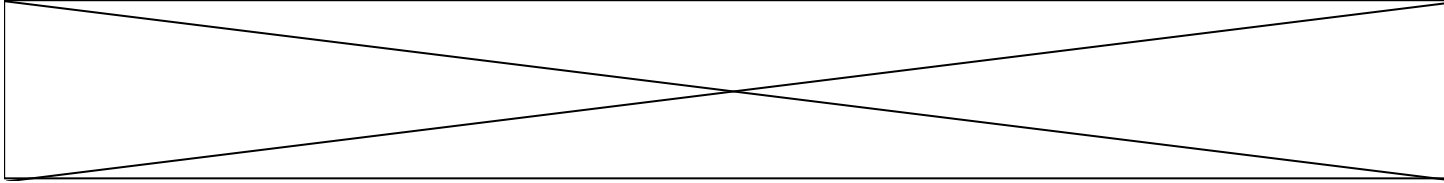
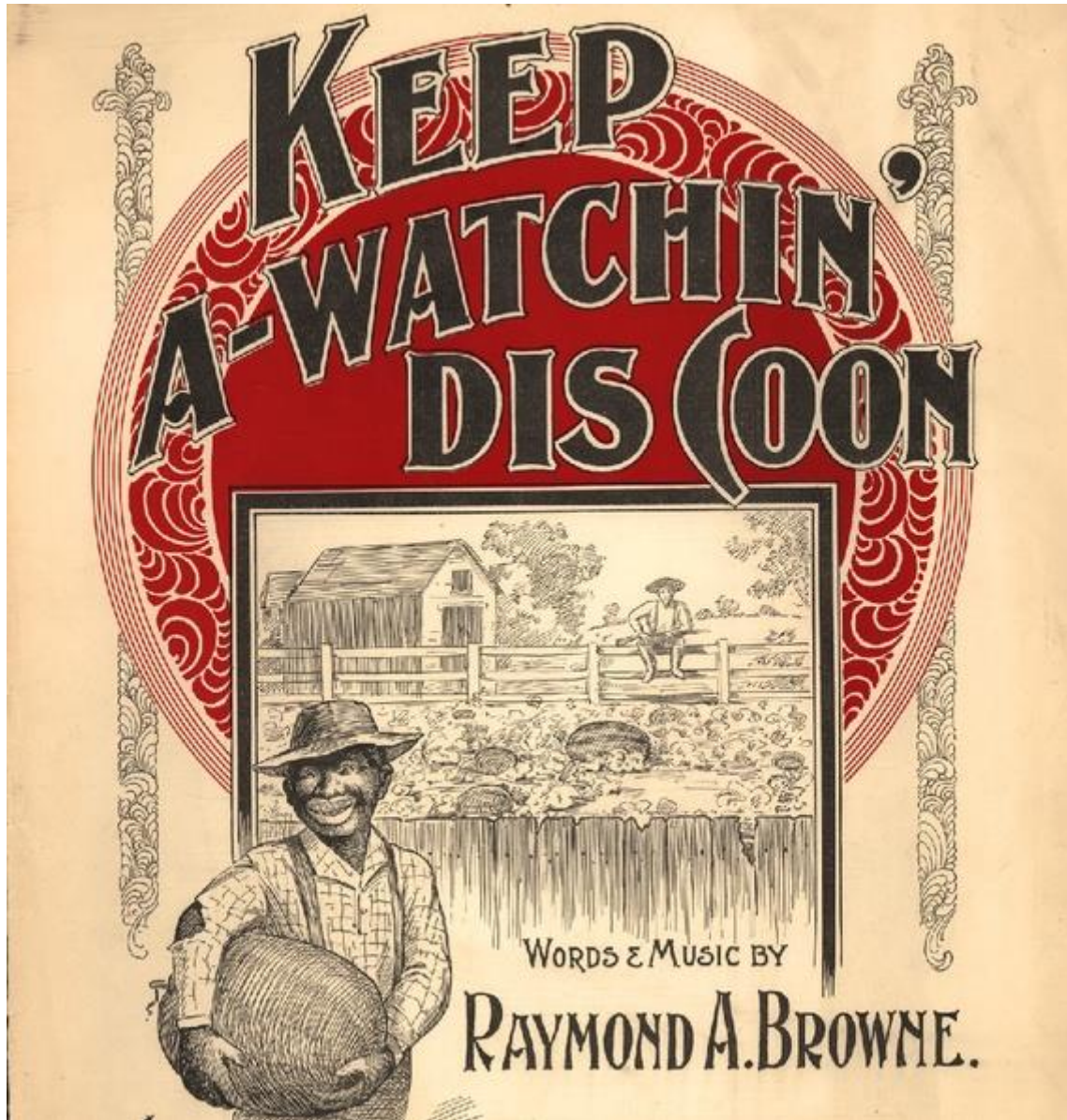


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## How Watermelons Became a Racist Trope

By William Black

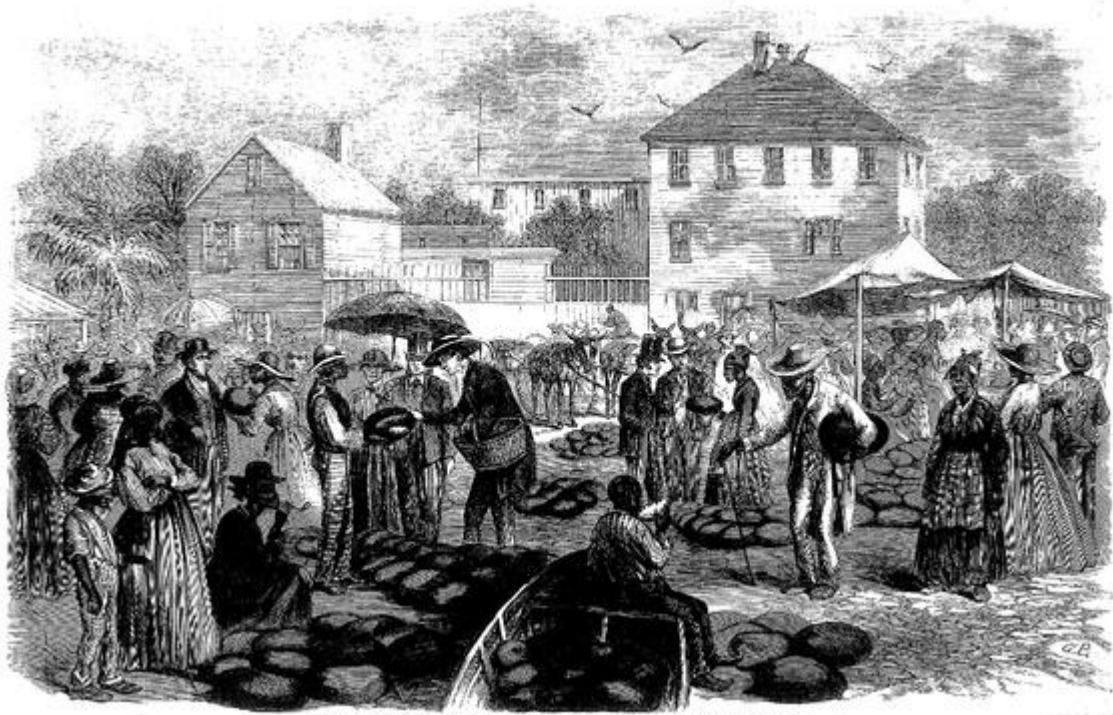
It seems as if every few weeks there's another watermelon controversy. The *Boston Herald* got in trouble for publishing a [cartoon](#) of the White House fence-jumper, having made his way into Obama's bathroom, recommending watermelon-flavored toothpaste to the president. A high-school football coach in Charleston, South Carolina, was briefly [fired](#) for a bizarre post-game celebration ritual in which his team smashed a watermelon while making ape-like noises. While hosting the National Book Awards, author Daniel Handler (a.k.a. Lemony Snicket) [joked](#) about how his friend Jacqueline Woodson, who had won the young people's literature award for her

memoir *Brown Girl Dreaming*, was allergic to watermelon. And most recently, activists protesting the killing of Michael Brown were greeted with [an ugly display](#) while marching through Rosebud, Missouri, on their way from Ferguson to Jefferson City: malt liquor, fried chicken, a Confederate flag, and, of course, a watermelon.

While mainstream-media figures deride these instances of racism, or at least racial insensitivity, another conversation takes place on Twitter feeds and comment boards: What, many ask, does a watermelon have to do with race? What's so offensive about liking watermelon? Don't white people like watermelon too? Since these conversations tend to focus on the individual intent of the cartoonist, coach, or emcee, it's all too easy to exculpate them from blame, since the racial meaning of the watermelon is so ambiguous.

But the stereotype that African Americans are excessively fond of watermelon emerged for a specific historical reason and served a specific political purpose. The trope came into full force when slaves won their emancipation during the Civil War. Free black people grew, ate, and sold watermelons, and in doing so made the fruit a symbol of their freedom. Southern whites, threatened by blacks' newfound freedom, responded by making the fruit a symbol of black people's perceived uncleanness, laziness, childishness, and unwanted public presence. This racist trope then exploded in American popular culture, becoming so pervasive that its historical origin became obscure. Few Americans in 1900 would've guessed the stereotype was less than half a century old.

Not that the raw material for the racist watermelon trope didn't exist before emancipation. In the early modern European imagination, the typical watermelon-eater was an Italian or Arab peasant. The watermelon, [noted](#) a British officer stationed in Egypt in 1801, was "a poor Arab's feast," a meager substitute for a proper meal. In the port city of Rosetta he [saw](#) the locals eating watermelons "ravenously ... as if afraid the passer-by was going to snatch them away," and watermelon rinds [littered](#) the streets. There, the fruit symbolized many of the same qualities as it would in post-emancipation America: uncleanness, because eating watermelon is so messy. Laziness, because growing watermelons is so easy, and it's hard to eat watermelon and keep working—it's a fruit you have to sit down and eat. Childishness, because watermelons are sweet, colorful, and devoid of much nutritional value. And unwanted public presence, because it's hard to eat a watermelon by yourself. These tropes made their way to America, but the watermelon did not yet have a racial meaning. Americans were just as likely to associate the watermelon with white Kentucky hillbillies or New Hampshire yokels as with black South Carolina slaves.



THE WATER-MELON MARKET AT CHARLESTON, S. C.—FROM A DRAWING BY JOHN E. TAYLOR.—SEE PAGE 156.

Soon after winning their emancipation, many African Americans sold watermelons in order to make a living outside the plantation system. (Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper)

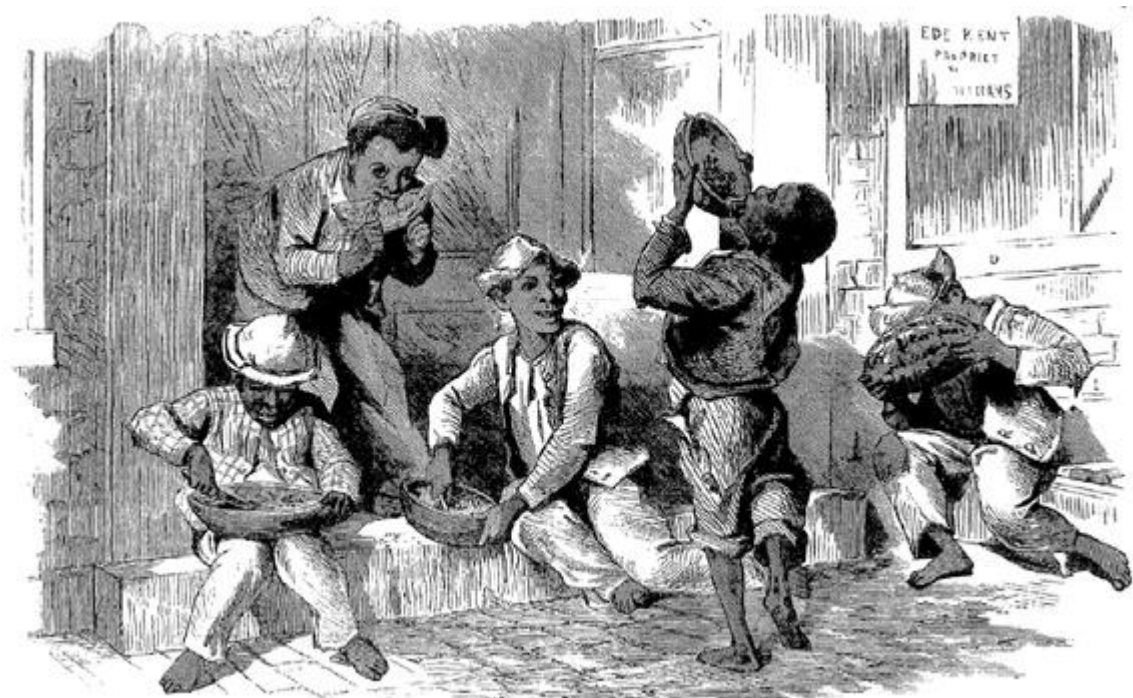
This may be surprising given how prominent watermelons were in enslaved African Americans' lives. Slave owners often let their slaves grow and sell their own watermelons, or even let them take a day off during the summer to eat the first watermelon harvest. The slave [Israel Campbell](#) would slip a watermelon into the bottom of his cotton basket when he fell short of his daily quota, and then retrieve the melon at the end of the day and eat it. Campbell taught the trick to another slave who was often whipped for not reaching his quota, and soon the trick was widespread. When the year's cotton fell a few bales short of what the master had figured, it simply remained "a mystery."

But Southern whites saw their slaves' enjoyment of watermelon as a sign of their own supposed benevolence. Slaves were usually careful to enjoy watermelon according to the code of behavior established by whites. When an Alabama overseer cut open watermelons for the slaves under his watch, he expected the children to run to get their slice. One boy, Henry Barnes, refused to run, and once he did get his piece he would run off to the slave quarters to eat out of the white people's sight. His mother would then whip him, he remembered, "fo' being so stubborn." The whites wanted Barnes to play the part of the watermelon-craving, juice-dribbling pickaninny. His refusal undermined the tenuous relationship between master and slave.

Emancipation, of course, destroyed that relationship. Black people grew, ate, and sold watermelons during slavery, but now when they did so it was a threat to the racial order. To whites, it seemed now as if blacks were flaunting their newfound freedom, living off their own land, selling watermelons in the market, and—worst of all—enjoying watermelon together in the

public square. One white family in Houston was devastated when their nanny Clara left their household shortly after her emancipation in 1865. Henry Evans, a young white boy to whom Clara had likely been a second mother, cried for days after she left. But when he bumped into her on the street one day, he rejected her attempt to make peace. When Clara offered him some watermelon, Henry [told her](#) that “he would not eat what free negroes ate.”

Newspapers amplified this association between the watermelon and the free black person. In 1869, *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* published perhaps the first caricature of blacks reveling in watermelon. The adjoining article explained, “The Southern negro in no particular more palpably exhibits his epicurean tastes than in his excessive fondness for watermelons. The juvenile freedman is especially intense in his partiality for that refreshing fruit.”



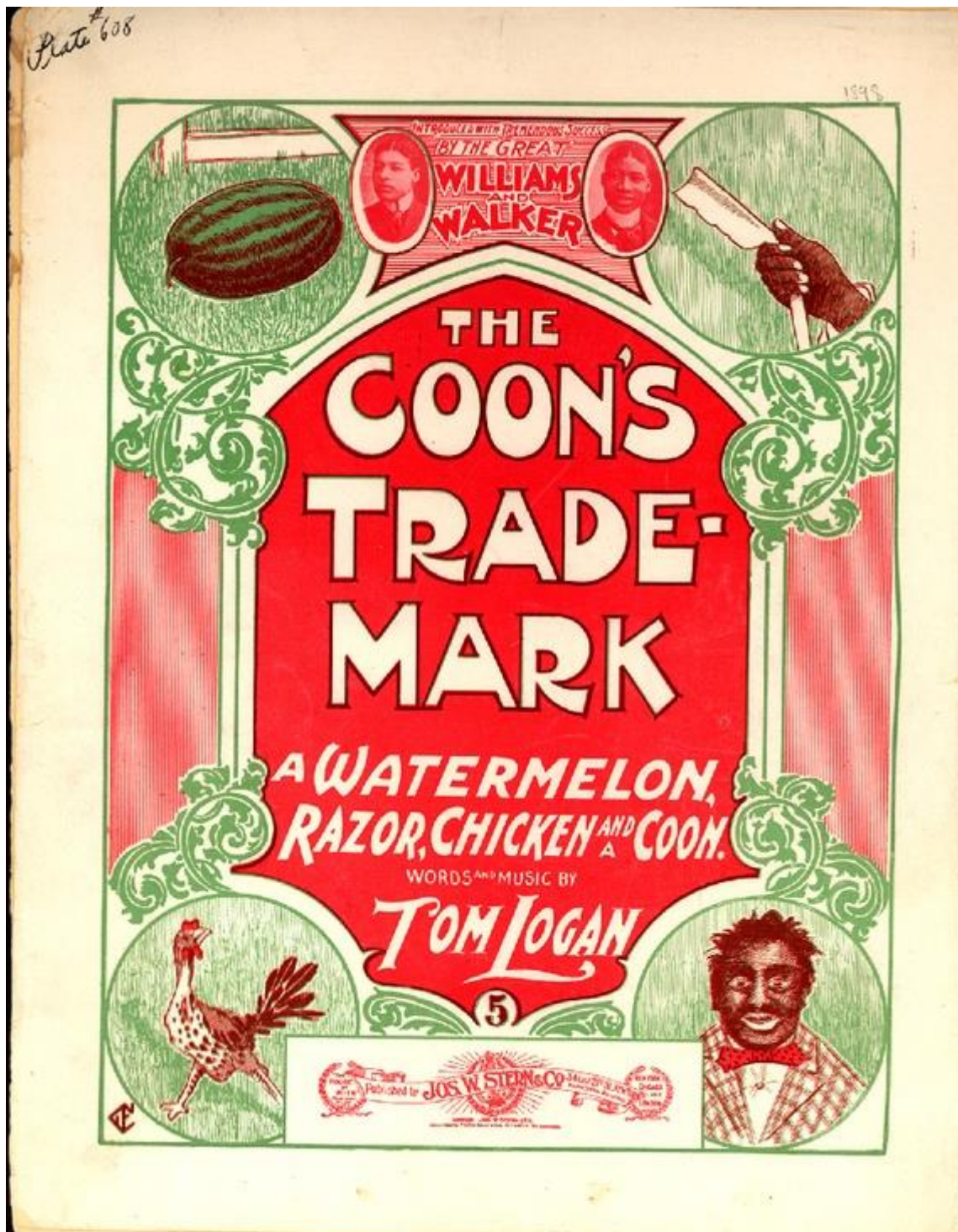
A WATERMELON FEAST IN RICHMOND, VA.—FROM A SKETCH BY WM. H. SHEPARD.—SEE PAGE 415.

Perhaps the first printed illustration of the racist watermelon trope, c. 1869. (Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper)

Two years later, a Georgia newspaper reported that a black man had been arrested for poisoning a watermelon with the intent of killing a neighbor. The story was headlined “Negro Kuklux” and equated black-on-black violence with the Ku Klux Klan, asking facetiously whether the Radical Republican congressional subcommittee investigating the Klan would investigate this freedman’s actions. The article began with a scornful depiction of the man on his way to the courthouse: “On Sabbath afternoon we encountered a strapping 15th Amendment bearing an enormous watermelon in his arms *en route* for the Court-house.” It was as if the freedman’s worst crime was not attempted murder but walking around in public with that ridiculous fruit.

The primary message of the watermelon stereotype was that black people were not ready for freedom. During the 1880 election season, Democrats [accused](#) the South Carolina state

legislature, which had been majority-black during Reconstruction, of having wasted taxpayers' money on watermelons for their own refreshment; this fiction even found its way into history textbooks. D. W. Griffith's white-supremacist epic film *The Birth of a Nation*, released in 1915, included a [watermelon feast](#) in its depiction of emancipation, as corrupt northern whites encouraged the former slaves to stop working and enjoy some watermelon instead. In these racist fictions, blacks were no more deserving of freedom than were children.



As mass-produced pianos and sheet music became popular in the late nineteenth century, so did “coon songs,” popular tunes that mocked African Americans for their lazy, shiftless, childish ways. (Courtesy Brown University Library)

By the early twentieth century, the watermelon stereotype was everywhere—potholders, paperweights, sheet music, salt-and-pepper shakers. A popular postcard portrayed an elderly black man carrying a watermelon in each arm only to happen upon a stray chicken. The man

laments, “Dis am de wust perdickermunt ob mah life.” As a black man, the postcard implied, he had few responsibilities and little interest in anything beyond his own stomach. Edwin S. Porter, famous for directing *The Great Train Robbery* in 1903, co-directed [The Watermelon Patch](#) two years later, which featured “darkies” sneaking into a watermelon patch, men dressed as skeletons chasing away the watermelon thieves (à la the Ku Klux Klan, who dressed as ghosts to frighten blacks), a watermelon-eating contest, and a band of white vigilantes ultimately smoking the watermelon thieves out of a cabin. The long history of white violence to maintain the racial order was played for laughs.

It may seem silly to attribute so much meaning to a fruit. And the truth is that there is nothing inherently racist about watermelons. But cultural symbols have the power to shape how we see our world and the people in it, such as when police officer Darren Wilson saw Michael Brown as a superhuman “demon.” These symbols have roots in real historical struggles—specifically, in the case of the watermelon, white people’s fear of the emancipated black body. Whites used the stereotype to denigrate black people—to take something they were using to further their own freedom, and make it an object of ridicule. It ultimately does not matter if someone means to offend when they tap into the racist watermelon stereotype, because the stereotype has a life of its own.

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