Out at the Barrel: The Search for Citizenship at Cracker Barrel Old Country Store

THESIS

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Arts in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

Kyla Morgan Young

Graduate Program in African American and African Studies

The Ohio State University

2013

Master's Examination Committee:

Dr. Kenneth Goings, Advisor
Dr. Kevin Boyle, Committee Member
Dr. Judy Tzu-Chun Wu, Committee Member
Abstract

In 1991, the Cracker Barrel Old Country Store endorsed a heterosexual vision not only of the traditional family, but also of who it would employ. The then Vice-President of Human Relations, William Bridges, issued a policy memorandum that stated that Cracker Barrel would no longer “continue to employ individuals… whose sexual preferences fail to demonstrate normal heterosexual values.” Over the next decade, Cracker Barrel defended its heteronormative views, and emerged as crucial stronghold of Evangelical conservatism. In response to Cracker Barrel’s staunch position, queer activists confronted the sexual discrimination attempting to gain access to full recognition and participation in the cultural and political polity.

I begin my work by examining the ideological and cultural shifts that occurred from the New Deal through to the Great Society programs that transformed the American landscape. The use of public space, particularly the workplace, as a site for contesting the legitimacy of racially and sexually-marginalized groups in America was a result of a confluence of events that began during the Great Depression. During this time, I argue that the American family transformed from a self-sustaining entity that was religiously-disconnected and production-driven, to a standardized familial unit that is understood through Christian morality and consumptive behaviors. Cold War attitudes and the rise of big business, then, reinforced this ideological transition of the family and secured its association as a qualifier for citizenship.
Cracker Barrel capitalized on this philosophical shift by constructing a family-centric restaurant that catered to preserving an idyllic, American past that was based in a Southern Evangelical memory. This memorial presented the white, heteronormative, nuclear family as the prototypical American experience. By analyzing Cracker Barrel’s physical space, I have argued that Cracker Barrel serves as both an extension of neoconservative ideology and as an emblem of the religious Right. Through space, policy, and product offering, I contended that businesses like Cracker Barrel are utilized to moderate the meaning of American citizenship, especially within the context of sexuality. Cracker Barrel, in this project, is understood to represent a larger conservative contestation to define America. While activists secured a policy change through a decade of protests, I ultimately conclude that Cracker Barrel successfully protected its space and ensured the commodification of conservative ideals in the cultural marketplace of America into today.
For Jesse & Norma
Acknowledgments

I jokingly told my family over breakfast one Saturday morning that for graduate school, I wanted to find a way to travel and “eat my way across America”. At the time, we all laughed, but several years later that moment seems rather prophetic. This project began with the hope to uncover the possibility of the corporate space to disrupt binaries, but what I found was quite the opposite. This was not the story I planned to tell, but I am immensely indebted to several individuals who believed in me enough to let me pursue it anyhow. I would not have considered Cracker Barrel without guidance from my own personal academic Yoda and colleague, Tyran Steward. He and his wife, Tamanika, have lived this project with me. Without their endless advice, constant guidance, and occasional meal, I would not have been able to even begin this project.

Several professors have greatly contributed to my evolution along the way. First and foremost, I am appreciative for my advisor, Ken Goings, for his academic faith to let me pursue this project. He taught me to value everyday culture and to observe the stories surrounding me. I owe the graduate students and faculty in the Department of History great thanks for welcoming me into the fold. Thanks to Professor Kevin Boyle, I discovered I was a historian at heart and had the joy of introducing him to his first Cracker Barrel. His kindness and pure enthusiasm for my work challenged me to think big. Professor Judy Tzu-Chun Wu guided me into the unknown literature of gender history, allowing me to uncover stories to go with a long list of names and organizations.
Professor John Howard graciously mailed his primary resources across the pond to me, making it possible to piece together Cracker Barrel’s story. Finally, I am grateful for the continuing interest in this work from the Department of History at Princeton University.

Of course, however, this work required more than just the support of an academic community. Without unending support and inspiration from my friends and family I would not have been able to enjoy myself through all of this. Always being able to return home to the comforts of my family, their food, and washer and dryer has kept me grounded through this process. Their endless love and willingness to join me for Cracker Barrel visits made this work bearable. My dear friends at Vineyard Columbus must be thanked for teaching me the important role of balance in my life. Their encouragement to both work and play hard is something I will cherish for years to come. Two friends deserve special attention. Michelle, my lifelong best friend, listened to more complaining than any one friend ever should and David spent literally hundreds of hours in various Starbucks with me as I read and wrote for this thesis.

Finally, I find it only befitting to dedicate this work to two of my grandparents. My grandfather, Jesse, was Southern to his core and serves as a reminder of the humanity and complexity of people like Evins. I wrote the first draft of what would become chapter two from my grandmother’s Hospice room. Her love for history and encouragement, even into her last days as she battled cancer, to continue to learn has left an indelible mark on my life. To all of you, then, thank you.
Vita

August 2009 .............................................. A.A. African American Studies

March 2011 ................................................. B.A. African American and African Studies, The Ohio State University

June 2013 ..................................................... M.A. African American and African Studies, The Ohio State University

Fields of Study

Major Field: African American and African Studies
Table of Contents

Abstract ................................................................................................................................. ii
Dedication ............................................................................................................................... iv
Acknowledgments ............................................................................................................... v
Vita ........................................................................................................................................ viii
List of Figures ..................................................................................................................... x
Introduction: Inside the Barrel .............................................................................................. 1
Chapter 1: Imagining the Barrel ........................................................................................... 9
  Consuming the Dream ....................................................................................................... 11
  The Heart and Soul of the Nation ...................................................................................... 14
  The Head of the Home ...................................................................................................... 19
Chapter 2: Constructing the Barrel ...................................................................................... 21
Chapter 3: Contesting the Barrel ........................................................................................ 33
  Negotiating Boundaries ..................................................................................................... 34
  Working Their Way In ....................................................................................................... 35
  The Here and Queer ......................................................................................................... 39
  Buying Their Place .......................................................................................................... 46
List of Figures

Figure 1 - Typical Store Layout .................................................................25
Figure 2 – Typical General Store Layout .......................................................27
Figure 3 – Cracker Barrel Old Country Store, General Store, Sunbury, Oh ..............28
Figure 4 – Cracker Barrel Old Country Store, Stone Fireplace, Cleveland, Oh ..........30
Figure 5 – Sign that is posted as a result of the Pleasing People Anti-Discrimination Policy, Hilliard, Oh .................................................................54
Introduction: Inside the Barrel

As the front porch of the Douglasville Cracker Barrel restaurant filled with families awaiting their Sunday afternoon brunch, the cacophony of voices, country music, and creaking rocking chairs were no match for the jarring roars of protestors only mere feet from the restaurant chanting, “We’re here! We’re Queer! Get used to it!” Inside the restaurant, tables were occupied by members of the gay-rights organization Queer Nation Atlanta and their supporters, who ordered only coffee. Lynn Cothren, Chairman of Queer Nation Atlanta, clanked his country juice glass, quieting the dining room, to announce that Cracker Barrel managers were being forced *sadly* to turn away customers. The room exploded in raucous applause as activists reveled in their success in effectively shutting down business at the country-themed establishment that had fired seventeen gay employees.²

A company memorandum, issued by then Vice-President of Human Relations, William Bridges, started the controversy in February 1991. The memo instructed managers to fire all homosexual employees.³ As reports of firings circulated through networks of grassroots organizations and local newspapers, the Lebanon, Tennessee, based chain quickly fell under scrutiny for its defense of the traditional family. Store

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protests soon began just outside of Atlanta at the stores where firings had taken place in March. The opposition to Cracker Barrel’s discriminatory policy quickly garnered support from gay rights allies, and protest rallies spread swiftly throughout the South and Midwest. The company ignored the complaints, promoting its identity as a retailer that not only desired to “recreate a time gone by” but whose goal also was “to preserve it.”

Cracker Barrel believed in a picture of America that was for the Evangelical family, but the growing demonstrations eventually forced the company’s attention as more gay rights sympathizers latched on to the cause. Ivy Young, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Project Director, explained that “Cracker Barrel thought they could get away with this policy because they thought [the fired employees] were just a bunch of ‘fags’ and ‘dykes’ and nobody would care…They got a huge shock when they discovered that lesbian, gays, and people of good conscience around the country are speaking out and protesting their bigotry.”

Over the next two decades, gay rights’ activists would contest the Cracker Barrel employment policy through a variety of means. While the policy was eventually overturned, however, the conservative space of Cracker Barrel has endured.

Thus, Cracker Barrel serves as an example of the ways the New Right used privately controlled spaces to negotiate and protect its view of America.

This thesis proposes that Cracker Barrel Old Country Store embodies the ways in which conservatives have employed alternative spaces to help regulate and negotiate

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definitions of citizenship. The use of space, décor, product offering, and policy at Cracker Barrel all aid in defining American identity in conservative Evangelical terms. By excluding those individuals who disrupt or challenge their ideological conception of who is an American, conservative are able to culturally and economically limit access to citizenship for particular groups, ultimately defending their construction of the authentic “American”.

Traditionally, historians and political scientists have understood citizenship in terms of the individual’s relationship with the state. Political theorist Shane Phelan frames this relationship as being “about recognition and participation.”\(^7\) Scholars often articulate citizenship through acts like voting or the ability to run for office, but the terms of ‘equality’ broaden the scope of what it means to be recognized and to participate in society. For instance, historians Alice Kessler-Harris and Lizabeth Cohen each argue that the ability to participate economically is necessary for securing full citizenship. Both scholars also acknowledge that economic participation, like legal participation, in America has been colored by racial, sexual, and gender discrimination.\(^8\) Employment policies of companies like Cracker Barrel that limit participation demonstrate an ideological commitment on the part of conservatives to endorse a particular kind of

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\(^8\) According to Kessler-Harris the New Deal policies formed legalized and institutionalized structures that aided in preventing women’s access to full equity in the polity. For more see generally, Alice Kessler-Harris, *In Pursuit of Equity: Women, Men, and the Quest for Economic Citizenship in 20th Century America*. Lizabeth Cohen, similarly, articulates the ways in which African Americans and other minorities were excluded from full economic participation as a consequence of New Deal and postwar policies, allowing a growing inequality to develop. For more see generally, Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer’s Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Knopf, 2003); Alice Kessler-Harris, *In Pursuit of Equity: In Pursuit of Equity: Women, Men, and the Quest for Economic Citizenship in 20th Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).
citizenship by way of the corporation. Companies like Cracker Barrel thus function as what Louis Althuusser defined as an “ideological state apparatus.” Ideology is nothing more than “the system of the ideas and representations which dominate the mind of a man or a social group.” These imagined constructions guide the relationships of individuals with one another. Therefore, Althuusser contends, “no class can hold State power over a long period without at the same time exercising its hegemony over and in the State Ideological Apparatuses.” Historically, school systems and churches were used by the State to disseminate national beliefs, indoctrinating citizens in the ways of the polity and the citizen’s intended role. These institutions enforced the superiority of American ideals such as freedom and liberty, while also perpetuating hegemonic notions of race and gender.  

With a rising emphasis on the consumer in the postwar years, the corporation, too, became a powerful site of defining what is American. Sociologist George Ritzer, for instance, studied the impact of the McDonald’s Corporation in “Americanizing” the global landscape through the company’s locations and dedication to a key set of principles – efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control of nonhuman technology. By standardizing and exporting a particular company model, through scripts, recipes, décor, and menu, McDonald’s has become a commodified symbol of America, both

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9 Althuusser claims that in a mature capitalist society education serves as the dominate ideological apparatus, replacing the role of the church. I am contending, however, that in a globalized capitalistic system (which develops by the 1970s) the corporation has become the epicenter for culture. In the American context, however, the role of Evangelicals in business complicates the ideological motivations of companies. For more see Althusser, Louis, and Ben Brewster. "Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatus." In Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 152, 158, 165. Quote from Louis Althusser’s “Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatus,” 146.
domestically and abroad.\textsuperscript{10} Cracker Barrel, similarly, is highly controlled and distinctly styled; yet, it is radically different because of its Evangelical political commitments. The Cracker Barrel narrative does not simply allow for a consumption of a generic, unmarked Americana, but rather reifies a markedly white, heteronormative, Southern Evangelical family experience as defining an authentic American.

Cracker Barrel’s politicization did not occur accidently; rather, the use of private space to defend and perpetuate conservative notions of America is an outgrowth of a larger conservative ascendancy that took place throughout the country, beginning as a reaction against the New Deal and building through the postwar years. Donald Critchlow says that though “the conservative movement was neither preordained nor inevitable, it did ultimately triumph,” in defining America.\textsuperscript{11} The changing socio-economic landscape in the postwar years in industry, neighborhoods, popular culture, and foreign affairs created the context for a conservative revival by allowing “Republicans [to represent] the fears of white middle-class and religious voters through a political platform of lower taxes, national defense, preservation of family values, regulation of social morality, and opposition to policies that affirmed racial, gender, or sexual preferences in the public sphere.”\textsuperscript{12} Through the confluence of changing culture beliefs, economic realities, and political ideologies, conservatives were able to employ companies like Cracker Barrel to defend, protect, and perpetuate their Americana.

\textsuperscript{11} Donald Critchlow, \textit{The Conservative Ascendancy: How the GOP Right Made Political History} (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2011), 5.
\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Ibid} 4.
This political mobilization of company owners also has a long history. According to historian Kim Philips-Fein, businessmen worked to defend their America starting in the 1930s. These men formed the “economic agenda of the conservative movement,” characterized by the disempowering of “labor unions, social welfare programs and government regulation of the economy that came into existence during and after the Great Depression of the 1930s.” However, because of the changing cultural ideology and emphasis on Christian morality in the 1960s and 1970s, companies were able to monopolize on their family-friendly brands to act politically. Bethany Moreton, in her book *To Serve God and Wal-Mart: The Making of Christian Free Enterprise*, highlights the ways corporations used their space to reaffirm and reconcile beliefs in the traditional family and the free market. Moreton’s study highlights that “[family] values are an indispensable element of the global service economy,” because of the way family-centric companies are able to be politically deployed. Cracker Barrel follows this model. As a family restaurant, Cracker Barrel’s brand, use of space, and policy were able to be politically deployed by conservative company owners to defend a narrow definition of America, disenfranchising those who did not fit their ideals.

I intend to demonstrate that corporate space is a private-but-public site that has been used to invent, reinforce, and/or refine qualifications for political membership. By

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15 For the context of this thesis, I am focusing on the ways in which the Right has mobilized in these spaces. While the more liberal activists have contested these spaces, I argue they do not employ retail spaces the same way politically until much more recently. Starbucks Coffee Co., for instance, in 2012 openly endorsed and backed Marriage Equality legislation in Washington state. For more information, see
seeing corporate space as a politically-charged site for structuring inclusion and exclusion, we can grasp fully the decade-long challenge to overturn Cracker Barrel’s policy as a battle for full citizenship by those communities erased by conservative definitions of ‘American’. To determine Cracker Barrel’s definition of America and its conservative ideologies, I have chosen to employ a mixed methods approach. I engaged in twenty five participant observations at Cracker Barrel’s throughout Ohio, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Georgia, observing the company’s use of space, décor, and product offerings to determine a general Cracker Barrel aesthetic. Because of the control over décor by the Cracker Barrel design team over each corporate-run restaurant, the selection of stores is reflective of the Cracker Barrel Corporation at large. Cracker Barrel’s set design team, led by Larry Singleton since 1981, and his family prior to that year, will tailor store memorabilia geographically at times, yet all of the nearly 900 relics per store follow a strict portrayal of what is American, according to the company. ¹⁶ I have also conducted archival research in Cornell University’s Human Sexuality Collection in the Division of Rare Books and Manuscript Collections. Thanks to the generosity of Dr. John Howard, one of the few scholars to publish on the Cracker Barrel protests, I amassed hundreds of primary documents concerning the Cracker Barrel protests from newspaper articles to the company’s annual stockholder’s reports from 1990 to 2008. Through analyzing these sources, I aim to position Cracker Barrel as a case study of Conservatives

employing corporations to commodify a particular brand of Americana that narrowed the definition of who could be understood as an authentic American.

My argument is detailed in four parts. In chapter one I investigate the social and political events that allowed the corporation to become a stronghold to reify notions of citizenship. The changing philosophy of the consumer, combined with an Evangelical revival and a global Cold War, allowed corporations to function as definitional mediators of what is American. This Americanism that is produced by conservatively-owned companies, then, gave conservatives a way to reinforce their particular version of America and exclude those who did not adhere to their narrative of citizenship. In chapter two, I examine the inception of the Cracker Barrel Corporation specifically to demonstrate how they express their narrative, citing their use of space, brand, and product offerings to market and reinforce a strict understanding of Americana. Then, in chapter three, I highlight the ways in which that narrative was contested by various activists and interest groups. I conclude my argument by demonstrating that despite policy change, Cracker Barrel successfully protected its ultimate interest of maintaining a conservative space. Though activists overturned the anti-gay policy, Cracker Barrel has continued to dominate the restaurant industry and reify its ideology. In total, Cracker Barrel’s resilience demonstrates the persistence of conservatism culturally in America and the power of ideology to shape consumer society.
Chapter 1: Imagining the Barrel

“Call it nostalgia if you want, but the goal isn't simply to recreate to a time gone by – it's to preserve it.”

- Cracker Barrel Old Country Store Inc.\(^{17}\)

The Cracker Barrel brand is premised upon a protection of the memory of a certain American past. The guiding ideologies of this memory center upon the preservation and retention of the traditional white family led by a male breadwinner and guided by Evangelical moral principles. This family is understood as patriotic in all respects. It consumes in the name of American capitalism, embraces democracy as a moral imperative, and believes in the rights of individuals.\(^{18}\) One may ask why Cracker Barrel would desire to preserve this narrative of America? It is in this picture that conservatives are able to achieve their ideal America, so the conservatively-owned Cracker Barrel’s brand is reflective of larger conservative longings to preserve their past and ensure their monetary future. This specific Americana did not emerge on its own. Through a confluence of events from the 1930s through the late 1960s, conservative ideologies took root in the political, economic, and social realms of America, allowing conservatives in the 1970s and 1980s to promote a distinct American narrative that worked to protect this particular view of the American past.

In this chapter, I will aim to trace the key events in America that aided in transforming the American ethos into a distinctly conservative one that created the

\(^{17}\) “Heritage and History.”

environment for companies like Cracker Barrel to flourish. Admittedly, the history from
the Depression to the Great Society is both intricate and expansive, so this chapter by no
means is meant to be a comprehensive explanation of the rise of conservatism.\textsuperscript{19} Instead,
it will broadly explore particular moments that can be cited as fundamental indicators of
the changing ideological temperament of the American people. I begin in the 1920s, as
the American work ethic produced highly saturated markets with too few consumers that
resulted in economic collapse by the end of the decade. It is in this moment that
American citizenship became intimately connected to consumption as a practice that was
inherently ‘American’.\textsuperscript{20} This philosophical transition in citizenship was met by a
wartime revivalism that allowed Christianity to reaffirm its place in defining America.
Through the lens of postwar policies like the GI Bill and the tensions of the Cold War, I
explore how the beliefs regarding the “good” citizen as expressed through the American
family were re-inscribed. Infrastructure changes, consumption patterns, and media
portrayals of the family all highlighted how this version of citizenship was facilitated and
reproduced.\textsuperscript{21} I conclude this chapter as the Great Society programs come into effect,
arguing this expression of liberalism was not simply accepted by conservatives, but rather
ideologically contested in the social realm in the private-but-publically controlled spaces
of the corporation.

\textsuperscript{19} This chapter, while ambitious in its timeline, does not aim to produce an all-encompassing history of the
1930s to 70s. Instead, this chapter serves as a genealogical guide for the reader in order to trace the
evolution of conservative’s ideological power, particularly in the postwar years. As this project proceeds
into a dissertation, this will prove to be a place of further expansion and scholarship. While many other
historians have written on this era, few have attempted to connect the role of the family, consumption,
sexuality, and citizenship. This historiographical shortcoming necessitates further scholarly research in this
area.
\textsuperscript{20} Cohen, \textit{A Consumer’s Republic}, 115-118.
Consuming the Dream

By the late 1920s America had become an industrial, urbanized nation. Americans entered into the mass production workforce, working long days at unsafe factories. While indulgences of the city may have increased, the general ethos of America as one defined by hard work, thrift, and frugality persisted. Individual’s consumption was rooted in need, limiting mass spending and leaving the market oversaturated with far less of a demand than what was necessary to support the newly recruited labor force. The Great Depression of 1929 was thus the result of the contradicting ideologies of the market and the people. Therefore, to reconcile these opposing beliefs, New Dealers challenged the dominant American narrative of thrift by making consuming an act of nationalism. In fact, the Roosevelt administration “institutionalized the consumer viewpoint in many of its agencies.” According to Lizabeth Cohen, this relationship between citizens, the state, and consuming allowed for the market to become a place of possibility for accessing freedom while maintaining a free market. African Americans, for instance, launched “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” campaigns in the 1930s to promote group rights. According to Kevin Kruse, these boycotts allowed African Americans to be not just consumers, but also political actors. Citizen consumers, as Cohen calls them,

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23 Cohen, A Consumer’s Republic, 54-55.
24 Ibid, 28.
25 Cohen cites several instances of the use of the market as a platform for attempting to gain rights. Particularly, she closely examines several women’s organizations that worked to secure protections for consumers by lobbying for price controls. For more see Lizabeth Cohen, A Consumer’s Republic, 62 -110.
concerned themselves with “safeguarding the general good of the nation, in particular for prodding the government to protect the rights, safety, and fair treatment of the individual consumer in the private marketplace,” when buying. Purchaser consumers, on the other hand, were “viewed as contributing to the larger society more by exercising purchasing power.”

These opportunities to link citizenship and consumption did present possibilities for political mobilization of marginalized groups; however, with the outbreak of World War II the attitude toward consumption as patriotic became the premiere conception of consumer behavior.  

Fearing another economic collapse in the postwar years, “[mass] consumption in postwar-America [became] not be an act of personal indulgence, but rather a civic responsibility,” to guarantee the stability of the economy and proliferate the American Dream. This shift in the conception of the consumers tempered the transgressive political possibilities presented by the market and instead reinforced American individualism and a belief in consumption as the great equalizer. Philosophically, as well, America’s transition from a country of hard-working savers to politicized consumers began to solidify. Lizabeth Cohen notes that “a vision of postwar America [developed] where the general good would be best served not by frugality or even moderation, but by individuals pursuing personal wants in a flourishing mass consumption marketplace.”

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30 Ibid 113.
31 I use the word “politicized” here to denote the civic responsibility of consumers that was driving their behavior.
32 Cohen, A Consumer’s Republic, 121.
These personal wants, beginning with a home and a car, helped transform the American landscape. The desire, and social obligation, to obtain these goods dramatically aided in changing community infrastructures. According to James T. Sparrow, from 1940 to 1947 over 25 million Americans moved across county lines, with half of this population moving across states. These Americans increasingly sought to become home owners, heightening the need for residential communities. Cities did not have the capacity to meet the spatial demand for the number of homes that needed to be built; hence, suburban communities developed. Simultaneously, then, these communities developed infrastructure to ensure accessibility. The Eisenhower administration commissioned the construction of an extensive highway system across the nation. More specifically in 1956, U.S. Senator Albert Gore Sr., of Tennessee and Congressman George Fallon of Maryland championed the National System of Interstate and Defense Highway bill that financed the construction of a national super highway system, beginning in the South. Interstate-65, connecting Tennessee and Alabama, opened on November 15, 1958. Simultaneously, Interstate-40 was also constructed, making Tennessee a bridge from the east to the west and through the south. These highways would be the future routes for the Cracker Barrel chain.

The South’s super highway systems not only connected various communities, but it also shifted commercial retail space away from downtown areas. Restaurants and shops began moving away from downtown centers and into the suburbs, which were accessible via these newly constructed highways. By de-centering towns, commercial spaces became increasingly important to community life. Malls and other private-but-public spaces were able to regulate political behavior, more easily curtailing unwanted protests. Kim Philips-Fein demonstrates that the ownership of these commercial spaces belonged largely to conservatively minded business owners. These businessmen often sold more than just goods; they also perpetuated certain conservative ideologies about race, gender, and sexuality.

*The Heart and Soul of the Nation*

The postwar years, while heavily influenced by the changing ideologies of the consumer and new community structures, were ultimately undergirded by a conservative push to maintain white hegemony. Conservatives endorsed the ideals of individualism as a means of creating and protecting their version of America through a variety of means. Whites flocked to the suburbs in the postwar years thanks to the GI Bill. With the passage of *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, racial fears concerning integration allowed conservatives to see the new suburban communities as a place of protection, a

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37 Philips-Fein, *Invisible Hands*.
38 Kim Philip-Fein argues this conservative “push” is being funded directly by conservative business owners who are acting out of a desire to protect their own economic interests that have been threatened by New Deal policies. For my purposes, however, I want to expand the bounds of conservative agents to include every day, self-identified, citizens. While they may have been unable to articulate a distinctive political agenda, I am asserting that there is a level of consciousness to their consumptive practices that is motivated by a desire to protect their constructed America.
“racially-safe” community, for an idealized America. As Kevin Kruse notes, southern white conservatives withdrew from public spaces and established separate spheres. These private spaces worked in tandem to allow white hegemony (as manifest through segregation) to be maintained more covertly because of the emphasis on individualism. Public city transportation was replaced with individual car ownership, isolating whites from integration. Suburban communities were highly uniform. Thus, the new commercial centers also were able to maintain a sense of homogeneity. These private-but-public spaces could commodify a conservative version of Americana and constrict the definition of American. The fast-paced consumptive lifestyle of suburbia, in conjunction with a deepening ideological commitment to the protection of American individualism, created community space for conservative privately-owned businesses to flourish.

The postwar years also were characterized by a new wave of Evangelicalism that promoted the free market and traditional family values. The confluence of the events of the Depression, New Deal policies, and hopelessness among Americans re-branded Evangelicals socially. Preachers were now concerned with the nation’s well-being, not just individuals’ salvation. Evangelists began to use new technologies to preach national uplift starting in the late 1930s. For example, in 1937 Charles Fuller, an American evangelist, launched a radio program called *The Old Fashioned Revival Hour*. This

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41 I begin with Fuller’s ministry for two reasons. Primarily, I start the rise of this new wave of Evangelicalism with Fuller because of his use of media and distinct style. It is a style that would serve as a
successful radio program gave Evangelicals a media platform to reach well beyond their local communities and reinforce the necessity for a return to Christ, restoration of family, and defense of America. By 1951, the radio broadcast was distributed by the ABC Radio Network on over 650 stations nationwide. The Evangelical movement in the two decades following WWII was a unique moment where politics and faith collided and socially shaped the nation. By 1957, 96% of the population when asked about their religion on the Census was able to give a specific denominational affiliation. Americans with church membership rose consistently from the 1940s until the 1970s. America was being ‘Christianized’ to combat the evils of the day. God was introduced into the Pledge of Allegiance and prayer became a prominently highlighted feature of the school day. Evangelicals pushed to fight for the America they believed in.

By the late 1940s, Evangelical preachers dominate public spheres preaching the greatness of America. Billy Graham, for example, began his US-based ministry in 1939 when he was ordained by the Southern Baptist Convention. His national ministry became popular through his annual revival meetings, the “Billy Graham Crusades” starting in 1947. Over the years, the crusades became increasingly popular, yielding

prototype for other ministries in the Christian Right. Secondly, it is one of the first ministries to be centered upon a value of nostalgia. The Old Time Revival Hour reinforced key elements of family and country, beyond calls for religious transformation and repentance. For a fuller discussion see Matthew Avery Sutton, Jerry Falwell and the Rise of the Religious Right: A Brief History with Documents (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2013), 4.

large number of converts. Graham was particularly known for his impassioned speech that not only emphasized a renewal of faith, but also promoted strong nationalism. In 1951, Graham started a television show to minister to the masses and by 1956 was producing a magazine called *Christianity Today*.46 These mass outlets allowed Graham to save souls and restore the nation.47

While Graham and his contemporaries were products of the Depression, they also were preaching in a Cold War context in which America and its core values of faith and family were being contested. Scholar Stephen Whitfield notes that Graham’s ministry in the early years specifically was vehemently concerned with denouncing Communism. Accordingly, “an ‘old-fashioned Americanism’ that was equated in 1954 with ‘the way of the Cross’ was Graham’s proposal for the most effective shield against ‘Satan’s version of religion,’ which was Communism.”48 The Cold War tensions that promoted consumerism as inherently American also drove Americans to embrace Christianity as a sort of civic duty. To be American, meant to be Christian. “The theology of the fifties was based far less on, say, Aquinas’s proofs for the existence of God than on the conviction that religion was virtually synonymous with American nationalism.”49 As patriotism became part of the rhetoric of Evangelicals, other preachers were similarly politicized and mobilized to protect America as they understood it.

Several preachers began television and radio ministries that contained overt political agendas in the 1960s and 1970s, hoping to defend the promise of America. Jerry

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46 Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, “Biographies.”
47 Miller, *Billy Graham*, 20
49 Ibid 87.
Falwell, the founder of Liberty University in Lynchberg, Virginia, began his television ministry in December 1959. Falwell wanted to have a Christian-run polity that would protect a white, patriarchal America. His program, an ode in name to Fuller’s former broadcast, *The Old Fashion Gospel Hour,* regularly featured prominent segregationists like George Wallace and Lester Maddox.Falwell denounced the Civil Rights Movement as a “civil wrong” and openly promoted his antipathy towards African Americans. He also promoted strict gender roles for women, condemned feminism, and openly protested against homosexuality as an abomination to God’s order.

Dr. James Dobson, a psychologist by training and preacher in action, formed his radio ministry Focus on the Family in 1977. Reacting to rising divorce rates, legalized abortions, and gay rights movements, Dobson sought to treat the American by offering a spiritual prescription that worked to “preserve and promote the institution of the family and the biblical principles on which it is based, and to seek to introduce as many people as possible to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Specifically, the focus of the ministry is on marriage, parenthood, evangelism, the sanctity of human life and encouraging righteousness in the culture.” These three men and similar national ministers believed that America was a great nation, in need of a renewal of righteousness and faith.

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As a distinct American brand defined by racialized consumerism and Christianity began to dominate the Cold War social landscape, this changing ideology worked to reposition women back into the home as mother and wife. During WWII, women entered the workforce in mass to aid in the war effort. Answering their civil duty, women found a level of economic independence, earning a wage and providing for the family. Though the number of women entering the workforce steadily increased, as the men returned from combat, women were systematically displaced from certain industries and opportunities. GI Bill benefits gave men a disproportionate advantage economically by providing lower mortgage rates and tax incentives to encourage spending. These provisions were intentionally sexist, according to Margot Canaday. “Embedded in the GI Bill, as in other welfare state social provision,” she says, “was a heterosexual norm that positioned male heads of households as the most deserving citizens.”

Women were to function as “good citizens” by marrying and having children. Religious sermons preached the value of mothers and women in the home, while television and movies reinforced it. Postwar television hits like *Father Knows Best*, *Ozzie and Harriet*, *Leave it to Beaver*, and *I Love Lucy*, amongst several others, depicted strong, white male-centered homes where women were at best loving and submissive and at worst silly and dependent.

In the 1960s, women’s liberation movements gained national prominence. While conservatives fought to solidify the traditional family and free market dominance, more

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liberal groups sought their inclusion into the American narrative. African Americans, feminists, and homosexuals all rallied for equality. Legally, African Americans and women both gained protection and recognition. Though not necessarily enforced well, these legal changes did start to change America socially. Women and African American entered into schools, workplaces, sports, and media in mass but the conservative ideals did not simply go away. More than ever, conservatives in the 1960s employed culture as a battleground for defending their version of Americana. The desire for a ‘simpler’ America, the America of the 1950s, became a longing of many weary from the social change of the 1960s. Cracker Barrel’s opportunity had arrived.
Chapter 2: Constructing the Barrel

“To me it creates a connection to people with memories… It’s hard to explain at times. People see things that they had or their parents or grandparents had and it really grabs folks. The things that we grew up with, the things we had when we were kids. They’re not always made in America. A lot of the cast-iron or tin toys, the dolls, the marbles, the things that kids played with, they weren’t made here. But they’re part of our history. Home-grown, homemade. Those are the thoughts I think of when I think of Americana.”\(^56\) – Larry Singleton, *Cracker Barrel Set Designer*

America was changing. Families traveled readily on the new highway systems, new technology entered homes, and the social landscape was transformed by the civil rights and feminist activism of the 1960s. Not all Americans, however, felt this was a positive evolution. Conservatives enjoyed their simpler construction of an all-White, Christian America. That was home and they wanted to return. Shows like *The Beverly Hillbillies, The Real McCoys,* and *I Love Lucy* gained national popularity, ranking amongst the top programs in the 1950s and 1960s.\(^57\) By the late 1960s shows like *Hee Haw* kept the rural memory in the popular culture, while *The Andy Griffith Show* and other family sitcoms reminded America of the purity of the past.\(^58\) The desire for this idealized past was a brand all its own.

Cracker Barrel Founder Dan Evins recognized the significance of the burgeoning fast food industry but was also attuned to the American desire for a return to the so-called “good-ole-days.” The concept of creating a roadside oasis for travelers to enter the

\(^{56}\)Petrusich, *It Still Moves* 180.


\(^{58}\)Bethany Moreton acknowledges the role of the hillbilly persona as an authentic American experience. Cracker Barrel similarly establishes the same aesthetic to define Americanism. For more information see Moreton’s *To Serve God and Wal-mart: The Making of Christian Free Enterprise* 42-45.
comfort not only of home but also of a bygone era positioned Evins to succeed with his business endeavor. Founded in 1969 in the quaint community of Lebanon, Tennessee, Cracker Barrel rapidly expanded eight years later to thirteen stores that stretched from the heart of Tennessee to the red-clay hills of Georgia, all along the South’s superhighway. 59

Dan Evins was not some “fire-breathing good ol’ boy by any means,” but he was far from an apolitical restaurant owner. 60 Evins served in the U.S. Marine Corps for three years from 1954 to 1957. Following his military duty, Evins returned to work for various family members, beginning as an aide with his fifteen-term-congressional-serving uncle, Democratic Congressman Joseph L. Evins. After two years serving under his uncle, he became an oil jobber with Consolidated Oil, a company founded by his grandfather. Evins developed an awareness of the challenges facing Shell’s rural gas stations - owned by Consolidated Oil – from highway expansion. Evins decided to build a combined restaurant and gas station as an attempt to remedy the company’s problem. He built the first Cracker Barrel restaurant and filling station on land he already owned in Lebanon and leased the filling stations from the company. 61 His political ideology and southern roots are evident in his business choices. Evins’ Cracker Barrel brand, distinct use of space, décor, and product offerings all reinforces a conservative Americana.

The corporation is highly controlled and intentional. Every decision, store layout, press release, and logo must be created, voted on, and approved before it ever becomes a part of the corporate identity. Evins understood the significance of consistency for

59 “Heritage and History.”
branding. Intentional choices were made in the first two decades of the company that drastically informed the Cracker Barrel corporate space.

Every identity begins with a name. A good name has a purpose—it tells something about what you do or value; it may have sentimental meaning. But all names, especially in the corporate world, have a meaning. In the days of small town general stores, food and other products would be shipped in large wooden barrels. A literal barrel of crackers would often be set out in the general store and would informally serve as a meeting point for community. The name “Cracker Barrel Old Country Store” thus attempts to demonstrate a commitment to both an idyllic American past and a revival of small-town community. Each store is located on the border lands of the suburban and rural. As noted in chapter one, with the development of the highway, downtowns were often displaced as town centers. In its own quaint way, the Cracker Barrel name invites customers back into community. The Company’s name and marketing offer an escape from the fast-paced modern American life as potential customers travel the interstate.

Before ever stepping foot inside a Cracker Barrel restaurant, consumers are greeted by a billboard sign for the establishment with a man seated in a country rocking chair with his hand held high, beckoning folks to stop in and “Dine and Unwind” or come in for “Family Meals. Country Style.” These large simple signs greet the potential consumers from up to twenty miles from the nearest restaurant. Created in the early 1970s by artist Bill Holley, the Cracker Barrel logo features an older man in bibbed

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62 “Heritage & History.”
63 Billboards, Cracker Barrel Old Country Store Inc., Ohio locations
64 Throughout my field observations all billboards appeared with a twenty-mile radius of the store location.
overalls, better known to consumers as Uncle Herschel, named after founder Dan Evins’
own Uncle Hershel McCartney. This “country gentleman” is the voice of authority
within the restaurant naming the specials for the day and bidding all to come back soon
upon their departure. Uncle Herschel symbolically serves to oversee all who enter into
the Cracker Barrel family by reinforcing the main tenants that Cracker Barrel clings to a
traditional family and simple hospitality.

After pulling off the highway, generally travelers must navigate their way through
cement islands to enter a well sectioned off parking lot. The exclusivity of the building
allows the consumer to be solely immersed in the nostalgia of the site, protected from
outside distractions. From the parking lot the simple melodies of American folk music
greet the customer. The front porch clearly establishes the theme of the restaurant as an
ode to old time country charm. The facade of each building is a brown worn wood, made
to resemble an early twentieth century general store. The front of each store features
windows looking into both the general store and the dining area, under the cover of the
front porch. On the porch Cracker Barrel invites its guests to ‘make themselves at home’
on the wooden rocking chairs, all of which are for sale, while playing a game of jumbo
checkers. The customer is also prepared for immersion into the memorial to Americana
because the walls of the front of the building are covered in antique signs, generally
advertising cola or local grain for sale. However, the true Cracker Barrel experience
happens upon entry.

Each restaurant is divided into three separate spaces for consumers: the front porch, the general store, and the dining room. The Cracker Barrel commitment to preserving the past meant transforming each location of the quickly expanding chain into a memorial to an older, presumably less complicated America. With the help of family friends Don and Kathleen Singleton, who owned an antique shop, Evins used his company to emphasize what he contended were fundamentally ‘American’ beliefs. Using regional antiques, each store boasts over 900 authentic and location specific elements. However, Evins carefully crafted each location with the help of the Singletons. In 1981, their son, Larry, took over for his parents. The Tennessee-native assigns and approves every store layout having overseen nearly 600 design layouts, creating individual wall schematics to ensure the exact placement of each item.67 This impressive detail demonstrates Cracker Barrel’s commitment to ensuring that its brand of Americana is

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preserved and sold properly. All of these elements work together to protect Cracker Barrel’s picture of the past while profiting off the desires of its customers.

Walking through the vestibule of the store, the customer is met with the sweet scent of spices and potpourri. The general store, also referred to as the gift shop, is filled with literally hundreds of items from home décor to old fashioned candies. Looking up, the customer can be overwhelmed by the hundreds of relics suspended from the ceiling, ranging from antique bicycles to old tin cans. The creak of the wooden floors in the gift shop only adds to the feel of home as one explores the random product offerings. Looking to the left, the customer would see a mix of seasonal home décor, generally cloaked with sayings about God or family such as “God bless this home” or “Family is God’s precious gift”. Going further left one would see the cashier’s counter which is adorned with jars full of cheap candies and a kiosk of audio books ranging from authors like Christian evangelist Joyce Meyers to conservative political commentator Glen Beck. Country and gospel music produced by Cracker Barrel’s own recording label is readily available for purchase by the entryway as well. ‘Wholesome,’ ‘down home and family-friendly’ tend to be on the signs advertising the latest albums for sale. DVD collections of various John Wayne Westerns, Leave it to Beaver, and The Andy Griffith Show are prominently displayed, each of these shows reinforcing the wholesomeness and strength of America and the family.
The gift shop continues to bombard the consumer with country themed trinkets and seasonal displays immediately to the right as well. As the customer heads towards the back right hand corner, they would pass a display of hand crafted blankets and women’s clothing. The general store is overtly gendered, targeting women with clothing, jewelry, and home goods. Moving to the back right corner of the general store is the most gendered area in the store - the toy section. The toys are very clearly divided by gender. Girls’ toys are displayed on white kiosks and shelves, while boys’ toys are displayed on
darker or primary colored wooden shelves. Toys tend to reinforce specific gender
dichotomies, offering stuffed animals and dolls for girls and guns and cars for boys.

Figure 3- Cracker Barrel Old Country Store, General Store, Sunbury, Ohio
Beyond all the products for sale, every blank space is used to memorialize a distinct Americana that reinforces a white, Christian, patriarchal family. After experiencing the gift store, the consumer moves into the main space, the dining room. The dimly lit, grey-hued room is generally divided into two or three sections for seating consisting of three to four columns of wooden two or four seat tables. Every table is complete with the monthly promotions, daily specials, a wooden peg game, and an oil lamp. Each section is highly decorated with wall panels adorned with relics ranging from nineteenth century portraits to old tin cans. These relics are tailored to their specific locale, so it is possible to see an ad from a historic company.

No dining room would be complete without the great stone fireplace that is constructed at the front of every location. The hyper-visibility and the consistency of the fireplace décor positions it as the ideological center for expressing Cracker Barrel’s American narrative. Every fireplace is free of the ads that dominate the rest of the dining space, reminding customer’s that America at its core is about the family and faith. Overt Christian images of angels, The Last Supper, and church congregations often appear on the mantle. The wall above the fireplace, however, is reserved for displaying the family. These family photos remind customers that the true picture of America is a white, straight, hardworking family. Typically, a stern, authoritative, male portrait is hung next to a female’s demure portrait. Juxtaposed in between is a buck’s head with a nineteenth century rifle prominently displayed below. Women are often times pictured with children, while the man was not. In the twenty-five field visits all mantles followed this exact structure. In every case all images on the mantle were of white families, with the
exception of a restaurant, in a rural town southeast of Cleveland, when a black portrait appeared below the rifle on the ledge of the mantle. The prominence of the white family

Figure 4- Cracker Barrel Old Country Store, Stone Fireplace, Cleveland, Oh
and the reinforcement of women as mothers is a material expression of the conservative ideology that formed in the postwar years.

Throughout the remaining sections of the dining room, the walls are adorned with a bit of everything from old farm tools, classic sporting goods, to charming advertisements for anything from soda to bubble gum. The remaining images are far from reflective of the country’s demographics. Few depictions of people of color ever grace the walls. When they do, the images tend to be either ethnically ambiguous or sexually androgynous. Women are generally only shown as wives and mothers while the select early twentieth century advertisements reinforce the objectification of women. Additionally, throughout my observations no counter-faith narrative was ever depicted; only Christian images and product offerings were available. Overall, the highly-stylized space of Cracker Barrel allows customers to journey into that “time gone-by” and experience its imagined simplicity.

The structure of the restaurant and its décor reflect Evins’ ideological commitments. As he contended, the two most important things were “what was being served and who was servin’ it.” 68 The emphasis on the later resulted in unequal hiring practices for homosexuals in February of 1991. 69 The leak of an internal memorandum exposed the covert political agenda within the Cracker Barrel Corporation. The then Vice-President of Human Relations, Williams Bridges, stated on February 21, 1991 that the company was “founded on a concept of traditional American values,” and had

decided to no longer “continue to employ individuals… who sexual preferences fail to demonstrate normal heterosexual values.”

Within twenty-four hours of the statement becoming public, Bridges rescinded it and issued a second memorandum claiming that the original comments “may have been a well-intentioned overreaction to the perceived values of our customers and their comfort levels,” promising that “in the future we will deal with any disruption in our units…on a store-by-store basis.”

Though rescinded, the policy was upheld in practice. Individual managers began witch-hunts for homosexual employees. Reports of management interviewing employees about their sexual orientation filled newspapers from New York to Los Angeles. While firings varied in number, seventeen reported cases of unmerited dismissals occurred the first year after the policy was publicized nationally. The Cracker Barrel Old Country Store had gone from a quaint imitation of the past to a stronghold of conservative ideology within months. This shift, however, did not go uncontested. A hailstorm of protest was unleashed within days of Bridges’ comments. The company could not prepare for the battles that were coming its way.

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73 Ibid.
74 The actual number of firings is not clear because worker’s files are private. The seventeen cases are only representative of those who reported their firing to the NGLTF. Mubarak S. Dahir. “Coming Out at the Barrel,” The Progressive, Vol. 56, No. 6, June 1992, 14.
Chapter 3: Contesting the Barrel

The ink had hardly dried on the dismissal forms as activists began to organize against the Old Country Store. Cracker Barrel’s institutionalization of its conservative ideology had moved from a claim of space to an exclusion of bodies. This attempt to sexually regulate, or at least closet, homosexuals made Cracker Barrel a space of contestation for full recognition and participation for members of the LGBT community. In this chapter, I will examine the ways in which various activists challenged Cracker Barrel’s policy. Though the protests were overlapping at times, I have distinguished three modes of challenge activists employed against the company. At the most basic level, all activists sought a formal change of policy. Other activists made more provocative challenges. For instance, the National Gay and Lesbian Taskforce were interested in the economic inclusion, or what I will call economic citizenship, of homosexuals. Thus, the NGLTF’s campaigns were designed to prioritize the worker and minimize their sexuality. The most radical activists, Queer Nation Atlanta, believed in normalizing homosexuality. Its attack against Cracker Barrel sought to fundamentally challenge Cracker Barrel’s construction of what is American by advocating for sexual inclusion of citizens, or otherwise noted as sexual citizenship. Each of these challenges temporarily disrupted Cracker Barrel’s notion of

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76 The term ‘economic citizenship’ is one I have borrowed from historian Alice Kessler-Harris. For more information see Alice Kessler-Harris, *In Pursuit of Equity: Women, Men, and the Quest for Economic Citizenship in 20th Century America*

77 The term ‘sexual citizenship’ is one I have borrowed from theorists David Bell and Jon Binnie. For more information see David Bell and Jon Binnie, *The Sexual Citizen: Queer Politics and Beyond* (Malden, Ma: Polity Press, 2000).
America. However, none was able to change the institutional ideology or space of Cracker Barrel.

**Negotiating Boundaries**

The first level of challenge came on an individual level. Fired employees sought legal counsel from the American Civil Liberties Union after being terminated but were turned away by lawyers who explained that Cracker Barrel’s policy was permissible within the parameters of the law.78 The Equal Opportunities Employment Commission, the federal body that works to ensure worker’s rights, did not have any provisions protecting individuals on the basis of sexual orientation. In fact, only two states at the time, Massachusetts and Wisconsin, and as few as eighty cities nationwide, had laws protecting employees from discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.79 With the law against them, gay rights’ activists concentrated their challenges to Cracker Barrel’s policies by demanding both economic citizenship and sexual citizenship.

This dual focus reflected the politics of the gay and lesbian community. For conservative gay and lesbian rights advocates, the response to the company policy was to demonstrate the validity of the LGBT-community as productive members of the capitalistic system through their ability to work and consume. More liberal queer activists, though sensitive to the economic argument, were motivated by the desire to promote sexual citizenship as a necessity. They advocated for the open acceptance of alternative sexuality and prioritized sexual identity over other identities, uniting citizens

78 Hayes, “Cracker Barrel Comes Under Fire,” 1, 79.
through differences, not their similarities. Over the next ten years, activists confronted the company through a variety of tactics to expand the boundaries of citizenship to include gays and lesbians as authentic Americans.

Working Their Way In

“We are not asking for special rights. All we’re asking is to hold a job and perform a job without being discriminated against.”– Robert Bray, spokesman for the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force

The response by gay rights’ activists to the Cracker Barrel policy was initially a demand for economic citizenship. The right to work and participate in the market, without fear of harassment or termination, had been a long standing goal of the LGBT movement. The “homo economy,” citing the LGBT’s market-involvement prior to the Gay Liberation Movement, was initially characterized by illegality and perversity because of the criminality of homosexual behavior. Following the Stonewall Riots, however, the desire not only to come out of the closet, but also to legitimize the gay lifestyle became central to the gay agenda. To confront social misconceptions concerning queer individuals, some gays engaged in assimilationist-behavior distinguished by a politics of respectability. The mantra of the “good homosexual” depicted gay and lesbians as model “consumer-citizens and therefore as builders of stable communities,” because without children to care for, gay couples were able to “make a disproportionate

82 Ibid 77.
Accordingly, some activists felt strongly that by authenticating themselves as legitimate contributors to society, and by also gaining full acceptance within it, they could participate in the larger economy. Thus, some members within the gay rights movement became invested in making the workplace both an accessible and safe public sphere for openly homosexual individuals so that they could also gain full citizenship.

The National Gay and Lesbian Taskforce, the New York-based organization founded in 1973, had long sought to integrate the homosexual community into the larger American polity. According to historian John D’Emilio, the task force was driven by the cultural injustices of the time. The NGLTF had a history of “filling in” to fight for homosexuals in various arenas. For example, “the Task Force played a critical role in the campaign to eliminate the sickness classification of homosexuality. It worked to lift the prohibition on federal civil service employment for gays and lesbians. It strove in the 1970s to make the Democratic Party responsive to the gay community. It took the lead in the 1980s in national organizing against homophobic violence. As AIDS began to devastate gay male communities, the Task Force shaped the first serious efforts in Washington to address the epidemic. It was a founding member of the Military Freedom Project, which prepared the ground for the gays-in-the-military debate of 1993.” The task force essentially was a first responder to all things gay rights related. When reports

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83 Bell and Binnie, The Sexual Citizen, 97.
84 John D’Emilio The World Turned 114
85 Ibid.
86 Ibid 99.
of Cracker Barrel’s policy were made known, the NGLTF attempted to organize accordingly.

The Cracker Barrel case was unique for the taskforce, which usually fought against more hidden corporate discrimination. Spokesman Robert Bray called the policy “unprecedented because the company [had] codified and institutionalized bigotry and discrimination.” For the National Gay and Lesbian Taskforce members to mobilize around the reports of termination, they first began advocating for economic citizenship for the fired Cracker Barrel employees. The NGLTF was not necessarily concerned with employees coming out, but rather with encouraging employees to openly profess their sexuality. The NGLTF, therefore, would be able to both challenge the conservatives’ view of gays as “deviants” and “perverts” and also self-regulate the LGBT community’s own black market behaviors. In order to mobilize without any legal protection to ensure homosexual participation in the workforce, taskforce activists used guiding principles of the politics of respectability to construct the perfect figure head to attack Cracker Barrel. To rally against the company they would need to find a candidate who could draw sympathy nationwide as Rosa Parks had done during the Montgomery Bus Boycotts.

Two cases came across the desks of the NGLTF as Cracker Barrel began firing employees. Though both originated in Georgia, the cases were worlds apart. George

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87 The termination form for Cheryl Summerville explicitly stated that she was fired for being homosexual. While employee discrimination was occurring, the explicit documentation was rare. For more information see Out at Work.
89 Escoffier, American Homo, 77.
Wylie Petty was an effeminate 21 year old homosexual waiter in Tifton, Georgia.90 Fired from the company on January 15, 1991, he was one of the first cases to circulate in the press.91 The young waiter had been with the company for fifteen months and was “never aware of the policy.”92 According to Nation’s Restaurant News, the Cracker Barrel policy, in its written form, had been enacted because of a complaint to the company’s headquarters about two male waiters kissing in the dining room of a rural Georgia location.93 While Petty was never identified as one of the individuals, his public position in the front of the restaurant (as opposed to in the kitchen) made him highly visible and open to critique. As well, his position as a waiter challenged traditional notions of gender, disqualifying him from being the NGLTF’s central figure to rally support around.

Cheryl Summerville, on the other hand, a female cook, was known as a hard worker by her boss and co-workers, but that did not save her job from the strict Cracker Barrel policy when she sat down for a meeting with her store and district manager in February.94 The 32 year old self-identified lesbian had worked for the company for nearly four years, consistently being touted as one of the top employees at the Douglassville location, just outside of Atlanta.95 As the interviews began at the Douglasville store, Summerville’s sister, who also worked at the company, warned Summerville of the new

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91 Ibid.
92 Ibid.
95 Ibid.
company policy. Summerville went to work the next day, February 15 and confronted her manager. The manager urged Summerville back to work and not to worry, stating that “the policy was really aimed at effeminate men and women who have masculine traits who might be working as waiters or waitresses.” But Summerville refused to go back into the closet realizing “it would just be a matter of time before the policy caught up with [her], too.” The story of this mother and committed partner of 11 years’ was strategically employed by the NGLTF to mobilize. With her saving grace of hard work and stable family life, Summerville was promoted to the center of the controversy, becoming the poster child for the protests against Cracker Barrel.

The Here and Queer

The NGLTF wasted no time organizing action against the Cracker Barrel policy. On March 13, NGLTF held a telethon protest through Western Union that sent over 300 protest calls to Dan Evin’s direct office line. The pre-recorded messages demanded that the policy be fully rescinded and former employees rehired. In addition, the callers

96 Out at Work.
97 Out at Work.
100 The NGLTF did promote Cheryl Summerville as a leader of the movement, however, when Summerville was first dismissed from the company she did not make contact with the NGLTF. She first contacted the ACLU who was unable to help her contest the lawfulness of her firing. (Summerville was the only dismissed employee whose termination papers read “Fired for being gay.”) Through the recommendation of her partner Sandra Riley, Summerville attended a Queer Nation meeting and informed Lynn Cothren of her situation. It was only after she was involved with QN/ATL that Summerville was co-opted by the NGLTF. For the purposes of discussing citizenship, however, it is easiest to first explore the economic aspects and then juxtapose them against more liberal organizations. For more details see Out at Work.
demanded that Cracker Barrel make a contribution to LGBT advocacy groups that sought to end discrimination. 102 While NGLTF mobilized to attack the actual policy, grassroots activist groups like Queer Nation Atlanta mobilized locally that Sunday. 103

Queer Nation, “the sometimes radical, always flamboyant gay and political group,” always had a flare for the dramatic. 104 Created in New York City in 1990, the “collection of local affinity groups” nationwide was founded with the sole goal of forcing heterosexuals to recognize gays around them and accept their existence. 105 Each chapter had its own social agenda and tactics for protesting, only united by the goal of making their presence known. John D’Emilio says Queer Nation made “politics into a form of theater.” 106 According to Lauren Berlant and Elizabeth Freeman, Queer Nation chapters, though locally focused, consistently “produced images, occupied public spaces of consumption like bars and malls, and refunctioned the culture of the trademark.” 107 Queer Nation Atlanta healed leave the nationwide charge against Cracker Barrel. Both their Southern location and chair heavily shaped the collective response against Cracker Barrel.

The southern-based chapter had a unique history. Lynn Cothren, the QN ATL chairman, worked at the Martin Luther King Jr. Center in Atlanta and was trained in non-violent resistance. His close working relationship with Corretta Scott King – he was her personal assistant for over twenty years - exposed him to Civil Right strategies that would

102 Ibid.
106 Dyer “Radical Queer”
107 Berlant and Freeman, “Queer Nationality,” 152.
directly influence Queer Nation Atlanta’s response to Cracker Barrel. With “no rules, no bylaws and no statement of purpose” nationally, it would be easy to perceive the Queer Nation as a discordant, radical group only able to make a scene; but in reality, the movement’s desire to make heterosexuals confront the homosexual lifestyle was advocating for a different form of citizenship – sexual citizenship. This sexual citizenship, while it is at its core anti-assimilationist does not endorse a dis-identification with the nation-state. Sexual citizenship, instead, calls for the full recognition and participation of an individual in every area of society because he or she is recognized as an individual within society. Queer Nation’s chant, “We Are Everywhere. We Want Everything,” is the summation of this concept; it is the difference that defines one’s place.

This embrace of difference thus pushed Queer Nation Atlanta to protest differently than the NGLTF. For instance, Queer Nation hoped to use Summerville not just as a figurehead, but as an active agent in its crusade. Cothren understood that because of the circumstances of her firing, Summerville had leverage and could be used to fuel the protests against Cracker Barrel. The company offered the former cook her job back on February 27, but she refused since the company would not publically apologize. So on March 3, 1991, twenty protestors gathered outside of the Norcross Cracker Barrel, just

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108 Out at Work.
109 Dyer, “Radical Queer.”
110 Some queer activists did readily endorse a dismantling of the state apparatus and called for a rejection of national citizenship. Queer Nation, however, was not advocating for the renunciation of national identity, but rather hoped that within the nation, identity would be constructed through difference. For more see Berlant and Freeman, “Queer Nationality,” 154.
111 Ibid 149.
outside Atlanta. The committed lot, led Cothren and Summerville, was ignored by the
noontime customers, but would soon be noticed by the company. As forces combined
with the local and national protests efforts, Queer Nation upped the ante.

The Queer Nation’s objectives were simple – draw attention to the injustice of the
Cracker Barrel policy by any means necessary. Protestors lined up outside the
establishment with signs and chanted against the company. After a few months of this
method, it was clear activists would need something more direct to make an impact.
Taking a cue from the lunch counter sit-ins of the 1960s, members of Queer Nation
moved their protest into the restaurant, took seats by the country fireplace, ordered
coffee, and waited. Cothren’s training at the King Center was evident as he replicated
the lunch counter protests of the Civil Rights Movement. “We are not trying to get
arrested; we are going prepared to be arrested,” Cothren boldly stated. After previous
warnings by store management to keep protests outside the stores, the eleven protesters
drank cup after cup of coffee waiting for confrontation. Effectively halting business with
the occupation of tables and amusing curious customers, the protesters, dressed in black
shirts adorned with large, yellow Q’s on the front, were asked to leave by two employees,
but they refused. The police soon escorted the protesters, including Summerville, off
the premises, charging all of them as criminal trespassers. Weeks later in Union City,

113 Ibid.
116 Ibid.
117 Shepard, “Restaurant Protesters.”
118 Ibid.
just miles from Lithonia, eighteen additional protesters, under Queer Nation’s direction, were arrested for similar behavior. The arrests did not quell the passion Queer Nation had against Cracker Barrel. However, the charges did limit their ability to protest. An alliance with the NGLTF to rally against the company, though, created a venue for protest that trumped any ideological differences between the two organizations.

On August 11, 1991, 150 protesters descended upon the company’s headquarters in Lebanon, Tennessee. Led by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, the protest began at 9 a.m. in Nashville’s Centennial Park. Various organizations and allies including Queer Nation Atlanta, the National Organization for Women, the Metropolitan Community Church – Nashville, the Tennessee Boycott Coalition and others joined to hear Cheryl Summerville’s personal experience of the company’s bigotry. Summerville gave a “moving testimony on the injustice of the policy and how [it] mobilized her to take action.” The protest then travelled to the company’s headquarters and oldest locale and the protestors from all present groups proceeded to effectively stop 97% of the Sunday brunch sales by occupying tables. Activists from Queer Nation, however, were still banned from entry by the company, so they led the raucous protest outside the restaurant. Together, the gay supporters advocated for the full recognition of homosexuals and their access to economic participation.

119 Ibid.
121 Ibid.
The interjection of a homosexual presence into Cracker Barrel aided in queering the company’s American memorial. Since the restaurant was filled with gay adversaries, as well as allies, the actual stores served as a battleground for challenging the inclusion of homosexuals in various areas of American life. Summerville and those arrested understood this reality – the Cracker Barrel Company would not idly tolerate being targeted, instead they and their customers would defend their policies and practices. Cracker Barrel videotaped and observed the protesters carefully. Outside, gay-rights activists were met with smoke bombs by anti-gay Cracker Barrel customers and drivers attempting to plow down the picket lines. Other accounts of the day detail the hostility of the setting. Mel Perry, a pastor at Grace Bible Presbyterian Church in Madison, Tennessee, marched as a “counter-protester” with a sign reading “Homosexuality Is An Abomination!” But it did not stop there. Just a few months later, in November, Cracker Barrel sued the activists for damages. Ivy Young, Director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, along with members from Queer Nation and others, were named in the suit. Young promised that the suit would not “stop our protests, demonstrations, petition drive or boycott until this company makes it clear that lesbians and gay men can work for them in safety and security.” Queer Nation continued to demand a meeting with Evins and the board of directors, but the company would not respond. Company officials were convinced that if they could ignore the protestors, or better yet, prevent

124 Ibid.
125 Hayes, “Cracker Barrel Protesters Don’t Shake Loyal Patrons.”
protesting all together, then they would be able to protect the private space and policies of the company. In the face of lawsuits and arrests and the seeming indifference of Cracker Barrel customers, new measures had to be taken to end the discrimination.\textsuperscript{128} If activists wanted change, they could no longer advocate for economic and sexual citizenship. To overturn the policy, their activism had to be broadened.

Without the classification of a protected category from workplace discrimination, gay-rights activists were attempting to gain legal protections through persistent protests and media coverage. Cheryl Summerville was elevated to media stardom, condemning the nostalgic chain on programs such as ABC’s 20/20, CNN’s Larry King Live and The Oprah Winfrey Show. However, her efforts fell short.\textsuperscript{129} Though protests and restaurant occupations continued well into 1993, Cracker Barrel’s business was booming. Company sales had increased by 29\% and 46 new stores were opened from 1991 to 1993.\textsuperscript{130} The company was well on its way to becoming one of the fastest-growing family chains in the nation. By July of 1992, the company was worth well over 1 billion dollars, with annual profits increasing 50\%.\textsuperscript{131} The occupations of only a few stores on select weekends could not dent the profits being made. Evins first sold stock to the public in 1981, so while customers and corporate players might agree with the policy, one group’s opinion Evins and his team neglected, and unwisely underestimated, were the shareholders.\textsuperscript{132}

\[\text{\textsuperscript{128} Ibid.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{129} Shepard, “Not Just Fired.”}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{131} “Growth Companies,” Restaurant and Institutions, Vol. 102, No. 17, July 22, 1992, 108; Gutner, “Nostalgia Sells,” 102.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{132} Gutner, “Nostalgia Sells,” 102.}\]
By 1993, Cracker Barrel had faced countless protests. But in its silences, Cracker Barrel had failed to adequately appease its stockholders, a group able to disrupt much more than just a lunch hour. The New York City Employee Retirement Systems (NYCERS), responsible for managing pensions for the city, held over 89,000 shares in Cracker Barrel, worth approximately 3 million dollars in 1991. On March 12, just weeks after the publication of the employment policy, comptroller Elizabeth Holtzman and finance commissioner Carol O’Cleireacain wrote a letter to the company challenging the policy and requesting it be withdrawn. Evins responded by denying the discriminatory policy still existed, but reports of firings continued. The weak company assurance and their failure to justify the remedial action taken against the fired employees prompted Holtzman to commission an investigation of the company that concluded that without a public apology, the pension fund would remove its investments from Cracker Barrel. Unlike the various queer activist groups, the northern-based pension fund opted to fight Cracker Barrel through mediated corporate resolutions rather than direct political action. The NYCERS also were not fighting for a particular form of citizenship. Rather their antagonism against the company came from an objection to the lack of legal protection for workers. This concern began to broaden the range of people who would take notice of Cracker Barrel’s policy and take issue with the company’s unwillingness to change.

134 The pension fund did remove some funds over the next few years, decreasing their investments to 121,000 shares, but still remained heavily invested in the company, controlling 4.5 million dollars. See Jack Hayes, “Cracker Barrel Protesters Don’t Shake Loyal Patrons,” *Nation’s Restaurant News*, August 26, 1991.
As NYCERS began to public profess its dissatisfaction with Cracker Barrel, Queer Nation members and other gay-rights activists launched the “Buy One” campaign, buying single shares of stock in the company in order to be able to attend the annual stockholder’s meeting alongside the NYCERS. By working as a part of the company, activists would have the ability to submit proposals for proxy vote. So on November 6, 1991 the NCYERS voted to submit a shareholder resolution that required the implementation of an anti-discrimination employment policy that would encompass sexual orientation.\textsuperscript{135} Queer Nation members and NYCERS intended to make their case to the company.

This resolution was to be voted on by shareholders and the advisory board at the annual shareholders meeting later that month. However, this incipient challenge was met with resistance by Cracker Barrel. In fact the resolution was not presented at the 1991 shareholders meeting. Instead several single stockholding activists were met with a court injunction prohibiting their participation in the stockholders meeting. Only a select few activists were allowed in, while Summerville and others were prohibited.\textsuperscript{136} The company wished to carry on business as usual and viewed their policy as nothing more than an “old issue” that should be treated as such; therefore, the company remained silent and continued to ignore requests from stockholders for the next five months.\textsuperscript{137} During this time, however, more queer activists began to broaden their influence by making alliances with labor unions, pension funds, and civil rights organizations nationwide.\textsuperscript{138}

\textsuperscript{136}“Coming Out at the Barrel,” \textit{The Progressive}, Vol. 56, No. 6 (June 1992) 14.
\textsuperscript{138}Out at Work.
spring of 1992, protest had spread into states as far north as Michigan.\textsuperscript{139} As protests began to impact stores outside of the South, so did the media attention. A media campaign against the company exposed the lack of legal protection for homosexuals, categorizing the policy as a matter of civil liberties. The idea that a person could be fired just for being gay began to worry some equal opportunists about the enforcement of other civil rights legislations. This attention allowed the NYCERS resolution to gain the support of other prominent shareholders such as the Philadelphia Municipal Retirement System.\textsuperscript{140} Beyond the fear that other minorities may be at risk, the company’s decision to ignore and alienate stockholders caused the NYCERS to push back even more adamantly. The NYCERS were determined that their rights as company owners would no longer be ignored.

Faced with sending proxy material to all shareholders regarding the resolution, Cracker Barrel looked for a loophole in the Securities Exchange Commission’s corporate regulations. According to Rule 14a-8 of the SEC, when a resolution was filed, the company must send proxy materials to its shareholders and host a vote on the resolution at its next shareholders meeting; one exception, however, said that activities that could be categorized as “ordinary business operations” were beyond the governance of shareholders. The vague language of “ordinary business operations” was further muddied as Cracker Barrel analysts tried to determine if hiring practices were within the realm of every day operations. This particular rule had been challenged in 1976 to block corporations from keeping important issues from shareholders merely because they were

\textsuperscript{139} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{140} “Cracker Barrel Hit by Anti-Bias Protest.”
concerned with routine operations. The language of the rule was not amended a clause stating “matters which have significant policy, economic or other implications inherent to them,” were unable to be excluded by corporations from proxy vote. This addendum to Rule 14a-8 became known as the 1976 adoption. Cracker Barrel, confused by the ambiguity of this rule and the 1976 adoption, wrote to the SEC for further clarification.¹⁴¹ In October 1992, the SEC responded with a “no-action” letter, permitting Cracker Barrel to prohibit the inclusion of the proposed resolution in the materials for shareholders at the annual 1992 meeting, once again defeating the NYCERS petition for a change in hiring practices.¹⁴²

The SEC’s refusal to protect shareholders’ voices led the store-based policy to become a battle over more than just gay rights. O’Cleireacain wrote on behalf of the NYCERS to the SEC following the no-action letter asserting that “this ruling is not consistent with previous SEC determinations which allowed shareholder proposals respecting equal employment policies” to be distributed.¹⁴³ By changing the language of their organizing to become an issue of equal rights and shareholders’ rights, NYCERS effectively thrust Cracker Barrel back into the national spotlight. The policy debate of Cracker Barrel had been re-centered from those marginalized populations to a challenge over the rights of stockholders.

¹⁴² Ibid.
The movement that once began to defend the inclusion of homosexuals had become one of equal protections of the law – a civil right. “Discrimination in employment, whether on the basis of sexual orientation, race, religion, or gender has no place in this country,” stated Holtzman, grouping sexual orientation in with other protected categories. Critics of the SEC’s decision began to make noise. John C. Coffee, a Columbia Professor and Mary Schapiro, a SEC board member, each wrote explicit editorials criticizing the SEC’s unwillingness to intervene. The SEC feared that by allowing any stockholder to submit a resolution the corporation would become infested with political agendas, not recognizing that the conservative owners of companies policies and operations were already effectively politicized.

The NYCERS along with two other groups, the United States Trust Co. of Boston and the United Methodist Church’s Women’ Division decided that they could not wait any longer for the grassroots methods of their queer allies to pay off, so they sued the SEC in March 1993 to get their voices heard. Judge Kimba Wood ruled that the SEC “could not bar resolutions on employment discrimination from shareholder proxies without going through formal rule-making procedures, a lengthy process that involves issuing an opinion and collecting public comment,” and so the NYCERS had finally made an inroad for change. The proposal to protect employees from discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation was first heard in November 1993. While the first attempt failed, the ability for stockholders to demand legal protection for sexual minorities was a

144 Noble, “Gay Group Asks Accord in Job Dispute.”
first. The proposal would continue to be presented for the next ten sessions and would eventually be adopted in 2002.\textsuperscript{147}

Conclusion: Retaining the Barrel

In January 2012, Cracker Barrel founder Dan Evins passed away. The New York Times announced his death stating, “Danny Evins, who created Cracker Barrel Old Country Store, a restaurant heavy on grits and nostalgia, expanded it into a $2 billion chain and then fought a losing battle to discriminate against gay employees, died on Saturday in Lebanon, Tenn.” Nearly two decades removed from the initial incident, the company and its founder, were still being defined by the defense for their America. However, the company’s opponents had long since stopped their protests. Queer Nation Atlanta had disbanded in April 1994. The policy changes that were secured in 2002 kept stockholders happy and Cracker Barrel continued to expand well into the next decade. So did Evins and the Cracker Barrel Company actually lose? While their policy was overturned, Cracker Barrel defended its space, both physically and ideologically, to continue to construct and commodify a conservative-friendly picture of America. Activists settled for attacking Cracker Barrel on the grounds of discrimination, fairly unsuccessfuely because of the limit of the law, without forcing any ideological shift in the company. By allowing conservatives to continue selling their brand of America and culturally dominating the restaurant industry, conservatives continue to have cultural cachet in the marketplace.

Cracker Barrel’s defense of a “simpler” America kept them occupied in the courts. The court cases that continued in the late 1990s and early 2000s were concerned with racial and gender discrimination. Because sexual orientation was not a protected class, the courts were only able to challenge the company in this regard. Few activists, however, were able to actually affect the corporation. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, one of the 120 members of the Boycott Cracker Barrel coalition, began accumulating a slew of complaints by Cracker Barrel employees claiming racial discrimination. Employees and customers were being treated unjustly, the claims said, denied promotions and visibility in the workplace, and subject to racial slurs, such as “porch monkey” and “nigger.” In 1999 a court case Kelvis Rhodes et al. v. Cracker Barrel was filed in federal court in the northern district of Georgia claiming that Cracker Barrel was guilty of systematic racial discrimination in promotions and hiring. Thirteen complainants motioned for a class action suit to challenge the hiring and promotion practices of the company. While they requested changes to the hiring procedures and minimal fees to be paid, no individual sought punitive damages from the settlement. The case was investigated by the Department of Justice and the EEOC for three years before the motion was denied in December 2002. The individuals were unable to prove that this was an act of the company, not of individuals.  

The Department of Justice began gathering leads for its own case in the early 2000s. It found evidence of discrimination in over fifty locations, spanning seven states, and by the end of its investigation had 150 witnesses.\footnote{Department of Justice, Press Release, May 3, 2004.} The lawsuit filed in 2002 was one of four active lawsuits facing the company.\footnote{CBRL Group, Inc. 2002 Annual Report. Report. Lebanon, Tn, 2002.} Cracker Barrel made its concerns for repercussions clear to shareholders, yet it was not worried by unfavorable rulings.\footnote{Department of Justice, Press Release, May 3, 2004.} Thus to end the cases quickly, Cracker Barrel settled with the Department of Justice agreeing to adopt a forty-two page anti-discrimination policy that would require outside auditors, new human relations training, and posted signs of the company’s commitment to diversity.\footnote{Department of Justice, Press Release, May 3, 2004.} The “Pleasing People” policy, identified by Cracker Barrel’s own Uncle Herschel, co-opted country themes and language to seem inclusive. Yet the

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\caption{Sign that is posted as a result of the Pleasing People Anti-Discrimination policy, Hilliard, Oh}
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new program upheld the company’s aesthetic and down-home values, with little reference to race or gender. The company was not forced to admit guilt, allowing the family restaurant to remain respectable. Yet, it was placed on a five year probationary period.

Four months later, the NAACP launched a heavy handed attack, a $100 million lawsuit against the company on the behalf of forty-two different individuals in over sixteen states. Cracker Barrel ultimately paid out only 8.7 million dollars to settle the NAACP case. Over the next six years, Cracker Barrel faced charges in Illinois, New Mexico, and Arkansas all led by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. These cases cost Cracker Barrel millions of dollars and kept it in violation of its 2002 probation. The complaints were the same everywhere; black Americans and women were talked down to, seated in unfavorable sections, refused service, and at times threatened. Cracker Barrel paid to maintain and defend its space. Cracker Barrel’s picture of America was distinctly white, straight, with preference to males and within their restaurant it could be a reality. While activist may have been tiring out Cracker Barrel’s corporate lawyers, the multi-billion dollar corporation continued expanding to over 600 stores nationwide. On September 27, 2011, the company signed an agreement with the EEOC that would allow it to streamline the cases so as to pay its fines without having to keep going to

154 Ibid: CBRL Group, Inc. "Student Research FAQ."
156 Ibid.
158 “Heritage and History.”
court.\textsuperscript{159} Cracker Barrel had learned that it was better to pay in the courts than have activists interjecting its American narrative. By keeping its restaurants styled accordingly, free of any counter-narrative, Cracker Barrel would be able to maintain their American dream, a land defined by Evangelical, white families.

The Cracker Barrel Corporation represents the ways in which conservative business owners were able to use companies to limit authentic membership to the American story and protect their version. While policies and legal status may changes, as long as the sites persist, conservatives will still be able to fight for their beliefs. Conservative America is a reality. With every side of fried apples, a distinct taste of Americana is being served. These roadside oases achieve their mission of preserving the past by maintaining their place in America’s consumer society.

Bibliography


