SOFTWARE & TECH

# Aunt Jemima And Uncle Ben

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## From Stereotype to Rebrand: The Complex Legacy of Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben

For generations, breakfast tables and dinner plates across America were graced by two familiar faces: Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben. These characters, emblazoned on pancake syrup and rice boxes, were more than just brand mascots—they were cultural touchstones embedded in the American consciousness. However, beneath the smiling visages and comforting brand names lay a deeply problematic history rooted in racial caricature and slavery-era imagery. The journey of Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben from beloved household figures to symbols of outdated stereotypes, and ultimately to their modern rebranding, tells a powerful story about race, commerce, and the evolving American identity. Understanding this transformation is essential for anyone interested in marketing, social justice, or the subtle ways that imagery shapes our perceptions of history.

## The Origins of Aunt Jemima: A Story Rooted in Minstrelsy

The Aunt Jemima brand was born in 1889, not from a real person, but from a commercial fantasy. The character was inspired by a minstrel show song titled "Old Aunt Jemima," which itself was performed by white actors in blackface. Chris Rutt and Charles Underwood, the creators of the pancake mix, needed a memorable name and image. They found it in this song, and the character of Aunt Jemima was born—a happy, faithful, and rotund Black woman who was supposedly content serving white families.

The first person to portray Aunt Jemima publicly was Nancy Green, a formerly enslaved woman who was hired in 1890 to demonstrate the pancake mix at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Green was a talented storyteller and cook, and she helped launch the brand into national prominence. However, she was never allowed to be herself. She was required to wear an apron, a headscarf, and speak in the exaggerated dialect expected of the "mammy" stereotype. This image—the smiling, loyal, and subservient Black woman—would define the brand for over a century.

Over the decades, several Black women portrayed Aunt Jemima, including Anna Robinson, who was featured on the iconic box for many years, and later Lillian Richard and Aylene Lewis. Each woman brought humanity to the role, but the underlying caricature remained unchanged. The character's image was updated periodically—in 1968, the headscarf was replaced with a headband, and in 1989, she was given pearl earrings and a lace collar—but the core stereotype persisted. The name "Aunt" itself was a problematic holdover from the post-Civil War South, where Black women were denied the respectful titles of "Mrs." or "Miss" and were instead called "Aunt" by white families, regardless of any actual familial relationship.

## The Origins of Uncle Ben: From a Real Person to a Rice Icon

The story of Uncle Ben's Rice follows a similar trajectory, though with some distinct differences. The brand was created in the 1940s by Converted Rice Inc., which sought to market a new parboiled rice product. The company's founders, Eric Huzenlaub and Gordon Harwell, drew inspiration from a real Black rice farmer in Texas named Uncle Ben, who was known for producing high-quality rice. The character on the box, however, was based on Frank Brown, a Black head waiter at a prestigious Chicago restaurant.

Unlike Aunt Jemima, Uncle Ben was not originally born from minstrelsy, but his image was still filtered through a lens of racial stereotyping. The name "Uncle" carried the same demeaning connotations as "Aunt"—a term used to deny Black men the dignity of "Mr." while implying a comfortable, non-threatening familiarity. The image of Uncle Ben showed a dignified, elderly Black man in a bow tie, which was actually a step up from the more overtly caricatured depictions common at the time. However, he was still presented as a servant figure—a smiling, kindly man who served white families their rice.

The portrayal of Uncle Ben as a "servant" or "butler" figure was reinforced by the brand's early advertising, which often showed him in a domestic serving role. Over time, the brand sought to update his image by giving him a business suit and later a more professional appearance, but the name "Uncle Ben" remained a point of contention. The character, like Aunt Jemima, became an uncomfortable reminder of a time when Black people were depicted as happy to serve, rather than as equal participants in society.

## Cultural Impact and Criticism: The Weight of Stereotypical Branding

For decades, Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben were accepted by mainstream America without question. They were seen as harmless, even comforting figures that evoked nostalgia for a simpler time. But for many Black Americans, these images were painful reminders of a history they were trying to escape. The "mammy" and "uncle" stereotypes locked Black people into narrow, demeaning roles that had been used to justify slavery and segregation.

The cultural criticism of these brands grew louder in the late 20th century. Civil rights organizations, including the NAACP, began calling attention to the harmful nature of racial caricatures in advertising. Academics and activists pointed out that these stereotypes were not just offensive but actively damaging, as they reinforced outdated ideas about Black subservience and contentment with second-class citizenship. The fact that these images were used to sell food to American families made the insult even more profound—it suggested that Black people were so eager to serve that they could even be used to market the products they prepared.

Despite growing awareness, the companies behind Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben were slow to change. They made small adjustments to the images over the years, but they consistently defended the characters as "warm" and "friendly" figures, ignoring the racial undertones. For many years, the business case for maintaining the brand equity of these iconic characters outweighed the calls for change. The brands were massively profitable, and their images were recognized by over 90% of American consumers. Changing them seemed like an unnecessary risk.

## The Rebranding Movement: A Long-Overdue Reckoning

The tipping point came in the summer of 2020, after the murder of George Floyd and the global protests for racial justice that followed. Companies across America were forced to confront their own histories and contributions to systemic racism. In June 2020, PepsiCo, the owner of the Quaker Oats Company which produced Aunt Jemima, announced that it would retire the brand name and image after 131 years. Mars Inc., the owner of Uncle Ben's Rice, followed shortly after, announcing a similar change.

These decisions were not made lightly. Both companies acknowledged that the characters were based on racial stereotypes and that it was time to move forward. Quaker Oats stated that the Aunt Jemima brand "did not appropriately reflect the values of the company or its consumers." Mars Inc. echoed this sentiment, noting that "there is a clear opportunity to evolve the Uncle Ben's brand, including its visual identity." The announcements were met with a mix of praise and criticism—many celebrated the long-overdue change, while others argued that it was a performative gesture that did little to address deeper issues of racial inequality.

It is worth noting that some Black employees of these companies had been pushing for change for years, only to be ignored until the national mood shifted. The rebranding also raised important questions about the people behind the characters. Nancy Green, the first "Aunt Jemima," was a formerly enslaved woman who never received full recognition or compensation for her contribution to the brand. Frank Brown, who posed for the Uncle Ben portrait, was never publicly identified during his lifetime. The companies have since made efforts to acknowledge these individuals and their stories, but critics argue that more should be done to honor their legacies, such as through scholarships or charitable foundations.

### What Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben Became

After months of deliberation and research, the new identities were unveiled. The Aunt Jemima brand was renamed the **Pearl Milling Company**, named after the original company that produced the pancake mix in the late 1800s. The new logo features a simple, modern design with a red and white color scheme and an illustration of a gristmill. The Pearl Milling Company focuses on the history of the product itself, rather than on a problematic character.

Uncle Ben's became **Ben's Original**. The new name removes the "Uncle" title while keeping the name "Ben," which the company says was inspired by the original rice farmer. The packaging was redesigned to feature a simple orange background with the text "Ben's Original" in a clean font. The image of the elderly Black man was removed entirely, replaced by a single grain of rice as the icon. The company also committed to telling the stories of Black rice farmers and to supporting educational and community initiatives.

## Broader Implications: What the Rebranding Means for Marketing and Representation

The evolution of Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben has significant implications beyond the grocery store aisle. It represents a fundamental shift in how companies think about brand heritage and consumer expectations. In the past, brand loyalty was often tied to nostalgia and familiarity. Companies assumed that changing a beloved logo or name would alienate customers. The rebranding of these two iconic brands demonstrated that, in the modern era, consumers—especially younger generations—are more concerned with authenticity and social responsibility than with outdated imagery.

However, the rebranding also raises important questions about corporate accountability. Critics note that changing a name and logo is relatively easy compared to making meaningful changes in corporate culture, hiring practices, and community investment. For example, both PepsiCo and Mars Inc. have pledged to increase diversity in their advertising and leadership, but these promises must be backed by measurable action. The removal of Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben alone does not solve the problem of racial inequality in the food industry or in corporate America.

Another important consideration is the preservation of history. Some historians and cultural critics have argued that removing these images entirely could lead to "historical erasure." They suggest that these brands should be documented and taught about as examples of how racial stereotypes were commercialized, rather than simply hidden away. The Pearl Milling Company and Ben's Original have taken steps to acknowledge their past on their websites and in their marketing materials, but the physical packaging no longer carries the visual reminder of that history. This tension between moving forward and forgetting the past is one that many companies will continue to grapple with.

### The Impact on Other Brands

The decision to rebrand Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben sent shockwaves through the food industry. Other companies quickly followed suit, including:

- Mrs. Butterworth's syrup, which changed its packaging to remove the character that appeared to be a "mammy" figure.
- Cream of Wheat, which removed the image of a Black chef from its packaging and began a review of its branding.
- Eskimo Pie, which changed its name to Edy's Pie to remove a term considered a racial slur.
- Fairlife milk, which changed its logo after criticism of its imagery.

This wave of rebranding showed that the conversation about racial imagery in advertising was no longer a niche concern but a mainstream expectation. Consumers were increasingly willing to vote with their wallets, and companies realized that clinging to outdated stereotypes was a liability rather than an asset.

## Lessons Learned: The Future of Inclusive Branding

The story of Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben offers several important lessons for marketers, business leaders, and consumers. First, it demonstrates that brand imagery is never neutral. Every image, name, and logo carries cultural weight and historical context. Companies must be vigilant about how their branding might be interpreted, especially when it draws on racial, ethnic, or cultural symbols. Second, it shows that listening to marginalized communities is essential. For decades, Black consumers and employees raised concerns about these brands, but their voices were ignored. When the national conversation shifted, the companies finally acted—but only after the damage had already been done to their reputations.

Third, the rebranding journey highlights the importance of genuine action over performative change. Removing an offensive image is a good first step, but it must be accompanied by deeper commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion. This includes hiring more people of color in leadership positions, supporting Black-owned businesses, investing in communities, and telling more authentic and inclusive stories in advertising.

Finally, this story is a reminder that progress is possible, even for the most established institutions. The fact that two of the most recognizable brands in American history could be fundamentally changed in the span of a few months shows that societal norms can evolve rapidly when the conditions are right. It also


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