

Dear Editor,

February is Black History Month, a time to reflect on the many great accomplishments and contributions by African Americans throughout the centuries. As we celebrate this rich history, we also must acknowledge the many tragic aspects of our history with America, including the troubling 400+ year relationship between Blacks and the tobacco industry.

Though commercial tobacco has evolved over the years, from regular cigarettes to menthols, flavored cigars to e-cigs and vapes, there is one constant — industry targeting of Black communities. What began with tobacco being introduced to West Africa by Europeans, then cultivated in Sierra Leone, and used to suppress hunger in the Congo by the 1600s, devolved into tobacco and tobacco pipes being established as one of the main goods used to buy enslaved people on the African coast by the mid-17th century.

The slave trade brought tobacco to North American colonies, mainly Virginia, to supply the English market. Slaves in North America now cultivated the very crop that had enslaved them. Not until the Emancipation Proclamation did Blacks in America cease to cultivate tobacco fields as slaves. Still the tobacco industry refused to release its hold on free Black labor. They now used the deception of sharecropping, Jim Crow, the chain gangs, incarceration and generations of Black Americans to cultivate their tobacco fields.

Sadly, the multibillion tobacco industry of today has been built on the backs of the enslaved and their lineage. This success has been achieved to the detriment of Black health and through the egregious behaviors that are so deeply entrenched in the tobacco industry's DNA.

The negative impacts continue today in the United States, including here in Wisconsin. Studies show that there is up to 10 times more tobacco marketing in Black neighborhoods than other neighborhoods. The tobacco industry spends an estimated \$161.2 million dollars to market its deadly products in our state. Many of their ads feature menthol and are targeted towards Black communities. Menthols are the most heavily marketed and sold product in communities of color.

The targeting is working. The adult smoking rate for Black people living in Wisconsin is 17%, much higher than the rate for white people in the state (12%). In the 1950s, less than 10% of Black smokers in the U.S. used menthol cigarettes; today in Wisconsin the number has grown to 85%, compared to 41% of White Smokers. Menthol's influence is not limited by Black communities in the state, as [forty-three percent of adults](#) in Wisconsin who smoke currently smoke menthols.

There is some light at the end of the tunnel. Efforts to raise awareness about the tobacco industry targeting, especially with menthol, continue to grow. Exhibitions like "[Same Game Different Smokers](#)," which explores the troubled history between African Americans and tobacco, and the film series "[Black Lives/Black Lungs](#)," have motivated thousands to learn this history and take action so it doesn't keep repeating itself.

You have the power to make a difference. Join or support (ADD COALITION/ORGANIZATION NAME). Speak out against tobacco industry injustices. Help those who are victims of targeting quit by urging them to utilize the [Wisconsin Tobacco Quit-Line](#) at 1-800-QUIT-NOW, or by texting "[VAPEFREE](#)" to 873373. Youth can become involved by joining [FACT](#), Wisconsin's youth-driven tobacco prevention movement.

