



# A Fresh Take on Tolerance

The Jim Crow Museum began as the personal project of David Pilgrim, a sociology professor at Ferris State University. It grew out of his initial collection of more than 3,000 artifacts suffused with racist imagery. Using items from his collection to interact with his students, he witnessed the learning these interactions inspired. Dr. Pilgrim sought to make his collection more publically accessible by donating it to the university.

Since its inception in 1996, the Jim Crow Museum has become an internationally recognized resource for students, teachers, researchers, scholars, human rights workers, documentarians, and the national media. It even has come to serve as a teaching tool for police and law enforcement agencies. In 2012 the Museum was reconceptualized and expanded upon—bringing more objects onto display on the lower level of the university's FLITE Library Building.

A similar re-conceiving process is underway to have the now-massive collection of over 20,000 assets displayed in a wholly new museum building at the university's main entrance, transforming the institution into the *Jim Crow Museum, Archive, and Research Center*.



**One of the most important contributions to the study of American history that I have ever experienced.**

**—Dr. Henry Louis Gates Jr., Director of the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for African American Research**

# A Message from Dr. David Pilgrim, Museum Founder and Director

**I bought my first piece of racist memorabilia when I was about 12 years old** in Mobile, Alabama. It was a salt-n-pepper shaker. Today, some people would call the object black memorabilia—but that label hides the ugliness that it represented. I broke it. In the years that followed, I bought similar objects: two- and three-dimensional items that caricatured, mocked, and belittled Black people. I did not break those pieces. Instead, I began a lifelong quest to collect as many of these objects as I could afford to use as teaching tools. As a young professor, I showed my students the objects I had collected. We sought to understand the many ways that these objects reflected and shaped attitudes toward African Americans.

In 2012, we opened the current iteration of the Jim Crow Museum on the campus of Ferris State University. Woodbridge Nathan Ferris, the founder of our university, was committed to making this world better. That is a commitment shared by and lived out in the work of the Jim Crow Museum. We take objects that were meant for harm, we contextualize their role in our nation's past, and we use them to facilitate the conversations that will help us, as Americans, avoid the mistakes of the past.

This anti-racism facility is a shrine to the resiliency of African Americans, not a shrine to racism. Every day we have the conversations Americans need to have about race and race relations with our visitors. In 2021, the public is seeking trusted resources to better understand race, race relations, and racism. African Americans still endure the consequences and injustices of a racist past. The museum and its staff have years



**The mission of the Jim Crow Museum is straightforward: to use items of intolerance to teach tolerance and promote social justice.**

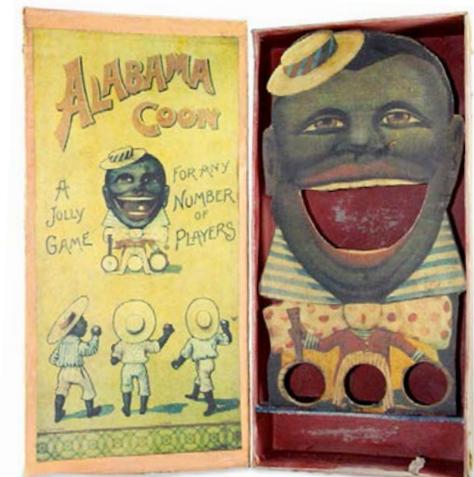
**—Dr. David Pilgrim**

of experience in engaging in civil discourse with those of all backgrounds, races, colors, or creeds through challenging history and confrontational objects. They

are experts in deploying the museum's collection to share history, facilitate dialogue, and teach tolerance to the world. As our schools, communities, and institutions strive to foster healing and grapple with uncomfortable and challenging dialogues, Ferris State University is planning, designing, and constructing a new Jim Crow Museum, Archive, and Research Center.

Our new facility and accompanying programs will expand access to the museum's resources, enhance preservation efforts, and amplify the work of our mission—to use objects of intolerance to teach tolerance and promote a more just society moving forward. A better America is possible, and it will be led by the thoughtful people who are not caught up in happy history—people that see the wrongs of the past and seek to repair the world.

**We need dedicated champions who will help us move the important work of the museum forward. I hope you join us.**





**Buildings need only act as shelter. Architecture must express something more. The central message of the [*Jim Crow Museum of Racist Imagery*] can be told by the exhibits alone, but the visitors can leave with a stronger impression if the architecture reinforces the exhibits within and the architectural language speaks for the building’s reason for being.**

**–Kenneth Neumann, Architect, Neumann/Smith Architecture**

## The Museum’s Mission, Reflected in the Building’s Form

**The architecture of the new building infuses its exterior presence with the the museum’s mission.**

It melds together a metaphor of the Black experience and the intolerance of the Jim Crow era to express the concepts of tolerance and equity. The facade and shape of the building express the fraught racial experiences described within the museum. It evokes the duality of the Black American experience—of complex individuals seen in a single dimension.

A warm, earth-toned, curved veil wraps a portion of the building and stands in stark contrast to the white block-like structure it seems to support. Together, these elements suggest a contrast between Black and white experiences and imply the tensions that persist in American society around race. The veil opens up into a ribbon surrounding the white structure, representing the barriers imposed on Black people.



To live behind the veil is to be Jim Crow-ed, cut off from full participation, belittled, treated as inferior.

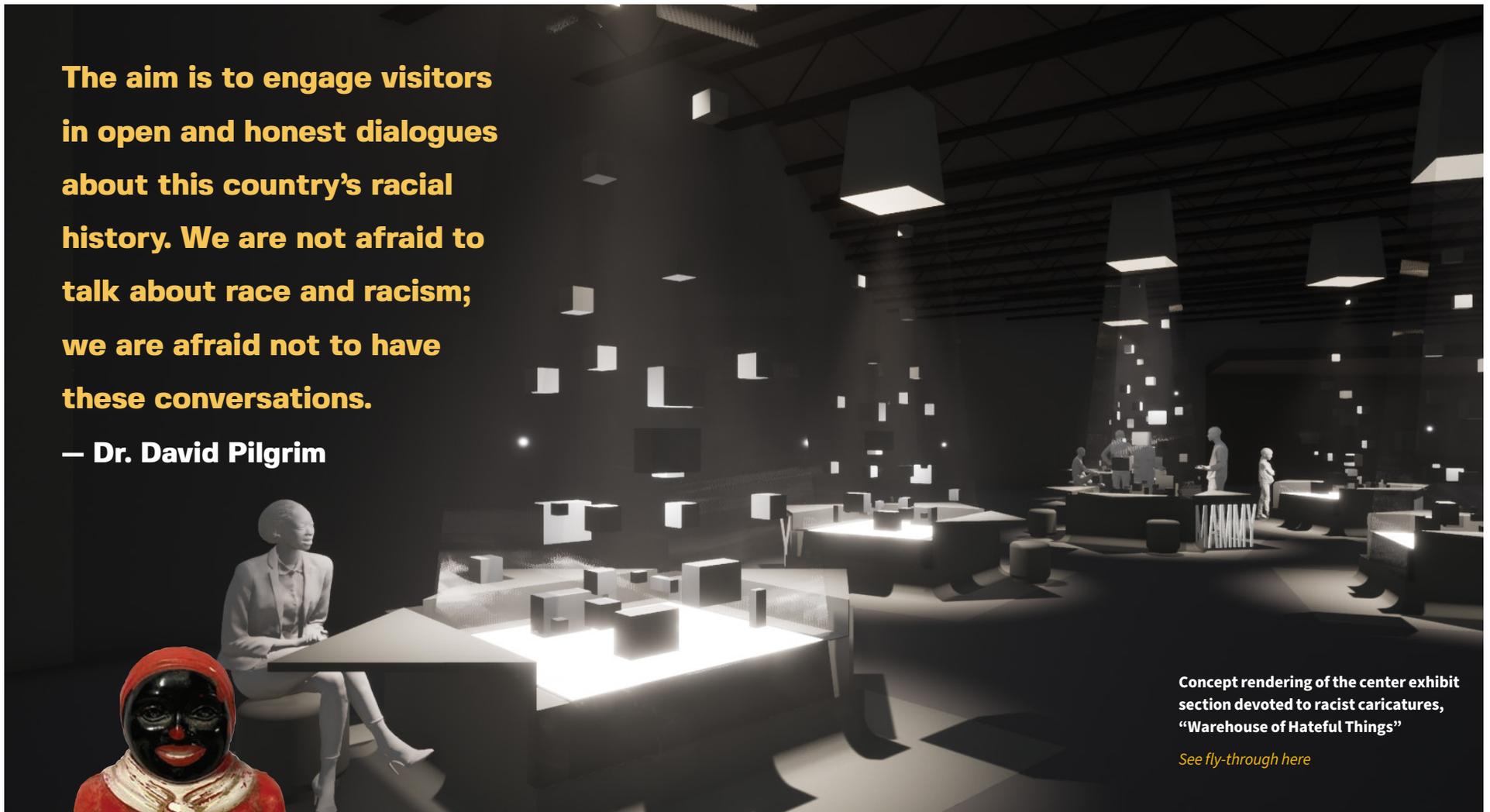
This design employs the forms, colors, and symbolism of African diaspora cultures and the experience of living under Jim Crow laws. Built from steel panels in various sizes and textures with a rusted patina, each piece of

the veil offers unique characteristics to the collective expression. Evocative of “the veil,” as described by W.E.B. DuBois in *The Souls of Black Folks*, the textured scrim connotes a sense of otherness in the architecture. As the veil shrouds the building, it obscures views from inside and out, limiting an understanding of what’s beyond and within.

Rivers link Black Americans to Africa. They are symbols of African heritage. From antiquity to today, rivers—both symbolic rivers and actual ones—influenced souls and lives. The river is also a symbol of the challenges faced and overcome. The many rivers crossed are evidence of strength and resiliency. And as visitors approach the entrance, they cross the muddy banks of the metaphorical river bisecting the museum, representing the challenging subject matter they will face within.

**The aim is to engage visitors in open and honest dialogues about this country's racial history. We are not afraid to talk about race and racism; we are afraid not to have these conversations.**

**— Dr. David Pilgrim**



Concept rendering of the center exhibit section devoted to racist caricatures, "Warehouse of Hateful Things"

[See fly-through here](#)



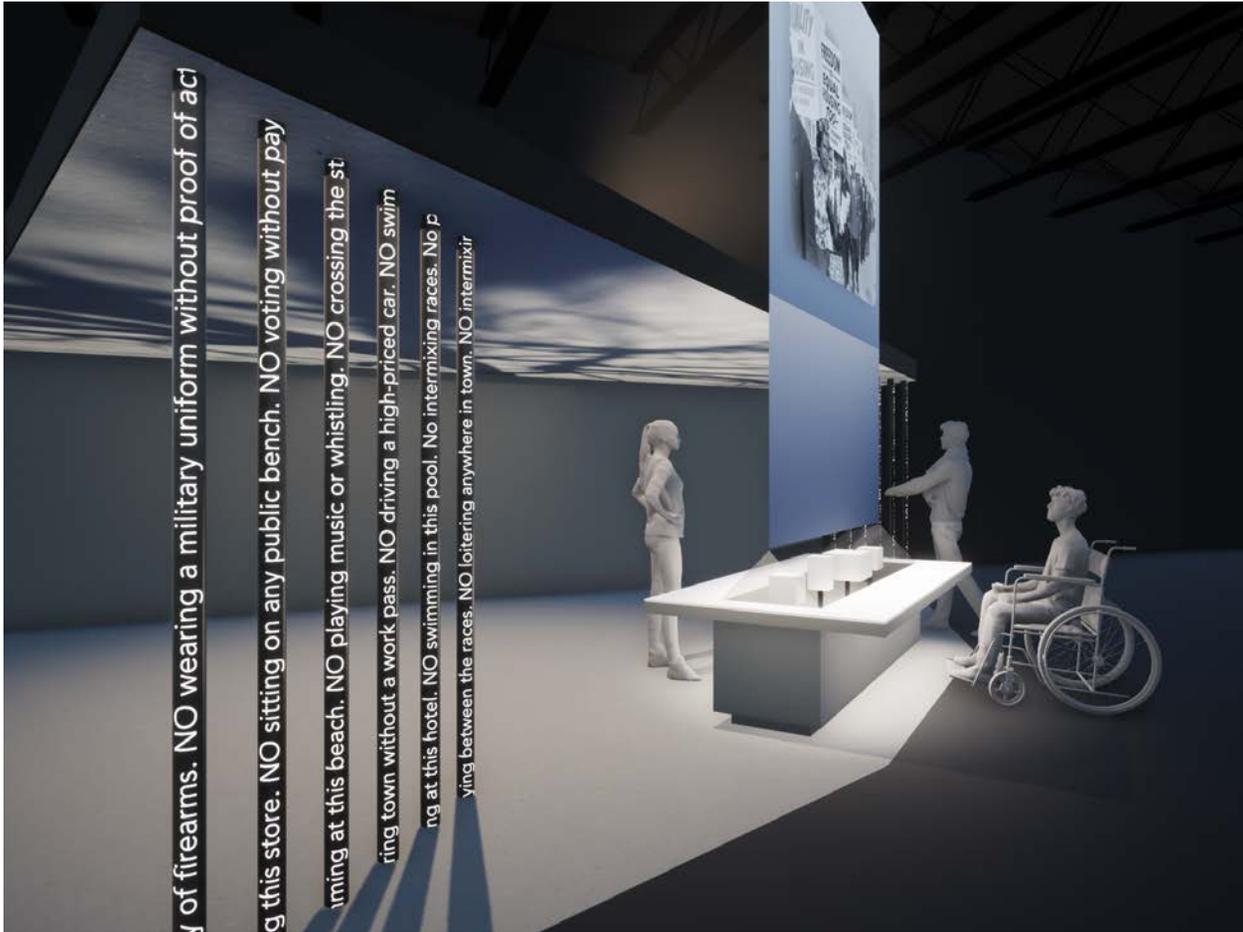
## **Shining a Light on Objects Steeped in Hate; A Warehouse of Hateful Things**

**This expansion marks a new milestone** for the Jim Crow Museum. As a full-fledged, standalone museum, the new building will contain spaces dedicated to classroom education; changing exhibits; and collections storage for 20,000 artifacts, documents, media pieces, and other assets. The centerpiece of the new facility will be a 7,500-square-foot permanent exhibition gallery dedicated to the large-scale display and interpretation of the most compelling assets, with the continually growing collection on view in a towering parade of open storage cases in the central atrium.



## Immersive Exhibits Bring the Realities of Segregation to Life

**With the permanent exhibition's greatly enlarged footprint,** stories about the collection will be both broadly representative and thoughtfully nuanced. Immersive spaces will bring to life the injustices and horrors of daily life endured by Black people forced to live under the structures of Jim Crow. The hoarder's sensibility—an emphasis on displaying myriad examples of the same type of artifact—will again be used to underscore how common and pervasive hateful representations of Black people have been in the public realm. The most symbolic artifacts, as seen in the rendering on the previous page, will be displayed and highlighted in dramatic and compelling arrays.



**NO** DOGS  
NEGROS  
MEXICANS

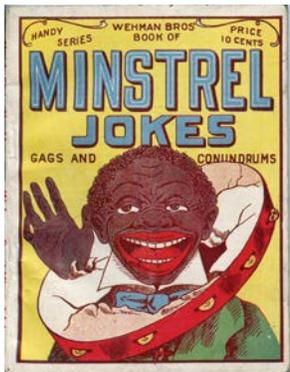


**The museum's contents are only a small part of the damaging effects of the Jim Crow laws that were found all across America, including bright and sunny California. This history is not only an important part of understanding where America was but, in an age of states making it harder and harder for citizens to vote, it is relevant to note that we have been here before.**

**—Henry Rollins, host of the History Channel's  
*10 Things You Don't Know About***

# Media and Technologies, Thoughtfully Integrated

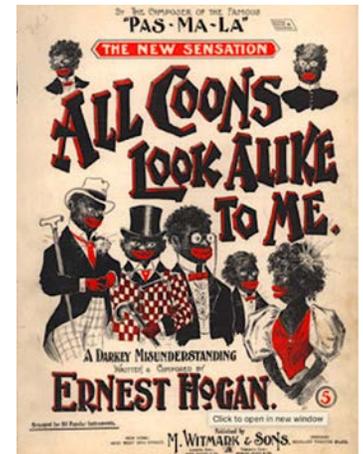
Leveraging the best new interactive technologies, while being mindful of seamless integration, digital media will be deployed in ways that invite visitors to witness the early iterations of minstrel shows and blackface, while revealing the harmful stereotypes that have permeated modern media for decades.



Digital artifact explorers will offer visitors immediate access to far more of the collection than will be on display. The interactives give users access to the artifacts' profound backstories, a deeper understanding of the objects' symbolism

and messages, and the personal perspectives of people those messages impact.

A digital mapping interactive will chart instances of racial violence, clearly demonstrating that vigilante acts of violence were hardly limited to the South.



# Elevated Stories of Black Achievement

In the new museum, the stories of Black achievement—of proud Black people actively resisting oppression or simply living their lives with dignity despite stifling segregation—are threaded throughout, serving as a counter narrative to both the overt and subliminal messages of hate infused in the thousands of racist caricatures.



**This was a horrific time in our history, but it needs to be taught and seen and heard.**

**—Malaak Shabazz,**  
daughter of Malcolm X  
and Betty Shabazz,  
on the Jim Crow Museum



## Relevant Stories, Accessible to All

**Inclusive and universal design practices** are reflected throughout the new museum experience, from the legibility of the graphics and labels, to integral open-captioning for all media, to the form and placement of tactile and interactive elements.



**Only by facing our history and its hold on our psyche can we construct a better culture. This work is invaluable.**

— **Damali Ayo**, author of *How to Rent a Negro* and *Obamistan! Land without Racism*

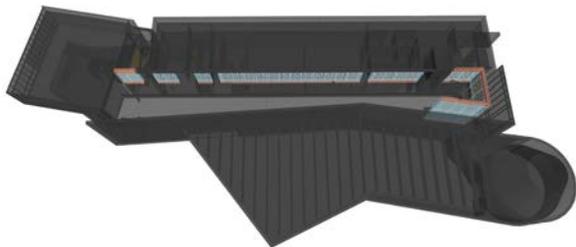
## **A Soaring Space for Reflection: Offering Visitors a Path Towards a Better World**

**At the end of the experience rises an arena under a glowing dome** resplendent with mosaic-like artwork evoking our shared humanity, where visitors can lay back on tiered seating to take in the contemplative views as a chorus of voices sweep over them. Audio drawn from poetry, iconic speeches, and songs articulate a continued need for change while instilling hope. Those inspired to share memories can enter a recording booth to leave their account of reckoning with issues of race. And just before parting, visitors can carry away actionable steps through connections to local, national, and global groups whose missions to heal the world are grounded in education, advocacy, and allyship.



Concept rendering of the archive

[See fly-through here](#)



## The Overwhelming Scope of the Collection, Permanently Visible

A new, publicly accessible 4,000-square-foot archive with visible storage allows the public to view the breadth of the collection while also protecting and preserving the items.

# Join us in this mission.

## Help us build the new Jim Crow Museum.



### Contacts

**Dr. David Pilgrim**

Museum Founder & Director  
(231) 591-3946  
davidpilgrim@ferris.edu

**Bob Murray**

Associate Vice President for Advancement  
(231) 591-2850  
robertmurray@ferris.edu

**General information**

(231) 591-5873  
jimcrowmuseum@ferris.edu



### Location

**Ferris State University**

**1010 Campus Drive**  
**Big Rapids, Michigan 49307**

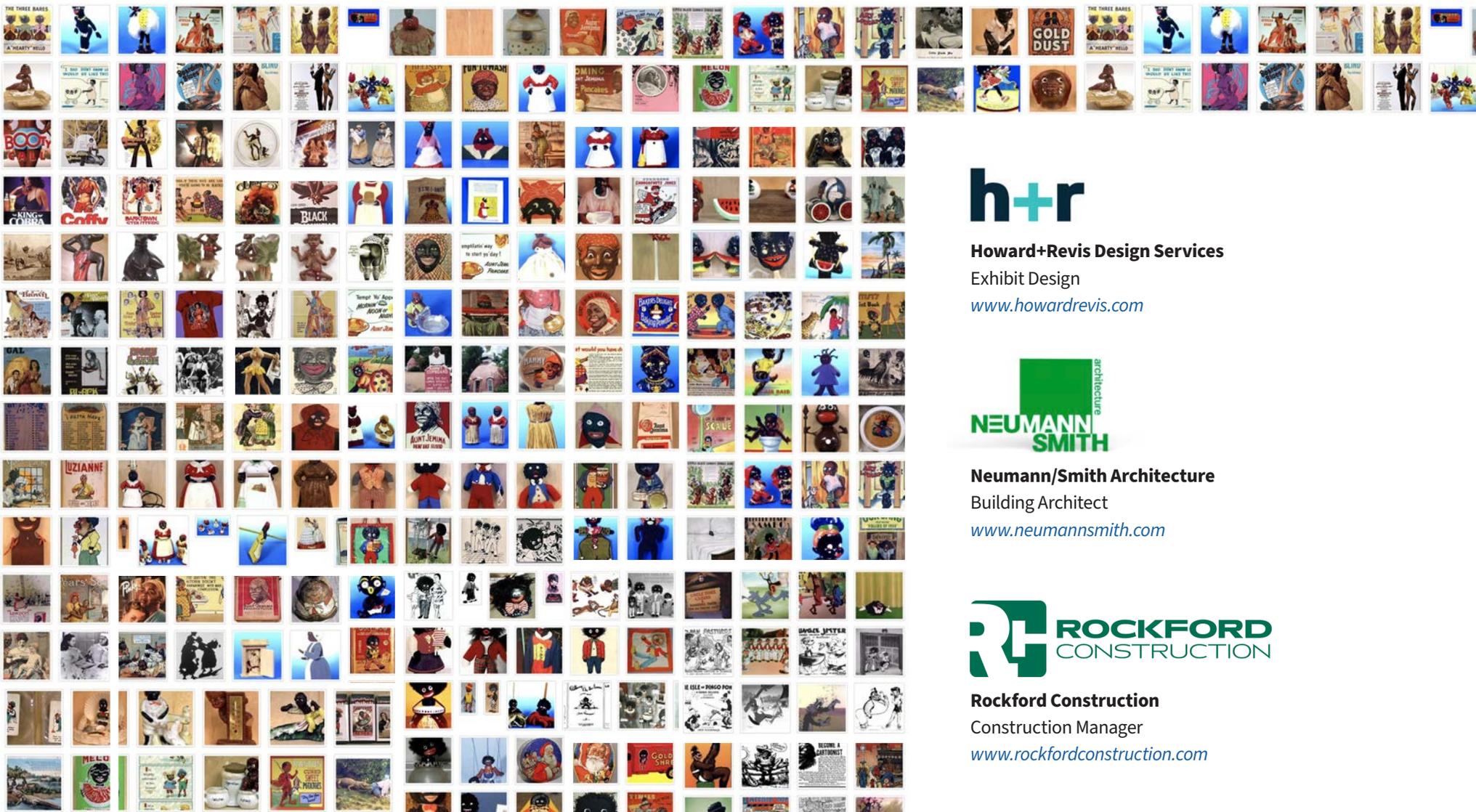
The Jim Crow Museum is located on the Lower Level of Ferris State University's FLITE Library in Big Rapids, Michigan.

Mailing address and for donations:

**Jim Crow Museum**

**Ferris State University**  
**1010 Campus Drive**  
**Big Rapids, Michigan 49307**





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