

Cracker (pejorative)

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Cracker, sometimes **white cracker** or **cracka**, is a derogatory term for white people,^[1] especially poor rural whites in the Southern United States. In reference to a native of Florida or Georgia, however, it is sometimes used in a neutral or positive context and is sometimes used self-descriptively with pride.^[2]

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Etymology

There are multiple explanations of the etymology of "cracker", most dating its origin to the 18th century or earlier.

One theory holds that slave foremen in the antebellum South used bullwhips to discipline African slaves, with such use of the whip being described as "cracking the whip". The white foremen who cracked these whips thus became known as "crackers".^{[3][4][5][6]}

They are called by the town's-people, "Crackers," from the frequency with which they crack their large whips, as if they derived a peculiar pleasure from the sound"^[7]

Another whip-derived theory is based on Florida's "cracker cowboys" of the 19th and early 20th centuries; distinct from the Spanish vaquero and the Western cowboy. Cracker cowboys did not use lassos to herd or capture cattle. Their primary tools were cow whips and dogs.^{[8][*citation needed*]}

An alternative theory holds that the term comes from the common diet of poor whites. The 1911 edition of *Encyclopedia Britannica* supposes that the term derives from the cracked (kernels of) corn which formed the staple food of this class of people.^[9]

Examples of usage

As early as the 1760s, this term was in use by the upper class planters in the British North American colonies to refer to Scots-Irish and English settlers in the south, most of whom were descendants of English bond servants. A letter to the Earl of Dartmouth reads:

"I should explain to your Lordship what is meant by Crackers; a name they have got from being



"A pair of Georgia crackers" as depicted by James Wells Champney from *The Great South* by Edward King, 1873

great boasters; they are a lawless set of rascalls on the frontiers of Virginia, Maryland, the Carolinas, and Georgia, who often change their places of abode."^[10]

Frederick Law Olmsted, a prominent landscape architect from Connecticut, visited the South as a journalist in the 1850s and wrote that "some crackers owned a good many Negroes, and were by no means so poor as their appearance indicated."^[11]

In 1947, the student body of Florida State University voted on the name of their athletic symbol. From a list of more than 100 choices, Seminoles was selected. The other finalists, in order of finish, were *Statesmen*, *Rebels*, *Tarpons*, *Fighting Warriors*, and *Crackers*.^{[12][13]}

Crackin' Good Snacks (a division of Winn-Dixie, a Southern grocery chain) has sold crackers similar to Ritz crackers under the name "Georgia Crackers". They sometimes were packaged in a red tin with a picture of The Crescent, an antebellum plantation house in Valdosta, Georgia.

"Cracker" has also been used as a proud or jocular self-description. With the huge influx of new residents from the North, "cracker" is used informally by some white residents of Florida and Georgia ("Florida cracker" or "Georgia cracker") to indicate that their family has lived there for many generations. However, the term "white cracker" is seldom used self-referentially and remains an offensive racial slur used to demean Caucasians.^[14]

Before the Milwaukee Braves baseball team moved to Atlanta, Georgia, the Atlanta minor league baseball team was known as the "Atlanta Crackers". The team existed under this name from 1901 until 1965. They were members of the Southern Association from their inception until 1961, and members of the International League from 1961 until they were moved to Richmond, Virginia in 1965. However, it is suggested the name was derived from players "cracking" the baseball bat and this origin makes sense^[citation needed] when considering the Atlanta Negro League Baseball team was known as the "Atlanta Black Crackers".

The Florida Cracker Trail is a route which cuts across southern Florida, following the historic trail of the old cattle drives. In this context, the term refers to the cracking of the whips used by the Florida drovers.

Singer-songwriter Randy Newman, on his socio-politically themed album *Good Old Boys* (1974) uses the term "cracker" on the song "Kingfish" ("I'm a cracker, You one too, Gonna take good care of you"). The song's subject is Huey Long, populist Governor and then Senator for Louisiana (1928–1935). The term is also used in "Louisiana 1927" from the same album, where the line "Ain't it a shame what the river has done to this poor cracker's land" is attributed to President Coolidge.

In his speech "The Ballot or the Bullet", Malcolm X used the term "cracker" in reference to white people in a pejorative context.^[15] In one passage, he remarked, "It's time for you and me to stop sitting in this country, letting some cracker senators, Northern crackers and Southern crackers, sit there in Washington, D.C., and come to a conclusion in their mind that you and I are supposed to have civil rights. There's no white man going to tell me anything about my rights."^[15]



A "cracker cowboy" with his Florida Cracker Horse and dog by Frederick Remington, 1895



Georgia Cracker label depicting a boy with peaches

In 2008, former President Bill Clinton used the term "cracker" on *Larry King Live* to describe white voters he was attempting to win over for Barack Obama: "You know, they think that because of who I am and where my politic[al] base has traditionally been, they may want me to go sort of hustle up what Lawton Chiles used to call the 'cracker vote' there."^[16]

On June 27, 2013, in the trial of George Zimmerman, concerning the shooting of Trayvon Martin, the term "cracker" was mentioned in courtroom testimony. A witness under examination testified that Martin said (on the phone) to her that a "creepy ass cracker is following me" moments before the altercation between Martin and Zimmerman occurred. Zimmerman's attorney then asked the witness if that was an offensive term, to which the witness responded "no". That testimony and response brought about both media and public debate about the use of the word "cracker".

See also

- Georgia cracker
- Hillbilly
- Honky
- Jimmy Crack Corn
- List of ethnic slurs
- Redneck
- Social class in the United States

References

Notes

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15. ↑ ^{*a*} ^{*b*} "The Ballot or the Bullet" (http://www.edchange.org/multicultural/speeches/malcolm_x_ballot.html). Retrieved

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Further reading

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External links

- Cracker (<http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/nge/Article.jsp?path=/Folklife/CustomsandLocalTraditions&id=h-552>) – Entry in the *New Georgia Encyclopedia*
- Etymology of "cracker" by Professor Kim Pearson (<http://kpearson.faculty.tcnj.edu/Dictionary/cracker.htm>)

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