
Juneteenth Celebration: A Legacy

During the American Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation on September 22, 1862, with an effective date of January 1, 1863. Juneteenth is the name for a holiday celebrating June 19, 1865, the day when Union soldiers arrived in Texas and spread the word that President Lincoln had delivered his Emancipation Proclamation. News traveled so slowly in those days that Texas did not hear of Lincoln's Proclamation until more than two years after it was issued!

The proclamation declared "that all persons held as slaves" within the rebellious states "are, and henceforward shall be free." Thus, the Emancipation Proclamation was limited in many ways. It applied only to states that had seceded from the Union, leaving slavery untouched in the loyal border states. It also expressly exempted parts of the Confederacy that had already come under Northern control. Most important, the freedom it promised depended upon Union military victory.

Although Juneteenth has been informally celebrated each year since 1865, it wasn't until June 3, 1979, that Texas became the first state to proclaim Emancipation Day (Juneteenth) an official state holiday. But it is much more than a holiday. Juneteenth has become a day for African Americans to celebrate their emancipation, culture, and achievements.

The Proclamation declared all enslaved Africans to be freed in the Confederate States of America in rebellion and not in Union hands (this excluded Tennessee, Virginia and lower Louisiana, which were occupied by the Union). It also announced that the Union would start recruiting former enslaved Africans and free blacks to serve in the military. Recruitment began in the spring of 1863.

Enslaved Africans had often escaped to Union lines for protection and many of them served in the military. In some areas, contraband camps were set up to house the freedmen temporarily, as well as start schools and put adults to work. Lincoln had urged the governments in the Border States, which had remained in the Union, to free their enslaved Africans under a system of gradual abolition and compensation, but none did so. Those enslaved Africans were not emancipated until the end of the war.

Former enslaved Africans formed a unique ethnic identity in Texas while facing societal and institutional discrimination. Even after enslaved Africans were emancipated, this was a difficult era. Conditions in contraband camps were crowded and had the same poor sanitation that existed in most military encampments. Just as more soldiers on both sides died of disease rather than wounds, because of the social disruption from the war and general harsh conditions, many former enslaved Africans died of disease in the years from 1862 to 1870, including from a smallpox epidemic.

More isolated geographically, Texas was not a battleground. Its enslaved Africans were not affected by the Emancipation Proclamation unless they escaped. Planters and other slaveholders had migrated into Texas from eastern states to escape the fighting, and many brought their slave property with them, increasing by the thousands the number of enslaved Africans in the state at the end of the Civil War.

By 1865, there were an estimated 250,000 enslaved Africans in Texas. As news of end of the war moved slowly, it did not reach Texas until May 1865, and the Army of the Trans-Mississippi did not surrender until June 2. On June 18, 1865, Union General Gordon Granger arrived at Galveston Island with 2,000 federal troops to occupy Texas on behalf of the federal government. On June 19, standing on the balcony of Galveston's Ashton Villa, Granger read aloud the contents of General Order No. 3, announcing the total emancipation of enslaved Africans:

"The people of Texas are informed that, in accordance with a proclamation from the Executive of the United States, all enslaved Africans are free. This involves an absolute equality of personal rights and rights of property between former masters and enslaved Africans, and the connection heretofore existing between them becomes that between employer and hired labor. The freedmen are advised to remain quietly at their present homes and work for wages. They are informed that they will not be allowed to collect at military posts and that they will not be supported in idleness either there or elsewhere."

Former enslaved Africans in Galveston rejoiced in the streets after the announcement, although in the years afterward many struggled to work through the changes against resistance of whites. But, the following year, Freedmen organized the first of what became annual celebrations of Juneteenth in Texas. Barred in some cities from using public parks because of state-sponsored segregation of facilities, across parts of Texas, freed Africans pooled their funds to purchase land to hold their celebrations, such as Houston's Emancipation Park, Mexia's Booker T. Washington Park, and Emancipation Park in Austin.

In the early 20th century, economic and political forces led to a decline in Juneteenth celebrations. From 1890 to 1908, Texas and all former Confederate states passed new constitutions or amendments that effectively disenfranchised Blacks, excluding them from the political process. White Democrat-dominated state legislatures passed Jim Crow laws imposing second-class status. The Great Depression forced many Blacks off farms and into the cities to find work. In these urban environments, they had difficulty taking the day off to celebrate. From 1940 through 1970, in the second wave of the Great Migration, more than 5 million Blacks left Texas, Louisiana and other parts of the South for the North and West Coast, where jobs were available in the defense industry for World War II. As historian Isabel Wilkerson writes, "The people from Texas took Juneteenth Day to Los Angeles, Oakland, Seattle, and other places they went."

By the 1950s and 1960s, the Civil Rights movement focused the attention of Black youth on the struggle for racial equality and the future. But, many linked these struggles to the historical struggles of their ancestors. Following the 1968 Poor People's Campaign to Washington, D.C. called by Rev. Ralph Abernathy, many attendees returned home and initiated Juneteenth celebrations in areas where the day was not previously celebrated.

Since the 1980s and 1990s, the holiday has been more widely celebrated in African-American communities. In 1994 a group of community leaders gathered at Christian Unity Baptist Church in New Orleans, Louisiana to work for greater national celebration of Juneteenth. Paul Herring started a neighborhood celebration in Flint, Michigan in 1994; as he said, "...this is our day to be happy." Juneteenth informal observances have spread to many other states, including Portland, Maine, in part carried by Texans. Expatriates have celebrated it in cities abroad, such as Paris, France. Some US military bases in other countries sponsor celebrations, in addition to those of private groups.

In 1980, Texas was the first state to establish Juneteenth as a state holiday, under legislation introduced by freshman Democratic state representative Al Edwards. The legislation was opposed by African-American representative Clay Smothers of Dallas County, who declared the holiday "fraudulent" and belittled the observance as "ceremoniously grinning and bursting watermelons on the Capitol grounds". Juneteenth is a "partial staffing holiday"; state offices do not close but some employees use a "floating holiday" to take the day off. Public schools are not affected because they are already into summer vacation by June 19.

In 1996 the first legislation to recognize "Juneteenth Independence Day" was introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives, H.J. Res. 195, sponsored by Barbara-Rose Collins (D-MI). In 1997 Congress recognized the day through Senate Joint Resolution 11 and House Joint Resolution 56. In 2013 the U.S. Senate passed Senate Resolution 175, acknowledging Lula Briggs Galloway (late president of the National Association of Juneteenth Lineage) who "successfully worked to bring national recognition to Juneteenth Independence Day", and the continued leadership of the National Juneteenth Observance Foundation.

In June, 2005, Michigan Governor Jennifer M. Granholm officially designated the **third Saturday in June** as Juneteenth National Freedom Day in Michigan. Senate Bill 384 (PA 48) was sponsored by Senator Martha G. Scott. Michigan was the 18th state to officially recognize Juneteenth as a state holiday.

By 2008, nearly half of U.S. states observed the holiday as a ceremonial observance. As of May 2014, when the Maryland legislature approved official recognition of the holiday, 43 of the 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia have recognized Juneteenth as either a state holiday or as a ceremonial day of observance. States that do not yet recognize it are Arizona, Hawaii, Montana, New Hampshire, North Dakota, South Dakota and Utah.

A 2014 University of Texas at Austin study stated that Austin was the only U.S. city with a fast growth rate that was losing African Americans. The first person of African ancestry to arrive in Texas was Estevanico in 1528.

President Biden signed the **Juneteenth National Independence Day Act in 2021**, making it an official federal holiday.