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The Republican Party of Texas

- JUNETEENTH -



Juneteenth celebrations are only recently becoming widely known. Those who have heard of this day of remembrance and celebration, however, don't always know what it is and what it represents for Black people, especially in Texas. In general, it represents the date, June 19, 1865, when slaves in Texas learned they were free. This date represents a two-and-a-half-year delay in the notice for slaves in Texas, thus increasing the importance and significance of remembering this day.

Although America was heading into its third year of a bloody civil war, President Abraham Lincoln made the bold move to issue what is famously known as the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863.¹ The proclamation stated that



Emancipation Day Celebration Band, June 19, 1900. Credit: Austin History Center.

“all persons held as slaves within any State or designated part of a State, the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States, shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free.”² In essence, President Lincoln declared freedom for slaves in the United States. However, slaves would be far from free, especially in many Southern States as the war raged on.

Freedom for slaves was not an automatic process and did not happen in an instant, all at once. It would ripple from state to state, in many instances, as the Northern (Union) troops gained victories. Therefore, dates of notice for the Emancipation Proclamation and the application for newly freed slaves often differed from state to state. As noted, it would take over 2 years for slaves in Texas to get the notice that they were now free.

Also, in Texas, slavery continued due to the absence of any large-scale fighting and lack of a significant presence of Union troops. This prompted many slave owners outside of Texas to embark upon the Lone Star State as they viewed it as a safe haven for slavery.³ It is believed that more than 150,000 slaves made the trek west.⁴

On June 19, 1865, Union General Gordon Granger arrived in Galveston,



General Gordon Granger

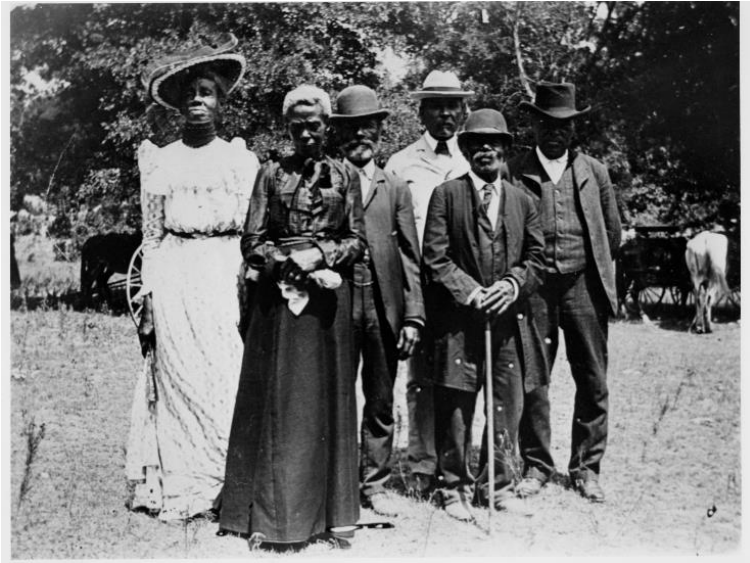
Texas to announce to all, the slaves were now free. He issued General Order No. 3 which highlighted that the newly freed slaves now had absolute equality of personal rights and rights of property. Uniquely, the following was also a part of that General Order⁵:

- Any continued relationships with former slaves and masters were now that of employer and hired labor.
- Freed were advised to remain at their present homes and work for wages.
- Freed persons were not allowed to gather at the military post and no idleness would be allowed.

The message of freedom for slaves in Texas, though grossly late, would gradually reach 250,000 slaves over months after the war ended, as individual slave owners were often the bearers of the news. Unfortunately, in some cases, enslavers withheld the information about the emancipation until after harvest season—celebrations ensued among newly freed Black people, thus a birthing of Juneteenth!⁶

Juneteenth was originally called “Jubilee Day” on June 19, and over the years became a day of celebration consisting of music, barbecues, prayer services, family reunions, etc. This dynamic celebration would spread to other states as Black people would depart from Texas to other destinations. Fittingly, Texas would be the first state to make Juneteenth an official holiday with 46 additional states eventually following this lead.⁷

Newly freed Blacks, nevertheless, did not only celebrate, but they also exercised their new rights to buy land. In some instances, Black people would collect funds to purchase tracts of land for use in the Juneteenth celebrations. It would be two short years before Juneteenth was celebrated in the capital of Texas (1867) under the direction of the Freedmen’s Bureau, eventually becoming a part of the calendar of public events by 1872.⁸



Picnic At Emancipation Day Celebration, June 19, 1900, in Austin, TX. Credit: Austin History Center

On the eve of January 1, 1863, also known as “Freedom’s Eve,” many slaves (and freed blacks) held *Watch Night* services in churches and private homes across the nation, praying as they awaited the news of the *Emancipation Proclamation*. Prayers were indeed answered, and slaves were declared legally free. Union soldiers, many being Black, marched onto plantations reading copies of the *Emancipation Proclamation*, spreading the news about freedom for the slaves.⁹

Although July 4, 1776, marks independence day for America, many blacks were still enslaved. Therefore, June 19, 1865 (Juneteenth) could be viewed as America’s second independence day, as it marks the day the last of the slaves in the westernmost Confederate state found out they were free. Today, though discussions have increased at the national level, Congress has not yet moved to make Juneteenth a national holiday. Hopefully, they can follow the lead of the Lone Star State, and make this importance historically significant day, a national holiday. Remember, *History Matters!* May God Bless Texas and the United States of America!

Endnotes

¹ The Emancipation Proclamation (2019). National Archives. Retrieved June 2, 2021, from <https://www.archives.gov/exhibits/featured-documents/emancipation-proclamation>

² Transcript of the Proclamation (2017). National Archives. Retrieved June 2, 2021, from <https://www.archives.gov/exhibits/featured-documents/emancipation-proclamation/transcript.html>

³ Nix, Elizabeth (2021). What Is Juneteenth? History. Retrieved June 3, 2021, from <https://www.history.com/news/what-is-juneteenth>

⁴ Gates, Henry Louis Jr. (2013). What is Juneteenth? PBS. Retrieved June 3, 2021, from <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/african-americans-many-rivers-to-cross/history/what-is-juneteenth/>

⁵ Acosta, Teresa P. Juneteenth. Texas State Historical Association. Handbook of Texas.

⁶ Nix, Elizabeth (2021). What Is Juneteenth? History. Retrieved June 3, 2021, from <https://www.history.com/news/what-is-juneteenth>

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Acosta, Teresa P. Juneteenth. Texas State Historical Association. Handbook of Texas.

⁹ The historical Legacy of Juneteenth. Smithsonian. Retrieved June 3, 2021, from <https://nmaahc.si.edu/blog-post/historical-legacy-juneteenth>