

Juneteenth

Slavery Didn't End On Juneteenth. What You Should Know About This Important Day

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By Sharon Pruitt-Young



Emancipation Day is celebrated in 1905 in Richmond, Va., the onetime capital of the Confederacy.

Library of Congress

It goes by many names. Whether you call it Emancipation Day, Freedom Day or the country's second Independence Day, Juneteenth is one of the most important anniversaries in our nation's history.

On June 19, 1865, Maj. Gen. Gordon Granger, who had fought for the Union, led a force of soldiers to Galveston, Texas, to deliver a very important message: The war was finally over, the Union had won, and it now had the manpower to enforce the end of slavery.

The announcement came two months after the effective conclusion of the Civil War, and even longer since President Abraham Lincoln had first signed the Emancipation Proclamation, but many enslaved Black people in Texas still weren't free, even after that day.

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That was 156 years ago. Here are the basics of Juneteenth that everyone should know.

What Juneteenth represents

First things first: Juneteenth gets its name from combining "June" and "nineteenth," the day that Granger arrived in Galveston, bearing a message of freedom for the slaves

there.

Upon his arrival, he read out General Order No. 3, informing the residents that slavery would no longer be tolerated and that all slaves were now free and would henceforth be treated as hired workers if they chose to remain on the plantations, according to the National Museum of African American History and Culture.



Head Quarters District of Texas
Galveston Texas June 19th 1865.

General Orders
No. 3

The people of Texas are informed that, in accordance with a proclamation from the Executive of the United States, "all slaves are free". This involves an absolute equality of personal rights and rights of property between former

masters and slaves 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.

By order of Major General Granger.
R. W. Emery,
Major A. A. Seal.

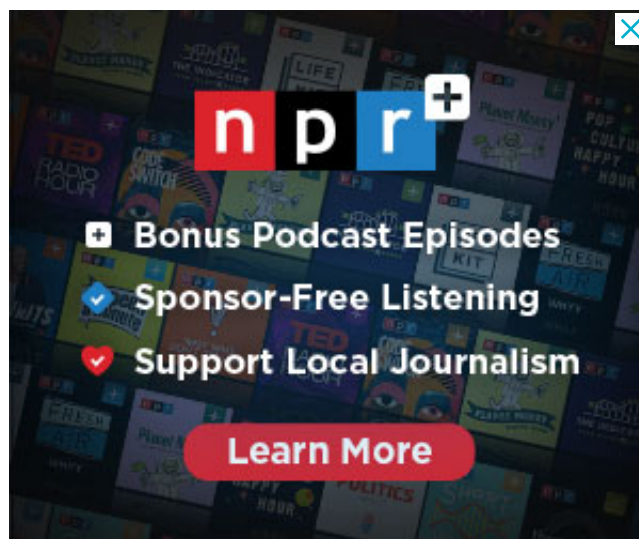
General Order No. 3 was the final execution and fulfillment of the terms of the Emancipation Proclamation. The people to whom this order was addressed were the last group of Americans to be informed that all formerly enslaved persons were now free.

"The people of Texas are informed that in accordance with a Proclamation from the Executive of the United States, all slaves are free. This involves an absolute equality of rights and rights of property between former masters and slaves, and the connection heretofore existing between them becomes that between employer and hired laborer," the order reads, in part.

It's perhaps unsurprising that many former slaves did not stay on the plantations as workers and instead left in search of new beginnings or to find family members who had been sold away.

"It immediately changed the game for 250,000 people," Shane Bolles Walsh, a lecturer with the University of Maryland's African American Studies Department, told NPR.

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Enslaved Black people, now free, had ample cause to celebrate. As Felix Haywood, a former slave, recalled: "Everybody went wild. We all felt like heroes ... just like that, we were free."

Slavery did not end on Juneteenth

When Granger arrived in Galveston, there still existed around 250,000 slaves and they

were not all freed immediately, or even soon. It was not uncommon for slave owners, unwilling to give up free labor, to refuse to release their slaves until forced to, in person, by a representative of the government, historian Henry Louis Gates Jr. wrote. Some would wait until one final harvest was complete, and some would just outright refuse to submit. It was a perilous time for Black people, and some former slaves who were freed or attempted to get free were attacked and killed.

For Confederate states like Texas, even before Juneteenth, there existed a "desire to hold on to that system as long as they could," Walsh explained to NPR.

Before the reading of General Order No. 3, many slave owners in Confederate states simply chose not to tell their slaves about the Emancipation Proclamation and did not honor it. They got away with it because, before winning the war, Union soldiers were largely unable to enforce the Emancipation Proclamation in Southern states. Still, even though slavery in the States was not abolished until the ratification of the 13th Amendment, the Emancipation Proclamation still played a pivotal role in that process, historian Lonnie Bunch told NPR in 2013. (And the amendment did not extend to tribal lands.)

"What the Emancipation Proclamation does that's so important is it begins a creeping process of emancipation where the federal government is now finally taking firm stands to say slavery is wrong and it must end," Bunch said.

People have celebrated Juneteenth any way they can

After they were freed, some former slaves and their descendants would travel to Galveston annually in honor of Juneteenth. That tradition soon spread to other states, but it wasn't uncommon for white people to bar Black people from celebrating in public spaces, forcing Black people to get creative. In one such case, Black community leaders in Houston saved \$1,000 to purchase land in 1872 that would be devoted specifically to Juneteenth celebrations, according to the Houston Parks and Recreation Department. That land became Emancipation Park, a name that it still

bears.



Juneteenth is celebrated in Houston's Emancipation Park, which was created specifically for such celebrations, in 1880.

Wikimedia Commons

" 'If you want to commemorate something, you literally have to buy land to commemorate it on' is, I think, just a really potent example of the long-lasting reality of white supremacy," Walsh said.

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Nevertheless, Black Americans found a way to continue to celebrate and lift one another up. Early on, Juneteenth celebrations often involved helping newly freed Black folks learn about their voting rights, according to the Texas State Historical Association. Rodeos and horseback riding were also common. Now, Juneteenth celebrations commonly involve cookouts, parades, church services, musical performances and other public events, Walsh explained.





People celebrate last year's Juneteenth by riding horses through Washington Park in Chicago. This year, it is a federal holiday.

Natasha Moustache/Getty Images

It's a day to "commemorate the hardships endured by ancestors," Walsh said. He added, "It really exemplifies the survival instinct, the ways that we as a community really make something out of nothing. ... It's about empowerment and hopefulness."

And there's reason to be hopeful. After literal decades of activists campaigning for change, Congress has approved Juneteenth as a federal holiday.

Clarification

July 14, 2022

The 13th Amendment did not include Native American lands under tribal autonomy, where later treaties would negotiate the end of slavery there.

Corrected previously on June 19, 2021: A previous version of this story incorrectly said that Black community leaders bought the land for Emancipation Park in Houston in 1867. The land was purchased and park established in 1872.

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