

The fight for abolition started before America's existence. African-Americans in abolition societies lobbied Congress relentlessly. They stood in front of the White House daily, sent letters to President Lincoln, gave speeches about the horrors of slavery, aided runaways, and published slave narratives and newspapers. Slaves refused to participate in the institution of slavery by feigning illness, destroying crops, running away, or revolting. The collective determination to end slavery came when there was an emerging black identity. Slaves began to unite not under their ethnic groups from the continent but the identity of blackness in America. A new culture with African roots formed around life in America, the new Black Church, and the drive to end slavery.

President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863. President Lincoln is heralded as sympathetic to the plight of the slave; instead, he did what he could to preserve the Union. He proclaimed, "that all persons held as slaves" in the rebelling Confederate states "are, and henceforward shall be free." The decree came almost three years into the Civil War after decades of fighting for abolition legislation. Still, it wasn't enough; until all slaves were free, no one was free. The Proclamation changed the tide of the war from a fight about state's rights to a battle of morality. Africans in America were critical of that change and continued to push the morality of slavery to garner support.

Further, slaves weren't automatically freed by Lincoln's pen, as it couldn't be implemented in places still under Confederate control. So how did slaves gain their freedom? They hopped the Union line. Slaves followed the Union army in droves, and as soon as the military took back territory for the Union, they were free. So, where does Juneteenth fit in? About two and a half years after Lincoln issued the Proclamation and just over two months after the war ended, federal troops entered Galveston, Texas, on June 19, 1865. Led by Major General Gordon Granger, these troops arrived to assume state control and free slaves in the former Confederate territory. Following the war's end, the Union army continued south to return it to order by placing it under military law; this duty included freeing slaves and setting up programs to rebuild the South.

Juneteenth combines the month and day the slaves in Galveston, Texas, were emancipated. In other parts of the country, Emancipation or Freedom Days are celebrated, marking other days of emancipation for slaves in those regions before the 13th Amendment. Slavery would not be officially abolished until December 6, 1865, ensuring that all slaves in all parts of the Union were free. They are a reminder of the struggle for freedom and the immense pride in the African-American culture that grew from those four million people.

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