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What is Juneteenth and who has made it an official holiday?
By Gabrielle Fonrouge
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Juneteenth is one of America’s oldest holidays and is observed each year on June 19 to mark the official end of slavery in the US.

The day, which gets its name from combining June and 19, has long been celebrated by black Americans as a symbol of their long-awaited emancipation — but the story behind the holiday, and how Juneteenth got its meaning, starts 155 years ago Friday in Galveston, Texas.

What is the meaning and history behind Juneteenth?

On June 19, 1865, Union troops led by Gen. Gordon Granger arrived in Galveston, Texas, to break the news to the last remaining Confederate sympathizers that they’d lost the Civil War and all slaves must be freed.

“The people of Texas are informed that in accordance with a Proclamation from the Executive of the United States, all slaves are free,” the Union general read aloud to the residents of Galveston, according to the Texas State Library and Archives Commission.
"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."

Newly freed slaves celebrated emancipation with "prayer, feasting, song, and dance" and the following year, the first official Juneteenth celebration was born, according to Encyclopedia Britannica.

"The Importance of [Juneteenth] is that it's kind of rooted in this long history of struggle to get freedom and then the efforts to maintain that freedom in the face of enormous repression that was going to come shortly after," explained Columbia University Professor David Rosner, PhD.

"It signified the true end of the Civil War and the beginning of Reconstruction, a time that was supposed to be very happy and hopeful but became a very miserable time as part of the redemption of the South to move African Americans to indentured servitude."

While President Abraham Lincoln abolished slavery in his Jan. 1, 1863, Emancipation Proclamation, rebellious Confederate strongholds dotted across the South delayed the widespread implementation.

A print depicting the night of Dec. 31, 1862, as enslaved people waited for President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation to go into effect in 1863. Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture

Following Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee's reluctant surrender at Appomattox, Virginia, to Union Gen. Ulysses S. Grant, Granger was able to finally make his way to Galveston to enact Lincoln's proclamation and free the last remaining victims of chattel slavery in the US.

The reason why the news took so long to travel, and why slavery persisted in Galveston for more than two and half years after Lincoln ended the practice, isn't clear.

Legend has it a messenger on horseback with news of freedom was murdered on his way to Texas, while other historians blame Galveston's isolated nature as a barrier island on the eastern edge of Texas, and their limited access to communication.

But Professor Noliwe Rooks, PhD, director of American studies and professor of Africana studies at Cornell University, said the delayed end to slavery was fueled by nothing but greed.

https://nypost.com/article/what-is-juneteenth/
This week, Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam announced plans to give every executive branch employee a paid day off Friday and said he will work with the legislature to pass a law making Juneteenth a permanent state holiday later this year, Al Jazeera reported.

New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo made a similar announcement Wednesday when he signed an executive order recognizing June 19 as a paid holiday for state employees and said he will propose legislation to make it a permanent state holiday down the line.

Now, as Black Lives Matter protests bring a renewed focus to the plight of black Americans, private companies have started to designate Juneteenth as a paid company holiday.

This is a running list of the companies promising to recognize Juneteenth, according to NBC:

- Best Buy announced employees will be offered a “paid volunteer day” for Juneteenth 2020 and in 2021, it will become a “formal, paid company holiday.”
- General Motors plans to hold an 8-minute, 46-second-long moment of silence in honor of Floyd, who was killed at the hands of Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin.
- Google urged their employees to cancel unnecessary meetings and encouraged employees to “use this day to create space for learning and reflection.”
- J.C. Penney told staffers Juneteenth will be considered an annual holiday for workers.
- JPMorgan Chase plans to close all Chase branches early at 1 p.m. Friday in honor of the day.
- Lyft said Juneteenth will be considered a companywide holiday effective Friday.
- Mastercard designated June 19 as a “Day of Solidarity” and urged workers to “pause and reflect” about all of the work left to do to “combat racism and discrimination.”
- NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell said Juneteenth will be considered a league holiday and the NFL office has been ordered to close Friday.
- Nike will make Juneteenth an annual paid holiday.
- Postmates has declared June 19 an official company holiday.
“The idea that people in that part of Texas had no idea that the war was over is farcical, quite frankly,” Rooks told The Post, chuckling at the thought.

“There were wire services, there were newspapers ... the larger plantation owners were very wealthy and wealthy people have access to information,” the professor went on.

“They were brutal people but they were the ruling class in the United States. They were elite, many were wealthy, they were not illiterate or backwards. They were brutal and inhuman, but not ignorant.”

At the time, Galveston had its own newspaper, the Galveston Daily News, and a dispatch from New Orleans detailing the end of the war and the return of Confederate prisoners was published on June 3, 1865, more than two weeks before Granger arrived, according to archives accessible through Newspapers.com.

Nevertheless, Juneteenth has been "passed down" through black communities ever since, Rooks said, and in 2020, at the height of a modern-day civil rights movement following the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis police custody, the holiday is seeing a renewed interest.

**When did Juneteenth become a holiday and how many states and companies recognize it as a holiday?**

Juneteenth is not a federal holiday, but 46 states and the District of Columbia recognize it as a state or ceremonial holiday.

The first official Juneteenth celebration came the year after the liberation of slaves in Galveston, but it would take more than a hundred years for Texas to consider it a state holiday. In 1980, Texas became the first state in the US to declare Juneteenth a state holiday.

The only four states yet to recognize Juneteenth as either a state or ceremonial holiday are Hawaii, North Dakota, South Dakota and Montana.

But while the majority of states observe the day, only a couple of states — outside of Texas — recognize it as a paid state holiday.
Spotify will make Juneteenth a paid holiday for all employees.

Target workers who are paid hourly will receive time and a half for working June 19 and it’ll be recognized as a company holiday moving forward.

Twitter and Square made Juneteenth a company holiday this year and going forward.

Uber employees will be given a paid day off.

How is Juneteenth celebrated?

In the late 1860s and early 1870s, Juneteenth celebrations made their way through Texas and into neighboring states, according to the Congressional Research Service’s latest Juneteenth fact sheet.

![Emancipation Day celebration held on June 19, 1900, in Austin](image)

“Texas celebrated Juneteenth beginning in 1866, with community-centric events, such as parades, cookouts, prayer gatherings, historical and cultural readings, and musical performances. Over time, communities have developed their own traditions,” the report states.

In 1872, black Texans led by Baptist minister and former slave Rev. Jack Yates raised $1,000 to buy 10 acres of land in Houston that could be dedicated to Juneteenth celebrations and named the location Emancipation Park, according to the Houston Parks and Recreation Department.

Today, Rooks said Juneteenth continues to be a day for jubilant celebrations.
“It’s a celebration, it’s not solemn, it’s filled with joy and pageantry. It’s not a funeral, so people have cookouts and those kinds of things,” Rooks said.

“You’ll see people with crowns on their head and they’re Miss Juneteenth and they’ve been voted on and crowned ... people have carnival-like atmospheres, block parties, street vendors, it’s very much a celebration.”

Amid nationwide demonstrations against police brutality, Rooks expects 2020’s celebration of Juneteenth will be marked by more protests and a renewed focus on the work that still needs to be done to advance black rights.

“In the US at least, there’s a real grappling with what it meant and it what it continues to mean that so much of the economy in the US during a particular period of time was based on the enslavement of human beings and not acknowledging the humanity and calling us property that allowed slavery to flourish,” Rooks explained.

“And so what joins those two moments [of Juneteenth and nationwide protests] in my mind at least is both at its center, at its core, is a call for the recognition of black people as human beings whose lives matter.”