



JUNETEENTH

JUNE 19

JUNETEENTH is the oldest celebration in the nation to commemorate the end of slavery in the United States. The word “Juneteenth” comes from a colloquial pronunciation of “June 19th,” which is the date celebrations commemorate.

In 1863 President Abraham Lincoln signed the **Emancipation Proclamation**, officially freeing slaves. However, word of the Proclamation did not reach many parts of the country right away, and instead the news spread slowly from state to state. The slow spread of this important news was in part because the **American Civil War** had not yet ended. However, in 1865 the Civil War ended and **Union** Army soldiers began spreading the news of the war’s end and Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation.

On June 19, 1865, Major General Gordon Granger and Union Army soldiers arrived in Galveston, Texas. On his arrival, one of General Granger’s first acts was to publicly read General Order Number 3, which began:

The people of Texas are informed that in accordance with a Proclamation from the [President] of the United States, all slaves are free. This involves an absolute equality of rights and rights of property between former masters and slaves,

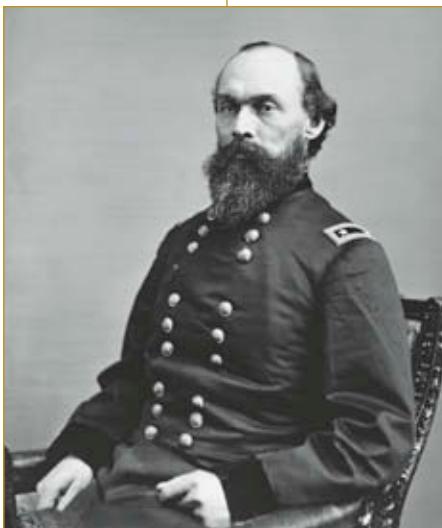
and the connection heretofore existing between them becomes that between employer and free laborer.

With this announcement the last 250,000 slaves in the United States were effectively freed. Afterward many of the former slaves left Texas. As they moved to other states to find family members and start new lives, they carried news of the June 19th event with them. In subsequent decades former slaves and their descendants continued to commemorate June 19th and many even made pilgrimages back to Galveston, Texas to celebrate the event.

Most of the celebrations initially took place in rural areas and included activities such as fishing, barbeques, and family reunions. Church grounds were also often the sites for these celebrations. As more and more African Americans improved their economic conditions and became land owners, tracts of land were purchased specifically for hosting events such as Juneteenth. One of the first documented land purchases specifically for holding Juneteenth celebrations was organized by

Reverend Jack Yates. Through fund-raising efforts, he raised \$1000 and purchased what became known as Emancipation Park in Houston, Texas.

Juneteenth celebrations began declining in the 1920s and 1930s,



PREVIOUS PAGE: In June 2002 trail boss James Frances Jr. leads the Emancipation Trail Ride, a 137-mile-long ride that commemorates the reading of Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation in Galveston, Texas.

ABOVE: Major General Gordon Granger and his soldiers arrived in Galveston, Texas on June 19, 1865, where he announced that all slaves were free.



in part because of severe economic difficulties, especially the **Great Depression**. However events during the 1950s and '60s, including the Civil Rights Movement, led to a resurgence in Juneteenth celebrations. As national attention focused on improving rights for African Americans, the interest in remembering and celebrating important African-American events increased. In 1968 Reverend Ralph Abernathy led the Poor Peoples' March to Washington, D.C. This event called for people of all races, **creeds**, and economic levels to meet and show support for the poor. Many of those who attended returned home and **revived** Juneteenth celebrations as a way of educating and empowering their communities. In fact, two of the largest Juneteenth celebrations taking place today were founded after this march and take place yearly in two cities in the state of Minnesota—Milwaukee and Minneapolis—cities that had not previously held Juneteenth celebrations.

On January 1, 1980, Juneteenth became an official state holiday in Texas, making it the first, and only, officially recognized emancipation

celebration. Since then Juneteenth has gradually grown in popularity throughout the United States. Today Juneteenth is celebrated as an occasion for encouraging self-development and respect for all cultures. Juneteenth is commemorated as a day, week, and sometimes a month, marked with parades, family reunions, barbeques, historical reenactments, and educational speeches.

Glossary

colloquial: *adj.* informal way of speaking or pronouncing words

Emancipation Proclamation: *n.* the government document that officially proclaimed or stated American slaves to be free. The word **emancipation** refers to setting someone or something free. A **proclamation** is a public or formal announcement.

American Civil War: the war fought in the U.S. from 1861 to 1865 between non-slave states in the north (by the Union army) and slave-owning states in the south (by the Confederate army)

Union: *n* refers to the United States

ABOVE: At a Juneteenth Family Fun Festival in Daytona Beach, Florida, people participate in a reenactment of the life of Harriet Tubman who played a major role in freeing millions of slaves in the 1850s.



heretofore: *adv.* up to this time

effectively: *adv.* actually

descendant(s): *n.* a person related to someone who lived in the past

pilgrimage(s): *n.* travel to a place that holds special meaning

tract(s): *n.* a section of land

host(ing): *v.* to receive people and provide services for an occasion

document(ed): *adj.* evidence providing proof of an event

Great Depression: *phrase.* a drastic decline in the world economy from 1929 to 1939 that resulted in widespread unemployment and poverty

resurgence: *n.* a rise in popularity after a period of declining or absent popularity

Reverend: *n.* a title of respect applied to a member of the clergy or religious leader, usually in the Protestant faith

creed(s): *n.* a set of beliefs

revive(d): *v.* to make something popular again

barbeque(s): *n.* a meal in which the

food is cooked over charcoal or an open fire outside
reenactment(s): *n.* a performance of an event that took place in the past