

Juneteenth.... A very personal revelation

For years, I knew nothing about Juneteenth. When I did learn of it, I thought it only had to do with enslaved people in Texas in 1865. "How dreadful", I thought "to have learned of your freedom two and a half years after the Emancipation Proclamation." Interesting information, but not really relevant to me. After all, I grew up in the North where slavery - when it existed at all - was mostly benign. Or so, I had been taught.

Two years ago, my family started to research our family history in Kinderhook, Columbia County NY. My daughter, Leigh, and I cofounded the African American Archive of Columbia County. This year, I began to publish *The Path*.

I had never attended a Juneteenth celebration. But this year - for business reasons - I decided to visit several in the Hudson Valley. I'd like to tell you about my thought-provoking journey.

I started by attending a kick-off in Bedford sponsored by a number of groups from Westchester and Rockland counties. As I watched a dance troupe perform an African dance, my mind wandered; and, I looked around the room. There, sat Ginny Norfleet (Haverstraw African American Connection) who I've known for several years. "Her story" (of enslaved peoples in Haverstraw) was so different than mine. So disturbing, so akin to the harsh existence of the South.

As my mind stopped wandering, I realized that, on stage, a Black man was recounting the history of northern slavery. What did he say? "Slavery ended in New Jersey in 1865"? How could that be? That's same year as Texas. I must have heard that wrong.

A week or so later, at the invitation of NYS Cultural Interpreter, Lavada Nahon, I visited the Historic Huguenot Street Festival in New Paltz. There, I did what visitors normally do. I toured the historic houses and the Visitors Center. A new exhibit told the story of Jacob Wyncoop, a free Black man who, in 1851, purchased land. "Ah, vindicated." This was "my kind" of Hudson Valley story.

I left the Visitors Center and joined others listening to Native American interpreters. A woman cooking over an open fire told me that every year her family drives down from Canada to participate. I moved to another group, expecting to hear about life in colonial times. But, that was not what the Shawnee man, from Chicago, was discussing. He was talking about Native American life, now. "Don't call me indigenous. I am an American Indian." Apparently, "indigenous" immigrants, from Central and South America and Puerto Rico living in New York City, are representing themselves as the original natives. Who knew? During slavery, enslaved Blacks, welcomed by the Indians formed tribes, such as the Ramapo. An upcoming Supreme Court decision involving American Indian children being given to white foster parents rather than Native Americans, would hopefully right a long term wrong. Was that still happening? I thought that had ended generations ago.

Then the other man - the husband of the woman from Canada - began to speak. He explained that his band of American Indians had originally occupied the entire Hudson Valley, Connecticut, Vermont and Massachusetts all the way to Canada. In the early 1800s, his Lanape band - the Stockbridge-Munsie band of Mohicans - had been driven off their land. What? I was floored to learn that the first Trail of Tears-type journey from the east coast to Wisconsin had taken place in 1818.. far earlier than the one we have all heard about. I thought I knew my American history. I grew up steeped in Dutch and American Indian lore. The Indian warrior whose tomahawk had made a deep gouge in the stair rail of the Schuyler Mansion. The Indian warriors who, to avoid the enemy, walked stealthily below the ridge of Indian Ladder during the French and Indian War. My dad, as a boy, finding arrowheads in Albany's clay banks. Visiting the State Museum to see the Iroquois long-house, which stoked my

imagination. Who hadn't seen and cried through *Dances with Wolves*? But, no one ever mentioned, that our local Indians had been removed in the same way... another forgotten atrocity.

A week or so later, on June 18th, I attended a panel discussion (New York's Reluctance to End Slavery) with Michael Lord (Philipse Manor Hall) and Lavada Nahon (NYS Cultural Interpreter). The discussion of the long drawn out ending of New York's slavery era was very enlightening. But viewed from an academic standpoint, it was not heart-rending. I could allow myself to feel somewhat removed.

Finally on Juneteenth, I accompanied my family to Kinderhook - the upstate New York village where my family lived for generations. My daughter, Leigh had been invited by *Africa's Daughter and GOD belongs in our county* to speak at Kinderhook's People of Color Cemetery - the final slavery-era resting place of more than 500, mostly unnamed, enslaved and free Black people. Of the 15 remaining headstones, 5 are my ancestors.

I listened as Leigh spoke. Most of what she said was familiar. I had heard it all before. Except this time, she asked us (me) to imagine we had been born in Kinderhook in 1797 and had 3 children. I would have spent 30 years waiting for my freedom. My eldest child, born in 1816, would have been 28 when freed; my middle child, born in 1825, 21. Only my youngest child, born in 1828, would have been born free.

As I looked at my daughter, I tried to imagine how I would have felt if she could have been taken from me. Leigh has 3 daughters. I tried to imagine how she, or I, would have felt if any of her 3 daughters were taken. Leigh spoke of Peter Burgit, a man born in slavery in 1811. He was Leigh's great, great, great grandfather. When Leigh said that Peter's children are buried in that cemetery, it all became far too real for me. They are my family. Like every other American immigrant, who has helped to build this great nation of ours, my ancestors paid their dues. This truly is my land. When I walk these streets, they are my streets. I belong here.

I have come to realize that Juneteenth is not like any other American public holiday. It is not a time for hot dogs and celebration. It is a time for learning and understanding the real story... our real stories.

As the Negro National Anthem says: *Lift every voice and sing, 'Til earth and heaven ring, Ring with the harmonies of Liberty;...*

Here is a link to Leigh 's speech.

<https://fb.watch/lk7sWXDMM1/>