

What is Juneteenth?

On "Freedom's Eve," or the eve of January 1, 1863, the first Watch Night services took place. On that night, enslaved and free African Americans gathered in churches and private homes all across the country awaiting news that the Emancipation Proclamation had taken effect. At the stroke of midnight, prayers were answered as all enslaved people in Confederate States were declared legally free. Union soldiers, many of whom were black, marched onto plantations and across cities in the south reading small copies of the Emancipation Proclamation spreading the news of freedom in Confederate States.

But not everyone in Confederate territory would immediately be free. Even though the Emancipation Proclamation was made effective in 1863, it could not be implemented in places still under Confederate control. As a result, in the westernmost Confederate state of Texas, enslaved people would not be free until two and a half years later. Freedom finally came on June 19, 1865, when some 2,000 Union troops arrived in Galveston Bay, Texas. The army announced that the more than 250,000 enslaved black people in the state were free by executive decree. This day came to be known as "Juneteenth," by the newly freed people in Texas. Only through the Thirteenth Amendment did emancipation end slavery throughout the United States. (Ratified December 6, 1865)

The post-emancipation period known as Reconstruction (1865-1877) marked an era of great hope, uncertainty, and struggle for the nation as a whole. Formerly enslaved people immediately sought to reunify families, establish schools, run for political office, push radical legislation and even sue slaveholders for compensation. Given the 200+ years of enslavement, such changes were nothing short of amazing. Not even a generation out of slavery, African Americans were inspired and empowered to transform their lives and their country.

In 1979, Texas became the first state to make Juneteenth an official holiday. In June 2021, Congress passed a resolution establishing Juneteenth as a federal holiday and it was signed into law on June 21, 2021.

Juneteenth marks our country's second Independence Day. Long celebrated in the African American community, this monumental event still remains largely unknown to many Americans.

How To Talk To Kids About Slavery + Freedom + History

Juneteenth is a time for celebration and reflection with the whole family. For young children, the abstract concept of freedom and the hard history of slavery can be challenging to grasp. NMAAHC's early childhood education team offers the following resources to support young children's understanding and celebration of Juneteenth: a guide on how to talk about slavery and freedom in age appropriate ways, an activity to inspire hope and activism, and a children's book and online resources list:

https://nmaahc.si.edu/sites/default/files/files/nmaahc_kids_-_juneteenth_resource.pdf

Reading List for Kids

All Different Now: Juneteenth, The First Day of Freedom by Angela Johnson illustrated E.B. Lewis

Juneteenth Jamboree by Carol Boston Weatherford illustrated by Yvonne Buchanan

Juneteenth by Vaunda Micheaux Nelson and Drew Nelson

Enough! 20 Protesters Who Changed America by Emily Easton illustrated by Ziyue Chen

A Sweet Smell of Roses by Angela Johnson illustrated by Eric Velasquez

Sources: National Museum of African American History & Culture <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/historical-legacy-juneteenth>

www.history.com/news/what-is-juneteenth

Juneteenth Reading List from National Museum of African American History & Culture / Smithsonian

ON JUNETEENTH

Annette Gordon-Reed

Texas native Gordon-Reed weaves together her American and family history into a historian's view of the country's long road to Juneteenth, from its origins in Texas to Reconstruction, through Jim Crow and beyond.

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS

(Originally Published 1881)

Frederick Douglass

Raised as a plantation slave, Douglass went on to become a writer, orator, and major participant in the struggle for African American freedom and equality. In this engrossing narrative he recounts early years of abuse, his dramatic escape to the North and eventual freedom, abolitionist campaigns, and his crusade for full civil rights for former slaves.

FOUR HUNDRED SOULS

Edited by Ibram X. Kendi and Keisha Blain

A "community" history of African Americans written by 90 writers that cover the 400-year journey of African Americans from 1619 to the present.

ENVISIONING EMANCIPATION: BLACK AMERICANS AND THE END OF SLAVERY

Barbara Krauthamer and Deborah Willis

Using photos, this book illustrates what freedom looked like for Black Americans in the Civil War era. These portraits of Black families and workers in the American South challenge perceptions of slavery.

MORE BEAUTIFUL AND MORE TERRIBLE: THE EMBRACE AND TRANSCENDENCE OF RACIAL INEQUALITY IN THE UNITED STATES

Imani Perry

Perry draws upon the insights and tools of critical race theory, social policy, law, sociology, and cultural studies to demonstrate how postintentional racism works, but also identifies a place of hope.

THE WARMTH OF OTHER SUNS

Isabel Wilkerson

A chronicle of the decades-long migration of Black citizens who, during the twentieth century, fled the south for northern and western cities in search of a better life.

A BLACK WOMEN'S HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES

Daina Berry and Kali Gross

This book is a compact, exceptionally diverse introduction to the history of Black women, from the first African woman who arrived in America to the women of today.