

The History of Juneteenth



Juneteenth – also known as Freedom Day, Jubilee Day, Liberation Day, and Emancipation Day – is a holiday celebrating the emancipation of those who had been enslaved in the United States. Originating in Galveston, Texas, it is now celebrated annually on the 19th of June throughout the United States. It is commemorated on the anniversary date of the June 19, 1865 announcement by Union Army general Gordon Granger, proclaiming freedom from slavery in Texas.

President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation had officially outlawed slavery in Texas and the other states in rebellion against the Union almost two and a half years earlier. Enforcement of the Proclamation generally relied on the Union troops, but Texas being the most remote of the slave states, had a low presence of Union troops as the American Civil War ended. Thus, enforcement in Texas had been slow and inconsistent.

But on the morning of Monday, June 19, 1865, Union Major General Gordon Granger arrived on the island of Galveston, Texas to take command of the more than 2,000 federal troops recently landed in the department of Texas to enforce the emancipation of its slaves and oversee a peaceful transition of power. Granger's men marched throughout Galveston reading General Order No. 3 first at Union Army Headquarters. Next, they marched to the 1861 Customs House and Courthouse before finally marching to the Negro Church on Broadway (since renamed Reedy Chapel-AME Church). The order informed all Texans that, in accordance with a Proclamation from the Executive of the United States, all slaves were free. The order stated:

The people of Texas are informed that, in accordance with a proclamation from the Executive of the United States, all slaves are free. This involves an absolute equality of personal rights and rights of property between former masters and slaves, and the connection heretofore existing between them becomes that between employer and hired labor. The freedmen are advised to remain quietly at their present homes and work for wages. They are informed that they will not be allowed to collect at military posts and that they will not be supported in idleness either there or elsewhere.

The reactions to this profound news ranged from pure shock to immediate jubilation. The celebration of June 19th was coined "Juneteenth" and grew with more participation from descendants. The Juneteenth celebration was a time for reassuring each other, for praying and for gathering remaining family members. Juneteenth continued to be highly revered in Texas decades later, with many former slaves and descendants making an annual pilgrimage back to Galveston on this date.

Celebrations date to 1866, at first involving church-centered community gatherings in Texas. It spread across the South and became more commercialized in the 1920s and 1930s, often centering on a food festival. During the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, it was eclipsed by the struggle for postwar civil rights but grew in popularity again in the 1970s with a focus on African American freedom and arts. By the 21st century, Juneteenth was celebrated in most major cities across the United States.

A range of activities were provided to entertain the masses, many of which continue in tradition today. Rodeos, fishing, barbecuing and baseball are just a few of the typical Juneteenth activities you may witness today. Juneteenth almost always focused on education and self-improvement. Thus, often guest speakers are brought in and the elders are called upon to recount the events of the past. Prayer services were also a major part of these celebrations.

Certain foods became popular and subsequently synonymous with Juneteenth celebrations such as strawberry soda. More traditional and just as popular was the barbecuing, through which Juneteenth participants could share in the spirit and aromas that their ancestors - the newly emancipated African Americans, would have experienced during their ceremonies. Hence, the barbecue pit is often established as the center of attention at Juneteenth celebrations.

Food was abundant because everyone prepared a special dish. Meats such as lamb, pork and beef which were not available everyday were brought on this special occasion. A true Juneteenth celebration left visitors well satisfied and with enough conversation to last until the next. Dress was also an important element in early Juneteenth customs and is often still taken seriously, particularly by the direct descendants who can make the connection to this tradition's roots.