

Why is the Celebration of Juneteenth Important in the History of Texas?

Juneteenth officially became a federal holiday in 2021, almost 150 years after the actual emancipation of slaves in the United States. While the origins of this national holiday have been predominantly U.S based, the message has traveled worldwide. Today, people around the world hear the message that Juneteenth passes along and rejoice in the liberty that was granted to enslaved people on that day. This national holiday has become a cornerstone for Texas history which has aided in heralding equality and prosperity in a state that was historically the last to grant rights to a marginalized group.

Slavery in the United States has had a complicated history that must be explored in order to fully understand the implications that emancipation has today. African Americans in the Thirteen Colonies were inspired by the American Revolution to fight for freedoms that were only granted to white landowning males. Their participation in the Revolutionary War gave them hope that their efforts would also grant them freedom. The issue of slavery was already engrained in the United States at the Constitutional Convention at which the issue was acknowledged, but never directly mentioned. Upon closer examination of the language, it never mentioned any race. It wasn't until the 13th amendment, which formally abolished slavery, that the notion of race was actually mentioned. It was in 1780 that

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Pennsylvania became the first state to formally abolish slavery, and many other northern states rapidly followed suit. By 1804 there were officially 11 free states. In 1820, the Missouri Compromise extended the Mason–Dixon line westward as the official dividing line between free and slave states east of the Ohio River. As the United States expanded westward via manifest destiny, compromise after compromise was written to appease each side. These compromises however, could not hold back the inevitable for much longer. The tipping point came when the Kansas-Nebraska act resulted in a conflict known as Bleeding Kansas which has been argued to be the first war-like conflict in the U.S Civil War.

It was in 1863 that Abraham Lincoln issued his Emancipation Proclamation that ended slavery in the 10 remaining Confederate states. The news regarding the abolition of slavery was heard triumphantly throughout The Union. Meanwhile, Confederate states prolonged telling their slaves for as long as they could get away with. In 1865 the United States government ratified the Constitution and added the Thirteenth Amendment in which slavery was officially illegal. It was on June 19, 1865 when Granger read General Order No. 3 declaring that all slaves are free in Galveston, Tx. Texas was the last state to inform slaves that they were free, and it could have arguably been much longer considering that

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Granger traveled from the north to deliver this message. While the convoluted history that follows the emancipation of slaves in the United States is one that should not go untold, it is important to recognize the achievements that Juneteenth engenders. This national holiday does not commemorate the day the Constitution was ratified nor the day the Emancipation Proclamation was read. Instead, this holiday commemorates the day that slaves were actually freed.

Today, the implications of Juneteenth reach far and wide. When observing Texas directly, it has proven to be diverse and the most rapidly growing state. 13% of the population in Texas is black Americans and this national holiday serves to represent those who usually do not have a voice in the government. The history of slavery in the United States is inexplicably treacherous yet poignant throughout the majority of what students learn in their history class every year. This holiday serves as a stark reminder of the horrific acts which occurred in the south while also giving hope that equality and peace may soon be a reality. In commemorating a day of victory for a marginalized group we are commemorating a victory for the entire nation and humanity. While it is difficult to truly explain what a day like Juneteenth means to a black person in America, it is easier and more efficient to uplift black voices that can

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explain what it means to them. As writer Ralph Ellison put it “we remember the shining promise of emancipation, along with the bloody path America took by delaying it and deferring fulfillment of those simple, unanticipating words in Gen. Granger’s original order No. 3: that ‘This involves an absolute equality of personal rights and rights of property between former masters and slaves.’”