

## Why Juneteenth Matters

Shennette Garrett-Scott

“When peace come they read the ’Mancipation law to the cullud people. [The freed slaves] spent that night singin’ and shoutin’. They wasn’t slaves no more.”

— *Former slave Pierce Harper in 1937 recalling 1865 when enslaved people in Texas learned the Civil War was over and that they had been emancipated more than two years earlier by the Emancipation Proclamation*

Freedom delayed was just as sweet to the formerly enslaved men, women, and children in

Texas who received two pieces of good news on June 19, 1865: first, that the Civil War was over and second, that they had been freed by the Emancipation Proclamation two and half years

earlier. Despite Confederate General Robert E. Lee’s surrender in April 1865 at Appomattox

Courthouse, Virginia, the end of the Civil War did not immediately come to Texas. Lying on the

far edges of the U.S. western frontier, geography spared Texas from much of the fighting

compared to other southern states. In fact, many enslavers, especially those from Louisiana and

Mississippi, refugeed, or hid, their slaves in Texas to keep them from Union forces. Thus, by the

end of the Civil War, an unknown number of enslaved people, probably thousands more, joined

the more than 180,000 slaves already living in Texas.

Texas enslavers refused to emancipate their slaves or acknowledge that the war was over.

Union Brigadier General Gordon Granger and 1,800 federal troops arrived off the coast of

Galveston in mid-June 1865. Though many enslaved people had already learned through the

“grapevine telegraph” and from African American dockworkers and U.S. Colored Troops that

they were free, on June 19, 1865, Granger made news of freedom official. He stepped onto the

balcony of Ashton Villa, the former headquarters of the Texas Confederate Army, and read

[General Orders No. 3](#). The reactions of the newly emancipated to the announcement ran the

gamut: some stood in quiet shock and disbelief, others shouted prayers to God, but most sang

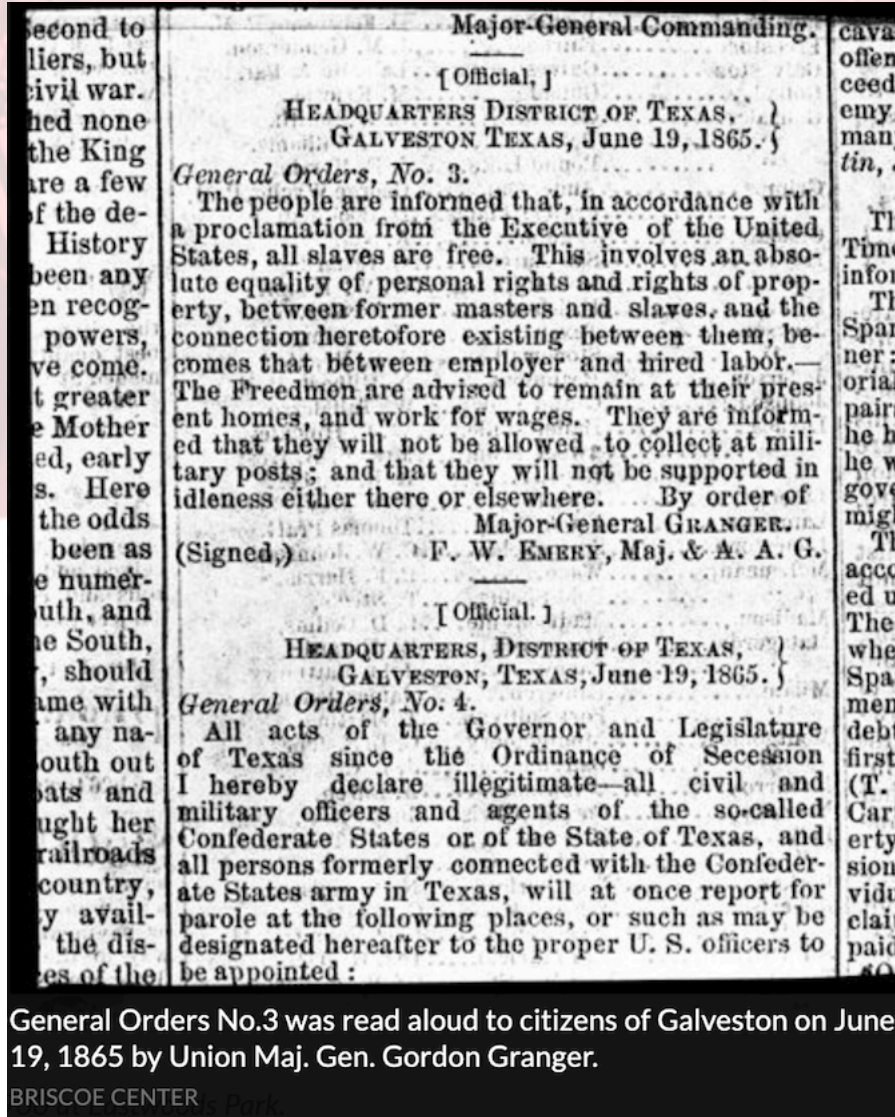
and danced right there in the streets.

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June 19 became African American Texans's new "Emancipation Day" or "Jubilee Day."

The first Jubilee Day celebrations took place in 1866 in [freedom colonies](#), or settlements of African Americans. Those celebrations shared similarities to [African American emancipation day celebrations](#) dating back to the early 19th century. Freedpeople celebrated with parties, food, and sporting events. They sang songs, especially spirituals. By 1870, nearly fifty freedom colonies were located near [Comanche Crossing](#) in Limestone County. The largest and most popular Juneteenth celebrations occurred there. African Americans also celebrated in Texas cities. In 1872, Reverend Jack Yates, local black churches, and community groups in Houston

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raised money to purchase ten acres of land for an [Emancipation Park](#) to hold Juneteenth celebrations. Blacks in other cities also purchased land to hold special Jubilee Day celebrations.

In the early 1890s, “Juneteenth” gained popularity as the name for these Jubilee Day celebrations. The celebrations emerged as an important part of African American political culture. African American strengthened old and forged new personal and family networks. Men, women, and children debated issues and candidates running for office and encouraged attendees to participate in the political process. By the early 1900s, Juneteenth celebrations in Texas, southeast Oklahoma, southwest Arkansas, and parts of Louisiana rivaled Independence Day celebrations. Disenfranchisement, extralegal violence, and economic exploitation foreclosed African Americans’ vision of freedom almost before the ink dried on Granger’s orders. Juneteenth celebrations not only adapted to the challenges African Americans faced but also reflected the vibrancy of African American culture.



Antioch Baptist Church (Houston) Juneteenth Parade, c. 1895- 1905, African American Library at The Gregory School, Houston Public Library

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A transformation in Juneteenth celebrations occurred in the mid-1930s. Dallas educator and businessman Antonio Maceo Smith led efforts to create a major exhibit of Negro achievement at the Texas Centennial Exposition in 1936. When state fair organizers refused, Smith and other civic leaders in Texas and around the country secured a \$100,000 grant from the federal government to build the [Hall of Negro Life](#). Over local whites' protest, the hall opened to the public on June 19, 1936. Over 46,000 African Americans streamed into the state fair grounds for the largest Juneteenth celebration ever held at that time. White Dallasites demolished the hall soon after the fair closed, but the 1936 Juneteenth celebration represented the most important celebration of African American life and achievement in the state's history. It revived the public celebration of Juneteenth and helped spread the celebration around the country.

Emboldened by their accomplishments during the Texas Centennial and rallied by World War II calls for a "[Double V](#)," a victory abroad against fascism and a victory at home against racism, Juneteenth celebrations in the 1940s and 1950s honored African American veterans and highlighted appeals for equal rights. During the Civil Rights Movement from the mid-1950s to the late 1960s, many African Americans drew connections between their present-day movement and historical struggles for freedom and equal rights. Debates surrounding the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Act, for example, made explicit connections to fulfilling the freedom first guaranteed in the Emancipation Proclamation. Activists drew obvious connections between the proclamation and Juneteenth. Organizers of the 1968 Poor People's March held the [Solidarity Day Rally](#) on Juneteenth. Blacks attended from around the country. After they returned home, they revived or initiated Juneteenth celebrations in their hometowns around the country.

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As the Civil Rights Movement gave way to Black Power, celebrations in the 1970s focused on racial pride and cultural heritage. By the late 1980s, California, Wisconsin, Illinois, Georgia, Washington, D.C., and other cities hosted major Juneteenth celebrations, which included music, art, and expressions of African heritage. By the end of the 20th century, people of all races, ethnicities, and nationalities in the United States and in parts of the Caribbean, Africa, and Europe celebrated Juneteenth.

Freedom took root in the hearts of those African Americans gathered in Galveston on June 19, 1865, despite the obstacles they faced in realizing its full fruits. As the founders of Black History Month, ASALH celebrates their legacy. Through festivals of freedom like Juneteenth, African Americans took an active role in constructing citizenship and U.S. political culture. They laid claim to public space, and they affirmed their collective memory in the face of Lost Cause and public discourses that diminished not only their role in shaping but also their contributions to U.S. history, culture, and society. ASALH salutes the men and women who made this day possible. The holiday makes room for people of all backgrounds to celebrate what is unique about their culture and experiences while pushing America to make social justice a living reality for everyone. Juneteenth endures as an acknowledgement of both the failures and the promises of America.

This is a revised version of the essay Shennette Garrett-Scott, “‘When Peace Come’: Teaching the Significance of Juneteenth,” *The Black History Bulletin*, Special Issue: At the Crossroads of Freedom and Equality: The Emancipation Proclamation and the March on Washington 76, no. 2 (Summer/Fall 2013): 19-21



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