

JUNETEENTH

Many people might say that enslaved people were officially freed when the Thirteenth Amendment was ratified on December 6th, 1865, making slavery illegal in the United States. Yet freedom came in varied ways to four million enslaved people even before the Civil War ended. For some, freedom from slavery came as early as 1861, when Union forces captured territory on the fringe of the Confederacy and freed those held in slavery. Still other enslaved people freed themselves by taking advantage of the disruption of war to flee to freedom. Later, on January 1st, 1863, the Emancipation Proclamation issued by Abraham Lincoln freed every person enslaved in the Confederacy. Emancipation for still more black Americans came during April 1865 at the end of the Civil War.

News of the Confederate surrender spread quickly across most places in the South, and those who were enslaved as well as their enslavers recognized that slavery would exist no more. However, in remote areas, news of the war's end—and slavery's end—traveled slowly. For those separated from Union armies, life carried on as if freedom did not exist.

Texas was one such secluded place. While it was a part of the Confederacy, it saw no fighting between Confederate and Union armies and therefore remained isolated from the events of the war. It was not until June 19, 1865, two and a half years after President Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, that enslaved Texans in Galveston were informed that slavery was officially abolished. Union General Gordon Granger and 2,000 federal troops landed on the beach in Galveston to take control of Texas. On June 19, Granger read the words of General Order No. 3, announcing: “The people of Texas are informed that, in accordance with a proclamation from the [President] of the United States, all slaves are free.”

This anniversary is celebrated in many communities across the U.S. as Juneteenth—a name that combines the words *June* and *nineteenth*. Juneteenth celebrations originated in Texas as a local tradition, but as families moved to different parts of the country, they brought this holiday with them. Not surprisingly, Texas was the first state to make Juneteenth an official holiday in 1979. Over time, more than 40 states recognized Juneteenth as a state holiday or observance. After years of advocacy, legislation was passed by Congress and signed into law by President Joe Biden on June 17, 2021, establishing Juneteenth as a federal holiday.

We consider July 4th a celebration of not only the United States' independence from Great Britain, but of freedom itself—but it should be noted that that freedom was not extended to all in 1776. Juneteenth celebrates the emancipation of all those who were formerly enslaved and honors the day that freedom was realized by all people in the United States. It is, in essence, a holiday commemorating the end of slavery as an important moment in our country's ongoing struggle toward freedom and equality for all.

Sources

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