

Juneteenth

June 19th marks the day when news of emancipation and the Civil War's end finally reached the last group of enslaved people in the United States. It is the most popular annual celebration of emancipation from slavery in the U.S..

History

Five days after the Union won the Battle of Antietam, President Abraham Lincoln issued a preliminary proclamation that demanded rebelling states return to the Union by January 1, 1863. If they did not comply, the enslaved people would be declared "forever free".

As the South did not oblige, The Emancipation Proclamation was issued on January 1, 1863.

However, news was not delivered to the 250,000 slaves in Texas.

On June 19, 1865 Maj. Gen. Gordon Granger issued the following order that established the Union Army's authority over Texas:

"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."

—General Orders, Number 3; Headquarters District of Texas, Galveston, June 19, 1865

Why the 2.5 year gap between the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation and the General Order No. 3?

One popular theory was that the messenger was killed at some point during his journey to Texas with the news of freedom. Another theory is that it was kept a secret as retribution for the "unruly" behavior that the slaves exhibited during their enslavement. In the mid 1850s, open Black rebellion against slavery increased dramatically in the South and especially in Texas.

....Over the years....

The first public Juneteenth event occurred in 1866. Former slaves would read the Emancipation Proclamation honoring Abraham Lincoln, who many White Texans saw as the destroyer of Southern "freedom". On that day, African-Americans sang spirituals, held games, and celebrated freedom.

Still, the holiday was celebrated by Black Texans and spread nationwide with the Great Migration of Blacks from the South to the North, Midwest and West.

Juneteenth experienced a resurgence in 1968 after the Poor Peoples Campaign, which included a massive march in Washington D.C. on Juneteenth. Marchers brought the celebration back to their homes, creating new traditions in cities and towns across the country.

In 1980 Texas made Juneteenth an official paid state holiday and in 1997, Congress recognized June 19 as "Juneteenth Independence Day".

As of May 2016, 45 of the 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia -- including New York -- recognized Juneteenth as a state holiday or a day of observance.