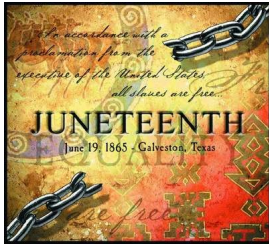


What Is Juneteenth?

Written by Henry Louis Gates Jr.

Monday, 17 June 2013 09:32 - Last Updated Monday, 17 June 2013 09:38



The First Juneteenth

"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." --General Orders, Number 3; Headquarters District of Texas, Galveston, June 19, 1865

When Maj. Gen. Gordon Granger issued the above order, he had no idea that, in establishing the Union Army's authority over the people of Texas, he was also establishing the basis for a holiday, "Juneteenth" ("June" plus "Nineteenth"), today the most popular annual celebration of emancipation from slavery in the United States. After all, by the time Granger assumed command of the Department of Texas, the Confederate capital in Richmond had fallen; the "Executive" to whom he referred, President Lincoln, was dead; and the 13th Amendment abolishing slavery was well on its way to ratification. But Granger wasn't just a few months late. The Emancipation Proclamation itself, ending slavery in the Confederacy (at least on paper), had taken effect two and a half years before, and in the interim, close to 200,000 black men had enlisted in the fight. So, formalities aside, wasn't it all over, literally, but the shouting?

It would be easy to think so in our world of immediate communication, but as Granger and the 1,800 bluecoats under him soon found out, news traveled slowly in Texas. Whatever Gen. Robert E. Lee had surrendered in Virginia, the Army of the Trans-Mississippi had held out until late May, and even with its formal surrender on June 2, a number of ex-Rebels in the region took to bushwhacking and plunder.

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That's not all that plagued the extreme western edge of the former Confederate States. Since the capture of New Orleans in 1862, slave owners in Mississippi, Louisiana and other points east had been migrating to Texas to escape the Union Army's reach. In a hurried re-enactment of the original Middle Passage, more than 150,000 slaves had made the trek west, according to historian Leon Litwack in his book *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery*. As one former slave he quotes recalled, " 'It looked like everybody in the world was going to Texas.' "

When Texas fell and Granger dispatched his now famous order No. 3, it wasn't exactly instant magic for most of the Lone Star State's 250,000 slaves. On plantations, masters had to decide when and how to announce the news -- or wait for a government agent to arrive -- and it was not uncommon for them to delay until after the harvest. Even in Galveston city, the ex-Confederate mayor flouted the Army by forcing the freed people back to work, as historian Elizabeth Hayes Turner details in her comprehensive essay, "Juneteenth: Emancipation and Memory," in *Lone Star Past: Memory and History in Texas*.

Those who acted on the news did so at their peril. As quoted in Litwack's book, former slave Susan Merritt recalled that, " 'You could see lots of niggers hangin' to trees in Sabine bottom right after freedom, 'cause they cotch 'em swimmin' 'cross Sabine River and shoot 'em.' " In one extreme case, according to Hayes Turner, a former slave named Katie Darling continued working for her mistress another six years (she " 'whip me after the war jist like she did 'fore,' " Darling said).

Hardly the recipe for a celebration -- which is what makes the story of "Juneteenth" all the more remarkable. Defying confusion and delay, terror and violence, the newly "freed" black men and women of Texas, with the aid of the Freedmen's Bureau (itself delayed from arriving until September 1865), now had a date to rally around. In one of the most inspiring grassroots efforts of the post-Civil War period, they transformed June 19 from a day of unheeded military orders into their own annual rite, "Juneteenth," beginning one year later in 1866.

" 'The way it was explained to me,' " one heir to the tradition is quoted in Hayes Turner's essay, " 'the 19th of June wasn't the exact day the Negro was freed. But that's the day they told them that they was free ... And my daddy told me that they whooped and hollered and bored holes in trees with augers and stopped it up with [gun] powder and light and that would be their blast for the celebration.' "

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Other Contenders

There were other available anniversaries for celebrating emancipation, to be sure, including the following:

- * Sept. 22: the day Lincoln issued his preliminary Emancipation Proclamation Order in 1862

- * Jan. 1: the day it took effect in 1863

- * Jan. 31: the date the 13th Amendment passed Congress in 1865, officially abolishing the institution of slavery

- * Dec. 6: the day the 13th Amendment was ratified that year

- * April 3: the day Richmond, Va., fell

- * April 9: the day Lee surrendered to Ulysses Grant at Appomattox, Va.

- * April 16: the day slavery was abolished in the nation's capital in 1862

- * May 1: Decoration Day, which, as David Blight movingly recounts in *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*, the former slaves of Charleston, S.C., founded by giving the Union war dead a proper burial at the site of the fallen planter elite's Race Course.

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* July 4: America's first Independence Day, some "four score and seven years" before President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation.

Each of these anniversaries has their celebrants today. Each has also had its share of conflicts and confusion. July 4 is compelling, of course, but it was also problematic for many African Americans, since the country's founders had given in on slavery and their descendants had expanded it through a series of failed "compromises," at the nadir of which Frederick Douglass had made his own famous declaration to the people of Rochester, N.Y., on July 5, 1852: "What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer; a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity."

The most logical candidate for commemoration of the slave's freedom was Jan. 1. In fact, the minute Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation had taken effect at the midpoint of the war, Northern black leaders like Douglass led massive celebrations in midnight jubilees; and on its 20th anniversary in 1883, they gathered again in Washington, D.C., to honor Douglass for all that he and his compatriots had achieved.

Yet even the original Emancipation Day had its drawbacks -- not only because it coincided with New Year's Day and the initiation dates of numerous other laws, but also because the underlying Proclamation -- while of enormous symbolic significance -- didn't free all the slaves, only those in the Confederate states in areas liberated by Union troops, and not those in the border states in which slavery remained legal until the ratification of the 13th Amendment. (Historians estimate that about 500,000 slaves -- out of a total of 3.9 million -- liberated themselves by escaping to Union lines between 1863 and the end of the war; the rest remained in slavery.)

Because of its partial effects, some scholars argue that perhaps the most significant aspect of the Emancipation Proclamation was the authorization of black men to fight in the war, both because their service proved to be crucial to the North's war effort, and because it would be cited as irrefutable proof of the right of blacks to citizenship (which would be granted by the 14th Amendment).

No one in the post-Civil War generation could deny something fundamental had changed as a result of Lincoln's war measure, but dwelling on it was a separate matter, David Blight explains.

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Among those in the 'It's time to move on' camp were Episcopal priest and scholar Alexander Crummell, who, in a May 1885 address to the graduates of Storer College, said, "What I would fain have you guard against is not the memory of slavery, but the constant recollection of it, as the commanding thought of a new people." On the other side was Douglass, who insisted on lighting a perpetual flame to "the causes, the incidents, and the results of the late rebellion." After all, he liked to say, the legacy of black people in America could "be traced like that of a wounded man through a crowd by the blood."

Hard as Douglass tried to make emancipation matter every day, Jan. 1 continued to be exalted -- and increasingly weighed down by the betrayal of Reconstruction. (As detailed in last week's column, the Supreme Court's gift to the 20th anniversary of emancipation was striking down the Civil Rights Act of 1875.) W.E.B. Du Bois used this to biting effect in his Swiftian short story, "A Mild Suggestion" (1912), in which he had his black main character provide a final solution to Jim Crow America's obsession with racial purity: On the next Jan. 1 ("for historical reasons" it would "probably be best," he explained), all blacks should either be invited to dine with whites and poisoned or gathered in large assemblies to be stabbed and shot. "The next morning there would be ten million funerals," Du Bois' protagonist predicted, "and therefore no Negro problem."

Juneteenth Endures

While national black leaders continued to debate the importance of remembering other milestone anniversaries, the freed people of Texas went about the business of celebrating their local version of Emancipation Day. For them, Juneteenth was, from its earliest incarnations, as Hayes Turner and others have recorded, a past that was "usable" as an occasion for gathering lost family members, measuring progress against freedom and inculcating rising generations with the values of self-improvement and racial uplift. This was accomplished through readings of the Emancipation Proclamation, religious sermons and spirituals, the preservation of slave food delicacies (always at the center: the almighty barbecue pit), as well as the incorporation of new games and traditions, from baseball to rodeos and, later, stock-car races and overhead flights.

Like a boxer sparring with his rival, year after year Juneteenth was strengthened by the contest its committee members had to wage against the Jim Crow faithful of Texas who, in the years following Reconstruction, rallied around their version of history in an effort to glorify (and whitewash) past cruelties and defeats. When whites forbade blacks from using their public spaces, black people gathered near rivers and lakes and eventually raised enough money to buy their own celebration sites, among them Emancipation Park in Houston and Booker T. Washington Park in Mexia.

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When white leaders like Judge Lewis Fisher of Galveston likened the black freedman ("Rastus," he called him) to "a prairie colt turned into a feed horse [to eat] ignorantly of everything," Juneteenth celebrants dressed in their finest clothes, however poor, trumpeting the universal concerns of citizenship and liberty, with hero-speakers from the Reconstruction era and symbols like the Goddess of Liberty on floats and in living tableaux. And when Houston refused to close its banks on Memorial Day in 1919 (only to do so four days later on Jefferson Davis Day, honoring the former Confederate President), Juneteenth celebrants still did their own remembering, in Hayes Turner's words, to project "identification with American ideals" in "a potent life-giving event ... a joyful retort to messages of overt racism ... a public counter-demonstration to displays of Confederate glorification and a counter-memory to the valorization of the Lost Cause."

Strengthening the holiday's chances at survival was its move across state lines -- one person, one family, one carload or train ticket at a time. As Isabel Wilkerson writes in her brilliant book, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*, "The people from Texas took Juneteenth Day to Los Angeles, Oakland, Seattle, and other places they went." As it spread, the observance was also changing. This was especially true in the 1920s, Hayes Turner explains, with the Consumer Age infiltrating black society with advertisements for fancier Juneteenth getups and more elaborate displays of pomp and circumstance.

This did not mean that Juneteenth's advances remained unbroken, however. Despite local committees' best efforts, with each new slight, with each new segregation law, with each new textbook whitewashing and brutal lynching in the South, African Americans felt increasingly disconnected from their history, so that by the time World War II shook the nation, they could no longer faithfully celebrate freedom in a land that still rendered them second-class citizens worthy of dying for their country but not worthy of being honored or treated equally for it. Hence, the wartime Double V campaign.

It is possible that Juneteenth would have vanished from the calendar (at least outside of Texas) had it not been for another remarkable turn of events during the same civil rights movement that had exposed many of the country's shortcomings about race relations. Actually, it occurred at the tail end of the movement, two months after its most prominent leader had been shot down.

As is well-known, Martin Luther King Jr. had been planning a return to the site of his famous "Dream Speech" in Washington, this time to lead a Poor People's March emphasizing nagging class inequalities. Following his assassination, it was left to others to carry out the plan, among

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them his best friend, the Rev. Ralph Abernathy, and his widow, Coretta Scott King. When it became clear that the Poor People's March was falling short of its goals, the organizers decided to cut it short on June 19, 1968, well aware it was now just over a century since the first Juneteenth celebration in Texas.

As William H. Wiggins Jr., a scholar of black folklore and cultural traditions, explained in a 2009 interview with Smithsonian magazine: "[T]hese delegates for the summer took that idea of the [Juneteenth] celebration back to their respective communities. [F]or example, there was one in Milwaukee." Another in Minnesota. It was, in effect, another great black migration. Since then, Wiggins added, Juneteenth "has taken on a life of its own."

Juneteenth Today

Responding to this new energy, in 1979 Texas became the first state to make Juneteenth an official holiday. (Ironically, the bill was passed on June 7, the anniversary of Homer Plessy's arrest on the East Louisiana line, as covered in last week's column.) Leading the charge was Rep. Al Edwards of Houston, often referred to as "the father of the Juneteenth holiday," who framed it as a "source of strength" for young people, according to Hayes Turner. (As a concession to Lost Cause devotees, Texas reaffirmed its commitment to observing Jan. 19 as Confederate Heroes Day.)

Since then, 41 other states and the District of Columbia have recognized Juneteenth as a state holiday or holiday observance, including Rhode Island earlier this year. "This is similar to what God instructed Joshua to do as he led the Israelites into the Promised Land," Al Edwards told Yahoo in 2007. "A national celebration of Juneteenth, state by state, serves a similar purpose for us. Every year we must remind successive generations that this event triggered a series of events that one by one defines the challenges and responsibilities of successive generations. That's why we need this holiday."

You can follow Edwards' efforts and others' worldwide at juneteenth.com, founded in 1997 by Clifford Robinson of New Orleans. Another organization, the National Juneteenth Observance Foundation, founded and chaired by the Rev. Ronald Meyers, is committed to making Juneteenth a federal holiday on par with Flag and Patriot Days (Note: They are not calling for Juneteenth to be a paid government holiday, like Columbus Day.) "We may have gotten there in different ways and at different times," Meyers told Time magazine in 2008, "but you can't really celebrate freedom in America by just going with the Fourth of July." You can follow his

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organization's activities at nationaljuneteenth.com.

These days, Juneteenth is an opportunity not only to celebrate but also to speak out. Last year, for example, The Root reported that the U.S. Department of State leveraged the holiday for releasing its 2012 Trafficking in Persons Report, with then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton noting, "Today we are celebrating what's called 'Juneteenth' ... But the end of legal slavery in the United States, and in other countries around the world, has not, unfortunately, meant the end of slavery. Today it is estimated as many as 27 million people around the world are victims of modern slavery."

As further proof that Juneteenth is back on the rise, this Wednesday, June 19, Washington, D.C., will be abuzz during the unveiling of a Frederick Douglass statue in the famed U.S. Capitol Visitor Center, thanks to the work of D.C. Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton. (Douglass will join three other African Americans in the hall: Rosa Parks, Sojourner Truth and Martin Luther King Jr.) No doubt Douglass would be surprised to learn that such an honor had not been scheduled for Jan. 1 (the 150th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation), but glad nevertheless that the country is still finding ways to remember "the causes, the incidents, and the results of the late rebellion."

Postscript

I grew up in West Virginia, many miles from the site of the first Juneteenth, and I never heard of the holiday until I went off to college. But I have come to see the beauty in its unexpected past and persistence. Besides, June 19 is generally a more comfortable day for outdoor family fun -- for fine jazz music and barbecue -- than Jan. 1, a day short on sunlight. Two weeks ago, in my article "Should Blacks Collect Racist Memorabilia?" I quoted W.E.B. Du Bois' summation of Black Reconstruction: "The slave went free; stood a brief moment in the sun; then moved back again toward slavery." At the time I failed to appreciate just how apt a description it was.

Of all Emancipation Day observances, Juneteenth falls closest to the Summer Solstice (this Friday, June 21), the longest day of the year when the sun, at its zenith, defies the darkness in every state, including those once shadowed by slavery. By choosing to celebrate the last place in the South that freedom touched -- reflecting the mystical glow of history and lore, memory and myth, as Ralph Ellison evoked in his posthumous novel, Juneteenth -- we remember the shining promise of emancipation, along with the bloody path America took by delaying it and deferring fulfillment of those simple, un-anticipating words in Gen. Granger's original order No.

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3: that "This involves an absolute equality of personal rights and rights of property between former masters and slaves."

My hope this Juneteenth is that we never forget it.

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