

## **Juneteenth is the oldest known celebration commemorating the ending of slavery in the United States**

By Ulandus Powell-Quinn and Stan Byrd

Juneteenth; also known as Freedom Day or Emancipation Day and is observed as a public holiday in fourteen states of the United States. This is an African –American celebration that honors the day in 1865 when slaves in Texas and Louisiana finally heard they were free. Note that this was two and a half years after President Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation - which had become official January 1, 1863. June 19<sup>th</sup>, therefore, became the “official day” for independence for thousands of African Americans. June 19<sup>th</sup> was quickly shortened to "Juneteenth" among celebrants.

Attempts to explain this two and a half year delay in the receipt of this important news have yielded several versions that have been handed down through the years. One story told is that the messenger who was to deliver the message was murdered on his way to Texas. Other stories state that the news was deliberately withheld by the enslavers to maintain the labor force on the plantations. Yet another story states that the troops waited for the slave owners to reap the benefits of the last cotton harvest before going to Texas to enforce the Emancipation Proclamation. It is still speculation to which of these is true.

The Order sent to Texas was called General Order Number 3. It stated: *"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 rights and rights of property between former masters and slaves, and the connection heretofore existing between them becomes that between employer and free laborer."*

The celebration of June 19<sup>th</sup> grew with more participation from descendants. The Juneteenth celebration was a time for reassuring each other, for praying and for gathering remaining family members. Juneteenth continued to be highly revered in Texas decades later, with many former slaves and descendants making an annual pilgrimage back to Galveston on this date.

The state of Texas made Juneteenth an official holiday on Jan. 1, 1980, and became the first to grant it government recognition. Several states have since issued proclamations recognizing the holiday, but the Lone Star State remains alone in granting it full state holiday status, a day when government employees have the day off. Nonetheless, supporters and celebrants of Juneteenth continue to grow in number and in diversity; today, Juneteenth is promoted not only as a commemoration of African-American freedom, but as an example and encouragement of self-development and respect for all cultures.

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Sources:

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2. "Juneteenth." Infoplease.  
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