

celebrate • commemorate • reflect

# Juneteenth

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## What is Juneteenth?

Juneteenth is one of America's oldest holidays and represents a day of independence – though it is a history that has been marginalized and still remains largely unknown outside of the Black and African American community. Juneteenth falls on June 19 each year (“June” plus “nineteenth”) and marks the day, June 19th, 1865, when federal troops lead by General Granger arrived in Galveston, Texas. General Granger read the General Orders Number 3, which declared:

*“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.”*

Juneteenth was officially recognized as a Texas state holiday in 1980, soon followed by other states. Although it is not yet a federal holiday, as of June 18, 2020, 49 states and the District of Columbia recognize the day. Many view Juneteenth as the effective “end” of slavery in the U.S., however its history is complicated and this perspective does not capture a complete story.

## Juneteenth and the Emancipation of Enslaved People in the United States

By the time General 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 in the process of ratification.

As writer Vann Newkirk II notes, Juneteenth commemorates a “belated liberation.” Two-and-a-half years before June 19th, 1865, President Lincoln’s famous Emancipation Proclamation was declared on January 1, 1863, which “freed” enslaved people in Confederate states engaged in rebellion against the Union. Yet, even the Emancipation Proclamation was not a full liberation declaration, as some border states and Confederate states controlled by the Union were exempt from the mandate of emancipation.

The holiday spread throughout the country as Black Texans moved North in the Great Migration. Nearly 100 years later, Juneteenth had not been forgotten, in fact delegates took the idea of a Juneteenth celebration back to their communities across the country to fight for civil rights in another “great Black migration” as scholar William H. Wiggins, Jr. noted. Henry Louis Gates also reflects:

*“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 “I Have a 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... 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 that it was now just over a century since the first Juneteenth celebration in Texas.”*

### Why is Juneteenth relevant today?

The legacy of the disadvantage of enslaved people has reverberations that last to this day. Lack of economic opportunities, lack of the actual right to vote and later the effective right to vote, Jim Crow laws, mass incarceration, and more.

Thus, it is important to note when debating which date may best represent emancipation, some point to December 6, 1865, when the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment technically abolished legal slavery. However, even this date does not capture full liberation, as the 13th Amendment created a loophole that allowed for – and continues to allow for – the enslavement of an imprisoned population.

Many argue that because of this loophole, slavery was “rebranded,” as evidence reveals there is disproportionate policing and incarceration levels of Black and Brown people in the United States. Unfortunately, other forms of systemic racism also persist, and because of this, many argue that full liberation has yet to be granted to the larger Black and African American community.



*Juneteenth day celebration in Texas, 1900.  
Credit: Austin History Center.*

Therefore, a more accurate perspective may be to recognize a “both/and” approach when thinking of Juneteenth. For example, this is a day to **both** recognize progress within the ongoing process of civil and human rights **and** the need to keep pushing for increased access to opportunity and equity for people of color in the United States, especially Black and African Americans.

Henry Louis Gates echoes the importance of “racial uplift” and how commemorating Juneteenth provided many Black and African Americans an opportunity to reinvest in themselves.

*“For the free people of Texas, Juneteenth provided an opportunity to measure 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.”*

For a group of Americans who had been stripped of human rights – often including the institution of family and cultural inheritance – Juneteenth can provide an essential routine of reclamation.

This “both/and” approach is also reflected throughout scholarship and opinions about this day, as Vann Newkirk II wrote:

*“Juneteenth is both a second Independence Day and a reminder of ongoing oppression and continuing forms of stricture. It is a memorial to the dead and a remonstrance to those who killed them. It is a clear articulation of the fact that America can never be free until her people are free, and a celebration of the people who have worked to make it so. Juneteenth is the purest distillation of the evils that still plague America, and a celebration of the good people who fought those evils. It is tragedy and comedy, hope and setbacks.”*

## Commemorating as a Community

Many have a personal connection to this day and have been celebrating or commemorating Juneteenth for years. Others, such as allies, accomplices, and co-conspirators, may commemorate the event of Juneteenth by educating themselves on many aspects of not only enslavement, but the Black experience in America as a whole. The discrimination, violence, and lifelong servitude Black and African American people were forced to endure, as well as the strength, courage, intelligence, and resilience it required to endure it – in addition to the many contributions enslaved people made throughout history, and the contributions Black and African Americans continue to make today – should be learned and reflected on.

Commemorating Juneteenth can also provide an opportunity to recognize a moment that represents progress in the realm of human and civil rights, as well as recognize the need for more equity. As a society, we should continue to think about what we can do to enact change and justice. Taking action and participating in community service in your hometown focused on racial injustice is a powerful way to commemorate. We should also consider policies or practices that support the continued advancement of people of color at Sheppard Mullin.



*Juneteenth celebration in 1900 at Eastwoods Park.  
Credit: Austin History Center.*

In closing, we should remember Juneteenth as the holiday that doesn't commemorate a document, a battle, a birthday or a national tragedy, but the fundamental promise of America being more completely realized.

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