

June 19, 1865 – Juneteenth Layers

Introduction

Chairman Brennan asked me to write a Juneteenth article – last year. I couldn't do it as it was too difficult to sort through all the layers associated with it. After processing for a year, I'm ready. By now, hopefully, all of us know the history behind the Holiday. I'm referencing that history and discussing some things I associate with the Holiday. Everything except my personal reflections is in the public domain, and if I haven't cited a source, I have no intent to claim someone else's thoughts or written reflections as my own. I've left some links in material taken from other sources – these links will assist in providing additional information if desired.

I'm using Wikipedia, and it works in this particular instance. I'm citing from Dictionary.com and, of course, Siri. Everybody doesn't like Siri, but humor me just this once. For purposes of this discussion, I'm using the word layers to mean complex, multifaceted, and not easily understood or able to be described by a single word or trait – complicated.

Definitions

I had never heard of Juneteenth until recent years, and thought the name sounded unique. So, when in doubt, I Google it, see what Dictionary.com says, or, my personal favorite, ask Siri.

Wikipedia – The Holiday's name is a portmanteau¹ of the words “June” and “nineteenth,” as it was on June 19, 1865, when Major General Gordon Granger ordered the final enforcement of the Emancipation Proclamation in Texas at the end of the American Civil War.

Dictionary.com – June 19th, a U.S. holiday celebrating the end of slavery in the United States and commemorating the emancipation of the last enslaved African Americans in Texas, on June 19, 1865.

(More About Juneteenth: When is Juneteenth? Why is it called Juneteenth? What is the history of Juneteenth? What are some terms that are often used when discussing Juneteenth? (slavery, chattel slavery, enslaved, freedom, emancipation, racism, reparations, Civil War, Emancipation Proclamation, Thirteenth Amendment)

Siri – Juneteenth, officially Juneteenth National Independence Day, is a federal holiday in the United States. *Should I keep going?*

Wikipedia has a pretty good definition but also has pages of additional information. Let's refer to this additional information as the “layers” referenced in the introductory paragraph. Dictionary.com basically has the same information but then adds an enormous footnote entitled “more about Juneteenth” (*in italics*) after the definition above. Again, let's refer to this enormous footnote as “layers.” When I asked Siri, the definition was given, and then this question - “Should I keep going?” In other words, even Siri recognized that there are layers.

Let's look back for a moment and unpack a few things.

¹ Portmanteau – A word that combines the form and meaning of two or more other words.

History

In 1863, President Lincoln issued the [Emancipation Proclamation](#)² declaring “all persons held as slaves within any State, or designated part of a State, the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States, shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free.” The Emancipation Proclamation, however, did not end slavery in the nation since it only applied to areas of the Confederacy currently in a state of rebellion (and not even to the loyal “border states” that remained in the Union). The Emancipation Proclamation was followed by a constitutional amendment to guarantee the abolishment of slavery.

On **June 19, 1865**, General Granger arrived with General Order No. 3 and the enforcement power of almost 2,000 Union soldiers:

General Orders, No. 3

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 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.³ *(my emphasis added)*

Following that, the 13th Amendment was passed at the end of the Civil War. The Senate passed it in April 1864, but the House initially did not. The passage of the 13th Amendment was added to the Republican Party platform for the upcoming 1864 Presidential election, and the House passed the bill in January 1865 with a vote of 119–56. It was ratified on December 6, 1865.

The 13th Amendment to the United States Constitution states, "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction."

With the adoption of the 13th Amendment, the United States found a constitutional solution to the issue of slavery. The 13th Amendment, along with the [14th](#) and [15th](#), is one of the trio of Civil War amendments that greatly expanded Americans' civil rights.

Juneteenth Myths

In an article, John Burnett addressed enduring myths about Juneteenth that are not based on fact. I think it's important that we examine them for the purposes of this discussion.

² The Emancipation Proclamation is broken down into all of its parts in the book entitled [Forced Into Glory – Abraham Lincoln’s White Dream](#) by Lerone Bennett, Jr. This is truly an enlightening read (a/k/a layers!)

³ Layers

Myth #1: President Abraham Lincoln issued his [Emancipation Proclamation](#) on Jan. 1, 1863, and it's outrageous that it took two and a half years for the news to finally reach enslaved people in Texas.

Fact: Many slaves knew about Lincoln's executive order emancipating them. The news was widely covered in Texas newspapers—with an anti-abolitionist spin—and black people would have overheard white people discussing it in private and in public. Moreover, "There was an incredibly sophisticated communication network among slaves in Texas,"⁴. "News like that spread like wildfire. We know some slaves knew about the Emancipation Proclamation even before slaveowners. It didn't mean anything because there was no army to enforce it."

June Collins Pulliam is a fifth-generation Galvestonian whose enslaved great-great-grandparents, Horace and Emily Scull, were freed by the [Juneteenth Order](#). "It wasn't that all these poor people didn't get the message," she says, "It was that there was no one enforcing it, no one making it happen!"

Myth #2: Major Gen. Gordon Granger penned General Orders No. 3, the Juneteenth Order, and is credited with freeing Texas slaves.

Fact: The order—which includes the powerful language "all slaves are free" and "absolute equality"—was actually written by Granger's staff officer, Maj. Frederick Emery, who hailed from an abolitionist family in Free Kansas. "As a crusader against slavery in Kansas, Emery was well versed on the subject of emancipation," writes Cotham in his Juneteenth book.

Myth #3: Gen. Gordon Granger read the Juneteenth Order from a balcony to the people of Galveston, announcing that "all slaves are free."

Fact: According to Cotham, Gen. Granger never read the order publicly, nor did any member of his staff. It would have been posted around town, particularly at places where Black people gathered, such as "the Negro Church on Broadway," as [Reedy Chapel-AME Church](#) was then called. Most enslaved people in Texas learned of General Orders No. 3 when the slave master called them together and read them the news.

Myth #4: The Juneteenth Order was basically a Texas version of the Emancipation Proclamation.

Fact: General Orders No. 3 stated unequivocally "all slaves are free," but it also contained patronizing language intended to appease planters who didn't want to lose their workforce. Forty-one words of the brief 93-word order urged enslaved people to stay put and keep working.

⁴ Edward T. Cotham, Jr., Texas Civil War historian and author of *Juneteenth, The Story Behind The Celebration*.

*"The freed are advised to remain 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."*⁵

Why did I footnote this as layers? Because even in the General Order, the stage was set for continued oppression. How? You are free, but stay put, continue to work for your former master, think of yourself as an employee now, and don't start hanging out at places you don't belong! Can you imagine? Not to mention the fact that to date, slaves had received no compensation for any of the work done, no compensation for any inventions which made accomplishing the work better, no accommodations for conditions of slavery.... See footnotes 3 and 5!

2021 - Today

President Biden signed bipartisan legislation [establishing](#) Juneteenth as the Nation's newest Federal holiday so that all Americans can feel the power of this day, learn from our history, celebrate our progress, and recognize and engage in the work that continues.⁶

So, as of June 19, 2021, Independence Day has been joined by a second federal holiday, a bookend to Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation that gives rise to and adds a voice to the 13th Amendment and celebrates the freedoms and equal citizenship of all black citizens of the United States. In future years, "Juneteenth" will be marked alongside Independence Day as a celebration to include those who were barred from the benefits of the original event and intent. Viewed as an enhancement to and completion of the original independence movement, Juneteenth merits the same community reference and celebration based on the belief, in the words of Opal Lee, that "none of us [is] free till we're all free."

While Lee was described by President Joseph Biden as the "Grandmother of the Juneteenth movement," she and others continue to worry that Juneteenth will become only a "black" holiday rather than a national one.⁷

And here we are, 2024, talking about Juneteenth and all that is forever associated with it. Look at the Dictionary.com definition again; it is not so much about the defining words but the extra layers that come with the definition. Particularly these - *slavery, chattel slavery, enslaved, freedom, emancipation, racism, reparations, Civil War, Emancipation Proclamation, Thirteenth Amendment*.

We cannot separate the celebration of Juneteenth from these words. It cannot be just another day off or described by any means as solely a joyful celebration. Even as I write this article, a White House concert commemorating the holiday is in progress. Referencing Vice President Kamala Harris, "...next Wednesday, across our Nation, Americans will come together with generations of loved ones to celebrate Juneteenth. We want to celebrate black excellence and leadership, culture and community, resilience and resistance, and to fully remember our

⁵ Layers!

⁶ Quoted from the Whitehouse's description of the purpose of the Juneteenth Concert on June 10, 2024

⁷ [Juneteenth. The History and Legacy of the Holiday that Commemorates the End of Slavery in the South](#) by Charles River Editors (audiobook)

nation's history. For more than two years after the Emancipation Proclamation was signed, as we all know, hundreds of thousands of African Americans in Texas were still enslaved. Then, Union troops arrived in Galveston, and on June 19, 1865, the enslaved people of Texas learned they were free. On that day, they claimed their freedom, and today, as we celebrate Juneteenth together, we are reminded of the promise of America: a promise of freedom, liberty, and opportunity - not for some, but for all. In many ways, the story of Juneteenth and of our Nation is a story of our ongoing fight to realize that promise. Our ongoing fight to build a Nation that is more equal, more fair, and more free. A Nation where every person has the opportunity to not just get by but get ahead....”

Among other things, Vice President Harris went on to say, “While Juneteenth is a day for celebration, it is also a day for dedication. A day to rededicate ourselves to the ongoing and unfinished work of our American experiment. A day to renew our commitment to defend our freedoms, to honor our history, and to continue to fight for the promise of America.”

Initially, I said we should look back and unpack some things. I think that looking forward to the nation's unfinished work will be more beneficial. If we are to continue with the strides that have been made, we will need to do everything in our collective power to ensure that the vehicle of progress stays in drive and does not go into reverse.

Conclusion

I am presently a Commissioner at the IWCC and was appointed in February of this year. My office decorations have as a backdrop the doll collection I am building, which includes Harriet Tubman, Rosa Parks, Ida B. Wells, Stacy Abrams, Kamala Harris, Madam C.J. Walker, Maya Angelou, Barack Obama, Bessie Coleman, and Lady Justice, flanked on either side with the American Flag and the State of Illinois flag⁸. Behind them is my window with a view of the Daley Center, a symbol of justice. Looking forward, I look out of the door of my office with the intent of holding the door open for others coming behind me in our quest to keep moving forward. There is a lot of work to be done. Let us remember Juneteenth.

-Raychel A. Wesley

⁸ Under construction