

Juneteenth Reflections: Freedom and the Work of Remembering

By Raychel A. Wesley

Initially, it took me about a year to filter through my personal layers and to offer a helpful, informative discussion about Juneteenth. My thanks to Chairman Brennan for the continued platform to reflect on this.

In these changing political times — with the rise of debates over what is called "woke," the efforts of history revisionists, and the ongoing blurring of lines around civil rights, DEI, civility, and democracy — there are more layers than ever, and the importance of remembering is even greater.

Juneteenth marks June 19, 1865 — the day when Union soldiers arrived in Galveston, Texas, and announced the freedom of enslaved African Americans, more than two years after the Emancipation Proclamation was signed.

It has become a national day of reflection, not only on the ending of slavery but on the ongoing journey toward full freedom and equality.

But as we reflect, it is important to understand the history accurately. Over time, several myths have grown up around Juneteenth. NPR journalist John Burnett has identified and clarified some of these common myths:

- **Myth:** The Emancipation Proclamation didn't reach Texas until two and a half years later.

Reality: Many enslaved people in Texas already knew of Lincoln's 1863 proclamation — through newspapers, word-of-mouth, and communication networks — but there was no military presence or enforcement in Texas to implement the law until Union troops arrived.

- **Myth:** Maj. Gen. Gordon Granger personally wrote and executed General Orders No. 3.

Reality: While Granger issued the order, it was written by his staff officer, Maj. Frederick Emery, who was an abolitionist from Kansas. Granger served more as the authority delivering the order.

- **Myth:** Granger read the order from a balcony to a cheering crowd.

Reality: There was no dramatic balcony reading. The order was posted in public places around Galveston and often read privately by slaveowners to the enslaved or by Union soldiers directly to communities of freed people.

- **Myth:** General Orders No. 3 was Texas's version of the Emancipation Proclamation.

Reality: While the order declared freedom, it also included language encouraging freed people to remain with their former masters as hired workers. This tempered the message of full and immediate independence and reflects the complexities of emancipation on the ground.

As Opal Lee, known as the Grandmother of Juneteenth, reminds us: "None of us are free until we're all free."

Juneteenth should not be seen simply as a 'Black holiday,' but as an opportunity for everyone to reflect, to serve, and to contribute toward the ongoing work of justice, equality, and healing. It is a chance for all Americans to recognize our shared history and take responsibility for building a better future together.

As a Black woman, this reflection is deeply personal to me. It is not only history; it is lived experience. As a Commissioner at the Illinois Workers' Compensation Commission, inside my office, a portion of my personal doll collection is displayed on the credenza by the window, framed by the backdrop of the halls of justice — the Daley Center — visible through the glass.

These figures represent powerful symbols of both history and hope. Among them are Harriet Tubman, the Statue of Liberty, Rosa Parks, Madam C.J. Walker, Bessie Coleman, Ida B. Wells, Lady Justice, Barack Obama, and Maya Angelou.

Following the publication of my Juneteenth reflections last year, the Commission received an anonymous donation: a beautiful rendition of Lady Liberty, which now hangs prominently in the Commission office. This inspiring image further reflects the values of freedom, dignity, and perseverance that Juneteenth commemorates. I invite you to take a moment to view Lady Liberty when visiting the Commission as a reminder of the work that continues.

Juneteenth is a celebration of deliverance, but also a call to remain vigilant in the ongoing work of justice. As we face continuing challenges to voting rights, economic equity, and civil rights, we honor the strength of those who came before us by pressing forward — holding the door open for others, just as others

held it open for us, while doing our part to ensure that the progress made is not lost but steadily advanced.

Let us remember.