

Background

Slavery in the United States can be traced back to the 16th century when Spanish explorers brought African slaves with them to the “New World.” In 1862, with the war going badly, President Abraham Lincoln had begun to change his thinking about slavery. Long an advocate of gradual abolition by paying slave owners, the President began to believe that more drastic action was needed.

The war was becoming increasingly unpopular and enlistments were dwindling. Lincoln, however, was faced with increasing pressure from northern abolitionists to take at least some action to free the slaves.



So in July, as a military measure, Lincoln drafted a proclamation ironically freeing slaves in rebel states where he had no practical power to do so. Lincoln did have power, however, over slaves in “Border States,” such as Kentucky. But to keep slaves owners in those states from joining the rebellion, the proclamation Lincoln had penned allowed the bondage of blacks there to continue.

The proclamation was drafted and the Cabinet knew it would be issued, but Lincoln waited for a military victory before taking even this half step toward complete emancipation. It wasn't until September, after a quasi-victory at Antietam, that the government decreed that as of January 1, 1863, slaves in rebel states were “then thenceforward and forever free.”

In the abolitionist strongholds of the Northeast, the proclamation was greeted warmly. But in what is now the Midwest, it was disparaged for making the war more about ending slavery than about putting down the rebellion in the South.

More importantly, perhaps, it stopped the great powers of England and France from recognizing the Confederacy as a legitimate government. Doing so would have been an enormous boost to Confederate fortunes. And while Lincoln had obvious practical reasons for issuing the proclamation, it was a turning point in the Civil War and Lincoln understood it.

He had always thought the war would eventually extinguish slavery. But the proclamation and the atmosphere it created put slavery's extinction – and possibly the Union's victory – on a fast track.

By the summer of 1863, as a consequence of Lincoln's changed thinking, more than 30 black regiments were under arms and 14 were ready for battle. The following year, Lincoln came under pressure to revoke emancipation to get the South to rejoin the Union, but he refused.

He said he couldn't break faith with the thousands of black soldiers who'd fought and died for their freedom. So when the Galvestonians gather at Ashton Villain in June, they won't be re-enacting history, they'll be commemorating something the 16th President would say is far more important.

Ultimately for Lincoln, emancipation gave the war a higher purpose. Renowned Lincoln scholar David Herbert Donald wrote that eventually Lincoln came to think of the proclamation as the “crowning achievement” of his presidency.



On June 18, 1865
Union General Gordon Granger arrived at Galveston Island with 2,000 federal troops to occupy Texas on behalf of the federal government. Standing on the balcony of Galveston's Ashton Villa, Granger read aloud the contents of “General Order No. 3,” announcing the total emancipation of slaves.



The Juneteenth flag is often displayed with the United States flag to symbolize that slavery is illegal.

General Order #3

"The people 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, become that between employer and hired labor.

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."

Juneteenth today throughout the United States celebrates African American freedom while encouraging self-development and respect for all cultures. As it takes on a national and even global perspective, the events of 1865 in Texas are not forgotten, for all of the roots tie back to the fertile soil from which a national day of pride is growing. The future of Juneteenth looks very bright because the history, culture and knowledge extend beyond Texas.

In 1991, Glynn Johns Reed, a progressive leader and visionary, founded the Juneteenth Freedom & Heritage Festival and celebrated on the grounds of the historic Douglass Park in North Memphis. Each year the festival highlighted and celebrated the varied milestones of African Americans. There was a theme each year as well. 'The Educators', for example, were recognized one year. Another year, "The Tuskegee Airmen," were celebrated. That year, the youth were privy to airplane flights. Then there was the year of the "Black Cowboys." That year, the youth enjoyed horseback rides. Throughout the years there were many educational and uplifting themes as well.

The Juneteenth Freedom & Heritage Festival was celebrated 21 years in Douglass Park during Father's Day weekend. Families, friends and strangers gathered yearly in the park to relax to the soulful sounds of music of all genres.

During Glynn's tenure as producer, a mixture of Memphis Blues and New Orleans Jazz was a constant source of entertainment that was offered to the public free of charge.



In 2011, the reigns and responsibilities of the Annual Juneteenth Freedom & Heritage Festival were passed from Glynn Johns Reed to Telisa Franklin of TFC Media Group. The three-day festival is still held on Father's Day weekend; however, in 2014, Ms. Franklin reorganized and rebranded the Juneteenth Freedom & Heritage Festival into the Juneteenth Urban Music Festival held yearly on Father's Day weekend. Douglass Park in North Memphis continues as a community to celebrate yearly but the Juneteenth Urban Music Festival was relocated to the historic Robert R. Church Park in Downtown Memphis as an all-inclusive music festival that not only entertains the public, but also educates a nation of people about the final "Celebration of Freedom." The knowledge of freedom is a power that allows the impossible to be possible to anyone willing to embrace understanding and togetherness.

"We the people of the United States Cherish FREEDOM!"

- www.MemphisJuneteenth.com
- www.Juneteenth.com
- www.nationalJuneteenth.com

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