

Freedom by Any Other Name: Juneteenth Celebrations and Its Expansion Throughout the United States  
and Overseas

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When do you celebrate freedom? What does it mean to be free? In the United States, this question can get complicated. African Americans address these questions through the celebration of Juneteenth. Sometimes referred to as Emancipation Day, Freedom Day, or other regional names, Juneteenth takes the month and date, June 19<sup>th</sup>, that marks the date on which enslaved African Americans learned of the Emancipation Proclamation, which Lincoln gave a full two years prior. Juneteenth marks not only the celebration of African Americans coming out of slavery, but Black communities also use this day to memorialize, commemorate, and learn about the national tragedy of slavery. The holiday expanded out of the streets of Galveston to become a Texas state holiday. Eventually as its cultural prominence grew, Juneteenth migrated out of Texas and out of the South. Though not an official nation-wide holiday, over 40 states, Washington DC, communities in Canada, and several other communities around the world celebrate the holiday. Much like the movement of African Americans and their communities out of slavery and away from the South, Juneteenth migrated out of Texas, the South, and spread into cultural prominence. As each decade passes since the Emancipation Proclamation, communities continue to celebrate Juneteenth whether quietly with close family members or with large community gatherings. With the onset of social justice reform efforts and the growing prominence of the Black Lives Matter movement in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Juneteenth, especially within the last decade, gained even higher significance in the American cultural phenomenon.

On January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1863, President Lincoln delivered the Emancipation Proclamation freeing enslaved African Americans remaining in the Confederate states during the waning years of the Civil War. While Lincoln's proclamation made it official, Richard G. Weiss of the Salt Lake Tribune suggests that African Americans had long been working to gain freedom for themselves. From rebellions and resistance, enslaved African Americans had long been working for their freedom before the Emancipation

Proclamation. Weiss writes, “Those in bondage were part of this process at every step of the way, from resistance and rebellion to escape” (Weiss, 2020). On June 19, 1865, Union soldiers finally arrived in Galveston, Texas informing those still enslaved that the Emancipation Proclamation by President Lincoln officially freed them, almost 2.5 years after the proclamation.

Many theories exist to explain the reasons behind the delay in informing Texas enslaved persons of their freedom. One theory suggests that the union soldier sent to dispense the message was killed on his way to Texas (Wiggins Jr., 1993). Another proposes that either the mule riding mission or the mission by water to get the news to Galveston was exceptionally slow (Wiggins Jr., 1993). Several writers intimate there were not enough Union soldiers in the area to enforce the newly given freedom and thus Texas was left behind (Jeffries, J. 2020). Perhaps the most repugnant theory of all remains that the federal troops purposefully delayed and withheld the Emancipation Proclamation message so that they gained the profits from one final cotton harvest before the Civil War ended (Wiggins Jr., 1993). No matter the reason for the delay, reactions to the news was, naturally, a mixture of shock and jubilation. A combination of the words “June” and “Nineteenth,” Juneteenth celebrations began in Galveston as early as 1866 according to historian Charles A. Taylor.

Juneteenth celebrations tend to represent Independence Day to African Americans more so than July 4 because it marks the freedom of *all* citizens of the United States (Regis, Z. 2020). Though largely a joyful, triumphal occasion, education is a major component of Juneteenth celebrations occurring both in and outside of Texas (Hume, J. & Arceneaux, N., 2008). African Americans celebrate their freedom, but in these celebrations there lies a heavy emphasis on the reminder that their freedom was hard fought and was not granted until long after the July 4 Declaration of Independence (Palomo-Acosta, T., 2020). Professor Richard G Weiss of Georgetown University writes, “if Americans are going to mark and celebrate Juneteenth, then they should do so with the knowledge and awareness of the agency of enslaved people” (Weiss, R. G., 2020 p. 5). The celebrations of Juneteenth encompass a wide range of activities and sizes depending on the location and decade. Some events are and remain small and local, held in

backyards with family and friends or at churches. Others are held as large city and community-wide events. Most recently, Juneteenth celebrations coincided with marches and protests against ongoing racial injustice in the United States. Just as they differ in size, Juneteenth celebration activities are equally as varied. These include rodeos, barbeques, baseball tournaments, and festivals (Juneteenth.com, 2020). Foods also serve as a focal point of celebrations. Many foods served at events incorporate the color red because at the heart of these celebrations of freedom lies the education and remembrance of the bloodshed of slavery (Regis, Z. 2020). Zeema Regis explains, “while Juneteenth is a time for celebration [Dr. Lydia] Willingham, who also serves as a president of the Black Presbyterian Women Caucus, sees it as a time to acknowledge the brutality of slavery and the blood that was shed” (Regis, Z. 2020 p. 27). This is done through consumption of red food/drink such as strawberry soda, red velvet cake and by wearing the color red (Regis, Z. 2020).

Almost immediately after learning of their freedom, African Americans began to leave Texas, taking the celebration of Juneteenth with them. At first, they moved into neighboring states, Louisiana, Oklahoma, Arkansas, searching for relatives and seeking to simply leave the plantations where they were forced to live and work (Juneteenth.com, 2020). These singular, familial movements most likely contributed to keeping the tradition alive. Henry Louis Gates Jr. states, “strengthening the holiday’s chances of survival was its move across state lines – one person, one family, one carload at a time” (Gates Jr, 2013). This movement laid the early groundwork for the national and international celebrations seen today. The Great Migration was one of the largest expanders of Juneteenth’s reach. People known as “Texpats” moved out of Texas and into the urban Northwest, Midwest, and West taking Juneteenth celebrations with them (Anderson, J. 2015). Immediately after the end of the Civil War and throughout the Reconstruction era, gatherings to celebrate Juneteenth served as a means for African Americans to solidify their place in their community and form their citizenship roles (Garrett-Scott, S, 2013).

Between 1910 and 1930 raises a strange dichotomy for Juneteenth. On one hand, this time sees the US becoming involved in WWI as well as the onset of the Great depression while simultaneously

seeing a shift in mechanized manufacturing and more consumer goods. Consumerism in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century meant there was a shift from hand-made, home-made goods to factory-made, ready-to-use goods for purchase. This created a new status of citizen according to historian Lizbeth Cohen, the consumer (Cohen, L. 2003). In response to the new consumer movement, companies began to target Black Americans in order to advertise fancier clothing and accessories for them to use at Juneteenth celebrations. Unfortunately, this backfired as during this time community-wide, large-scale celebrations of Juneteenth diminished opting instead for small, familial gatherings. Shanette Garrett-Scott states the context for this decline is key. During the years 1910-1930, discriminatory Jim Crow laws solidified as xenophobia, nativism, and segregation gripped the United States tighter and tighter. Mostly white Americans, but some Blacks, felt the Juneteenth celebrations were unamerican because they fixated on slavery rather than patriotism and their vision of American nationalism (Garrett-Scott, S. 2013).

As the United States recovered from the first World War, there was a second wave of African American migrations. This time the main direction of the movement was to the west. In 1945, a Texas migrant named Wesley Johnson moved to the San Francisco Bay area. Historians largely credit Johnson with bringing Juneteenth to the area. He did so by opening night clubs and cultural centers in his neighborhood and hosting Juneteenth events there. In the first of four stages of Juneteenth expansion, Black Americans flocked to the San Francisco Bay more than any other city (Blanck, E. 2019). To this day, Juneteenth celebrations still occur in San Francisco and the surrounding area still celebrate Juneteenth making it one of the longest running Juneteenth celebrations. Towards the end of and immediately following World War II, African Americans began to push the Double V Campaign meaning victory over fascism and victory over racism. This expanded Juneteenth celebrations and awareness of the holiday across the nation by celebrating Black accomplishments and Black veterans. They used the educational aspects of Juneteenth to appeal for civil rights (Blanck, E. 2019). The end of WWII also marked the one of the first times Juneteenth expanded past the US borders. As African Americans moved west, they also moved into Vancouver, Canada settling in the neighborhood known as Hogan's Alley.

With them, they brought the Juneteenth celebrations and created a thriving “cultural center of gospel, drinking, dancing, gambling, southern blues, and ethnic cuisine” (Scott, C. 2013). While there was now a wider reach of Juneteenth Celebrations outside of Texas, celebrations remained mostly small because according to William H. Wiggins Jr. these celebrations were not seen as being patriotic.

The Civil Rights Movement brought renewed energy to Juneteenth celebrations. The movement allowed for further spread of celebrations across the United States. Journalist Olivia Waxman reported in *Time Magazine*, “In the 1960s, the civil rights movement [SIC] brought a new push for American to live up to ideals [of equality] – and with it came a renewed awareness of Juneteenth”. The Civil Rights Movement also changed the way African Americans celebrated Juneteenth. Now more than ever before, the educational portion of the celebrations took a more central role. Increasingly, as seen in Atlanta, Georgia, Blacks used Juneteenth to give stern reminders that freedom was still not equal across the United States (Palomo-Acosta, T. 2020).

The Civil Rights Movement marked the beginning of the second phase of Juneteenth’s nationwide expansion. At this point, celebrations of Juneteenth evolve into street festivals for entire communities, asserting their freedom and strengthening the bonds within their community (Blanck, E. 2013). Wiggins explains, “It took twenty years and political actions spawned by the Civil Rights Movement to revive Juneteenth celebrations back to their pre-war community presence.”

The crowning moment for Juneteenth and the Civil Rights Movement came in the Poor People’s March on Washington in 1968. This march on Washington gathered peoples from across America, both Black and white, who were poor and disenfranchised. It is known as Martin Luther King Jr’s last march before being assassinated. The purpose was to call for equality, freedom, and federal assistance for the poor and underserved (Dellinger, D. 2018). The march ended on June 19, 1968 and culminated with one of the largest Juneteenth celebrations to date (Palomo-Acosta, T. 2013). As always, education served a central role in the celebration. Crowds from around the United States learned about the holiday’s significance and meaning. The march served as a super spreader event for Juneteenth knowledge and

celebrations. Participants took the information they learned and placed Juneteenth in the cultural heritage of their home states. They began celebrating the tradition in cities like Minneapolis, Milwaukee, and The Bronx, areas that before the Poor People's March had not celebrated the holiday.

Though widely celebrated throughout Texas, Texas did not recognize Juneteenth as an official holiday until 1979. Then Governor William P. Clements signed Bill 1016 which made Juneteenth an official Texas state holiday. Wiggins Jr. writes, "Since Governor William P. Clements signed the historic bill into law, Representative Edwards has actively sought to revitalize the observance of the celebration in Texas as well as to spread Juneteenth into all regions of the United States." State leaders worked diligently toward this goal increasingly throughout the 1980s. During this time, not only did more states recognize the holiday, nationally recognized systems such as the American History Museum in Washington DC, the Chicago Historical Society, and now the National Museum of African American History started to sponsor, discuss, and promote Juneteenth discussions and events spreading knowledge about the holiday further and with the backing of nationally recognized institutions. As of 2019, forty-five states and the District of Columbia officially mark Juneteenth as a state holiday or observance (Stewart, E., et al 2020).

Juneteenth celebrations follow the Black communities as they migrated out of the south and into new areas of the United States. The evidence suggests that the holiday followed African American migrants into foreign countries. The earliest documentation of this is the Mascogos peoples in Mexico. Keven Seif of The Independent explains this community grew from enslaved Blacks who escaped slavery in southern Texas for freedom in northern Mexico. The community retained contact with those still in Texas in any capacity they could. Immediately after Union troops informed enslaved Texans of their freedom, Blacks continued to move into this village and established the earliest known international Juneteenth celebrations (Ferguson, W. 2019). This community, though now very different from its origins, still celebrates Juneteenth to this day.

Another early expansion abroad was the development of the Hogan's Alley neighborhood in Vancouver, Canada. George H. Junne reports that as part of the Great Migration, African Americans not only moved into the American West, but they also moved into western Canada and south into Mexico. A late 19<sup>th</sup> century gold rush enticed African Americans and white Americans alike out of California and into Vancouver. At this point, African Americans established the Hogan's Alley neighborhood in Vancouver. The culture established in this neighborhood centered around the church, and community events centered around their home culture which included celebrations of Juneteenth (Scott, C. 2013).

Little data exists on international expansion of Juneteenth until the 1990s. Clifford Robinson of Juneteenth.com established a forum where people from around the world can post of Juneteenth celebrations they are hosting or attending. Many on the forum are associated with US military base locations, giving the impression that as African Americans enlisted in the army and served overseas, they took their Juneteenth celebrations with them. There are also several celebrations associated with the National Pan-Hellenic Council as well as the United States military. South Korean US military base, Camp Carroll with Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity Inc. and Zeta Phi Beta Sorority Inc. reported hosting celebrations of the military base. In Japan, the website reports the African American Friendship Association hosted a celebration in 2008 in Tokyo. Another example is the W.E.B DuBois Center for Pan African Culture hosting an event in 2005. The earliest documented observance of the holiday via this forum is in 1999. The events that are not associated with a military base abroad seem to be the product of American colonial efforts into other countries.

Like most events in 2020, Juneteenth ceremonies felt and actively were different for a variety of reasons. Unrest and referendums on social and racial injustice in the United States based on the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd made national and international headlines and prompted a new wave of protests and calls for reform of the American justice system and removal of confederate statues. The marches and protests that grew out of these events influenced Juneteenth observances and brought renewed fervor and awareness of the holiday both in the United States and

abroad. As with the Civil Rights movement, 2020 brought renewed intensity to the educational aspect of Juneteenth celebrations. D.S. Burch of the New York Times explains, “this year, the holiday – cherished always by African Americans – feels bigger, more urgent as a nation gutted by a series of violent deaths of black people has given way to outsized demonstrations and protests against police brutality and the enduring clutch of racism.” William and Mary College partnered with their local NAACP to host their first Juneteenth event on campus as part of the dedication of a memorial to slavery that is an unavoidable aspect of the college’s founders (Zagursky, E. 2020). Richard Weiss writes, “this holiday which only became a nationwide celebration (among black [SIC] Americans) in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has grown in stature over the last decade as a result of key anniversaries ... trends in public opinion ... and the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement.” According to journalist C. Brandon Ogbunu this renewed fervor of the Black Lives Matter movement and social justice reform caused the Juneteenth holiday to essentially go viral. *The Guardian* agrees writing, “increased awareness of the holiday comes around growing calls for profound change to tackle systemic racism in American society.” Large corporations ranging from Apple to Nike and ZocDoc, higher education systems like William and Mary College and even NFL teams “moved from, in some places, complete ignorance to full recognition of Juneteenth” (Ogbunu, C. B. 2020). These factors allowed for further spread both national and internationally.

Due to the COVID19 pandemic many traditional celebrations had to move to virtual settings. For example, the National Museum of African American History and Culture, a branch of the Smithsonian Institute, hosted a two day virtual event that focused on showcasing performances, learning how to trace ancestry, presentations about the history of Juneteenth, and reading or reciting traditional folk tales according to their website. According to their website, iamjuneteenth.org sponsored a virtual music festival with guests such as Outkast, and other live bands. The organization streamed the music festival live on their website and on Facebook. The city of Dallas hosted a virtual music festival as well that they broadcast on YouTube.com. Tickets could be purchased to obtain a link to the event with proceeds going to local community organizations (12 News, 2020).

Virtual events and the virality of the holiday caused even further spread of events. At the Aviano Air Force Base in Italy, the African American Heritage Committee, a private organization on base, hosted a socially distant event on base. According to the event's organizer, 200 people pre-registered to participate. The event was also live streamed on Facebook which received 11,000 views. Another military base, the US Army Garrison Daegu in South Korea held an unofficial celebration on the base. For their socially distant event, guests were invited to partake in a poster making contest where the posters reflected what Juneteenth means to the creator. British Vogue writer Maya Richard Craven encouraged Brits to celebrate in solidarity with the United States by getting involved with African American organizations like the NAACP and the Black Lives Matter movement and to host a socially distant celebration to mark the holiday and learn more about its significance because, as she writes, that is one of the central messages of the holiday, education. Participants should "engage in dialogue about the work that needs to be done in the service of equality" (Richard Craven, M. 2020). One of the few silver linings of the pandemic in 2020 appears to be that now more than ever, Juneteenth reached new audiences around the world as celebrations moved to the world wide web.

Freedom remains one of the enduring cornerstones of the American identity, but in a nation founded using slavery, how do you celebrate that freedom when for so long it has not been given equally? In 1865 in Texas, newly freed African Americans took agency over their freedoms and set out to begin their new lives. They memorialized this most important day and as they moved out of the South and off the plantations that for so long treated them as property or worse, they brought the celebration of their freedom, Juneteenth, with them. Whether it is referred to as Emancipation Day, Juneteenth, or Freedom Day, Juneteenth is the closest the United States has come to a national recognition of the emancipation of slaves. One by one, community by community, this celebration has spread. Now officially recognized by 47 states, DC, multinational corporations, and now around the world, Juneteenth's educational aspect has perpetuated the holiday and kept it going in each new location. As the pandemic drew closer and closed the doors to many activities, Juneteenth, like the spirit of its origins, could not be squandered. In perhaps

the biggest spread, celebrations moved virtual, available to be shared multiple times in any location with internet access. Through hardship, oppression, and a global pandemic, Juneteenth endures. As it spreads to more corners of the world, we can hope that the ideas of freedom and equality grow even further.

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