

Have you heard of a holiday called Juneteenth? Do you know what it is, or why it's important in American history? Well, listen here – this is the episode for you. This is straight-up history – Ancestry.com is on the blink, so we're steering clear of Ancestry lessons for a few weeks in order to let them get themselves together again. And since there's a holiday to discuss, why not use the opportunity to learn in a whole new way? We've got quotes from the Emancipation Proclamation and General Order #3, from Henry Louis Gates Jr and from an array of private researchers who were good enough to lend us their views and understanding of Juneteenth. Grab your Faygo Red Pop. It's time to learn!



Welcome to Episode 19 of From Paper To People, Ancestors Alive! Genealogy's sooper-doooper podcast. I am your hostess with the mostest, Carolynn ni Lochlainn, and I'm back with a history-focused episode. You may have noticed that Ancestry.com is still on the blink, so I'm steering clear of lessons about it for a little while, just until they've cleaned house. Besides, variety is the spice of life, so let's try something different.

Today is going to be a bonanza: I'm using historical documents to teach historical facts, quoting real-live human beings from my personal circle and from my larger Facebook genealogy family, and it's all in the name of a localized Texas holiday that is becoming more of a national, cultural phenomenon every year: Juneteenth. Never heard of it? Great! I hadn't until a few years ago myself, and researching this episode taught me even more, not only about the history but about current feelings and perceptions surrounding it. So get in the spirit, grab a Faygo Red Pop, and listen in, because this episode is where cultural and popular history meet. And if you're not up on your Civil War history or you're not from the US, you may want to grab a US map and have your Google handy. It might get a little hairy for you.

Obvious first question: What is Juneteenth? If you want to do a little quick reading, there's a great website called [juneteenth.com](http://juneteenth.com) that tells the story. Henry Louis Gates Jr. has also

blogged about it on pbs.org. In fact, the internet including YouTube is full of a lot of great resources, even before you get to books and the more scholarly assessments of the date and its weight in African-American history. I'm paraphrasing them, as well as some other sources, in this episode.

Juneteenth, also known as Freedom Day, is a holiday that originated in Galveston, Texas. It is celebrated on June 19th every year, hence the name. It commemorates the day in 1865, over a month after General Robert E Lee surrendered at Appomattox Courthouse, when Union forces under Major General Gordon Granger delivered General Order #3, a declaration that slavery had indeed ended in all states and territories of the US and the defeated Confederacy. Since then, and particularly in the past 5 years or more, it has spread with migration and with social media to become a holiday that celebrates blackness and unity for some, yet for others in the black community, it means nothing.

I came into this episode thinking that all black folks celebrated it, but that was a classic white cultural mistake. As I researched and conversed with people, I found that Juneteenth is much more complex than I suspected. We'll get to those layers in a few minutes.

But first, we need to talk about a few American History basics. Fundamentally: If you think that the United States Civil War was NOT fought primarily over slavery, think again. Read real history, read and listen to slave narratives, and then, think some more. It was. It was an economic issue: white people who owned other humans didn't want to lose their free labor force. And it was an issue of hate, because racists didn't want to lose their control over the bodies and fates of other subjugated humans. That's the truth. Speak it and shame the devil.

To lead into Juneteenth, we need to start by understanding non-military efforts that the Union made in order to free the enslaved during the Civil War. The signal effort, of course, was the Emancipation Proclamation. I know, many have said much about it, but it's not the simple document it seems to be, considering it's only 708 words, including the dates written out in longhand.

President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation as an Executive Order on New Year's Day of 1863, in the middle of the Civil War. It was not the first definitive step that the Federal Government took to break the slavery system legally, but it was also not a panacea. In fact, it was a bit of a see-saw act. In 1862, the Union government had issued a series of warnings: Confederate supporters had 60 days to surrender, or face confiscation of their land and the enslaved persons they considered their property, thus freeing the enslaved. That would have ended slavery. But, it didn't.

The Proclamation went further than those 1862 attempts, creating a status called "freedom" for African-Americans: it declared that "all persons held as slaves [...] are, and henceforward shall be free; and that the Executive government of the United States, including the military and naval authorities thereof, will recognize and maintain the freedom of said persons." This affected 25,000 to 75,000 enslaved persons immediately, changing their status to "free."

But the Proclamation defined its own limitations, which were considerable: it worked immediately in Confederate-held lands ONLY. It did not apply to the non-combatant border states where people were still enslaved (Kentucky, Maryland, Delaware, and Missouri), nor to lower Louisiana parishes and Tennessee (which, by then, were occupied by Union forces and where people were, yes, still enslaved), and it excluded by name the Virginia counties that would later become West Virginia even though Virginia was the capital state of the Confederacy. And the Virginia counties obviously contained enslaved persons. Emancipation in those places would come after separate state actions, or as a result of the December 1865 ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment to the US Constitution. The 13th made slavery illegal everywhere within the United States' jurisdiction, but its ratification was 2 years and 11 months after the Proclamation. And that left 3.5 million souls out of the equation, and in an enslaved limbo, until 1866. An estimated 500,000 enslaved persons liberated themselves by escaping to Union lines between 1863 and 1865, but millions more remained in slavery due to the wishy-washy, gerrymandering nature of the Proclamation.

You can see what a mess this was. Anybody keeping track on a map would have had to do so

at a county-by-county level, with a calendar and at least one stiff drink. On top of this, the newly-freed were not given full citizenship – that would not come until the 14th Amendment in 1868, which is why the “free” status created by the Proclamation was illusory. And yet, the Proclamation ordered that all freedmen fit for military duty would be “received into the armed service of the United States to garrison forts, positions, stations, and other places, and to man vessels of all sorts in said service.” It said nothing about their pay rate, which was notoriously lower than that of white soldiers, and it arrantly took advantage of a formerly enslaved man’s need to be paid, have food and clothing and some semblance of safety, and to enjoy some measure of physical freedom by being able to travel with his unit. It may not have been slave ownership, but it was still exploitation.

Arguably, the right to serve set up the right to citizenship, and it allowed freedmen a chance to shine as heroes. Military duty therefore created precedent that became a Constitutional amendment, and that fostered national pride – blacks finally being able to free other blacks under color of law.

I feel two ways about this – on the one hand, freedmen who joined up had a chance at a new life in the military, and that was fantastic. They could send home their pay packets to families that had never known income, and that’s awesome. They knew an unprecedented degree of autonomy, and that must have been incredible. But pre-Proclamation, Lincoln referred to the men he would free as a “great untapped resource,” which sounds like a description of cannon fodder. And indeed, Colored Troops suffered casualties at a rate 35% greater than white troops. Their valour and their seeming expendability combined to mark them for an increased death rate over that of their white fellows.

Key to understanding Juneteenth is that TEXAS was one of the states named in the Proclamation as a state in rebellion, a state where the enslaved were now, henceforth and forever free. And Texas was the location of the Battle of Palmito Ranch, which was fought on May 12, 1865, over a month after Lee’s surrender on April 9th. US Colored Troops fought against the Confederacy in that battle, by the way.

So, on June 19th, 1865, 1800 Union troops led by Major General Granger landed at Galveston, Texas, and Granger read out the following:

“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.”

Those warnings about staying at home were unfair, because they put the burden of safety on the potential victims of violence instead of warning potential criminals that they'd be summarily executed for harming freedmen. Sadly, they were prescient: there were lynching parties on the loose, and some were successful. The thing that doesn't compute is this: how did nobody in 1865 Texas know about the 1863 Proclamation? US Colored Troops, raised by the Union to end the Confederacy as a product of the Proclamation, and as a product of freeing cities like Vicksburg, Mississippi, ENTERED TEXAS IN UNIFORM MONTHS EARLIER AND FOUGHT FOR THE NORTH at Palmito Ranch.

The strongest irony here is that these soldiers were proof to Texas slaveholders that their party was over. There must have been gossip among the enslaved, as well, about these black men wearing blue uniforms. Juneteenth.com gives a few reasons why this might have been:

1. a messenger, on his way to Texas with the news of the Proclamation in 1863, was murdered en route.
2. Federal troops waited for plantation owners to reap the benefits of one last cotton harvest before going to Texas to enforce the Emancipation Proclamation, thus exploiting enslaved labor as long as they could.
3. The news was deliberately withheld by plantation owners from their enslaved workers to

maintain a labor force on their plantations.

I have no facts or magical insight here, but I'm willing to say #1 is apocryphal, #2 is likely, and #3 is definite.

Juneteenth was a response to the good news of an end to slavery as stated in General Order #3. It was celebrated publicly with food and sporting events like rodeos because there is a great tradition of black cowboys in the West, and in Texas specifically. Some whites saw themselves as great saviors, and Juneteenth as a holiday gift to blacks, at first. Blacks themselves focused on uplift, education, and self-improvement throughout the history of Juneteenth, and continue to do so. And in terms of the recognizable symbols that carry to celebrations across the country today, strawberry soda has become a drink of choice, barbecue the food, and locations near the water have been preferred, for cultural reasons dating back to African spiritual practices brought over on 18th-century slave ships.

White people who were initially tolerant, however, became less so in just a few years' time. Their true colors began to show once Reconstruction ended, the Confederacy's standards resurged, and Jim Crow became the vicious, repressive legal and social standard in the South. Henry Louis Gates Jr explains how the Juneteenth ground shifted, and how blacks adjusted to it, during Jim Crow: "When whites forbade blacks from using their public spaces, black people gathered near rivers and lakes and eventually raised enough money to buy their own celebration sites, among them Emancipation Park in Houston and Booker T. Washington Park in Mexia." [both are towns in Texas]

Roughly 40 years after the first Juneteenth, a white Galveston Judge named Lewis Fisher called free blacks celebrating Juneteenth "prairie colt[s] turned into [...] feed horse[s] [eating] ignorantly of everything." Fisher was one in a long line of whites trying to make freedmen out to be less than human. People still do it today. Gates explains how the black citizenry responded to this and other, similar remarks and attitudes: "Juneteenth celebrants dressed in their finest clothes, however poor, trumpeting the universal concerns of citizenship and

liberty, with hero-speakers from the Reconstruction era and symbols like the Goddess of Liberty on floats and in living tableaux.” So, freedmen made Juneteenth about far more than themselves. They took upon themselves the cause of freedom, citizenship, education, and self-improvement, and despite oppression, celebrated those ideals for everyone.

Juneteenth is very much a response to white-created enslavement of blacks, white-created and black-won freedom for blacks, and white criticism of the very freedom that whites granted to blacks as a result of the enslavement that whites created in the first place. 153 years later, black people who choose to do so celebrate Juneteenth, from its Galveston, Texas origins in 1865 to an African-American Emancipation Day that has spread across the United States. But to what degree do people celebrate, and to what degree has it spread?

Since this holiday isn't MY holiday, I asked a variety of African-Americans what this day means to them. I got answers from friends and strangers who were kind enough to share their thoughts and words.

Yvonne Deal Chandler, who hails from New Jersey, says “I am African American. I am 69 yrs old. I learned next to nothing about slavery & the civil war in school. My parents, who were teachers and southern, taught us most of what we came to know about Black History. I didn't learn about Juneteenth celebrations until I was an adult. I love the Juneteenth Celebration. It helps to educate our children and young adults about the truth of slavery and the awesome endurance of our ancestors. When I lived in Connecticut, there were several parties, balls, celebrations at churches and events for families and children.”

Our own Christopher Harris, who grew up in Indiana, says “Juneteenth represents a celebration of resilience, rejoicing the freedom my ancestors' wish for themselves and their posterity” ...he's not from Texas, but he celebrates.

Hans Nielsen says “I worked in the Arizona prison system which had contracts with meal preparation companies to feed the inmates. One of the stipulations of the contract was that

special meals had to be prepared on specific holidays. One of these special meal days was Juneteenth. It was my favorite. They served hot links, barbecued chicken, black eyed peas, greens, and cornbread, and sweet potato pie.”

Of course, that begs the question of mass incarceration being so pervasive that a prison system sees the need to celebrate a black cultural holiday, but we won't go there today. I definitely get behind Hans' taste for sweet potato pie, though.

My friend Melissa Malcolm King, who grew up in New York, says “Juneteenth is a freedom day! It is the opportunity to recognize all those who died and sacrificed so that we could be free. The process to freedom did not end on June 19th, 1865 – it was just the beginning. There are people of color today all around the world still fighting to be free and to be treated like human beings. Juneteenth is a time to celebrate how far we have come and to educate the future generations!”

Gilda Kennedy, who lives in North Carolina, says “Juneteenth is a day that I quietly celebrate by going through family pictures and heirlooms, attempting to touch my ancestors. I reverently honor the sacrifices they made by choosing to live through slavery. Juneteenth is a day that is celebrated because it represents the last nail in slavery's coffin. The day that we could finally breathe freedom.”

Edie Paige, from Pennsylvania, says “Juneteenth is a very important date. For my ancestors, it was the realization of hoping against hope, of untold prayers that had gone unanswered for over 200 long years. Finally freedom had come!!! On that day we have a festival in historic Germantown, Pennsylvania, place of the first written protest of slavery by white people. Black people protested constantly, but their voices were forcibly silenced. It's a time to reflect on how it must have felt to have the freedom to make choices. Of course the choices were severely limited for the poverty-stricken people. Many set about looking for the family that had been taken from them. Many got married officially. Too many stayed, entered into unfair sharecropping scams, and became de facto prisoners on the same familiar farm. Juneteenth

was the beginning of a brief 10 year period in the south where Black people made progress, voted, held elected office. This reconstruction ended with the implementation of the Black Codes which severely restricted freedom, and opportunity, effectively reducing Blacks to servitude once again. Juneteenth is yet another example of that.

Sarah Williams told me something extraordinary. She wrote:

I am in Prairie View, Texas. One of my prized possessions is a two page document about a Juneteenth celebration from 1883. It is handwritten by my grandfather, Charles Joel Robinson. The document hangs in my hallway. It says that community members should gather for the 18th annual celebration of Juneteenth. That there would be a parade through the main streets of Scott's Springs and end up at a church in Caldwell, Texas. There would be 10 orators. My grandfather would read the Emancipation Proclamation. My grandfather was born in Mississippi as a free black in 1859. I found his birth date by looking at the 1900 census. It doesn't say where in Mississippi. The census says he was a farmer- perhaps because he owned 400 acres of land. But you can tell he was an educated man by his handwriting which looks like calligraphy. He graduated from Prairie View A&M in 1882. Was a teacher in Snook, Texas. Republican party county Chairman of Burleson County. By 1878 he was in Texas. Had established a first family. Then established a second family from which my Dad was born in 1892. My life was in the 1950s in Columbus, Texas. Juneteenth was a huge event. Social life centered around the segregated schools, of which the community was quite proud. Annually, one of the close towns would decide who would host the annual parade. (I recall this information from listening to my parents, James Joel and Lizzie M. Robinson). The big event to me was watching the marching bands and beautiful majorettes from the surrounding towns. There would be decorated floats. Often there would be a rodeo at Connor's ranch with all the black cowboys. We variably called the day 19th of June or Juneteenth. And, of course, we had the traditional foods, i.e., barbecue, watermelon, and red soda water. At the time, 1940s, '50s, mid 60's we had a quite learned Negro population due to the segregated school system. People would go off to college, come back, and become teachers, preachers, business people. So we had grand Juneteenth celebrations.

On the other hand, some people said that their geographical areas had their own celebrations corresponding to their own Emancipation Days (Kentucky celebrates on August 8th, for instance). Others said that they had never heard of Juneteenth at all, or at least not until they studied it in college (yet another argument for teaching African American history as a part of all American history).

But a few people polled made an entirely different assertion: that Juneteenth is Texan-only and doesn't apply to them, or that it emphasizes a passive receipt of freedom rather than the actions of those who ran to freedom, bought their families out of freedom, rebelled, or who fought with the US Colored Troops to liberate all enslaved persons. I requested responses in a few Facebook groups, and the threads were peppered with discussions pro and con. Until I saw these discussions, I admit that my view was simplistic and untextured, but now I am beginning to understand, as only an outsider can imperfectly do, that there are many sides to the prism of Juneteenth as one of many African-American freedom days.

This viewpoint was expressed by people from all over the US, but was best voiced by Sonja Woods: She said "Juneteenth means nothing to me because I'm from North Carolina, and it's a regional holiday. It also detracts from the stories of the United States Colored Troops regiments, whose presence in Texas before "Juneteenth" signals that the Emancipation Proclamation was in effect. Juneteenth shouldn't have spread out of Texas because it does not apply anywhere else." Sonja's work centers on the US Colored Troops, and I hope to be interviewing her for the podcast so that we can all learn more about her research - their contributions to the war effort despite systematic limitations are a fascinating topic.

So, lots to consider. Fortunately, no one is saying that there should be only ONE Freedom Day. There are other days that African-Americans celebrate as a holiday, a freedom day, and they include:

- Jan. 1: the day the Emancipation Proclamation took effect
- Jan. 31: the date the 13th Amendment passed Congress, officially abolishing the

institution of slavery

- April 3: the day Richmond, VA fell to Union forces
- April 9: the day Lee surrendered to Grant at Appomattox, VA
- April 16: the day slavery was abolished in Washington DC
- May 1: Decoration Day, which became Memorial Day – when formerly enslaved citizens of Charleston, SC gave the Union war dead a proper burial at the site of the city’s horse racing venue
- July 4: America’s first Independence Day
- August 8th: Kentucky’s Emancipation Day
- Sept. 22: the day Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation
- Dec. 6: Ratification Day of the 13th Amendment

And these are crucial points for all non-blacks to understand about the Black experience in the United States – it is one of a see-sawing legal system underpinned by severe, vicious racist, nationalistic and ethnic hatred, and being black is NOT a monolithic experience. Some see celebration of Juneteenth as an extension of a white man’s narrative, something to be defended against, while others see it as a spiritually significant day, and an evolving step forward into a national and international, cohesive Black and African diasporic identity and culture that non-blacks will not be able to deny. In New York, there are yearly cultural festival days for a variety of immigrant populations; there is nothing similar for a people who have been here only a few years less than Anglo-Europeans. Of course, there is also no formal holiday recognition for indigenous peoples, for Native Americans in the US, but unfortunately we can’t get there today, either.

So how does this connect to genealogy? If you don’t understand history, you can’t perform research. You won’t see connections and possibilities, and you won’t have compassion for people or situations. And if you can’t approach folklore with the necessary understanding of history and how people might feel about it today, you run the risk of missing facts, storylines, or of offending your informants so much that they will shut down, closing off your access to an entire line of inquiry.

My job as an Anglo-Irish and European-American researcher is to keep learning about cultures and histories other than my own, to understand that it's not my place to agree or disagree with other people's self-perceptions, self-definitions and arguments, and to try to understand, support, and provide space on my platform. I have to learn the history, the layers of personal truth, and do my best to give all things equal credence and support. I don't get to define Juneteenth, what it is or what it should be. That's not my lane.

I know how I'm celebrating Juneteenth, though. It's the 25th anniversary of my mother's death, so I plan to do two things: I'll cook with the radio blaring, exactly as she used to, and I'll update my Ancestry profile to include all information I have about all of my slaveholding ancestors, some of whom belonged to her line, so that anyone who chooses to can quickly sift through that information, examine my tree, and start to find possible ties, either using DNA or using documentary evidence, in order to find information about their own enslaved ancestors. She would adore that, too.

Thanks so much for listening to this special, all-history Juneteenth episode!

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And Curt Brady wrote and performed my theme music. He can do the same for you. Send questions and ideas for your new theme to [curtisbrady@yahoo.com](mailto:curtisbrady@yahoo.com). He'll take good care of you.

Have a great week, do your research, don't be a Jeffrey, keep learning EVERYONE'S history, and above all, Expect Surprises!



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