



United States Department of the Interior

OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY

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Washington, DC 20240

The Celebration of Juneteenth

The question of slavery divided the nation during the decades leading up to the Civil War. But by September of 1862, President Abraham Lincoln made abolition a formal position of the US government when he announced the Emancipation Proclamation, which declared that enslaved people in states or areas of “rebellion against the United States” would be free effective on January 1, 1863. However, the Proclamation was not easily enforced because the Union did not have enough soldiers in those slaveholding areas to support enforceability. Moreover, slaveholding areas did not publicly inform or acknowledge the Emancipation Proclamation to the slave communities.

For these reasons, the news of the Emancipation Proclamation was slow to reach Texas. In some quarters, there was no news of an Emancipation Proclamation. In other places, the news was hidden by slaveholders to preserve slavery.

On June 19, 1865, when General Granger of the Union Army announced that the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 freed slaves, he had several additional tasks to complete. He additionally explained that not only were slaves now equal to their former slave masters but any working relationship between the former slaves and former slave master had changed from slave master to owner to employer and employee.

In honor of the final and complete liberation of slaves that occurred on June 19, 1865, African Americans commemorated this event with regular celebrations that highlighted particular cultural references. These celebrations later became known as “Juneteenth.” First was a heavy emphasis on wearing your best attire because, in many instances, slaves were prohibited or limited in the ability to wear appropriate attire. Second, there were a range of activities to entertain the masses, many of which continue in tradition today. Rodeos, fishing, barbecuing and baseball are just a few of the typical Juneteenth activities you may witness today. Juneteenth almost always focused on education and self-improvement. Thus, often guest speakers are brought in and the elders are called upon to recount the events of the past. Prayer services were also a major part of these celebrations.

The Juneteenth celebration grew during the years following the Civil War, with many formerly enslaved African Americans and their descendants making annual anniversary pilgrimages to Galveston.

Juneteenth is the oldest known US celebration of the abolition of the chattel slave system, and the emancipation of enslaved African Americans in Texas. In 1980, Texas became the first state to officially acknowledge Juneteenth as a state holiday.