



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

Juneteenth: A celebration 154 years in the making

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Soon after the Civil War started, people who escaped slavery came to Alexandria to assert their freedom. Enslaved people located elsewhere within the United States had to wait longer for that experience. One of those locations was Galveston, Texas, which waited until June 19, 1865, for Union Gen. Gordon Granger to declare that "...rights of property between former masters and slaves, and the connection heretofore existing between them becomes that between employer and hired laborer."

The formerly enslaved people of Galveston started a tradition of celebrating their freedom on Juneteenth – June + 19th. That tradition became a national federal holiday last year, 154 years after the residents of Galveston first celebrated the occasion.

While Alexandrians have celebrated the freedom of the formerly enslaved people in our city since the end of the Civil War, the celebration's date has varied. Starting in the 1880s, Alexandrians organized the celebration commemorating the end of slavery. Some early keynote speakers included Frederick Douglass and John Mercer Langston, the first African American to represent Virginia in the House of Representatives.

The writings of Alexandria newspaper publisher Magnus Robinson show us that in 1891, the Emancipation Celebration took place on January 1, marking the day that the Emancipation Proclamation took effect. Later celebrations took place on September 24 – probably due to the announcement of the Emancipation Proclamation on Sep. 22, 1862 – such as in 1894, when Frederick Douglass spoke at the Emancipation Celebration.

In the last 40 years, Alexandrians have followed the lead of Galveston in celebrating the end of slavery on Juneteenth. Texas declared the date a state holiday in 1980, and for almost 30 years, the Alexandria Black History Museum has celebrated the day with festivals, film screenings, performances and other activities. In 2020, Virginia declared Juneteenth a permanent state holiday. In 2021, President Joe Biden signed the Juneteenth National Independence Day Act, establishing Juneteenth as a national holiday. This year, Alexandria continues its tradition of celebrating the abolishment of slavery with children's activities, a concert by the Washington Revels at Market Square on June 19, and the Grand Opening of the Freedom House Museum on June 20.

For more information on Juneteenth in Alexandria, please visit <https://www.alexandriava.gov/museums/juneteenth-a-time-ofreflection-and-rejoicing>.



John Mercer Langston, the first African American congressman from Virginia, and the keynote speaker of Alexandria's Emancipation Celebration in 1895 and 1897. Photo/Library of Congress.

"Out of the Attic" is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as "Marking Time" and explored Alexandria's history through collection items, historical



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into “Out of the Attic” and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria and invited guests.