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Juneteenth: A Continuing Story of Perseverance

Summer means popsicles, skating on the pavement, and festivals. For me, summer meant the nonstop fun of celebrating Juneteenth with parades, soul food, and musical performances all month long commemorating the legacy of my ancestors. Juneteenth is singularly one of the most pivotal holidays in African-American culture; however, it has largely remained unknown until recently.

The journey of African-Americans in America started more than four centuries ago when European nations began the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. Slavery had long existed, but this slave trade produced a violent and deadly form of “chattel slavery,” where individuals were classified as personal property. Chattel slavery was fundamentally different from indentured servitude, where, in the former, the individual’s identity was enmeshed in property.

America maintained this form of slavery through the early 19th Century. Abolitionists campaigned throughout the country for slavery’s abolishment. The debate culminated in a divide amongst the states eventually leading to the Civil War. The prominent issue involved the state’s right to keep slaves. President Abraham Lincoln understood that the seceded states were able to maintain their strength in the war through their economy, which was largely stabilized by slavery. Additionally, many slaves were actively fighting in the War for the Union. As a tactical decision, President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation on September 22, 1862; it was to go into effect on January 1, 1863.



Black Troops serving the Union Army during the Civil War.

Waiting on Freedom

On the eve of New Years in 1862, Black Americans packed out their churches for a new phenomenon known as “Watch Night Service” as they waited on “Freedom’s Eve.” They waited for the stroke of midnight to see the freedom they had long prayed to possess. I’ve celebrated this tradition every year with my family since I was a child, as my parents did when they were children, and their parents before them. Often times we reminisce on this history during these services. We rekindle the same hope our ancestors once had to motivate us towards

higher hopes as we walk into the New Year. They gathered with so much hope as they knew that the stroke of twelve represented a new life.

Jubilee!



A 1908 photograph of two women in Texas sitting in a buggy decorated with flowers for the annual Juneteenth Celebration parked in front of Antioch Baptist Church in Houston's Fourth Ward.

Union soldiers, many of whom were Black, marched onto plantations and across cities in the South reading small copies of the Emancipation Proclamation spreading the news of freedom in Confederate States. But not everyone gained their freedom. Even though the Emancipation Proclamation came into effect in 1863, it could not be implemented in places still under Confederate control. As a result, enslaved people in Texas would not be freed until much later. In Texas, slave owners neglected to tell the enslaved African-Americans that they were free. Freedom finally came on June 19, 1865. Roughly 2,000 troops arrived in Galveston Bay, Texas announcing that the more

than 250,000 enslaved Black people in the state were free by executive decree. This is how we came to have the day “Juneteenth,” as it represents the actual date June nineteenth.

The post-Emancipation period known as Reconstruction marked an era of great hope for the future. Many African-Americans were elected to public office, started businesses, and reunited their families during this era. The first Juneteenth celebration was held on June 19, 1866 in Texas, and it went by many names—*Jubilee Day*, *Freedom Day*. The Juneteenth celebration commemorated more than just freedom. It also commemorated the legacy of enslaved and freed Black Americans who fought for American liberty. More than 179,000 African-Americans fought in the Civil War, and the Army Reorganization Act of 1866 made African-Americans a permanent part of the military. Every Juneteenth celebration starts with a parade, the focus of which is a memorial for Black U.S. troops and their service. The parades also feature Black high school bands and dance troops, which are guided by horses. The festivals also feature amazing eats decorated around the color red. The thematic use of red inspired celebrants to add red food coloring to what were called “velvet cakes.” This is how the American favorite Red Velvet cake emerged. Over time, these celebrations have grown to host musical acts and professional singers.

Growing up in the Bay Area, California, our Juneteenth celebrations lasted the entire month. It lasted from the first weekend in June till the last—so long, I assumed the name represented a monthly celebration. Each weekend a different city would host their own Juneteenth celebration. It was a great time for reconnecting with family and friends around the area. Black small businesses would also have the chance to be spotlighted and experience some growth during this time. While the holiday has gained a significant amount of prominence in recent years, it has grown much more commercialized removing the spotlight from our small businesses. This month, I encourage everyone to patronize at least one Black business and take advantage of the chance to taste more of our culture.