

Chapter 17

THE FIRST JUNETEENTH



The first Juneteenth was a day filled with the weight of human history and hope, unlike any moment that had come before. On June 19, 1865, General Gordon Granger arrived in Galveston, Texas, bearing General Order No. 3. This single document held words that reverberated like a bell through time: “The people of Texas are informed that, in accordance with a proclamation from the Executive of the United States, all slaves are free.”

These words arrived over two and a half years after President Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation.

Imagine standing in the Texas heat with thousands of others whose lives had been twisted and scarred under the long shadow of enslavement. Imagine looking at the Black and White Union soldiers, uncertain of their faces, fearful but hopeful, and hearing this message for the very first time. The emotions that must have erupted on that hot June day were like floodwaters breaking through a dam—tears, laughter, screams of joy, and perhaps, silent disbelief. Many people fell to their knees, hands lifted, overwhelmed by the weight of newfound freedom, centuries of ancestral pain and hope colliding at once. Juneteenth was a proclamation of freedom and a long-awaited recognition of their humanity after years of degradation and pain.

Yet, alongside joy, there must have been hesitation. The world had changed overnight for the newly freed, and with it came questions and fears. Where would they go? How would they live? How could they protect themselves from the retribution from former slaveholders who had long

relied on their labor? Freedom was intoxicating and glorious, yet terrifying and unpredictable. The landowners who were now forced to reckon with free people around them were not likely to let go of their grip quickly. So, even in freedom, there was danger. For many, the future was daunting, and the gap between legal freedom and practical reality must have seemed vast. But despite fears pressing on all sides, the proclamation lit a new path forward, and this historical day became enshrined in Black culture.

Today, Juneteenth is a reminder that freedom is not just a moment but an ongoing commitment. It is a celebration of progress, a reflection on the painful past, and a call to continue fighting for true equality. It is a bridge between past and present, reminding us of the resilience and unity needed to carry forward this legacy. It is a day that demands celebration and a renewed dedication to justice, so the spirit of freedom that started on that hot day in Texas lives on.

The First Juneteenth: Celebration and Reflection



The news of emancipation spread rapidly through Galveston. On that historic day, formerly enslaved men, women, and children poured into the streets, their emotions a mixture of joy, disbelief, and cautious optimism. The initial celebrations were spontaneous and heartfelt, with many gathering at the "Negro Church on Broadway," which is known today as Reedy Chapel A.M.E. Church., a significant spiritual and community center for Black Galvestonians. This church became a focal point for the first Juneteenth celebrations, hosting speeches, readings of the Emancipation Proclamation, and jubilant singing of songs like "John Brown's Body." Granger's proclamation was posted at the Church for all to see.

Several months later during a "freedom march," *Flake's Bulletin*, a local newspaper, reported on the orderly and joyful procession of around a thousand freed people through the streets of Galveston. The article highlighted the dignity and grace with which the newly freed conducted themselves, reflecting a deep sense of pride and resilience. Despite the challenges they had faced and would continue to face, the freed individuals of Galveston embraced their newfound freedom with hope and determination.

The Meaning of Freedom: Reuniting and Rebuilding

For many, the new freedom carried a deep and personal significance. It meant the possibility of reuniting with family members who had been sold away. For years, families had been separated, their connections severed by slave markets and auctions. Juneteenth brought the hope of finding lost brothers, sisters, children, and parents. Some may have taken those first steps down dusty roads, determined to search for loved ones, unsure where the path might lead, but propelled by a newfound freedom that gave them the right to try.

Freedom also meant they could make choices about their lives, whether that meant finding work for wages, establishing churches and schools, or simply choosing when to rest and labor. Education, denied to so many during slavery, became a symbol of their new status as free individuals. They understood that literacy and knowledge were keys to their empowerment and resilience in a world that still sought to marginalize them.

Many of the newly freed recognized that their struggle was not over. They were entering a world that would not welcome them as equals. Yet, the power of that day lay in the collective sense of possibility, the idea that they could now shape their own destiny, even if the path forward was difficult. They knew that freedom meant more than the absence of chains; it meant the ability to build a life, own land, and create a legacy for their children, or at least hoped that would be the case. They had endured unimaginable suffering, but they had not been broken. Their ancestors' dreams of freedom had carried them to this point, and they would not let this new chance slip away.

As the sun set on June 19, 1865, the enslaved people of Galveston, Texas, might have gathered to sing, pray, and hold each other close. They might have looked up at the stars, believing they belonged to them for the first time. The moment was a bittersweet mixture of hope, fear, joy, and sorrow, but it was theirs. Juneteenth marked the end of one chapter and the uncertain beginning of another. It was a reminder that freedom, even when delayed, is worth the wait and that the human spirit, once set free, cannot be contained.

There was much rejoicing and jubilation that their lifelong prayers had finally been answered. Many of the slaves left their masters immediately upon being freed in search of family members, economic opportunities, or simply because they could. They left with nothing but the clothes on their backs and hope in their hearts. Oh, freedom!

“When my oldest brother heard we were free, he gave a whoop, ran, and jumped a high fence, and told mammy good-bye. Then he grabbed me up and hugged and kissed me and said, ‘Brother is gone, don’t expect you’ll ever see me any more’ ‘I don’t know where he went, but I never did see him again.’” —Susan Ross

Susan Ross's brother may not have had a destination in mind, but he probably felt any place was better than the plantation he had been slaving on all his life. So, he left everything behind in search of a better future.

Others felt rage. They had been kept enslaved for two and a half years after being legally freed. How many more backs were scarred, how many more families were torn apart, and how many more deaths in those stolen years? The bitterness mingled with joy, creating an emotion that words cannot define.

But mostly, there was hope, said one freedman. Raw, trembling hope that caught in our throats and made our hands shake. Hope for our children, who will never know the auction block or the

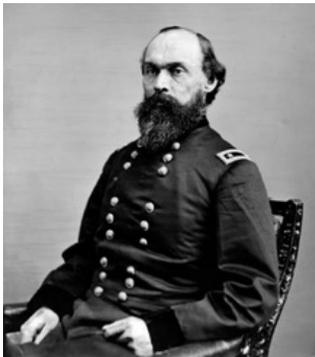
overseer's lash. Hope for ourselves to learn to read without fear of punishment, marry legally, own land, and speak our minds without consequence. Hope to simply be. A woman clutched her infant to her chest, whispering, "Free, baby, you free" over and over, as if saying it enough times would make it more real. An old man, his back bent from decades in the cotton fields, straightens his spine for the first time in years.

"That night, we tasted freedom for the first time. We spoke our own names with pride, knowing that we belonged to no one but ourselves. We looked at the stars and knew that tomorrow, we would walk toward them in any direction we chose. We were no longer slaves. We were free."

Juneteenth became a day of celebration, remembrance, and teaching children about the price and promise of freedom. But none ever felt quite like the first, when the impossible became possible when the property became people, slaves became citizens, and a dream deferred finally bloomed under the Texas sun.

In retrospect, the first Juneteenth was not just about the end of enslavement; it was a celebration of survival, resilience, and the indomitable spirit of a people who had long been denied their rights. It was a moment that encapsulated the essence of freedom—an opportunity to dream, to love, and to build a future free from the chains of oppression.

General Order No. 3,



Gordon Granger was one of many Union generals who served exclusively in the West. After the Civil War, he was on sick leave much of the time, and he died in Santa Fe, New Mexico Territory, in 1876.

Official.

HEADQUARTERS DISTRICT OF TEXAS.
GALVESTON, TEXAS, JUNE 19, 1865.
General Order, No. 3.

The people 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 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.

By order of
Major-General Granger
F.W. Emery, Maj. & A. A. G.
(Signed,)

Granger's Order began Texas' Reconstruction, yet sadly, it showed more concern for order and stability than for the newly acquired rights of Black people. Granger's Order encouraged the freedmen to sign labor contracts and remain with their old masters, a recipe for disaster. Nonetheless, General Order No. 3 is the origin of the Juneteenth celebration. While the exact details of the initial posting of General Order No. 3 are somewhat debated, it is widely acknowledged that it was read publicly from several locations in Galveston.

One significant site associated with this historic event is Reedy Chapel AME Church. On June 19, 1865, after Granger's arrival, there were public readings of the order, and Reedy Chapel played a central role in the celebrations and gatherings of newly freed individuals. This church, known as the "spiritual home of Juneteenth," hosted the first Emancipation Day observance and continues to be a focal point for Juneteenth commemorations in Galveston.

Another notable location linked to the issuance of the order is the Ashton Villa, where reenactments of the reading of General Order No. 3 take place annually. The villa's grounds feature a Juneteenth statue and marker, commemorating the announcement of freedom for the last enslaved people in Texas. These locations and events highlight Galveston's importance in Juneteenth's history and underscore the significance of General Order No. 3 in ending slavery in Texas.

Under the command of Major General Gordon Granger, the Union troops arrival was pivotal in enforcing the Emancipation Proclamation, which had little impact in Texas until Union forces could take control. The presence of several regiments of the United States Colored Troops (USCT) alongside Granger's forces provided a powerful and symbolic reinforcement of the Union's commitment to emancipation. These regiments had traveled from Virginia to Texas, encountering significant logistical challenges, including shortages of coal and water, which forced them to dock in Galveston on this historic day, which many of the enslaved saw as a sign of providence.