

Juneteenth, History & Legal Ramifications Today

By Susan Sweetman, PP, PLS

This year marks the 150th anniversary of Juneteenth. Also known as Emancipation Day, Juneteenth is the oldest known celebration commemorating the end of slavery in the United States. On June 19, 1865, Union soldiers, led by Major General Gordon Granger, arrived in Galveston, Texas. Two and a half years after President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation was issued, Granger came to Texas with the news that the Civil War had ended.

The Emancipation Proclamation became effective on January 1, 1863, but had very little impact in Texas. The truth regarding why it took two and a half years to enforce the freedom of slaves remains unknown. While news traveled slowly in those days, this does not explain the nature of the delay. There are three prominent explanations which have been handed down over the past 150 years. First, the story is told of a messenger who was murdered on his way to Texas to deliver the news of freedom. The second story is that the enslavers deliberately withheld the news to maintain the slave labor force on their plantations. Third, the story is told that federal troops intentionally waited for slave owners to benefit from one last cotton harvest before going to Texas to enforce the Emancipation Proclamation. All or none of these stories may be true. What we do know is that most slaves were not educated, most could not read, therefore, they would not have known they were free except through word of mouth.

When Granger arrived in Texas, his first order of business was to read GENERAL ORDER NUMBER 3 to the people of Texas, which began most significantly with:

"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 rights and rights of property between former masters and slaves, and the connection heretofore existing between them becomes that between employer and free laborer."

Reactions to the news included both shock and immediate jubilation. Many former slaves remained with their former owner to work in a new employer/employee relationship, while others left immediately, despite having nowhere to go. The diversity of reactions among former slaves attests to the varying conditions that existed on the plantations amidst the realization of freedom. Many went north, a logical destination, while others had family in neighboring states, settling into Louisiana, Arkansas, and Oklahoma. The freedom brought new challenges to establish status for black people in America.

In the early years, celebration of Juneteenth was primarily among the African-American community. Celebrations included a range of activities, festivities, and food. Prayer services were a major part of the Juneteenth celebrations, as were rodeos, fishing, and barbecuing. Most early celebrations were in rural areas around rivers and creeks that could provide for these additional activities, and were often held on church grounds. As African Americans acquired land, the festivities grew. One documented land purchase in the name of Juneteenth was organized by Reverend Jack Yates. The fund-raising effort collected \$1,000, and Emancipation Park was purchased in Houston, Texas. Booker T. Washington Park became the site for Juneteenth celebrations in 1898, and was purchased by the local Juneteenth organization in Mexia. As many as 20,000 African Americans flowed through during the week, making Booker T. Washington Park one of the state's largest celebrations. Often guest speakers were brought

in and church elders were asked to recount past events. Food was abundant, and certain foods became popular and synonymous with Juneteenth, such as strawberry soda. Everyone prepared a special dish, and the barbecue pit was the center of attention. There are a few accounts of white landowners interrupting Juneteenth celebrations and demanding that their laborers return to work, however, most gave workers the day off, and many made donations of food and money for the celebration activities.

In the early days, children were family taught and Juneteenth history was provided. By the early 1900's, as students moved to the classroom and traditional textbooks, their education proclaimed Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation of January 1, 1863 as the date slavery ended. Little impact, if any, was given to Granger's arrival in Texas on June 19th, 1865, and Juneteenth celebrations began to decline.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the Civil Rights movement yielded a resurgence of Juneteenth celebrations, some positive and many negative. African-American youth linked these civil rights struggles to the historical struggle of their ancestors. One such struggle was evidenced by student demonstrators wearing Juneteenth freedom buttons in an Atlanta Georgia civil rights campaign in the early 1960s. One positive outcome occurred in 1968, following the Poor Peoples March on Washington D.C. Reverend Ralph Abernathy called for people of all races, creeds, economic levels, and professions to join the March and show support for the poor. Attendees returned home after this March, and initiated Juneteenth celebrations in their areas. Two of the largest celebrations are held in Milwaukee and Minneapolis today.

On January 1, 1980, Texas became the first state to make Juneteenth an official state holiday, largely through the efforts of Al Edwards, an African American state legislator. Successful passage of this bill marked Juneteenth as the first official emancipation celebration to be granted state recognition. The recognition of Juneteenth continues to grow, and communities and organizations throughout the United States are joining in sponsoring Juneteenth-centered activities. The Smithsonian, the Henry Ford Museum, and the State of Michigan have undertaken the mission to promote and cultivate knowledge and appreciation of African-American history. Juneteenth has become a time for reflection, rejoicing, self-assessment, self-improvement, and planning for the future, and the growing popularity is long overdue. Across America, people of all races, nationalities, and religions are joining hands to acknowledge a period in our history that shaped and continues to influence our society today. Being sensitized to the conditions and experiences of others enables us to make significant and lasting improvements in our society.

American school children are taught that slavery in America ended in the 19th Century; however, modern day slavery still exists. It is estimated there are 60,000 slaves today in the United States, and 29.8 million people worldwide. The 2013 Walk Free Global Slavery Index places the United States at 134th out of 163 countries. Hillary Clinton wrote an editorial calling the world to pay attention to hideous modern day slavery. She advocated for using "every available tool" to eradicate modern slavery, and called on organizations, governments, and people to "redouble our efforts to fight modern slavery". Slavery today takes the form of sex workers, laborers, and domestic servitude. It is estimated that 55% of today's slaves are women and girls, 26% are under the age of 18. 78% of victims are in forced labor, and 22% are enslaved for sex. It is further estimated that slavery generates \$32 billion annually for traffickers worldwide. India has the largest number of slaves, at a horrifying 14 million victims, while in Mauritania it is estimated that 4% of their entire population is enslaved.

Michigan ranks as one of the top five states for human trafficking, and our legislators have worked to curb human trafficking in the state. Last year Representative Kurt Heise (R-Plymouth) spearheaded

legislation, aimed not only at prosecuting solicitors of prostitutes and the sex trade, but also with the goal of ensuring the needs of victims are met as well. Heise said “I don’t think anything could be more important than protecting innocent children and vulnerable adults who have been dragged into this terrible crime.” HB 4056 was reintroduced in January by Heise. Local Representative Joe Graves (R-Argentine Township), a supporter of the legislation said “It’s outrageous that this goes on today, that we have people being victimized this way. This sends a message that it won’t be tolerated.” In December 2013, business was suspended at a Genesee County business, Lake Spa in Fenton, due to allegations of prostitution and human trafficking. After undercover officers confirmed illegal activity, Prosecutor David Leyton obtained a temporary restraining order.

The Michigan Human Trafficking Task Force is made up of over 90 member agencies committed to a collaborative effort to identify and rescue victims and prosecute offenders. There are up to 30 joint law enforcement task forces around the United States working to address human trafficking by using intelligence to identify traffickers and gain insights into how they conduct business, researching possible elements in cases initially identified as human smuggling and internet crimes against children, and working closely with rescued trafficking victims, many of whom don’t speak English. Since local police officers are often the first ones on the scene in a suspected case, training is important so that they know what to look for and so that local police departments fully understand the crime.

In 2000, Congress passed the Trafficking Victims Protection Act to address the problem. The FBI and US Department of Justice are calling on Americans to help identify potential victims and put a stop to modern day slavery. Watch for signs of potential human trafficking and slavery, which include multiple people living in a cramped space, the inability to speak to an individual alone, scripted and rehearsed answers, the individual is living with the employer, the employer is holding identity documents, poor living conditions, signs of physical abuse, the individual is submissive or fearful and unpaid or paid very little. To report human trafficking or locate assistance for victims, call 888-373-7888.

To learn more, please consider joining Michigan’s celebration of Juneteenth. Opening ceremonies are Thursday, June 18th in Lansing, with festivities Friday and Saturday, June 19-20, 2015.

SOURCES:

1860 U.S. Census

2005 WL 1406024 (June 15, 2005)

2013 Walk Free Global Slavery Index

Trafficking Victims Protection Act, USC § 7101, et seq.

US Department of State

www.americaslibrary.gov

www.fbi.gov

www.juneteenth.com

www.lansingjuneteenthcelebration.org

www.state.gov (November 2010)

www.tctimes.com

<<http://academic.udayton.edu/race/02rights/slave04.htm>>

<<http://borgenproject.org/10-statistics-on-slavery-today/>>

TIMELINE of Slavery in America

1666-1776:

Slaves imported only by the English for the English, French and Spanish colonies: 3 million (250,000 died on the voyage).

1680-1786:

Slaves imported for the English colonies in America. 2,130,000 (Jamaica alone absorbed 610,000).

1716-1756:

Average annual number of slaves imported for the American colonies: 70,000, with a total of 3.5 million.

1752-1762:

Jamaica alone imported 71,115 slaves.

1759-1762:

Guadeloupe alone imported 40,000 slaves.

1776-1800:

Yearly averages of 74,000 slaves were imported to the American colonies, or a total of 1,850,000

1860 Census:

Total Number of Slaves: 3,950,528

September 22, 1862:

President Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation

January 1, 1863:

Emancipation Proclamation Freed American Slaves

January 31, 1865:

The house passed the 13th Amendment to the US Constitution, abolishing slavery in the United States.

June 19, 1865:

JUNETEENTH – Union soldiers and Major General Gordon Granger arrived in Texas to enforce the Emancipation Proclamation.

June 3, 1979:

Texas became the first state to proclaim Juneteenth (or Emancipation Day) as an official state holiday.

2000:

Congress passed the Trafficking Victims Protection Act, USC § 7101, et seq.

Today:

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