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What Really Happened When Texas Slaves Were Freed

The Very First Juneteenth: June 19, 1865



William Spivey Follow 9 min read · 1 day ago

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Susan Merritt -Federal Writers' Project slave narratives collections, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

The biggest misconception about Juneteenth is that June 19, 1865, is when Texas discovered that enslaved people were free, based on the Emancipation Proclamation issued two and a half years earlier on January 1, 1863. Plantation owners and Texas legislators knew of the Emancipation Proclamation; many of them had forcibly brought their slaves West to Texas, fleeing other states where the Union Army could enforce it. Many, if not most, enslaved people knew about the Proclamation. They also knew it required them to reach a free state, a Union military base, or a contraband camp to have a hope of attaining freedom.

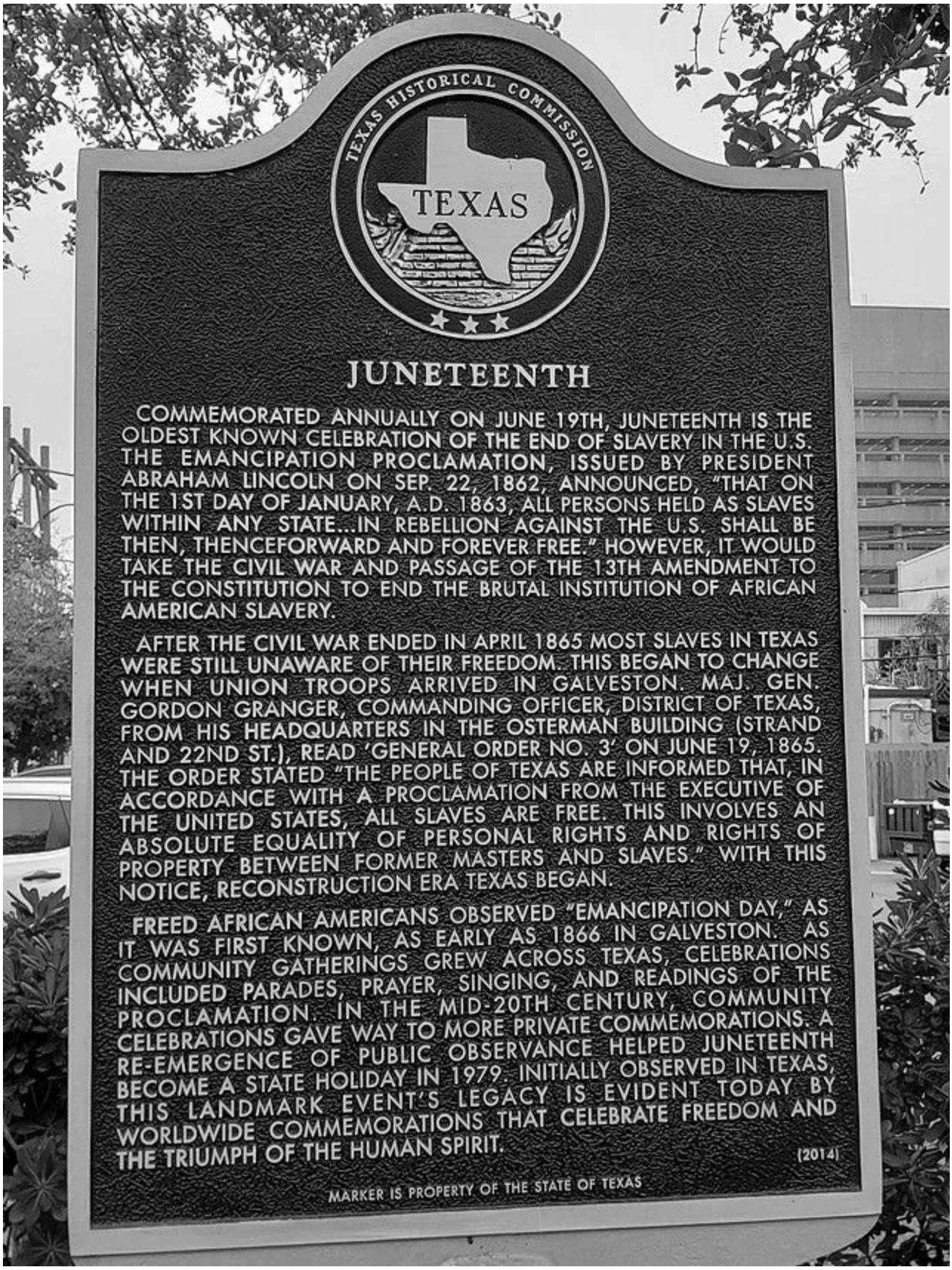
> " Oh, we knowed what was goin' on in it all the time. We had papers in them days, just like now." — former enslaved man Felix Underwood

So what happened when Major General Gordon Granger arrived on the island of Galveston, Texas, and issued General Order #3 announcing slavery was over? It's best to think of Granger's role not as one of emancipation but of managing the transition. The most important part of his brief order was telling freedmen and women to return to their plantations.

> "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 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 quietly 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"

In 1865, Galveston, TX, had a population of about 10,000 on an island of 211 square miles. Granger brought some of his troops to the Osterman Building at 2201 Strand Street, where he posted the order he'd written on a wall of the former Union Army headquarters and a few places around town. There was no dramatic reading with throngs of cheering formerly enslaved people. The word spread via word of mouth and through local newspapers like the Galveston Daily News. Enslaved people were generally dependent on their masters informing them of their freedom, something some had already known for years.



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When Gordon Granger came to Texas, there were approximately 250,000 persons still enslaved there. Many of their owners were reluctant to grant them their freedom (or pay them) until a government representative personally told them. Some waited until their final harvest of the year was complete (cotton has two harvesting seasons). There are stories that Granger waited until the cotton was planted before entering Galveston and issuing his order. Some plantation owners refused to relinquish their slaves, killing them if they tried to "escape."

Susan Merritt was born enslaved and lived in Rusk County, Texas, about 180 miles due North of Galveston. Merritt didn't get word of her freedom until September 1865. A man on horseback rode up and told her owner, Andrew Watt. Watt kept his Black people enslaved for several months.

> "Massa Watt didn't have no overseer, but he have a nigger driver what am jus' as bad. He carry a long whip 'round the neck and I's seed him tie niggers to a tree and cowhide 'em till the blood run down onto the ground. Sometimes the women gits slothful and not able to do their part but they makes 'em do it anyway. They digs a hole, 'bout body deep, and makes them women lie face down in it and beats 'em nearly to death. That nigger driver beat the chillen for not keepin' their cotton row up with the lead man. Sometimes he made niggers drag long chains while they works in the field and some of 'em run off, but they oughtn't to have done it, 'cause they chase 'em with hounds and nearly kilt 'em.
>
> I hears 'bout freedom in September and they's pickin' cotton and a white man rides up to massa's house on a big, white hoss and the houseboy tell massa a man want see him and he hollers, 'Light, stranger.' It a gov'ment man and he have the big book and a bunch papers and say why ain't massa turn the niggers loose. Massa say he tryin' git the crop out and he tell massa

> have the slaves in. Uncle Steven blows the cow horn what they use to call to eat and all the niggers come runnin', 'cause that horn mean, 'Come to the big house, quick.' That man reads the paper tellin' us we's free, but massa make us work sev'ral months after that. He say we git 20 acres land and a mule but we didn't git it."

When Watt and other Rusk County plantation owners refused to let their slaves go, some ran away, hoping to find the freedom they were alleged to have already. Another fate awaited many of them. They were shot while attempting to cross the Sabine River. Their bodies were then hung from trees as a warning to others seeking escape. Merrit told an interviewer:

> "Lots of niggers was kilt after freedom, 'cause the slaves in Harrison County turn loose right at freedom and them in Rusk County wasn't. But they hears 'bout it and runs away to freedom in Harrison County and they owners have 'em bushwhacked, that shot down. You could see lots of niggers hangin' to trees in Sabine bottom right after freedom, 'cause they catch 'em swimmin' 'cross Sabine River and shoot 'em. They sho' am goin' be lots of soul cry 'gainst 'em in Judgment!"



Sabine River -Chenarr, CC BY-SA 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>, via Wikimedia Commons

If you are uncertain about General Order #3 having little to do with freedom, consider the following. The day before Granger delivered his order, Galveston's mayor, C.H. Leonard, called on Rankin G. Laughlin, Union provost marshal general for the state of Texas. Laughlin appeased many of the mayor's concerns. As Leonard was leaving, he met a cotton merchant who had under his charge three men who had escaped from plantations nearby. A local newspaper correspondent reported the discussion on what was to be done:

> "The Mayor said that it had been his rule to send all such negroes home, but as the United States authorities were now here he would consult them and accordingly he went back again to the Provost Marshal General; and having

> stated to him the case, asked him how he would dispose of the negroes, informing him, that the same time, what had been his own rule in all such cases. The Provost Marshal General said, it might be very well to send them to their homes, but as he had work for them to do, he would send them, for the present, to the Quartermaster for employment. This was accordingly done, but the Quartermaster having no immediate work for them, sent them to jail for safe-keeping till he should want them. We mention this as an indication of the policy our Government is now pursuing in relation to runaway negroes."

In the days following the issuance of General Order #3, Laughlin called on several of Galveston's leading citizens (enslavers) to ease their minds. First among their concerns was the harvest of the crops in the field. Failure to harvest them on time would significantly harm the local economy. Laughlin issued a public statement, "that it is well known, that the Government desires to furnish every facility to her citizens to resume and continue their usual avocations, and that the public and private interests require of them as well as their former servants the exercise of perfect and entire good faith in all their civil and domestic relations."

Plantation owners were concerned about their ability to require the freed people to work as hard as before.

> "Indisposition to work in a state of freedom is the first difficulty. That immunity from labor constitutes freedom, is the stereotyped idea of the negro. And if left to himself, he will, as a general rule, carry out his principles in practice. The only remedy under heaven for the cure of negro indolence is physical force, such as is exercised by a parent or guardian over minors. Moral force should always precede physical force, but if it fails, then apply the switch." — J.M. Baker of Plantersville

The *Houston Telegraph* noted the process as it occurred:

> "We hear that the Federal authorities at Galveston are bringing the negroes to common sense in a summary manner. They call them up, on by one, and ask who they belong to. Those who tell the truth are sent home at once, while those who acknowledge no home or master are put to work on the streets, and on other labor, under the control of the military authorities. Negroes who flatter themselves that the new regime has no labor connected with it will make a grievous mistake."

Mayor Leonard expressed concerns that formerly enslaved people had been able to procure housing rented to them by citizens, which they then used to congregate and plot revenge against white people. Granger updated his order to appease the white landowners.

> "No persons formerly slaves will be permitted to travel on the public thoroughfares without passes or permits from their employers, or congregate in buildings or camps at or adjacent to any military post or town. They will not be subsisted in idleness, or in any way except as employees of the government, or in cases of extreme destitution or sickness; and in such cases the officers authorized to order the issues shall be the judge as to the justice of the claim for such subsistence.
>
> Idleness is sure to be productive of vice, and humanity dictates that employment be furnished these people, while the interest of the commonwealth imperatively demands it, in order that the present crop be secured. No person, white or black, and who are able to labor, will be subsisted by the government in idleness, and thus hang as dead weight upon those who are disposed to bear their full share of the public burdens. Provost marshals and their assistants throughout the district are charged

with using every means in their power to carry out these instructions in letter and spirit."

The Galveston Daily News was happy to report that General Granger was a reasonable man who understood and met their concerns.

"We are glad to learn that Gen. Granger and our Provost Marshal General are both practical men, and not theorists. They look upon emancipation, not as freeing the negro from all obligation to labor, for no human being, white or black, enjoys such freedom, but simply as changing obligation to work without stipulated wages, to an obligation to work for such reasonable wages as may be mutually agreed upon. It is such an obligation as this that is alone consistent with rational freedom, and it is this obligation that we now understand our Federal authorities intend to enforce.

This is certainly the only sensible and practical view of the subject. It was natural that the negro should suppose that the privilege of living in idleness was the most essential attribute of his freedom, and that which gave his emancipation its chief value.

It follows then that the South can only be cultivated by those of tropical extraction whose color fits them to stand the enervating tendencies of hot climates — directed by the intelligent white natives of the South, whose education has qualified him for the business of planting, and whose knowledge of the peculiar habits, and disposition of the dusky races, fits him to direct their labors to beneficial results. If the staples of the South are raised, the native Southerner will have to direct their cultivation. The system of compulsory labor has been done away with, and in its place is proposed to substitute a quasi system of peonage; based upon the mutual consent of the proprietor and laborer."

Juneteenth is seen by some as a celebration of freedom, when in truth, it took the enslaved people of Texas from one system of bondage to another. It became a federal holiday to help us forget the brutal murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police. There will be cookouts, ceremonies, and Hallmark Cards noting the occasion. When you picture thousands of happy enslaved people finally freed. Think also of those hanging after being shot on the banks of the Sabine River, as a symbol of what happened to those seeking freedom after Juneteenth.

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Responses (6)

Tom Mitchell

What are your thoughts?

Bertroch
1 day ago

A great piece on this history and why I have been conflicted about celebrating Juneteenth as a holiday. You mention how we got Juneteenth instead of police reform under the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act. The John Lewis Voting Rights... more

2 Reply



Mike Hall, PhD
1 day ago

White supremacy reigned in Texas in spite of the June 19th General Order #3 - the Emancipation Proclamation. It was evident through the newspapers you documented and the recollections of former slaves, such as Susan Merritt (A Folk History of... more

1 Reply

geri shirk
1 day ago

Thank you for the reality

Reply

See all responses