

East Windsor Juneteenth Observance

On June 19th, 1865 Major General Gordon Granger issued General Orders 3 in Galveston, Texas that “all slaves were free” and that there would be “equality of personal rights and rights of property between former masters and slaves.” He was leading the Union Army through Texas in the closing days of the American Civil War. This was the last corner of the Confederate States of America, not yet occupied by the Union Army. While General Lee had surrendered to Ulysses S. Grant a few months earlier, some remnants of the Confederate Army remained in the west, including rebel bushwhackers, and fleeing slave owners determined to keep owning African Americans as long as they could.

In theory, African Americans had already been freed for a little over two years following Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation. Lincoln’s words declared that African Americans held in rebel territories were “and henceforward shall be free.” However, it had no legal standing and was simply a promise that the Civil War would now be about ending slavery. Southern states in rebellion ignored this proclamation and continued to hold African Americans in bondage. The 13th amendment would guarantee a legal end to slavery in 1865, but that was still in the process of being ratified when Juneteenth occurred. It would rest on the Union Army to forcefully liberate states in the Confederacy.

Even the Juneteenth announcement itself was not the end-all to slavery or the fight for equal rights and treatment in our nation. It still took some time for slave owners in Texas to be forced to free some two hundred and fifty thousand African Americans. However, the day marks when the last African Americans in bondage were made aware of their freedom. Sporadic celebrations began to ensue in the state. Finally, all African Americans would realize freedom and emancipation, though the challenges of Reconstruction, the Jim Crow era, and the Civil Rights movement would still lay ahead.

Juneteenth honors the day the last African Americans learned of their freedom, but it is also a call to the necessary fact that the fight for equality and justice for all is never over. Even when laws improve rights for oppressed groups, Americans committed to justice need to be willing to carry them out. This day honors the work of brave abolitionists like Frederick Douglass, who worked tirelessly to end slavery. It honors the nearly four million freed African Americans, and all of those who came before them, who helped build this nation on their backs. It honors the nearly 200,000 African Americans who fought in the Union Army to help liberate their brothers and sisters and hold the Union together. Perhaps most importantly, the day is a reminder that the struggle for equality is never over. We must all be diligent guardians of liberty, justice, and fair treatment for all, and must always be committed to doing the necessary work to make it a reality.

East Windsor Township is pleased and honored to celebrate this wonderful holiday and to be committed to upholding the day's values for all of its citizens.

PBS: <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/african-americans-many-rivers-to-cross/history/what-is-juneteenth/>

NPR:

<https://www.npr.org/2021/06/17/1007315228/juneteenth-what-is-origin-observation>