

# This Day in History... June 19, 1865

## The First Juneteenth

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In the summer of 1862, the Confederates scored one victory after another. President Lincoln believed freeing slaves would weaken the South by greatly reducing its labor force. He prepared a proclamation that would free slaves in the Rebel states, but needed a Union victory to win support in the North. That chance came in September, when Northern forces stopped a Confederate invasion at Antietam, Maryland.



*Issued for the 100th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation.*

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On the first day of 1863, Lincoln issued his Emancipation Proclamation. The order only applied to people enslaved in Confederate states, but thousands of Black refugees, or "contrabands of war," at Union-held forts in the South celebrated their liberty. Young Black men tasting freedom for the first time joined the US Army and Navy in its fight to restore the Union and grant liberty to those still in bondage.

However, Lincoln's proclamation had no effect on the daily life of many of those enslaved. This was particularly true of isolated areas like Galveston, Texas. Over the course of the war, planters and slaveholders moved to Texas to avoid the fighting. The number of enslaved people in Texas increased dramatically – from about 1,000 in Galveston and Houston in 1860 to over 250,000 in all of Texas by 1865.

Far away from the battlegrounds and major eastern cities, news was slow to reach Galveston. It's unclear exactly why the people enslaved in Galveston didn't hear of their emancipation for over two years. It's been suggested that a messenger was sent but was killed along the way. Another possibility is that those who owned Black people simply didn't tell them so they could continue the practice. Some have even suggested that federal troops intentionally waited to allow additional cotton harvests.

Even though the war ended in early April, the people of Texas didn't find out about it until May. Then the following month, on June 18, 1865, Union General Gordon Granger arrived in Galveston to occupy the state on behalf of the federal government. The next day, June 19, 1865, Granger stood on the balcony of the Ashton Villa (one of the first brick buildings in Texas) and announced the emancipation of the slaves:

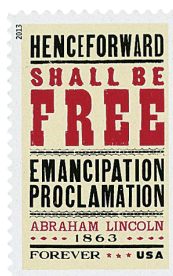
"The people of Texas are informed that, in accordance with a proclamation from the Executive of the United States, all slaves are free. This involves an absolute equality of personal rights and rights of property between former masters and slaves, and the connection heretofore existing between them becomes 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."

The now formerly enslaved men, women, and children took to the streets to celebrate their newfound freedom. The following year the freedmen of Texas held their first organized Juneteenth celebration. Many of their early celebrations were challenged by state-sponsored segregation that refused them the use of public parks. So they raised money to buy their own land and established locations such as Houston's Emancipation Park, Mexia's Booker T. Washington Park, and Austin's Emancipation Park. The difficulties in celebrating continued for several decades, as they were not allowed the day off from work. Between the 1940s and 70s, some five million Black Americans left Texas and other Southern states for the North and West Coast, bringing Juneteenth with them.

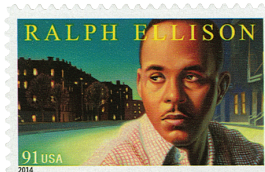
Texas designated Juneteenth as an official state holiday in 1980. Juneteenth received Congressional recognition in 1997. For many years, Juneteenth was celebrated as a state or ceremonial holiday in 45 states plus the District of Columbia. In 2021, it became a federal holiday as part of the Juneteenth National Independence Day Act. It was the first new federal holiday since Martin Luther King Jr. Day was established in 1983. Every year, several large institutions, such as the Henry Ford Museum and the Smithsonian, hold events relating to Juneteenth.



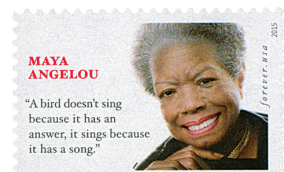
*Stamp pictures a Lincoln statue funded by freed slaves.*



*Stamp pictures a broadside printed in one of America's oldest working letterpress print shops.*



*Ralph Ellison worked for years on a novel called Juneteenth, which was published after his death in 1994.*



*Maya Angelou's writings are often read at Juneteenth celebrations.*

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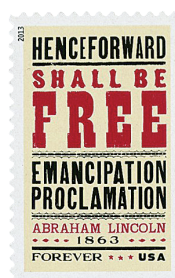
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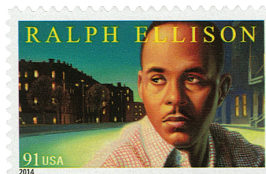
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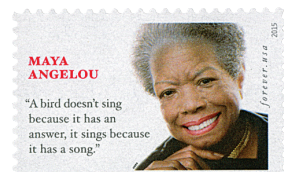
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