

The History of the Juneteenth National Holiday

Juneteenth is a nationally recognized holiday celebrating the end of slavery in the United States. During the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln created the Emancipation Proclamation, an Executive Order abolishing slavery throughout the country. Although the Emancipation Proclamation became official on January 1st, 1863, it had little effect on the state of Texas. As a southern state, Texas was home to rebel forces that resisted the Union and the doctrines of Lincoln's new order. However, this changed after the surrender of Confederate General Robert E. Lee. On June 19th, 1865, Union Major General Gordon Granger and 2,000 Union soldiers arrived in Galveston, Texas. Granger and his men were tasked with informing the citizens of Texas about the end of the war and enforce the emancipation of slaves. Upon hearing the news of the war and the Emancipation Proclamation, many of the newly freed African Americans left Texas and traveled North. Others stayed in Texas or moved to neighboring states like Arkansas to be with their families. Soon after, freed African Americans started reflecting about the events that took place on June 19th, 1865 and celebrated with various festivities. The name of the celebration, "Juneteenth," was created by combining the word "June" with "Nineteenth," the day Major General Granger arrived in Texas. For decades afterwards, smaller Juneteenth celebrations were prevalent in Texas and throughout the country.

Although Juneteenth was observed around the country, the holiday saw a decline in activity as America entered the 20th century. Up to that point, a majority of the Juneteenth celebrations took place in rural regions. As the Great Depression came about in the 1930's, many people found themselves moving to urban areas in search of work. Employers in major cities were less inclined to let their workers take time off to celebrate the holiday. Additionally, classroom education recognized January 1st, 1863, the date when the Emancipation Proclamation became official, as the end of slavery, not June 19th, 1865. Small celebrations continued but the holiday wouldn't see a resurgence until the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960's.

Several events during the Civil Rights Movement helped bring the Juneteenth holiday back into the public eye. The first took place in Atlanta during a civil rights campaign. Student protestors involved in the campaign wore Juneteenth freedom buttons. The second event happened in 1968 in Washington D.C. During an event called the Poor People's March, a civil rights activist named Rev. Ralph Abernathy asked for people from all walks of life to travel to Washington and unite in support of the poor. After the event, many of the supporters returned to their homes and started celebrating Juneteenth. On January 1st, 1980, almost a decade after the Civil Rights Movement, an African American state legislator named Al Edwards helped make Juneteenth an official holiday for the state of Texas. This was a pivotal moment, and many states began adopting the holiday as well. Although Juneteenth is not a national holiday, 47 states have declared it as a state holiday and communities around the country celebrate it every year. One of those communities is the city of Omaha, NE.

In 1891, the city of Omaha had its first recorded celebration related to the emancipation of African American slaves. Prior to "Juneteenth, Omaha and cities in surrounding states referred to the event as "Emancipation Day." From 1891 to 1944, the "Emancipation Day" was celebrated throughout the city. After 1944, festivities began to decline, and the city wouldn't see major "Emancipation Day" activities until the Civil Rights Movement. In 1977, several years before Texas made Juneteenth a state holiday, the city of Omaha held its first official Juneteenth celebration. Over the years, Omaha's Juneteenth celebrations have grown and received support from many local organizations including the Great Plains Black History Museum, the Malcolm X Memorial Foundation, the Elks Club, and the Omaha Star newspaper. With the upcoming Omaha Freedom Festival, Freedomtainment will make its contribution to the rich legacy of Juneteenth, a holiday built on community and understanding.

REFERENCES

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BACKGROUND

The History of Juneteenth is presented by Freedomtainment to educate the community about the National holiday and its importance celebrated by the Omaha Freedom Festival held each June in North Omaha, Nebraska.

About Freedomtainment



Freedomtainment, a new 501(c)3 non-profit was started amidst the pandemic in early 2020 by Tim Anderson and Calvin Williams, long-term residents of North Omaha seeking to celebrate African American culture and share its rich history with the Omaha community thru Education, Empowerment and Entertainment. Its key programs consist of the Omaha Freedom Festival, Critical Hits, North Side State of Mind and Let Freedom Read. www.Freedomtainment.com.

About Omaha Freedom Festival



The Omaha Freedom Festival is hosted by Freedomtainment, a 501c3 non-profit organization located in North Omaha, Nebraska, and celebrates the national Juneteenth holiday which honors the emancipation of those enslaved in the United States. The Festival extends the NAACP Juneteenth Parade to an all-day family-friendly event at the Malcolm X Memorial Foundation's outdoor amphitheater. The inaugural Festival will take place on June 19, 2021. www.OmahaFreedomFestival.com.