



Vitalii Abakumov/iStock

What is Juneteenth?

In 1863, President Abraham Lincoln issued the [Emancipation Proclamation](#) which declared that all enslaved African Americans were to be freed. Yet, it took more than two years for this news to travel to all those who were enslaved. The final announcement took place on June 19th, 1865, when General Gordon Granger of the Union Army announced to Texas that all enslaved African Americans were free. Juneteenth, which is shorthand to commemorate this date, honours the anniversary of freedom for all enslaved African Americans.

In 1866, the first Juneteenth celebration took place. The celebration included prayer meetings and singing, and participants wore new outfits, as the enslaved African Americans could not choose their own clothing, to celebrate their freedom.¹ The celebration spread across the Southern states in the 1920s and 1930s, expanding to include the sharing of food and music. In the 1970s, the Anniversary started to focus more broadly on the celebration of African American freedom and arts.

This month, the U.S. Senate passed the *Juneteenth National Independence Day Act* which establishes Juneteenth as a federal holiday. Many have fought for this formal recognition for decades. Yet, some prominent Black voices feel that this gesture is not enough from senate and call for more meaningful attention to the systemic issues that impact the lives of Black citizens. Their struggle continues.

¹ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Juneteenth>

In 2021, the National Museum of African American History and Culture interviewed three experts to find the answer to the question “What is the significance of Juneteenth to the Black community?” Some responses they received include:²



Mary Elliott, Curator of American Slavery
Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture

“Even though we know that the Emancipation Proclamation freed African Americans in rebelling states (Texas being one of them, from as early as it when the Proclamation went into effect on January 1st, 1863) and we know that the Civil War had ended in April of 1865, it took a while for freedom to make its way to the western most rebelling state. Although there were enslavers who were aware of the implementation of the Emancipation Proclamation, it wasn’t until June 19th, 1865 that it was actually enforced with the Union Army. June 19th freed enslaved people in the rebelling states, it did not free enslaved people throughout the nation.

Keep in mind, there were still border states which were still part of the Union. They had not seceded from the Union, and they still maintained slavery. Maryland, for example, was one of them. It took the creation of the Emancipation Proclamation, the end of the Civil War, and the passage of the 13th Amendment to finally end slavery throughout the nation. The Reconstruction Amendments are significant as they came into being after the end of the Civil War. They include the 13th Amendment that ended slavery; the 14th Amendment provides citizenship, due process and equal protection; and the 15th Amendment provides the opportunity to vote and hold office.”³

² To read the full article please go to: <https://nmaahc.si.edu/blog-post/what-juneteenth>

³ <https://nmaahc.si.edu/blog-post/what-juneteenth>



Angela Tate, Curator of African American Women's History
Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture

“When I think about Juneteenth, I think less about it being a specifically American, but how it connects African American thoughts about freedom and emancipation to the same notions across the African diaspora. There is this impulse towards commemorating, celebrating, and remembering freedom. African Americans have always used these moments of memory to think about where the community has come from and what we’re pursuing and striving towards, as well as taking the time to pass down history and culture.

Juneteenth is a time to reflect. What does it mean to really celebrate our freedom? What does it mean to be free in moments where freedom is conditional, and freedom is always a challenge? Juneteenth is a moment to think about freedom being conditional freedom and it is something that we must continuously strive and fight for.”⁴



Kelly E. Navies, Museum Specialist of Oral History
Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture

⁴ <https://nmaahc.si.edu/blog-post/what-juneteenth>

“Juneteenth has evolved over the years to mirror shifts in our struggle. Sometimes it wanes, but it reemerges. After World War II, we have this new sense of pride and the Great Migration started to carry Juneteenth throughout the United States. You see it come up again during the Civil Rights movement of the late 60s and into Solidarity Day at the Poor People’s Campaign here in Washington D.C. in 1968.

Fifty years ago, and from that moment, Solidarity Day (on June 19th, 1968), you saw activists bring it back to their communities where it developed a whole new grassroots identity. That’s around the time that my family started celebrating it. Even though my family and I didn’t have ties to Texas, my activist father brought it with us from Detroit to California. We don’t celebrate July 4th, we celebrate Juneteenth.

At its very core, Juneteenth is this affirmation that we are here, and we will continue to be here. We will continue to struggle in the face of many challenges.”⁵

To learn more about Juneteenth and ways to stand in solidarity with the Black community, please review our resources below. It is important to listen to and amplify Black voices.

Free event to learn more:

Juneteenth: A Celebration Of Resilience | Juneteenth: Connecting The Historic To The Now: <https://nmaahc.si.edu/event/juneteenth-celebration-resilience-juneteenth-connecting-historic-now?trumbaEmbed=view%3Devent%26eventid%3D153443904>

To Donate:

To stand in solidarity with the Black community please review the sources listed on this website: <https://supportblackcharities.org/>

Watch:

Black Voices in Canadian Media: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BZ93DY3tjWE>

Podcasts:

[Seat at the table](#): Friends Martine St-Victor and Isabelle Racicot have in-depth conversations with notable guests from media, sports and pop culture. They capture personal stories about the power of the Black Lives Matter movement, the urgency of this moment, and what it will take to move forward.

[Secret Life of Canada](#): The Secret Life of Canada is a history podcast about the country you know and the stories you do not.

[Mic Drop](#): Created in 2018, Mic Drop is the first CBC podcast to hand the mic over to teenagers and let them tell stories in their own voices - with no adult interruptions.

⁵<https://nmaahc.si.edu/blog-post/what-juneteenth>