



# COMMUNIQUE

By Marci Rosenblum

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## JUNETEENTH FINALLY GETTING THE RECOGNITION IT DESERVES

While Juneteenth is the oldest known celebration honoring the end of slavery in the United States, it wasn't until this year that commemorating the day has come with renewed interest.

The annual holiday has been celebrated by African-Americans since the late 1800s. This year, however, spurred on by national protests over the deaths of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and others, Juneteenth has resonated in new ways with people of all races, nationalities, and religions who joined together to acknowledge a period in history that continues to influence society.

Juneteenth received its moniker by combining June and 19. The day, also referred to as "Juneteenth Independence Day," "Freedom Day" or "Emancipation Day," commemorates African-American freedom and emphasizes education and achievement. It is often marked with celebrations, guest speakers, picnics, and family gatherings, and is a time for reflection, rejoicing, assessment, self-improvement, and planning the future.

Yet, it wasn't that long ago that Juneteenth was barely recognized outside the African-American community. From its Galveston, Texas, beginnings in 1865, the observance of June 19 as the African-American Emancipation Day now has spread across the country with 47 states and the District of Columbia officially recognizing Juneteenth as either a holiday or celebration. In 1980, Texas was the first state to make Juneteenth a state holiday.

This year, New York State Gov. Andrew Cuomo signed legislation declaring Juneteenth an official holiday for state workers and is on track for it to become a statewide holiday in 2021. The date will also become an official New York City and public school holiday beginning in 2021.

Where is Juneteenth not an official holiday as of yet? In the United States. While Texas Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee has been pushing for decades to make Juneteenth a federal holiday, the Senate has not cooperated.

Former President Barack Obama, the first and only African-American to hold this position, said in a statement that the holiday "has never been a celebration of victory", but is instead a "celebration of progress". "It's

an affirmation that despite the most painful parts of our history, change is possible—and there is still so much work to do."

### History of Juneteenth

On June 19, 1865, Union soldiers landed at Galveston, Texas, with news that the war had ended and slaves were now free. This was two and a half years after President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation had become official on Jan. 1, 1863, declaring "that all persons held as slaves" within the rebellious states "are, and henceforward shall be free." Attempts to explain the delay in telling slaves they were free include stories of a messenger who was murdered on his way to Texas with news of freedom; the news was deliberately withheld by owners to keep slaves on the plantations; and that federal troops waited for the slave owners to reap the benefits of one last cotton harvest before going to Texas to enforce the Emancipation Proclamation.

Former First Lady Michelle Obama, whose own ancestors were slaves, tweeted "what I love about Juneteenth is that even in that extended wait, we still find something to celebrate."

Corporate America also has jumped on the bandwagon, with employees from Nike, Uber, Square, Twitter, Vox Media, the N.F.L., Best Buy, and Target being given a paid day off, while Google asked its employees to cancel non-urgent meetings and "create space for learning and reflection".

In school classrooms, textbooks proclaim Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation as the date signaling the end of slavery, mentioning little or nothing of the impact of June 19. That leaves white children with no knowledge of the day and Black children understanding the importance of it only by what they glean from their older generations.

In a quick, informal poll Local 1180 took in early July on its Facebook page about whether members remember ever learning about Juneteenth in history classes in school, only a couple of responses came back positive, with members saying they learned about the day from either a parent or a work supervisor. Members who answered did not all grow up in New York City either; some were from the south—Georgia, Oklahoma, Alabama—with others in California, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania.

Marilynn Gipson, Administrative Manager at FDNY, attended Colored School #9 in Georgia. She was one of the few who did learn about Juneteenth, but not in a history class. Gipson learned about June 19 in her English class and during lunch time from a teacher who valued the importance of education.

"Several of us always made a point of sitting with our English teacher, and from time to time, she made it a point of even stopping by our home unannounced to just sit and talk with us about everything," Gipson said. "She told us about the news of Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. In my history class, I learned about places like Russia, Europe, and Spain, George Washington and Lincoln, and my history book for the first time showed me what a 'PICANNINY' was."

Gipson, whose great grandmother was born a slave, recalls receiving used text books from "the white schools across town, all torn, dirty, and obsolete. Colored students walked to school every day regardless of the distance or the weather, and on cold mornings, only had wood-burning stoves to try and warm up to. White students had the convenience of being picked up/dropped back home on the school buses."

With protests on the rise and a newfound mass understanding and appreciation for Juneteenth, Gipson said she only hopes that mainstream education surrounding not only Juneteenth, but other Black history, is soon included in the teaching of American history. ■



**Editor's Notes:** "Which American holiday, more than any other, is the day that Americans celebrate the deeply held ideals of liberty, justice, and freedom from oppression? The answer depends on whom you ask..."

Four Local 1180 members at The Century Foundation penned a commentary on Juneteenth entitled "Elevating Juneteenth: A Day As Important to America As Any Other." To read the article written by Senior Policy Associates Michelle Burris, Taela Dudley, and Anthony Walsh, and Contributor Roquel Crutcher, visit their website at [www.tcf.org](http://www.tcf.org) and enter "Juneteenth" in the search bar.