

Reflections on Juneteenth

Juneteenth...I remember learning about this holiday from the time I was a child, growing up in St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Petersburg, the oldest Black parish in the Diocese of Southern Virginia. Juneteenth is the first nationally celebrated commemoration of the ending of slavery in the United States – let me repeat that again – it marks the actual end of slavery in the United States. So, let's start with what we were told, versus what we now know.

On June 19, 1865, two-thousand Union Army troops arrived in Galveston Bay, Texas and Union General Gordon Granger announced that the more than 250,000 enslaved Black people in the state – that's a quarter of a million people – were free, by Executive Decree. But note – the Emancipation Proclamation had been signed into law 2½ years before, on January 1, 1863.

June 19, 1866 marked the first Juneteenth celebration, and for 155 years, we have recognized this day, some more than others. Texas was the first state to formally recognize the holiday. In 2017, Montana recognized Juneteenth, and in 2019 New Hampshire became the latest state to formally recognize and celebrate the holiday, resulting in 47 states and the District of Columbia celebrating Juneteenth. North Dakota, South Dakota, and Hawaii are the only three states that have not formally enacted the recognition of this national celebration. But let's think: before this year, do you remember mention of this holiday? Maybe not.

In 1980, the Texas State Legislature was the first governing body to recognize a day of observance; 40 years later, in 2020, Texas, New York, and the Commonwealths of Pennsylvania and Virginia were the only four states recognizing Juneteenth as a paid holiday for its state employees. This is the first year we put Governor Ralph Northam's signature in 2020, into action. Our Bishop, aligning with the Commonwealth of Virginia, is providing the Diocesan staff a day off, to celebrate, and reflect.

And how do people celebrate? Well, the list is endless: picnics, cookouts, BBQs, parades, reenactments, blues concerts, rodeos, street fairs, park and block parties, and family reunions just a few of the many approaches to commemorate and celebrate. Juneteenth is also called Freedom Day, Liberation Day and Emancipation Day, yet celebration goes far beyond a day off; it is an opportunity.

Across my career in the federal government, I remember individuals who continued to open doors of opportunity for me, thus embodying the spirit of Juneteenth, and going far beyond lip service to equity in action. And embracing the wisdom in Luke 12:48, "To whom much is given, much will be required," I in turn, ensured opportunities were provided to those who came after me, always lifting as I climbed. This embodies Juneteenth's opportunity, in action. So, for those of you still wondering how to celebrate this holiday, remember, it is more than a cookout; it's a chance.

The Reverend Canon Lennard L Hamlin Sr., Canon Missioner at Washington National Cathedral, writes: "The...National Cathedral will be lit from June 15 through June 19, in celebration and in honor of Juneteenth, when the doors to opportunity were opened. The lights...remind us that making those freedom words real does not benefit some, it is a benefit to all. May we emerge on the other side with more faith, more hope, more love. We need to do more than just talk about it; may these words be witnessed in the lives that are lived, and deeds that are done! On these nights, and every night, as we continue the work of lifting us beyond the challenges of today, we pray that we will come out different from the way we went in."

So, as we reflect, we are called to action on this historic day in the Commonwealth of Virginia; for it is up to us to begin the work, to continue to open wide the doors of opportunity, and to be ever mindful of the things done, the actions taken, and the impact made, to give rise to self-determination and equity for all.

God's Blessings,

Renee Escoffery-Torres, Ph.D.