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Miss Juneteenth Sean-Maree Swinger-Otey waves to the crowd during the celebration parade in Denver on June 20, 2015. | Joe Amon/The Denver Post via Getty Images

Juneteenth, explained

The holiday's 156-year history holds a lot of meaning in the fight for Black liberation today.

By Fabiola Cineas | Updated Jun 17, 2021, 7:31pm EDT

A year after **protests for racial justice swept the nation**, propelling conversations on how to improve conditions for Black lives, the country is getting ready to celebrate the 156th anniversary of one of its earliest liberation moments: Juneteenth.

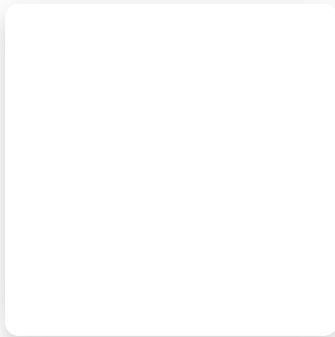
A portmanteau of “June” and “nineteenth,” Juneteenth marks the day in 1865 when a group of enslaved people in Galveston, Texas, finally learned that they were free from the institution of slavery. But, woefully, this was almost two-and-a-half years after President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation. As much as Juneteenth represents freedom, it also represents how emancipation was tragically delayed for enslaved people in the deepest reaches of the Confederacy.

The first Juneteenth in 1866 was celebrated with food, singing, and the reading of spirituals — and it commemorated newly freed Black people taking pride in their progress. Today,

Juneteenth celebrations **span the world**, with the global diaspora adopting the day as one to recognize emancipation at large.

After being largely ignored in schools, recognition of the day has also grown in recent years, especially amid a climate seeking justice for Black lives — a new **Gallup poll** found most Americans now know about Juneteenth. And just this week, **Congress passed a bill to make** Juneteenth a national holiday.

While the past year has shown that some factions in America are willing to fight against the systemic racism that continues to plague the country, others are **introducing legislation to ban anti-racist education**, lessons that would help students understand the significance of a holiday like Juneteenth. As the American public continues to grapple with how to talk about slavery and its enduring consequences, the national recognition of Juneteenth is at least a start to acknowledging the harmful way America was built and the foundational contributions of the enslaved.



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Setting the foundation for Juneteenth

Often referred to as the Second American Revolution, the Civil War began in 1861 between northern and southern states over slavery and economic power. A year into the war, the US Congress passed the Confiscation Act of 1862, which authorized **Union troops to seize Confederate property**, including enslaved people. (The act also allowed the Union army to recruit Black soldiers.) Months later, on January 1, 1863, President Lincoln affirmed the aims of the act by issuing the final draft of the Emancipation Proclamation. The **document declared** that “all persons held as slaves ... are, and henceforth, shall be free.”

While the proclamation legally liberated millions of enslaved people in the Confederacy, it exempted those in the Union-loyal border states of Delaware, Maryland, Missouri, and Kentucky. These states **held Confederate sympathies and could have seceded**; Lincoln exempted them from the proclamation to prevent this. A year later, in April 1864, the Senate attempted to close this loophole by **passing the 13th Amendment**, prohibiting slavery and involuntary servitude in all states, Union and Confederate. But the amendment wouldn't be enacted by ratification until December 1865. In other words, it took two years for the emancipation of enslaved people to materialize legally.



A group of formerly enslaved people who worked as laborers and servants with the 13th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment during the American Civil War, circa 1862. | Corbis via Getty Images

Not to mention, the ratification happened after the Civil War had already ended — in April 1865, Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee surrendered at Appomattox, Virginia. Enslaved people in Texas, meanwhile, didn't learn about their freedom until three months later. On June 19, 1865, Maj. Gen. Gordon Granger of the Union army arrived in Galveston and issued **General Order No. 3** that secured the Union army's authority over Texas. The order stated the following:

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.

Still, even under Order No. 3, as **historian Henry Louis Gates Jr. noted**, freedom wasn't automatic for Texas's 250,000 enslaved people. "On plantations, masters had to decide when and how to announce the news — or wait for a government agent to arrive — and it was not uncommon for them to delay until after the harvest," he wrote.

Emancipation came gradually for many enslaved people, the culmination of a century of American abolition efforts, North and South. And even still, the formerly enslaved were viewed as chattel that merely existed to work and produce.

Juneteenth symbolized hope — that was quickly quashed

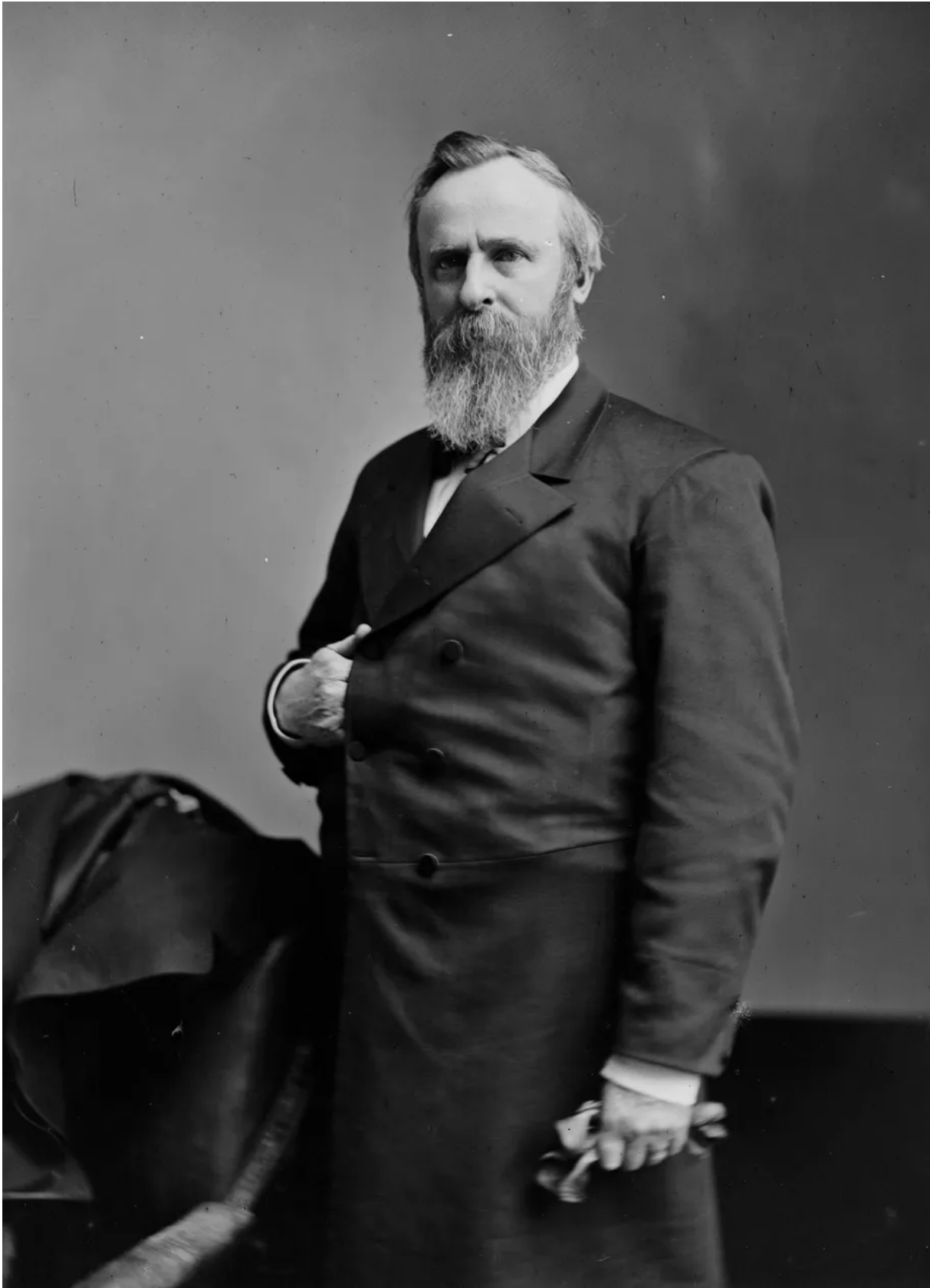
According to Gates, newly freed Black women and men rallied around Juneteenth in the first year it was recognized, transforming it from a "day of unheeded military orders into their own annual rite."

The first Juneteenth celebration took place in 1866 in Texas with community gatherings, including sporting events, cookouts, prayers, dances, parades, and the singing of spirituals like “Many Thousands Gone” and “Go Down Moses.” Some events **even featured fireworks**, which involved filling trees with gunpowder and setting them on fire.

At the core of the celebrations was a desire to record group gains since emancipation, “an occasion for gathering lost family members, measuring progress against freedom and inculcating rising generations with the values of self-improvement and racial uplift,” Gates wrote.

Communities would read the Emancipation Proclamation as part of the tradition, which was especially significant during Reconstruction, when the holiday reinforced hope.

Reconstruction (1863-1890) was a time to rebuild the Southern economy and society through the ratification of the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments — which gave Black people freedom, due process, and the right to vote — Black-run Southern governments, and the work of the **Freedmen’s Bureau**, among other efforts.



President Rutherford B. Hayes oversaw the end of Reconstruction. After the Civil War, reformers aimed to rebuild society through the passing of the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments, black-run Southern governments, and the work of the Freedmen's Bureau. | Universal Images Group via Getty Images

But the goals of Reconstruction were consistently countered by white supremacists. For example, Democratic Congress members awarded Republican Rutherford B. Hayes the 1876 presidential election in exchange for the withdrawal of Union troops from the South,

according to historian Richard M. Valelly's *The Two Reconstructions: The Struggle for Black Enfranchisement*. After Hayes's win, leaders at the state and local levels "weakened black voting in the South by means of gerrymandering, violence, and intimidation," Valelly wrote.

Then in 1890, Mississippians drafted a white supremacist state constitution to disenfranchise local Black people; it included provisions that required people to be able to read and understand all parts of the state constitution in order to vote, **according to the New York Times**. This barred thousands of illiterate Black people from voting in the 1890s.

Meanwhile, the Federal Elections Bill, or Lodge Bill, to oversee Southern elections failed in the summer of 1890, effectively closing the last window for national voting rights jurisprudence for decades to come. This signaled the end of Reconstruction and the beginning of Jim Crow. "Once black southerners were disenfranchised by the early 1900s, the stage was set for a systematic entrenchment of white supremacist norms and public policies," Valelly wrote.

Then, and now, the symbolism and spirit behind Juneteenth remain sorely needed.

Over time, Juneteenth spread to neighboring states like Louisiana, Arkansas, Oklahoma, and eventually to California as Black Texans moved west; it also appeared in Florida and Alabama in the early 20th century due to migration from Texas, **wrote historian Alwyn Barr** in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Volume 4: Myths, Manners, and Memory*.

Perceptions of Juneteenth have also changed over the past century. During World War I, white people and some Black people even considered it un-American, unpatriotic, and shameful "because it focused attention on a dark period in U.S. history," according to the authors of the academic article "**When Peace Come: Teaching the Significance of Juneteenth**."

According to Barr, Juneteenth observations declined in the 1940s during World War II but were revived in 1950 "with 70,000 black people on the Texas State Fair grounds at Dallas." The celebrations would decline again as attention went to school desegregation and the civil rights movement in the late 1950s and 1960s but picked back up in the 1970s as advocates in Texas launched the first effort to make Juneteenth an unofficial "holiday of significance ... particularly to the blacks of Texas."

On January 1, 1980, Juneteenth became a Texas state holiday after state Rep. Al Edwards put forth legislation. Since that move, individual states began commemorating Juneteenth, and **48 states and Washington, DC**, currently observe it.

For more than a decade, Texas Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee has introduced **a resolution** to recognize the historical significance of Juneteenth. In 2020, Democrats introduced a bill to make the Juneteenth a national holiday, but Sen. Ron Johnson (R-WI) single-handedly blocked it on the grounds that America could not afford another day off for federal workers. This year, though, the **legislation** passed in both the Senate and the House and was signed into law by President Biden — the day before the very first Juneteenth would be commemorated as a federal holiday.

The shift in opinions and recognition of Juneteenth

Juneteenth has been called many things over time: Emancipation Day, Jubilee Day, Juneteenth National Freedom Day, Juneteenth Independence Day, and Black Independence Day. And yet despite the many monikers, Juneteenth has **faced competition from other emancipation holidays** and has been **unknown to many Americans** — until perhaps last year, when widespread protests for racial justice coincided with the day.

In 2020, corporations pledged to be anti-racist and many recognized Juneteenth as a company holiday. Cities also took steps to specifically recognize Juneteenth at the municipal level. For example, Philadelphia, the site of one of the country's largest Juneteenth parades, passed an executive order designating Juneteenth as an official city holiday for 2020. "This designation of Juneteenth represents my administration's commitment to reckon with our own role in maintaining racial inequities and our understanding of the magnitude of work that lies ahead," **said the city's mayor, Jim Kenney.**



Performers during the 48th Annual Juneteenth Day Festival in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on June 19, 2019. | Dylan Buell/Getty Images for VIBE

One reason Juneteenth's history has remained widely misunderstood, or even unknown, until recently is because it's not often taught in schools. Karlos Hill, an author and University of Oklahoma professor of African and African American studies, **told Vox in 2018** that "Juneteenth as a moment in African-American history is not, to my knowledge, taught." As for history textbooks **that already tend to whitewash history**, "I would be willing to guess that there are few, if any, mentions of this holiday," Hill said.

In "Teaching the Significance of Juneteenth," Shennette Garrett-Scott and others wrote, "It is sometimes hard to teach small but pivotal moments in American history. Survey classes mostly allow for covering the biggest events and the most well known people." But to help students understand major moments like the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, it is

important to teach the smaller historical milestones. To Garrett-Scott, teaching Juneteenth gives students a fuller picture of the long, enduring fight for freedom.

Another obstacle that remains for Juneteenth is the pervasive idea that it's a "Black thing," much like Kwanzaa. "It is seen as a holiday that is just observed by African Americans and is poorly understood outside of the African American community. It is perceived as being part of black culture and not 'American culture,' so to speak," Hill said.

Now, the meaning of Juneteenth is being seized more broadly by activists as an opportunity for the United States to come to terms with how slavery continues to affect the lives of all Americans today — it is something for everyone, of every race, to engage in. Stereotypes about Black people as being subhuman and lacking rationality are rooted in slavery. These harmful notions still rear themselves today as police officers disproportionately kill Black people and the health care system fails to adequately care for Black bodies. Advocates argue that the national holiday obviously wouldn't put an end to racism but would rather help foster dialogue about the trauma that has resulted from the enslavement of 4 million people for more than 250 years.

This year, Juneteenth will be commemorated with protests, marches, and opportunities for healing and joy across the country. It will also be celebrated as it has been for decades, with cookouts and parades as well as church gatherings and spirituals, keeping in touch with the original tradition. In 1937, formerly enslaved man Pierce Harper **recalled** the first Juneteenth: "When peace come they read the 'Mancipation law to the cullud people. [The freed people] spent that night singin' and shoutin'. They wasn't slaves no more."

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