

Journey to Juneteenth

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**Note, as of June 2020: I have deleted much of the presentation and I'm only including here the part about Juneteenth and Frederick County. There are no footnotes because this was a presentation.*

...First, to help provide context, I need to burst two historical bubbles. All of you probably know these two things, but

No. 1 – the Civil War did not end at Appomattox Court House on April 9th, 1865, and
No. 2 – the Emancipation Proclamation did not free everyone enslaved

Let's discuss that first historical myth and later I'll get to the second one. On April 9, 1865, Robert E. Lee surrendered just one of the various Confederate forces, the Army of Northern Virginia. It was not until April 26, however, that Confederate General Joseph Johnston surrendered his large force in North Carolina, and even though almost all other smaller Confederate forces surrendered throughout May of 1865, it was not until June 23rd that the last Confederate general signed a cease-fire, and the last Confederate warship did not surrender until Nov. 6.

One of the last Confederate states to come under federal control was Texas. There has always been a debate about "the last battle" of the Civil War, but many historians consider a battle fought May 12th and 13th, 1865, at Palmetto Ranch, Texas, in the very southern tip of Texas on the Mexican border, to have been the war's last battle.

As the last of the Civil War fighting was winding down, the decision was made to send a large Federal force to Texas to accomplish four things:

(1) To convince Texas Confederates, by force if necessary, that the war was really over

- (2) As elsewhere in the South, to protect both whites who had been loyal to the United States and newly-freed blacks
- (3) To maintain a strong American presence on the border with Mexico, which was trying to ward off France from taking over Mexico
- (4) To push back western American Indian tribes

As part of this Federal force, Union General Gordon Granger declared on June 19, 1865, in Galveston, that Texas was now under Federal authority. He also announced General Order #3, which read in part: “The people 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...” Two and a half years after the Emancipation Proclamation had been issued, slaves in Texas were now finally and officially free. For reasons unknown, this day, June 19th, was shortened to Juneteenth, and has ever since been the day that African Americans in Texas celebrate Freedom Day.

Juneteenth, therefore, started out as a Texas celebration, and was never observed in Frederick or anywhere else in mid-Maryland until relatively recently. As I will discuss in more detail in a few minutes, Frederick African Americans started their own tradition of emancipation celebrations.

But there is actually a direct connection between the original Juneteenth and Frederick African Americans. As it turns out, African American soldiers from Frederick (as well as other counties in Maryland) were in Galveston that day in June 1865 when General Granger read Proclamation No. 3 freeing the enslaved in Texas.

Now, you may ask, how did Frederick African American soldiers wind up in Texas?

As the Civil War was coming to a close in May 1865, Federal authorities knew that an occupying force of Union soldiers would be required for some time to keep the peace throughout the South. By war’s end, over 140 regiments of African American Union soldiers totaling almost 150,000 men were still in service. Since African Americans had not been allowed to join the Army until 1863, almost all the African American regiments had less time in service than their fellow white Union regiments, so guess which regiments were allowed to disband and go home first? In consequence, most of the occupying Union force in the South after the war were

African American soldiers. Eventually, some African American units from Northern states that had been first to enter the war, were allowed to return home starting in the summer and fall of 1865, but most of the USCT regiments were kept in service in the South until as late as 1867.

African American soldiers from Frederick and many other Maryland counties were part of this Federal military presence in the South after the war, and many were part of the large force sent to Texas. Getting back to Juneteenth for a moment, while most African American regiments were still en route to Texas on June 19, and were headed further south than Galveston anyway, one division was diverted to Galveston because of bad weather. This division included several African American soldiers from Frederick County. We know a little about them from their military records, but precious little else:

Lewis Johnson was 22 years and a laborer from Frederick County when he enlisted in Dec. 1864. He served as a corporal in the 29th United States Colored Troops, and before being sent to Texas, he served in Company I in the campaign that ended at Appomattox Courthouse.

Abraham Stout was 37 years old and also a laborer from Frederick when he enlisted as a substitute in Jan 1865 for a Frederick Kolb.

John Johnson II was 40 years old and a laborer from Frederick County, and he also served with the 29th United States Colored Troops. Along with Lewis Johnson, John Johnson also participated in the campaign to Appomattox Courthouse.

We don't know if any of these three, or any of the other Frederick soldiers in Galveston that day, had been enslaved before their enlistment, and unfortunately no written recollections of that day by any of these soldiers have survived, but just being part of a liberating army must have been a powerfully moving experience. Although duty in Texas eventually proved to be brutal due to heat, disease, lack of water, and inadequate facilities, more than a few African Americans were no doubt proud to defend the borders of the United States and to help in the liberation of their Southern brethren from slavery.

When these soldiers returned to Maryland, they did not bring Juneteenth back with them. In fact, as far as I have been able to trace the history, the first Juneteenth celebration in Frederick County was in 2006. So how did African Americans in Frederick celebrate and memorialize emancipation?

To recap the milestones of freedom: the Emancipation Proclamation freed all slaves in rebellious territories in January 1863, and those enslaved in Maryland were emancipated in November 1864 through a new state constitution. The ratification of the 13th Amendment in December of 1865 finally abolished slavery throughout the country.

But even before the passage of the 13th Amendment, Frederick African Americans held their first emancipation celebration in August of 1865. A report of the celebration in the *Frederick Examiner* claimed that 3,000 people attended the event, and that the celebration commenced with the singing of the hymn, “Blow Ye the Trumpet, Blow,” in which the main refrain is “The year of jubilee is come!” In addition to “one of the most eloquent and impressive prayers it was ever our good fortune to listen to,” offered by Rev. Benjamin Tucker Tanner of Frederick’s Bethel Church (now Quinn AME), the main event was an address by Rev. Henry Highland Garnet, one of the most prominent African American leaders in the country at the time.

Two years later, in 1867, even more people attended the Frederick County emancipation celebration. A reporter for the *Frederick Examiner* claimed this “was one of the largest gatherings that ever took place in this county.” Between 5,000-8,000 people crowded into an area known as Worman’s Woods north of town, preceded by a grand parade with over 2,500 participants.

The Frederick County emancipation celebration became an annual event, and often special train excursions brought participants from Baltimore, Hagerstown, Westminster, and other cities. These festivals included parades, speeches, picnics, and other entertainment. From my research in local newspapers, this event was held annually from 1865 to 1939. I have not yet found the reason why the event ceased after 1939.

Why was this celebration held in August? And it tended to move around in the month, as well, sometimes held in late August and sometimes in early or mid-August. In *Festivals of Freedom: Memory and Meaning in African American Emancipation Celebrations, 1808 – 1915*, the author Mitch Kachun describes how the dates for emancipation celebrations after the Civil War varied from place to place. Although some African Americans advocated designating one

common day to celebrate what many called the African Americans' "4th of July," local custom seemed to prevail in choosing Freedom Day. Many places celebrated in August because before the Civil War, many African Americans in northern states celebrated the Aug. 1 anniversary of the ending of slavery in Great Britain's West Indian colonies (which had occurred in 1834). This may explain why the Frederick celebration was held in August, although it also may have just been the most convenient time in the agricultural calendar to hold such an event. Other communities celebrated on January 1 in honor of when the Emancipation Proclamation took effect. Some places in Maryland celebrated in early November in remembrance of when the 1864 Maryland constitution abolished slavery in the state. Still other places around the country celebrated in March or April in honor of the ratification of the 15th Amendment to the United States Constitution, giving black males the right to vote. I've found emancipation celebrations held in Hagerstown in January, October, and September. And of course, in Texas, June 19 (or Juneteenth) became the official day of celebration.

Again, I haven't done an exhaustive study, but I don't think Juneteenth was ever celebrated in Frederick until 2006. But in the last few decades, Juneteenth has spread from Texas and has become something of a national event. At least 31* states now celebrate Juneteenth as either an official or at least partially-official state holiday, and in many places it is considered THE day to commemorate emancipation. (*I have not checked this number since I gave this presentation in 2009.)