



The Associated Press

In this June 19, 2018, file photo, Zebiyah Fields, 11, at center, drums alongside more than 20 kids at the front of the Juneteenth parade in Flint, Mich. Juneteenth, the holiday that commemorates the end of slavery in the United States.

# WHAT IS JUNETEENTH?

Acknowledging history, progress and the continued fight for equality for Black Americans

## THE BATTLE CONTINUES

In recent years, protests for racial justice — generally stemming from brutality against Black people — helped spotlight issues affecting and important to Black Americans. That included the national recognition of Juneteenth and its importance in Black American history.

The holiday, which became a national holiday in 2021, was born out of the end of slavery. In 1863, the Emancipation Proclamation was signed, declaring an end to slavery. However, news of their newfound freedom did not reach the enslaved people of Galveston, Texas, until June 19, 1865. A year later and each June 19 after, Black Americans commemorate the day with festivities, food and dancing, a tradition that continues to this day.

Though it took some time, Doug Matthews, who has been involved in establishing recognition for Juneteenth since 1980 when the state of Texas named it an official state holiday, said he hopes the recognition underscores the American idea that all human beings are free, regardless of race.

“We all are free whether we came on

a slave ship or not; we all (are) equal,” he said.

Over the years, hard fought events helped pave the way toward equality for Black people, including the Freedom Rides where Americans — Black and white — rode buses through the South in the 1960s in protest of segregation laws.

Freedom Rider and key civil rights leader Bernard Lafayette Jr. reflected on the violence and resistance that he and other civil rights activists had endured in the fight for equal rights and recognition post-slavery.

Encouraged by his former roommate — the late Congressman John Lewis — at the American Baptist Theological Seminary in Nashville, Lafayette said he and fellow activists were optimistic that their fight for equality would not be in vain.

“We had already had the Montgomery Bus Boycott so that gave you some idea that this approach that Martin Luther King was using can work,” Lafayette said, relating Civil Rights-era protests to recent protests for equality. “The main thing that we discovered is that if enough of the right people get involved, they can have the power to make the change. So our actions were really directed towards trying to involve other people, the right people.”

The recognition of Juneteenth, La-

fayette said, is a way for not just Black Americans, but for all Americans to recognize and change history. He encourages people to use the day for reflection and appreciation.

“It’s much more impactful for young people because of the generations and generations of people who experienced things. They come and they go, especially the leadership, so it all depends on how effective you can be in conveying this to younger people and their appreciating their history,” Lafayette said from his home in Alabama, a key state in the Civil Rights Movement. “[Juneteenth] is a reality of the history of the past and we must appreciate that.”

Carol Bunch Davis, a Texas A&M at Galveston professor whose research explores cultural memory and contemporary Black representation, noted the importance of the national Juneteenth recognition, but was cautious in declaring it a win, hoping that America does not “romanticize the idea” that progress is complete.

Davis said that people of color continue to be disproportionately mistreated across several sectors including voting, policing, housing and education.

“[The recognition] is a terrific accomplishment. It’s something that should have been done a long time ago, and it’s great that we’ve done it, but there’s still more work to do,” Davis said.

## THE FLAG

Like the American flag, the official Juneteenth flag is red, white and blue and holds a lot of meaning. The similar colors are said to show that African Americans are one with America, thus purposed to represent equality.

At the centerfold of the flag lies a white star and burst, symbolizing the “Lone Star State” of Texas, where Juneteenth originated, ushering in the freedom and new beginnings of Black people in all 50 states. The arc separating red



and blue represents new horizons and opportunities for Black people.

The Juneteenth flag was created

in 1997 by Ben Haith, founder of the National Juneteenth Celebration Foundation, with assistance from illustrator Lisa Jeanna Graf.

During Juneteenth celebrations, the African Liberation Flag or the Pan-African flag is often displayed. The red stripe represents the blood, struggle and sacrifice of Black Americans, who are represented in the flag with the Black stripe. Green symbolizes the natural wealth of the African land.

“By making Juneteenth a federal holiday, all Americans can feel the power of this day, and learn from our history, and celebrate progress, and grapple with the distance we’ve come but the distance we have to travel.”

President Joe Biden, June 2021

## PROGRESS

Advancing Black equality since the launch of Juneteenth:

**1863:** On Jan. 1, President Abraham Lincoln signs the Emancipation Proclamation, proclaiming the freedom of all slaves.

**1865:** On June 19, word that slavery had been abolished finally reaches Galveston, Texas, where more than 250,000 Black people in Texas remained enslaved. They are one of the last groups of slaves to be freed in the U.S.

**1866:** On the first anniversary, the first official Juneteenth celebrations take place in Texas. The holiday typically includes prayer, religious services and festivals with parades, music, food and dancing.

**1870s:** Around the start of 1870s, so-called “Jim Crow” laws impose racial segregation on public transportation and in public facilities predominantly in Southern states.

**1909:** The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, known as the NAACP, is formed in response to the Springfield Race Riot of 1908. The tragedy included the burning of Black-owned homes and businesses and the killing of Black citizens.

**1963:** March on Washington, regarded as one of the most significant moments of the Civil Rights Movement, draws an estimated 250,000 people in highlighting the challenges and inequalities faced by African Americans.

**1964:** A landmark legislation, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, is signed by President Lyndon B. Johnson, prohibiting “Jim Crow” laws of racial segregation in public facilities and education, and ending employment discrimination based on race, color, sex and national origin.

**1965:** The Voting Rights Act of 1965 is signed into law by Johnson, outlawing voting discrimination, making it illegal to bar any U.S. citizen from voting based on race or color.

**1980:** Texas is the first state to officially recognize Juneteenth as a state holiday.

**2008:** Barack Obama is elected the first Black president of the United States.

**2017:** A Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, turned violent and deadly after far-right, white supremacist groups protesting the removal of a Robert E. Lee statue clashed with counter-protestors. Following the rally, 36 Confederate statues were removed from multiple sites.

**2020:** After George Floyd was killed by a police officer, protests and marches break out across America, igniting discussions on race relations in the U.S. Following the protests, 94 Confederate statues were removed across the country.

**2021:** President Joe Biden signs the Juneteenth National Independence Day Act making Juneteenth a federal holiday.



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Crowds surrounding the Reflecting Pool, during the 1963 March on Washington.



Obama