

# Honoring JUNETEENTH

BY ASIA ASHLEY, [aashley@cnhnews.com](mailto:aashley@cnhnews.com)

## Origin of the holiday

Juneteenth is all about emancipation — freedom. But it wasn't until more than two years after President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation Jan. 1, 1863, freeing enslaved persons in Confederate states, before emancipation took place.

Word did not reach Texas until June 19, 1865, when a Union Maj. Gen. Gordon Granger delivered an order to Galveston stating the more than 250,000 slaves in Texas were to be set free.

A barely legible copy of Granger's order is preserved at the National Archives Building in Washington, D.C.

It states: "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."

In a 1941 recorded interview with the late University of Texas professor John Henry Faulk, former slave Laura Smalley can be heard recalling that day as she received the joyous news. Smalley's interview is among dozens of interviews with freed persons that are archived in the Library of Congress's "Voices Remembering Slavery: Freed People Tell Their Stories" collection.

She estimated that she was about 10 years old at the time and said her former enslaver had come back from fighting as a Confederate soldier at least six months before she officially received the news. "You know, an old master didn't tell, you know, they was free," Smalley said in the interview. "They worked there, I think now they say they worked them, six months after that. Six months. And turn them loose on the nineteenth of June. That's why, you know, we celebrate that day. Colored folks — celebrates that day."

Upon receiving the news, those who had been enslaved rejoiced and celebrated their newfound freedom. Juneteenth — or June 19, also called Jubilee Day, Emancipation Day, Freedom Day, and Black Independence Day — is often commemorated with parades, festivals, prayer and barbecues.

Houston native Kelly Dixon Tealer said Juneteenth now has a more personal meaning to her after recently being connected to letters from her great-great-grandfather Hawkins Wilson, who was freed from slavery in Galveston on "Juneteenth." Wilson was separated from his family in Virginia at age six.

"We ended up learning that he was involved in the early parts of Juneteenth. He was part of the very first Juneteenth," said Tealer, whose research nearly 20 years ago ultimately led to his discovery through Ancestry.com. "If you read his letters, it's so tender, so sweet, so much compassion in there. But he's still tried to rise above a lot of that ... being part of slavery and coming from slavery, and now you're leading thousands of people. It's just so beautiful."

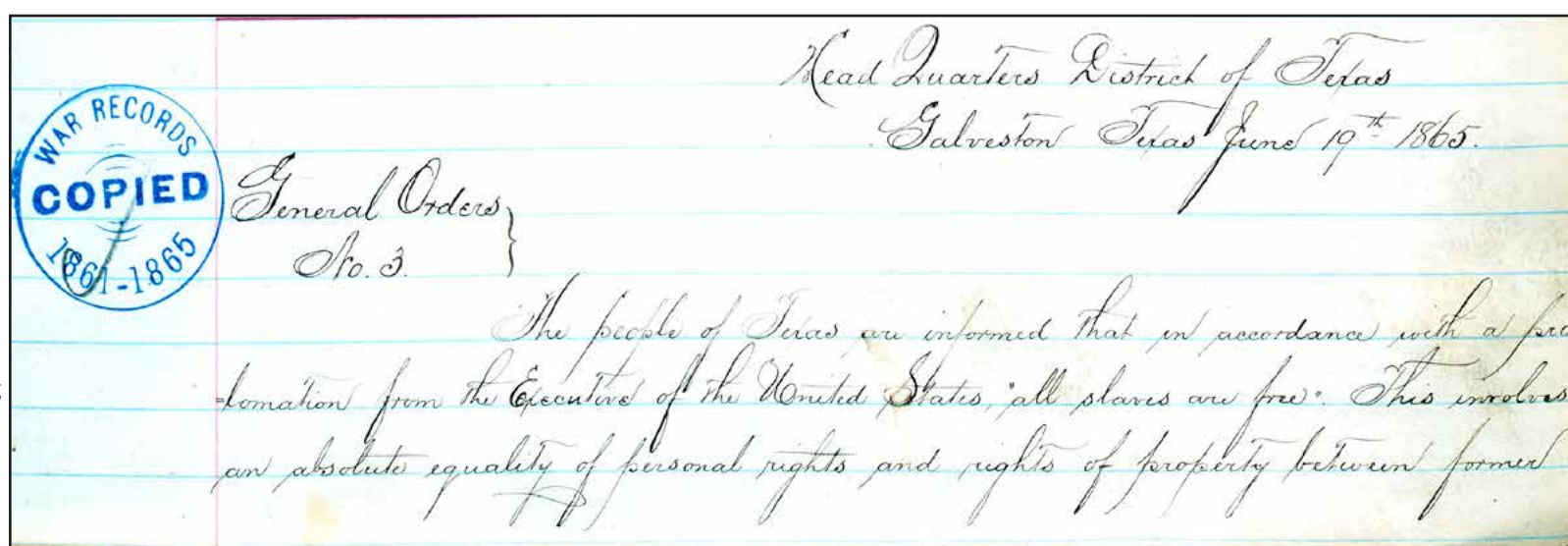
Two of Wilson's letters — now part of the National Archives — had been sent to the Freedmen's Bureau, which formed after the Civil War to help reconnect African-Americans who were separated by slavery.

"I am anxious to learn about my sisters, from whom I have been separated many years. I have heard from them since I left Virginia twenty four years ago. I am in hopes that they are still living and I am anxious to hear how they are getting on," Wilson's May 11, 1867, letter to the Bureau stated. "You will please send the enclosed letter to my sister Jane, or some of her family, if she is dead."

Tealer, whose mother is Wilson's great-great-granddaughter, said she was excited when Ancestry.com contacted her regarding her relation to Wilson and to read his letter in search of family. "I am writing you tonight, my dear sister, with my Bible in my hand praying Almighty God to bless you and preserve me and you to meet again," a letter to his sister, Jane, reads. "Thank God that we are not sold and torn away from each other as we used to be."

Though Juneteenth has been celebrated each year since 1866, it was not a nationally recognized holiday until 2021 when President Joe Biden signed the Juneteenth National Independence Day Act.

"Yes, I do celebrate it a little differently knowing (about) my loved one — and I probably should have been doing this — but it hits home knowing the work that was put into it," Tealer said.



National Archives

On June 19, 1865, U.S. Maj. Gen. Gordon Granger issued General Order No. 3, which informed the people of Texas that all enslaved people were now free. This day has come to be known as Juneteenth, a combination of June and 19th. It is the oldest known celebration commemorating the end of slavery in the United States.



The Associated Press

Randy Robinson, right, of Philadelphia views a Leland-Boker copy of the Emancipation Proclamation signed by Abraham Lincoln as Pvt. Gregory Harris, left, and Pvt. William Burton Jr., center, with the 3rd Regiment Infantry United States Colored Troops Civil War Re-enactors stand watch at the African American Museum in Philadelphia, Monday, June 19, 2006.

## A timeline of Juneteenth

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**1863:** President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation on Jan. 1, stating "all persons held as slaves within any State or designated part of a State, the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States, shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free." The "rebellion" Southern states were fighting against the Union to secede from the U.S.

**1865:** On April 9, Confederate Gen. Robert Lee surrendered the Army of Northern Virginia in the Civil War after a four-year struggle against the Union.

**1865:** Union Maj. Gen. Gordon Granger delivered an order in Galveston, Texas, that all slaves were freed.

**1865:** In December,



File photo

Lewis Cureton plays a traditional African drum with the Family of Aya Community Rhythm Movement Organization. Several groups and individuals offered performances during the Juneteenth Celebration at the courthouse square in downtown Valdosta in 2014.

Congress passed the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, abolishing

slavery and involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime.

**1866:** On June 19, the first "Jubilee Day" was organized by Black people in Texas. The celebration would later become known as Juneteenth and become more widespread as Black persons began to migrate from Texas to other states.

**1979:** Texas becomes the first state to recognize Juneteenth as a state holiday.

**2021:** Following nationwide racial injustice protests, President Joe Biden signed the Juneteenth National Independence Day Act on June 17, making Juneteenth a federal holiday.

**2023:** At least 28 states and the District of Columbia recognize Juneteenth as a holiday, giving state employees a paid day off, according to Pew Research.

**"I was a big, big boy then. A good big boy. And the Yankees had come, and after a while there'd be a whole troop of men come, they said they was Yankees. All walking, all walking. That crew of Yankees would go through. Next time you see, there come a whole troop of Yankees, all riding horses, big guns a-hanging on in there, and all like that you know. Yeah. We all would standing looking at them, all going home. And I said, I ask them, I said, I ask them, I say, 'Mama, where they, where they going?' Said, 'They all going home now.' And old Col. M. that was our master, he was in there, and he say, 'Well, Harriet, all of you ... is all free now. Yankees all going home.' I remember that just as well."**

— Uncle Billy McCrea, former slave, in an interview with John A. Lomax in Jasper, Texas, in 1940