What is Juneteenth?

Juneteenth, also known as Juneteenth Independence Day or Freedom Day, is a holiday that commemorates the announcement of the abolition of slavery in Texas in June 1865, and more generally the emancipation of African-American slaves throughout the Confederate South. Celebrated on June 19, Juneteenth is recognized as a state holiday or special day of observance in most states. In practice, the Emancipation Proclamation only freed persons held in Confederate States who were either behind the Union lines or close enough to take advantage of the Union advance. Therefore, the news and practice of freeing enslaved people moved slowly. The date marks the moment when the news of the end of the Civil War and the complete emancipation of all slaves was announced in Galveston, TX on June 19, 1865, over two months after the surrender of General Lee at Appomattox Courthouse in Virginia and Two Years after President Lincoln had signed the Emancipation Proclamation and published it on January 1, 1863. We mark this moment as a Church not only as the end of the institution of American slavery, but also in the spirit of reconciliation and new life as we journey together towards togetherness and community.

Litany for Juneteenth – From the African American Heritage Hymnal

Litanist: O Lord, we celebrate your strong hand of deliverance. We have seen your grace in the midst of life’s burdens.

**Lord God of Hosts, on the anniversary of our freedom from slavery, we know that we can do all things through Christ, who strengthens us. (see Phil. 4:13)**

Litanist: The Emancipation Proclamation freed African slaves in the United States on New Year’s Day in 1863. But actual freedom for the last slaves did not come until a June day two and a half years later, This Juneteenth milestone reminds us of the triumph of the human spirit.

**Lord God of Hosts, be with us always, as you were with Harriet Tubman.**
The Constitution once defined African Americans as three-fifths human. But we have labored and died as whole men and women.

**Lord God of Hosts, be with us always, as you were with Frederick Douglas.**
The Thirteenth Amendment abolished the heinous institution of slavery, but we still struggle against the chains of racial discrimination.

**Lord God of Hosts, be with us always, as you were with Vernon Johns.**
The Fourteenth Amendment made us citizens by legislation because our blood, sweat, and tears helped to build this nation.

**Lord God of Hosts, be with us always, as you were with Thurgood Marshall.**
The Fifteenth Amendment said we could not be denied the right to vote because of our color; yet we have faced systematic exclusion from the political process, and we continue to struggle for full inclusion.

**Lord God of Hosts, be with us always, as you were with Barbara Jordan.**
The Twenty-fourth Amendment abolished poll taxes, voting tests, and other restrictions upon our right to vote; but these soon were replaced by gerrymandering and political apathy.

**Lord God of Hosts, be with us always, as you were with Benjamin Quarles.**
The Civil Rights Act of 1964 translated into law most of the goals of the Civil Rights Movement, protecting all citizens from racial segregation and discrimination. Let us remain ever vigilant in our commitment to proactive citizenship.

**Lord God of Hosts, be with us always, as you were with Stokely Carmichael.**
Our hopes soar to heights of joy when we remember the emancipation of Nelson Mandela in 1990, and his ascendancy to President of South Africa after twenty-six long years in prison. Blessed are the righteous.

**Lord God of Hosts, be with us always, as you are with Desmond Tutu.**
Let us leave behind those sins that pulled us down in the old year, and answer the high calling of your will for our lives in the new year.

**Lord God of Hosts, on the anniversary of our freedom from slavery, we know that we can do all things through Christ, who strengthens us.**

(Litany from the book: African American Heritage Hymnal)

Let us ALL pray together: (From the Book of Common Prayer)

_O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son: Look with compassion on the whole human family; take away the arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; unite us in bonds of love; and work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth; that, in your good time, all nations and races may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen._

Closer to Home

The anniversary of the day took on festive traditions and a new name: it came to be known as Juneteenth. Over the next few years, African-American populations across Texas collected money to buy property dedicated to Juneteenth celebrations. In Houston, the effort was led by the Reverend Jack Yates, a Baptist minister and former slave. His church, Antioch Baptist, and Trinity Methodist Episcopal Church formed the **Colored People’s Festival and Emancipation Park Association**. In 1872, they pooled $1,000 to put down on ten acres of open land as home for their Juneteenth celebration. In honor of their freedom, they named it Emancipation Park.
The Twentieth Century at Emancipation Park

By 1918, it had been acquired by the City of Houston. Racial segregation was the law of the land, and Emancipation Park was the only municipal park African-Americans could use at that time. In 1939, Miss Annette Finnigan, a veteran of the push for women’s suffrage, donated property to the city for a second one, which became Finnigan Park.

Also in 1939, the WPA undertook the construction of a community center building in Emancipation Park. Designed by William Ward Watkin, the new facility provided greater recreational and educational programs for park users. In 1976, the Association for Study of Afro-American Life and History placed a plaque dedicated to Rev. Yates in the park.

On June 7, 1979, the State of Texas enacted legislation declaring Juneteenth to be a state holiday. The bill was introduced by Representative Al Edwards of Houston and was signed into law by Governor William P. Clements, Jr. The first state-sponsored Juneteenth holiday took place the following year. Since then, many other states and the District of Columbia have come to observe Juneteenth as a state holiday or observance. Juneteenth received national recognition in 1997 through Senate Joint Resolution 11 and House Joint Resolution 56.

For more information on Juneteenth observations, please consult a reputable source.

And On Into the Twenty-first...

Over the years, many improvements have taken place in the park. In 1998, the Parks to Standards program resulted in extensive renovations. Through the early years of the Twenty-first Century, several community organizations worked to raise funds for a major renovation for Emancipation Park. On Saturday, June 17, 2017, Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner, the OST/Almeda Redevelopment Corridors TIRZ#7, Emancipation Park Conservancy and the Houston Parks and Recreation Department rededicated Emancipation Park after an extensive renovation process. Park improvements include the construction of a new recreation center, the renovation of the existing community center and bath house, the construction of a new swimming pool, reconfigured parking options, an entry plaza, a sprayground, playground, walking trail, and picnic areas. Tennis and basketball courts and a ball field round out the park amenities.

Set aside to commemorate events of the Nineteenth Century, Emancipation Park continues to serve its neighborhood today. It stands as a monument to the pride and hope that the founding members of the Colored People’s Festival and Emancipation Park Association felt as they stood with their backs to slavery and their faces turned to the future.