

Juneteenth holiday of independence for African-Americans

Katherine Stapp
Special to Sentinel-Voice
NEW YORK (GIN) - The Fourth of July may be the United States' official Independence Day, but to many African-Americans the real date is June 19 — known as "Juneteenth." It is the oldest continuous celebration of the ending of slavery.

With events nationwide, African-Americans in nearly every U.S. state and abroad recalled the day in 1865 when Black people in Galveston, Texas got the news that the Civil War was over and slavery had been abolished — nearly two and a half years after the Emancipation Proclamation was read by President Abraham Lincoln. The messenger was Maj. Gen. Gordon Granger, backed by 1,800 Union soldiers, who fought their way through to the last bastion of slavery in the South and read General Order Number 3 which proclaimed that human bondage in the United States was officially dead.

"Texas was the last state that held out for slavery," explained Lula Briggs Galloway, the president of the Michigan-based National

Association of Juneteenth Lineage. Even though the Emancipation Proclamation became federal law on Jan. 1, 1863, "the majority of slaves in the South were not aware of their freedom until June 19, 1865," Briggs said.

Just as those slaves were kept in the dark, most Whites and even many African-Americans are unfamiliar with "Juneteenth" and what it stands for.

"Most Black children are not aware unless their great grandparents are around, and that is why it needs to be a part of the history books," said Briggs, who is campaigning to have the events of Juneteenth included in the curriculum of elementary schools, high schools and colleges.

"It's a part of the culture, and when you don't educate one about one's culture, the holocaust of slavery will repeat itself," she said.

Dr. Akinyele K. Umoja, a professor in African-American studies at Georgia State University, said that Juneteenth represents the human capacity to survive even under the most

miserable and dehumanizing conditions.

"As a teacher, I can say that a lot of Black people don't know anything about Juneteenth," he said. "I think that what it reflects in our society is a culture of denial, an attempt to forget history and...your connection with a past that some people may not look at as glorious.

"But, I think what young people have to come to understand is the fact that the beauty of the whole thing is that folks endured, and people survived and people struggled through that hell that they experienced," Umoja said. "They should know that they come from a people that did struggle to live, to maintain their humanity and elements of their culture. And, that's what needs to be embraced."

Why African-Americans in Texas were unaware of the Emancipation Proclamation for two and a half years remains unclear. Rumors include: the Union troops' neglect to enforce the order and a deliberate delay to allow slaveowners one last cotton harvest.

Certainly, southern slaveholders had a vested

Blacks upset Owens scheduled summit

DENVER (AP) — Several black community groups boycotted a summit on youth violence because it was held on the same day as a celebration marking black history.

The statewide summit was initially planned for fall, but it was moved ahead after the Columbine massacre in which two student gunmen killed a dozen classmates, a teacher and themselves on April 20 at Columbine High School.

Although Gov. Bill Owens regretted the scheduling conflict with the black history celebration known as Juneteenth, the Columbine shootings made it important to hold the youth violence summit sooner, he said. Black leaders were not pleased.

"It's absolutely offensive," said Michael Hancock of the Urban League. "To me it boils down to a sensitivity issue."

The boycott was supported by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Colorado Black Chamber of Commerce, among other groups.

Owens noted that a lot of other events were scheduled for June 19 as well. And he said 15 black ministers encouraged their congregations to attend both events. Owens visited both.

About 3,000 people from across the state attended the day-long summit. Topics included youth gangs, gun control legislation, parenting and school safety. Two miles northeast of the college, about 140,000 gathered for the 3rd annual Juneteenth celebration, a street fair featuring barbecue, arts and crafts and entertainment.

conspiracy to keep crops and products as long as you could here in the South. They delayed Gen. Granger in many ways."

Whatever the reason, the reaction of the former slaves was stunned jubilation, followed by wild celebrations in the streets of Galveston.

Juneteenth celebrations began in Texas the next year and persisted despite resistance from former slaveowners and the mass northern migration that took place after the war ended. It gradually spread to other states and became an annual tradition.

"There was a dry spell right after Reconstruction," Briggs said. "People were too busy trying to relocate and find their ancestors, and then there was a void right around the 1960s because they were working on other movements, and it sort of died down.

"But, it's resurging," she added. "Juneteenth is just getting bigger and bigger."

The date is now an official state holiday in Texas, Oklahoma and Michigan, and has been nationally recognized by the U.S. Congress.

interest in suppressing the news that their human "property" was free. "There was a civil war going on," said Craig Bowie, an organizer for the Galveston celebrations, now in their 135th year. "There was also

Legislation

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unfair."

When asked if he thought that racial politicking would occur in drawing the boundaries, Montandon said, "I don't really think so. If you look at areas that are predominantly Hispanic or African-American, they are usually in slower growth areas. It would be unfair to section off those areas with less growth, so I will attempt to draw lines from north to south rather than east to west."

Montandon said that racism isn't much

of a factor in the minimal development in ethnic areas.

"They're fully developed already. There's no vacant land to build on," he said.

"So many people have fought for wards for so long because most of the council people have been concentrated in one area," Rhodes said.

"Now we will have the opportunity to have representation throughout, which will hopefully bring a more informed councilperson and constituency."

Boggs

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organizational experience. I have an undergraduate degree from Notre Dame with a master's degree in public administration from UNLV. Who's the best qualified?"

McDonald said the recent decision to expand the council by two seats will enable her to be more effective.

"It gives us a smaller area to worry about," she said. "Right now, each

councilperson is responsible for 120,000 residents. With six city council members, we'll only have 75,000 residents each, which will allow me to be more responsive to citizens."

Festival

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"The Fruits of Africa is about a coming together of African, African-American, African-Latino, African-Caribbean," Aird said. "We as black people, no matter where we are, or where we got dropped off, ... we are a very special people. We've had a very positive impact on the world, not negative, like what is usually projected. We're already planning next year's festival and it's going

to be phenomenal. ... Many really would like us to just go away behind the scenes, but we're not."

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