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Honoring Juneteenth, Origin of the Holiday, 2023 June 18

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Honoring JUNETEENTH

BY ASIA ASHLEY, 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.

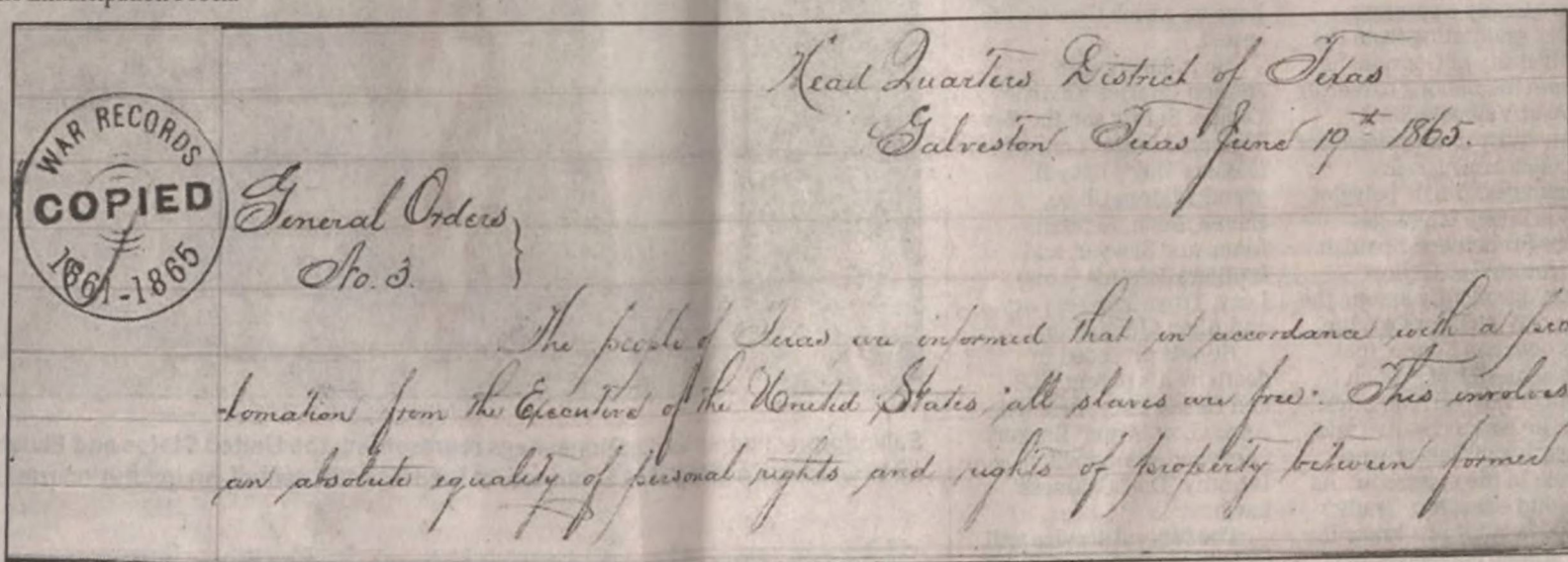
A barely legible copy of Granger's order is preserved at the National Archives Building in Washington, D.C.

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



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.



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."

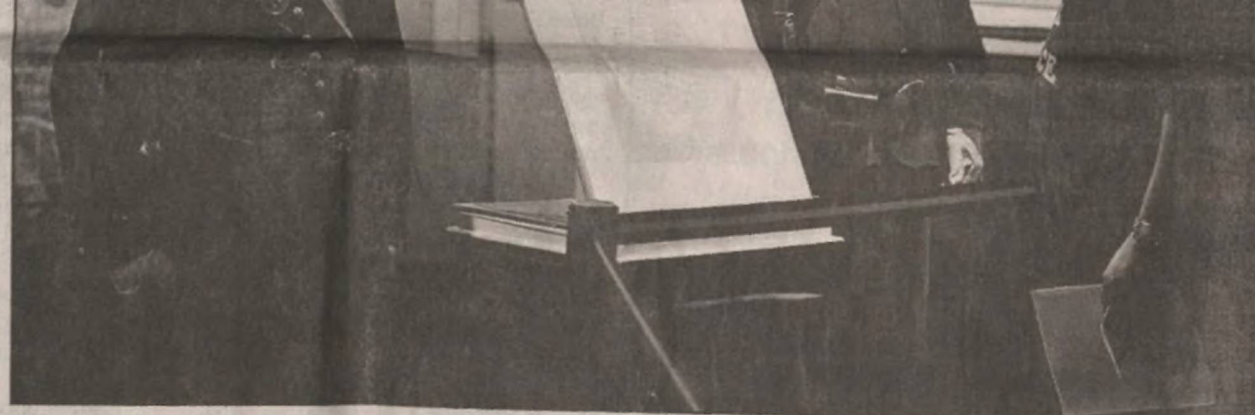
Two of Wilson's letters — now part of the National Archives — had been sent to the Freedmen's Bureau, which formed after the Civil War to help reconnect African-Americans who were separated by slavery.

"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.



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.

The Associated Press

A timeline of Juneteenth

BY ASIA ASHLEY, aashley@cnhnews.com

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

PointOfView

4A

Sunday, June 18, 2023

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Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

OUR POINT OF VIEW

Juneteenth celebrates liberty

Juneteenth is all about emancipation — freedom.

Juneteenth is not less than.

For Black Americans, Juneteenth is as much about liberty as the Fourth of July.

While the Emancipation Proclamation was signed Jan. 1, 1863, it was more than two years later when many Americans living in the West learned they were free.

Despite the proclamation, word had not reached Texas until June 19, 1865, when a Union general made the declaration in Galveston.

Freed men, women and children celebrated.

Large public celebrations began the very next year on June 19, 1866, and in many communities the annual celebration of freedom has continued since that time.

It was not until two years ago that Juneteenth was formally recognized as a federal holiday.

If we are not all free, are any of us really free?

While Juneteenth marks the freedom of Black slaves and the end of the darkest chapter in American history, the day should be embraced and celebrated by everyone.

It was not until that day on June 19, 1865 that Americans began to live up to the most sacred words in its most sacred secular text, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that



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THEIR POINT OF VIEW

Passed over by overpasses

Black communities impacted by GDOT, city projects

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the first part of a two-part column. The second part will run in the Tuesday, June 20, edition of the Valdosta Daily Times.

Mayor and City Councils who have served since 1980

what has already been lost, our first goal is to ask the city to do a re-survey of the Southside Historic District and

Created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. — That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.”

You cannot embrace American freedom without embracing all of those words for all people.

Unlike many places across the South, our community has celebrated Juneteenth for decades.

We have also been celebrating the holiday all week long, with events continuing this weekend.

We encourage our entire community to celebrate freedom and to support Juneteenth.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The Valdosta Daily Times encourages readers to submit letters to the editor. All letters must include the writer's name, address, telephone number and signature for verification purposes. Only the writer's name and city of residence will be published with the letter. We encourage letter writers to state their cause clearly and use 300 words or less as a general guideline to meet space requirements. Letters may be edited or rejected based on inappropriate or libelous content, but we believe in a robust public dialogue representing diverse points of view. Letters must not address personal matters. **Letters should submitted to:** valdostadailytimes.editorial@gafnews.com

Valdosta Daily Times

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...board members who have served since 1980 when the Ernie Nijem administration voted to adopt the Valdosta Historic Preservation Ordinance. It created the Local Historic District and the Historic Preservation Commission in 1981; the latter currently run by the city's Historic Planner Jeff Brammer.



GWEN SOMMERS REDWINE

The first district created was the Valdosta Commercial Historic District in 1983, which includes Downtown Valdosta, but ends at the railroad tracks. We believe this ordinance excluded the Black community from its purview. It re-segregated Valdosta by creating historic district boundary lines that only contain properties owned by what have been considered the non-Black citizens of Valdosta.

In post Civil-War Valdosta, Black and white areas were kept strictly segregated. Indeed, starting in the late 1880s, and by the early 1900s, that segregation was completely written into law. Black people could only live in Black neighborhoods. Due to this segregation, Black life in Valdosta happened south of the tracks. Black businesses, theaters, clubs, neighborhoods and churches rose up successfully to serve the Black community and often attracted whites from “across the tracks.”

There was a rich life here of clubs, organizations, businesses, neighborhoods and congregations, that for over 100 years served the Black section of Valdosta. Remember that Valdosta is a majority Black city. Its history is a rich one, just as rich as the history associated with our beloved Crescent, the nice bungalows on Williams Street, or the few Victorian houses in the Fairview Historic District, added to the Lowndes Historic District in 1984. Historic property designation, especially historic commercial designation, brings money and opportunity in the form of Main Street grants, historical preservation grants or refurbishment grants.

Twenty-five years after the creation of the LHD, the city did designate a “Southside Historic District” which included the Black commercial district. However, because the Black commercial district was not designated an “Historic Commercial District,” no funds listed above are available to help grow Black businesses in the historically Black areas of Valdosta.

Business owners a block down from our “historic” downtown cannot access the resources. Although we can't save

PART I

Members of the African American Community, representatives of the Valdosta Black Heritage Group, representatives from the City of Valdosta and the Georgia Department of Transportation met on April 27, 2023 to discuss the proposed St. Augustine Overpass project, currently in the planning stages.

We appreciate the special meeting and the initial discussion of this project with the Valdosta Black community.

The Valdosta Black Community has a long history of negative impacts resulting from projects created between the GDOT and City of Valdosta that have impacted its living conditions, home values and formerly cohesive neighborhoods for the worse.

This current project will be the third incursion into Valdosta's historically Black neighborhoods.

To sum up, the history in the African American community of Valdosta with Georgia Department of Transportation projects has been negative primarily because of encroachment, destabilization, devalued property, uncompensated forced displacements and disruption, resulting neighborhood blight and a doomed future for the remaining residents and future generations who may opt to remain where they are. We are hoping, with joint work between the Valdosta Black Community and other affected residents, the City of Valdosta and the GDOT to have a different, more mitigated outcome for this third overpass proposed for St. Augustine at Savannah Avenue.

There is a history here, much of which concerns how the City of Valdosta has treated historically Black spaces. It is a subtle and lengthy history that shows the negative impacts of systemic racism in the valuing of historically Black areas in the city.

According to census.gov for Valdosta, the racial demographic of Valdosta is 36.6% white and 56.3% Black, as of 2022. Valdosta, Georgia, is a majority Black city. However, its historical district community boundary line — for over 40 years — completely excluded historically Black neighborhoods, businesses and churches. Only Black neighborhoods have been affected by GDOT overpasses.

While GDOT bears some ethical and social blame for these atrocities that have resulted from public projects such as overpasses into historically Black spaces, the real blame lies squarely on the shoulders of the Valdosta

goal is to ask the city to do a re-survey of the Southside Historic District and the Valdosta Commercial Historic District, if necessary.

The Black and white commercial districts should be integrated. Perhaps the best solution is to repeal the outdated 1980 Valdosta Historic Preservation Ordinance altogether that has kept the city segregated.

Because of lack of historic district protection, so far two overpasses have been erected in Black historical areas. Here is the history of those overpasses.

1980-82 Beck Overpass

Ground broke without a Section 106 review as was required by the Federal 1966 Historic Preservation Act. Lack of review led to excluding the Black commercial district — home to over 200 businesses with payrolls. This used to be a thriving Black area, contributing to the Valdosta economy and bringing financial stability to a group that is traditionally lacking in generational wealth.

During the construction, these Black businesses were compensated by the project for the loss of their business spaces, for the overpass passing them by and leaving them under a dark shadow that led to blight.

Accounts of this situation indicate one white furniture store owner affected by the overpass did receive \$2 million (\$1 million from GDOT and \$1 million after a lawsuit with the city). Otherwise no businesses were compensated, according to city employees familiar with the history.

For the Black community, this created a monolithic concrete monster, a space under that monster that has caused ugliness, blight and ruin. Shells of historic buildings surrounded by gaping holes allow a clear visual of how badly the area was affected. It is a ghost town now. Remaining structures and grounds are unkempt. It is very embarrassing to the City of Valdosta.

The delay and initial exclusion from Valdosta's Commercial Historic District in 1983 was the first harm. Most sad is that all-Black St. Paul AME church, the oldest church in downtown — Black or white — is the only church not within the Local Historic District, and remarkably, there aren't any Black churches on the National Register of Historic Places from Lowndes County.

By contrast at least three traditionally white congregations enjoy Register protection and are all within the Local Historic District and at least one of them also is a National Landmark.

Part II runs Tuesday, June 20.

Gwen Sommers Redwine is the founder of the Valdosta Black Heritage Group.